



Mistletoe Lore

Guest Author - Phyllis Doyle Burns

*Oh ho, the mistletoe hung where you can see
Somebody waits for you, kiss her once for me*

- From Holly Jolly Christmas, sung by Burl Ives and written by Johnny Marks

As far back as I can remember, my parents and just about everyone we knew would hang mistletoe at Christmas time, usually above the front door. I never gave it much thought - I just knew that if you stood under the mistletoe, someone would give you a kiss. How delightful! Victorian homes always had mistletoe hanging in their halls and archways and it was considered a cherished decoration and is still a tradition in many homes.

There is, however, a lot more to this plant and its celebrated lore than most people give thought to. For instance, the mistletoe does not grow on the ground with roots taking hold in the soil. It grows in the mighty Oak as a parasitic plant and pulls nutrients from the Oak in order to survive. The berries of the mistletoe are poisonous. So - why do people use it as traditional Christmas decoration and kiss under it as if it were magical?

Pliny the Elder wrote in his ancient writings that the Druid priests used mistletoe in a ceremony. This ritual lasted five days and was conducted after the new moon after the Winter Solstice. The gathering of the mistletoe was itself a ceremony as they journeyed into forests with a golden sickle to cut loose the mistletoe from the Sacred Oak, which was a solemn ritual.

Sprigs of the mistletoe were given out to the people of the villages, in order to protect them from evil. Druids believed that all plants and trees had a soul and that the mistletoe contained the soul of the Sacred Oak from which it had clung to. Their thought process came from the fact that the mistletoe drew it's nourishment from the Oak and it keeps the tree green during the winter.

Ancient Celts believed the mistletoe was full of miraculous healing and strong benevolent powers. The Celtic meaning of the word "mistletoe" is "All Heal". They believed that the mistletoe could not only heal and protect from evil, but that it also brought good luck and blessings to those who possessed it.

The Celtic people believed in the power of the mistletoe to help defeat enemies and bring about peace, so the tradition of hanging the sprigs above doorways at Christmas time became a symbol of peace and goodwill to any who enter. This belief actually originated in Scandinavia and spread to the Celtic peoples.

As with other evergreen plants, such as holly, pine, fir, and laurel, the mistletoe was very special to the Celtic and other ancient peoples because the colors of these plants kept the landscape beautiful throughout the dark and cold winter months. They were, and still are, a hopeful reminder that spring and rebirth is not far away.

Sir James George Frazer (January 1, 1854, Glasgow, Scotland – May 7, 1941), was a Scottish social anthropologist influential in the early stages of the modern studies of mythology and comparative religion. In *The Golden Bough*, Chapter 65, Sir James George Frazer writes, *From time immemorial the mistletoe has been the object of superstitious veneration in Europe. It was worshipped by the Druids, as we learn from a famous passage of Pliny. After enumerating the different kinds of mistletoe, he proceeds: "In treating of this subject, the admiration in which the mistletoe is held throughout Gaul ought not to pass unnoticed. The Druids, for so they call their wizards, esteem nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree on which it grows, provided only that the tree is an oak.*

The author goes on to say, *In another passage Pliny tells us that in medicine the mistletoe which grows on an oak was esteemed the most efficacious, and that its efficacy was by some superstitious people supposed to be increased if the plant was gathered on the first day of the moon without the use of iron, and if when gathered it was not allowed to touch the earth; oak-mistletoe thus obtained was deemed a cure for epilepsy; carried about by women it assisted them to conceive; and it healed ulcers most effectually....,*

So, you see, there is so much more to the history and lore of this magical plant than most of us realize. However, if the sprig hanging above the door is only there for someone to give you a kiss, that in itself is magical.

The mistletoe is still hung up in farm-houses and kitchens at Christmas, and the young men have the privilege of kissing the girls under it, plucking each time a berry from the bush. When the berries are all plucked the privilege ceases.

- Washington Irving