

THE SILVER BOUGH
A FOUR VOLUME STUDY OF THE NATIONAL AND
LOCAL FESTIVALS OF SCOTLAND

By
F. MARIAN McNEILL

VOLUME THREE
A CALENDAR OF SCOTTISH NATIONAL
FESTIVALS HALLOWE'EN TO YULE

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE AUTHOR

F. Marian McNeill was born in 1885 at Holm in Orkney where her father was the minister of the Free Presbyterian Kirk and it was this early life on the islands which would shape her life-long passion for Scottish culture and history. She moved from Orkney so that her secondary education could be continued in Glasgow and then Paris and the Rhineland. She travelled extensively as a young woman, visiting Greece, Palestine and Egypt and then living and working in London as part of the suffragette movement.

Her first book *Iona: A History of the Island* was published in 1920 following her visit to the island. Her only novel, *The Road Home*, was published in 1932 and was loosely based on her years in Glasgow and London. The Scottish traditions which Marian had been brought up on shaped two of her books, *The Scots Kitchen* (published in 1929) and *The Scots Cellar* (1956), which both celebrated old recipes and customs and provide a social history of northern domestic life.

Marian MacNeill was most proud, however, of this, her four-volume work, *The Silver Bough* (1957–1968), a study of Scottish folklore and folk belief as well as seasonal and local festivals. The Scottish Arts Council celebrated the completion of this work by giving a reception in her honour.

THE SILVER BOUGH

The Silver Bough is an indispensable treasury of Scottish culture, universally acknowledged as a classic of literature. There is no doubt F Marian McNeill succeeded in capturing and bringing to life many traditions and customs of old before they died out or were influenced by the modern era.

In the first volume of the Silver Bough, the author deals generally with Scottish folk-lore and folk belief, with chapters on ethnic origins, the Druids, the Celtic gods, the slow transition to Christianity, magic, the fairy faith and the witch cult. In the three subsequent volumes she explores in more depth the foundations of many of these beliefs and rituals through the Calendar of Scottish national festivals, in which we find enshrined many of the fascinating folk customs of our ancestors. This third volume focuses on the opening seasons of the Calendar of Scottish National Festivals from the Festivals of Spring to the immemorial rites associated with Autumn Harvesting.

As man makes greater and greater advances in the understanding and control of his physical environment, the river between the known and the unknown gradually changes its course, and the subjects of the simpler beliefs of former times become part of the new territory of knowledge. The Silver Bough maps out the old course of the waterway that in Celtic belief winds between here and beyond, and reveals the very roots of the Scottish people's distinctive customs and way of life.

The Silver Bough is a large and important work which involved many years of research into both living and recorded lore. Its genesis lies, perhaps, in the author's subconscious need to reconcile the old primitive world she had glimpsed in childhood with the sophisticated modern world she later entered. How much more so can we, today, echo the words of the author:

"I do not believe that you can exaggerate the importance of the preservation of old ways and customs, and all those little things which bind a man to his native place. Today we live in difficult times. The steam-roller of progress is flattening out many of our old institutions, and there is a danger of a general decline in idiom and distinctive quality in our Scottish life. The only way to counteract this peril is to preserve jealously all these elder things which are bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. For, remember, no man can face the future with courage and confidence unless it is solidly founded upon the past. And conversely, no problem will be too hard, no situation too strange, if we can link it with what we know and love"

F Marian McNeill

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FOREWORD

In the first volume of this work I deal with the folk-lore and folk-beliefs in which our ancient festivals are rooted— Druidism, Magic, the Fairy Faith, the Witch Cult and kindred matters; in the second, after a preliminary chapter on the "plays" that succeeded the pagan festivals in the medieval burghs of Scotland (as in those of other countries), I follow the cycle of the seasons from Candlemas, the Festival of Spring, to Autumn and the Festivals of the Corn; in this, the third volume, I complete the cycle from Hallowe'en—the Samhuinn of our Celtic forebears, which marked the entry of Winter and of the Celtic year—to Yule, when our Scandinavian forebears celebrated the winter solstice. Both these nature-festivals were in due course Christianised by the Church, Samhuinn, which was in origin a Festival of the Dead, being identified with the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls, and Yule, "the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun," being identified with the Feast of the Nativity, or Christmas. Thus Hallowe'en and Yule commemorate (as do the corresponding summer festivals of Beltane and Midsummer) the two main racial strains in the Scottish people. The traditions of the Norse and Danish settlers are shared by the Angles who colonised the Lothians and the southeastern corner of Scotland, but the Celtic strain is, of course, much the older, and has the wider and deeper roots.

Although Druidism as a religious faith has long been as dead as the dinosaur, the Druidic rites have persisted amazingly, as folk customs, right down the centuries to our own times. Today, they are almost entirely in the hands of the young folk and the children, and are reduced in status to mere Beltane and Hallowe'en frolics. At the same time, Yule, or, more strictly, the "hinner-end" of it, survives lustily as Hogmanay, whilst Christmas proper—that is, the religious celebration—after remaining long in abeyance, is renewing its hold on the imagination and affections of the people.

As an appendix to this volume I give a short account of Burns Night, which in less than two hundred years has acquired much of the character of a folk-festival.

F. M. McN.

Edinburgh, December, 1960.

CHAPTER I

HALLOWE'EN (October 31)

Samhuinn,¹ or Hallowe'en, was one of the two main festivals of the Celtic peoples. It marked the entry of winter; but, since the Celtic year began with winter, it marked also the entry of the New Year.² Hence Samhuinn was probably of even greater importance than Beltane. Again, since the Celtic day began with night, the festival began on its eve. Samhuinn, in short, was the Celtic Hogmanay.

Although the two festivals had many features in common— notably the fires of propitiation and purification—they differed considerably in character; for whilst Beltane celebrated the renewal of vegetation, Samhuinn solemnised its decay. At this season, too, abundance of provender was put by for winter store, and Samhuinn to some extent celebrated the inning of the crops, or, in other words, it was in one aspect a community harvest home.³ The Beltane ritual was, so to speak, a 'grace before meat,' and that of Samhuinn, a 'grace after meat.'

THE FESTIVAL OF THE DEAD

Samhuinn appears to have originated at a very remote period in the Cult of the Dead. The ancient doctrines relating to life and death were symbolised, as we know, in the yearly movements of the sun. November was the season of earth's decay. The sun's strength waned; all nature was abandoned to the powers of darkness; and the day that marked the end of summer was symbolic of death. Thus Samhuinn became a day of remembrance of the dead.

Since the Cult of the Dead was based upon the doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul, the festival can never have been an entirely gloomy one. Death was not a reality, but only an appearance. After winter, spring; after death, resurrection: the law of renewal governed both the natural and the spiritual world —if, indeed, the early Celts could be said to regard them as two separate worlds.

In folk-belief, the spirits of the dead haunted the megalithic monuments that marked the ancient burial-grounds, and these were the main sites of the festival. Offerings and sacrifices were made to ancestral spirits, to whom great power was attributed.

In many of the Celtic territories there are traces of the ancient horse races and of the funeral games and dances. The latter lingered into the nineteenth century.⁴

In accordance with the policy of the Christian Church to graft a Christian festival upon each pagan one, Samhuinn in due course became Hallowmas, or the Feast of All Saints. The original date of this feast in the Christian Calendar was February 21—that of the Roman Feralia, from which it derived—but in 835 it was transferred by Pope Gregory to November 1. Whilst the Feast of All Saints commemorated the blessed dead who had been canonised, the Feast of All Souls (November 2), which was established in 998, was consecrated to the faithful dead and to prayer for the eternal repose of their souls.

All over Europe, the souls of the departed were believed to-revisit their old homes on the eve of Allhallows and warm themselves at the fire or regale themselves with the food and drink set out for them by their kinsfolk.

'It was perhaps a natural thought,' says Frazer, 'that the approach of winter should drive the poor, shivering, hungry ghosts from the bare fields and the leafless woodlands to the shelter of the cottage with its familiar fireside. Did not the lowing kine then troop back from the summer pastures in the forests and on the hills to be fed and cared for in the stalls, while the bleak winds whistled among the swaying boughs and the snowdrifts deepened in the hollows? And could the good-man and the good-wife deny to the spirits of their dead the welcome which they gave to their cows?'⁵

In Roman Catholic countries, people visit the graves of those dear to them on the *jour des marts* and, kneeling, sprinkle them with holy water. In modern Brittany, as in ancient Egypt, people left food on the table before retiring for the night, and it is questionable if the old belief has even yet entirely died out in Scotland.

*It's the nicht atween the Sancts and Souls
When the bodiless gang about,
An' it's open hoose we keep the nicht
For ony that may be oot.*⁶

Within the present century the late John Duncan, the well-known artist, had the extraordinary experience of being taken for a revenu by an old man on the Island of Barra.⁷

It was not only the souls of the departed that were abroad on Hallowe'en. It was believed that at the end of each quarter the Other-world was temporarily upset; but at Hallowe'en there was more than an upsetting—there was a complete upheaval, and all the denizens of that world were released for the night, free to work weal or woe on those human beings they encountered.

'At the mouth of the night, between daylight and dark, came abroad ill things to meet, from out the earth, from out the air, from out the water and the Under-world.... The mouth of the night is the choice hour of the *Sluath*, the Host of the Dead,⁸ whose feet never touch the earth as they go drifting on the wind till Day of Burning; of the *Fuath*, the Spirit of Terror, that frightens folk out of the husk of their hearts; of the Washer, who sits with herself in the twilight; of the slim, green-coated ones, the Water-Horse, and what not. The light that is shadowless, colourless, softer than moonlight, is ever the light of their liking. At the mouth of the night, along the water-courses by ways that at the hour of dusk and of lateness you had best be shunning, you are like to meet them; to west of houses they pass—what to do, who shall say? their ways being nowise human.'⁹



From a painting by W. S. MacGorge, R.S.A.

HALLOWE'EN

After dark, the children went about with turnip lanterns and kail-runt torches that had been lit at their Hallowe'en bonfire, to protect themselves from mischievous spirits.



From a painting by John Duncan, R.S.A

THE HUNTED GOBLIN

Hallowe'en will come, will come:
Fairies will be at full speed,
Running in every pass!
(Highland Mothers' Warning)

The eeriness of Hallowe'en is conveyed by poets of different periods—Alexander Montgomerie, for instance, in the sixteenth century:—

*In the hinderend of harvest, on alhallow evin,
Quhen our gude nychbouris rydis, if I reid rycht,
Sum buklit on ane bwnwyd and sum on ane bene,
Ay trippand in troupes fra the twilycht;
Sum saidlit on a scho-aip all graithit in grene,
Sum hobland on hempstalkis hovand on hicht,
The king of Phairie and his court with the elph-quene.
With mony elrich incubus was rydand that nycht.^{9^a}*

and Sir Walter Scott in the eighteenth: —

*On Hallowmas Eve, e'er ye boune to rest,
Ever beware that your couch be blest;
Sign it with cross and sain it with bead.
Sing the Ave and say the Creed.*

*For on Hallowmas Eve the Nighthag shall ride,
And all her nine-fold sweeping on by her side.
Whether the wind sing lowly or loud,
Sailing through moonshine or swathed in a cloud.*

*He that dare sit in St. Swithin's Chair
When the Nighthag wings the troubled air,
Questions three, when he speaks the spell,
He may ask, and she must tell.^{9^b}*

And Highland mothers still warn their little ones: —

*Hallowe'en will come, will come,
Witchcraft will be set a-going,
Fairies will be at full speed,
Running in every pass,
Avoid the road, children, children!*

THE FAIRIES

Hallowe'en was the great flitting-time of the fairies, who moved in procession from one fairy-hill to another to the music of bells and elf-horns.

*But as it fell out last Hallow-even,
When the seelie court was ridin' by.
The Queen lichtit doun on a gowany brae,
Nae far frae the tree where I want to lie.¹⁰*

It was believed that those who had been snatched to fairyland might be recovered within a year and a day, but the spell for their recovery was potent only when the fairies made their procession on Hallowe'en. It was thus that Janet won back her lost love in the ballad of Tamlane: —

*The nicht is Hallowe'en, Janet,
The morn is Hallowmas Day,
And gin ye daur your true luv win,
Ye hae nae time to stay.*

*The nicht it is gude Hallowe'en,
When faerie folk will ride,
And they that wad their true luv win,
At Miles Cross they maun bide.*

*Gloomy, gloomy was the nicht,
And eerie was the way,
As fair Janet in her mantle green
To Miles Cross she did gae.*

*About the middle o' the nicht,
She heard the bridles ring;
The leddie was as blythe at that
As ony earthlie thing.*

*First she lat the black pass by,
An' syne she lat the broun,
But quick she ran to the milk-white steed,
An' pu'd the rider doun.*

*Sae weel she minded the words he spak,
And Young Tamlane did win;
Syne rowed him in her mantle green,
As blythe's a bird in spring.*

Sir Walter Scott tells the story of a farmer whose wife had been 'taken,' and who re-appeared and taught him a spell by which she might be rescued. The farmer conned the lesson carefully, and on Hallowe'en took his stand by a plot of furze to await the passing of the fairy host; but alas, the ringing of the fairy bells confused him, and before he had sufficiently recovered to use the spell, the train had passed and his wife was lost to him forever.

It was also possible in the hours between sunset and cock-crow to gain admission to a fairy hill.

'It is believed,' says Scott, 'that if, on Hallowe'en, any person, alone, goes round one of these hills nine times, towards the left hand (*sinistrorsum*), a door shall be opened by which he shall be admitted into their subterranean abodes.'¹¹

THE WITCHES

After dark on Hallowe'en, witches and warlocks might be seen cleaving the air on broom-sticks or shank-banes, or sailing aloft in sieves or egg-shells,¹² or galloping along the road on tabby-cats transformed for the night into coal-black steeds, on their way to the Hallowmas Rade.¹³ A fragment of the traditional rallying-song of the Nithsdale and Galloway witches has been preserved: —

*When the grey owlet has three times hooded,
When the grimy cat has three times mewed,
When the tod has yowled three times i' the wud
At the reid mune co'erin' ahint the clud,
When the stars has cruppen deep i' the drift,
Lest cantrips pyke them out o' the lift,
Up horses a', but mair adowe!
Ryde, ryde for Lochar-brig-knowe!¹⁴*

What were they up to? That was what many a decent man asked of his errant spouse.

*'Quhare haif ye been, ye ill womyne,
This three lang nichtis fra hame?
Quhat garris the sweit drap fra yer brow,
Like clotis o' the saut sea-faem?*

*It fearis me muckel ye haif seen
Quhat guid man never knew;
It fearis me muckel ye haif been
Quhare the grey cock never crew.'*

Says the gudewife: —

*The first leet-night, quhan the new mune set,
Quhan all was douffe and mirk,
We saddled our naigis wi' the moon-fern leif,
And rade fra Kilmerrin kirk.
Some horses were of the brume-cow framit,
And some of the greine bay tree;
But mine was made of ane humloke schaw,
And a stout stallion was he.
And aye we raide and sae merrily we raide*

*Throw the merkist gloffis of the night;
And we swam the floode, and we darnit the woode,
Till we cam to the Lommond height.
And quhan we cam to the Lommond height,
So lythlye we lichtit doune,
And we drank fra the hornis that never grew,
The beir that was never browin.¹⁵*

Besides the lonely moor or sea-shore, a favourite meeting-place was the churchyard, the successor to the ancient pagan burial-ground—a survival that links us with the Cult of the Dead. It was in Auld Alloway kirkyard that Tam o' Shanter, mounted on his auld mare, Maggie, spied the witches at their cantrips: —

*Glimmering through the groaning trees,
Kirk Alloway seemed in a bleeze;
Through ilka bore the beams were glancing,
And loud resounded mirth and dancing.*

*Warlocks and witches in a dance:
Nae cotillon brent new frae France,
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels
Put life and mettle in their heels
A winnock-bunker in the east.
There sat Auld Nick, in shape o' beast;
To gi'e them music was his chairge:
He screwed the pipes and gart them skirl
Till roof and rafters a' did dir!¹⁶*

The whole poem, which is at once gay and gruesome and uncannily alive, brings home to us the hold 'the witches' had retained in the memory and imagination of the Scottish peasantry at the end of the eighteenth century.

At Aberdeen, in 1596, the witches acknowledged that they had danced round both the 'mercat croce' and the 'fische croce' on Hallowe'en; and also round 'ane grey stane' at the foot of the hill at Craigleuch, Satan acting as musician, 'playing befor them on his form of Instrumentis.' The dancers were 'transformit in other lykness, sum in haris (hares), sum in catts, and sum in other similitudes.... Thou the said Thomas was formest and led the ring, and dang (beat) Kathren Mitchell becaus scho spillit (marred) the dans, and ran nocht sa fast about as ye rest.'

As a festival of beginnings, the ancient Samhuinn was accompanied with orgiastic rites. These continued to be practised by the followers of the witch-cult on Hallowe'en, as on the eves of the other Quarter Days, and some of the Presbytery records indicate that their survival in a debased form among the people caused great concern to the Reformers.



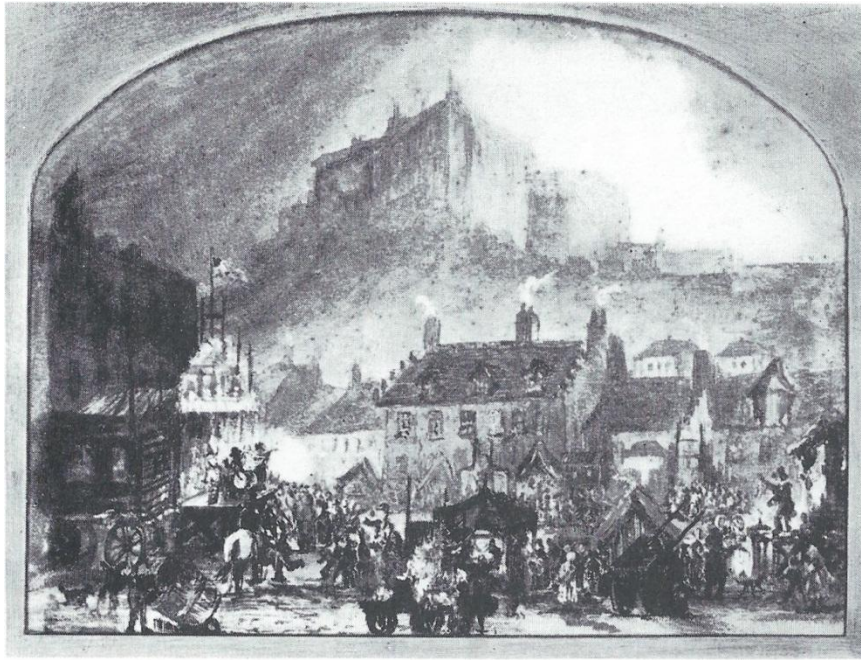
From an engraving by J. M. Wright

WITCHES' REVELS

Witches and and supernatural powers held full sway on Hallowe'en

While Tammie glour'd, amazed and curious,
The noise and fun grew fast and furious:
The piper loud and louder blew.
The dancers quick and quicker flew!

Robert Burns: *Tam o' Shanter*



From a painting by Mrs Stewart Smith

**ALL HALLOW FAIR
IN THE
GRASSMARKET, EDINBURGH**

*Here Chapmen billies tak their stand.
An' shaw their bonny wallies;
Wow, but they lie fu gleg aff-hand.
To trick the silly fellows.
Heh, Sirs! what cairds and tinklers come
An' ne'er-do-weel horse-coupers,
An' spae-wives fenzying to be dumb.
W'i' a siclike landloupers,
To thrive that day.*

Robert Fergusson: Hallow Fair

Billies, fellows; wallies, wares, toys; gleg, nimble, quick; aff-hand, on the spur of the moment; cairds, tramps; couper, dealer; spae-wife, fortune-teller; fenzying, feigning; siclike, suchlike; land-louper, vagabond.

THE BONFIRES

Unlike the Beltane fires, which were kindled at dawn, those of Hallowe'en were kindled at dusk. The motive behind the ancient Samhuinn fires was to combat the powers of darkness that were now in the ascendant. The days were growing shorter, the sun's strength was diminishing, and malevolent influences of every kind were abroad. In later times, these influences were identified with 'the witches.' In Aberdeenshire, up to our own time, the formula used by the lads who went about collecting fuel for their Hallowe'en bonfire was, 'Gi'e's a peat to burn the witches!' (The needfire, as we know, was a sovereign remedy for witchcraft, for it was believed that the witches hovering unseen in the air were consumed by the purifying flame.) Once the fire got going, the lads kept tossing the burning mass while the younger ones danced round the fire or ran through the smoke shouting, 'Fire! Fire! Burn the witches!' The ashes were scattered far and wide, scaring away all evil powers and fertilising the fields; and hardly had the last spark died when the cry was raised, 'The deil tak the hindmost!' and they would run for their lives. Sometimes the cry was, 'Let the muckle black sow wantin' a tail tak the hindmost!' — for on Hallowe'en, it was said, there was a 'cutty black sow' or a 'bogie' on every stile, and woe to the runner he caught running before him!¹⁷

In some districts, when the fire was smouldering low the ashes were collected and laid in the form of a circle. Round the circumference a stone was placed for each person present. If before morning any stone was injured or removed, it meant that the person it represented was fey and doomed to death before another Hallowe'en.¹⁸

BURNING THE WITCH

The ancient practice of 'Burning the Witch' was kept up at Balmoral in Queen Victoria's time. 'A huge bonfire was kindled in front of the Castle, opposite the principal doorway. The clansmen were mustered, arrayed in Highland garb. At a signal, headed by a band, they marched towards the palace. The bonfire was kindled so as to be in full blaze when the procession reached it. The interest of the promenade was centred in a trolley on which there sat the effigy of a hideous old woman or witch called the Shandy Dann.¹⁸ Beside her crouched one of the party holding her erect while the march went forward to the bagpipes' strain. As the building came in sight, the pace was quickened to a run, then a sudden halt was made a dozen yards or so from the blaze. Here, amid breathless silence, an indictment is made why this witch should be burned to ashes, and with no one to appear on her behalf—only this *advocatus diaboli*, paper in hand—she is condemned to the flames. With a rush and a shout and the skirling of bagpipes, the sledge and its occupant are hurled topsyturvy into the fire, whilst the mountaineer springs from the car at the latest safe instant. There follows cheers and hoots of derisive laughter, as the inflammable wrappings of the Shandy Dann crackle and splutter out.

'All the while the residents at the Castle stand enjoying this curious rite, and no one there entered more heartily into it than the head of the Empire herself.'¹⁹

'This is a remarkable relic,' comments the Rev. J. M. McPherson. 'It is the action of the whole clan. They destroy the witch as representative of the powers of darkness. "Burning the witch" is a relic of very great antiquity. It was practised in Babylon.'²⁰

Originally a solemn rite, in later times the building of the bonfire was a popular ploy, each community being bent on having a bigger and better one than its neighbours. For days beforehand, broken timber, tar-barrels, peat, furze, heather, dried fern—anything combustible, in fact—were

collected and carried to the site. Some of the bonfires were as big as a haystack. In later times the needfire was superseded by the flint, and eventually by the modern match.

Although the rites and ceremonies associated with them have gradually disappeared, the Hallowe'en fires have burned down the centuries in an unbroken chain to our own time. In the eighteen-sixties, Sheriff Barclay, travelling from Dunkeld to Aberfeldy, counted thirty bonfires blazing on the hill-tops, each with a ring of people dancing round it.²¹ In Buchan, from sixty to eighty used to be visible from one point.²² Paisley boys lit bonfires on little islands which they made in the bed of the White Cart river, and an observer in 1826 writes of the beauty of their reflection in the water at night. In the twentieth century, we find them still burning in the remoter districts.

'Some years before the War (1914-1918),' writes a correspondent to a Scottish newspaper, 'on a crisp autumn night in a far-away part of the Highlands, an old dominie revealed to me that Scotland's history was older than the date-columns in our school-books. Sitting outside the school-house door, we were looking over the valley to where the dark mountains were silhouetted against the rising moon. For miles and miles the landscape was dotted at wide intervals with bonfires that blazed against the dark hillside. The date was October 31, and these bonfires were the direct descendants of the fires lit each year by the ancient Druids.'²³

Throughout the greater part of the country, however, the fires have descended from the hill-tops to the village knowes. The grown-ups have forgotten the significance of the age-old festival, but the children continue to revel in the fire-games and in the practice of guising.

THE HALLOWE'EN TORCHES

The custom of circumambulating the farms and fields with blazing torches was kept up in many parts of Scotland down to the middle of the nineteenth century. Usually thin splinters of bog-fir, from one to three feet long, were used, but where wood was not available, several stalks of heather, the longest to be found, were tied into a 'torch.' Originally these were lit at the Hallowe'en bonfire; later, at the domestic fire. At Braemar, 'the father and mother stood at the hearth and lit the splints at the peat-fire. These they passed to the children and servants, who trooped out, the one after the other, and proceeded to tread the bounds of their little property, going slowly round at equal distances apart, and invariably with the sun.... When the fields had been thus circumambulated, the remaining spills were thrown into a heap and allowed to burn out.'²⁴

A different type of lustration was carried out at Logierait, in Perthshire, at the end of the eighteenth century. 'Heath, broom, and dressings of flax are dried upon a pole. This faggot is then kindled. One takes it upon his shoulders, and, running, bears it round the village. A crowd attend. When the first faggot is burned out, a second is bound to the pole and kindled in the same manner as before. Numbers of these blazing faggots are often carried about together, and when the night happens to be dark, they form a splendid illumination.'²⁵

A similar custom survives to this day in Braemar, where the boys 'ding' either side of the road, from one end to the other, quite systematically, carrying not faggots, but blazing rolls of rag which have been dipped in paraffin and bound on a piece of wire from ten to fifteen feet in length.

'It is great fun for the performers,' writes a friend of the present writer who witnessed it in 1932, 'but less so for the onlookers, as when the whirling mass hits the ground it throws off more than sparks. But no one interferes with the bounds-to-bounds fire, however dangerous it may appear. A huge bonfire goes on at the same time, and the blackening of faces—the blacker the better.'

Two significant changes may be noted. First, wires are substituted for poles (in the old days no metal was permitted), and secondly, the direction of the ceremonies has passed from the grown men to the lads.

SACRIFICE TO SHONY

Not only the spirits of the soil had to be propitiated at Samhuinn. In the Isle of Lewis a libation to the sea was made with elaborate ceremonial as late as the third quarter of the seventeenth century.

'The inhabitants of Bragar had an ancient custom of sacrifice to a sea-god called Shony²⁶ at Hallowtide... The inhabitants of the island came to the church of St. Malvay, having each man provision along with him; every family furnished a peck of malt, and this peck was brewed into ale; one of their number was picked out to wade into the sea up to the middle, and, carrying a cup of ale in his hand, standing still in that posture, cried with a loud voice, saying, "Shony I give you this cup of ale, hoping you will be so kind as to send us plenty of sea-ware for enriching our ground for the ensuing year," and so threw the cup of ale into the sea.'²⁷

THE HALLOWMAS BANNOCK

The *bonnach Samhuinn*, or Hallowmas bannock, was one of the sacramental cakes baked ritually for each of the Quarter Pays. On the festival of All Saints, Martin tells us, the inhabitants of St. Kilda baked a large bannock 'in the form of a triangle furrowed.' In the Hebrides generally, however, the ancient pagan bannock was long since re-dedicated to St. Michael. The elaborate ritual associated with the preparation of the Michaelmas struan has been described in an earlier chapter. An equally elaborate, but very different ritual prevailed in the Lowlands, or at least, we may conjecture, in Strathclyde, and survived until comparatively recent times in the ancient burgh of Rutherglen. A full description of the baking of Rutherglen's once famous 'sour cakes' on the eve of St. Luke's Fair (October 1822) has been preserved: —

'About eight or ten days before St. Luke's Fair (for they were baked at no other time of the year) a certain quantity of oatmeal is made into dough with warm water and laid up in a vessel to ferment. Being brought to a proper degree of fermentation and consistency, it is rolled up into balls, proportionable to the intended largeness of the cakes. With the dough there is commonly mixed a small quantity of sugar and a little aniseed or cinnamon. The baking is executed by women only, and they seldom began their work till after sunset, and a night or two before the fair. A large space of the house, chosen for the purpose, is marked out by a line drawn upon it.²⁸ The area within it is considered as consecrated ground; and is not by any of the by-standers to be touched with impunity. A transgression incurs a small fine, which is always laid out on drink for the company.

'This hallowed spot is occupied by six or eight women, all of whom, except the toaster, seat themselves on the ground in a circular figure having their feet turned towards the fire. (The fire was formerly in the middle of the floor.) Each of them is provided with a bake-board, about two feet square, which they hold on their knees. The woman who toasts the cakes, which is done on a girdle suspended over the fire, is called the *Queen*²⁹ or *Bride* and the rest are styled her *maidens*. These are distinguished from one another by names given them for the occasion. She who sits next the fire, towards the east is called the *Todler*. Her companion on the left is called the *Hodler*; (these names are descriptive of the manner in which the women so called perform their part of the work. To *todle*,

is to walk slowly like a child. To *hodle* is to move about more quickly), and the rest have arbitrary names given them by the Bride, as Mrs. Baker, *best* and *worst* maids, etc.

'The operation is begun by the todler, who takes a ball of the dough, forms it into a small cake, and then casts it on the bakeboard of the hodler, who beats it out a little thinner. This being done, she, in her turn, throws it on the board of the neighbour; and thus it goes round from east to west, *in the direction of the course of the sun*, until it comes to the toaster, by which time it is as thin and smooth as a piece of paper. The first cake that is cast on the girdle is usually named as a gift to some well-known cuckold, from a superstitious opinion that thereby the rest will be preserved from mischance. Sometimes the cake is so thin as to be carried, by the current of air, up into the chimney.

'As the baking is wholly performed by the hand, a great deal of noise is the consequence. The beats, however, are not irregular nor destitute of an agreeable harmony; especially when they are accompanied with vocal music, which is frequently the case. Great dexterity is necessary not only to beat out the cakes with no other instrument than the hand so that no part of them shall be thicker than another, but especially to cast them from one board to another without ruffling or breaking them.

'The toasting requires considerable skill, for which reason the most experienced person in the company is chosen for that part of the work. One cake is sent round in quick succession, so that none of the company is suffered to remain idle. The whole is a scene of activity, mirth and diversion.ⁱ³⁰

The cakes were given away to strangers who frequented the fair. The custom is now obsolete.

According to Ure, no tradition survives concerning the origin of this custom, which 'must be very ancient.' The proximity of St. Luke's Fair to Old Hallowe'en is, however, significant. It is also significant that the chief personage, the toaster of the cakes, was known as Bride (alias the Queyn or Maiden), for Bride's reign ends on Hallowe'en, when her place is taken by the Cailleach, or Auld Wife. Note, too, how the women sit in a circle round the fire, as the herds sat round their Beltane bonfire, having first cut a circular trench to symbolise the sun. It can hardly then be doubted that the Rutherglen 'sour cakes' are a survival, in the Strathclyde or ancient British form, of the Samhuinn or Hallowmas bannock.

THE HALLOWMAS FAIR

The original site of Edinburgh's ancient Hallowmas Fair is the Calton Hill—the fairy hill of tradition, on whose slopes, if there is aught in a name, grew the hazel trees that supplied the nuts used by the young folk of Edinburgh in the divination rites of Hallowe'en. In the Edinburgh Charters (1507), reference is made to the 'Alhalow Fair quhilk (which) is haldin at our burgh of Edinburgh,' and a notice appeared annually in the old *Edinburgh Evening Courant* that 'All-Hallow Fair of this city is to be kept on —, the twelfth day of November (Hallowe'en, O.S.), to continue the usual time, and to be: kept and held on the lands of Caltonhill.' Later it moved to the Grassmarket.

The fun of the fair in the seventeenth century is described by Robert Semple of Beltrees: —

*There's mony braw Jockies and Jennies
Comes weel-buskit into the fair,
Wi' ribbons on their cockermonies,
And fouth o' braw flo'er i' their hair.
Maggie sae brawly was byskit*

*When Jockie was tied to his bride.
The pownie was ne'er better whiskit
Wi' a cudgel that hung by his side.
Sing fal re ral, la de.³¹*

Another poet, Robert Fergusson, describes the scene in the eighteenth century: —

*Hech, Sirs, what cairds and tinklers come.
And ne'er-dae-weel horse-coupers
And spae-wives, frenzying to be dumb,
Wi' a' sic-like land-loupers,
To thrive that day.³²*

The Fair is still held, but has moved out to a more spacious site. An old-established firm of bakers still exposes for sale at this season the traditional Hallowfair gingerbread.

THE GUISERS

Hallowe'en is one of the occasions in the year when the guisers are 'out,' the other being Hogmanay. But the two groups differ considerably in character. The Hogmanay Guisers, or Yule Boys, of whom we shall hear more later on, appear to have represented the Twelve Apostles (although in the course of time other characters were introduced), and went about performing their play, *The Goloshan*. It is true that this play, although it has been Christianized, derives from a pagan *ludus*; but there is nothing even nominally Christian about the Hallowe'en guisers. It is thought that they may have originated in a folk-memory of the actual initiators at the Druidic feast, who, as masked men, represented spirits, but until fairly recent times their object was to avoid being recognised by the spirits of their dead, who might possibly do them a mischief.³³ To-day, the grotesque masks and fantastic garments of the guisers represent the uncanny creatures whom their forefathers believed to be at large on this occult night —ghoulies, ghaisties and bogies; fairies, banshees and gruagachs; witches, warlocks and wurricoes; brownies, urisks and shelly-coats; kelpies and water-bulls; spunkies, gnomes, trolls and sprites: the whole unhallowed clanjamfrey of the netherworld.

Instead of masks, some of the guisers have blackened faces. This is a relic of the blackening with the ashes of the Druidical bonfire for protection and good fortune.

The Hallowe'en guisers were formerly found all over the country from Holyrood, where their appearance at the Court on 'Aphallowday, 1585,' is recorded, to the remotest Isles.

THE HALLOWMAS FOY

In Shetland, Old Hallowe'en was celebrated in every district with a foy or feast. The Grülacks were abroad. These were the young men of the toon (township) dressed in fantastic costumes.

'Tall, graceful hats, woven by themselves out of straw, and adorned with many-coloured ribbons gifted by sweethearts and sisters, were the indispensable headgear. Their faces were concealed by veils. Their leader was called the Skuddler; another carried a fiddle and was nicknamed the Reel-Spinner. One of their number carried a buggie, a bag formed from the skin of a sheep drawn intact off the carcase, cleaned and dried, and forming a water-tight bag.

'They went masked from bouse to house, entertaining the company with singing and dancing; and having their buggie filled with such traditional dainties as burstin brunies (cakes made with a mixture of toasted oatmeal and beremeal), legs of vivda (wind-dried mutton) and sparls (Shetland sausages), besides butter, cheese and money. Next evening they went to the house, or barn, of one of their number, where they were joined by their sisters and sweethearts, and here they held a feast and spent half the night in games, singing and dancing. What remained of their viands was bestowed on some "puir awmous peerie lads" (poor, deserving little boys) or needy old folk in the community.

'On Hallow morning, every beast in the byre got a whole "Hallow" (sheaf of corn) for breakfast in addition to the usual allowance; but in the household the day was preserved as a "fanteen" (fast) until the evening.¹³⁴



From an engraving by J. M. Wright

BURNING THE SWEETHEART NUTS

*Joan slips in twa, wi' tentie e'e:
Wha 'twas, she wadna tell.
But this is Jock, and this is me.
She says into hersel'.*

Robert Burns: *Hallowe'en*

Tentie. attentive.



From a painting by Marshall Brown

THE THREE LUGGIES

*In order, on the clean hearth-stane
The luggies three are ranged.*

Robert Burns; *Hallowe'en*

GUIISING AMONG THE CHILDREN

Although in some parts of the Highlands the young men and women still go guising, elsewhere the practice has passed almost entirely into the hands of the children. As soon as it is dark, small, fantastically-garbed figures, wearing grotesque masks, emerge from their homes, carrying turnip lanterns or kail-runt torches; and, forming into little groups or processions, they pass through the village street singing one of their traditional rhymes: —

*Hallowe'en! A nieht o' tine!³⁵
A can'le in a custock!³⁶*

or perhaps

*Heigh Ho for Hallowe'en,
When the fairies a' are seen,
Some black and some green,
Heigh Ho for Hallowe'en!³⁷*

The more mischievous spirits would sing, beating on the shutter with a kail-runt and then running off: —

*The nicht is Hallowe'en and the morn's Hallowday,
Gin ye want a true love, it's time ye were away!
Tally on the window-brod,
Tally on the green,
Tally on the window-brod,
The nicht's Hallowe'en!*

Emboldened by disguise, they go from door to door with a 'Please to help the guisers!' and are rewarded with apples, nuts-and copper coins. Their rounds completed, they dance round their bonfires, leap through the flames, and blacken their faces in the ashes 'to keep the witches away.' Then it's home to supper and all the fun of the indoor rites in the big warm kitchen.

The Hallowe'en customs vary somewhat in different districts. In some towns, the school children raid the principal shops for apples, nuts and other good things, and in Elgin the streets resound to the cry of 'Eelie-ol-ol!' ¹³⁸

THE TURNIP LANTERN

To make a lantern, choose a large round turnip. From the top, cut off a thick slice—about a quarter of the whole—and scoop out the inside, preferably with a spoon, taking care not to break the skin. The 'shell' should be as thin as possible, but a stump must be left at the bottom and hollowed out to serve as a socket. Now take a sharp pen-knife and carve on the turnip a man-in-the-moon face, a skull and cross-bones, or other device. Then get a candle, plain or coloured as desired,

and set it firmly in the socket. Make two holes near the top, one at each side of the 'face,' and fix a piece of string or a wire through them to act as a handle. It should be long enough to prevent any risk of burning one's hand. Alternatively, the lantern may be suspended from a forked stick.

When the lantern is lit, there is a soft, luminous glow, and the device you have carved stands out clearly.

HALLOWE'EN PRANKS

On Hallowe'en, the halflins, or young lads, wearing masks, go from house to house playing pranks on their elders, in emulation of the mischievous spirits that their forebears feared.

A favourite ploy is to go bundering at the doors and puff smoke into the dwelling-houses. In Moray this ceremony is known as 'burning the reekie mehr.'

Burning the Reekie Mehr: Take a cabbage or kail stock, scoop out the centre, and fill the hollow with tow. (This is the 'mehr.' 'Reekie,' of course, means smokie.) Choose your scene of action: then set fire to one end of the mehr, apply the lighted end to the key-hole of a door, blow lustily at the other end, and you will send a column of smoke into the house.

When you tire of this, climb up to the roof and stop the chimney with turf, thus turning back the smoke. It is advisable to have a rope handy for a speedy descent.

Window-tapping: Take two pieces of string, one long, one short. Tie an end of the long one to a pin, and about an inch from the pin tie the short string to the long one; then fix a small stone or a button to the other end of the short string. Fix the pin in the wood on the outside of the window, and, holding the free end of the long string in your hand, take up a position some distance from the window. Pull the string gently towards you and immediately slacken it. Every time this is done, the stone or button strikes the window. Should the occupants come out to investigate, pull the string hard, and the pin will come away. Repeat the performance as soon as they go in, and thus keep on annoying them.

Sham Window-Smashing: Two lads stealthily approach a window, one of them carrying a bottle. One of them strikes the window with his hand, and the second instantly smashes the bottle against the wall of the house. Those inside rush to the window, convinced that it has been smashed.

There was no end to the tricks played by the 'halflins.' Doors were blocked with carts, or attacked with a fusillade of turnips. Ploughs and carts were carried off and hidden; gates were taken off their hinges and thrown into a neighbouring ditch or pond; horses were led from the stables and left in the fields a few miles away. Certainly some of the Plallowe'en jokes went beyond a joke to their victims. Nevertheless, the occasion being what it was, the majority of the victims displayed great forbearance.

'Malicious mischief was barred,' says Colin Macaonald, writing of his boyhood in Ross-shire.³⁹ 'Crofters who took the lads' pranks badly had extra attention the following year. Two oppressors not on speaking terms gave a heaven-sent opportunity for the mixing-up of cart-wheels, axles, ploughs, socks and swingle-trees, which it took the owners weeks to unravel.

'Neighbours who did not resent such tricks were seldom molested. There was no fun, for instance, in running off with anything belonging to Uilleam Ruaridh, for Uilleam left his gear unchained and unprotected, and would never say an angry word if we went off with the lot. So instead of stealing Uilleam's gear, fantastically dressed, with blackened faces, we would pay a friendly call, announcing our arrival with a fusillade of turnips on the door.'

Again, 'One morning after Hallowe'en, Eilidh Dhonn's chimney would not draw. Maillean's washing-pot had been placed upside down on the lum. Two of us climbed up and removed the obstruction. We had the grace to feel a little guilty on receiving much praise and a handful of "lozenges" from dear old Eilidh, for well we knew how the pot had got there.'

Then there was the day the Taillear Fada and his wife 'slept in.'

'It took a lot of doing, but we did manage without being discovered to plug up the windows and round the Taillear's door with a plaster of soft peat so that not a *dideag* (peep) of light could enter the house. As the Taillear never possessed a clock, but regulated his rising by the light of the sun, the ruse succeeded beyond our brightest expectations. It was the persistent *ranail* of the beasts in the byre that at last impelled the Taillear to open the door—and there, to his astonishment, was the sun at twelve o'clock!'

In the Island of Lewis, Hallowe'en is still observed in accordance with the Old Calendar, i.e., November 12.

'Immediately after nightfall,' writes a native of the island,⁴⁰ 'the village youths make a raid on cabbage fields and turnip fields. If the turnips have been harvested and removed to the cornyard, spades are taken to tap the pit in which they are enclosed. Sometimes the crofters keep a strict watch over their property, but often the vegetables disappear in spite of their vigilance. There is a story told of some youths who were employed during the day in a farmer's cornyard and secretly tied strings to scores of his cabbages. They took the leads over the wall, pulled, and uprooted the cabbages. The farmer, who was patrolling the yard, saw his cabbages walking off before his very eyes.

'These vegetables are used as ammunition. The youths spread themselves over the village and begin a systematic attack on the houses. The attack usually comes from the house-tops. Some daring youth climbs up and over the thatch, and, taking good aim, drops a cabbage or turnip down the chimney so that it lands on the hearth. The householders then know that mischief is afoot. The crofter himself rushes out and tries to rout the besiegers. The youths retreat, and the chase that follows is reckoned the best part of the game.

'If the crofter does not rise to the occasion, the attack proceeds from other fronts. Missiles are fired from the open doorway and aimed at any article that rests on the hearth. Sometimes teapots are smashed, pots capsized, and cinders scattered over the clay floor.

'No harm is intended, however, and if the householder rushes out and gives the boys a good run for their money, he is no longer molested. And as payment for the trouble given him, the vegetables with which he was attacked are left in his possession, whether they came from his own yard or not.

'This game continues far into the night, for doors are never locked in the country parts of Lewis; and when the sport is over, the remaining vegetables are divided and given to the poorest households of the village.'⁴⁰

THE NUT-GATHERING

A popular ploy with children in those districts where hazel-trees grew was the gathering of the nuts for use in the divination rites—and for tucking into—on Hallowe'en. An old Highland lady recalls the annual nut-gathering of her childhood in Argyll. They set out, some with aprons doubled and sewn up at the sides to form a capacious pocket, others carrying sacks, and walked a mile uphill to the nutwood—the topmost growth of the natural woods that clothed the precipitous sides of the great ravine at the entrance to Glenstockdale.

'On coming to the higher reaches,' she writes, 'though the nuts were dropping and the squirrels busy, it was impossible not to pause and drink in the beauty of the October woods.... Around, beneath, far down to the dim depths veiling the linn, and stretching up the valley on both sides, the woods were all aglow. There were ash trees with fronds of primrose yellow, golden birches, orange chestnuts, russet beeches and oaks, with flaming rowan trees which, hung like crimson clouds among the more sober tints, seemed to send up a shout of colour, while the Great Waterfall filled the glen with an atmosphere of sound.'

Under a clear blue sky they clambered up the cliffs to the hazel-woods, and scrambled among the branches where the largest and ripest clusters hung. 'Surely,' she concludes, 'the day in the nutwood was the crowning glory of the year.'⁴¹

THE HALLOWE'EN APPLE

So popular is the Hallowe'en apple, particularly in the West, that local supplies are totally inadequate to meet the demand. An octogenarian sea-captain told the present writer that in his boyhood in Glasgow, a small fleet of Jersey sloops—about a dozen as a rule—used to sail up the Clyde near the end of October, laden with apples from the Channel Islands, and the children from the poorest districts of the city used to gather at the Broomielaw, where the sloops unloaded, and scramble for the bruised fruit that was thrown out to them.

A MEMORY

A vivid little picture of Hallowe'en in her native Angus is given by Violet Jacob in her poem of that name: —

*I mind foo often we hae seen
Ten thoosand stars keek doon atween
The nakit branches, an' below
Baith fairm and bothie hae their show,
Alowe wi' lichts o' Hallowe'en.*

*There's bairns wi' guizards at their tail
Clourin' the door wi' runts o' kail,
And fine ye'll hear the skreichs an' skirls
O' lasses wi' their droukit curls
Bobbin' for aipples i' the pail.*

*But gin the auld folks' tales are richt,
An' ghaists come hame on Hallow nicht,
O freend o' freends, what wad I gi'e
To feel you rax your hands to me
Atween the dark an' can'le-licht?*

*Awa' in France, across the wave,
The wee lichts burn on ilka grave,
An' you an' me their lowe hae seen—
Ye'll mebbe hae yer Hallowe'en
Yont, whaur ye're lvin' wi' the lave.⁴²*

