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Romantic Guide To Handfasting: Rituals, Recipes & Lore



Synopsis

Sacred and solemn, handfasting is a marriage rite practiced by Pagans, Druids, Witches, and Shamans for centuries. Anna Franklin explores the fascinating origins of this beautiful ritual and provides practical advice and ideas for planning your own handfasting celebration.

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Customer Reviews

Anna Franklin is a third degree witch and high priestess of the Hearth of Arianrhod who has been a practicing Pagan for more than forty years. She is the author of twenty-eight books and the creator of the Sacred Circle Tarot, Fairy Ring Oracle, and the Pagan Ways Tarot (Schiffer, 2015). Her books have been translated into nine languages. Anna has contributed hundreds of articles to Pagan magazines and has appeared on radio and TV. She lives and works in a village in the English Midlands where she grows her own herbs, fruit and vegetables, and generally lives the Pagan life. Visit her online at www.AnnaFranklin.co.uk.

Chapter 1 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND Contrary to popular belief, marriages in the old days did not always take place with the benefit of clergy. Oftentimes only the rich could afford a church ceremony (which took place in the porch of the church, not inside), and in any case, in some areas, priests were thin on the ground, and one could not be found to conduct every marriage. In most parts of Europe, a declaration before witnesses was enough to constitute a legal marriage recognized by Roman Catholic Canon law. Even children were married in this manner, with the

consummation sometimes taking place years later. It wasn't until 1563 that the Council of Trent changed the law, and a priest and marriage ceremony were required to constitute a valid marriage in Catholic countries.

Roman Common-Law Marriages

The ancient Romans could celebrate marriage *ex usu*, by which, if a woman, with the consent of her parents or guardians, lived with a man for a year without being absent for three nights, she became his legal wife. This custom was obsolete in Roman law by the time of the Republic.

English Handfastings

The term handfasting originates in the Anglo-Saxon word *handfæstung*, which meant the shaking of hands to seal a contract. A similar word exists in German and Danish. Among other things, it was applied to the act of betrothal in both England and Scotland. This betrothal itself was called, in Anglo-Saxon, a *bewedding*, because the future husband was called upon to make a down payment, or *wed*, against the bride price of his lady. (This is the origin of our term wedding.) The contract was sealed with a handshake, or *handfæstung*.

Irish Handfastings

In ancient Ireland, Teltown Marriages were temporary unions entered into at Lughnasa, the festival celebrated at the beginning of August. At Larganeeny (Lag an Aonaigh, *“the hollow of the fair”*), there was an oral tradition, recorded in the nineteenth century, that a form of marriage was held there in Pagan times. According to this legend, a number of young men would go to the north side of a high wall, while a number of young women went to the south side. A woman would then put her hand through a hole in the wall, and a man would take it, guided in his choice only by the appearance of the hand. The two who had thus joined hands by blind chance were then obliged to live together for a year and a day. At the end of that time they appeared together at the Rath (Fort) of Teltown, and if they were not satisfied, they obtained a deed of separation and were entitled to go to Larganeeny again to get a new partner. If they were satisfied, a longer-term arrangement was entered into. One of the largest Lughnasa fairs was held at Kirkwall in the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland. The fair lasted eleven days, and taking a sexual partner for its duration was a common practice. Such couples were known as *“Lammas brothers and sisters.”* For couples thinking of a slightly longer-term commitment, this was a traditional time for handfasting. Couples would join hands through a holed stone, such as the ancient Stone of Odin at Stenness, and plight their troth for a year and a day. Many such temporary unions became permanent arrangements. The handfasting ritual was just one of the forms of marriages permitted under the ancient Brehon law. The same law declared how the property would be divided if the couple split up, and how any children of the marriage would be cared for. It wasn't until the middle of the nineteenth century that the registration of marriages was required by the government in Ireland.

Scottish Handfastings

In Scotland, the civil authorities recognized marriages constituted in the old style-consent to marry

followed by intercourse at some later date-though the Scottish Church did not. Such marriages were legal until 1940. As a result, many English couples whose parents objected to their marriages crossed to the Scottish border town of Gretna Green where they could perform their own handfastings before witnesses. In Scotland, the term handfasting, or handfisting, meant the shaking of hands to seal a contract. This might be a contract of employment or a betrothal. In 1820, the famous Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott wrote of handfasting as a trial marriage in *The Monastery*: When we are handfasted, as we term it, we are man and wife for a year and a day; that space gone by, each may choose another mate, or, at their pleasure, may call the priest to marry them for life; and this we call handfasting. The practice was also mentioned by Thomas Pennant, recounting his tour of Scotland in 1772: Among the various customs now obsolete the most curious was that of handfisting, in use about a century past. In the upper part of Eskdale . . . there was an annual fair where multitudes of each sex repaired. The unmarried looked out for mates, made their engagements by joining hands, or by handfisting, went off in pairs, cohabited until the next annual return of the fair, appeared there again and then were at liberty to declare their approbation or dislike of each other. If each party continued constant, the handfisting was renewed for life.¹ This account was confirmed in *The Old Statistical Account of Scotland*: At that fair [in Eskdale], it was the custom for the unmarried persons of both sexes to choose a companion, according to their liking, with whom they were to live till that time next year. This was called hand-fasting, or hand in fist. If they were pleased with each other at that time, then they continued together for life; if not, they separated, and were free to make another choice as at the first. The fruit of their connexion (if there were any) was always attached to the disaffected person. In later times . . . a priest . . . came from time to time to confirm the marriages.²

Welsh Broom-Jumping Weddings There was a custom of jumping the broom as a declaration of marriage in both Wales and England. As a child I remember an old lady saying that a couple were *“living over the brush,”* meaning that they were living together without being legally married, but had a common-law relationship obtained by jumping over a broom. In Wales, this was called the *priodas coes ysgub*, or broom-stick wedding.³ In Wales, a broom was placed on the doorstep with its handle leaning on the door frame, and the couple had to jump over it in front of witnesses. The couple were free to part within the first year, and simply had to jump over the broom again. If a child had been born, the man was obliged to support it. In Caernarvonshire, the practice was overseen by the oldest man in the village, and the broom was constructed of oak branches and called *ysgub dderwydd*, or *“druid’s besom,”* indicating that the custom may have been very old indeed, dating back to the time of the druids.

1. Thomas Pennant, *Tour of Scotland* (London, 1790). 2. *The Old Statistical Account*

of Scotland (1791-99). 3. T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1930). --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As some of you who follow me on instagram, youtube, or this blog know Brad and I got engaged at the beginning of December. Neither of us wanted to have a long, drawn out engagement. Winter is my favorite season; Winter is also a convenient season to host a wedding and reduce the cost of a giant party. So, we set a date at the end of this February. I immediately used this speedy engagement as an excuse to purchase some Pagan handfasting books. Today I want to share with you a review of Anna Franklin's *A Romantic Guide to Handfasting: Rituals, Recipes & Lore*. In the Christian world marriage is seen as a sacrament. It is a holy rite that demands certain traditions and symbols in order to be recognized by the community and God. Our culture has absorbed many of these traditions and symbols into even the most secular marriages. This can leave those of us who wish to honor our Pagan paths in a bit of a pickle. Where do we find traditions that honor the earth or scripts that do not put pressure on couples to satisfy the demands of child bearing heterosexual couples? *A Romantic guide to Handfasting* attempts to provide some options for Pagans and couples looking for a more offbeat wedding. The book begins by discussing some wedding basics. All of these organizing questions are, in my opinion, obvious. Most people know that they either want lots of guests or have their handfasting be a more private event. I also think that most couples already have a general idea of what types of vows they are or aren't comfortable with. This is really only useful to readers who really are starting with no idea what they want. The next few questions go into more interesting topics. There is a discussion about the way and types of Deities that might be invoked for a handfasting. Details of historical customs and possible themes are also mentioned. I particularly found the pages relating to how time could be invoked for a ritual. Many couples choose to say that their vow is "for this lifetime," "Until we are parted by death," or, even more commonly, "while love shall last." Brad and I have instead opted to avoid a time frame entirely. We have a bit in our vows mentioning that it is in our power to "make and remake" our vows. This is going to be more and more important in a world when divorce is common and families are mixed and varied. Finally, the book provides examples of rituals and symbols that couples can use in their own rites. Brad and I chose to use of the examples in a part of our handfasting. However, I found that many of these examples didn't quite hit the inspiration button I was hoping for. I enjoyed how simple and approachable the examples were, though. For readers looking for basic ideas or looking for an introduction into Pagan wedding rituals, they will find *A Romantic Guide to Handfasting* to be enjoyable. It probably won't satisfy the readers looking to officiate for many different couples and

need a meaty reference book. It's handfasting - light not handfasting - all encompassing.

It's ok, has some great information in it. I wish it had more ceremony examples in it not just information about ideas and traditions. But it does have some great info in it, just not exactly what I wanted.

I bought this book to help me find a handfasting that I liked. They were very insightful, and had lots of suggestions. I did have to go online to find more in-depth information, but I wouldn't have known where to go without this book! Thanks

It is all in composing but I don't like that the writer starts out as dismissive of couples that wish to do an eternal bond. It's a good base book for those who are going to have an alternative marriage ceremony.

I am having a handfasting in May and my priestess suggested that I take a look at this book. It is very informative and I read it in like two days. there are maybe three ways to approach a handfasting and you can choose from the rituals in the book. I will happily pass it on to the next person that would like ideas to handfasting.

It gave me so many beautiful ideas for my handfasting!

Very interesting book

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