



Samhain in Britain

01988, Tana Culain, 'K·A·M'

Hallows, or Samhain, celebrated on October 31st eve through November 1st is both the beginning of the Celtic year and the first day of winter. At Samhain the Celts tallied up their livestock and mated their ewes for the following spring. Surplus animals were slaughtered and many were presented to the Gods as a sacrifice. The Gods were very much alive and present at Samhain — I suppose they could smell dinner cooking. It was (and still is) a time when the veil between the Worlds grows thin and it was possible to communicate with the dead, who were known to rise up and wander across the countryside.

The belief that the dead walk at Hallows not only lasted well into the 19th century in England but grew in some instances to include the not-yet-dead. In one 19th Century novel a young girl is startled to see several people, including her soon-to-be-dead lover, walk across the graveyard and through the lych (corpse) gate of the village church at dusk on Hallow's Eve. It was believed in some parts of England that the spirits of all who were to die in the following year could be seen walking through the graveyard on this night.

An Upbraiding

*Now I am dead you sing to me
The songs we used to know,
But while I lived you had no wish
Or care **for** doing so.*

*Now I am dead you come to me
In the moonlight, comfortless;
Ah, what I would have given alive
To win such tenderness!*

*When you are dead, and stand to me
Not **differenced**, as now,
But like again, will you be cold
As when we lived, or how?*

Thomas Hardy
*Moments of Vision and
Miscellaneous Verses, 1917*



It was customary at Samhain to light a fire on the household hearth which would burn continuously until the following Spring. On a much larger scale, bonfires were lit at dusk on hilltops to both honour the Gods and to guide the spirits of the dead home to their kin.

In Ireland, on Samhain Eve, special hills (called sidhes but pronounced she's) opened up and the fairies poured out into the world of men and women. The fairies were, of course, the Gods and Goddesses of earlier times, shrunk down and banished by Christianity but still quite powerful and concentrated in their diminutive form.

Samhain was pretty much just the one 24-hour holiday until the Christian church became involved. Because it was far too important to the Celtic population to be done away with, the Church decid-

ed to divide and conquer. October 31st, the eve of **Samhain**, became the eve of **Hallowmass**, or Hallow's Eve. Samhain, November 1st, became All Saint's Day, a day to honour and remember the dead, particularly the saintly. And November 2nd was added and named All Soul's Day, the day on which the souls of the dead would return to their former homes. It was a good idea for "proper" Christian households to keep the kitchen warm and food on the table on the eve of All Souls'.

Hallowe'en was first proclaimed as an official Christian holiday by the **Benedictines** in A. D. 999., and recognized by Pope John XIX in 1006. The Samhain **bonfires** continued in the countryside until 1605, when an event happened that brought them back to the towns and cities of Britain in full force. On November 5 of 1605, one Guy Fawkes was

caught in the cellars of Parliament preparing to blow it up.

Fawkes was quickly dispatched and the 5th of November became a convenient day on which to celebrate Samhain with a vengeance. Children would go out begging for money, chanting "A Penny for the Guy" in order to buy both fireworks and materials to make a dummy of the unfortunate Catholic rebel. On November 5th, the "Guy" was burned and fireworks were set off amid great fanfare and ruckus.

For a stirring depiction of a bedrock Hallows tradition married to this historical enactment, listen to Britain's **Tim Laycock** sing his "Nine Blazing Barrels on a Sharp November Night", depicting the contemporary revels at Devonshire's Ottery St. **Mary**:

*"It isn't just for Guy Fawkes,
nor the Carnival show;
why they really roll the Barrels
no one really knows.
I thought I saw the Hunter,
keep the Beast at bay
And carry the Sun 'till
Spring should come and melt
the snows away".*

*"Nine Burning Barrels on a
sharp November Night
Keep hold, keep hold, keep
them blazing bright!
Roll them, run them, run
them all about
Run them through the streets
until they're
All Burned Out!"*

In Ireland and the Catholic sections of Scotland October 31st remained the major day to celebrate Hallows since the Guy Fawkes incident was part of a **failed** Roman Catholic plot against Parliament.

Even in the strongly Catholic countries of Central and South America, a Day of the Dead (**Dia de Los Muertos**) is still celebrated where **families** picnic by the graves of deceased relatives. Little cakes and candy in the shape of skeletons and coffins are sold in many of the stores and consumed in honour of the dead. A superb shop in Los Angeles features Dia de Los Muertos paraphernalia — dancing skeletons and the lot!

In France, Samhain is celebrated in its New Year's aspect on Martinmas Eve, November 10th, with a festival of lanterns. These lights are made from paper with cut-outs of the Sun on them and carried candlelit through the darkened houses. St. Martin, the patron saint of beggars and drunkards, looks a lot like a good-hearted Bacchus to me, covering up the poor and inebriated with his cloak, like a proper Good Samaritan (who was also a Pagan, by the way).



In England's West Country, Samhain is celebrated as Punkie Night. Lanterns are carved from hollowed-out pumpkins (a new-country plant) into bogey-man faces and carried about the town by children, who sing:

*"It's Punkie Night tonight
Give us a candle, give us a
light,
If you don't, you'll get a
fright."*

The lanterns were originally intended to represent the souls of the dead who wander the earth at this time.

In northern England, where the Norse had quite a strong influence early on, it is a custom to go "caking", which involves collecting money for fireworks and begging for cakes which are left out on the table for dead souls overnight. One kind of cake, now commonly known as Lancashire **Parkin**, is also called Harcake, or Soul Hars Cake. Har is another name for the Norse God **Odin**. The custom of Soul Caking is also practiced to this day in Belgium, Bavaria, and the Tyrol region of Switzerland.

Recipe for Harcake

**1. 1 1/2 cups flour, 1 pinch salt, 1 tsp. ginger, 1 tsp. soda, 2 tsp. cinnamon*

**2. 10 oz. oatmeal, raisons (optional)*

**3. 6 oz. molasses, 5 oz. butter, 1/2 cup brown sugar, 1 1/2 cups whole milk [the dead don't need to lose weight]*

**4. 1 egg*

*Sift all the items in *1. Add items in *2. Heat items in *3 until butter is melted. Beat well then **pour** in dry ingredients and stir just until smooth. Cook in a greased, square cake pan at 350F for 1 hour. Put out on Halloween. Watch and see who comes...*

Last, but most important to many of us, Samhain is also the time of year, in the 20th Century, that we Witches get together for what I consider one of our largest holidays. While I am occasionally annoyed that the media only wants to interview Witches at this time of year, never at Beltaine or Yule, I am also gratified when I walk into a card shop and see rows and rows of cards celebrating our holiday. And I feel a bit smug knowing that for weeks ahead of time, children of all religions are busy cutting out paper witches, black cats, and orange pumpkins.

And for those of you who plan on doing a little divining this Hallows to see what mate the fates have lined up for you, I hope you have better prospects than this poor Witch by the craft name of "Anon"...

*"Woe's me! Woe's me!
The acorns not yet
Fallen from the tree
That's to grow the wood
That's to make the cradle
That's to rock the bairn
That's to grow the man
That's to lay me."*