

MAY MORNING

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I am going to lay before you a few, rather tentative, distinctly humble, attempts to unscramble a very complex and venerable omelette, which is the set of Oxford May morning customs which in our time, focuses on the singing of a Latin carol (which is probably not called the *Hymnus Eucharisticus* after all) from the tower of this college.

I'm going to say at once that I could not have begun the unscrambling of this ancient *pasticcio* (which is Italian for both a kind of omelette and a real mess) without the breathtakingly adroit and thoughtful article by Roy Judge 'May Morning and Magdalen College, Oxford' in *Folklore*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (1986). It is a model of meticulous history and patient scepticism when confronted with passionate assertions of improbable antiquity and unlikely continuity. I hope I can sketch the bones of the history and offer perhaps a few thoughts of my own. My chief thought is that the revived May celebration, after the break of the Civil War and interregnum, was substantially different from the standard English maying, as described before the civil war. This revival in an altered form was very much part of a larger Carolean 1670s project for Oxford, which included the revival of the University Act (complete with that unfunny medieval encumbrance the *Terrae Filius*) and the building of the Sheldonian to put it in. But far beyond anything I can tell you in forty-five minutes or so, may I encourage you to read Roy Judge's article?

Appositely enough, I got interested in May morning, on May morning a few years ago – the first time that it had been celebrated in person, on Magdalen Tower since that interregnum in all our lives, the Covid pandemic. I was fascinated by the 1670s music trying surely to sound much older than it was, and, remembering Robert Herrick's poem *Corinna going a Maying* I could not square the May customs which it describes, with the crowds listening at the foot of the tower, remaining in the city, dancing in the streets. Let me describe the scene for you a little:

There is not a lot of space on top of the tower: a pitched lead roof in the middle and broad lead guttering round every side, reassuringly high stone parapet and pinnacles. But through the gaps in the tracery what views of green parks, gardens and hills on every hand, and numberless flowering hawthorns and chestnuts seen from far above, and the domes and spires all lying below us. There were scattered groups of people on the Magdalen lawns, scattered groups in the Botanic Gardens, strange, mysterious, elegant, dawn garden parties. Log jam of boats on both sides of the bridge. And the High Street and the Bridge itself crammed with people as far as I could see on the town side, and right across the bridge to the Plain on the east.

The choir appeared one by one through the little hatch from the ladder, the singing men larking around and taking selfies, the choristers cheerful and a little bit unruly. A big plastic box of surplices appeared, crumpled in transit, which they all put on and formed themselves up on the slope of the roof facing the Informator and the Dean.

Six bells under our feet, and the choir started their May Song, an odd Restoration-period carol, not quite sure if it is an invocation of the Trinity or a summary of the life of Christ, set to a c17 choirmaster's idea of medieval music. It's one of those truly weird artefacts from the later seventeenth century, presumably invented in the place of an original lost beyond recovery in the wars and the Interregnum. Of course it was magical with red streaks of rising sunlight behind the luminous gray clouds over Headington Hill, and the birds singing so loud in all the parks and gardens, and silence from the thousands of people in the street below. Then a ragged cheer from the crowd below, and Andrew read the prayer (nineteenth or twentieth century I guess) about the beauty of the earth and life renewed, and then shook water from green leaves from the four sides of the tower, blessing the city and university, with a surprisingly loud *Amen* answering him from below. The first drum-tap and squeak of tuning-up fiddle had started in the street, when one of the tenor clerks moved to the front and sang "The Lark in the Clear Air" with the choir humming softly behind his voice, sending his bright notes forth into the silent air above, into silence below.

And that was that. Drum and fiddle loud in the street, and shouting, and the crowds started to move off towards Radcliffe Square and the dancing. There then followed a very charming if very odd 0620 hours party on the tower (which was now just perceptibly swaying from the swelling, tremendous peal of bells under our feet) people milling around and chatting politely, and taking each other's photographs, until they started to shuffle towards the ladder and then the choir put their rumpled surplices back in the plastic box and disappeared from view one by one.

Leaving me thinking about a lovely May poem by Herrick – *Corinna's going a Maying* -- and the May custom which it describes – let's look at some parts of it.

Rise; and put on your Foliage, and be seene
To come forth, like the Spring-time, fresh and greene;
 And sweet as *Flora*. Take no care
 For Jewels for your Gowne, or Haire:
 Feare not; the leaves will strew
 Gemms in abundance upon you:
Besides, the childhood of the Day has kept,
Against you come, some *Orient Pearls* unwept:
 Come, and receive them while the light

Hangs on the Dew-locks of the night:
And *Titan* on the Eastern hill
Retires himselfe, or else stands still
Till you come forth. Wash, dresse, be briefe in praying:
Few Beads are best, when once we goe a Maying.

Come, my *Corinna*, come; and comming, marke
How each field turns a street; each street a Parke
 Made green, and trimm'd with trees: see how
 Devotion gives each House a Bough,
 Or Branch: Each Porch, each doore, ere this,
 An Arke a Tabernacle is
Made up of white-thorn neatly enterwove;
As if here were those cooler shades of love.
 Can such delights be in the street,
 And open fields, and we not see't?
 Come, we'll abroad; and let's obey
 The Proclamation made for May:
And sin no more, as we have done, by staying;
But my *Corinna*, come, let's goe a Maying.

There's not a budding Boy, or Girle, this day,
But is got up, and gone to bring in May.
 A deale of Youth, ere this, is come
 Back, and with *White-thorn* laden home.
 Some have dispatcht their Cakes and Creame,
 Before that we have left to dreame:
And some have wept, and woo'd, and plighted Troth,
And chose their Priest, ere we can cast off sloth:
 Many a green-gown has been given;
 Many a kisse, both odde and even:
 Many a glance too has been sent
 From out the eye, Loves Firmament:
Many a jest told of the Keyes betraying
This night, and Locks pickt, yet w'are not a Maying.

Come, let us goe, while we are in our prime;
And take the harmlesse follie of the time.
 We shall grow old apace, and die
 Before we know our liberty.
 Our life is short; and our dayes run
 As fast away as do's the Sunne:
And as a vapour, or a drop of raine

Once lost, can ne'r be found againe:
 So when or you or I are made
 A fable, song, or fleeting shade;
 All love, all liking, all delight
 Lies drown'd with us in endlesse night.
Then while time serves, and we are but decaying;
Come, my *Corinna*, come, let's goe a Maying.

The song sung before dawn at the May festival in Padstowe in Cornwall (the festival with the dancing Oss and its attendants) evokes almost exactly the same May customs as Herrick does – albeit with a melancholy note in the third verse – which takes my mind to Hardy's verses about the Napoleonic wars – about the young men who are absent on May day.

Padstow May Song (night song)

I warn you young men everyone,
For summer is acome unto day,
To go to the green-wood and fetch your May home,
In the merry morning of May.

All out of your beds,
For summer is acome unto day,
Your chamber shall be strewed with the white rose and the red
In the merry morning of May.

Where are the young men that here now should dance,
For summer is acome unto day,
Some they are in England some they are in France,
In the merry morning of May.

Where are the maidens that here now should sing,
For summer is acome unto day,
They are in the meadows the flowers gathering,
In the merry morning of May.

And our final piece of evidence comes from another town in Cornwall, from the Helston May song:

Hal-an-tow, jolly rumble, 0.
For we are up as soon as any day, 0
And for to fetch the Summer home,
The Summer and the May, 0
For Summer is a-come, 0,
And Winter is a-gone, 0.

Which makes it nicely clear that the act of fetching the May into the town brings the summer with it. (Helston also offers the darkest warning as to what scholar-singers and antiquaries can do to a May song and its customs – seeing a fleeting resemblance between the Helston song and the hunters’ song in Shakespeare’s *As you Like It*, several versions simply import a verse of Shakespeare into the Helston song. We’re going to have to deal with a good deal of reverse-engineered tradition a little later.)

We have a clear pattern here: all of these May celebrations have in common the going OUT of the city into the country to fetch in green branches and flowering branches which are then set up at house doors.

So what can we be sure about the celebration of May morning in Oxford BEFORE the Civil War. Aubrey in his wonderful *Remaines of Gentilisme* (compiled from 1688) quotes his colleague Anthony a Wood. In fastigio turre Collegii Sanctae Mariae Magdalenae Oxon ministri istius Sodalitatis chorales, annuatim de more, primo die Maii ad horam quartam matutinam melodice cantat. That at least gives us a present tense attestation of SOME music on the roof of Magdalen tower in the *later* seventeenth century. But the time before the wars is still undefined and most likely following what seems to have been a universal pattern.

And immediately afterwards, he records an Oxford town custom which appears to have survived reformation, civil war and well-meaning antiquarians alike, until the rough end of it was suppressed in the nineteenth century.

Memorandum: at Oxford the Boyes doe blow Cowshorns and hollow canes all night: and on May-day the young maids of every parish carry about their parish Garlands of flowers, which afterwards they hang up in their churches. (And this DOES sound like the accompaniment to the expedition out of the city.)

This hornblowing will resurface about a century later, accompanied by egg throwing, but that comes later. Aubrey also makes a shrewd identification of the parts of the community most likely to keep up custom whatever might be going on in Church and State.

Memorandum, that *non obstante* the Change of Religion, the Plough-boies, and also the school-boies will keep-up and retaine their old ceremonies and customs and priviledges.

Aubrey, be it said, also goes to the heart of the real objections of the Carolean Oxford Divines (and indeed the establishment generally, not to mention the seriously maypole-averse Godly) to the old May games: that when the young men and women went out of town to gather flowering thorn branches, general sexual license prevailed. Herrick’s verses might be said to be softening or turning a clerical blind eye to this aspect, whereas

Aubrey quotes from Hobbes's *Historia Ecclesiastica* lines which offer the opinion that English May day observances were nothing but a revival of the worship of Priapus.

So no wonder that the Godly suppressed Oxford's May Morning comprehensively, and no wonder that when it was revived, mostly officially, it was in a more controlled and considerably altered form. After all, the main point of the May ritual, going forth into the country to bring the talismanic hawthorn branches back, and, the magical or effectual point of the ritual, thus somehow bring the summer into the city along with the flowering branches, has vanished entirely. There remains the dawn music as a focal point for a gathering of the dual community of Oxford (and there were of course later fissions and fights) but the whole thing is now confined to the areas within the jurisdiction of the city and university.

Aubrey's colleague Anthony Wood also gives some context of how, in pre-Civil War Oxford, May custom could be used with malice aforethought to wind up the "godly" the maypole-averse Puritans.

People used to play April Fool tricks on May Morning. Anthony Wood, the great diarist of 17th-century Oxford, refers more than once to 'may games' as practical jokes.

Wood's writing also indicates that a Maypole might be set up by a householder as a May game – especially to wind up the local Puritans. For the summer of 1641 Wood reports that 'a most licentious and profane fellow' in the parish of Holywell set up a Maypole and fixed to it the picture of a Roundhead, specifically a Puritan steward of one of the Oxford colleges. With his companions, 'making themselves mad-merry about it', they brought muskets and other weapons to shoot at the effigy.

A servant hit the picture, 'at which the said master did fall a-laughing extremely, and on a sudden sunk down, falling into a long, sharp and terrible convulsion-fit, and so continued a long time after very sick and in great pain and misery; but whether he be since alive or dead, I am uncertain.'

Before I ask what seems to me the vital question raised by this perilously thin continuity *why was the custom revived in such an altered form? Was it policy or was it part of a larger project of Restoration Oxford*. I think we might glance at a couple of Oxford rituals, not at all dissimilar to the pre-war form of the May game, which seem not to have survived beyond the seventeenth century. Let's do this before we think about the Restoration project in Oxford.

Again we are obliged to Aubrey's *Remaines* for an account of two Oxford customs clearly related to the pre-civil war May Game:

I remember at Oxford before the Civill Warres the custome was that some day of the Whitsun Holydayes the Master cooke [of Exeter College] with the rest of his Bretheren were marched in silk doublets on Horseback and rode I think to Bartholemews or Bullingdon Green to fetch in the Flye: the said Master cooke

treated his bretheren before they rode-out. . . and on Michaelmas-day they rode thither to convey the Flye away.

While this is pleasantly mysterious, the timing would suggest that this is another version of “bringing in the summer.”

In Holy Week the fellows of New College “time out of mind” went to the hospital near Oxford called Bart’lemews “where they retire into the Chapell, and certaine prayers are read and an Antheme sung, from thence they goe to the upper end of the grove adjoining to the chapel (the way being beforehand strowed with flowers by the poor people of the Hospital) they place themselves around the well there, where they warble forth melodiously a Song of 3 or 4 parts; which being performed, they refresh themselves with a morning’s-draught there and retire to Oxford.”

(Antiquarian warning here: it didn’t take very long before a version of this account had been reverse engineered with singing on the tower, on the Magdalen model, rather than the much more mysterious and compelling singing around the well.)

Aubrey also recounts that at Woodstock, classically and as in Herrick’s poem, on May morning, the people went out into the park to collect branches of Hawthorn which they set before their doors. Wood records a May garland as a flash point in the tense year of 1643, when a Puritan parishioner of St Peter le Bailey attempted to prevent his fellow-parishoners from bringing a May garland into the church.

Wood later records May customs being weaponised against Puritans after the Restoration, or in fact while the Restoration was in progress, as 1 May 1660 fell between the Declaration of Breda and the return of Charles II.

‘A maypole against the Bear in Allhallows parish, set up on purpose to vex the Presbyterians and Independents. Dr John Conant, then vice-chancellor, came with his beadles and servants to have it sawed down, but before he had entered an inch into it, he and his party were forced to leave that place.’

This is a moment when quite simply, we can see the tide of popular feeling turning.

While I cannot demonstrate that the Carolean authorities revived the May Custom in altered form with a focus on music on Magdalen tower, a few things are certain. For certain the focus of the celebration is INSIDE the city bounds, and the element of going out into the country to “bring in the May” has disappeared entirely. After the 1670s, the university provides the focus and the music. A popular custom has been brought, however enjoyably, under civic and ecclesiastical control.

This is not in any way surprising. Restoration England – the invaluable Aubrey is again our witness -- almost universally revived local customs which had been suppressed in the Interregnum as “rags of Popery or paganism” but did so as part of a project of garnering popular support for the new regime; secondly Restoration Oxford was committed to a

policy of carrying out projects dating from the time when Archbishop Laud was Chancellor, in the 1630s, just before the outbreak of the first of the wars. Perhaps the most notable visible testimony of this was the building of the Sheldonian Theatre in the 1660s. It carried out an ambition begun under Laud and championed by his successor the restored Archbishop Sheldon, that university ceremonies (which could have a profane and rowdy side) should be moved permanently out of the University Church, into a purpose-built theatre, thus preserving the church for the Beauty of Holiness which was a central tenet of the Laudian vision of the Anglican settlement. Once more we have a revision of custom which promotes good order and respect for the sacred. The revision of the May Morning celebrations is wholly in line with the project and purposes of Laud and his successors.

Now we begin to inch into territories where we can have some certainty: but I'm afraid we can't even trust the title of the hymn now sung from the tower on May morning:

The Hymn itself, *Te Deum patrem colimus*, had been Magdalens's 'after grace,' since it had been written by Benjamin Rogers who was organist and choirmaster, 1665 to 1686. There are three early pieces of evidence about it. An autograph copy of the music by Rogers still exists, dated between 1673 and 1685. (Here there seems to be some confusion: 1685 was the year when Rogers was made Doctor of Music; the music book in which it's written was begun in 1673.) The words are thought to have been written by Thomas Smith, Fellow of the College from 1665 to 1692, and a copy in his handwriting survives, which seems to have been made when he was Vice President in 1682. Finally, the college accounts record the printing of copies of a grace in 1678 and 1679. It should be noted that the title Hymnus Eucharisticus refers to another work by Rogers, set to words by Nathaniel Ingelo, and performed as an act of thanksgiving for the Restoration in the London Guildhall in July 1660.

An article in *Notes and Queries* by Edward F Rimbault confirms the date and original function of the hymn:

Whilst making some researches in the library of Christ Church, Oxford, I accidentally met with what appears to me to be the *first draft* of the "Grace" in question. It commences "*Te Deum Patrem colimus*," and has the following note:—"This Hymn is sung every day in Magdalen College Hall, Oxon, dinner and supper throughout the year for the after grace, by the chaplains, clarkes, and choristers there. Composed by Benjamin Rogers, Doctor of Musique of the University of Oxon, 1685." It is entered in a folio volume, with this note on the fly-leaf,— "Ben Rogers, his book, Aug. 18. 1673, and presented me by Mr. John Playford, Stationer in the Temple, London."

Let us remind ourselves of the words of the hymn, or the grace.

Te Deum Patrem colimus,
Te laudibus prosequimur,
qui corpus cibo reficis,
coelesti mentem gratia.

Te adoramus, O Jesu,
Te, Fili unigenite,
Te, qui non dedignatus es
subire claustra Virginis.

Actus in crucem, factus es
irato Deo victima
per te, Salvator unice
vitae spes nobis rediit.

Tibi, aeterne Spiritus
cuius afflatu peperit
infantem Deum Maria,
aeternum benedicimus.

Triune Deus, hominum
salutis auctor optime,
immensum hoc mysterium
ovante lingua canimus.

It is a wholly credible text as a grace or after-grace, if a little strange that what is essentially a Trinitarian hymn does not fit itself into three stanzas, but its absolute lack of connection with May morning, gives real substance to at least one of the historical assertions, which is that the *Te Deum Patrem colimus* only became associated with May morning in the later eighteenth century, and then only by force of circumstance.

Let us try to puzzle out something of a history for May Morning at Magdalen, though I will admit most happily that without Roy Judge's excellent work, this would be an enterprise of hacking our way through a dense thicket of antiquarian speculation, and romantic antiquarianism armed with little more than a small penknife of common sense.

As we have seen from Aubrey and Wood, there is evidence to suggest that singing has taken place on Magdalen Tower on May Morning since at least the late seventeenth century. A guidebook of 1817 suggested that it was done

in lieu of a requiem, which, before the Reformation, was performed in the same place for the soul of Henry VII. The rectory of Slimbridge, in Gloucestershire, is charged with an annual payment of ten pounds for the performance of this service.

There is actually a grain of truth here: the college had received the advowson (the right to nominate a priest) of the living in Slimbridge from Lord Berkeley in 1484 in return for daily prayers and keeping an obit for him after his death. Henry VII then inherited the estate and allowed Magdalen to keep the advowson in return for the same service being accorded him, albeit with the prayer offered annually instead of daily (on 3 or 4 October). The college also (successfully, but please note separately) petitioned to be paid £10 a year from the Slimbridge tithes, which subsequently went towards funding the May Day ceremony. I think we must note here that the tithes **subsequently** went to the funding of the May celebrations.

Now, Magdalen Tower was built between 1492 and 1508-9 and it is possible that some kind of dedication on or around a May Day could have occurred (the bells being installed in 1504-5). But the earliest reference to an annual ceremony there on 1 May was made by Anthony Wood in 1674. This is what I conjecture to be the Carolean reclaiming or reworking of Oxford May customs suppressed during the Interregnum. Wood claimed there was an ancient custom involving the choral ministers saluting Flora with 'vocal music of several parts'. This joyful entertainment was said to have given 'great content to the neighbourhood, and auditors underneath' and to be an annual ixture of later seventeenth century Oxford. Yet in 1688, during the college's dispute with James II, the tradition did not occur at all for 'want of choristers and clerks'.

By 1749, John Pointer confirmed that the event, which had originally involved a requiem being sung for Henry VII's soul, had become a merry May-day concert. (This sounds like the beginning of the gravest confusion of two entirely different things, the Henry VII chantry and May Day, Slimbridge being the only real connection – watch this strand – it will get considerably worse before it gets better). The May day concert started at 4 o'clock in the morning and lasted nearly two hours, before being concluded with the ringing of the tower's bells. That may well have been the kind of event that continued until the end of the eighteenth century.

Now we come to the fact that it is unclear when Benjamin Roger's hymn was added to the May Day ceremony. It is extremely difficult (to put it mildly) to tell when the Hymn was introduced to the May Morning singing, and when it became the single item sung. One story, associated with the possible authority of Dr. Routh, President from 1791 to 1854, was that 'the change was due to the accident of a rainy morning on May Day, when only the organist and choristers appeared, and the organist took them to the Tower and made them sing the Latin Hymn. Just such an occasion was recorded by Thomas Hearne in 1715: 'This was a very wet Morning, and there was no singing as usually at 5 Clock on Magd. Tower, only about 7 the Boys got up and sung about 2 or 3 minutes.

But it is not known what they sang, and 1715 seems too early to be seen as a moment of transition. It is true that there is one isolated reference in 1737 to the effect that 'upon May Day at 4 a Clock in the Morning all the Singing Men and Choiristers go to the top of the Tower, and sing an anthem.' But other evidence would seem to suggest that lengthy

concerts of the kind described by Pointer in 1749 did continue till towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Most people, however cultured and informed, accepted happily a highly romanticised version of the history. For example, Eccles Carter, the curate of Slimbridge, used the resources of the Magdalen archives for a painstaking history of the parish published in 1845, but he also put his authority behind the popular story of Henry VII. I should perhaps say here that antiquarian reverse engineering, deriving from the £10 from Slimbridge, had the pre reformation chantry Masses for Henry VII sung ON the top of the tower, which is where the absurdity becomes manifest.

These Ambiguities only begin to clear up with John Clerk's publication of the musical setting for the Hymn in 1810. Only a tentative conclusion can be drawn from all this, but perhaps that is inevitable from the self-reinventing nature of the occasion. It does seem to have been essentially fluid and variable, uncommitted and unselfconscious. But during the 1790's it may be possible to see signs of the Hymn assuming a more important role. With Clarke in 1810, and with Wade's account in 1817, the hymn now became the single expected item on May morning.

Arising out of these picturesque beliefs came the events of 1844. The moving spirit behind them was the Rev. John Rouse Bloxam, 1807-1891, Fellow of Magdalen 1835 to 1863. A tractarian and ritualist (but committed Anglican) he was as intent as any Carolean divine on reclaiming May morning for the Church. The observance of the ceremony had declined into something little short of a riot, with heavy undertones of a fight between Town and Gown. The Town blew horns (Aubrey's May Horns) and the choristers threw rotten eggs down on the crowd below.

There are some now living who remember the mode of singing the hymn at an early period in this century as

irreverent, and more like a Bacchanalian song than a sacred hymn. The choirmen and choristers went up the Tower in their usual garb and kept their hats and caps on during the singing. The principal function of the choristers seemed to be to throw down rotten eggs on the people below. Old Munday, the principal Porter, tried to remedy this, by standing at the bottom of the Tower staircase and tapping the pockets of the choristers, as they passed him, with the Tower key. Few if any persons from other colleges ever attended, but in 1843 Dr. Barrow, Fellow of Queens, made his appearance on the Tower, and, when the Hymn commenced, shamed the solitary Fellow then present, by uncovering his head. This led to an important change in the following year. Instructions were given, afterwards confirmed by the President, Dr. Routh, 1st. That the Choir should wear their surplices. 2. That they should uncover when the hymn commenced. 3. That they should turn to the East towards the sun, which usually rose just at that time.

When this more orderly and reverent mode was adopted the attraction to the ceremony became great.

I think we have possibly arrived at an interim conclusion: although the *Te Deus Pater* may have become associated with May morning by chance of bad weather or thin attendance, it became fixed as the essential part of what was still a rowdy and irreverent Town and Gown celebration in the early nineteenth century. It was the Tractarian Dr Bloxham's reforms which fixed the mood and shape of the event much as it is today.

Holman Hunt 's painting *May Morning on Magdalen Tower* (1888-91) records and amplifies the success of Dr Bloxham's reform, though he cannot resist adding garlands of flowers as a reference to the pagan origins which he conjectured for the ceremony, nor can he resist adding the figure of a Parsee worshipping the sun, as an indication of his conjectures as to the place of worship of the returning sun in the ceremony's origins.

In Hunt's own words:

Whatever the cause of its retention, the ceremony seems never to have been discontinued. It can scarcely be doubted that it was originally a Druidical worship, and possibly the recognition of this fact by narrow minded devotees was the occasion of opposition to its perpetuation. More liberal intelligences, however, looked upon the ceremony as a reverent act of worship, and had no fear of its reverting to its original materialism. They accepted the sun as a perfect symbol of creative power; to us the preservation of the ceremony remains a mark of the poetic character which ever distinguished that branch of the Aryan race to which Englishmen belong. Destiny has reunited us once more to that people from whom we sprang, and the foundation of the Indian Institute at Oxford must bring many an oriental (who regards the children of ancient Persia as the sole possessors of sun worship) to wonder at the singleness of purpose which here animates both Parsee and Englishman.¹¹¹

But all festivals allow for an element of reinvention and spontaneity: it is now clear that what happens in the street below the tower is endlessly variable (though the stupid custom of jumping off the bridge was happily short lived). By the 1920s, the event had become associated with all kinds of other revelry, like Jack-in-the-Greens, children wearing garlands and companies parading decorated horse and carts around the area. Indeed, a number of newspapers commented that the widening range of pastimes connected with May Morning was testament to the growing popularity and prowess of the festival.

Morris dancing was only introduced in 1923 and it was not until the late 1960s that burgeoning numbers of spectators helped the whole affair take on a much more 'bizarre and colourful' character. By the 1980s, the festivities had spread out across much of the city and they included 'Scottish dancing, Maypole dancing, Street Theatre, Baroque Music, Madrigals, Jazz, Barber Shop Quartets, Juggling, Punch and Judy, Mobile Discos, and so on...'

In the twentieth century this form of celebration of hymn from tower and morris dancing and the like in the streets has become much loved, as attested by the verse *May Morning* by Vera Brittain:

The rising sun shone warmly on the tower,
Into the clear pure Heaven the hymn aspired

Piercingly sweet. This was the morning hour

When life awoke with Spring's creative power,
And the old City's grey to gold was fired.

Silently reverent stood the noisy throng;
Under the bridge the boats in long array

Lay motionless. The chorister's far song
Faded upon the breeze in echoes long.

And May Morning appears in that love letter to Oxford lightly disguised as a detective story, Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* from 1935. I think we can end with it. Maybe May morning is not an immemorial observance in its present form: following I conjecture a 1660s taking of control by Oxford's Carolean divines, singing probably started at Magdalen in some form in the 1670s, possibly acquiring the Magdalen hymn *Te Deus Pater* somewhere in the late eighteenth century, finding its present religious and more decorous tone at the hands of the Tractarian Dr Bloxham in the 1840s, acquiring Morris Dancing in the streets in the 1920s, it is still quite successfully a ritual of community and celebration. Real rituals are perhaps like that, more real for their re-inventions. Over to Dorothy Sayers:

The choisters had sung their hymn. The sun had risen, rather red and angry, casting faint flush over the roofs and spires of the waking city. Harriet leaned over the parapet, looking down upon the heart-breaking beauty of the curved high Street, scarcely disturbed as yet by the roar of petrol-driven traffic. Under her feet the tower began to swing to the swinging of the bells. . . She moved to the East side of the tower, there lay the river and Magdalen Bridge, with its pack of punts and canoes. It was wonderful to stand so above the world, with a sea of sound below and an ocean of air above. A cluster of people still lingered on the Tower itself – her companions in this airy hermitage. They too spell-bound with beauty.