ForeWord Reviews

MUSIC

Make Merry in Step and Song: A Seasonal Treasury of Music, Mummer's Plays & Celebrations in the English Folk Tradition
Bronwen Forbes
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The lead dancer raises high over his head a star created by locking together the swords of his fellow danc-ers. Slowly he lowers the star until the center circles the neck of the Old King. Each dancer takes possession of his hilt once more and in a flash withdraws it from the intricate formation. The Old King falls to the floor dead.

This scene is the dramatic climax of the longsword dance often performed in the Yule season as part of a mummer's play. Mummer's plays were passed from generation to generation in the oral tradition and center around the idea of death and rebirth as shown when the king is brought back to life with a little magic. This idea is central to many seasonal celebrations; for instance Winter Solstice represents the rebirth of the sun and spring has long been seen as a time when the earth reawakens from a long winter sleep.

Forbes who teaches workshops on English folk traditions at Pagan and Wiccan festivals and conferences around the country presents instructions for eight dances scripts for six plays and music and lyrics for thirty-nine songs. Throughout the book she also discusses the history of these folk traditions and their application to Pagan celebrations today.

According to Forbes her purpose in writing this book was "to continue…the process of reintroducing American Pagans to their pre-Christian British folk customs." While she succeeds in offer-ing Pagans a thorough guide to performing these celebrations her audience does not need to be so limited. Many readers interested in history theater music and dance will find this book to be of interest. The one drawback that students might find is that while it is obviously well-researched many of the book's historical facts are not cited with their original source. A selected bibliography is included however along with contact information for the Country Dance and Song Society of America to aid in further research.

This book shares only a fraction of the folk traditions practiced but it is a great start to incorporating them into seasonal celebrations. After all as Forbes says “A tradition can survive only if people still honor it and make it an important part of their lives.”

Christine Canfield