

A Family Celebration

Family celebrations tend to accompany hatchings, matchings and despatchings. In the past these usually involved religious celebrations, but now this is often not the case. When one was young, birthdays were also a cause of family celebration. But after 'coming of age', at 21 when I was young but now when one is 18, birthdays seem to be much less celebrated except for so-called 'landmarks' such as 40, 50, 60 and so on. Also rites of passage such as First Holy Communion among Catholics or Bar Mitzvah among Jews are occasions for family celebration.

Many religious holidays were in former times occasions for family celebration. Once there were many of these; but those celebrated as family occasions have become fewer than they once were. Easter was once the main Christian time of celebration and is still a time for family celebration among Orthodox and Catholic Christians. But the only one that is still widely celebrated even by agnostics or, indeed, by people of no religion is Christmas. The Eid at the end of Ramadan is a time for family celebration among Muslims, as is Passover, Hanuka and other festivals among Jews; and our Prime Minister keeps Diwali and other Hindu festivals with his family.

The family celebration I shall describe is one of matching which, of course, involves two families in celebration. This is the marriage of my eldest son, Justin, on 7th August, 1993. It was memorable in many ways as it was celebrated in France, indeed, more or less in the centre of France in Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule on the northern Auvergne. The 'Annonces de la semaine' of the Parish Church there listed for that Saturday: "15^H Mariage de Justin BROWN et de Murielle CHERASSE." Thus it was a celebration of my family and the Chérasse family.

As the wedding was taking place in the centre of France, it was unrealistic to expect people to travel all that way on the day. So most of the contingents from England and Wales travelled down the day before and occupied several rooms of the *Le Chêne Vert* ('the holm oak') near the centre of the town. We met Murielle's mother, who was a widow, and others in the town. That evening outside the hotel we hosted a meal for all those who had travelled down with us and for Murielle's mother and some of her family. It was a good ice-breaker. Murielle's mother had been somewhat wary about her daughter marrying a Britisher about whom she knew next to nothing, though she had been somewhat re-assured when Justin had gone over to France a week or so before the wedding to rehearse ceremonies and she found he was, as indeed he still is, a practising Catholic. During the meal she became even more reconciled; it was helped in that my wife, Caroline, was (and still is) a fluent French speaker.

The next day was the wedding day. There was none of the British superstition that the groom should not see his bride on the day before the ceremony. We have photographs of them in their wedding attire that morning. In the street where Murielle's mother lived there were cars with white bows attached to their aerials.

In France, as in most countries, the civil and religious ceremonies are separate. So later we made our way to the Mairie where M. le Maire, adorned with a blue, white and red sash, conducted the civil ceremony. We were surprised to notice many of the French women there were carrying flowering plants in pots. We soon found out why. After the ceremony they carried those pots along to the church ready for the Nuptial Mass at three in the afternoon. The Mass was conducted in French but we did have one hymn in English: Charles Wesley's 'Love Divine all Loves Excelling.'

After the Mass parents of the bride and groom walked out first behind the married couple. At the entrance we were expected to stop and receive 'félicitations' from each guest as he or she filed out and the ladies expected me to kiss them on both cheeks (the right one first) though I recall one who insisted on being kissed three times on the cheek (right, left and right again). This was followed by

the official photographer doing just what photographers do here, i.e. photograph the couple, the couple with parents and so on in front of the church and its environs, finishing up with a group photograph of everyone. But in France these photographs are enhanced by the addition of the potted flowers that had been carried to the Mairie and then to the church.

As I look at the group photograph now, I see Justin was supported by us, his Mum and Dad, by Caroline's Mum and Dad, by his brother, Martin, and Martin's wife, Anne, by his sister, Rachel, by Caroline's sister, Tina, with her husband, Richard, and their son's Edward and Jonathan, and Jonathan's wife, Ruby, by my sister, Jan, and her husband, John, and two of Jan's sons, Ashley and Courtenay, and by two of our friends from Newport, making nineteen in all on the English and Welsh side. Unfortunately my own parents were too frail to make the journey, though they would like to have done so; my brother-in-law, John, took many videos of proceedings, including the joint meal the evening before, which he later showed my parents.

On the French side Murielle was supported by her mother and grandmother, by her brother, Alain, and his girlfriend, Delphine, and by seventeen others. I am sure I was told how most of them were related but, alas, nearly thirty years later I regret I have forgotten.

Then came a longish break in proceedings. There is an island in the Sioule river and apparently it was traditional for newly weds to go there so that the official photographer could photograph them in various wistfully romantic poses. When at last the couple re-appeared it was time to form a cavalcade of cars decorated with white bows and begin the drive to a hall in a nearby village where the reception was being held. In true French fashion, cars in the cavalcade blew their horns when driving through any built-up areas.

When we arrived at the hall we saw cars circling around in the parking area outside the hall. Caroline said it was silly and did not want us to join in. "You wouldn't see my Dad doing that," she said. "Well, who's that?" I asked, pointing at one of the cars merrily circling around with Caroline's Dad and Mum in it laughing away. So I was allowed to join in the merriment as well.

Eventually of course the cars did decide to stop and park properly before we all went into the hall. Those who know anything about the French will know that no family occasion is complete without a meal which must be taken slowly, with wine and much talking over several courses. Thus it was. I still have my copy of the menu; there were ten courses, and Google translates each course thus:

- Marquissette pump with grattons
- Smoked salmon purse with fresh salmon mousse
- Veal sweetbread gratin with mushrooms madeira sauce and puff pastry
- Siberian hole
- Vegetable buncher
- Roasted Charolais sirloin
- Frou-frou of greenery
- Mice feast
- Ice farandole
- Well

Some Google has managed to translate reasonably well. Of those which caused the automatic translator problems, I do remember that the 'Siberian hole' was a sorbet to refresh the palate after the first three courses, ready for the six which followed. The 'Well' at the end was a French style wedding cake, shaped like a wishing well and adorned with sparklers. Presumably the 'vegetable buncher' and 'frou-frou of greenery' were some sort of vegetable dishes but I not now remember what the 'marquissette pump with grattons', the 'mice feast' and the 'ice farandole' were.

There was also wine and, at the end, coffee. The courses were not overlarge and nothing was hurried. Intervals between courses were filled with chatter and sometimes a couple or two dancing. I think there was the odd speech or two but, as far as I recall, not the obligatory formal speeches of English weddings.

Eventually this long, leisurely and merry meal came to end sometime, if I remember rightly, around midnight. Then tables and chairs were cleared to one side to allow for dancing. At this point some guests did leave; but we and most of the younger ones stayed where dancing went on through the night until dawn when all were served in true French style with traditional French Onion Soup.

After that it was a question of tidying up the hall and making our way back to our hotel for a long, late sleep. When we awoke much later in the day, Justin and Murielle had gone off on their honeymoon; the celebration was over and all it remained for us to do was to thank friends and family who had come over to support Justin before they made their several ways back to Britain and to say good-bye to Murielle's mother and family and wish them well.

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