

The Marsden Imbolc festival: A case of civic paganism?¹

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss an event that takes place on the 1st of February every year in the town of Marsden, West Yorkshire, UK. This is a public occasion which celebrates the ancient festival of Imbolc – one of the four ‘fire festivals’ that some say underpinned the pagan Celtic calendar within the British Isles. Anyone familiar with ongoing debates concerning notions of precedent and authenticity with respect to modern ‘revivals’ of ancient pagan ways will be aware of just how contestable such attempts can appear in that specific regard (see Hutton 1996:411 and Bowman 2002). However, they will also probably be aware that such debates do not seem to have made much of a dent on the enthusiasm levels of those modern western individuals who elect to perform or observe such rites. Perhaps the most obvious example of such revivalism (among scholars of alternative religions, at least) is that of modern Pagans, who have taken it upon themselves to develop and maintain an approximation (in ‘spirit’, if not necessarily in ‘fact’) of the ancient, pre-Christian ritual calendar.

But what seems especially interesting about the Marsden festival (along with similar occasions like the May Day or Beltain festivals in Edinburgh and Hastings) is that, whatever resemblance it may have to overtly Pagan celebrations of this nature, it is intended first and foremost as a secular (as opposed to religious or spiritual) occasion, with the emphasis firmly upon a civic-minded inclusivity, although Pagans are by no means unwelcome as either participants or observers. With this distinction in mind, the following analysis will therefore attempt to assess the Marsden Imbolc festival’s significance in the light of the two contexts to which it is has arguable relevance – namely, those of modern British Paganism and the cultural ‘mainstream’, although historical references will also be cited where appropriate. It is based on questionnaire responses from festival participants, an in-depth interview with its long-time organiser, and personal observations of this year’s proceedings.

2. ‘Traditional’ background

The first point to make about any attempt by British individuals – Pagan or otherwise – to celebrate Imbolc concerns the absence of any demonstrable ancient British precedent for them to do so. As Ronald Hutton has pointed

out, while there is evidence for such a festival having occurred in Ireland and some parts of Scotland, there is none to prove the existence of any counterpart on the British mainland as a whole. Nevertheless, the advent of Wicca soon after World War Two introduced Imbolc – or, to give it its other titles, Oimeic or Brigantia – as part of a year-long, eightfold cycle of ritual celebrations that, regardless of historical continuity, has come to play an intrinsic part in the cultural life-worlds of many, if not most, Pagan individuals today, as well as serving as something of a spur for British folk tradition enthusiasts. This ‘wheel’ features two interlocking sequences, these being the two pairs of Solstices and Equinoxes, and the four ‘Fire Festivals’. Imbolc itself belongs to the latter group, coming between Samhain (1 November) and Beltain (1 May), the other being Lughnasadh or Lammas on 1 August. According to modern Pagan claims (which, it should be added, often do appear to demonstrate at least a modicum of familiarity with Celtic tradition), Imbolc thus provides a ceremonial and communal respite from the cold and dark that predominates at that time of year. Or as the Celtic reconstructionist Caitlín Matthews puts it, “[the] feast of Oimeic marked the loosening of Winter’s grip”, since it was at this point that “the new lambs were born and ewes were in milk” (Matthews 1989:84).

Interestingly, however, some argue that Imbolc was less culturally prominent in ancient times, for, as Matthews has it, “[l]ittle tribal celebration was observed at this time of year”² (1989:85) – and it does seem that festivals such as Samhain and Beltain enjoy far higher profiles within the respective (sometimes overlapping) worlds of Pagans and folklore enthusiasts today. That said, it should also be noted that Imbolc is thought by some to have celebrated what was perhaps the most popular deity in the areas where it occurred – the goddess Brigit, who is both daughter of the Dagda³ and a figure associated variously with motherhood, fertility and fire.

Mention should also be made here of Imbolc’s closest British equivalent, the Christian festival of Candlemas, which, according to Hutton, traditionally “marked the formal end of winter” in the British folk custom calendar (Hutton 1994:18). The folklorist, Christina Hole, suggests that Candlemas was being celebrated as far back as the fifth century (although Hutton cites the eighth century as more likely), and, describing the ceremony, writes that every 2 February, “the candles used in the churches are blessed and distributed and carried round in procession”, as a literal representation of Simeon’s description of Jesus as “a light to lighten the Gentiles” (Hole 1995/1976:57-8). Whether or not the ceremony really has its origins in a “pre-Christian Feast of Lights”, as Hole suggests (Hole 1995/1976:57), Candlemas can nevertheless be seen as a longstanding tradition exemplifying

the staging of a symbolic and communal occasion in a manner appropriate for the time of year at which it takes place, and as such could perhaps be thought as no less a precedent for modern Imbolc celebrations than any notional Pagan predecessor. Needless to say, however, little or none of its theological content is evident in Pagan celebrations, and so it is probably safest to assume that the *de facto* connection between the two festivals is an oblique one based on little more than broad thematic similarities.

3. Background

The Marsden Imbolc festival itself has only been celebrated since 1993, the initial planning having taken place the year before. Its originator, Duggs Carré, a folklore enthusiast who works for Kirklees Council, was involved in a local environmental organisation called the Countryside Volunteers. According to his professional colleague Neil Windett, Duggs was “looking for a local tradition, which [the Volunteers] could establish”; he adds, however, that “[u]nfortunately the only ones he could find out about involved either cruelty to animals or an excuse for vandalism”, which meant that they had to look somewhat further afield for inspiration.

Regarding their eventual choice, those with Pagan sympathies might be interested in the festival’s indirect relevance to the area by way of its presiding deity, since Brigit’s British equivalent, Brigantia (from whom its alternate name derives) is thought to have been the tutelary deity of the local Celtic tribal confederation, the Brigantes. However, Angie Boycott, another Countryside Volunteer and Marsden Imbolc’s longstanding organiser, claims to have been unaware of the ‘tribal’ connection during the festival’s initial development (although she admits that her colleague might conceivably have had some knowledge of this link). Either way, she is unaware of any direct ceremonial forebear having operated within the Marsden area, or even, for that matter, the country as a whole. According to Angie, the Volunteers thought that Imbolc was suitable for their purposes for two reasons. Firstly, they thought that

it would draw people out into the local environment to give them some sense of belonging and community, and to look at the environment and to have an awareness of the turning of the seasons.
(AB: 1)⁴

She adds:

I think people have become disassociated from the earth, and from the turning of the seasons and from the natural environment. And the thing about the Celtic stuff was that it reintroduced that to people, or it seemed so to me – to make people more aware of that natural cycle. (AB: 2)

Secondly, it was appropriate for the time of year at which they wanted to establish the festival. As Angie puts it:

[We] wanted something that's in winter, and generally things have gone quite, and we wanted it to be a fire festival, so you're limited to the particular times when the fire festivals [take place]. (AB: 2)

In all then,

[We] knew it was a fire festival, we knew it celebrated things beginning to wake up, under the earth, and so it was sort of the end of winter and beginning of spring, and so we wanted to put that over to people. (AB: 2)

However, it is very important to stress at this point that, according to Angie, although both are interested in Celtic traditions, neither herself nor Duggs regard themselves as Pagan. Moreover, they were anxious to promote “community involvement” in the project (AB:1), and thought that a sense of true inclusiveness could not develop around the festival were it presented as a Pagan occasion. Additionally, they are aware that, as a community group, the Volunteers should not be seen to be promoting Paganism *per se* out of sensitivity to those who might – justifiably or not – be alarmed by such an association. Angie illustrates her point by referring to some “churchgoing parents” who had objected to her promotion of the event in local schools, whom she successfully persuaded of the festival’s worth only after convincing them that there was no religious agenda or “faith” at work behind it (AB:10).

The organisers’ intentions are thus neatly summarised in the following words:

We're not celebrating Imbolc as a *religious* festival, but we are celebrating it as a festival which is based on the elements behind Imbolc. (AB:8)

More will be said on this subject, with particular reference to the questionnaire responses, in due course. Suffice it to say for now that in accordance with this brief, the festival has proceeded to grow remarkably since its inception, both in terms of public attendance and local involvement. Regarding the former, for example, the organisers estimate that the average crowd size at recent festivals is around a thousand people, which represents an increase of some 700 attendants or so since the first festival. Community participation in the festival takes many forms. For instance, during the 2004 festival there were four separate drumming groups taking part, including an *ad hoc* group calling itself a 'Community Orchestra', not to mention sundry other musicians, artists, dancers, masked walkers, lantern-makers, fire-jugglers, fire-twirlers and other pyrotechnicians, and a group of around ten or so adults and children carrying an enormous paper dragon puppet. And in point of fact, of the numerous participants in the 2003 event, only three could be described as 'official' organisers, these being Angie and Duggs themselves, and a colleague of theirs who has customarily acted as chief steward.

Interestingly, Angie relates that such is the level of local enthusiasm for the festival that she is now in the position where individuals seek her out with suggestions for improvements and offers of help, rather than *vice versa*. Moreover, it appears that local commercial interests have been keen to get involved, in the form of the Marsden Business Association, although a degree of sponsorship already exists thanks to the town's Community Shop, which "local groups" can apply to for money (AB: 12).

Among the participants canvassed, opinions regarding the festival's intended community focus were generally very positive. Responses to the questions, 'What does the Marsden Festival mean to you?' and, 'What do you think the festival means to the community?' included the following:

The keeping of tradition / Bringing communities together;

A chance for like minded people to get together to create an event that can be shared by the wider local community;

I think it brings folk together and reminds them of the coming Springtime;

Celebration, bright spot in dark days;

A good time to be had by all;

Celebration, community, good fireworks, something different.

Some were slightly more circumspect, however. A couple, for instance, described the festival in terms of a more general perception on the part of the populace of ‘incomers’ or hippies ‘acting weird’, and one suspected that “it means very little to a sizeable part of the community”, although he admits also to “liking the collective celebration aspect of it”. Ultimately, though, it seems impressive that, as one participant reveals, the festival attracts a “[m]ixed solid turn out by a minority of village, year on year” that numbers about ten per cent of the population, although Angie qualifies this estimate by suggesting that a number of those attending usually come from outside of Marsden (AB:9). It might also be significant that for all its high local profile, the festival has attracted negligible controversy from the ‘mainstream’, since the organisers claim to have received around 99% positive feedback, including media reports.

4. The Imbolc procession (2004)

In its initial stages, the Imbolc festival consisted of little more than a trail along the local canal, although it did include several interesting touches, drawing from a mixture of Celtic and non-Celtic sources, including at one time a “giant phoenix” coming out of an egg (AB:8). The canal walk has remained one of the permanent features of the festival. British Water – the company that owns the land – has not always been entirely co-operative with the organisers, citing insurance problems, although the Volunteers have up until now always been able to iron out any differences in time for the event. Around six years ago a dramatic climax to the procession was added, involving a ritual battle featuring (amongst other things) a ‘giant’ Green Man figure. Since then, the Volunteers have settled on a ‘core’ ceremony – basically, the canal-side procession followed by a ritual ‘battle’ capped off with fireworks – around which they can incorporate other, less integral, elements and features as they see fit (AB:11).

The 2004 festival began at around 7.00 pm, with a procession commencing from the pub/station, led by a group of black-cloaked individuals, most of whom were musicians playing a suitably solemn yet haunting folk dirge along the way. One of the company was wearing something resembling the black skull of a bird; the rest of the group all appeared to be wearing white masks. The crowd followed the procession alongside the railway towards a large, cordoned-off circle. A number of red flares and fires were positioned

around the arena, and an impressive ‘crest’, featuring a fox’s head above a Latin inscription⁵ stood in front of a larger fire. Actually lighting the fires proved troublesome, due to driving rain. Eventually, however, the fires took light and the ceremony proceeded with an impressive display of what could only be described as Morris dancing, albeit performed by a troupe wearing fox masks and cloaks and wielding torches, to the accompaniment of yet more sonorous, vaguely medieval – not to mention rather eerie sounding – folk music. The performers are actually a Sheffield-based group with whom Angie is involved, and who are active throughout the year, although this particular performance is something they devised especially for Marsden Imbolc.

After this stage had ended, the now very sizeable crowd followed yet another troupe of musicians playing atmospheric, dirge-like music through a housing estate towards the canal for the now traditional canal-walk. From the bridge leading towards the canal, it was possible to see a number of fire-twirlers positioned on a hill in the distance. In all, the journey appeared to take around 25 minutes, although the poor weather conditions and boggy ground may have made it seem to take longer than it actually did. Eventually, the procession arrived at the hill, where torches were still being swirled, and impressively large Catherine wheels were being ignited to the sound of some atmospheric, gamelan-style music courtesy of the Community Orchestra. Partially illuminated by these, it was possible to see some fragile and irregular structures – namely, six large discs and three even larger (roughly eight foot tall) vaguely conical shapes. The discs were set alight, leaving a line of burning ‘spokes’, while some flares were also ignited, and torches of some sort set alight inside the cones.

Eventually, a procession arrived, which included some of the participants seen earlier, such as the ‘fox people’ and the white-masked musicians, the bird-skulled individual, and a stag-headed character (whom Pagans would doubtless identify as the Horned God). This time, however, they were accompanied by much larger figures, of the sort folklorists refer to as ‘giants’.⁶

The first of these characters sported a silvery and very spiky head. This, it turned out, was meant to be Jack Frost, who had been chosen to embody winter for the occasion, although the Volunteers believe that his appearance in such a folk ritual is unprecedented. Soon, another giant appeared, this time with a massive, illuminated green head, and accompanied by his own troupe. This was the Green Man, the personification of life and growing things, and (in this context) of the light half of the year. According to Angie, this figure

features (in such forms as Jack-in-the-Green) more customarily at Beltain or Mayday, but was deemed appropriate for the occasion due to his traditional associations with “fertility and new growth” (AB:19). The two giants had a brief standoff before commencing their symbolic struggle, which Jack duly lost. He exited from the hillside to cheers from the crowd (not to mention an impromptu chorus of ‘Hit The Road, Jack’ coming from a couple of women in the crowd).

The Green Man’s victory over Jack heralded the arrival of the final giant figure – the Sun, whose entrance heralded the lighting of a solar disc (also obviously representing the ‘rebirth’ of the Sun), which in turn gave way to a spectacular firework display. Finally, after ten minutes or so, the individual overseeing the pyrotechnics made a circle with his torch then threw it onto the hillside, signalling the end of the festival, to much cheering and applause from the crowd.

5. Possible significance

Given the pivotal role of the modern Pagan movement in Imbolc’s instillation within British the cultural landscape, and the obvious and apparently growing popularity of the festival in this guise, it is appropriate to ask whether Marsden Imbolc might therefore be thought to represent a sort of civic Paganism – which is to say, an example of ‘revived’ Paganism taking centre stage within a ‘mainstream’ locale. Considering the seemingly ambivalent status accorded to religious and Pagan notions in the festival context by the organisers, it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to sustain such an argument.

Not least, for all the – largely indirect – influence that Pagan ritual notions have had on the development of Marsden Imbolc, the two are by no means entirely congruent. To compare the two, it is first necessary to look at what Pagans actually believe they are doing when performing ritual. Thus, as Susan Greenwood has persuasively argued (and as is supported by the author of this article’s own doctoral research on the phenomenon [Jones 2003]), the principle *raison d’être* behind modern Pagan ritual praxis is the cultivation of a sense of potent and immediate “[c]onnection with the otherworld”⁷ (Greenwood 2000:1). Being such a key idea, this ‘Otherworld’ concept needs further explication. Briefly, it can be understood as the notional ‘source’ of magical and spiritual energies, which is thought by Pagans to exist in accessible, vivifying proximity to the world of sense impressions and everyday ‘reality’. Accordingly, Pagan ritual – including seasonal celebrations such as the ‘fire festivals’ – is inherently an “intensive

experience” for those taking part (2000:16), being a “multi-modal symbolic form” that, as Greenwood saliently puts it, serves as “scaffolding for access to the otherworld” (2000b:24). As such, it offers a ‘controlled’ experience of these realms (a necessary precaution, it is held, given the intense, and therefore potentially disruptive and troublesome, nature of Otherworld ‘contact’).

In contrast, regardless of what seems to be the organisers’ broad environmentalist affinities (which are also a hallmark of much Pagan discourse), the scrupulously non-religious agenda behind the Marsden festival means that it can appeal to the locality’s non-Pagan majority, including those who are unfamiliar with, or disbelieving or antagonistic towards Pagan notions, or have no desire to experience powerful Otherworld ‘energies’. In this regard, Marsden Imbolc therefore contrasts sharply with a type of – predominantly American – phenomenon Sarah Pike has written about in a recent study, where Pagan individuals amass in rural locations to create “a place apart” from the ‘mainstream’ (Pike 2001: 24). This is because the intention in such cases is clearly of forging a specifically Pagan-centred sense of community identity, based on the participants’ expectations of or hopes for profound magical ‘connectivity’ with each other and with the immediate environment, whereas no such ‘governing’ or ‘official’ agenda is evident with regard to Marsden Imbolc.

But on the other hand, the thematic and symbolic congruities between Marsden Imbolc and identifiably Pagan ritual celebrations also mean that the event provides sufficient ideological ‘space’ to enable those who wish to use it as a stage for Pagan ‘worship’ to do just that, albeit on a strictly personal level. It is interesting to note, for example, that a number of the participants at this year’s festival – including some of the ‘fox people’ – do indeed identify themselves as Pagans, and that the organisers are aware of a number of Pagan groups who regularly travel from outside Marsden to attend the event. Indeed, the author himself was first made aware of Marsden Imbolc through an email message sent in 2003 to year to members of the Leeds University Occult society.

The participant questionnaire responses are particularly significant here. In particular, responses to the questions, “Do you currently class yourself as religious or spiritual? If so, what is your current religion or spiritual orientation?” elicited the following responses:

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C of E;

Nothing concrete;

Hmmm, spiritual but open to all ideas;

Definitely not religious, but I believe in a higher order and a Spirit World;

No;

Personal spiritual ideas not necessarily based on any religion/philosophy;

Spiritual;

Spiritual – no firm beliefs but pagan leanings!

Spiritual – non denominational;

None that I could name;

No;

No;

Pagan;

Pagan-ish.

They were also asked what their background religion was. Responses, in the same order, were as follows:

C of E;

Catholic (Not now practising);

C of E;

No Religion – Agnostic;

C of E;

None;

C of E;

None;

C of E;

No religion;

Atheist-devotee;

Ø;

Pagan;

Pagan-ish.

It is important to stress at this point that it is in no way the intention here to suggest that the respondents necessarily constitute a representative sample of all the participants, let alone of all those attending. Rather, their comments are merely intended to give a very broad indication of the range of attitudes and opinions that can be found among the sort of individuals who actively support the event. But in accordance with this (limited) brief, when viewed alongside a claim that Angie makes to the effect that a number of the regular participants are actually “church-going Christians”, the above comments do seem adequately to demonstrate the broad and inclusive nature of the event’s appeal, extending, as this appears to do, from those who deny the veracity of any spiritual notions, to those with strong religious or quasi-religious affinities (of either ‘conventional’ or heterodox hues), *via* the extensive middle ground of vague or ‘agnostic’ metaphysical speculation.

Moreover, further to this point, whatever their representative value in methodological terms, the combined comments on the participants’ current and background religious affiliations arguably paint a picture that appears closely to resemble that which seems typically to be portrayed nowadays in studies of modern British religious trends. Grace Davie’s comment on what she sees as Britain’s peculiarly “low-key approach to religiosity” notably springs to mind (Davie 1994: 69), as does Tony Walter’s assertion that modern trends illustrate “the considerable detachment of religious experience from formal religion” (Walter 1996: 45). In turn, such studies serve to reinforce the sort of recent, general appraisals of western religiosity which seek – plausibly, it could be argued – to describe the ongoing influence of secularisation on religious understandings as a broadly individualising rather than destructive one, while also emphasising what appears to be the peerlessly non-committal and ‘eccentric’ nature of British (or, to be more precise, English) religious culture.

That said, it is appropriate also to stress once more the event’s basically non-religious ethos, which strongly suggests (as do a number of the previous questionnaire responses) that, on a communal as opposed to purely personal level, at least, its primary importance lies in its function as an enjoyable and entertaining public spectacle, rather than as a source of spiritual ‘resonance’. But, again, a comparison with broader contexts is useful. It is interesting to note, for example, that during the historical period when cultural life was dominated by large-scale public festivities of this sort (which Hutton dates

from around the late fifteenth century up to the Reformation [Hutton 1994, esp. chapter one] entertainment and spectacle were integral features of many of these events⁸. Moreover, the governing ethos of Marsden Imbolc strongly accords with the community focus that too seems to have been of central importance in public celebrations during the ‘Merry England’ period, and even much later⁹.

Thus, in its organisers’ desire to deliver exactly the type of simultaneously visceral and civic-minded activities portrayed in historical accounts of such festivities, Marsden Imbolc could, despite its meagre levels of ‘authenticity’ *per se*, perhaps be seen as reasserting at least some elements of the cultural ethos that once prevailed within the British ‘mainstream’ during its folkloric ‘heyday’.

But this begs the question, “Why now?” That is, why has an event that some might dismiss as a mere folkish anachronism appeared so spectacularly within a modern and mainstream location, and to such seemingly popular and uncontroversial effect? Without wanting to venture too close to the muddy waters of postmodern theory, it might be worth citing Giddens’ notion of the ‘disembedding of tradition’ following the demise of modernity’s ‘certainties’, which theory, as Helen Berger has recently suggested, may be of some use when discussing modern cultural heterodoxies such as Paganism (1999). However, as was argued recently (Hope and Jones 2003), while the degree of leeway that modern individuals now appear to have with respect to the construction of their own personal ‘lifeworlds’ might seem unprecedented, Giddens’ theoretical description of this process perhaps overstates the extent to which the post-Enlightenment fortunes of ‘tradition’ have been inversely proportional to those of the techno-rationalist imperative that, he supposes, lies at the heart of modernity. That is, it could be countered that, as Campbell’s discussions of Romanticism (1987) and the ‘cultic milieu’¹⁰ suggest, modernity has in fact never been quite the symbolic ‘blank slate’ that theorists such as Giddens portray it as being. And moreover, while the deliberate ‘recreation’ and re-contextualisation of ‘traditional’ forms may seem more evident nowadays, it could also be added that the dissemination and maintenance of ‘tradition’ has arguably perennially concerned what Raymond Williams referred to as ‘reproduction in action’ (quoted in Fornäs 1995:22), and as such is intrinsically a far more artful and creative a process than has often been assumed¹¹. Overall, then, for all its nuances, the idea of ‘disembeddedness’ nevertheless paradoxically hinges upon a longstanding but nowadays hard to sustain Romantic, or alternately, Weberian view of ‘tradition’ as an idealised, catch-all category denoting or alluding to the

enduring, ‘meaningful’, even ‘primordial’, in defining contrast to the supposed novelty, in-authenticity and ephemerality of modernity.

An alternative explanation is that it is the demise of formal religious structures – not to mention strictures – that has effectively granted individuals *carte blanche* to furnish their own personal symbolic environments as they see fit. However, while, as Paul Heelas has persuasively suggested, this has in many cases resulted in a blanket rejection of the very notion of ‘tradition’ – the New Age being his consummate example (1996) – it may also perhaps be expected that other scenarios will arise. For example, it might be that, particularly among those with little in the way of religious ‘baggage’, new modes of symbolic engagement will be created or synthesised that do not reject such notions in their entirety, but will rather deliberately invoke aspects of these for their perceived experiential and cultural potency, while eschewing the potentially overbearing detritus of moral exclusivity or cosmic dread that conventionally accompanies religious expression in one form or another. The notion of ritual is a prime case in point. That is to say, it could be argued that while – as a number of recent studies have suggested – western individuals may commonly harbour spiritual or otherwise ‘supernatural’ notions¹², the symbolically inchoate nature of modern society has arguably left them wanting something more ‘tangible’ or robust, to help add structure and definition to their experiences, with ritual providing an adequate supplement in this regard, for some at least.

The following comment by Angie seems appropriate here:

I think, even though [some] people [attending the festival] maybe *are* churchgoing Christians, there’s a huge bulk of people I think these days who don’t actually have or follow religion in say the way ... say, you as a Pagan will actually follow your religion and celebrate it, and have certain things that you do, and if someone’s a churchgoing Christian they may do whatever they do. But there’s a big bulk of people in the middle who actually don’t have this sort of ritual in their life, and for me there’s a big ritualistic element to [the festival]. And I think even for people [attending the festival] who aren’t Pagans there’s still ritual there. (AB:8)

Of course, the notion of ‘ritual’ is, as Catherine Bell points out, a notably problematic term. Not least, it has been subject to a substantial degree of ‘reification’ as a consequence of western academic and cultural discourse, to become, in many instances, a “more important focus of attention than the doctrines that appear so tied to particular cultures and histories”

(Bell 1997:263). In other words, it has become possible for theorists and participants alike to regard ritual as an end in itself, in need of no governing pretext or context, at least in theory. Moreover, the construct has tended to be neither analytically nor empirically neutral, but rather has typically come attached with a culturally highly-loaded agenda. This is because initially it was “primarily used to define and mediate plurality and relationships between ‘us and them,’ with the practices of ‘them’ ranging from primitive magic to papist idolatry to the affirmation of traditional wisdom in the face of brutal modernity” (1997:262). In other words, it has conventionally been employed as an identifier of ‘otherness’, denoting either “disgust or romantic attraction” (1997:260) (in much the same way, it could perhaps be added, as have notions of ‘tradition’ generally).

However, while the genie may well more or less be out of the bottle, it might nevertheless be possible to discern a less troubling or tendentious side to this sort of ‘reified’ ritual conception. Firstly, it may perhaps be that such a ‘universalised’ understanding of ritual has allowed for an unprecedented degree of creativity and flexibility in ritual construction, by enabling individuals to establish ‘connecting points’ between all manner of cultural and symbolic streams, however seemingly disparate, based in no small part on what participants find appealing, intriguing or appropriate on either personal or collective levels. Much has been made of this tendency as it appears to be manifesting in Pagan culture, the work of Sabina Magliocco coming notably to mind. She writes, for instance, that Pagan ritual is

... not strongly fixed, but fluid; while it is built around a basic framework ... it is subject to constant innovation and variation according to the personalities of the individuals involved, their moods and desires, the time of year, and multiple other factors. (Magliocco 1996: 95)

And, while Marsden Imbolc might not be Pagan *per se*, it could nevertheless also be suggested that, given its eclectic origins, diverse sources of inspiration, and fluid construction, it is no less illustrative of such a principle, albeit on a less ‘intensive’ level ultimately.

Secondly, by providing a symbolic arena that could be seen as, at least in potential, detached from formal or overt political or religious narratives, this sort of ritualising approach might therefore give substantial scope for inclusivity by aspiring to popular appeal without demanding uniformity of interpretation. The example of Marsden Imbolc seems – again – appropriate, as the following comment from Angie perhaps illustrates:

[When] I talk to people in the village I *know* there are people who go because they love the spectacle of the fireworks at the end; there are other people who go because they want to celebrate Imbolc as a religious festival. There are other people who love drumming at night, you know? Everybody has their own reason for going. But what I love about it is that on that night everybody comes together, and whatever their differences are, for that short time they become a *community* that's celebrating this thing that's bigger than all of them.

And this, it could be argued, very much ties in with the anthropologist Ronald Grimes' suggestions for a less 'loaded' or ethnocentric understanding of ritual, which he defines simply as "*sequences of ordinary action rendered special by virtue of their condensation, elevation, or stylisation*" (Grimes 2000:70-1, emphasis in original), a formulation that he believes may serve as a culturally neutral guideline for western scholars and ritualists alike.

6. Conclusion

It might thus be proposed that, while it seems unlikely that human individuals will ever tire of activities which promise such 'elevated' experiences, modernity if anything seems to have encouraged the personalisation and secularisation of the interpretative contexts within which this sort of activity takes place. However – as the Marsden Imbolc festival perhaps attests – this process need not portend or signify the fragmentation of collective identities, but rather might under certain circumstances even be thought to facilitate the cultivation of a sense of inclusiveness and community. Furthermore, while the Marsden festival may exhibit little in the way of direct continuity with either ancient or modern Pagan precedents, its possible significance for the Pagan community should not be ignored. In short, it might conceivably be appropriate to regard it as providing a genuine symbolic nexus point where self-identified Pagans are able to co-mingle on equal terms with church-goers, atheists, and agnostics – inhabitants of mainstream and cultic milieux alike, not to mention the seemingly expanding 'grey area' in between – for the deliberate purpose of ritualised communal engagement. In conclusion, Marsden Imbolc arguably gives us a tantalising glimpse of at least some of the ways that religious, spiritual and cultural sensibilities are currently modifying themselves following the general demise of orthodox or institutional religion within the country, and as such shows that such festivals, occurring as these now appear to be throughout the UK, offer substantial scope for further academic investigation.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the second international conference on Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies, University of Wolverhampton, 21 May 2004.

² Matthews adds that "there are fewer myths and stories about the feast of Oilmelc [Imbolc]" than there are about the other fire festivals (Matthews 1989:87).

³ The chief god of Irish mythology

⁴ This referencing system denotes the page of the interview transcript from which the quote was taken (copy available from the author on request).

⁵ The author could only make out the word 'ferox' from this.

⁶ These are basically huge puppets carried aloft by participants in festivals, which appear to represent an authentic and very old British folk tradition. It is interesting to note, for instance, that a description of the types of midsummer festivities that were taking place in London prior to 1540 shows that these included, among other contributions, just such "model giants" (Hutton 1994: 37).

⁷ Modern Pagans draw their conceptions of the Otherworld realms from a number of sources, most notably European myth and folktale (especially from the Celtic and Nordic worlds), and the shamanic lore of 'tribal' cultures worldwide.

⁸ Consider, for example, the midsummer festival mentioned previously, which, alongside the ‘model giants’ already referred to, also featured (according to the same contemporary account) “Morris dancers” and “pageants”. Further, these accompanied a “4000 strong” procession made up of members of local guilds, who “paraded through the streets carrying torches or weapons” (Hutton 1994: 37). Hutton also points out that the largest number of such spectacular events actually took place during “the first half of the year”, such as Yuletide, New Year and Candlemas, but adds that the festival of Lammastide (1 August), which “ushered in the main period for the holding of fairs”, was also notable in this respect, since these “provided a set of entertainments as varied and exciting” as those which occurred earlier in the year (1994:44).

⁹ Interestingly, Hutton writes, “[throughout] the whole period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century”, such events were united in their principle *raison d’être*, this being “to promote friendship and neighbourliness” (Hutton 1994: 244). Accordingly, it could be said that Marsden Imbolc conceivably demonstrates that there is no reason to assume that this “remarkable continuity of form and function” (1994: 244) should not be thought to extend even into the twentieth century and beyond.

¹⁰ Campbell describes this as a diffuse yet “constant” and “largely stable feature of [modern] society” (cited in York 1995:252). Defining its parameters, he writes: “Substantively [the cultic milieu] includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure.” (ibid)

¹¹ Hutton’s 1994 study seems to provide yet more significant parallels here, since it holds that the ‘Merry England’ period was one of remarkable and, it seems, unprecedented ritual innovation.

¹² See Hervieu-Léger (2001) for a useful synopsis of the current prevailing sociological wisdom on secularising trends.