

## November Fire-Festivals

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“By communicating with idolaters in their rites and ceremonies, we ourselves become guilty of idolatry.”<sup>1</sup>

Through the span of the fourth-quarter *Bulwark*, each day witnesses the ebb of the sun and the creeping dominance of the cold and the dark, until we arrive at the winter solstice and the cycle is reversed. How welcome are the rays from a fired hearth! The association of fire with autumn is natural to dwellers in the temperate latitudes, and this natural association is found osmosing into religious activity throughout history. This article investigates the fire-festivals of early November in the context of the Scottish Church. As the historical background of the festivals is crucial, especial attention is given to their origins and adoption by the early Church; outline is made of the effects of the Scottish Reformation on festival days, and the observance of fire-festivals in the post-Reformation Scottish ecclesiastical diaspora.

### I. Origins

All Saints' (or All Hallows') Day is the first of the November fire-festivals introduced onto the Liturgical Calendar. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306 – 373) notes, in his writings from what is now Turkey, the practice of a feast dedicated to all saints.<sup>2</sup> Slightly later, an homily of Chrysostom of Constantinople (c. 347 – 407) affirms that such a feast day was celebrated in the region.<sup>3</sup> This homily dates the feast day as within seven days of Pentecost, likely the successive Lord's Day; “there are not yet seven days past since we celebrated the great and holy solemnity of Pentecost; and now again a quire, or rather a camp and army of martyrs, overtakes us, an army like the camp of angels which appeared to Jacob.”<sup>4</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 609, Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Pantheon in Rome to “St Mary among the Martyrs”, filled it with relics, and established a Feast of All Saints on this day.<sup>5</sup> This event is notable also as the first recorded Roman consecration of a pagan temple.<sup>6</sup> 13<sup>th</sup> May was also

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<sup>1</sup> Gillespie, G. ‘A Dispute Against English Popish Ceremonies’, in *Works vol. 1*, ed. by M.W. Hetherington, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Ogle, Oliver and Boyd, 1846).

<sup>2</sup> ‘All Saints Day’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of the English Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, ed. by E.A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Chrysostom. *The Cult of the Saints: Select Homilies and Letters*, ed. by W. Mayer and B. Neil, XXXI: *Popular Patristics* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Chrysostom. *de Martyribus totius orbis*. Cited in Bingham, J. ‘Of the General Festival of All Martyrs’, in *Origins Ecclesiasticae vol. 7*, 9 vols (London: Straker, 1844).

<sup>5</sup> DuTemple, L. *The Pantheon* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 2003), p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, J N D. *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

the culmination of the ancient Roman festival, Lemuria, in which propitiation was offered to the souls of the restless dead.<sup>7</sup> Similarities can be drawn between Lemuria and the Roman doctrine surrounding purgatory, and historians including Montillo,<sup>8</sup> Roy,<sup>9</sup> and Taylor<sup>10</sup> suggest that the adoption of 13<sup>th</sup> May for the Feast of All Saints was a Christianisation of the existing pagan date.

In 732, Gregory III relocated the Feast of All Saints to its current date on the Roman calendar – 1<sup>st</sup> November. At the same time, he “set up a new oratory in St Peter’s dedicated to the Saviour and the Virgin Mary, with relics of the apostles and various saints, and decorated with an image of Christ’s mother and inscribed plaques bearing instructions for perpetual liturgical celebrations at the site.”<sup>11</sup> During the reign of Gregory IV, instructions were issued for the Feast to be observed more widely. Amongst the most enthusiastic implementers was the Holy Roman Emperor, Louis I who, in 835, issued an edict for the observance of All Saints’ Day throughout his empire.<sup>12</sup>

A controversy exists concerning the reasons behind the adoption of 1<sup>st</sup> November as the date of All Saints’ Day in the Roman calendar. The majority position holds that the day was adopted to Christianise the Celtic festival *Samhainn*; opponents suggest that proof of this is wanting.

Of the four festivals quadrisecting the Celtic year, *Samhainn* - on the 1<sup>st</sup> November - is the most prominent in mythological and archaeological records.<sup>13</sup> Celtic peoples were found in the British Isles, northern France, and northern Germany. Whilst the events in Celtic mythology associated with *Samhainn* are centred on 1<sup>st</sup> November, the *Samhainn* festivities practiced by the Celts were largely on the eve – 31<sup>st</sup> October. As religious thought developed in Celtic culture, *Samhainn* developed from a simple harvest festival to one in which burnt sacrifice was intended to placate the powers of blight, which were manifested in death. The discomforts of winter were believed to evidence the ascendancy of malevolent powers.<sup>14</sup> A precursor to Halloween guises, evidence from France and Germany shows that men would don the skins and skulls of the sacrifice, having already eaten the flesh to incorporate its divinity. “Bone-fires” were lit across the Celtic world to consume the bones of the sacrifice which were, in some cases, human. Through this, the deadly effects of winter on both man and beast was hoped to be dampened; the extent of punishment levied on the souls of the dead was also said to be reduced.<sup>15</sup> This latter doctrine is noted to accord comfortably with the Roman Catholic theology surrounding purgatory. Hence, similarities can be observed between practices undertaken on Halloween (All Hallows’ Eve) and those of *Samhainn*.

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *City of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Image Books, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> Montillo, R. ‘Halloween and Western Commemorations of the Dead’, in *Halloween and Commemorations of the Dead* (New York, Infobase, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Roy, C. ‘All Saints Day and Halloween’, in *Traditional Festivals: a Multicultural Encyclopedia vol. 2*, 2 vols (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clío, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, R P. *Death and the Afterlife: a Cultural Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clío, 2000), p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> McClendon, C. ‘Old Saint Peter’s and the Iconoclastic Controversy’, in *Old Saint Peter’s: Rome*, ed. by R McKitterick and J Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 214-228.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. Kelly.

<sup>13</sup> MacCana, P. *Celtic Mythology* (Feltham: Hamlyn, 1970), p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> McNeill, F M. *The Silver Bough vol. 3*, 3 vols. (Glasgow: Maclellan, 1961), p. 17

<sup>15</sup> MacCulloch, J A. ‘Festivals’, in *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911).

The “Christianisation” of hitherto pagan festivals was an established policy of Rome. Bede cites a letter written in 601 from Pope Gregory I to Augustine of Canterbury, who was appointed a missionary to the British, instructing him to assimilate elements of pagan festivities into Christian worship. He writes, “Since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to devils, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs.” Details are given as to how this may be achieved. “They are not to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of all gifts for His bounty. If the people are allowed some worldly pleasure in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit.”<sup>16</sup>

The Oxford historian, Ronald Hutton, argues that the practice of All Saints’ Day on 1<sup>st</sup> November had “not started in Ireland, where the *Felire of Oengus* and the *Martyrology of Tallaght* prove that the early medieval churches celebrated the feast of All Saints upon 20 April.” Hutton notes also that an homily of Bede on the Feast of All Saints is not found in the oldest of Bede’s manuscripts, and questions the date and authorship of the homily. Thus Hutton concludes that “this makes nonsense” of the “notion that the November date was chosen out of ‘Celtic’ influence.”

The homily on the Feast, ascribed to Bede, is undated, but Bede lived between c. 672 and 735 and his written output is dated from around his adoption into the priesthood until his death; dating the homily, if indeed it is Bede’s, to a period between 701 and 735. A serious question must be raised on Hutton’s assertion that the *Felire of Oengus* dates the Feast of All Saints to the 20<sup>th</sup> April. In the *Felire*, the entry for 20<sup>th</sup> April reads, “Herodius, a presbyter who crucified desire, the feast in Rome – right noble stead! – of the saints of the whole of Europe.” Yet turning to the entry for 1<sup>st</sup> November: “the host of Hilarius sure multitudinous enoble stormy All-Saints’ day.” Oengus would surely not write of an All Saints’ Day on 1<sup>st</sup> November if he actually meant that All Saints Day was the feast on 20<sup>th</sup> April, which does not refer to all saints without exception! Perspicuity demands that we accept that the document suggests that All Saints’ Day was held on 1<sup>st</sup> November and that, whatever the feast of 20<sup>th</sup> April was, it was not a precursor to All Saints’ Day.<sup>17</sup> Oengus the Culdee was not a Culdee, but an Irish bishop who lived in the latter part of the 8<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Assuming that he also commenced writing around the time of his ordination to the priesthood, his document can be dated to 800-830.

Richard Bucher, a Missouri Lutheran Professor at Concordia Seminary, suggests that “we cannot say with certainty that it [*Samhainn*] has any direct connection with Halloween.” Certainly, no single piece of Dark Age evidence states a formal displacement of *Samhainn* with All Saints’ Day. However, Gregory I’s letter to Augustine of Canterbury establishes that the adoption of pagan festivities into the worship of the Church in Britain was sanctioned by 601. Boniface’s Feast of All Saints, established in 609, was relocated to 1<sup>st</sup> November by Gregory III in 735; between these two dates lies Bede’s homily on the Feast which, if authentic, suggests that the British Church was celebrating All Saints’ Day on 1<sup>st</sup> November prior to the official redating. Certainly by the time of Oengus, prior to Gregory IV’s edict for the mandatory celebration of the Feast throughout Western Christendom, the Church in Britain was celebrating All Saints’ on 1<sup>st</sup> November. All this, coupled with the similarities of

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<sup>16</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, translated by L S Price (London: Penguin, 1955).

<sup>17</sup> Oengus, *Felire Oengusso Celi De: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, translated by W Stokes (London: Harrison, 1905).

practice, enables a conclusion to be made beyond reasonable doubt that All Saints' Day and its Eve is the successor to the Celtic pagan festival *Samhainn*.

## II. The Reformation

All Hallows' Eve played a small role in the Reformation. A majority of historians accept Melancthon's account that Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the *Schloßkirch Wittenberg* on All Hallows' Eve; it is speculated that he chose the day knowing that there would be many passing the Church door that evening.<sup>18</sup>

The Sola Scriptura principle of the Reformation led its leaders to consider texts including Deut. 12:31 and Gal. 4:10-11. A unified stance between Calvinist and Lutheran was, in practice, initially held against holy-days. In 1520 Luther writes, "one should abolish all festivals, retaining only the Lord's day," but his reasoning appears to be out of pragmatism against "the present abuses".<sup>19</sup> In 1550 Geneva abrogated all festivals, with the exception of Sunday.<sup>20</sup> In 1560, Scotland outlawed the practice of holy-days, and the Kirk's *First Book of Discipline* stated that "the keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man...because in God's Scriptures they have neither commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from the realm; affirming farther, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil magistrate."<sup>21</sup> The State enacted the *First Book* in 1572(?). The 1580 National Covenant, renewed by the Kirk in 1590 and 1638, and ratified by the disputable(?) Short Parliament in 1640, covenanted the detestation and rejection of the Roman dedication of holy days.

Yet both on the Continent and in Scotland, a struggle was emerging in Protestantism between those who viewed holy days as positively unscriptural and those who viewed them as convenient. Episcopacy was favoured in the Kirk between the adoption in 1618 of the Five Articles of Perth - which included the restoration of holy days - to the renewing of the Covenant in 1638; Parliament similarly adopted the Five Articles in 1621. The Westminster Directory for Public Worship was accepted by both Church and State in 1645. It reiterates that "festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued."<sup>22</sup> At the Restoration in 1661, Charles II passed the Recissory Act to invalidate all legislation passed since 1633, evidently including a repudiation of the Westminster documents. An Episcopalian, Charles II preferred elements of the ornate Latin rite to the simplicity of the Presbyterian mode of worship. Under William of Orange, Scotland reaffirmed the Confession with the 1690 Confession of Faith Ratification Act. This Act remains in force today.<sup>23</sup>

## III. The Post-Reformation response

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<sup>18</sup> Junghans, H. 'Luther's Wittenberg' in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* (1520).

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, P E. *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966).

<sup>21</sup> 'Of Doctrine', in *First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1560).

<sup>22</sup> 'Directory for Public Worship' in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976), p. 394.

<sup>23</sup> Commons Hansard Debates, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1995. Mr. Charles Kennedy MP asked the Secretary of State for Scotland to list those acts of the Scottish Parliament before 1707 which are still in force.

The post-Reformation Scottish ecclesiastical scene has observed a gradual return to observing the November fire-festival, albeit on yet another day. On 5<sup>th</sup> November 1606, the Westminster Parliament declared the day to be one of national thanksgiving for the deliverance of the Crown from the “Papish plot”. Customs traditionally associated with Halloween became associated with Guy Fawkes Night – a bonfire, apples, and the adoption of mortification costumes. “Penny for the Guy” replaced “penny for the guise” as the vernacular cry.<sup>24</sup> It can be surmised that, as the discovery of the plot was a day for Protestant jubilation, so a “Protestant” festival was tolerated as a preferred outlet for the ancient festival elements.

Early North American Presbyterians preached vociferously against the observance of holy days, but with the doctrinal and practical liberation of the nineteenth century, the United States came to adopt Halloween as a cultural celebration. For many young people, a guise is donned and the old adage, “penny for the guise” is again used to obtain a small monetary sum or some confectionary. A darker side to Halloween celebrations can be observed in Detroit’s Devil’s Night wherein, from the 1960s to the ‘90s, hundreds of acts of vandalism and arson were committed across the city.<sup>25</sup> Devil’s Night remains a problem in Detroit, and efforts to supplant it with Angels’ Night, have been only partly successful in reducing the amplitude of the crime wave.

In 1826, the Rev. Donald MacDonald, a strongly Calvinistic minister ordained in the Church of Scotland, arrived to labour in Prince Edward Island. Over time, congregations associated with his labours became established in the Church of Scotland, Free. Due to a policy of allowing settlement only by “foreign Protestants”, the religious background of the island repudiated festival days. Yet arson and vandalism have become a problem at Halloween. The Rev. John MacLeod, Portmahomack recounted that, as a young minister in Prince Edward Island in the late 1970s, arson was rampant at Halloween. He recalls one Halloween during which a barn, owned by a Free Churchman, was set ablaze with loss of all the livestock inside. Another occasion saw Mr. MacLeod driving home from an engagement one Halloween and observing a pickup of youths jettisoning a burning tractor tire (sic) onto the road in front of him.<sup>26</sup> A 2007 news report describes Royal Canadian Mounted Police battling with a group of around sixty young people, and in 2008 upwards of \$100,000 arson damage was caused.

Neither was the avoidance of festival days uniform across Scotland. In Aberdeenshire, peat was collected to fuel the Halloween bonfire by means of “Gies’ a peat to burn the witches.”<sup>27</sup> In Bragar, Lewis, sacrifice was still made to a sea-god Shory at Halloween in 1703. Ale was brewed and ceremonially dispensed into the sea with the words “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”.<sup>28</sup>

What of the Church of Scotland? In 1875 Leishman, latterly a General Assembly Moderator, argued in *The Ritual of the Church* that, as the superstitions surrounding festival days had

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<sup>24</sup> Santino, J. *Halloween and other Festivals of Death and Life* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> *Washington Post*, ‘The Mischievous History of Devil’s Night’ (30<sup>th</sup> October 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Courtesy of Rev. John MacLeod, Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Portmahomack, Ross-shire.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit. McNeill, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Martin, M. *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, reprinted 2014).

been purged with time, the Church could now observe them again.<sup>29</sup> In 1922 the Church of Scotland General Assembly formally permitted the celebration of the “more important festivals” whilst also retaining the Westminster Confession as the principle subordinate standard.<sup>30</sup>

In 2009, the Rev. Mark Johnstone, Convenor of the Kirk’s Mission and Discipleship Council, stated, “Halloween for children probably means more in terms of sweets and treats than any serious reference to the supernatural. For the Christian Church, Halloween is the eve of All Saint’s Day when we may celebrate all who have been and are alive to God. Halloween parties could be refocused to celebrate faith.”<sup>31</sup>

The same year saw the Vatican’s official newspaper release a most incongruous article entitled “Halloween’s Dangerous Messages”, arguing that the celebrations are “absolutely anti-Christian”. The article then instructs that parents should “direct the meaning of the feast towards wholesomeness and beauty, rather than terror, fear and death.” With the first sentiment at least, we are in agreement with *L’Osservatore Romano*. Would the Lord take the Scottish Church to heed its history! “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” (Gal. 4:9).

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<sup>29</sup> Leishman, T. *May the Kirk keep Paschal and Yule?* (Edinburgh; William Blackwood, 1875).

<sup>30</sup> *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: 1922), p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Scotsman*, ‘No Treats for the Wicked as Vatican Takes Stand against Halloween’ (30<sup>th</sup> October 2009).