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MONA DOUGLAS "A CELTIC FESTIVAL OF YOUTH" (1924)

Following on the Celtic Congress held recently at Quimper, in Brittany, came the great annual festival of Breton girlhood, held in the same town, and known as the Fete de Reines de Cornouaille, or Feast of the Queens of Cornouaille. Most of the delegates remained to witness the Fete, and, in honour of the Congress, Lord Ashbourne, an Irish delegate, was appointed to perform the chief ceremony of the day, that of crowning the Queen of Queens for the year.

The Breton "Pardons" are, of course, famous, but the celebration is rather different from the usual religious festival; and, although there is an early Mass on the programme, the whole thing seems to have its roots in an earlier faith and way of life than Christianity. In the large district of Cornouaille, which is about the size of an English county, each village and small town elects every year its own Queen and maids of honour from among the prettiest and most popular girls in the community, and on the Fete Day, all these little courts of honour travel to Quimper to celebrate and ratify, before the eyes of the large community, their election for the coming year, and to choose from their number the Queen of Queens.

The Fete takes place on a Sunday, but in Quimper the celebrations commence on the Saturday night with a great torchlight procession through the streets. When that is over, the local bands, choirs, and pipers gather on a terrace above the main river, with the whole population as audience, and the fun begins in earnest. There is a decorated barge moored in the river, and from this a choir sings folk-songs and national airs at intervals. Alternately, the military band breaks in with some more sophisticated music, and in striking contrast four country lads follow with some warlike and barbaric strains played on a strange kind of twisted horn unlike any known instrument. But the most popular musicians of all are the pipers. Everyone knows of the fascination of the Scottish pipes, and the Breton variety of the instrument has all the Northern magic, with, perhaps, an added thrill due to the "Bombard," a special separate chanter, played by one of the pair of pipers, while the other uses the bagpipes alone. The chief players of this Fete are a famous pair, much in request at country weddings, and one of them is blind, but no worse a musician on that account. No sooner do they begin to play than groups of boys and girls gather up and break into an old figure dance, their dark, flowing costumes and swift, rather stiff movements giving a weird effect in the light of the great torches set along by the river. These songs and dances continue without a break until about 11 o'clock, when the public celebrations officially break up; but far into the early hours of the morning the skirl of the pipes and the voices and laughter 6f little groups of revellers can be heard in odd corners of the narrow streets.

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Next day the ceremonies start at 7 a.m., with an early service in the Cathedral, and the proclamation by mounted heralds of the events of the day. There are about thirty mounted cavaliers and bands, carrying swords and silver trumpets, and these, followed by a crowd o gaily dressed townsfolk, ride about the streets until ten o'clock, when everyone proceeds to the station to welcome the Queens and their retinue. On arrival, they are received with great honour, and a procession is formed, with last year's Queen of Queens in the midst, which marches through the streets to a hall, where a ceremony of welcome is performed, and the Queens are each invested with a sash of office. The Bretons, probably through long usage, have a good feeling for effective pageantry, and queens, cavaliers, pipers, and towns people alike move with a certain unconscious stateliness, which gives dignity and cohesion to the procession.

In the afternoon the company marches out to the municipal park, a great wooded enclosure on the outskirts of the town, wherein, on a natural platform on hillside beneath high trees, the various Queens are crowned and kissed, each by the "maire" of her own little town. Then comes the election by ballot of the Queens and maids of honour, of the Queen of Queens for the ensuing year, to whom the greatest honour is paid as she sits throned above all the other maidens. When the result of the ballot is declared. the retiring Queen is disrobed, kisses her successor, and descends from her throne, The new Queen is then invested, crowned, kissed, and saluted, and the Breton bards sing in her honour. Follow various country songs and dances before the Queens and Court, and then the procession forms up again and passes back to the hall in the town, where the new Queen is enthroned-her final ceremony-on the great stage in the midst of her Court, while the retiring Queen sits on the steps of the throne and acts as her chief maid of honour. This year's Queen of Queens is a girl from the Ile de Seine, a tiny island off the coast, and is immensely popular, so there are many cheers as she passes through the town.

The rest of the evening is given over to songs, dancing, and general rejoicings, and finally the Queens and Court are escorted back to the station to entrain for home. The lighted coaches move out into the darkness bearing their load of triumphant youth back to the quiet villages and monotonous round of peasant life, and the little town settles down again into silence and sleep, nestling between its two rivers. But over it all lies a sort of afterglow of this annual Feast of Youth, a curious and charming ceremony which has been a fitting conclusion to a week of meetings held chiefly on behalf the restoration and appreciation of ancient languages, lore, and customs.

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