

Why is the partridge sitting in the tree?

Much interpretation has been given to this festive and somewhat avian carol whose origins and meaning can be traced back many centuries. The suggestion is that in all probability it was first created as a children's memory game. However today we know it as a Christmas song that lifts the spirits and brings a smile to everyone's face, especially when the pace quickens and the brain works harder to recall the next line of these fanciful gifts. Though a festive song there's no obvious reference to the Christmas story other than the period in which it is set - the twelve festival days of merry-making between Christmas Day and Epiphany.

During the medieval period many local customs developed around these twelve festive days and especially Twelfth Night, for this was a time of partying and celebration, for games and much feasting. Rich Twelfth Night cakes were baked and shared amongst the guests. Hidden inside the cake was a dried pea or bean and who ever found them became the Lord and Lady, or King and Queen of the party for the night. Another popular game was 'snapdragon' where you picked raisins or other dried fruit out of a tray of flaming brandy. I wouldn't advise that you try that one at home: health and safety.

Traditions also grew round the agricultural year. In the cider counties many people went wassailing on Twelfth Night. This usually took place in old apple orchards, bread would be placed round the tree roots and in the branches and the last of the year's cider would be poured over the bread as a blessing, and in the hope of an abundant apple crop for the coming year – a tradition still practised in the West Country today. It was said that Twelfth Night marked the beginning of the agricultural year with the first Sunday after Epiphany becoming known as 'Plough Sunday' a celebration which involve bringing a ploughshare into a church with prayers for the blessing of the land, after which the farming year and the work would begin all over again.

So far there's very little in these traditions that relates to our carol, so what is the background of this Christmas song? The carol first appears in 1780 in a children's book called "Mirth Without Mischief" and this was said to be a Twelfth Night 'memories and forfeits' game. However, the carol goes much further back than 1780 and is in fact French and not English which may go some way to explaining the fanciful gifts. Even the title is something of a conundrum: what was the partridge doing up a pear tree when the English partridge is strictly a ground dwelling bird which scratches the earth in search of insects and seeds and certainly wouldn't be found in a pear tree or any other tree for that matter? Whereas the French partridge is a definite tree dweller.

It didn't take long for this children's rhyme to be adopted by some and given a spiritual interpretation - possibly an interpretation too far. It was suggested that the carol was in fact a 'catechism song', used by young Catholics to help them learn the tenets of their faith. It went like this:

1 Partridge/Pear tree stands for Jesus and the cross

2 Turtle Doves: Old & New Testaments

3 French Hens: faith, hope, love or the Holy Trinity or the 3 gifts of Magi

4 Collie Birds: Four Gospels

5 Golden Rings: Pentateuch (first 5 books of Bible)

6 Geese a-laying: 6 days God created the Earth

7 Swans a-swimming: the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit

8 Maids a-milking: the 8 beatitudes

9 Drummers drumming: the 9 fruits of the Holy Spirit

10 Pipers piping: the ten commandments

11 Ladies dancing: the eleven apostles (Judas doesn't count)

12 Lords a-leaping: 12 statements in Apostles' Creed

Any suggestion that this was a 'catechism song' has been widely refuted and although the origins of the song are unknown it's likely that it is entirely secular and playful, not spiritual and coded, simply a memory game, something to have fun with and celebrate the season.

We can't ignore that birds feature heavily in this carol – perhaps more so than we realise. The website Bird Spot has a fascinating theory that all the gifts relate to a specific species of birds that would be served up in elaborate medieval banquets, there's even suggestions of how they were cooked, which is not for the faint-hearted. It does take a giant leap of the imagination but it's a fun interpretation: 5 gold rings refer to the neck markings of the pheasant; 8 maids a-milking refers to the milk white cattle egret; 9 ladies dancing - the crane famous for its mating dance; 10 lords a-leaping – the heron; 11 pipers piping – the sandpiper and finally 12 drummers drumming, could only be the great spotted woodpecker. All these birds were certainly on the menu in the Middle Ages.

The only species to escape the pot were the 4 colly birds. The colly birds were thought to be blackbirds and the recipe involving blackbirds was not a dish intended to be eaten but rather to amaze. An empty cooked pie crust was filled with live birds which when set before the guests was cut open and the birds would fly out much to the amusement of those invited to the feast. Again, I wouldn't advise that you try this one at home either.

It's been calculated that if you tried to replicate this gift giving today, you'd be looking well in excess of £60,000, so you would need pretty deep pockets. Instead, perhaps we should just accept and enjoy this festive song for what it is - a way of celebrating the sheer merriment of the Christmas season from the birth of the Christ child to the arrival of the Magi at Epiphany. For the privilege of celebrating with family and friends and those we love, for the feasting, and gift-giving, and the many ways we can finally come

together to acknowledge and praise God in Christ who came down to earth at
Christmas. Emmanuel Advent blessings, Linda

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