

It was a glorious spring night, with a tapestry of stars in a clear sky. So, at rest at last, we sat in the dark drinking neat whisky – my wife, virtually teetotal, thought it was port – conversing in desultory Arabic. The cook, it turned out, had worked for the British oil company, the IPC, before it was nationalised and had some English. Amusingly he and I found we had a number of mutual acquaintances in the oil world.

The next morning at breakfast we had a long talk to Amin. He was missing his family who had yet to join him, but he was relaxed about the situation in his Province. We drove off to visit the highlands of Kurdistan with its spectacular scenery, precipitous cliffs and rushing rivers. We then returned home, passing the site of the battle of Gaugemela where Alexander defeated Darius in 331 BC. Two weeks later Amin was shot and wounded by fellow Kurds in an ambush.

Johnny Graham.

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THE HOLLY AND THE IVY (AND MISTLETOE)

Holly, ivy and mistletoe are the basic ingredients for our traditional festive decorations. Other than the fact that their shapes, surface and textures compliment each other making them such a pleasing combination in a design, why do we use them?

The tradition of dressing a house is a Christian practice dating back to the Romans, when giving branches as a gift was a symbol of good luck.

HOLLY was used in churches as its sharp leaves and red berries were associated with Christ's crown of thorns. In traditional Christmas songs holly is said to be a man's plant – the more prickly the holly the better the master would rule for the coming year. Holly, like elder, was believed to have power over horses and was used for whips. It was also used as a powerful fertility charm against house goblins and witches.

IVY is said to represent woman and even today is used in wedding flowers and is a sign of fidelity. In the 18th century it became a symbol of sadness as it was always found draped over old ruins. In the Highlands and Islands, ivy was plaited into wreaths with rowan and honeysuckle as a good luck charm. It was said that it kept evil away from cows and helped them to produce good milk and butter, therefore ivy was draped over the lintel of the byre.

MISTLETOE, revered by the Druids, had to be cut with a silver sickle, never an iron one, or bad luck would follow. Mistletoe must never touch the ground, thus the tradition of hanging it up denoting friendship and hospitality. Tradition says mistletoe should be caught in a white cloth held by four virgins. It will then have a miracle power of healing, protect against witchcraft and storms and bring fertility to the land and the people of the house (all that kissing perhaps!). Mistletoe in the language of flowers means "surmounting all difficulties" – hardly surprising if was to do all the above! The kissing custom, peculiar to Britain, originates from a Norse legend relating to Balder the God of Peace. Mistletoe was not allowed inside a church as it was a sacred plant of pre-Christian religions, the one exception being in York Minster where it has been placed on the high altar for the twelve days of Christmas since the middle ages. While the berries are sought after by birds they are poisonous to humans.