

The Songs and Rhymes of May



Presented here are a selection of songs, rhymes and poems associated with Beltane and May Day.

Gaelic Tradition

The following blessing would be sung at Beltane, and was collected in the *Carmina Gadelica, Volume 1* by Alexander Carmichael, who heard it from a South Uist crofter.

Am Beannachadh Bealltain

Beannaich, a Thrianailt fhoir nach gann,
Mi fein, mo cheile agus mo chlann,
Mo chlann mhaoth's am mathair chaomh 'n an ceann,
Air chlar chubhr nan raon, air airidh chaon nam beann,
Air chlar chubhr nan raon, air airidh chaon nam beam.

Gach ni na m' fhardaich, no ta 'na m' shealbh,
Gach buar is barr, gach tan is tealbh,
Bho Oidhche Shamhna chon Oidhche Bheallt,
Piseach maith, agus beannachd mallt,
Bho mhuir, gu muir, agus bun gach allt,
Bho thonn gu tonn, agus bonn gach steallt.

Tri Pears a gabhail sealbh anns gach ni 'na m' stor,
An Trianailt dhearbha da m' dhion le coir;
O m' anam riarach am briathra Phoil,
Is dion mo chiallain fo sgiath do ghloir,
Dion mo chiallain fo sgiath do ghloir.

Beannaich gach ni, agus gach aon,
Ta's an teaghlach bheag ri m' thaobh;
Cuir Crois Chrìosd oirnn le buaidh baigh,
Gun am faic sinn tir an aigh,
Gun am faic sinn tir an aigh.

Trath threigeas buar am buabhal bho,
Trath threigeas cuanal an cual chro,
Trath dh' eireas ceigich ri beinn a cheo,
Treoir na Trianaid bhi triall 'n an coir,
O treoir na Trianaid bhi triall 'n an coir.

A Thi a chruthaich mi air tus,
Eisd is fritheil rium aig lubadh glun,
Moch is anamoch mar is iul,
A d' lathair fein a Dhe nan dul,
A d' lathair fein a Dhe nan dul.

The Beltane Blessing

Bless, O Threefold true and bountiful,
Myself, my spouse and my children,
My tender children and their beloved mother at their head,
On the fragrant plain, at the gay mountain sheiling,
On the fragrant plain, at the gay mountain sheiling.

Everything within my dwelling or in my possession,
All kine and crops, all flocks and corn,
From Hallow Eve to Beltane Eve,
With goodly progress and gentle blessing,
From sea to sea, and every river mouth,
From wave to wave, and base of waterfall.

Be the Three Persons taking possession of all to me
belonging,
Be the sure Trinity protecting me in truth;
O satisfy my soul in the words of Paul,
And shield my loved ones beneath the wing of thy glory,
Shield my loved ones beneath the wing of thy glory.

Bless everything and everyone
Of this little household by my side;
Place the Cross of Christ on us with the power of love,
Till we see the land of joy,
Till we see the land of joy.

What time the kind shall forsake the stalls,
What time the sheep shall forsake the folds
What time the goats shall ascend to the mount of mist,
May the tending of the Triune follow them.

Thou Being who didst create me in the beginning,
Listen and attend to me as I bend the knee to Thee,
Morning and Evening as is becoming in me,
In Thine own presence, O God of life,
In Thine own presence, O God of life.

Moving away from the Highlands, we have some examples of May Day songs and rhymes sung across the country. The following was collected in Iona and Peter Opie's book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, which they heard sung by children in Huntingdonshire:

This begins the merry month of May,
The springtime of the year,
And now we've come into your house
To taste of your strong beer.

And if you have got no strong beer
 We'll be content with small,
 We'll take the goodwill of your house
 And return God thanks for all.

We have been travelling this long night
 And part of this long day,
 And now we've come into your house
 To bring you a branch of May.

A branch of May we have brought you
 And at your door doth stand,
 'Tis but a sprout but it's well budded out
 By the work of our Lord's hand.

The life of man is but a span
 And cut down in its flower;
 We're here today, tomorrow gone,
 The creatures of an hour.

Instruct and teach your children well
 The while that you are here.
 It will be better for your soul
 When your corpse lies on the bier.

Today you be alive and well,
 Worth many a thousand pound,
 Tomorrow dead and cold as clay
 Your corpse laid underground.

With one turf at thy head, O man,
 And another at thy feet,
 Thy good deeds and thy bad, O man,
 Will altogether meet.

Our song is done, we must be gone,
 No longer can we stay.
 God bless you all, both great and small,
 And we wish you a happy May.

The town of Peebles in the Scottish Borders has celebrated Beltane for hundreds of years, putting on a very elaborate parade and pageant each year, including the annual 'Common Riding', which takes place in many towns throughout the Scottish Borders. As well as the crowning of a Beltane Queen each year, it is custom to sing 'The Beltane Song':



The Beltane Song

At Beltane in the aulden time, it was the custom gay,
 To gather on the village green and hail the festal day,
 Huntsman gallant and sheperds grey, dought and blythsome men,
 And Lassies blooming fresh and fair cam liltin' doon the glen,
 Through the greenwood haste away,... Sing aloud the festal lay,
 Busk the the Beltane banner gay, to Peblis and the play.

Auld Neidpath, grim and grey wi' years, looks doon wi war-scarred face,
 And sentinels our royal toun wi' majesty and grace,
 Loyal sons of a fearless race, gather we here today,
 And sing the auld-warld round-e-lay of 'Peblis to the Play',
 Wave the Beltane banner high, Ring the anthem to the sky,
 While our silver stream rolls by, The Tweeddale glen for aye.

Across the wild foam-crested wave, in distant lands of fame,
 The exile oft wi' pride recalls the dear auld Border hame,
 And while we crown our Beltane queen, 'mid flaming skies of June,
 We pledge the leal hearts far a-wa and lilt our festal tune,
 Honour is our watchword clear, Truth our dauntless halberdier,
 Liberty's our heralds cheer, Long live our Beltane Queen.

The phrase 'Peblis to the Play' in this song makes reference to a poem in Old Scots that is rumoured to have been written by James the first. The first verse gives a sense of the lively and exciting celebration of Beltane:

At Beltane, quhen ilk bodie bownis
 To Peblis to the Play,
 To heir the singin and the soundis;
 The solace, suth to say,
 Be firth and forrest furth they found/
 Thay graythis tham full gay;
 God wait that wald they do that stound,
 For it was their feist day,
 Thay said,

Of Peblis to the Play.

Along with these older rhymes and songs, it is important to remember that the first of May also has strong connections to trade unions, the labour movement and socialism. The widespread establishment of May Day marches broadly stems from marches and protests in favour of establishing an 8-hour working day in the United States at the end of the 19th century, although of course are a continuation of a general community involvement in May festivities lasting hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Here are a couple of examples of songs that were sung when these May Day marches first began:

Harold Rome's Round for May Day

Oh, sing a song of labor upon the first of May!
Sing millions strong and march along in proud and gay array.
Oh, sing a song of struggle in labor's cavalcade,
So left, right, left is right, workers on parade.

Sheet music: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/music/rome.JPG>

Sound file: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/music/romeround.mid>

May Day Song

Once a year we hear the sound of marching feet,
Marching altogether on the May Day Street.
Come and join the crowd that is so proud to say
THIS IS OUR OWN DAY, YEAH!
Come on and march, come on and march,
Come on and march on May Day.
Goodbye to blues, goodbye to sorrow, we're marching today,
We're marching tomorrow, for a roof overhead,
For our bed and our bread,
Come on and march on May Day!
Come on and march, come on and march,
Come on and march on May Day.

Sheet music: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/music/robinson.JPG>

Sound file: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/music/maydaysong.mid>

Credits:

Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica Vol 1*: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/cg1/>

Peebles Beltane Festival: http://www.peeblesbeltanefestival.co.uk/html/the_beltane_song.html,