

Halloween/ Samhain

Halloween or Samhain sometimes receives a lot of bad press nowadays, especially with the perceived Americanisation of the festival. Yet it is a very important Celtic festival and to my mind any practice that ensures its survival in the hearts and minds of Celtic people cannot be a bad thing. Christianised as All Hallows, originating in the seventh century, many themes from that time are reminiscent of current



practices and must hark back to earlier, Pagan times. Themes such as divination (particularly concerning marriage and death), the lighting of bonfires, lanterns, going from house to house begging favours and the appearance of spirits have all played a part over the centuries.

In many parts of Wales it was believed that spirits were to be seen on every stile. Sometimes these would take the form of a *ladi wen* (white lady) or a *hwch ddu gwta* (a tailless black sow). Bonfires were lit after dark, having been prepared during the day and young people would compete to see which bonfire would last longest. Many superstitions were attached to the roasting of apples, potatoes and stones in the ashes. The next morning, people who had placed stones in the fire would return to search diligently for them. Finding them indicated good luck in the coming year, but failure to do so was taken as an omen of bad luck; even of death!

In Montgomeryshire a traditional supper of *stwmp naw rhyw* (mash of nine sorts) was cooked in which a wedding ring was concealed. All participants sat round with a spoon and the first to find the ring, it was believed would be the first to be married. In Carmarthenshire, each person threw a nut into the fire and it was believed that if the nut burned brightly, that person would be alive a year hence; if not, then death would come his way. In Llandysul, a brightly burning nut indicated marriage within the year.

The much maligned 'trick or treating' also has its place. In Llansanffraid, men called from house to house dressed as an old man and woman (*gwrachod*), asking for fruit and nuts. In Llanfyllin working men would dress in old sheepskins or rags begging coppers, fruit or ale in ale-houses. *Gwrachod* means 'hags or witches', indicating that fiends, witches or fairies were about their business on this night. These people would often light their way with lanterns hollowed from turnips or swedes; the precursor of the hollowed out pumpkin.

I think it would be well to consider that although we may dismiss some modern practices as Americanised and therefore trivialised, many of them can be found in the folklore of England and Wales and many of them have their origins in ancient Pagan practice.

Oh and by the way; we welcome trick or treaters!

Angela