

October 28th 2005

Fright Night

By Eamonn Doherty



A couple of drinking buddies for Monday night.

The origins of the modern day Hallowe'en festival are of course, Celtic.

The ancient Irish called the festival "Samhain" (pronounced "sow -in", with "sow" rhyming with cow), which is now the Gaelic word for the month of November; although in recent times Hallowe'en is celebrated on October 31st.

The word Hallowe'en is of Scottish origin, and comes from "Hallow's Evening" (In old English the word 'Hallow' meant 'sanctify')

The festival is followed by the Christian festival of All Souls (All Saints in Spain), which falls on the first of November and is usually accompanied by a mid-term break for school children. The idea of this festival was introduced in the 7th century by Pope Boniface IV to replace a Roman festival of the dead. It was observed on May 13. Later, Gregory III changed the date to November 1.

During the ancient Celtic festival, all fires in homes and castles around the country were extinguished, except those of the Druids, or Holy Men.

Offerings were sacrificed to the gods on these fires and the hearths of the ordinary people would be re-lit from these holy pyres.

The custom of lighting a Hallowe'en bonfire continues in some parts to this day and in more modern times has been replaced by fireworks displays.

The sacrifice marked the end of the final harvest period of late summer and the move into the winter season, with the storage of provisions and readying for cold months ahead.

It was believed that the gap between the living world and the spirit world was at its weakest and interaction between these worlds was easiest at this point in the ancient calendar. Souls could wander freely across the earth.

Hallowe'en was also viewed as a time when evil spirits, the devil and witches were at their most powerful.

Nowadays, the festival is characterised by decorations of this sort in their homes, with witches, broom sticks, black cats and vampires being the height of fashion for most children.

Many years ago, it was felt that the baking of pastries and cakes as an offering would help the souls of the dead.

This tradition has also carried through to modern times, with the baking of apple cakes a pastime for many mothers in preparation for a Hallowe'en party.

In our house a Barm Brack was the norm. The Irish term for cake centuries ago was 'Bairgin' and if the 'Bairgin' contained rich currants and raisins it became a 'Bairgin Brack' or speckled cake, now more commonly known as a Barm Brack.

In ancient Ireland, Hallowe'en came close to the feast of St Columba and it was traditional for some people to go from door-to-door collecting bread, money, eggs, nuts and apples.

It was felt that these offerings gave protection against bad luck.

Today, this practice is known as "Trick or Treat", with the household which gives the least offering liable to have a "trick" carried out against it.