

The Seasons' Turning

(Transcript)

Part 1

It was around Christmas time last year, along the footpath though Kestle Barton between Helford and Frenchman's Creek, I came across these decorated trees.

Decorated trees are entirely normal at this time of year but out of their usual context these took me by surprise. I found them strange. I wondered if they had some kind of votive meaning.

They brought to mind something I'd read about the Lizard peninsula by Clara Vyvyan of Trelowarran.

She said:

'If I were asked to describe the country briefly I should use the single word '*magic*'...that sense of 'something more' behind or beyond or beneath things tangible or visible'.

She said of the Lizard

'Its atmosphere of magic was concerned with streams and their secret undergrowth and the coastal track that led along the high cliffs and down in to the valleys, with bird life and wild flowers and moor land space; and these things have not yet been obliterated in this obliterating age of the bulldozer'.

And she said that these qualities and this magic is

'Dangerously near extinction, threatened by the noise, ugliness and crowds of the industrial age'. (*'My Cornwall'* Bossiney Press 1973)

This was written in the sixties or seventies, perhaps earlier.

Clara must have seen the arrival of the satellite dishes on Goonhilly Downs and the development of the naval base at Culdrose.

There must have been a good few bulldozers involved.

The wind turbines are a more recent development.

And there is a lot more polythene around.

I wondered if Clara would feel that the sense of 'something more' she experienced *has* been obliterated.

Part 2

Some months later, walking through a farm yard on another footpath near Helston, I saw this cross on a barn door.

[Farmer comes across the yard]

Julia: Oh – Hi! I was just looking at this ...What is it?

Farmer: My mother-in-law asked me to put it up. We're doing the Keskerdh this year.

Julia: Oh yeah...er...Keskerdh?

Farmer: Yeah. It's a ritual. A bit like 'Crying the Neck'. You've heard of Crying the Neck have you?

Julia: Yeah – I have actually.

Farmer: Well, this one comes at the start of the season...and... [points to cross on the door] with the Keskerdh it's the procession around this shape [motions a circle movement]. And...it moves the seasons on, so they say.

Julia: I'd like to see that. But...do you believe it?

Farmer: Well...it's not really to believe or not believe, but I wouldn't be one not to do it.

Part 3

A procession around a shape to influence the seasons! Is this to do with Clara's sense of 'something more'?

A procession to celebrate the coming of spring is a famous custom in Helston. Me and my sisters took part through the seventies when we were at school.

Though my understanding of its meaning was vague, the effect of the bass rhythm and the drum was visceral.

Flora Day was already and remains quite a tourist attraction.

I wonder what Clara thought of it.

The tourists: "Crowds of the industrial age" are not all "noisy and ugly". Maybe they are drawn by some unspecified desire to mark the season's change?

The 'Keskerdh An Kammva Dro'.

Maybe I remember my grandmother talking about it... but she died twenty years ago. The farmer suggested that if I was interested in the Keskerdh I should go in to talk to his wife, Alice. She was making some of the bunting to mark out the route.

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[Alice is working at the kitchen table]

Julia: So um... is this for the Keskerdh?

Alice: Yes...Yes, it is! In my gran's time they used dyed rags, but nowadays – well, this time round – we decided we'd use colourful plastic bags. They will last a bit longer and we can plait them together, just like a Corn Dolly. And...!

think they look very effective. But as I'm doing this I can see I'm running out...I'm running out of pink! I'm doing May at the moment, and I need some more pink...'

Part 4

Later that year Alice arranged an opportunity for me to meet with her Uncle William. She said he'd be able to tell me a lot about the background to the Keskerdh and Crying the Neck. Both these events are held around harvest time.

[Meeting with Uncle William]

Uncle William: As far as I know, the Keskerdh means 'procession' and Kammva-dro is 'turnstile' or 'capstan'. So, put together they really mean a procession around a capstan or turnstile.

If you are interested in growing a new crop or trying out some new land and it was very important to you, you would hold a Keskerdh. It involved plotting out a cross...every leg had a colour according to the season. Just for instance, the summer had bright colours like bright green and red and yellow. The autumn had gold and browns, the winter had purple and black and the spring bright colours again like green and pinks and blues.

People would walk around it. This is what they did. They'd have flags or branches of trees; they'd be dressed in all different sorts of colours to represent the whole of the year I think. They would go around it. They would go around it and then they would make as much noise as they possibly could. They would use whistles, drums, anything they thought they could bang or make a loud noise.

It does remind me a little bit of what we used to call the 'Shallallee Band' years ago... we used to serenade young married couples – I had it done to me myself. And I think it seems to resemble that sort of energy – it brings about that sort of energy that they thought was necessary.

Julia: So, it wasn't musicians or anything like that?

Uncle William: Oh no, no, no! Dreadful noises really – I think they do probably try to get some sort of beat into it, but not very musical, no.

Julia: So it would more be a sound then, and a rhythm, than a tune?

Uncle William: It would be energy. It would be energy. They wanted to bring about the energy. And of course they were particularly interested in the leg that represents the spring season. They used to call it – I think they used to call it the 'Breggh Hir'. And they would really make a noise and this was a bit longer so that it would have the most weight, the most energy, the most noise and the most movement and then this would help – they thought this would help - to bring the spring around. It would motivate the seasons. Rotate the capstan as you might say. Rotate the seasons and the seasons hopefully then would be a bit decent and come when they should do.'

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So the Keskerdh is done in anticipation – it's about trying to bring round the right conditions for a good crop.

But what about Crying the Neck? Uncle William showed me a photograph. This was the modern version – more organized and formal with the people changed out of their work clothes.

He described the original event, which was much more rowdy, taking place within minutes of completing the harvest. Everybody involved was out in the field, celebrating with good deal of food and drink.

Uncle William: It was something to be celebrate. And this is what they did. The last bit of standing corn, shall we say the last square foot, the honour of cutting it was left to the farmer.

He would take a scythe, he would cut it, and then when he had cut it he would pick it up, he would hold it high into the air and he'd shout, 'I ave 'ee! I 'ave 'ee! I 'ave 'ee!'

And the rest of the labourers and the people surrounding would say, 'What 'ave 'ee? What 'ave ee? What 'ave 'ee?'

And he would say,

'The Neck! The Neck! The Neck!'

And this was followed by a series of hoorahs, first of all for the farmers, then for the labourers, then for the queen and then for anything because really what they wanted to do was make a lovely bit of noise so that all the neighbours, if it was a nice quiet still evening, would know that they had finished their harvest and they would be delighted over that. And then of course, the farmer would pick up his corn and he would make a bit of a corn d... [*motions and arch shape with his hands*]... make a neck out of it. Usually the big farmers weren't very good with their hands so they would hand it over to the wife or the daughter or somebody and they, right on the spot, would then plait it...

Because they felt that this was the spirit of the harvest in the corn dolly and it needed to be protected until the next year. They would bring it into the big farm house. It was put over the breast plate of the farm house and there it stood in honour till the next year.

Julia: Was there a similarity in meaning with the cross made for the Keskerdh?

Uncle William: I think what they did was they made as you might say a symbolic Bregh Hir... which represented the whole of the cross... and there again this spirit was captivated in this. And if they put it and pinned it on to the door of a building fairly close this would remind the forces that be that this was a continual thing and they needed the seasons...that it would stay there for twelve months and they hope that their efforts and energy would produce the right results and the season would come in at the right time and in the right way.

Julia: You said that in the days before binders and combine harvesters there would be a big feast in the farm house after the ceremony in the field – how about in more recent times? After the neck, or the corn dolly, is made, what happened then?

Uncle William: Then they would all retreat to a church and have a service and they do that to this day - they still do this, go to a service... very nice, nothing wrong with this.

Julia: Was this the same as Harvest Festival or...?

Uncle William: Usually it had been...the church had been decorated for harvest festival so it was ideal for, it's ideal for them to go to it.

Then what they would do after that, they would all retire to the village hall and have a pasty supper. And I should be saying they are doing this now, this is common practice now. But you see, nice as it was, it never came anywhere near to this community supper that they had in the big farm house kitchen with the spirit of harvest in the corn dolly looking out at them...'

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Harvest Festival is an important date in the church calendar. The decorations of flowers and produce from the congregation are tokens of thanksgiving.

Some of the hymns recall beliefs embodied in the Corn Dolly.

The Corn Dolly and the Kammva Dro were placed by farmers to intercede with the powers of nature to provide a good living. As well as thanksgiving, Harvest Festival makes a similar appeal to the Will of God.

Part 6

Clara may not have had such a hands-on relationship with the land, but her sense of awe for the forces shaping the landscape surely came from the same place.

There may be more machinery, technology and industry since the time that Clara wrote - but it doesn't mean there is no sense of 'something more' behind or beyond or beneath things tangible or visible.

Maybe it's about people and belief?
Or about a need to connect with elemental forces?

Or maybe its awareness that
Though elemental forces can be measured and channelled, they are forever beyond the reach of our control.

Clara needn't have worried about obliteration of the magic:
It's in that sense of awe
And in the wish to celebrate,
Or even motivate,
The Seasons' Turning.

Julia Giles 2012