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‘The Maypole is up, now give me the cup...’

Onlookers at the 1983 Chester Cycle or the 1985 Towneley Cycle productions at the University of Toronto were delighted to see an additional, pretty spectacle: Maypole dancing. In the intervals between plays, as a part of the craft fair entertainment, I led a willing assortment of volunteer dancers through the over-and-under motions of simple Maypole ribbon weaving. Sometimes the red, yellow, blue and green ribbons got tangled, but more often we were successful at producing a beautiful pattern of motion and woven colours gradually extending down the pole — and then we would reverse our movements and unwind. Sometimes we had musicians; sometimes the audience helped out by singing a tune for us!

What both dancers and audience perhaps did not realize was that the ribbons which looked so pretty were entirely anachronistic. In English tradition, Maypole dances with hand-held ribbons, woven around short poles as part of a ‘show dance’, go back to the mid-18th century at the earliest. Otherwise, people did simple country dances such as ‘Sellenger’s Round’ or ‘Gathering Peascods’ around the foot of the pole itself, or in a circle nearby. The early pole (often painted in barbershop spirals) was decorated with streamers and garlands of flowers, and was usually quite tall — too tall for the kind of ribbons we wove at the Cycle fairs. A few of these old-style poles still survive in England today, such as at Barwick-in-Elmet, near Leeds, or at Padstow, in Cornwall.

Ribbon dancing, generally thought of as an Italian import, became fashionable in the mid-19th century, just when many older popular sports and recreations were fading out of English folk life. When education became compulsory in the 1880s, the spread of ribbon Maypole dances was furthered by a new generation of lady school teachers who enjoyed such genteel exercise. The Victorian love of the floreate and of innocent childhood (rather indiscriminantly mixed up with a penchant for all things ‘Olde English’) contributed to the popularity of the new Maypole dances as well. Ribbon dancing became the dominant Maypole style, resulting in such compromises as one still seen today at Ickwell, in Bedfordshire, where ribbons have been attached about one third of the way up a tall red and white pole and the dancers wear mock rustic costumes of an uncertain period.

Even the ribbon-style Maypole dances faded into obscurity in England by the time...
of World War II, but the folk revival of the 1960s helped to bring them alive once more, as well as other traditional dances such as the Morris. Maypole dances also emigrated along with many folks to different corners of the world and, where successfully transplanted, have evolved in different ways. Colleges like Earlham and Bryn Mawr in the United States, for instance, have their own well-established traditional May Day ceremonies now — with ribbons on their poles! I have even learned of an Afro-Caribbean tradition of Maypole dancing (around a special May tree, without ribbons) which has developed on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua in the wake of British colonialism.

In Canada, however, when I say I am at work on a history of Maypoles, I am likely to see a quizzical eyebrow and hear 'maples?' Occasionally I find ethnic folk dances which feature small, decorated staff-like Maypoles; some informants have told me about dancing around Maypoles years ago — such as at the Ottawa Ladies College or within the Montreal Protestant School Board; another cited the little-known tragedy of a child who was killed in the 1930s, when a rusty metal ‘maypole’ (the kind of playground equipment hung with chains you hold and swing round on) collapsed — causing the Toronto School Board to banish them throughout the city.

But what of the early evidence of Maypoles? It is as fragmentary as the records of early English drama, and my research is by no means complete. What follows is a brief summary of my work to date.

Working backwards from the edict of 1644 which ordered all the Maypoles in England be taken down, we can generalize that Maypoles — also called ‘summer poles’, and as often linked to Whitsuntide as the Celtic first of May — were most widely enjoyed in the preceding 200 years. In the later 17th century, even after they were prohibited, some Maypoles lingered on in remote corners of the country. Of course there were many joyful restorations of Maypoles in 1661, especially of the famous pole erected in the Strand. However, they never again were as prevalent as before the Commonwealth.

The edict of 1644 was itself simply the end of a long succession of Puritan diatribes against the evil of Maypoles, or in Phillip Stubbes' famous words in 1583, against ‘this stinking Idol, rather. Because Maypoles were associated with pre-Reformation, church-sponsored May Games, they were condemned as ‘popish’. This is an ironic association, considering the pagan and phallic significance of the Maypole as a variation of the anciently symbolic Tree of Life.

Undoubtedly pre-Christian in origin, Maypoles and many other vegetation rites were absorbed into Christian times with difficulty. Long before the days of the 1618 or 1633 editions of King James' Book of Sports (specifying just when Maypole dancing was to be allowed); indeed long before the historic Evil May Day in 1517 (when the pole in front of St. Andrew’s Undershaft in London was taken down because it was the center for an apprentices’ riot), there were complaints about the bad influence of May activities. In 1244, for example, the bishop of Lincoln, Robert Grosseteste, complained about clerics who made ‘inductionem Maii’ [quoted in Chambers, The Medieval Stage, 1, p 91].

Well before the Tudor and Elizabethan May Games began to be popular, May processions and greenery for bowers, garlands, etc were common. Maypoles themselves, however, do not appear in written or visual records with any frequency until the 1500s. The earliest English evidence I have yet found documenting an actual Maypole is the Lostock, Cheshire, 'mepul' charter granted in the time of King John (1167–1216) [cited in Dugdale, Monasticon Anglicanum, 6, pt 2, p 207 (1847)]. The May Fair charter for an annual fair, held in the area of London which now goes by that name, was granted during the reign of Edward I (1271–1307). I do not know when the famous Maypole at Mayfair was first erected, although Chaucer mentions ‘the great shaft at Cornhill,’ also in London, in 1388, as though it were well known.

By the 16th century, however, Maypoles ('somar pole', 'summer tree' etc) were widely noted. Church wardens’ records are full of references to payments for poles being put
up, taken down, refurbished, made into firewood, ladders, and so forth. Alexandra Johnston, for instance, in her work on folk drama in Berkshire, has found approximately twenty references in that area inside a period of ninety years. Forthcoming REED volumes will document this activity much more fully, of course.

To date I have been unable to find any visual evidence of Maypoles earlier than the coloured painting attributed to Anne of Brittany’s Book of Hours, dated 1499, now located in the Bibliotheque Nationale. This picture simply shows a pole without dancers. The pole is highly stylized, on a tiered base, hung with round baubles which might be eggs (another symbol of spring). There are also some wonderful sixteenth-century woodcuts by the German artist H.S. Beham portraying peasant life at the village fairs, which include several different kinds of dancing and celebrating. And a delightful Flemish etching of the same period shows villagers dancing in a ring around a central tree (which holds a band of musicians up in its highly trimmed branches), while on the side of the green stands a tall pole, decorated with a garland of what may be eggs again. This is an anonymous work from the Victoria & Albert Museum, but these are definitely ‘Maytime’ dancers and the pole is a ‘Maypole’.

However, there are very few English visuals: I have found one sixteenth-century map of London with a tiny pole in front of the tiny Church of St Mary-le-Strand. This was drawn by a Dutchman, Van den Wyngaerde, in 1543. From the next century, the earliest representation of a Maypole in England is simply a broadsheet woodblock print (now in the Bodleian) of approximately 1630 – it shows a straight tall shaft with greenery and a garland at the top and no ribbons attached for dancers. The famous ‘Betley window’ featuring stained glass Morris dancers and a Maypole with the banner ‘A Mery May’ is probably from this same period as well.

As research for my book progresses, I am exploring the early Indo-European sources of the Maypole as it came to be known in England and now in North America, as well as the very slim evidence of its existence in the first millennium AD. I also am looking at many different influences on the ‘rise and fall’ of Maypoles and Maypole dancing in the second millennium, such as the Puritan opposition, already mentioned; royal patronage; agricultural or rural customs vs city life; class conflicts; settlement patterns in forests vs open fields; Sabbatarianism; the Enclosure Acts and the emergence of private property; the Industrial Revolution itself; and the calendar change of 1752, which ‘caused’ the first of May to have almost two weeks’ earlier weather. In addition, there is more to say about Maypoles as symbols of freedom, sometimes called ‘liberty poles’, and about nineteenth- and twentieth-century illustrators of children’s books, who seem to have doted upon Maypole imagery. The total history of Maypoles is fascinating, diverse, and often richly detailed.

I certainly have not yet assembled all the pieces of this history which I know are ‘out there’, particularly in terms of early English materials. There are many questions still to be asked, and the subsequent answers to puzzle over. For instance, one visual detail I want to decipher is the significance of a pair of copulating dogs in the foreground of the majority of the Maypole pictures I have collected! Any ideas? For this in particular, or for other issues in general, I would like to ask for assistance – references, specific quotations, and especially pictures – from anyone who reads this article. I will welcome any suggestions or help you can offer.