

THE WORSHIP OF TREES

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By Dr. C. D. Howe, Dean, Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto.

The belief that tree spirits had an influence upon cultivated crops was by analogy transferred to domestic animals, and various kinds of trees were used to insure the increase of the herds. Relicts of this belief in a changed form still remain in country districts in both the British Isles and on the Continent where a green bough placed against the stable on May Day will cause the cows to increase in milk. It was believed by our remote ancestors and is still believed by many primitive races that the presence of a tree or bough, or some ceremony in connection with trees was necessary to bring children to the home. It may be, we reflect, a modified relict of this belief in our desire to have a rubber plant or a dwarf fir tree in the home or a boxwood tree on the verandah.

Some antiquarians believe that tree worship was only an accidental offshoot, as it were, of ancestor worship, a form of worship apparently almost universal in the early development of nearly all races. Frequent sacrifices of animals, often of human beings, were made on the barrows, cumuli, or other forms of burial places. It was also the custom to keep the spirits of departed ancestors well supplied with food. Naturally, those practices greatly increased the fertility of the soil in the immediate vicinity and this expressed itself in a more luxuriant vegetation. The primitive man reasoned that the more vigorous growth of the trees in such places was caused by the spirits of his ancestors entering them. Therefore he held them in great veneration, and also regarded the tree as an emblem of fertility and productiveness. From this conception he passed by easy stages to the belief that the presence of certain trees in his fields or that certain ceremonies and rites centering about trees would increase the productivity of his crops and herds. In fact, some investigators believe that primitive man discovered the art of agriculture itself as a result of his ceremonies in ancestor worship. The burial of the dead and the victims of sacrifice resulted in the turning over of the sod and the stirring up of the soil. The native grains and fruits which he

THE MORNING COMETH.

Henry Van Dyke.

Many a tree is found in the wood
And every tree for its use is good;
Some for the strength of the gnarled
root,
Some for the sweetness of flower or
fruit;
Some for the shelter against the storm,
And some to keep the hearth-stone
warm;
Some for the roof and some for the
beam,
And some for a boat to breast the
stream;—
In the wealth of wood since the world
began
The trees have offered their gifts to
man.
But the glory of trees is more than their
gifts;
'Tis a beautiful wonder of life that
lifts,
From a wrinkled seed in an earth-bound
clod,
A column, an arch, in the temple of
God,
A pillar of power, a dome of delight,
A shrine of song, and a joy of sight!
Their roots are the nurses of rivers in
birth;
Their leaves are alive with the breath
of the earth;
They shelter the dwellings of man, and
they bend
O'er his grave with the look of a loving
friend.
I have camped in the whispering forest
of pines,
I have slept in the shadow of olives and
vines;
In the knee of an oak, at the foot of a
palm
I have found good rest and slumber's
balm,
And now, when the morning gilds the
boughs
Of the vaulted elm at the door of my
house,
I open the window and make salute;
"God bless thy branches and feed thy
root!
Thou hast lived before, live after me,
Thou ancient, friendly, faithful tree."

placed upon the burial ground as food for the spirits, germinated on the spot, grew vigorously and yielded an improved and more abundant harvest. Observing this, it occurred to some practical minded worshipper, keener than his fellows, to stir up the soil and plant seeds in other places than the burial mound, and thus began the cultivation of crops with all its far-reaching influence upon the development of the race.

The May-Pole Tradition.

At any rate, it seems quite certain that the prominent role of trees in the popular festivals of the European peasantry is an outcome of the

belief in the blessings which the tree spirits had in their power to bestow. We have an illustration of this in the May Day festival or the mid-summer festival. Originally in these, and it still holds in many parts, it was the custom to go into the woods, cut down a tree and bring it into the village amid general rejoicings. Later, these May-trees became simply May-poles. We have a quaint description of a May-pole celebration in the time of the good Queen Bess, from a Puritan writer who regarded such ceremonies as idolatrous. He says: "They have twentie or fourtie yoke of oxen, everyone having a sweet nose-gaie of flowers tyed on the tippe of his hornes, and these oxen draw home this Mai-pole (this tinckying idoll rather), which is covered all over with flowers and hearbes, bounde rounde aboute with strynges from the top to the bottome, and sometime painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children following it with great devotion. And being reared up with handkerchiefs and flagges streamying on the toppe, they strawe the ground about, binde greene boughes aboute it, set up sommer hauls, bowers and arbours hard by it. Then fall they to banquet and feast, to leap and daunce about it as the heathen people did at the dedication of their idoles whereof this is a perfect patterne, or rather the Thyng itself."

As we have seen, the object of this ceremony was to bring in from the forest the renewing and fructifying spirit of vegetation newly awakened in the spring, so the pole was renewed each year. In course of time, however, the original meaning and significance of the custom was forgotten and the May-pole was regarded simply as a center for holiday merry-making. The people saw no necessity of felling a fresh tree every year, so they let the pole stand, only decking it with green boughs and fresh flowers on May Day. Later, the pole was taken down at the end of the ceremony and stored away until the next May Day, and finally the pole was not used at all, and is used today in the May festivals only in the more