

Treat or Trick?
Halloween in a Globalising World

Edited by

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Treat or Trick? Halloween in a Globalising World, Edited by Malcolm Foley and Hugh O'Donnell

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Nor lad nor lass was missing;
 But ilka ane wha caught the same,
 Was pleased wi' routh o' kissing,
 Fu' sweet that night.

9. Soon as they heard the forward clock,
 Proclaim 'twas nine, they started,
 An ilka lass took up her rock;
 Reluctantly they parted,
 In hopes to meet some other time,
 Exempt from false aspersion;
 Nor will they count it any crime,
 To hae sic like diversion
 Some future night.

Glossary

1. *rockin*=gathering of [women] neighbours
2. *ilka*=each; *frees*=presages; *prediction rituals*
3. *mirk*=dark, gloomy; *flopp'd*=[flypped? To turn out]
4. *bleez'd*=blazed; *cooffs*=fools, rascals; *pokefu*=bagful; *nits*=nuts; *owre*=too
5. *kipple*=V-shaped rafter; *ilk*=each; *aft*=often
6. *stammer'd*=stumbled; *toom*=empty; *maun*=must; *greeting*=crying
7. *dree'd*=dreaded; *rugg'd*=pulled/tugged; *durst*=dared; *sae*=so
8. *heartsome*=hearty; *ilka*=each; *routh*=plenty of/an abundance
9. *ilka*=each; *sic-like*=suchlike

NEO-PAGAN CELEBRATIONS OF SAMHAIN

JENNY BUTLER

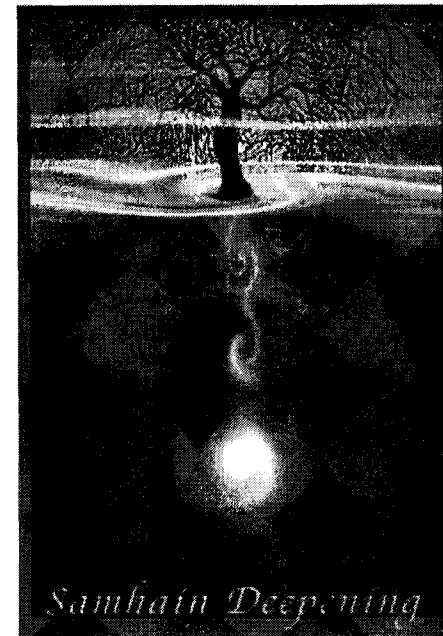


Fig. 1: Samhain Deepening, Painting

"Samhain Deepening" was inspired by the time of year when the energy of the land leaves the trees & foliage and seems to return to the earth. The mist curling around the tree symbolises the veils between the worlds parting at Samhain, allowing contact between this world and the Otherworld

—Jane Brideson, Pagan Artist.

The present chapter is a description of the festival of Samhain as celebrated by neo-Pagans. It concentrates on the significance of the festival within the neo-Pagan worldview and documents some of the beliefs surrounding this time of year. It illustrates how contemporary Pagans pick certain traditional cultural elements associated with the pre-modern folk celebration of Samhain and merge these together with references to the Celtic past to fashion a new festival of Samhain that is inimitably part of neo-Pagan culture.

Neo-Paganism is a broad term for a range of modern-day "earth-based" spiritual paths. One neo-Pagan path can vary widely from another in terms of belief and practices. My research covers Irish Witchcraft and Druidry and also those who do not belong to a specific Pagan path but self-identify as a "Pagan" or "Earth-based spiritualist". Pagan Witchcraft encompasses many different paths, including Wicca (a mystery religion) and Hereditary Witchcraft (believed to be passed on through familial lines). Within Paganism, there can be solitary practitioners who have their own private rituals in acknowledgement of important times and those who are part of groups who practise ritual and celebrate festivals together.

The neo-Pagan ritual year is based on seasonal transition and comprised of eight festivals: Samhain (October 31st), Imbolc (February 1st), Bealtaine (May 1st), and Lughnasadh (August 1st), the spring and autumn equinoxes and the winter and summer solstices. Each festival lends itself to both celebration and spiritual expression and I have adopted a phrase that one informant used, "spiritual parties", to describe the dual nature of these times.

Inventions and Reinventions of Tradition

From what we can glean of Celtic cosmology, Samhain was seen as a feast of the dead and is thought to have marked the start of winter, though some scholars dispute the notion that the festival marked the New Year for the Celtic peoples; others dispute the suggestion that it marked the New Year across all Celtic regions. In neo-Pagan cosmology, drawing on the notion that Samhain marks the New Year, this time is seen as one of new beginnings, when nature once again enters into its "dark half". Due to the notion that the Celts measured time by nights rather than by days, as we do today, many neo-Pagan groups start their celebration on the eve of the festival, i.e. on the night of October 31st, and continue through to November 1st whereas other groups and individuals may hold their celebration on a night close to this date that is more convenient for them.

The word Samhain is derived from the Old Irish language for the time of this festival and is still used in modern Irish to refer to the month of November. Leila Dudley Edwards has pointed out that even by using the term "Samhain" rather than "Halloween" to refer to their festival, neo-Pagans are making a conscious reference to links that the festival has with older practices that pre-date the Christian Halloween (2000, 225). The word might be a linguistic inversion of the Irish-language term *samhradh* (summer) so that Samhain means "summer's end", from *samh*, "summer" and *fuin*, "end" (Smyth 1996, 149). The name indicates that the festival marked the end of summer and the closing stages in the cycle of growth. On a symbolic level, neo-Pagans see this as a time of summing up the year's cycle since the previous Samhain and of regeneration and planning for the next cycle of personal growth in the coming year. As one Pagan describes it:

It is the gathering of the dark and the reminder of death and that all things die and strangely the time of the year I feel most alive! It brings balance after the long hot summer and as the days shorten quickly we have more rest as we hole up for the winter (e-mail communication with Janet, 22/10/06).

Samhain is described as a "Fire Festival" and as such is an affirmation of life and vibrancy in the face of the coming dark and harshness of winter. It is a time when neo-Pagans look towards the physical darkness of winter and also reflect upon personal metaphorical darkness, sometimes confronting challenging emotional issues and things that should be left behind in the "old year". As one Witch articulates it:

It is a gradual deepening into the longest nights preceding the rebirth of the sun at Solstice. Samhain used to be an agricultural festival ... and as few of us these days are farmers it feels to me that the "fire" festivals are a form of inner psychological beginnings or reflections of what will be the outer manifestations at the Solstices and Equinoxes. So that Samhain is going into our own personal darkness, which manifests later in the outer world as the longest nights of the eighth festival (e-mail communication with Jane, 24/10/06).

In neo-Pagan cosmology, there is balance between dark and light. Graham Harvey elaborates on the significance of the dark aspect:

A child is born from the darkness of the womb, day from the darkness of the night. Plants sprout from the darkness of the ground. Many Pagans

consider the year to begin with a festival which marks the beginning of winter in the northern hemisphere (1997, 3).

It is important to be aware of the diversity within Paganism and the fact that beliefs and practices are not homogeneous. While many Pagans view Samhain as the marker of the New Year, there are also individuals and groups who feel that Samhain, while a time of transition within the "Wheel of the Year", is not the beginning of the next year. A Druid Grove (ritual group of Druids) for example, chooses to celebrate New Year at winter solstice (see Butler 2005, 108).

"The Sabbats¹ of Neo-pagan Witches on this night now tend to honour the dead: calling out the names of those who have passed on, remembering what they did in life, asking the gods to grant them a worthy rebirth" (Lewis 1999, 256). All of the neo-Pagans I have spoken with believe that Samhain is a time to honour the dead. Many take time to remember dead loved ones and some attempt to commune with the spirits of the dead and may invite the dead to take part in ritual. Many Pagans believe that the spirits of the departed abide in the Otherworld and can be contacted more easily on this night, due to a prevailing belief that on this night the "veil between worlds becomes thin". It is a time to salute the afterlife but also to reflect on the achievements of life. A Wiccan, Janet, says she celebrates this festival "quietly and privately" and adds:

I feel it is a time of sombre reflection on the year that has passed and what I have achieved and accomplished. I also take time to honour my ancestors and listen if any have messages or well wishes or criticism, which can happen! (e-mail communication with Janet, 22/10/06).

Another informant, when asked about the significance of Samhain for her, replied:

It means a lot to me. I have lost relatives and friends and this is a time where I honour them. Because I don't participate in the more common ways of doing this in a Christian context, e.g. having an anniversary mass

¹ In Neo-pagan discourse, the term *sabbat* is used in reference to the eight annual festivals which make up the Neo-pagan ritual year. The phrase "*witches' sabbath*" appears in medieval documents relating to witch trials to describe an alleged nighttime meeting of witches with the Devil; this sense of the word needs to be distinguished from the neo-Pagan usage of *sabbat* to mean a celebration or festival to mark a seasonal change. It has been suggested that the term was derived from Hebrew or possibly an imitation of the Jewish "Sabbath" (Pickering 1996, 224).

etc, it's very important to take time to remember (e-mail communication with Ciara, 23/10/06).

Ciara also remembers the ancestors:

It is an important time to take stock and remember the people who went before us and to honour and acknowledge our own history and sense of identity as Irish people.

This notion of making links with those people who have gone before, in the sense of distant ancestral peoples rather than preceding generations of dead relatives, is echoed by many interviewee responses:

So, for me, a celebration of Samhain is nostalgic, to a certain degree: a time for recollection and recalling those who have gone ahead of me through the veil, a cherishing of memories, a renewal of my links to my roots, including cultural ones. It is also a celebration of the richness and bounty of Nature and a time to make formal thanks ... I will be making my own private celebration. It can be as simple as setting out a bowl of fresh fruit, lighting a candle and setting out some brack² and a glass of whiskey and recalling loved ones who have departed this world (e-mail communication with David, 22/10/06).

Carmel, a Druid, says:

I light a candle and place an apple and some wine in front of the picture [of my loved ones] and have a little chat and do a simple ritual of respect to their wisdom and ask for blessings and guidance (e-mail communication with Carmel, 24/10/06).

Jane, a Witch, explains why this time is special in the spiritual path that she follows:

Samhain in my tradition is the time of the Great Assembly- when all the members of the family meet. It is the time of "those who were, those who are and those who are yet to be", meaning that we honour the ancestors and also adopt (initiate) new members at this time. It is when we feast with those who have gone from this life and those who are still here (e-mail communication with Jane, 24/10/06).

² Brack or Barmbrack is an anglicised name from the Irish *bairin breac*, a traditional cake containing dried fruit.

Samhain is associated with “dark” deities connected with the underworld or death, such as the Cailleach (Hag) or Winter Crone, the Celtic God of the dead Donn, and Crom Crúaich³, a deity with legendary connections with ritual slaughter. The deity invoked in Pagan ritual is tied to the symbolic meaning of the time of year. Some feel this is a time to address personal problems and symbolically sacrifice those modes of thought or parts of the psyche that are no longer needed:

On a personal level I see Samhain as the time when we are approaching the depths of the year's darkness so it is about deep inner reflection—a time when I can connect with the Goddess in her darkness, with the deep mysteries. In the past I have scryed at this time and also cut cords to break connections that I no longer feel relevant (e-mail communication with Jane, 24/10/06).

Samhain has the mythological association of being a time of supernatural and dangerous happenings. As Miranda J. Green puts it:

Samhain was a strange time: the festival took place on 1 November and the night which preceded it. It was considered a time of great danger and vulnerability, for it stood at the boundary between two halves of the Celtic year. It was considered as outside or suspended from time, when the normal laws of the world were temporarily in abeyance (1997, 185).

Samhain could be viewed as “a zone of instability, being the void between one year and the next” (Dames 1996, 93) and a “time at which humans were most susceptible to divine and supernatural interference” (Hutton 2003, 177). This liminality and associated uncertainty of the ancient Celtic festival continued into folk belief. The dares and pranks of the traditional Samhain celebrations would take place in this topsy-turvy atmosphere.

Due to the belief that this is a time when the barrier between the world of the dead and the world of the living is down, there is also an idea that people may be privy to supernatural knowledge concerning the future, since the ordinary barriers of time and space are considered to be transparent. Traditionally in Ireland there were various divinatory customs connected with Samhain (see Danaher 1972, 202; 218–227). Magical aspects of folk culture are emphasised within neo-Pagan discourse. Neo-

³ In Old Irish the name Crom Crúaich meant “bloody crescent”. “Crom is described as the principal god of every Irish people before the coming of St. Patrick. To him was sacrificed on each Samain the first-born of every family and the first-born of every livestock” (MacKillop 2004, 112).

Pagans have continued divinatory practices on this night though the form they take may differ from traditional methods. For example, Pagans may predict future events by use of scrying mirrors (usually a blackened mirror, e.g. an obsidian mirror as this stone is black and shiny and a clairvoyant looks into it to “see” messages from the spirit world) and reflective objects or crystal balls may be used in a similar way as a focus to see beyond this world into the spirit realm. There is a notion that this time is more conducive to the efficacy of human psychic powers and rituals are performed to foretell future events, through various divinatory methods.



Fig. 2: Crystal balls and Scrying Mirror

In neo-Pagan cosmology, the Otherworld is conceptualised as being the habitation of the spirits of the dead but also other spirit-beings such as fairies. Due to the belief that the “veil” between worlds is insubstantial for this period, it is also an apposite time to honour the *Sidhe* (fairies in Irish tradition) and many Pagans do so as part of their ritual activities on this eve:

Samhain is also when the gates between this world and the Otherworld are open—so I nip out into the garden and leave some bread and a wee glass of something for the good people! (e-mail communication with Jane, 24/10/06).

Many Irish Pagan groups invite the *Sidhe* to take part in rituals and feasts. As well as a time of commemorating dead ancestors, in traditional

Irish society it was also thought of as a time when other kinds of supernatural beings were about. It was seen as "a time when ghosts and fairies were unusually active, the whole of the world of the supernatural *astir*" (Evans 2000, 277).

Comparing Pagan beliefs and practices to do with the *Sidhe* with traditional Irish folk belief and practice reveals how traditions can be reinterpreted in new contexts. It was believed that at Samhain the *liosanna* or fairy forts would open up and the fairies would intermingle with humans. "Halloween was also a particularly dangerous time to be outdoors, since the fairies were on the move from one dwelling to another and were particularly likely to abduct people" (Jenkins 1991, 318).

Irish customs associated with fairies mostly involve actions intended to ward them off or protect people or livestock from them. In vernacular Irish culture, there was a strong belief that metal could be employed as a defence against supernatural aggression. Iron in particular was used as a protective measure against the fairies (Ó Giolláin 1991, 203). It was believed, for example, that if an individual carried nails or pins in their pocket they would not be taken away by the fairies since fairies were thought to dislike iron. This folk belief has also entered into neo-Pagan discourse. When preparing to take part in a ritual with a Druidic Grove, I was asked not have any iron on my person when I entered the sacred circle since it would repel the *Sidhe* and interfere with the magical working. In the neo-Pagan worldview the *Sidhe* are generally thought of as benevolent denizens of the spirit realm and the *genius loci* of the Irish landscape. The practice of attempting to communicate with fairies in ritual shows that neo-Pagan attitudes towards fairies are quite different from that of traditional beliefs that fairies should be feared and avoided. Fairy belief is one aspect of Irish folklore that has been reinterpreted in the modern Pagan mindset.

At many Pagan gatherings there is the central focus point of the bonfire. The magical element of fire is connected with strength and passion, inspiration and spiritual illumination. Fires may be lit as part of a ritual designed to draw on this magical fire energy. Some believe that the fire is purifying and thus may be used to cast away negativity in an area before a ritual begins. Also, imitative magic or the sympathetic magical ritual of lighting a fire may be done to encourage the sun to grow in strength for its symbolic "rebirth" at winter solstice. There are many customs connected with fire at Samhain:

If I get a chance to go to a bonfire I either burn leaves entwined with straw or something I have collected in nature to make a pretty presentation while thinking of what I intend to accomplish or release, or failing that, I write it

on a piece of paper and give it to the candle flame to carry to the Universe. I take my time and put a lot of thought into this process. Then I ground⁴ and look forward to doing it all again next year (e-mail communication with Carmel, 24/10/06).

There are connections made between the lighting of fires at Samhain nowadays and the ancient pre-Christian pagan practices of lighting of fires on hills of the Irish landscape. For instance, connections are made in early Irish literature between the feast of Samhain and the Hill of Tara (Ó hÓgáin 1999, 130). Twelfth-century texts make references to a special feast or *feis* attended by Irish royalty and chieftains, which was said to have been held three days before Samhain and continued on three days after Samhain (Slavin 1996, 34) and that this *feis* was held once every three years (MacKillop 2004, 377). Though some neo-Pagans may visit Tara, the hill of Tlachtga, which is also associated with Samhain rituals (MacKillop 2004, 377) or other sacred sites at Samhain, this festival tends to be one of gathering together or joining in a group celebration at home. Some people decorate the home for the ensuing Samhain feast and some keep an altar, which they decorate with things appropriate to each season.

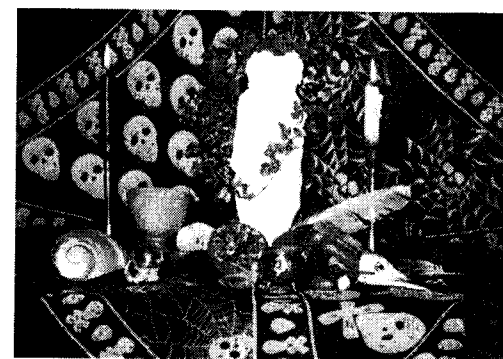


Fig. 3: Samhain Altar

Samhain has a special atmosphere, a time where humans are facing into the darkness of the approaching winter, and is thus an appropriate time to gather together to share news, tell stories, plan future events and feast. As one practitioner stated:

⁴ "Grounding" is a method of releasing spiritual energy raised in ritual from the physical body.



Figure 4: Table decorated for Samhain celebration

We are having a tine chnámh [bonfire] this year and we will be telling stories, honouring ancestors and using sage and cedar to cleanse and purify. We then will have a feast of seasonal fruits, soups, nuts and roasted chestnuts. We drink lots of wine and mead and generally have fun! (e-mail communication with Ciara 23/10/06).

Foods that would have traditionally been eaten at the end of harvest are included in Pagan feasts. Some groups may have a nut roast, as nuts are traditionally eaten at Halloween. Other foods associated with this time may take on a special meaning in Pagan discourse. For example apples are viewed as having magical associations and the pentacle, an important symbol in neo-Pagan magical systems, can be seen in the shape of an apple core when cut horizontally down the middle (Crowley 1996, 101). Traditional games like "snap-apple" or "bobbing for apples" may take on a new meaning in Pagan settings.

On October 31st 2002, I visited the neo-Pagan ritual centre "Púca Lodge⁵" in County Cork to take part in their celebration of Samhain. I arrived to see a gathering around a large bonfire in a field. Everyone present removed footwear so that our feet could be in direct contact with the earth. Each of us stepped into the sacred space that had been marked on the ground around the fire. Standing in a circle holding hands, we called the quarters by walking around "*deiseal*" (clockwise) and calling on the spirits of each quarter (certain magical entities are associated with each compass direction of the circle). Each individual then called on a dead ancestor to join us in the circle. Loaves of homemade bread and a chalice of mead were passed around the circle for people to share.

The welcoming of dead spirits into the ritual circle is a common practice among Pagans at Samhain. Messages for the dead can be meditated upon and psychically sent to dead loved ones or physically written on pieces of paper or otherwise symbolised as effigies or images that are burned in a bonfire or sometimes a cauldron.

Identity Politics at Samhain

Halloween is a time when people can confront particular kinds of fears and things that are taboo in life in a familiar, well-defined social milieu. Many view it as a children's festival when there is opportunity to dress as monsters, ghosts or witches and other figures that children normally fear. "Halloween costuming allows children the opportunity to be fanciful, to indulge their imaginations in a familiar setting, and perhaps to come to terms with the sinister in warm and secure surroundings" (Rogers 2002, 159). The fear and wariness of malignant supernatural forces to be found in modern industrial society is not often encountered in neo-Pagan discourse. In their worldview, communication with the spirit-world is viewed as beneficial and especially appropriate at Samhain as it may give

⁵ Names of places have been changed to preserve anonymity.

us answers to knowledge we are seeking or allow us to communicate with people we once knew who are now spirits.

The carnivalesque atmosphere that accompanies the feast extends to Pagan celebrations, which are often conducted in a light-hearted way. "Liminality may involve a complex sequence of episodes in sacred space-time and may also include subversive and ludic (or playful) events" (Turner 1982, 27). Interestingly, there are many layers of meaning to the symbols employed by Pagans in guising and ritual at this time. There is a conscious frivolity and impertinence in the ways that Pagans use the conventional imagery associated with Halloween in popular culture. Symbols such as the stereotypical witch figure, bats, cobwebs, pumpkins and so on, are placed within Pagan social contexts and utilised in a flippant way. A noticeable tendency among Pagans who self-identify as witches is to emulate the imagery used to represent the witch figure at Halloween:

The witch appears as an active and powerful figure, culturally constructed throughout history and easily manipulated to fit each age: that people today are happy to call themselves witches is just one more example of this process (Pearson 2002, 168).

An individual who presents herself (or himself) as the hackneyed "witch" figure when one actually follows the serious spiritual tradition of Witchcraft is sometimes a way of parodying or making an in-joke about the public perception of how "real" witches should appear. Wiccans and other Pagan Witches are playing with the stereotype of the witch while simultaneously self-identifying as living Witches. Some Pagan Witches may even like the popular images of Witchcraft or find them endearing: "Although considered stereotypical and demeaning by some Witches, others revel in the public display of witches on broomsticks, accompanied by their black cats, against a pumpkin moon" (Rabinovitch and Lewis 2002, 236). Donning ritual capes and robes but adding macabre makeup and the archetypal witch's hat can also be a reference to and a celebration of the historical witches who are largely viewed within Paganism as magic-workers worthy of respect. Samhain is a time of celebration of the Wise Woman figure or the Goddess in her "crone" or "hag" aspect.

There is a sense of reclaiming the witch figure as one of power and importance in the face of silly and sometimes mocking presentations of the witch identity in commercial contexts. As Robin Briggs puts it "modern ideas of the witch have been simplified to the point of caricature" (2002, 15). Witches are a familiar motif in children's literature and fantasy books and most people's perception of the witch is that of a wicked spell-casting hag-like old woman. "For despite the subtleties of radical feminists,

historians and modern witches, the dominant image of the witch is still of a shrieking hag on a broomstick, the Wicked Witch of the West" (Purkiss 2003, 276). In the mindset of the general public, Halloween and the witch figure are linked together. The witch is simultaneously a character of fun that children can dress as and also a personage with symbolic cultural associations that create apprehension and fear. These threads of meaning are picked up by neo-Pagan Witches and combined in their personal interpretations and presentations of themselves as having the identity of a Witch. On the one hand they reject or make fun of the wicked witch stereotype and on the other they subvert the popular conception of the witch. There is a process at work here, one of reinventing the Witch archetype and controlling the attribution of meaning, mimicry of the popular image while redefining what it signifies.

Concluding Remarks

What is perhaps most interesting from the folklorist's perspective is that neo-Pagans, often conceived of as part of a new, distinctive cultural movement, are purposefully striving to continue traditions that largely seem to belong to folk culture of a passed era. Writing on the phenomenon of festivals, Robert J. Smith tells us:

A revealing clue to the persistence of the festival is the fact that a great number of festivals continue to flourish, maintaining essentially the same form, long after their original meaning has been forgotten. This clue should suggest to the investigator that the enduring significance of the festival lies less in its avowed purpose or meaning than in the fact of celebration itself (1972, 160).

Whether or not academics can state with surety that Samhain was the Celtic feast of the dead and whether or not the general populace views Halloween as having its origin in a pre-Christian feast connected with ancestral spirits, the fact remains that for many in the neo-Pagan community, this is an important festival with links to pre-Christian paganism. The ethos of the festival is one of magic and mystery but it is also a time for fun, feasting and frivolity as this cold dark, time of year always seems to have been. Ritual revitalization is the "resumption of older cultural features or their retention for new reasons" (Salomonsson 1984, 45). In the case of the celebration of Samhain by neo-Pagans, we can see that some historical elements of the festival, regardless of original contexts (such as traditions to do with fairies and communing with the dead), are retained and other elements, such as divinatory practices, are

continued in new forms and as part of a new magical worldview. The traditional elements of the folk celebration of Samhain are not imported wholesale into the Pagan festivities but rather those parts that Pagans empathise with. As Alan Gailey states: "it is clear that different social groups adhere to different corpuses of tradition in defining their identities or in ascribing their identities to themselves" (1988, 65). For neo-Pagans in Ireland, there is an adherence to certain traditions connected with pre-modern Irish folk observances of the feast of Samhain but rejection of Christian traditions associated with All Hallows and All Souls. There is a process of identity-formation at work, where elements of historical practices that suit neo-Pagan sensibilities are incorporated into Pagan culture and identity. New energy and cultural vigour have been brought to the reinvented Samhain of neo-Pagan tradition.

Acknowledgements

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HOP TU NAA A PERSONA OF TH

The smell of burnt
childhood in the Isle of
island (see Fig. 1) has
island (see Fig. 1) has
km², of which forty per
under 80,000, though
50,000. The Island is a
Kingdom, and it has
The Manx language is
English was a foreign
Although the last native
is currently experiencing

Back in the 1950s, c
neighbourhood houses
crude "witch's" face (F
of Man, along with my
hopefully receive mon
was called Hop tu naa
and not as Halloween.
triangle for a nose and
Island (we lived in the
that featured stars, m
However, such variati
applied to the Hop tu n
our Douglas song was t

¹ Hop tu naa is prone
hyphenated, particularly
Manx derivation as "Hop
translated as "To-Night Is