

HAPPY SAMHAIN'S EVE



Samhain, 1st of November, was the major festival which marked the opening of winter in early medieval Ireland; it is sometimes spelt Samain or Samuin, although the pronunciation was the same. In Tochmarc Emire it is the first of four quarter days mentioned by the heroine Emer; 'Samhain, when the summer goes to its rest'. To the writer of this text, probably working in the tenth century, it was therefore the opposite to the time of Beltane, being the period at which the livestock had been gathered in from the summer pastures and the cold and confined season was setting in for human and farm animal. The cereal harvest would otherwise have long been completed and the time of warfare and of trading was to an end. It was therefore an ideal moment for the convention of the year's most important tribal assemblies, and indeed 'the feis of Samhain', at which local kings gathered their people, is a favourite setting for early Irish tales. In Serglige Con Culaind, which exists in a twelfth-century version, it is stated that the feis of the Ulaid (Ulstermen) lasted 'the three days before Samuin and the three days after Samuin and Samuin itself.

They would gather at Mag Muirthemni, and during these seven days there would be nothing but meetings and games and amusements and entertainments and eating and feasting'. These activities (together with a great deal of boasting and brawling) are precisely those portrayed at the feis in this and other accounts of it. No doubt there were religious observances as well, but none of the tales ever portray any, and a text like *Sanas Chormaic*, which is so informative on Beltane, furnishes nothing for the winter festival. Indeed, the only such reference is in the work of the thoroughly unreliable seventeenth-century Irish antiquary Jeffrey Keating, who states that the Druids of Ireland used to assemble on the hill of Tlachtga on 'the night of Samhain' and kindle a sacred fire. From this 'every householder in the country' relit his own domestic fire, which had been extinguished that night. His source is unknown, and the story implies an extremely unlikely degree of religious and political centralization in pagan Ireland; it may be that it is a mistaken transference of the custom of Beltane. When Keating's story is put aside, a considerable suspicion arises that the rites of Samhain do not feature in medieval Irish literature simply because by the time that it was written, centuries of Christianization, the authors did not know what they had been.

Jeffrey Gantz, author of one of the most accurate and accessible translations of that literature, has suggested that Samhain was regarded as a time of unusual supernatural power, because of the number of stories set at that feast in which humans are attacked or approached by deities, fairies, or monsters. He also draws attention to the number of legendary kings who were slain at that time. The same evidence has caused Proinsias MacCana to call Samhain 'a partial return to primordial chaos... the appropriate setting for myths which symbolise the dissolution of established order as a prelude to its recreation in a new period of time'. Both may be correct, but their point

cannot be proved from the tales themselves; it could just be that several narratives are started, set, or concluded at this feast because it represents an ideal context, being a major gathering of royalty and warriors with time on their hands. In the same way, many of the Arthurian stories were to commence with a courtly assembly for Christmastide or Pentecost. The same sort of consideration applies to gatherings of Otherworld beings at this part of the year, such as the 'bright folk and fairy hosts' believed by the fourteenth-century to hold games and feast on nuts each Samhain at the prehistoric mounds of the Bruigh na Boinne. They may just have been visualized as counterparts to the human assemblies at the time.

Heavy Irish immigration into the Scottish Highlands and Isles in the early Middle Ages carried the name Samhain there, in local variations, but to the Welsh the day was 'Calan Gaeaf', 'the first day of winter', and the night before was termed 'Nos Galan Gaea, 'winter's eve'. Perhaps significantly, the earliest Welsh literature attributes no arcane significance to these dates (in sharp contrast to May Eve) and describes no gatherings then (in sharp contrast to New Year). It must be concluded, therefore, that the medieval records furnish no evidence that 1st November was a major pan-Celtic festival. An Anglo-Saxon counterpart is difficult either to prove or to dismiss completely. Bede, in his work on the calendar, stated that September had been called Haleb-monath', while October was 'Vwinter-fylleth' and November 'Blod-monath'. He knew that Haleb-monath' meant 'holy month', but not why, and therefore neither can we; it is possible, as said before, that it derived from rites connected with the end of the grain harvest. The name for October signified the coming of winter, while that for November meant 'blood month'; and here Bede had some important information to offer. He stated that it derived from the annual slaughter of livestock in early winter to reduce the number that had to be kept

through the lean months, and that the victims were dedicated to the gods as sacrifices. There may here be a record of a festival, of equivalent importance and even of simultaneous timing to Samhain; or it may be that the passage describes an agricultural process rather than an event. Pagan Scandinavia had its own major festival of the opening of winter, the 'Winter Nights'; which began on the Saturday in the week between 11th and 17th of October. It features prominently in the saga literature, as a time when each substantial farmer held a feast and a sacrifice. Unhappily for our purposes, however, it is debatable how far the Christian authors of the sagas were accurately remembering heathen practices, and doubtful whether this festival was introduced into Britain.

At the end of the nineteenth-century, two distinguished academics, one at Oxford and the other at Cambridge, made enduring contributions to the popular conception of Samhain. The former was the philologist Sir John Rhys, who suggested that it had been the 'Celtic' New Year. He had not documented this from early records, but inferred it from contemporary folklore in Wales and Ireland, which he felt to be full of Halloween customs associated with new beginnings. To reinforce these he cited Keating's entry about Tlachtga, which he believed to fall into the same category, and 'corrected' the wording of a passage in Sanas Chormaic to support his view. He thought that it was vindicated when he paid a subsequent visit to the Isle of Man and found that its people sometimes called 31st October New Year's Night ('Hog-unnaa') and practised customs then which were usually associated with 31st December. In fact, the flimsy nature of all this evidence ought to have been apparent from the start. The divinatory and purificatory rituals on 31st October could be explained either by a connection to the most eerie of Christian festivals (All Saints) or by the fact that they ushered in the most dreaded of all seasons. The many 'Hog-unnaa' customs

were also widely practised on the conventional New Year's Eve, and Rhys was uncomfortably aware that they might simply have been transferred, in recent years, from then to Hallow'een, to increase merriment and fund-raising on the latter. He got round this problem by asserting that in his opinion (based upon no evidence at all) the transfer had been the other way round.

This issue can only properly be addressed using the data of the medieval sources, and this is not sufficient to conclude the matter. The fundamental problem is that writing, Christianity, and the Roman calendar all entered Wales and Ireland as parts of the same process. Therefore, by definition, the earliest records are going to commence the year on 1st January or 25th March according to the Roman fashion. This is certainly true of every surviving medieval Welsh calendar. Nonetheless, there are possible traces of an earlier system in the Irish records. Tochmarc Emire, after all, reckoned the year around the quarter-days which commenced the seasons, and put Samhain at the beginning of those. If it was the principal annual assembly of at least some of the Irish kingdoms, then it would make sense to calculate some sort of transaction from it. What seems to be insoluble is the crucial problem of whether 1st November was once the only date observed, or whether it had always run side by side with January, being used for different sorts of reckoning.

Rhys theory was further popularized by the Cambridge scholar, Sir James Frazer. At times the latter did admit that the evidence for it was inconclusive, but at others he threw this caution overboard and employed it to support an idea of his own: that Samhain had been the pagan Celtic feast of the dead. He reached this belief by a simple process of arguing back from a fact, that 1st and 2nd November had been dedicated to that purpose by the medieval Christian Church, from which it could be surmised that this had been a Christianization of a

pre-existing festival. He admitted, by implication, that there was in fact no actual record of such a festival, but inferred the former existence of one from a number of different propositions: that the Church had taken over other pagan holy days, that 'many' cultures have annual ceremonies to honour their dead, 'commonly' at the opening of the year, and that (of course) 1st November had been a Celtic New Year. He pointed out that although the feast of All Saints or All Hallows had been formally instituted across most of north-west Europe by the emperor Louis the Pious in 835, on the prompting of Pope Gregory IV. it had already existed, on its later date of 1st November, in England at the time of Bede. He suggested that pope and emperor had, therefore, merely ratified an existing religious practice based upon that of the ancient Celts.

The story is, in fact, more complicated. By the mid-fourth century Christians in the Mediterranean world were keeping a feast in honour of all those who had been martyred under the pagan emperors; it is mentioned in the *Carmina Nisibena* of St Ephraem, who died in about 373, as being held on 13th May. During the fifth century divergent practices sprang up, the Syrian churches holding the commemoration in Easter Week and those of the Greek world preferring the Sunday after Pentecost. That of Rome, however, preferred to keep to May date, and Pope Boniface IV formally endorsed it in the year 609. By 800 churches in England and Germany, which were in touch with each other, were celebrating a festival dedicated to all saints upon 1st November, instead. The oldest text of Bede's *Martyrology*, from the eighth-century, does not include it, but the recensions at the end of the century do. Charlemagne's favourite churchman Alcuin was keeping it by then, as were also his friend Arno, bishop of Salzburg, and a church in Bavaria. Pope Gregory, therefore, was endorsing and adopting a practice which had begun in northern Europe. It had not, however,

started in Ireland, where the Felire of Oengus and the Martyrology of Tallaght prove that the early medieval churches celebrated the feast of All Saints on 20th April. This makes nonsense of Frazer's notion that the November date was chosen because of 'Celtic' influence; rather, both 'Celtic' Europe and Rome followed a Germanic idea. The origins of that idea are lost; it may be simply that some northern churchmen felt the need of a spectacular feast at the opening of winter, at a time when some form of merriment was badly needed.

The dead arrived later. In 998 Odilo, abbot of Cluny, ordered a solemn mass for the souls of all Christian dead in his monastery and its daughter houses. The date which he chose was in February. When his example was followed, in other networks of churches during the next two centuries, it gradually linked to the preceding festival, as saints were increasingly seen as intercessors upon behalf of the departed souls facing judgement or suffering it. Indeed, by the high Middle Ages both festivals had become primarily a time at which to pray for dead friends or family members, when the withering of flowers and leaves, and the coming of frosts, directed human attention to death and decay. If the season was peculiarly appropriate to the rite, the latter was made ever more necessary by the developing Christian theological emphasis upon the terrors of hell, which in turn gave rise to the doctrine of purgatory. It remains possible that northern European pagans still utterly wanting but Frazer's chain of reasoning completely breaks down.

To hazard any guess about the ancient religious significance of Samhain and Calan Gaeaf, therefore, we are left completely dependant upon inferences projected backward from folklore collected in the last few centuries; and it has already been suggested that this can be a difficult business. Nevertheless, it can be taken further. It seems to be proved, from both medieval and modern evidence, that

May Eve and May Day, at the opening of summer, was regarded in the pastoral areas of the British Isles as a time when fairies and witches were especially active, and magical devices required a guard against them. Logically, the opening of winter, with the reoccupation of the home pastures and the byres, ought to have been another such time, and so it seems was the case. In nineteenth-century Wales Nos Galan Gaea was the year's most frightening Ysbrydnos, a night when the spirits were abroad, and churchyards, styles, and crossroads were all to be avoided as particular gathering-places for them. The same reputation attended Samhain Eve, Oiche Shamhna, in Ireland, where another name for it was 'Puca' (or Goblin) Night. In Scotland the sixteenth-century poet Alexander Montgomerie could write:

In the hindered of harvest, on alhallow evin,
Quhen our gude nychbouris rydis if I reid rycht
Sum buklit on one bwnwyd and some on ane bean
Ay trippard in troupes fra the twilycht;
Sum saidlit on a scho-aip graithit in grene,
Sum hobland on hempstalkis hovand on hicht,
The King of Phairie and his court with the elph-quene,
With mony elrich incubus was rydand that nycht.
(At the hind-end of harvest, on Hallow'een,
When our 'good neighbours' rideif I think right
Some mounted on a ragweed and some on a bean,
All tripping in troupes from the twilight;

Some saddled on a she-ape all arrayed in green,
Some riding on hempstalks rising on hight,
The King of Faerie and his court with the Elf-queen
With many a weird incubus was riding that night.)

Lest it be thought that these beliefs were confined to Celtic regions of the 'upland' zone it should be noted that in the nineteenth-century Shetland Isles, where a Norse culture prevailed, it was thought that at 'Hallowmas' 'the trows [trolls] came out from their fastnesses and wreaked havoc among cattle and crops in the yard'. At Longridge Fell, in the Lancashire Pennines, people would walk the hillsides on Hallow'een until the early part of that century, between 11p.m. and midnight. Each carried a lighted candle, and if one went out the holder would know that an attack from a witch was impending and would thus be waned to take precautions. The custom was called 'lating' (hindering) the witches. In all likelihood a prehistoric belief in the danger from supernatural forces at the turning of the pastoral seasons was much reinforced by the arcane associations of the Christian feast of the dead. Nevertheless, the analogy with the May Eve and May Day is so strong that it seems hardly plausible that all the dread of the night came from the Christian festival. It is this that lends credence to the characterization of the ancient Samhain as a particularly numinous time, made by Jeffrey Gantz and Proinsias MacCana, despite the lack of clear evidence in the early literature alone.

It must now be asked whether the folklore records provide any insight into the rituals which might have been employed at the pagan festival. Frazer certainly believed that he had found one, in the precise seasonal equivalent to the rite of Beltane: the use of fire as protective magic. He believed, indeed, that he had uncovered so much data for

this that he could term Hallow'een one of the 'Celtic' fire-festivals, and his information can now be much increased. As in the case of Beltane, the custom really only began to be recorded in detail when it was in advanced decline. In 1589 'hallowmas fires' were forbidden by the presbytery at Stirling. In 1648 the same order was made with respect to Fife by a Kirk Assembly and at Slains, also in Scotland, by the local kirk sessions. A writer in Anglesey during 1741 noted that Hallow'een 'coelcerths' (bonfires) were 'upon the decline'. It was in the last third of that century that Thomas Pennant, the travel writer, drew the attention of the educated public to the custom both in Scotland and Wales. He described how in the eastern Highlands as soon as night fell on Hallow'een, 'a person sets fire to a bush of broom fastened to around a pole; and attended with a crowd, runs round the village. He then flings it down, heaps great quantity of combustible matters in it, and makes a fine appearance'. In North Wales he heard of how families built a fire each, and, when it burned down, left a marked white pebble in the ashes for each one of them. If any stone was missing in the morning, then the person whom it presented would die within a year. Shortly after Pennant wrote, William Owen published a similar reference to the Welsh custom, and John Ramsay of Ochtertyre recorded a very full account of the Scottish one, starting with a description of how after dusk the young people of every settlement had 'assembled on some eminence near the houses'. They had made a fire:

'Which from the feast was called Samh-nag or Savnag. Around it was placed a circle of stones, one for each person of the families to whom they belonged. And when it grew dark the bonfire was kindled, at which a loud shout was set up. Then each person taking a torch of ferns or sticks in his hand, ran around the fire exulting; and sometimes they went into the adjacent fields where, if there was another company, they visited the bonfire, taunting the others of inferior in any respect to

themselves. After the fire was burned out they returned home, where a feast was prepared, and the remainder of the evening was spent in mirth and diversions of various kinds. Next morning they repaired betimes to the bonfire, where the situation of the stones was examined with much attention. If any of them were misplaced, or if the print of a foot could be discerned near any particular stone, it was imagine that the person for whom it was set would not live out the year. Of late years this is less attended to, but about the beginning of the present century it was regarded as a pure prediction. The Halow'een fire is still kept up in some parts of the Low Country; but on the western coasts and in the Isles it is never kindled, though the night is spent in merriment and entertainments.'

A further hundred years of records filled out the details of the fire-rites in both countries. In Perthshire they flourished all through the nineteenth-century, being repeatedly noted for their number and the exuberance with which they were maintained. Another of their strongholds was in the north-east, from the Moray or the Braemar districts. There each member of a family carried a torch of fir wood around their fields, sunwise, to protect them. At Corgarff in the upper Don valley, these were thrown into the bonfire at the end, with the words 'Brave bonfire, burn á, keep the fairies á awá.' In Moray boys begged fuel for their fires from each householder in their village, commonly with the words 'Ge's a peat 't burn the witches'. Once the blaze was started, 'One after another of the youths laid himself down on the ground as near to the fire as possible so as not to get burned, and in such a position as to let the smoke roll over him. The others ran through the smoke, and jumped over him'. This may have been an echo of the rite of the 'Beltane carline', or (more probably) the smoke was regarded as having protective powers. At Hallow'een 1874 Queen Victoria herself paid tribute to the traditions of the region by having an

'immense' bonfire made in front of Balmoral Castle, upon which the effigy of a witch was burned after being escorted thither by people costumed as fairies. By that time, however, the custom was dying in the Grampians, and nowhere did it seem to survive the end of the century. Indeed, despite this very marked popularity all along the Highland Line and in the districts on either side, it seems to be recorded nowhere else, save at Paisley on the Clyde, which is not far away, and on one single Hebridean island, Skye, in 1923. It may be that it had never been a tradition in the Western Highlands and the Isles; Ramsay was in doubt about the matter, and earlier observers in the Hebrides, such as Martin, and later folklorists there, such as Carmichael, do not mention it. The Skye exception may have been a later addition. There was a slightly wider distribution, apparently also covering the Highland borderlands but extending further into the lowlands, for the belief that all household fires should be extinguished and relit on the morning of All Saint's Day. It is a clear parallel to the custom of Beltane, and an interesting echo of that described by Keating, but again does not seem to have been universal.

Likewise, the coel earth on Nos Galan Gaea was apparently confined to north and central Wales, and the divinatory rite with the stones was found only in the north-west. What was ubiquitous throughout the Welsh areas in which the fires were lit was the belief that the most fearsome spirit abroad in the night took the form of a tail-less black sow, yr Hwrch Ddu Gwta. In the north-western Denbighshire, children running home from the fire would scream 'the tail-less black sow take the hindmost'. In Anglesey they had a rhyme:

A tail-less Black sow

And a White Lady

Without a head

May the Tail-less Black Sow

Snatch the hindmost

A Tail-less Black Sow

On Winter's Eve,

Thieves coming along

Knitting stockings.

It was said that menfolk on the island would pretend to be the pig, grunting in the darkness, to get the youngsters home faster. All across the north of the principality during the nineteenth-century, down to and including Montgomeryshire, yr Hwrch Ddu was said to sit on stiles upon this night, waiting for victims. Who this being might have been is a complete puzzle. Romano-British iconography and inscriptions, and medieval Welsh literature, are alike devoid of clues; the eleventh-century tale of Math, son of Mathonwy, certainly features a sow, but there is nothing supernatural about it. The modern notion of Ceridwen as a (white) sow-goddess, popularized by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, entirely lacks any supporting evidence. Such a figure seems to be wholly missing from the earlier Welsh records, and may have been a folk-devil evolved from the early modern period onward. In general, the fires in Wales seems to have been associated with divinatory rather than purificatory purposes, although the Denbighshire boys did run sunwise around theirs and believed that it was lucky to pass over the embers. The Winter's Eve blazes survived with diminishing frequency across their full range for most of the nineteenth-century, and lasted in Merionethshire until the 1930s.

There is an exact parallel to the Scottish and Welsh customs on the Isle of Man, where in 1845 it was recorded that fires called 'Sauin' had

been kindled each 31st October 'till a late period' to fend off fairies and witches. They were also known in Ireland, but only, it seems, in two places. One was in the Protestant districts of north-eastern Ulster, which had been heavily settled from Scotland, and the other in Dublin itself - and there only from the mid-twentieth century! Alan Gailey, discussing the distribution of the fires in Ulster, noted the striking lack of any ritual activity or solemnity associated with them, and suggested that they might represent a recent innovation. There is, indeed, a remarkable absence of them in the rich folklore collections for the rest of nineteenth-century Ireland, something which puzzled Frazer. This pattern does harmonize with the parallel lack of them in the more Gaelic regions of Scotland, the western and central Highlands and the Hebrides.

They are also not recorded in those other 'Celtic' areas of Britain, Cornwall and Cumbria, and at this point the whole notion of a 'Celtic fire festival' begins to break down. What we have instead is a powerful local tradition in three different areas; the districts on either side of Scotland's Highland Line, north and central Wales, and the Isles of Man. The custom of the stones in or by the fire, found in the first two, must have been migrated from one to the other by one of those strange and hidden processes by which identical popular practices (including some which are plainly late developments) can be found in widely separated places. Fires were indeed lit in England on All Saints Day, notably in Lancashire, and may well ultimately have descended from the same rites, but were essentially part of a Christian ceremony and could have a separate origin.

On the other hand, the use of bonfire was only one aspect of a genuinely widespread feeling that the night of the 31st October to 1st November was an especially numinous and dangerous one, requiring protective measures, found all over Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

Instead of employing flames, many of the southern Irish relied upon the parshell, a cross of sticks woven with straw which was placed over the inside of the entrance to a home. On the coasts of Connacht some householders preferred what is described, rather mysteriously, as 'a charm of fire, iron and salt against the puca', or goblin. On the Hebridean island of South Uist, boys would carry a burning peat around their house and outbuildings to protect them. Elsewhere in the Hebrides, people were more concerned to propitiate the powers of the sea, at the opening of the seasons worst storms; and they did so with one of the most blatant examples recorded in the British Isles of a pagan rite surviving into the Christian epoch. On Lewis in the seventeenth-century fisherman would go down to the shore at Hallow'een, kneel at the edge of the waves, and repeat the Paternoster. One of them then waded in up to his waist, poured out a bowl of ale, and asked a being called Shoney (Johnny) for a good catch over the next year. Then they all went up to St Malvey's chapel and sat in silence for a while before making merry in the fields for the rest of the night. The ceremony was wended in the 1670s after a determined campaign against it by two ministers., but it simply migrated to, or resurfaced upon, the midnight before Maundy Thursday at the opening of the sailing season. It survived on Iona until the late eighteenth-century and on Lewis until the early nineteenth-century, at which time the chant of the man pouring the bowl was (in Alexander Carmichael's translation):

O God of the sea

Put weed in drawing wave

To enrich the ground,

To shower on us food.

Thus, there seems to be no doubt that the opening of November was the time of a major pagan festival which was celebrated, at the very least, in all those parts of the British Isles which had a pastoral economy. At the most, it may have been general among the 'Celtic' peoples. There is not evidence that it was connected with the dead, and no proof that it opened the year, but it was certainly a time when supernatural forces were especially to be guarded against or propitiated; activities which took different forms in different regions. Its importance was only reinforced by the imposition upon it of a Christian festival which became primarily one of the dead, and it will be the last post in the series of three which will look at that cultural inheritance.

My second post of the series, which will post tomorrow, will look at the modern festival and how these two traditions have combined to give us a Halloween we would recognise today.

Francis Figueroa Lozano