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HALLOWEEN

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# HALLOWEEN

The eve of November 1 is both a solemn religious occasion and a time of games and pranks. Many of its customs descend from a Druidical holiday that involved burning men in cages

by Ralph Linton

**I**N THE U. S. Halloween has become what the sociologists term a "degenerate" holiday. As the eve of Allhallows, or Hallowmas or All Saints' Day, it is one of the most solemn fes-

tivals of the church. While devout Catholics go to church on this evening, for the public in general Halloween is a roistering holiday, a night when children in fantastic masquerade ring doorbells

and demand "trick or treat," when merrymakers gather to experiment in mock seriousness with superstitious spells and eerie games. The witch with her black cat is the presiding deity of the occasion,



**ON HALLOWEEN IN IRELAND** at the turn of the century the country folk paraded in honor of Muck Olla,

a figure whose origin has been forgotten. Led by a man wearing a mask in the shape of a horse's head, the pro-



and its rituals stem from practices which the church spent much energy and let much blood to exterminate. In our celebration of Halloween we have bypassed the Christian world and gone back to the mystic days of the Druids.

All the holidays of the Christian calendar have their roots in the pagan past, but most are drawn from widespread customs of the ancient world. Halloween seems to come fairly directly from the Druidical cult. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Halloween is celebrated by games and spells and rollicking masquerades only in Scotland and Ireland, the last strongholds of the Druids, and in the U. S., where these quaint folk customs were imported chiefly by the Irish. In Latin America and most of Europe, Halloween is a solemn religious occasion when the faithful attend extra masses and say prayers for their dead.

The Celtic order of Druids originated in Gaul about the second century B.C.

By that time the Gauls had had considerable contact with the Greeks; the order may have been modeled on some of the Greek mystery religions. However, the Druid rites also included savage and primitive elements. They were eerie enough to satisfy the Halloween thrill seeker, but they lacked the spirit of fun.

**T**HE FIRST of November on the Druidical calendar was the Celtic New Year's Day, the end of the growing season, the beginning of winter and "the light that loses, the night that wins." It was also the festival of Samhain, Lord of the Dead. As the end of the growing season, when the harvest was safely stored against the winter, it was also a time when the Sun God was thanked for ripening the grain and strengthened for his coming battle with the cold.

On this night Samhain was believed to assemble the souls of all those who had died during the previous year. For their sins these souls had been confined

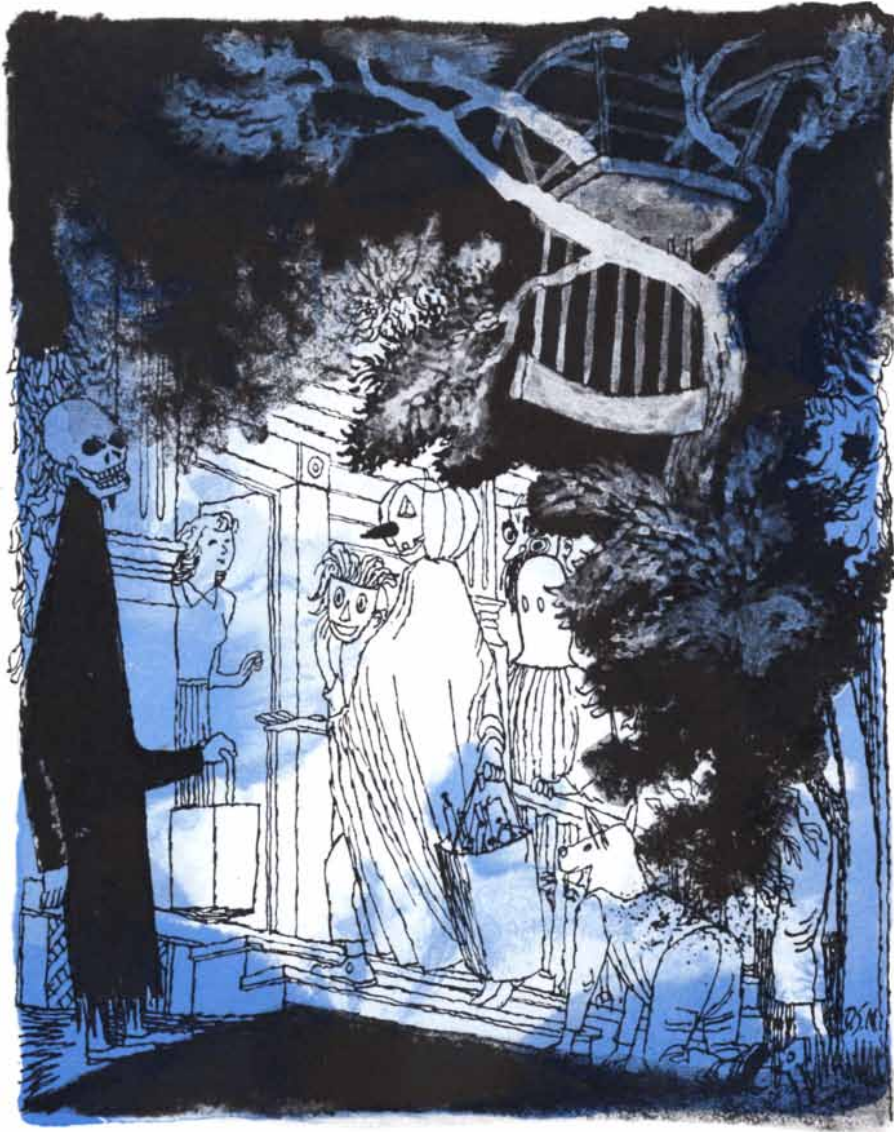
in the bodies of lower animals. On the New Year, their sins having been expiated by the ordeal, Samhain released them and sent them on their way to the Druid heaven.

Horses, the animals sacred to the Sun God, were sacrificed as part of the ritual. Human sacrifices were offered up also; the victims were usually criminals who had been rounded up for the occasion. These unfortunates were confined in cages of wicker and thatch made in the form of giants or huge animals. The cages were set afire by the priests and the hapless occupants roasted alive. This unhappy practice was outlawed by Roman command after the conquest of Britain. In A.D. 61 Suetonius ordered the Druidical groves of human sacrifice and augury destroyed.

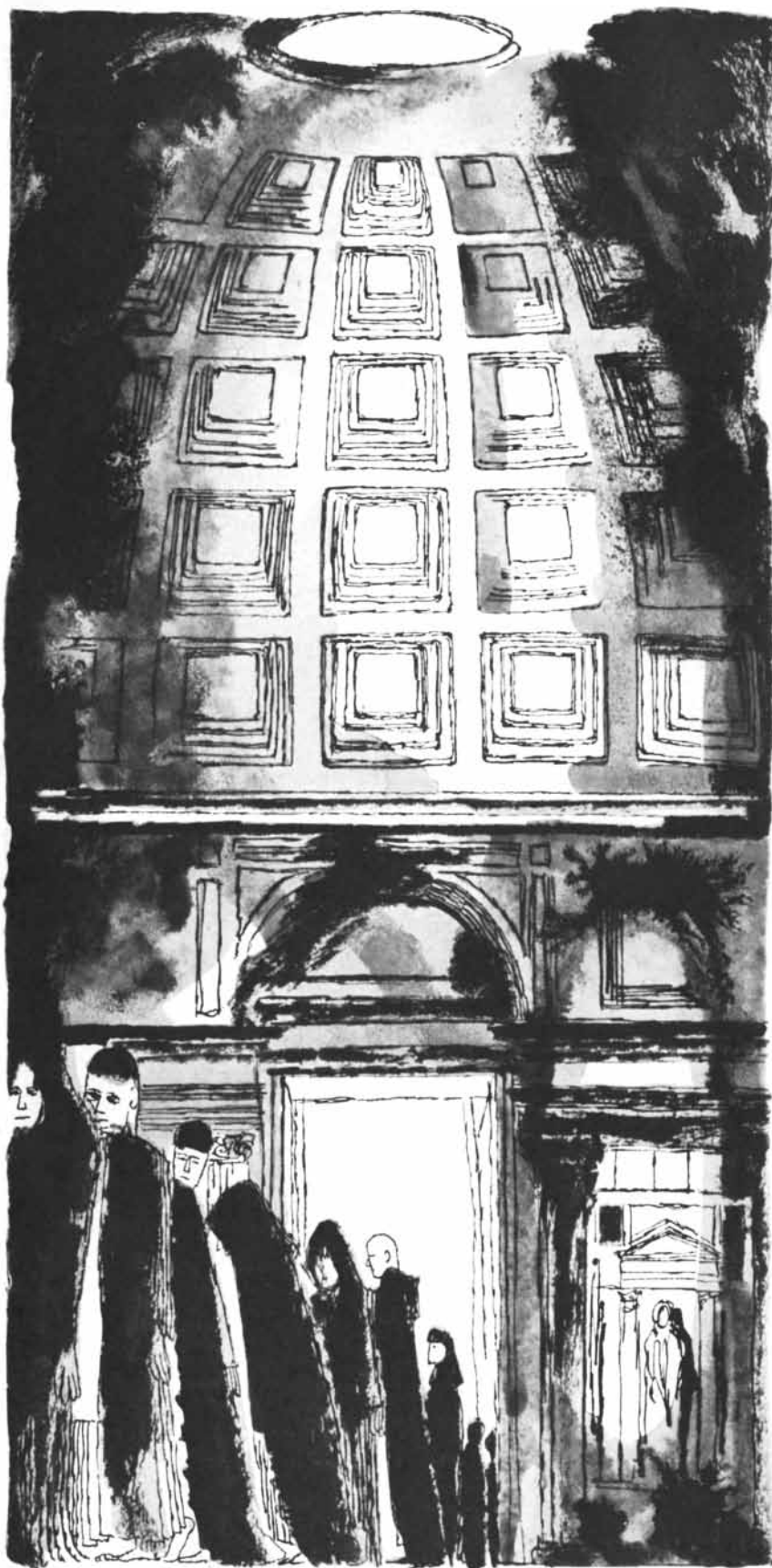
The old rites nevertheless survived in attenuated form. In medieval Europe there was a weird survival of the Druid burnings: on Halloween black cats were put into wicker cages and burned alive.



cession stopped at farms and begged for butter, eggs and other produce.



**ON HALLOWEEN IN THE U. S.** today children beg for candy and other edibles. This custom possibly originated with the procession of Muck Olla.



**THE PANTHEON** of Rome, an old pagan temple, was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the martyrs in 609. The feast of St. Mary and the Martyrs was first held on May 13 and later celebrated as All Saints' Day on November 1.

The cat sacrifices were made in the conviction that the cats were the familiars of witches, or were even the witches themselves, since it was commonly believed that witches often transformed themselves into cats.

In Britain horses were sacrificed at the feast of Samhain as late as A.D. 400. Even after the Christians had seized the pagan temples and consecrated them to the worship of God, oxen were sacrificed on Hallowmas, sometimes being led down the church aisles and slaughtered before the altar. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* quotes a sixth-century letter from Pope Gregory the Great to Abbot Mellitus, instructing him to tell Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, that "the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed but that the idols should. The sacrifice of oxen in pagan worship should be allowed to continue, but that this should be done in honor of the saints and sacred relics."

Another odd survival of these ancient rituals is reported for Ireland at the turn of the century by Wood Martin in *Traces of the Elder Faiths in Ireland*. On Halloween (still called Oidhche Shamna, Vigil of Samhain, in some parts of Ireland) the rustics in the district between Ballycotton and Trabolgan paraded through the district begging in the name of "Muck Olla." The identity of Muck Olla has evaporated in the mists of the past, but the name is probably a perversion of that of some Druid god. The procession was led by a man in a white robe wearing a horsehead mask. He was called Lair Bhan (White Mare). This undoubtedly harks back to the sacrificing of white horses to the Sun God on the feast of Samhain. Following the Lair Bhan were a guard of young men tootling on cow horn bugles, and the rest of the celebrants trooped after them.

At each farmhouse the procession halted and called out the master while the Lair Bhan recited a long string of verses, the purport of which was that the farmer's prosperity was due to the goodness of Muck Olla and that if he wished to continue to prosper, he had best make a generous contribution to the representatives of that spirit. The farmers, taking no chances with Muck Olla's displeasure, made liberal offerings, mostly in kind. The procession staggered home at the end of the evening laden with butter, eggs, corn, potatoes, wool and other farm produce. The present custom among children of dressing in outlandish costumes on Halloween and begging from house to house may well have its roots in the Muck Olla procession of Ireland.

Hallowmas was not incorporated into the Christian calendar until fairly late. Since the first of November was already associated in the popular mind with the thronging of the spirits of the dead, it



was reasonable that this date should have been chosen as a time to honor the hallowed dead. The church has always found it expedient to incorporate harmless pagan ideas into Christian ritual.

**ALLHALLOWS** is a feast of the church designed to commemorate all deceased saints known or unknown. The earliest known general ceremony in honor of martyrs was one held in Antioch on the Sunday after Pentecost. In 609 Pope Boniface IV consecrated the old Roman temple called the Pantheon and dedicated it to the Blessed Virgin and all the martyrs. The first feast of St. Mary and the Martyrs was held on May 13, 610. In the eighth century Pope Gregory III dedicated an oratory in St. Peter's to all the saints and fixed the anniversary of All Saints' Day as November 1. In 834 Pope Gregory IV established this festival in the calendar to be observed by all churches.

All Saints' Day was introduced into the church ritual because there were not enough days in the year to make it possible to dedicate a special day for each saint of the Catholic Church. It was also recognized that many martyrs and other faithful whose lives had been worthy of sainthood had never achieved canonization. So this day commemorates saints unknown as well as those honored by the church.

All Souls' Day follows All Saints' Day on November 2. This festival is designed to commemorate those who, although they have not suffered martyrdom or achieved sainthood, have died in the faith. It is dedicated particularly to those who have passed away during the preceding year and whose souls can be helped on their journey through purgatory by the prayers of the faithful.

The feast of general intercession for the souls of the dead was originated by Odilo, abbot of Cluny, who died in 1048. Odilo ordered this observance in his Cluniac monasteries, of which there were more than 300. The custom spread to other congregations as well. By the end of the 13th century the celebration of All Souls' Day was practically universal in the church.

**I**n both pagan and Christian days the period from nightfall on October 31 until sunset on November 2 seems to have held a mystic and eerie significance. At this time the unseen world of the spirits appeared to be closer to the mundane sphere than at any other date in the calendar. It had been dedicated to the souls of the dead since the Druidical priests called upon Samhain to release the souls and send them on their way. Most religious orders have celebrated a Day of the Dead. Egypt held this festival at the time of the winter solstice on the anniversary of the death of Osiris. Food was spread for the home-

coming spirits. At dusk rows of oil lamps were fastened outside the housefronts so that the wandering ghosts would not lose their way in the dark.

In Greece the festival of the dead was held in February and was known as the Feast of Pots. This was because pots of food were laid out for the spirits who thronged up into the land of the living on that day. The Greeks feared to offend their ghostly visitors, but they regarded the invasion without enthusiasm. They smeared their doorposts with pitch in an attempt to keep the spirits from entering and locked all the temples lest the ghosts find their way inside the holy places and linger there beyond their allotted time. The Romans had a feast of the dead called the Feralia, when they visited cemeteries, decorated the graves and left food for the ghosts.

On All Souls' Day in medieval times, criers dressed entirely in black walked the streets ringing a mournful bell and

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

A more extended account of the subject of this article may be found in *Halloween*, written by Ralph and Adelin Linton and published by Henry Schuman, New York.

calling on all people to remember the poor souls in purgatory. In London the church bells used to toll all day on November 2 until Queen Elizabeth ordered this clangorous procedure stopped. It was popish nonsense, she said, and the din was offensive to royal ears.

Outside the church the belief in Halloween as a gathering time for unsanctified as well as sanctified spirits seems to have continued with little change. To the ghosts originally assembled by the Lord of the Dead were added troops of goblins and fairies. This was logical enough, for the fairy folk had their beginnings in an exceedingly ancient, even pre-Celtic, cult of the dead. The fairy host as it first appears in Scottish and Irish legend was not made up of gauzy-winged midgets but of beings larger and more beautiful than men. They were the ghosts of ancient kings and heroes mingled with elder gods. The burial mounds of the Neolithic and Bronze Age folk were their dwellings, and they rode forth on the feast of Samhain to take a scornful look at the feeble folk who kept the land they once ruled. Stunned by the sound of Christian bells and shriveled by holy water, the fairy folk dwindled to "little people," whose only vestige of their ancient state was that they still kept their ancient dwelling places. Even so dazzling a figure of romance as Maeve, the warrior queen of Connacht, survived only as the fragile Queen Mab of the English poets.

Even more characteristic than the inclusion of goblins and fairies in the Hal-

loween customs was the association of the festival with witchcraft. Long after the church had triumphed over organized paganism, country people everywhere in Europe continued their ancient practice of placating local spirits and enhancing fertility by magical rites. Their magic was as much "white" as "black." The parish priests tolerated these doings even if they did not approve of them, and the villagers themselves saw no conflict between them and Christianity. In the later Middle Ages the church began to take a stronger stand against such survivals, and with the Reformation they were classed as heresy.

The result was the emergence of witchcraft as a more or less organized cult in opposition to the church. Much of its ritual was a travesty of Christian rites, but it also incorporated many of the ancient beliefs and practices, among them the ancient sacred days. Halloween became the great witch night. The Prince of Darkness and his cohorts, the witches and warlocks, gathered to mock the church's festival of All Saints by unholy revels of their own. In Germany their meeting place for the Great Sabbath was the mountain called the Brocken; in Sweden, the Blocksberg; in France, the Forest of Ardenne. In Great Britain it seems that any old church, ruined abbey or megalithic monument on a lonely heath would serve.

**O**n the eve of Samhain the pagan Celts lit bonfires on the hills to welcome the winter season and ward off evil spirits. In dwellings all the cooking fires were extinguished and new ones kindled in token of the new year. The idea that ghosts and spirits fear fire is widespread, and with the rise of the witch cult, fire became the favorite weapon against the powers of darkness. The burning of witches was a rite of purification even more than of punishment.

The peasants of Scotland and Ireland still build fires on the hillsides on Halloween. They also plait their pitchforks with straw, set them afire and wave them aloft to singe the brooms of any witches who may happen to be hovering nearby. The Scandinavian peasants have a similar custom, believing that blazing, straw-laden pitchforks and thrown disks of burning straw will drive the witches back to the Blocksberg, the mountain where the queen of the witches dwells.

While in Catholic countries people go to the churches and the cemeteries on Allhallows, in Scotland and Ireland shreds of the old Druidical mysteries still cling to this holiday and change its essential character. The Scots build great bonfires, and the glow of the flames is reflected in the lochs and lights up the hills. These fires are still called Samhnagan, though they are not lighted in honor of Samhain. The god's survival is in name only. The fires are kindled for

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Halloween gaiety and a defiant welcome to the winter season. Some of the old folks may recall that the flames are useful in driving away witches.

On Halloween the Gaelic country folk gather at some hospitable cottage to play the traditional eerie games and have a "social glass of strunt," as Robert Burns puts it in his poem *Halloween*, a treasury of folklore for this holiday. Since the fairies and trolls are abroad this night, as well as the witches and ghosts, the games are usually a form of divination spells. If they are approached with the proper rituals, the spirits can look into the future and help mortals look ahead and know their destinies. There are a great variety of these spells, mostly having to do with love prophecies: burning nuts, sowing hemp, walking downstairs backward with a lighted candle and a mirror, throwing apple peelings over the shoulder, pulling kale and so on.

Because the sportive, superstitious aspects of Halloween that we practice in the U. S. come directly from Scotland and Ireland, the celebration was a late development in this country. The early settlers were predominantly English and Protestant. Although the Church of England recognizes All Saints' Day, the roistering, supernatural Halloween is not an English custom. In England Guy Fawkes Day, celebrated on November 5, substitutes for Halloween. The Pilgrims of course rejected all church holidays, even Christmas. They must have regarded Halloween as popish heresy; surely the pranks and spells of the Gaelic Halloween would have been viewed as traffic with the devil himself.

**H**ALLOWEEN did not find a place on the American calendar of holidays until after the Gaelic people began to arrive on these shores. With them came the Catholic observance of Allhallows and All Souls and the folklore to which still cling shreds of the ancient Vigil of Samhain and the Halloween sports of the fairy folk. These later colonists began the custom of holding gatherings at farmhouses on the night of October 31. Since this was the time when apples and nuts were ripe, these two delicacies were an important feature of such parties. Halloween was often called "Snap Apple Night" or "Nutcarrack Night" in pioneer days. The participants played the traditional divination games with nuts on the hearth, ducked for apples, threw apple peelings over their shoulders to determine the initials of their future bridegrooms and indulged in other folk customs from the old country. They also discovered that the American pumpkins were excellent for making jack-o'-lanterns, and carved pumpkin faces became traditional symbols of Halloween.

These gatherings, however, were scattered and regional. It was not until after

the great Irish immigration which followed the potato famine in the 1840s that Halloween really became a nationally observed holiday in the U. S. The Irish imagination dwells more on the fantastic and capricious than on the darker powers. In Eire it is the fairies, the Sidhe (pronounced "shee"), rather than the witches and devils, which dominate the folklore. Since the Irish believe that the "little people" are constantly hovering about the homes of mortals and that they are especially active on Halloween, any mischief that occurs on that night can be blamed on them. This is the background for the Halloween vandalism which reached its heights in the late 19th century. In lusty pioneer communities practical jokes were one of the favorite diversions at any time of the year, and Halloween provided splendid opportunity for this form of amusement. Honest householders on the morning of November 1 were very likely to find their wagon on the barn roof, the front gate hanging in a sycamore tree and the outhouse lying on its side. They often said, "The goblins must have done it."

The vandalism has abated considerably in this generation. It has been suggested that the prevalence of indoor plumbing has taken much of the sport out of Halloween. Moreover, the police, in spite of their frequently Irish ancestry, take a dim view of goblins and lay a heavy hand on the real culprit when they can catch him. However, any prudent person will see to it that his car is locked in the garage and his porch furniture stowed away before Halloween night. And he will also have a stock of apples, nuts, candies or pennies on hand to dole out to the oddly dressed midg-ets, doubling for goblins, who ring his doorbell and demand "trick or treat." Otherwise he may find the next morning that he has soap scrawls on his windows, flour on his front steps and toilet paper garlanding his shrubbery.

**O**F course witches and their black arts are no longer a menace to the community. Ghosts, aware that no offerings are laid out for them by fearful relatives, haunt their former homes no more on the Day of the Dead. Fairies are found only between covers of brightly illustrated books for children or in Walt Disney cartoons. Despite all this, shreds of old pagan superstitions still cling to all of us. We can still feel a glow of satisfaction when the Halloween spells proclaim that our beloved is true, or that there is a new lover coming into someone's life, though, of course, we don't really believe in such childishness. Still I wonder how many readers could walk alone through a graveyard on Halloween night without feeling a chill of terror down the spine.

Ralph Linton is professor of anthropology at Yale University.

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