

## Celtic History: Halloween – Some Truth On the Matter

November 1 is the Celtic feast of Samhain. Samhain, (**pronounced, roughly, Sow-in**). Gaelic for "summer's end," it was the most important of the ancient Celtic feasts. There is no record of Samhain being the God of the dead as claimed by some religious tracts even though we have listings of some 300 Celtic gods and local spirits. Claims are made that Samhain was actually Satan and that was the evil lord the Celts worshipped.

As for "Samhain" or "Saman" being the 'lord of the dead,' this seems to have originated in the late 18th and 19th centuries. It appears in a book by George Higgins (first published in 1827), engaged in proving the Celts came from India. Higgins, quotes his source as Col. Charles Vallency, who was trying to prove that the Irish were descendants of Armenians! Higgins also refers to an author named "Pictet," who gives this name as that of a god, associating the word with "sabhan," a word not found in any Gaelic dictionary. Unfortunately, it has been entered as "truth" in several on-line and hard copy encyclopedias today.

The Celts honored the intertwining forces of existence: darkness and light, night and day, cold and heat, death and life. Celtic knotwork represents this intertwining. The Celts observed time as proceeding from darkness to light. The Celtic day began at dusk, the beginning of the dark and cold night, and ended the following dusk, the end of a day of light and warmth. The Celtic year began with An Geamhradh, the dark Celtic winter, and ended with Am Foghar, the Celtic harvest. Samhain marks the beginning of both An Geamhradh and the new Celtic year.

Samhain and the new Celtic year actually begin at dusk on October 31, the beginning of the Celtic day. Oidhche Shamhna, the Eve of Samhain, was the most important part of Samhain. Villagers gathered the best of the autumn harvest and slaughtered cattle for the feast. The focus of each village's festivities was a great bonfire. Villagers cast the bones of the slaughtered cattle upon the flames. Our word bonfire comes from these "bone fires." With the great bonfire roaring, the villagers extinguished all other fires. Each family then solemnly lit their hearth from the one great common flame, bonding all families of the village together.

The eve of the Celtic year was a very holy time. The Celts believed that Oidhche Shamhna ('Eve of Samhain') was a gap in time and reality. Our world and the Otherworld came together on the night between the old and new years. The dead could return to the places where they had lived. Many rituals of Oidhche Shamhna provided hospitality for dead ancestors. Celts put out food and drink for the dead with great ceremony. They left their windows, doors, and gates unlocked to give the dead free passage into their homes. Spirits returned to our world on November Eve. Not evil spirits but family members and relatives dropping back by as it were.

Divination of the events of the coming year was another prominent feature of Samhain. Celts used hazelnuts, symbols of wisdom, to foretell the future. Bobbing for apples, another traditional Samhain pastime was a reference to the Celtic Emhain Ablach, "Paradise of Apples," where the dead, having eaten of the sacred fruit, enjoyed a blissful immortality. It could also have been adopted from the Roman occupiers from their feast for the goddess Pomona.

Many ancient Celtic customs were compatible with the new Christian religion. Christianity embraced the Celtic notions of family, community, the bond among all people, and respect for the dead. The Western Church gave Samhain a Christian blessing in 837 AD when November 1 was designated the Feast of All Saints or Hallow Tide. Oidhche Shamhna became Hallow E'en or Halloween.

The custom of trick-or-treating was not invented by the Celts, who supposedly went door-to-door demanding food of their neighbors under threat of nasty tricks if they didn't comply. 'Religious' tracts claim that the Druids went door to door demanding tribute and, if not given, left a nasty trick or abducted family members for sacrifice. Unfortunately, the Druids (Priests of the Celts), unlike the Celts, both in the British Isles and the continent, didn't believe in writing their beliefs and practices down so the sources for these claims are highly suspect.

Trick-or-treat is actually a much later custom invented by medieval and post-medieval British people who went "souling" for soul cakes, which was an invention of the Church after it assimilated the pagan holiday into All Soul's Day (November 1). According to British historian Ronald Hutton in the book "Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain", Englishmen loved having a number of different holidays to seek food and drink.

There is also very little evidence to indicate that Samhain was a holiday calling for human sacrifice, and even less that the Celts ever sacrificed human beings in the huge wicker cages for which they've become notorious. The stories of the wicker cages come primarily from the writings of Caesar, who was basically drumming up support for the 'Romanization' of Britain, for no physical evidence of this. We have not found any archeological WMD's (Wicker of Mass Destruction.) Roman writers did the same with Christians of the time claiming that there was a practice of orgies and infant cannibalism at Christian services.

Black cats, let's not forget about the black cat. Christians during the Middle Ages believed that every witch had a demon servant given to them by Satan who gave them their powers. This demon was called a familiar. The familiars, which served their witches, usually existed in animal form, toad, goat, etc, but often, a black cat. This is a superstitious practice of medieval Christians and can not be attributed to the ancient Celts. Domestic cats were not introduced to Northern Europe until post-Julius Caesar, and didn't really "catch on" until after AD 1050.

Jack-o'-lanterns are also not part of a Celtic tradition. People in England and Ireland carved out beets, potatoes, and turnips to use as lanterns and not just on Halloween. The hollowed out turnip served as a homemade lantern and is a way to solve a technical problem in the absence of available, affordable metal. Pumpkins were not native to Europe and would have to wait for the discovery of the New World. In an 18th century Irish legend, jack-o'-lanterns were named for Jack, a man who could not enter heaven because he was a miser but could not enter hell either, because he had played jokes on the devil. So Jack wanders in darkness until Judgment Day with his lantern. The purpose of the lantern was to ward off evil, not participate in it!

This legend is recent and does NOT go back to ancient times. If it was ancient, we would find it in literature, the Christian art of Western Europe, pagan carvings, or somewhere in art. It is notable by its absence. After this legend reached America, pumpkins began to be used, rather than turnips, to represent Jack's lantern.

So, when some 'enlightened' person tells you that the Celts worshipped Satan or started Halloween as we know it, feel free to correct them.

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