JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

# Book Notes #78

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

## Boo! It's Halloween!


Recently, returning from a bike ride around Presque Isle, I noticed at the corner of West 12th Street and Peninsula Drive a band of itinerant peddlers had set up shop with Halloween costumes and other accessories. If I read it correctly, their low-budget sign hawking costumes for adults, children, and pets announced all wares were under $10.

Where, I wondered, did this mid-autumn, although nowadays it seems like late-summer, holiday custom of "tricking or treating," bobbing for apples, and dressing up like hobgoblins and other-worldly sprites originate?

And what is it about bonfires?

And what does the word "Halloween" mean?

And what are a few of the great Halloween and harvest poems and songs?

We'll look at the answer to the third question later, but the answer to the second question is straight-forward. The answer to the first, however, is both more involved and more interesting.

As we learned in a previous ***Book Notes,*** which can be found **here**, the New Year's custom of singing "Auld Lang Syne" has Scottish roots, actually Celtic roots.

Similarly, 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 present crops, enjoy a 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]

Before we explore the anthropology, however, first the etymology, or origin of the word "halloween." As noted at the **Online Etymology Dictionary**, "*Halloween* is a Scottish shortening of *Allhallow-even*, 'Eve of All Saints,' last night of October, the last night of the year in the old Celtic calendar, where it was *Old Year's Night*, a night for witches." [4] As Wikipedia has it, "InScots, the word*eve*is*even*, and this is contracted to*e'en*or*een*.Over time,*(All) Hallow(s) E(v)en*evolved into*Hallowe'en*." [5]

So much for the word's origins, but what does it mean? It simply defines the night before the Christian holy days *(holidays), All Hallows' Day* or *All Saints' Day* on November 1 and *All Souls' Day* on November 2. *All Saints' Day* commemorates all the saints of the Church; *All Souls' Day* honors all the faithful who have died and is sometimes known as the *Day of the Dead*. In the Roman Catholic tradition, *All Saints' Day* is a holy day of obligation "in which the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass." [6]

What do the Christian holidays *(holydays)* have to do with the folk customs that Burns describes? Everything and nothing. Regarding "nothing," Burns sings in "Halloween" 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" while "kitlin with Rob that night"; of telling stories about witches and ghosts and singing "merry" songs from which "they didna weary." [7]

But Burns did not sing of the Christian holy days, so what's the connection? As we learned in earlier ***Book Notes*** about Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and Valentine's Day, all of which can be found **here**, and in my ***American Holidays*** series, which can be found **here**, one of the early Christian church's strategies in converting the pagans was to co-opt their holidays and rituals transforming them into Christian holidays and rituals. *Saturnalia,* the Roman mid-winter festival of feasting and gift giving celebrating the Sun God Saturn at the winter solstice, became Christmas. Valentine's Day, which was originally *Saint* Valentine's Day, traces its roots back to the Roman fertility and purification ritual of *Lupercalia* on February 14. The word February comes from the root *februar*, to purify. And why is the feast of the Resurrection, Easter, called "Easter," a word that does not appear in scripture? Because *Eostre* was a Nordic goddess of the vernal equinox celebrating nature's springtime rebirth. She was associated with fecundity symbolized by eggs, baby chicks and, those wild

propagators, rabbits.

So, too, is Halloween, whose roots can be traced to the ancient Celtic festival of *Samhain* (pronounced sa-win or sow-win). [8] The Celts occupied northern France (Brittany), England (in particular the south and west to Cornwall), Wales, Scotland and Ireland. For the Celts, November 1 was New Year's Day, the beginning of the darker half of the year. *Samhain* was a harvest festival denoting the end of summer and winter's onset. Since the Celtic day began and ended with sunset, they celebrated it on October 31, the last day of the year with great festivals, feasting, and the opening of the ancient burial mounds. The Celts believed that the living and the dead mingled on *Samhain* when the ghosts of the dead returned threatening to interfere with the harvest, the storing of crops, and generally wreaking havoc.

It was a time of year of both celebration, if the harvest was good, and dread if it was not. For in a northern agricultural society, worry about having enough food to survive the long, cold winters caused great anxiety. Winter was the dying season. The Druids, the Celtic priests, took the opportunity the spirits' presence afforded to prophesize the future, and prophecies were a source of hope during the long, dark, cold winters. They lit huge bonfires, sacrificed animals and crops, and wore costumes to frighten away ghosts. To preserve the animals and crops through the winter months, the Celts propitiated, i.e. bribed, the spirits with gifts of bread and mead. It was believed that the souls of family members visited their homes seeking nourishment. From these two traditions evolved the custom of trick-or-treating, in which folk went about in costume singing songs for cakes and ale (note the similarity to the custom of Christmas caroling).

The Christian connection occurred late in the first millennium after Christ. Originally dedicated by Pope Boniface IV in May 609 C.E., the Roman Pantheon honored all martyrs and began the Catholic feast of *All Martyrs Day*. In the 9th century (the 800s), Pope Gregory III moved the festival's date to November 1 – *All Saints' Day* – and established November 2 as *All Souls' Day* to honor all the Christian dead. Note the date; why would Gregory move the date to November 1? Think St. Patrick converting the pagan Irish in the mid-late first millennium. It was Pope Gregory's tactic to co-opt the pagan holy day of *Samhain* and replace it with a Church-approved holiday.

In the newly converted Christian northwestern Europe, *All Souls' Day* was celebrated exactly as *Samhain* had been with bonfires, festivals and feasting. Now, however, the costumes celebrants wore depicted saints, angels, and devils. The tradition of going door-to-door seeking soul cakes and other fare continued; if the request was denied a trick was played upon the stingy homeowner. *All Saints' Day* was also sometimes called *All-hallowmas,* or mass or service for the dead, as we noted above in the etymology of the word *Halloween*. The night before it, October 31 – the original date for *Samhain* became *All-Hallows Eve*, which morphed into the compound or portmanteau word *Hallowe'en,* with the apostrophe ultimately dropped.

And, to quote Kurt Vonnegut, *hey presto* – a new holiday!

Halloween came to America with the earliest European settlers. In Puritan New England it was scarcely acknowledged, but in Catholic Maryland and the Anglican colonies to the south it took root. As in Europe, it was a harvest festival in which

neighbors told each other's fortunes, lit bonfires, told stories, danced, sang and, of course, feasted. The stories they told were, what else, ghost stories. The explosion of German and particularly Irish Catholic immigrants in the mid-19th century fueled the holiday's popularity. As the 19th century ended, it became a community holiday of neighborhood gatherings featuring seasonal foods (think pumpkins and apples), games, and costumes. As most things American, the holiday became secularized in the 20th century and increasingly focused on children. In short, its religious character, both pagan and Christian, receded as it became a holiday for childish pranks and trick-or-treating, with the ancient custom of going door-to-door in search of treats now strictly the province of children. During the post-World War II baby boom, dressing children up as goblins and skeletons canvassing the neighborhood for inexpensive candy treats transformed Halloween into a generally harmless exercise in communal fun.

It continues today as one of the fastest growing commercial holidays. Currently ranked #6 by the National Retail Federation (NRF) index of holiday spending, it is gaining momentum as a renewed holiday extravaganza with people now decorating their homes and yards with witches, giant spider webs, pumpkins real and fake, and other seasonal decorations. The NRF reports that "consumers are expected to spend $102.74 per capita on Halloween in 2021," up almost 25 percent from 2020. Three trends are driving this increase: 1) it's not just for kids anymore, as adults have taken to dressing up and households without children become party givers; 2) Halloween home decoration sales are "expected to reach an all-time high of $3.3 billion; and 3) it's "Spooky September" as more and more consumers plan to get a head start on the holiday." [9]

Pretty soon we're going to see Christmas in July and Halloween in late May!

For a more complete *Halloween* history, accompanied by visuals and music, answering what it was about those bonfires as erotic symbols, why wannabe lovers bobbed for apples, and why witches ride broomsticks, tune into ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN/NPR on Sunday, November 14 at 4 p.m. or listen to it at all the favorite podcast sites, beginning with WQLN/NPR available **here**. Also, we'll be exploring an expanded version of this on the ***American Holidays*** Jefferson Educational Society livestream on Thursday, November 18 at 4 p.m.

Before we leave to go trick-or-treating, I promised at the beginning to share with you a few of the most famous – I make no claims for quality – of the great Halloween songs. We'll close with a selection of Halloween poems.

First, however, what is the #1 ranked Halloween song of all-time?

It's almost too obvious, but at most such listings you'll discover Bobby "Boris" Pickett and the Crypt-Kickers' 1962 "Monster Mash." It sings:

*from* Monster Mash

I was working in the lab, late one night
When my eyes beheld an eerie sight
For my monster from his slab, began to rise
And suddenly to my surprise
He did the monster mash
(The monster mash) It was a graveyard smash

(He did the mash) It caught on in a flash
(He did the mash) He did the monster mash [10]

A recent ***Washington Post*** survey of "The 50 best Halloween songs of all time" includes Rosemary Clooney at #50 with "The Wobblin Goblin" and Roy Rogers at #49 with "Punky Punkin," the theme from "The Phantom of the Opera" at #46, "Time Warp" from ***The Rocky Horror Picture Show*** (see Susan Sarandon before she became a star), Bobby Pickett again at #40 with "Transylvania Twist," the Doors' "People Are Strange" at #34, "Evil Woman" at #19 by Electric Light Orchestra, David Bowie's "Space Oddity" at #16, "Psycho Killer" by Talking Heads at #13, "The Addams Family" theme and "Ghostbusters" by Ray Parker Jr. at #s 6 & 7 respectively and many more. [11]

On a different "note," there are scores of harvest and Halloween poems ranging from John Keats' "To Autumn," Carl Sandburg's "Theme in Yellow," Kenn Nesbitt's "Halloween Party," Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," James Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," and James Whitcomb Riley's old chestnut (ouch, but the cliché intentional) "When the Frost is on the Punkin." But I love Adelaide Crapsey's "November Night," which in its entirety captures the essence of the season in a northern town.

<u>November Night</u>

Listen …
With faint dry sound,
Like steps of passing ghosts,
The leaves, frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
And fall. [12]

Or, from the other side of the world, Li Po captures in far fewer words the spirit of some of Burns' young people coupling in autumn:

<u>Autumn River Song</u>

The moon shimmers in green water.
White herons fly through the moonlight.

The young man hears a girl gathering water-chestnuts:
into the night, singing, they paddle home together. [13]

Echoing that Celtic fear of winter's cold and the beginning of the dying season, Carl Sandburg's "Autumn Movement" gives it just a touch of American midwestern stoicism mingled with hope.

<u>Autumn Movement</u>

I cried over beautiful things knowing no beautiful thing lasts.

The field of cornflower yellow is a scarf at the neck of the copper
sunburned woman, the mother of the year, the taker of seeds.

The northwest wind comes and the yellow is torn full of holes,
new beautiful things come in the first spit of snow on the northwest wind,
and old thing go, not one lasts. [14]

Although he does not link bonfires to their Druidic past as symbols of the lifeforce fending off winter's deathly chill, Robert Louis Stevenson's "Autumn Fires" glimpses their magic.

Autumn Fires

In the other gardens
And all up the vale,
From the autumn bonfires
See the smoke trail!

Pleasant summer over
And all the summer flowers,
The red fire blazes,
The grey smoke towers.

Sing a song of seasons!
Something bright in all!
Flowers in the summer,
Fires in the fall! [15]

In a different "spirit," like the image at the beginning of this ***Book Note***, Robert Herrick's 17th century "The Hag" describes a witch astride her broom riding the night sky.

*from* The Hag

The Hag is astride
This night for to ride;
The Devill and shee together:
Through thick, and through thin
Now out, and then in
Though ne'r so foule be the weather.

A Thorn or a Burr
She takes for a Spurre:
With a lash of a Bramble she rides now
Through Brakes and through Bryars
O're Ditches, and Mires
She followes the Spirit that guides now. [16]

And if it's witches one wants, who better than Shakespeare? Here is the "Song of Witches" from ***Macbeth.***

Song of the Witches

Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.
Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.
Harpier cries '"Tis time, 'tis time."

Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone

Days and nights has thirty-one
Swelter'd venom sleeping got
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Fillet of a fenny snake
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog
Wool of bat and tongue of dog
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing
For a charm of powerful trouble
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Cool it with a baboon's blood
Then the charm is firm and good.

By the pricking of my thumbs
Something wicked this way comes. [17]

Oak trees were sacred to the Druids. It was in oak groves that they held their religious ceremonies. In the autumn, they would fashion out of willow and oak a *wicker man*, a huge effigy of a person capable of holding dozens of sacrificial victims, usually but not always criminals who had somehow offended communal values. They then burned them alive as an offering to the spirit world. Used for a lynching, nineteen hundred years later poet Paul Laurence Dunbar captures a barren oak tree's late autumn misery at the injustice for which it has been used.

*from* The Haunted Oak

Pray why are you so bare, so bare
Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
And why, when I go through the shade you throw
Runs a shudder over me?

My leaves were green as the best, I trow
And sap ran free in my veins
But I saw in the moonlight dim and weird
A guiltless victim's pains.

I bent me down to hear his sigh;
I shook with his gurgling moan
And I trembled sore when they rode away
And left him here alone. . .

... I feel the rope against my bark
And the weight of him in my grain
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.

And never more shall leaves come forth
On the bough that bears the ban;
I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead
From the curse of a guiltless man.

And ever the judge rides by, rides by
And goes to hunt the deer
And ever another rides his soul
In the guise of a mortal fear.

And ever the man he rides me hard
And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough
On the trunk of a haunted tree. [18]

Of course, if it's the thrill of prickly hairs on the back of your neck accompanied by the musicality of a poet who knew both how to scare you and to make you like being scared, let's end with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." If the Halloween customs of bobbing for apples, burning hazelnuts to read your future lover's initials in the ashes, looking into a mirror before another mirror all spoke of the need to "couple" to fend off winter's chill, then Poe inverts it as a lover mourning his dead Lenore sinks slowly into madness.

*from* The Raven

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door—
"'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more."

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; — vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow — sorrow for the lost Lenore —
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless*here*for evermore. [19]


Happy Halloween

It's not an oxymoron and don't forget to listen to the "Monster Mash"! It can be found **here**.

Christopher Lee, he of many a frightfully awful ghoulish film, can be heard reading "The Raven" **here**.

A selection of autumn poems at The Poetry Foundation can be found **here**.

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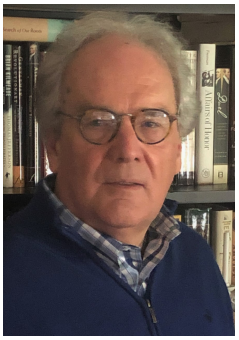

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## End Notes

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