



Samhain

The Celts, who lived 2000 years ago in the area that is now Ireland, the United Kingdom, and northern France celebrated their New Year on November 1st. This day marked the end of summer, the light half of the year. It was harvest time when crops and fruit were stored, cattle and sheep were moved to closer pastures, and all livestock were secured for the coming months of harsh winter. It was the start of the dark half of the year, a time that was often associated with human death. Celts believed that on the night before the New Year, more so than any other period of the year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred.

On the night of October 31 they celebrated Samhain, (pronounced Sow-en,) when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to Earth to mingle with the living. In addition to causing trouble and damaging crops, Celts thought that the presence of the other-worldly spirits made it easier for the Druids, Celtic priests, ritual leaders and bearers of knowledge, to make predictions about the future. To mark the event huge bonfires were built where the people gathered to burn crops and sacrifice animals to gain favor with the Celtic deities. The fires also served to aid the wandering souls in their journey, and to keep them away from the living, protecting the attendees from all manner of beings abroad who might wish them harm. While traveling and during the celebration the Celts wore costumes, typically consisting of animal heads and skins. In this way they would avoid being recognized by the ghosts and be mistaken merely for fellow spirits, and thus kept safe from mischief as they led the ghosts away from their homes. When the celebration was over, they re-lit their hearth fires, which they had extinguished earlier that evening, from the sacred bonfire to help protect them during the coming winter.

With the Roman conquest of the Celts by 43 CE, Roman celebrations of the harvest honoring Pomona, goddess of Fruit and Trees, especially the apple, and the festivals of the Feralia and Lemuria commemorating the dead, were grafted to the traditional Celtic Samhain. In subsequent attempts to Christianize the “pagans and their heathen festivals”, the church holidays were set to purposely coincide with persistent native celebrations. All Saint’s day, Hallowmas, was moved to November 1st and All Soul’s Day to November 2nd.

People continued to celebrate All Hallows Eve as a time of the wandering dead, but the supernatural beings were still thought of as threatening. Folks continued to propitiate those spirits, and their masked impersonators by setting out gifts of food and drink. Samhain and the Celtic New Year’s wardrobe were contemporized in the traditional Black and Orange. Black; to represent the time of darkness after death, and Orange; to signifying the predawn of the rebirth of the sun at Yule.