

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #189

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Happy Halloween



Boo! It's Halloween!

Taking a wee bit of a break (that's the Scots' influence seeping in at the beginning) from a lengthy **Book Note** during the Jefferson Educational Society's Global Summit XVI, let's very briefly see what the poets have had to say about our annual

autumnal festival of goblins and gremlins tricking and treating on All Hallow's Eve.

Do witches really ride broomsticks?

Where did trick-or-treating originate?

We explored these and other questions about Halloween's origins and customs in **Book Note #78**. In that earlier **Book Note**, I explained that just about all folk customs associated with Halloween are of Scottish origin. As my colleague Dave Frew, who is Scottish, told me, "If it's weird, the Scots probably had a hand in it!"

In that **Book Note**, I wrote:

Halloween has Scots origins. It was popularized in the 18th century by Scotland's national poet Robert Burns in his 1785 poem "Halloween." The poem, which describes the gathering of locals on *All-Hallows Eve* to gather crops, feast, tell fortunes revealing one's true love, trick-or-treat and frolic with the opposite sex, became a source catalog documenting folk customs celebrating *All Hallows Eve*, *All Saints Day*, and *All Souls Day*. The three days are collectively known as *Allhallowtide*, that portion of the church year "dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints ("hallows"), martyrs, and all the departed." [1] As Corey E. Andrews observed in his essay "Footnoted Folklore: Robert Burns' Halloween," "At 252 lines (among the longest poems in the Burns canon) 'Halloween' offers a wealth of folkloric practice that is skillfully interwoven within an episodic narrative." [2] Andrews also notes that the poem is "more highly regarded as an anthropological account than as a literary work. [3]"

Well, even if Andrews wasn't impressed with it as a poem, Burns' "Halloween" essentially created the folk holiday Halloween as you celebrate it today. In that earlier **Book Note**, I noted how Burns sang:

(Of) the folk going into the fields that night to gather the corns stalks, stack them high, and set them alight; of burning hazelnuts to find your lover's initials in the ashes, and 'bobbing for apples' and looking like Jennie into a mirror while biting an apple to divine your lover; of Nelly who lost her 'tap-pickle maist' [her virginity] while 'kitlin [cuddling] with Rob that night'; of telling stories about witches and ghosts and singing 'merry' songs from which 'they didna weary'?

from Halloween (in the original Scottish dialect)

Upon that night, when fairies light

On Cassilis Downans dance,
Or owre the lays, in splendid blaze,
On sprightly coursers prance;
Or for Colean the route is ta'en,
Beneath the moon's pale beams;
There, up the Cove, to stray an' rove,
Among the rocks and streams
To sport that night ...

The lasses staw frae 'mang them a'
To pou their stalks o' corn:
But Rab slips out, an' jinks about,
Behint the muckle thorn:
He grippet Nelly hard and fast:
Loud skirl'd a' the lasses;
But her tap-pickle maist was lost,
Whan kiutlin' in the fause-house
Wi' him that night. [*This poem is in the public domain.*]

I promised my editors, this **Book Note** would be under a thousand words. With a few recommendations for your Halloween pleasure, I think we will just make it!

You can find the complete version of "Halloween" in proper Scottish dialect at the Scottish Poetry Library: [Halloween by Robert Burns - Scottish Poetry Library](#)

A fabulous recitation of Halloween in proper Scottish dialect by Cameron Goodall recorded at the Burns Howff Club Halloween Supper in the Globe pub, Dumfries, Oct. 30, 2014, can be found, where else, on YouTube: [Halloween - YouTube](#).

For the less adventurous, a translation in modern English but still retaining some of the original's character can be found at Scottish Highland Games of San Diego at ["Halloween" by Robert Burns \(English Translation\) - San Diego Scottish Highland Games](#).

And a recitation in modern English by Chris Peterson can be found at ["Halloween" by Robert Burns \(English translation\)](#)



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End Notes

"Halloween," in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available [here](#) accessed Oct. 25, 2021.

Andrews, Corey E. "[Footnoted Folklore: Robert Burns' Halloween](#)," **University of South Carolina Scholar Commons** (2012) available [here](#) accessed Oct. 21, 2021, p. 25.
Ibid.

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