UNWRAPPING HALLOWEEN

A TALE OF TWO STORIES

Where did Halloween begin?

Halloween goes way back — all the way to an ancient Celtic festival called Samhain (pronounced "Sar-win"), commemorated in England, Scotland, Ireland and parts of France.

The Celts believed that as winter approached and the days got darker, evil spirits came out to roam the earth. These spirits were thought to cause all kinds of trouble — ruining the last crops, spoiling food stores, and even bringing starvation.

To keep the spirits happy, Celtic priests called Druids lit huge fires and made sacrifices. They offered up animals, crops, and even people, hoping to gain protection and to catch a glimpse of the future.[1]

1   https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/samhain

Around 50 BC, the Roman leader Julius Caesar wrote of his surprise at how the Celts of Britain, Scotland and Ireland seemed to believe that unless a human life was offered, the gods would not listen.[2] It was all a bit scary at times.

2   Caesar, Julius. The Gallic War. Translated by W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn. Book VI, Chapter 16. Project Gutenberg, 2004. http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10657

For a more accessible reflection: https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/4711600/samhain-is-the-pagan-origin-of-halloween-and-its-terrifying-rituals-include-human-sacrifices-and-pumpkins-filled-with-burning-human-fat/

When did that festival end?

The first big shift came around AD 43, when the Romans invaded Britain. They brought their own gods and even worshipped their emperor as a god. As Roman beliefs began to spread, the old Druid traditions started to fade.

But there was another powerful influence too: Christianity. It likely arrived with Roman merchants, and offered a very attractive message — one of peace instead of war, and love instead of fear. Instead of sacrificing to angry spirits, Christians spoke of a God who had power over darkness, bringing freedom. It offered a new way of hope and many embraced it.

As a result, the festival of Samhain, began to lose its meaning. But the traditions didn't disappear. Just like how many celebrate Christmas today without thinking much about Jesus, the old customs of Samhain continued — even though their meaning had faded.[3]

3   https://www.twinkl.co.nz/teaching-wiki/christianity-come-to-england
While the first official records of Christianity in Britain show an established faith by around AD 200, it is widely accepted that the message arrived earlier with Roman merchants, as also happened in other parts of the Empire.

Then Samhain was replaced by Halloween

As the original meaning of Samhain faded, around AD 730 a new idea was proposed to take its place.[4] Why not celebrate the saints who had brought the light that replaced the darkness they earlier feared?

The idea caught on, and a new festival was born — All Hallows Day, also known as All Saints' Day. (To 'hallow' means to revere as holy.)

It became a time to remember the men and women who stood for faith, hope, love, and freedom — human values, equality and charity — replacing fear with things far more powerful.

4   Pope Gregory III (AD 690–741) proposed that the first day of the festival be renamed All Hallows Day, to celebrate the saints who had brought light. The Romans, who had persecuted Christians, withdrew from Britain in AD 407. Ireland embraced Christianity through Saint Patrick in the 5th century. By the 8th century, Samhain had largely lost its original meaning. Sixty years after Gregory III, in AD 800, the English scholar Alcuin is known to have celebrated the festival. Pope Gregory IV later ordered its general observance in AD 837.

Where did the name 'Halloween' come from?

Just as children get excited on Christmas Eve, people also began celebrating on the night before All Hallows Day.

The evening was called All Hallows' Eve, which, over time, was shortened to Halloween.

It became a time of joy, remembering how light had replaced darkness, and freedom replaced fear. It was a celebration of hope, starting a tradition that has continued in many churches through to the present day.

The return of the 'dark side'

The mid-1800s brought tragedy for Ireland.

The Irish Potato Famine lasted seven years, from 1845 to 1852, causing the death of over one million people from starvation. Many fled to America simply to survive.

On arrival in America, many Irish immigrants felt lost and disconnected. In search of identity, they turned to their old traditions, including some connected with the ancient Samhain festival. They remembered the ghosts and spirits their ancestors once feared — but now it was just for fun. Sacrifices were replaced by bonfires, and turnips were swapped for glowing pumpkin jack-o'lanterns.

Scary costumes made a return too,[5] this time for trick-or-treating and collecting lollies.

It was playful, it was social, and for many it restored a sense of identity and belonging.

5   It was originally believed that wearing a mask would hide a person's identity, preventing spirits from possessing them.

How did Halloween become so popular?

Probably not for the reason you think!

In the early 20th century, some clever businesspeople saw an opportunity. If Halloween could be sold as fun — with costumes, lollies, and decorations — there was money to be made. And they were right.

Today, Halloween is one of America's most profitable business seasons in the year.

It's similar to how the image of Santa Claus became popular. While loosely based on Saint Nicholas, the modern Santa — red suit and all — was actually born in a Coca-Cola factory in 1931. (Few can make that claim!)

The success of these ideas wasn't in their meaning but in their marketing.

How did we end up celebrating Halloween?

While All Hallows Day is still remembered in some churches, the spooky, commercial version of Halloween arrived only recently in New Zealand. Just like in America, businesses saw a marketing opportunity. They began promoting costumes, decorations, and treats, mostly targeting children, and it worked.

After all, what kid doesn't love lollies?

So, what's the deeper meaning?

As a commercial festival there isn't really a meaning to it. Even many of the costumes worn today come from fictional popular movies rather than anything historical.

However, the season can remind us of deeper things in our past. Long ago, our ancestors believed in many gods and spirits. They made sacrifices hoping for protection because they feared and did not trust these gods. They were trying to make sense of a dangerous world.

Over time, many of our ancestors embraced a new faith. Christianity offered something entirely different:

– hope instead of fear,

– forgiveness instead of revenge,

– and ways of peace instead of violence.

'Sacrifices' of love and kindness replaced the real sacrifices once placed on an altar.

It's a story that has shaped both our past and our present.

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How will we celebrate today?

We get to choose. Halloween could celebrate the light or the darkness.

Children could dress as superheroes, or as ghosts and demons.

However, if we were to make it about heroes — the stories of those who helped shape our nation into one of the most free, fair, equality-based, and generous on the planet could be told!

Our nation's values and wider history are incredible — while the stories are largely untold.

6   All Hallows Day first started AD 609. Pope Gregory III then proposed the moving of its date in the early 700s.

An invitation to celebrate hope and light!

Today, a modern twist is being given to a 1400 year-old[6] 'All Hallows Eve' tradition at many churches through the hosting of 'Light Parties'. Children dress as superheroes, enjoy games — and collect lollies! Why?

Because light and hope are still worth celebrating!

Wherever there is darkness there can yet be new light and life. Love can replace hate. Peace can replace pain. Hurts can be healed.

Just as Halloween has had two very different meanings in our history — one dark and one bright — so too can our lives.

These are the two stories of Halloween. Darkness exists, and so does hope.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Jeremiah 29:11 in the Bible

While some ancestors did scary things, others made choices that led to a brighter future.

Because of these ancestors' efforts, we enjoy extraordinary levels of freedom, prosperity, equality, and charity.

Let's learn their stories — and celebrate them.

HopeProject.co.nz/a-minute-in-history