THE SILENT SPEAK

The Incomplete, True, Authentick,
and
Wonderful History of

May Day

including bibliography, pictures, and a
new method
of historical inquiry
based upon the

rainbow.

Blue Heron, Bosstown, 1985
The Soviet Union parades missiles and marches soldiers on May Day. The American government has called May first “Law Day” and associates it with militarism. The real meaning of this day has been obscured by the designing propaganda of both governments. The truth of May Day is totally different. To the history of May Day there is a Green side and there is a Red side.

Under the rainbow, our methodology must be colorful. Green is a relationship to the earth and what grows therefrom. Red is a relationship to other people and the blood spilt there among. Green designates life with only necessary labor; Red designates death with surplus labor. Green is natural appropriation; Red is social expropriation. Green is husbandry and nurturance; Red is proletarianization and prostitution. Green is useful activity; Red is useless toil. Green is creation of desire; Red is class struggle. May Day is both.

Once upon a time, long before the Bank of Boston laundered money or Ronald Reagan honored the Nazi war dead, the earth was blanketed by a broad mantle of forests. As late as Caesar’s time it was said that a person might travel through the woods for two months without gaining an unobstructed view of the sky. The immense forests of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America provided the atmosphere with oxygen and the earth with nutrients. Within the woodland ecology our ancestors did not have to work from Nine to Five. Indeed, the native Americans whom Captain John Smith encountered in 1606 only worked four hours a week. The origin of May Day is to be found in the Woodland Epoch of history.
In Europe, as in Africa, people honored the woods in many ways. With the leafing of the trees in spring, people celebrated "the fructifying spirit of vegetation," to use the phrase of J.G. Frazer, the anthropologist. They did this in May, a month named after Maia, the mother of all the gods according to the ancient Greeks, giving birth even to Zeus.

The Greeks had their sacred groves, the Druids their oak worship, the Romans their games in honor of Flora. In Scotland the herdsmen formed circles and danced around fires. The Celts lit bonfires in hilltops to honor their god, Beltane. In the Tyrol people let their dogs bark and made music with pots and pans. In Scandinavia fires were lit and the witches came out.

Everywhere people "went a-Maying" by going into the woods and bringing back leaf, bough, and blossom to decorate their persons, homes, and loved ones with green garlands. Trees were planted. Maypoles were erected. Dances were danced. Music was played. Drinks were drunk, and love was made. Outside theater was performed with characters like "Jack-in-the-Green" and the "Queen of the May." Winter was over, spring had sprung.

The history of these customs is complex and affords the student of the past with many interesting insights into the history of religion, gender, reproduction, and village ecology. Despite the complexities, whether May Day was observed by sacred or profane rite, by magic or not, it was always a celebration of all that is free and life-giving in the world. That is the Green side of the story. Whatever else it was, it was not a time to work.

Therefore, it was attacked by the authorities. The repression began in the 16th century when America was "discovered," the slave trade was begun, and nation-states and capitalism were formed. In 1550 an Act of Parliament demanded that Maypoles be destroyed, and it outlawed games. In 1644 the Puritans in England abolished May Day altogether. To these work-ethicists the festival was obnoxious for paganism and worldliness. Philip Stubs, for example, in Anatomy of Abuses (1585) wrote of the Maypole, "and then fell they to banquet and feast, to leap and daunce about it, as the Heathen people did at the dedication of their Idolles." When a Puritan mentioned "heathen" we know genocide was not far away. They also objected to the unrepressed sexuality of the day. Stubs said, "of fourtie, threescore, or an hundred maides going to the wood, there have scarcely the third part of them returned home againe as they went."

The people resisted the repressions. Thenceforth, they called their May sports, the "Robin Hood Games." Capering about with sprigs of hawthorn in their hair and bells jangling from their knees, the ancient characters of
May were transformed into an outlaw community. Maid Marions and Little Johns. The May feast was presided over by the "Lord of Misure," the King of Unreason," or the "Abbot of Inobedience." Washington Irving was later to write that the feeling for May "has become chilled by habits of gain and traffic." As the gainers and traffickers sought to impose the regimen of monotonous work, the people responded to preserve their holyday. Thus began the Red side of the story of May Day. The struggle was brought to Massachusetts in 1626.

**THOMAS MORTON OF MERRY MOUNT**

Thomas Morton came to Massachusetts in 1626 and settled in what is now called Quincy, which the Indians called Passonagessit, and which he called Merry Mount. The land seemed a "Paradise" to him, "millions of turtle-doves on the green boughs." On May Day, 1627, he and his Indian friends, stirred by the sound of drums, erected a Maypole eighty feet high, decorated it with garlands, wrapped it in ribbons, and nailed to its top the antlers of a buck. He brewed a "barrell of excellent beare" and attached to the pole the first lyric verses penned in America. A ganymede sang a Bacchanalian song. Governor Bradford wrote, "they also set up a Maypole, drinking and dancing aboue it many days togethier, inviting the Indean women for their consorts, dancing and frisking togethier (like so many faires, or furies rather) and worse practises."

Merry Mount became a refuge for Indians, the discontented, runaway servants, and what the governor called "all the scum of the countrey." When the authorities reminded him that his actions violated the King's Proclamation, Morton replied that it was "no law." Morton was a thorn in the side of the Boston and Plymouth Puritans, because he had an alternate vision of Massachusetts. He was impressed by its fertility; they by its scarcity. He befriended the Indians, they shuddered at the thought. He was egalitarian, they proclaimed themselves the "Elect." He freed servants, they lived off them. He armed the Indians, they used arms against Indians.

In June 1627 therefore the authorities sent Captain Miles Standish to burn down his house. Morton was
captured and shipped away. The rainbow coalition of Merry Mount was thus destroyed. That Merry Mount later (1636) became associated with Anne Hutchinson, the famous midwife, spiritualist, and feminists, surely was more than coincidental.

ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ATLANTIC

In England the attacks on May Day were a necessary part of the wearisome, unending attempt to establish industrial work discipline. Absolute surplus value could be increased only by increasing the hours of labor and abolishing holydays. A parson wrote a piece of work propaganda called *Funebria Flora, or the Downfall of the May Games*. He attacked, "ignorants, atheists, papists, drunkards, swearers, swashbucklers, maid-marian, morrice-dancers, maskers, mummers, Maypole stealers, health-drinkers, together with a rapscallion rout of fiddlers, fools fighters, gamesters, lewd-women, light-women, contemmers of magistracy, affronters of ministry, disobedients to parents, misspenders of time, and abusers of the creature, &c."

At about this time, Isaac Newton, the gravitationist and machinist of time, said work was a law of planets and apples alike. In 1717 he purchased London's hundred foot Maypole and used it to prop up his telescope.

Chimney sweeps and dairy maids led the resistance. The sweeps dressed up as women on May Day, or put on aristocratic periwigs. They sang songs and collected money. When the Earl of Bute in 1763 refused to pay, the opprobrium was so great that he was forced to resign.

Milk maids used to go a-Maying by dressing in floral garlands, dancing, and getting the dairymen to distribute their milk-yield freely. Soot and milk workers thus helped to retain the holyday right into the industrial revolution.

The ruling class used the day for its own purposes. Thus, when Parliament was forced to abolish slavery in the British dominions, it did so on May Day 1807. In 1820 the Cato Street conspirators plotted to destroy the British cabinet while it was having dinner. Irish, Jamaican, and Cockney were hanged for the attempt on May Day 1820. A conspirator wrote his wife saying "justice and liberty have taken their flight ... to other distant shores." He meant America, where Boston Brahmin, Robber Baron, and Southern Plantocrat divided and ruled an arching rainbow of people.
Two bands of that rainbow came from English and Irish islands. One was Green. Robert Owen, union leader, socialist, and founder of utopian communities in America, announced the beginning of the millenium after May Day 1833. The other was Red. On May Day 1830, a founder of the Knights of Labor, the United Mine Workers of America, and the Wobblies was born in Ireland, Mary Harris Jones, a.k.a., "Mother Jones." She was the Maia of the American working class.

THE HAYMARKET AFFAIR

The history of the modern May Day originates in the center of the North American plains, at Haymarket, in Chicago - "the city on the make" - in May 1886. The Red side of that story is more well-known than the Green, because it was bloody. But there was also a Green side to the tale, though the green was not so much that of pretty grass garlands, as it was of greenbacks, for in Chicago, it was said, the dollar is king.

Of course the prairies are green in May. Virgin soil, dark, brown, crumbling, shot with fine black sand, it was the produce of thousands of years of humus and organic decomposition. It was here in "the Egypt of the West" (as Abe Lincoln said) that agriculture was mechanized. Relative surplus value could only be obtained by reducing the price of food. The proteins and vitamins of this fertile earth spread through the whole world. Chicago was the jugular vein. Cyrus McCormick wielded the surgeon's knife. His mechanical reapers harvested the grasses and grains. McCormick produced 1,500 reapers in 1849; by 1884 he was producing 80,000.

"Farewell" to the hammer and sickle. "Goodby" to the cradle scythe. "So long" to Emerson's man with the hoe. "Hello" to the hobo. "Line up" the proletarians. Not that McCormick actually made reapers, members of the Molders Union Local 23 did that, and on May Day 1867 they went on strike, starting the Eight Hour Movement.

Thousands of immigrants, many from Germany, poured into Chicago after the Civil War. Class war was advanced, technically and logistically. In 1855 the Chicago police used Gatling guns against the workers who protested the closing of the beer gardens. In the Bread Riot of 1872 the police clubbed hungry people in a tunnel under the river. In the 1877 railway strike, Federal troops, recently seasoned from fighting the Sioux who had killed Custer, fought workers at "The Battle of the Viaduct." The Pinkerton Detective Agency taught the city police how to spy and to form fighting columns for deployment in city streets. A hundred years ago during the street car strike, the police issued a Shoot-to-Kill order.
McCormick cut wages 15%. His profit rate was 71%. In May 1886 four molders whom McCormick locked-out were shot dead by the police. Thus, did this 'grim reaper' maintain his profits.

Nationally, May First 1886 was important because a couple of years earlier the Federation of Organized Trade and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, "RESOLVED ... that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor, from and after May 1, 1886.

On 4 May 1886 several thousand people gathered near Haymarket Square to hear what August Spies, a Haymarket Square, had to say about the shootings at the newspaperman, Albert Parsons, a typographer and McCormick works. Albert Parsons, a typographer and labor leader spoke next. Later, at his trial, he said, "What is Socialism or Anarchism? Briefly stated it is the right of the toilers to the free and equal use of the tools of production and the right of the producers to their product." He was followed by "Good-Natured Sam" Fielden who as a child had worked in the textile factories of Lancashire, England. He was a Methodist preacher and labor organizer. He got done speaking at 10:30 PM. At that time 176 policemen charged the crowd that had dwindled to about 200. An unknown hand threw a stick of dynamite, the first time that Alfred Nobel's invention was used in class battle.

All hell broke lose, many were killed, and the rest is history.

"Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards," was the Sheriff's dictum. It was followed religiously across the country. Newspapers screamed for blood, homes were ransaked, and suspects were subjected to the 'third degree.' Eight men were railroaded in Chicago at a farcical trial. Four men hanged on "Black Friday," 11 November 1887.

"There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today," said Spies before he choked.

MAY DAY SINCE '86

Lucy Parsons, widowed by Chicago's "just-us," was
born in Texas. She was partly Afro-American, partly native American, and partly Hispanic. She set out to tell the world the true story "of one whose only crime was that he lived in advance of his time." She went to England and encouraged English workers to make May Day an international holiday for shortening the hours of work. Her friend, William Morris, wrote a poem called "May Day."

WORKERS
They are few, we are many: and yet, O our Mother, Many years were we wordless and nought was our deed, But now the word flitteth from brother to brother: We have furrowed the acres and scattered the seed.

EARTH
Win on then unyielding, through fair and foul weather, And pass not a day that your deed shall avail. And in hope every spring-tide come gather together That unto the Earth ye may tell all your tale.

Her work was not in vain. May Day, or "The Day of the Chicago Martyrs" as it is still called in Mexico "belongs to the working class and is dedicated to the revolution," as Eugene Debs put it in his May Day editorial of 1907. The A. F. of L. declared it a holiday. Sam Gompers sent an emissary to Europe to have it proclaimed an international labor day. Both the Knights of Labor and the Second International officially adopted the day. Bismarck, on the other hand, outlawed May Day. President Grover Cleveland announced that the first Monday in September would be Labor Day in America, as he tried to divide the international working class. In Russia Lenin wrote an important May Day pamphlet for the factory workers in 1896. The Russian Revolution of 1905 began on May Day.

In New York City the big May Day celebration was held in Union Square. In the 1930s Lucy Parsons marched in Chicago at May Day with her young friend, Studs Terkel. Yet, it was always a troubling day in America. In 1939 Pennsylvania declared "American Day." In 1947 Congress declared it to be "Loyalty Day." In 1958 Eisenhower adopted it as "Law Day," and act made official by J.F.K. in 1961. Yet, these attempts to hide the meaning of the day have never succeeded. As the Wobblies used to say, "We Won't Forget."

It's easy enough to go down to the library and look at past issues of the newspapers for the 2 May. The Globe, for instance, informs us that on May Day, 1946, the Arabs began a general strike in Palestine, and that Jews in Displaced Persons camps in Landsberg, Germany, went
on a hunger strike. On May Day, 1947, auto workers in Paris downed tools, an insurrection in Paraguay broke out, the Mafia killed six May Day marchers in Sicily, and the Boston Parks Commissioner said that this was the first year in living memory when neither Communists nor Socialists had applied for a permit to rally on the Common.

In May 1980 we may see Green themes in Mozambique where the workers lamented the absence of beer, or in Germany where three hundred women witches rampaged through Hamburg. Red themes may be seen in the 30,000 Brazilian auto workers who struck, or the 5.8 million Japanese who struck against inflation.

Also, in 1980, the Green and the Red was combined by a former Buick auto maker from Detroit, Michigan, one "Mr. Toad," who wrote this poem:

The eight hour day is not enough;
We are thinking of more and better stuff.
So here is our prayer and here is our plan,
We want what we want and we'll take what we can.

Down with wars both small and large,
Except for the ones where we're in charge:
Those are the wars of class against class,
Where we get a chance to kick some ass.

For air to breathe and water to drink,
And no more poison from the kitchen sink.
For land that's green and life that's saved
And less and less of the earth that's paved.

No more women who are less than free,
Or men who cannot learn to see
Their power steals their humanity
And makes us all less than we can be.

For teachers who learn and students who teach
And schools that are kept beyond the reach
Of provosts and deans and chancellors and such
And Xerox and Kodak and Shell, Royal Dutch.

An end to shops that are dark and dingy,
An end to Bosses whether good or stingy,
An end to work that produces junk,
An end to junk that produces work,
And an end to all in charge - the jerks.

For all who dance and sing, loud cheers,
To the prophets of doom we send some jeers.
To our friends and lovers we give free beers,
And to all who are here, a day without fears.

So, on this first of May we all should say
That we will either make it or break it.
Or, to put this thought another way,
Let's take it easy, but let's take it.
Suggested Reading to Learn More About May Day:


Charles Francis Adams, *Three Episodes in Massachusetts History* (1894)

William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*

Jeremy Brecher, *Strike* (1972)


William Hone, *The Every-Day Book* (1824)

Thomas Morton, *The New English Canaan* (1637)


Alexander Trachtenberg, *The History of May Day* (1947)
