

Episode 13: Brief History of Samhain

Dia dhuit! (Hello!)

This is Episode 13 of Podcrawl Podchroal, the podcast from the McClelland Irish Library. I'm your host, Lisa, the Librarian. Since it's October I thought it'd be very fitting to talk about Samhain.

Samhain [Pronounced 'sow-en'], originated approximately 2,000 years ago, was celebrated on the night of October 31st and into November 1st among Celtic people. Samhain also marked the end of the harvest season (autumnal equinox) and the beginning of the dark half of the year (winter solstice). Samhain is an important holiday on the Celtic calendar, and makes it one of the four Celtic cross-quarter days. Spirits, of the departed as well as gods, fairies and other creatures, were visible to mankind and were able to pass through from the otherworld to this world because the veil between them had thinned. Spooky spirits were warded off by people wearing costumes and masks. The belief was that if they were in disguise and blended in with the ghosts and other creatures, then they would be protected. Food, drinks and bonfires were part of the festivities as well.

The Christian holiday, All Saints' Day, was originally intended to honor the Virgin Mary. But in the eighth century when Pope Gregory III changed the date to November 1st because of the attention of Samhain from across the Atlantic, he included all saints to be honored. Some of the traditions of Samhain became part of All Saints' Day. The night before All Saints' Day which was also known as All Hallows, on October 31st, became known as "All Hallows Eve," and when squished together, sounds like "Halloween" which we know it as today.

As the Irish emigrated to America, especially during the time of the Great Famine of the 1840's, many of their Samhain harvest traditions survived including carving. In Ireland faces were carved into root vegetables, typically turnips, and lit with a candle as a form of protection from harmful spirits like Stingy Jack. Once in America, however, pumpkins, which were native to the New World, were discovered to be better suited and more versatile. And that has remained to this day.

But who is this Stingy Jack?

The most common explanation as to why carved pumpkins are called Jack-o'-lanterns is a legend that stems from Stingy Jack. Twice Jack tricked the Devil, which did not bode well for him. After Jack's death, his spirit was banned from heaven and he was not admitted into hell, so the Devil sent him on his way in the dark of night with just a burning coal, that was placed into a turnip, to guide him. Jack has been roaming the planet ever since. He was then referred to as "Jack of the Lantern," which became "Jack O'Lantern."

However, that's just one possible origin, meaning, and function of the Jack-o'-lantern. Stories change over time especially when different cultures merge together. We'll never know which one is "correct," but that plays into the mystery, I think, of Samhain.

If you're curious to see what these [carved] turnips look like, then check out a great, informative video on youtube by the National Museum of Ireland. It's called ["Samhain-The Traditions of Halloween at National Museum of Ireland."](#) Clodagh Doyle, Keeper of the National Folklife Collection, showcases carved turnips and other traditions and their origins to Ireland. A link to the video will be available in the transcript of this episode which can be found at azirish.org, just click on the research tab, then click on Library Podcast and you'll see this and all of the other podcast transcripts located there.

Some books that may be of interest that we have on our shelves, include:

[True Irish Ghost Stories](#) which is the first major collection of true Irish short stories compiled entirely from accounts sent in by correspondents from all over Ireland.

[Irish Ghost Stories](#): There is a strong tradition of the supernatural in Ireland, and almost every village or town has its own ghost story, handed down through the generations but often told firsthand by someone living today. In this book the author has collected frightening tales from every region of Ireland.

[The Lively Ghosts of Ireland](#): This is the fourth volume by The Ghost Hunter about some of the most lively ghosts in the world. The author and a medium traveled all over Ireland and found all sorts of ghostly characters.

There's much more about Samhain I'd like to share with you, so stay tuned for future episodes! Thank you so much for listening! We hope to see you soon at McClelland Library! Slan (Bye!)

Music by [Geoff Harvey](#) "Let the Mystery Unfold" from [Pixabay](#)

Sources

Irish Myths:

[Jack-o-lantern History](#)

[Samhain](#)

Library of Congress:

[The Origins of Halloween Traditions](#)

National Museum of Ireland:

[Samhain-The Traditions of Halloween at National Museum of Ireland](#)

New Grange:

[Samhain](#)

Smithsonian Magazine:

[When People Carved Turnips instead of Pumpkins for Halloween](#)