# MEMORY, AMONG THE OTHER STRENGTHS OF THE MIND

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**Abstract**. ***Memory, among the Other Strengths of the Mind.*** *Tradition, as a collection of customs and beliefs, has not come to an end. It is not confined entirely to rural communities and may be found in urban areas as well. Various customs and beliefs are nowadays essential constituents of the culture of all groups of people and a major source of information about the history of human life. They create and maintain a vivid national identity. Customs and beliefs cannot be left behind and dismissed from our minds; our memory retains and recalls ideas, information, images and thoughts about the past. This short article has been written as a token of appreciation of a highly respected scholar, one of the most enduring and admired professors at the Faculty of Letters; it is just a little something to show my appreciation of Professor Elena Dragoș. The study deals briefly with some customs restricted both to village and rural communities in Britain.*

**Keywords**: *tradition, custom, belief, community.*

## *JANUARY*

**WASSAILING THE APPLE TREES** *Wassailing*, an old and joyous Christmas custom, was previously celebrated throughout Britain. The substance of wassailing is the drinking of mutual health from a large common wassail bowl, which can be passed from person to person during a private party. Until recently the health of humans, farm animals, field crops were ceremonially drunk during the Christmas Wassailing. However, on January 17th *Wassailing the Apple Trees* is performed in many apple-growing areas (Knightly 1986, 227). The wassailers gather round the largest apple-tree in the orchard and pour cider onto its roots, and drink its health. Sometimes a piece of toast moistened in cider is placed in the branches of the tree for the robins and other birds that will watch over the tree in the year ahead. Shots are also fired into the branches of the tree to scare the evil spirits and to awaken and revive the god or goddess of the tree.

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**PLOUGH MONDAY** *Twelfth Night* (the evening of 5 January) traditionally marks the end of Christmas celebrations. *Plough Monday* is the first Monday after *Twelfth Night* and marks, for farmers, the return to the plough. The meaning of this celebration is the blessing of the plough (in recent times Plough Sunday has also been celebrated, with the blessing of the plough at church services). The tradition is celebrated in areas such as Yorkshire (a former county in north-east England), where a group of farmers pull a plough from village to village, performing a traditional dance at various spots on their way and asking villagers to give them money (Isaacs and Monk 1986, 327). Farmers may also perform plays that include elements of the mummers' play. Everything ends up with an evening feast.

## *FEBRUARY*

**CANDLEMAS** *Candlemas* is 2 February, kept as a special religious day to remember the presentation of Christ in the temple at Jerusalem and the making pure of the Virgin Mary. The candles carried in procession give the day its name. As a matter of fact, it was a pagan feast taken over by the early church. People once kept their Christmas decorations up until this day.

***BLESSING THE THROATS*** *The ceremony (Knightly 1986, 55) is performed every year on 3 February (in Catholic Europe) and invokes St Blaise, a physician-bishop and patron saint of throat sufferers, whose feast this day is. At the Roman Catholic Church in London, after the service, two long candles are blessed and tied into a X-shape. People who humbly ask God to help them heal their throat illness kneel before the altar; a priest holds the candle cross under their chins, praying in the same interval. It is said that St Blaise met a child who was unable to breathe properly and magically saved him from choking to death on a fishbone. St Blaise was violently torn to death with iron combs, and thus he also became patron saint of woolcombers. Until recently, many important centres for the wool trade and for textile production (Aberdeen, Bradford, Norwich, York, etc.) celebrated Bishop Blaise Day (*ibid.*).*

## *MARCH*

***ST DAVID'S DAY*** St David *(*Dafydd or Dewi*) is the patron saint of Wales. Little is known about him except that he started several religious houses in Wales. He lived in the place now called St David's, a very small town on the west coast of Wales. Its 12th century cathedral is the largest in Wales.* St David's Day*, the national day of Wales, is celebrated on 1 March. Many Welsh people wear a daffodil (one of the national emblems of Wales) on* St David's Day.

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## *APRIL*

***ALL FOOLS' DAY*** *The origin of this tradition is not absolutely certain; different people have different points of view about its origin and many of their assertions are highly debatable. What is unequivocal is that making fools of people on this day or playing tricks or jokes on each other continues to be one of the most thriving of all British customs.* All Fools' Day *(also known as* April Fools' Day*) is celebrated on 1 April, and the victim of the joke is called the* April Fool *(Palmer 1991, 110). Newspapers, television and radio often take part in playing tricks or jokes with fictitious events and reports.*

***ST GEORGE'S DAY*** *The saint's day of St George, the patron saint of England, is celebrated on 23 April every year. St George is said to have been a Christian who was killed for his religious and political beliefs by the Roman emperor Diocletian. The legend of St George says that he killed a dragon to save a princess and in many pictures of him, he is shown killing the dragon. The real St George, however, is said to have been a soldier in the Roman army in the first century who was a Christian and was executed because he refused to kill other soldiers (St George is still the patron saint of soldiers). Although it is the national day of England it is largely ignored and there are no special celebrations.*

## *MAY*

**FURRY DANCE** *The Furry Dance* (origin of name is uncertain: perhaps connected with 'fair' or with 'floral') at Helston in Cornwall is one of the most interesting spring festival dances in Great Britain. The people of Helston have celebrated it every year since pre-Christian times (Rouse 1989, 11). The dances take place on May 8th, St. Michael's Day, the patron saint of Helston. The local legends say that St. Michael defeated the devil, who wanted the place for himself. The people of the village danced with joy. The festival is really about the coming of summer and the going away of winter: 'for Summer is a-come, O, And Winter is a-gone, O' (*ibid*.).

**GARLAND DAY** On May 13th, the old May Day, the children of the village of Abbotsbury (Dorset) go from house to house collecting flowers, which they make into garlands; these wreaths or crowns of flowers are put on short poles. Then they go around the village with garlands, visiting each house to bring it luck. They get a small amount of money from each householder; at the end of the day the garlands are placed at the Abbotsbury War Memorial and the money is shared between the children (Rouse 1989, 13). According to the same author, originally, the custom had nothing to do

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with the men of Abbotsbury who died in the World War, but it was connected with the beginning of the fishing season. In those days garlands were thrown into the sea from the sides of the fishing boats and fishermen sang songs to bring luck to them in the coming fishing season.

## JUNE

**BAWMING THE THORN** The ceremony of *Bawming* (from a Middle English word meaning 'embalm', 'anoint', thus 'adorning') the Thorn (a small tree which has sharp thorns and produces white flowers and red berries) takes place in late June. In Cheshire (a county in NW England) children decorate the tree with ribbons, flags, and other decorations and then dance round about the tree. The origin of this tradition is obscure. Some researchers emphasize the fact that the hawthorn is famous for its supernatural powers; others say that the ceremony was previously performed for the most part by unmarried girls and define the ceremony as a survival of midsummer fertility rites (Knightly 1986, 47).

## JULY

**SWAN-UPPING** The ceremony takes place in July on the River Thames. Groups of people in boats mark swans to establish who owns them. Swans have received royal protection and have been regarded as royal birds. Most swans in Britain belong to the royal family, but in the 15$^{th}$ century groups of swans on the Thames were given to two companies (Dyers' and Vintners') in London. Today there are hundreds of swan marks throughout Britain. Adult swans are 'upped' from the water and examined for the beak marks which distinguish the companies' swans from the unmarked royal swans, and the young swans are marked according to the marks of their parents and ownership.

## AUGUST

**LAMMAS DAY** *Lammas* marks the beginning of harvest (Isaacs and Monk 1986, 238). This feast day of thanksgiving for the harvest implies a special mass in which bread made from the new crop was offered in churches. *Lammas Day* is one of the Scottish quarter days.

**MARYMASS FAIR** The name of this fair, held in regions such Ayrshire (an administrative region in SW Scotland) is taken from the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15 August), which in Scotland was always 'the Great Feast of Mary' (Knightly 1986, 159). The fair is also known for the amateur horse races (locally they are considered to be the oldest horse races in Europe).

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## *SEPTEMBER*

**HORN DANCE** Staffordshire is a county in W central England famous especially for its factories making china (plates, cups, etc.). Abbots Bromley, a small village in Staffordshire, is famous for its Horn dance, believed to be the oldest dance still in existence in Europe. This folk dance is performed on the Monday following the first Sunday after 4 September. The origin of its name is unclear but it is believed to have had some meaning as a fertility rite. There are twelve dancers. Six of them carry reindeer horns that are fixed up in carved wooden heads. The other half of the group consists of a musician (an accordion player), a triangle player, a boy with a bow and arrow, a fool, a Maid Marion, and a hobby horse. The dance is performed in different places (farms and houses) of the village to bring good luck for the year ahead. These performances were once held at Christmas, New Year and Epiphany but changed to the Monday of the local 'wakes week'. The horns used in the dance are authentic reindeer horns and are dated to the 11$^{th}$ century. They have been kept in the village church over the centuries. The dance dates from the Anglo-Saxon period (or earlier) and may celebrate the days when the locals were granted the right to hunt there (Isaacs and Monk 1986, 210).

**MICHAELMAS** *Michaelmas*, the feast of St Michael and All Angels, is celebrated on 29 September. It is one of the English 'quarter' days (the days that traditionally denote the quarters of the business year; the importance of 'quarter days' lies is in agreements and deals between landlord and tenant, being the days on which quarterly rents and charges become due and on which tenure agreements begin or reach the end of the period of time for which they are valid). The day is celebrated as a feast, the main course of which is the Michaelmas goose. In some English universities, the term that starts just after *Michaelmas* is called the *Michaelmas term*.

## *OCTOBER*

**LOST IN THE DARK BELLS** Various institutions in Britain use bells. Great Tom, the big bell at Christ Church College, Oxford, is rung 101 times each night to indicate the initial number of students at the college. The most famous bell in Britain is Big Ben (the nickname of the clock tower and clock of the Houses of Parliament; originally the name was attributed only to the bell). The sound of church bells is associated with Sunday mornings and with weddings. At times of national celebrations bells may also be rung throughout the country. A single bell is rung for five or ten minutes to notify a funeral; during a Christian church service at which people eat bread and

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drink wine as a symbol of Christ's death and sacrifice bells may also be rung. In some towns church bells are rung to mark annual fairs or weekly markets. Many stories are told about lost travellers who were saved by the sound of church bells. These lucky people wished to show gratitude for the help and left money to ensure that church bells were rung to help those unable to find their way. In Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire (Knightly 1986, 152), this tradition has been practised for a long time. It is said that a medieval merchant, who was lost in some marshy areas of the river Trent, was saved by the bells of St. Mary Magdalen's church; he left a sum of money for the continuation of the ringing. Today bells are rung in Newark-on-Trent on Sunday evenings in October and November. At Twyford, in Hampshire, a county of South England, bordering on the English Channel, the bells are rung early in the morning and in the evening on 7 October each year. Then people enjoy a large and special meal, which is partly paid by the descendants of an 18th century local landlord who was lost in fog until the ringing of the church bells saved him (*ibid*.). There are many other tales that explain the maintenance of bellringing in different parts of England.

**HALLOWE'EN** *Hallowe'en* is an old word for *Hallows Evening*, the night before *All Hallows* or *All Saints' Day*. October 31st is *Hallowe'en*. Witches and ghosts are free and you can expect to meet them that night. At least this is the way the story goes. But nowadays in Britain *Hallowe'en* is a time for joy and fun. Parties are often held to celebrate this special occasion and children often dress up as ghosts or witches and make pumpkin lanterns in the shape of hollow heads with hideous face and play trick or treat. 31 October was the New Year's Eve in the Celtic calendar and was traditionally celebrated with bonfires and animal sacrifices. It was the day on which the spirits of the dead were believed to revisit their homes. These features of the pagan celebration are kept alive in some present-day Hallowe'en traditions, connected with the Christian celebration of *All Souls' Day* (2 November, when people say prayers for people who have died).
Somerset is a county in south-west England. It consists mainly of agricultural land and is well-known for its cider; the administrative centre is Taunton. At Hinton St George in Somerset, the last Thursday in October, which may coincide with *Hallow'en*, is *Punky Night*. Children and adults walk together around the small village of Hinton St George carrying 'punkies' (lanterns made from a large turnip) and singing for candles and money (Isaacs and Monk 1986, 196). The tradition is believed to have originated in the Middle Ages and has been associated with the custom of 'souling': singing and begging alms for the souls of the dead (Isaacs and Monk 1986).

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## *NOVEMBER*

**BONFIRE NIGHT** On 5 November British people light fireworks and burn a guy on a bonfire. This is in memory of the time when a group of English Catholics led by Guy Fawkes intended to kill King James I and blow up Parliament on 5 November 1605. The plan failed when a relative of one of the conspirators was warned not to attend Parliament that day. The plot was discovered and all the people involved in the plot were killed. The historical significance of the event is no longer important today. *Bonfire Night* was initially observed as a celebration of the victory of Protestants over Catholics, but today British people enjoy the annual festivity. A figure of a man (a guy) made of old clothes, stuffed with straw and paper, symbolizing Guy Fawkes, is burned on top of a bonfire. A few days before *Bonfire Night* (or *Guy Fawkes' Night*) children take their guy into the streets and ask for money for fireworks (*ibid*.). Local councils or charities organize public events, while many families hold private bonfire parties in their gardens.

**REMEMBRANCE DAY** *Remembrance Day* is held on the Sunday nearest to 11 November. It is the day on which the British people commemorate those who died in the two world wars. Flowers and wreaths are laid at war memorials throughout the country. The largest ceremony is held in London, when members of the royal family, politicians and Commonwealth figures, members of the public lay flowers at the Cenotaph (the monument in the middle of Whitehall, London, built in memory of the armed forces who died in the two World Wars; the word *cenotaph* means 'empty tomb'). The day is also called *Poppy Day*, and people wear a paper or plastic poppy on *Remembrance Sunday*. This is undoubtedly a sign of remembering. During the weeks that precede *Remembrance Day*, many people subscribe to the Haig Fund (a fund for ex-servicemen, started in memory of Earl Haig, commander-in-chief of British forces on the Western Front during World War I). For their donations they receive a poppy (a symbol of the fields of Flanders, on which many young men died in World War I). The money raised by the sale of these poppies is donated to charities that are involved with all those who suffered in the wars. Some people wear a white poppy as a symbol of peace; they believe that this custom makes war seem glorious and celebrated, rather than something that makes people think of the deaths and the misery that was done.

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## *DECEMBER*

**MUMMING PLAYS** A *mummer* is an actor in a traditional English play without words in which actors wear masks covering their faces. Mummers' plays are associated with early dumb shows and were passed on orally from one generation to another. The basic themes of these plays are generally the same: downfall and birth, death and resurrection, the victory of good over evil. The story of mummers' plays traditionally involves a fight between St George and a Turkish knight (the characters are usually the same, although there is some local variation in the names of the characters). One of the main characters is killed but a doctor brings them back to life. Mummers' plays are performed today in regions such as Oxfordshire (a county in S central England, in and around the Thames valley), Hampshire (a county of S England, bordering on the English Channel), Yorkshire (a former county of NE England, now divided into North, West, and South Yorkshire, and Humberside). The meaning behind the play, which is performed especially at Christmas, is the death of the earth in winter and the return to life in spring (Knightly 1986, 172). It is probably one of the oldest surviving Christmas customs.

**YULE LOGS** This is an old Christmas tradition and nowadays is celebrated only in some traditionalist homes or pubs (once it was practised throughout Britain, especially the English northern and western counties and Scotland). On Christmas Eve a large log is brought in and then is lit with a bit of last year's log, which was kept to protect the house from fire and lightening, damage and loss. The log should be kept burning for at least twelve hours. It must not die out until it is intentionally extinguished, or this may bring bad luck during the year that is to come. Oak is the preferred timber for Yule Logs in Scotland (fruit-tree or ash wood, in England). In Somerset (a county south-west England) and Devon (a county in south-west England) a bundle of green ash twigs is preferred to a log (*ibid*.).

*May the face of good news and the back of bad news be towards you,*
*Professor Dragoş!*

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