

The Decline of Summer Festivals: How the Nuclear Family, Globalisation of Food Production, and International Trade and Travel Has Changed Our Relationship with Nature

By [Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

Traditional summer festivals have always revolved around the solstice and bonfires on the feast of St. John (24 June) in many countries.

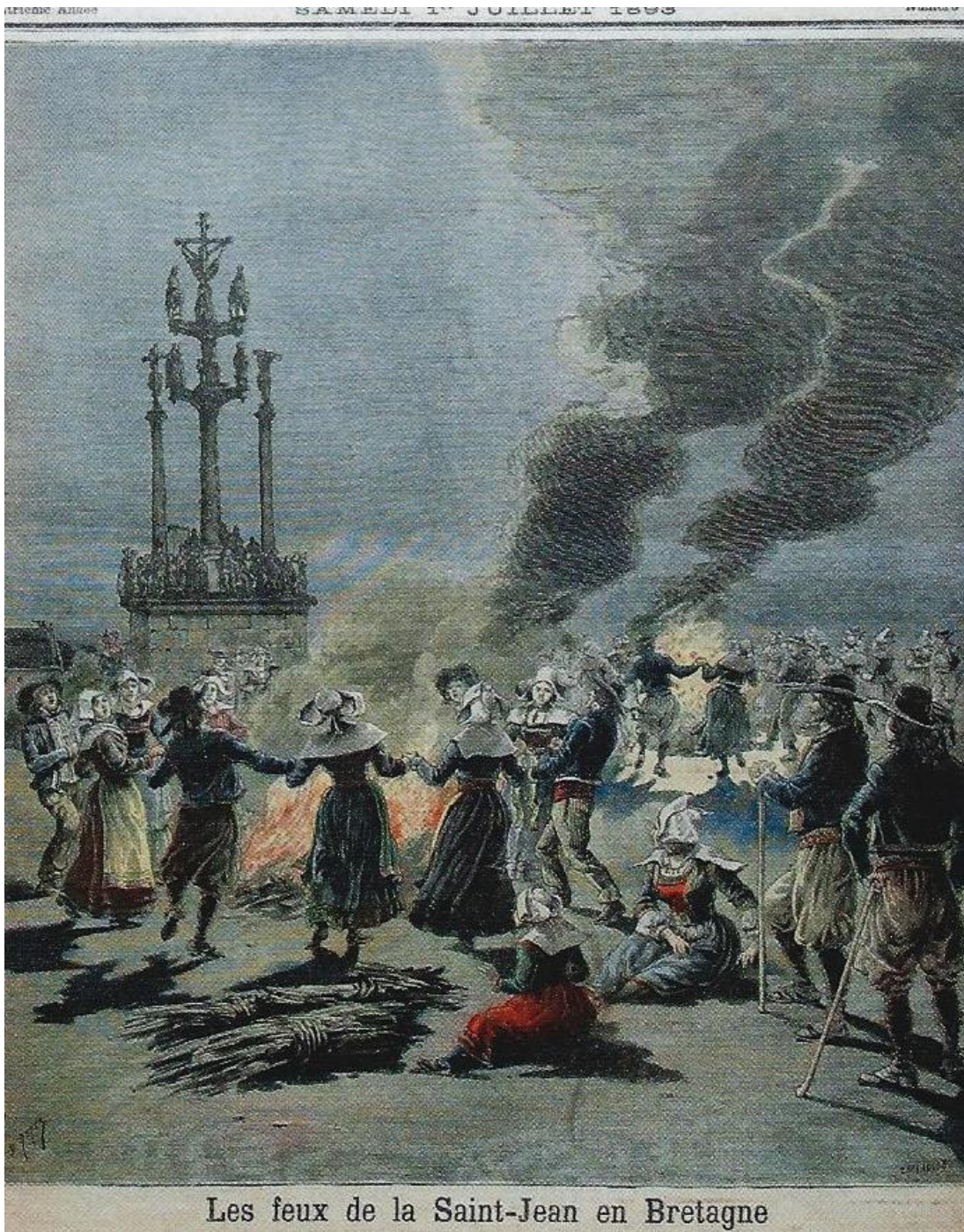
Maypole dancing was also an important aspect of some rural and agricultural summer events, and other summer festivals like Ferragosto (15 August), involved celebrating the early fruits of the harvest and resting after months of hard work. The summer solstice was seen as the height of the powers of the sun which has been observed since the Neolithic era as many ancient monuments throughout Eurasia and the Americas aligned with sunrise or sunset at this time. In the ancient Roman world, the traditional date of the summer [solstice](#) was 24 June, and “Marcus Terentius Varro wrote in the 1st century BCE that Romans saw this as the middle of summer.”

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Saint John's Fire with [festivities](#) in front of a Christian calvary shrine in Brittany, 1893

Ferragosto (Feriae Augusti ('Festivals [Holidays] of the Emperor Augustus')) were celebrated in Roman times on [August](#) 1st "with horse racing, parties and lavish floral decorations. Inspired by the pagan festival for Conso [Consus], the Roman god of land and fertility."

The pagan Italian deity, Consus, who was a partner of the goddess of abundance, Ops is [believed](#) to have come from condere ("to store away"), and so was probably the god of grain storage. The [holiday](#) of the Emperor Augustus was celebrated during the month of August with events based around the harvest and the end of agricultural work, and involved the rural community who were able to take a break from the back-breaking work of the previous weeks. In the 7th century, the Catholic Church in Italy adopted the holiday but changed the date of [celebration](#) from August 1st to August 15, to coincide with the

celebration of the [Assumption](#) of the Virgin Mary so as “to impose a Christian ideology onto the pre-existing celebration”.

Therefore, historically the midsummer festivities ranged from mid June to mid August as the strength of the sun went into decline and the fruits of the harvest were beginning to come in.

However, compared to the other seasonal festivals, such as Christmas, Easter, and Halloween, which have a very strong presence in the media and in the shops, but not the summer festivals. Why is this? Except for commercial music and arts festivals, there are no major commercialised products associated with the historical summer agricultural and fertility rites. For example, Christmas’s rebirth is associated with Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and the giving of presents. Easter’s new life festival is celebrated with dyed eggs, chocolate eggs and chocolate bunnies. Halloween’s reminders of death and the departed are celebrated with ‘trick or treating’, pumpkins, and bonfires.

In all these cases the combination of commercialisation and tradition has seen reciprocal relationships as one feeds off the other. The globalised media and cinema indulge in the myths of each season creating updated versions of their traditions that result in new economic and cultural products, for example, the growing of pumpkins in Ireland to replace the original turnip lanterns that the Irish brought to the USA, or new movies based on new twists on the myths of Christmas. These aspects keep nature-based pagan festivals alive in the mind of the public throughout most of the year.

Not so with summer. In general there seems to be no particular object or tradition to exploit or commercialise, or at least not yet. There are various possible reasons.



The [Feast](#) of Saint John by Jules Breton (1875).

In the last 100 years or so we have seen a societal change from the community to the nuclear family.

The general increase in wealth since the 1960s has resulted in mass international travel for summer holidays and tourism. The overall result of these changes in family, lifestyle, and the growth of non-agricultural occupations has seen people becoming more and more disconnected from the land and the agricultural traditions associated with farming and harvests. This was combined with the monopolisation and globalisation of agricultural production, and the international trade of agricultural goods.

Despite all of this, there are midsummer traditions that are persisting, although with a much lower profile than the other seasonal festivities.

What were the summer pagan traditions? Probably the strongest of the summer traditions is the bonfires of the feast of St. John. In the 13th century CE, a Christian monk of Lilleshall Abbey in England, [wrote](#):

“In the worship of St John, men waken at even, and maken three manner of fires: one is clean bones and no wood, and is called a bonfire; another is of clean wood and no bones, and is called a wakefire, for men sitteth and wake by it; the third is made of bones and wood, and is called St John’s Fire.”

In Ireland, St John’s Eve bonfires are still lit on hilltops in various parts of the [country](#). According to Marion McGarry:

“Since the distant past, bonfires lit by humans at midsummer greeted the sun at the height of its powers in the sky. The accompanying ritual celebrations were primal, restorative, linked with fertility and growth. Midsummer and the time around St John’s Day have been traditionally celebrated throughout Europe.”



Midsummer [festival](#) bonfire (Mäntsälä, Finland)

The bonfires were associated with purification and luck. Every aspect of the fire was important and taken into account: the flames, the smoke, the hot embers, and [even](#) the ash:

“Jumping through the bonfire was a common custom. A farmer might do this to ensure a bigger yield for his crops or livestock, while engaged couples would jump together as a sort of pre-wedding purification ritual. Single people jumped through in the hope it would bring them a future spouse. Finally, the fire was raked over and any cattle not yet at the summer pasture were driven through the smouldering smoke and ashes to ensure good luck. The remaining ash was scattered over crops or could be mixed into building materials to encourage good luck in a building. The ash was considered curative too, and some mixed it with water and drank as medicine. Embers were brought into the house as protective talismans.”

It was reported that John Millington Synge (playwright) and his friend, Jack B. Yeats (artist and illustrator) attended a St. John’s Eve [celebration](#) on a visit to County Mayo, Ireland, in 1905. At first, “they had been saddened by the depressed state of the area, but then Synge is quoted as saying: “...the impression one gets of the whole life is not a gloomy one. Last night was St. John’s Eve, and bonfires – a relic of Druidical rites – were lighted all over the country, the largest of all being in the town square of Belmullet, where a crowd of small boys shrieked and cheered and threw up firebrands for hours together.” Yeats remembered a little girl in the crowd, in an ecstasy of pleasure and dread, clutching Synge by the hand and standing close in his shadow until the fiery games were over.”

Bonfires were lit to honor the sun and to protect against evil spirits which were believed to

roam freely when the sun was turning [southward](#) again. They were “both a celebration of and devotion to the natural world.”

Maypoles were erected either in May or at midsummer as part of European festivals and usually involved dancing around the maypole by members of the community. It is not known exactly what the symbolism of dancing around the maypole is but most theories revolve around pagan ideas, e.g., Germanic reverence for sacred trees or as an ornament to bring good luck to the community. In [England](#):

“the dance is performed by pairs of boys and girls (or men and women) who stand alternately around the base of the pole, each holding the end of a ribbon. They weave in and around each other, boys going one way and girls going the other and the ribbons are woven together around the pole until they meet at the base.”



Dance [around](#) the Maypole by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, 16th century

In general, the importance of festive holidays lies in their value for reconnecting with family, friends and community. Michele L. Brennan [examines](#) the psychological aspects of traditional celebrations:

“Holiday traditions are essentially ritualistic behaviors that nurture us and our relationships. They are primal parts of us, which have survived since the dawn of man. Traditional celebrations of holidays has been around as long as recorded history. Holiday traditions are an important part to building a strong bond between family, and our community. They give us a sense of belonging and a way to express what is important to us. They connect us to our history and help us celebrate generations of family. Children crave the comfort and security that comes with traditions and

predictability. This takes away the anxiety of the unknown and unpredictable.”



Maypole [dance](#) during Victoria Day in Quebec, Canada, 24 May 1934

The seasonal festivals were based on the very real fear and anxiety of human survival, focussing on the means of sustenance: agricultural production. The vagaries of weather patterns meant that there was never any guarantee that fruits and crops would survive until successful harvesting.

While much of this anxiety was quelled by changes in the agricultural production methods of the twentieth century. However, now, in the twenty-first century, there is an ever growing recognition that modern agricultural systems are untenable, and that a new emphasis on alternative and sustainable food growing [practices](#) is essential:

“Increasingly, food growers around the world are recognizing that modern agricultural systems are unsustainable. Practices such as monocultures and excessive tilling degrade the soil and encourage pests and diseases. The artificial fertilizers and pesticides that farmers use to address these problems pollute the soil and water and harm the many organisms upon which successful agriculture depends, from pollinating bees and butterflies to the farm workers who plant, tend and harvest our crops. As the soil deteriorates, it is able to hold less water, causing farmers to strain already depleted water reservoirs.”

However, this in contrast with technocratic elites who have a very different perspective on the future of food, as Colin Todhunter [writes](#):

“It involves a shift towards a ‘one world agriculture’ under the control of agritech and the data giants, which is to be based on genetically engineered seeds, laboratory created products that resemble food, ‘precision’ and ‘data-driven’ agriculture and farming without farmers, with the entire agrifood chain, from field (or lab) to retail, being governed by monopolistic e-commerce platforms determined by artificial intelligence systems and algorithms.”

While science and education has contributed to the changes in beliefs associated with ancient traditions revolving around purification and fertility, the psychological aspects of traditional holidays remain important. Furthermore, the growing awareness of the importance of good organic food is gradually competing with the monopolistic trends of globalist agritech.

The observance of traditional festivals, with their emphasis on nature and the annual cycle of seasonal changes focus attention on the here-and-now, on living according to our means and resources, and is a far cry from the teleological ideologies of patriarchal religion. The Christian church diverted people’s attention away from a practical, scientific cosmology towards their own heroes and saints who provided individualistic examples of concern for one’s own destiny after death and ‘judgement’ in the far future, as being more important than our present relationship with nature.

Over the centuries this process formed a gradual alienation of people away from nature itself, helped along now by the constant monopolisation of land, and the growth of agritech giants.



Instead of respecting the land, farmers use intensive farming to maximize yields, using more and more fertilizer and pesticides, depleting the nutrients of the soil and causing desertification to [spread](#). When I was growing up, local annual horticultural festivals and competitions emphasised diversity, production over consumption, and quality food produced locally. Traditional festivals, with their focus on sun cycles and the seasons, complemented and structured our relationship with nature, as well as work and rest, life and death.

It is necessary to re-focus our attention back on this life, on how we plan to organise our basic sustenance into the future, and in a sustainable way, before others turn nature into a desert, a dust bowl of gigantic proportions, in their constant, remorseless drive to convert the earth into profit.

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*Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin is an Irish artist, lecturer and writer. His [artwork](#) consists of paintings based on contemporary geopolitical themes as well as Irish history and cityscapes of Dublin. His blog of critical writing based on cinema, art and politics along with research on a database of Realist and Social Realist art from around the world can be viewed country by country [here](#). Caoimhghin has just published his new book – *Against Romanticism: From Enlightenment to Enfrightenment and the Culture of Slavery*, which looks at philosophy, politics and the history of 10 different art forms arguing that Romanticism is dominating modern culture to the detriment of Enlightenment ideals. It is available on Amazon (amazon.co.uk) and the info page is [here](#).*

Featured image: *Bonfire Night, St. John's Eve* by Jack Butler Yeats ([Ireland](#))

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