The Hallowed Eve: Dimensions of Culture in a Calendar Festival in Northern Ireland

Jack Santino

Bowling Green State University
HALLOWED EVE

Dimensions of Culture in a Calendar Festival in Northern Ireland

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(Unless otherwise noted, photographs by Jack Santino)
Preface

The research for this book began, if one can mark a beginning to such research, with a ten-day folklorists' tour of Northern Ireland sponsored by the British Council. Dr. David Taylor of the American Folklife Center was responsible for suggesting candidates to the British Council; Marsha Maguire in turn suggested me. My great thanks to both of these friends and colleagues; they set me on a road I am still traveling.

It was my intention upon embarking on the folklorists' tour to establish an institutional relationship in Ireland through which I could return for lengthier research. I knew I wanted to study Halloween. I was welcomed and encouraged by the staff of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (UFTM). Under its auspices, I applied for and received both a Fulbright Research Award and a British Council Research Attachment to the museum. At the British Council I would like to thank Peter Lyner in Belfast and Carmel McGill in Washington, D.C. Dr. R.A. Gailey, then director of the UFTM, approved my applications and saw to it that my scholarly needs were accommodated. He also shared with me his vast expertise on mumming traditions, bonfires, and Halloween generally, and I hope his wisdom is reflected in the pages of this book. My immediate liaison at the UFTM was Dr. Philip Robinson, keeper of material culture at the museum. Philip has become a close friend, and I consider him in many ways a coauthor of this volume. He was always willing to share his insights, indulge my inquiries, provide me with research, and he even consented to be interviewed for this project. Moreover, he helped me and my family find a nice home in Bangor and set up our children in school. His help was indispensable for this foreigner, and his learning is crucial to my own.
Like Philip, folklorist Linda Ballard helped me directly. She has provided both data and insights that I have incorporated into my research. She has been a great friend and a great colleague, and I am in her debt. Michael McCaughan and I have collaborated on other projects, and my research interests in Northern Ireland have both benefited and broadened as a direct result of his friendship and collegiality. Anthropologist Anthony D. Buckley shares with me an interest in popular religion and ceremony more generally. In fact, he commissioned me to gather popular and mass-produced Halloween items for the museum’s collection. I have had many fruitful discussions with Tony and, once again, I have worked with him on another project. The late Ronnie Adams opened up the library to me and extended full staff privileges. His death is a major loss; his kindness will not be forgotten.

I took up residency at the UFTM from August 1991 through June 1992, where I was generously allowed access to all their services: typing, fax machine, duplication, and so on. I extend my sincere thanks to every member of the staff. They were helpful and extended themselves for me and my work. I owe my gratitude to everyone at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. I cannot mention everyone by name, but I hope they all realize how sincere my thanks are.

Likewise, I cannot begin to name the individuals who taught me about Hallow Eve in Ulster. My thanks extend to all those people mentioned by name in this book and also to the uncountable many with whom I spoke on a daily basis: in my living room, in their kitchens, in queue at the bake shop, at the schools. Thanks to you all. I do have to single out our next-door neighbors, Ethel and Ray Brewster, their granddaughter, Jemma, and Mrs. Davidson, who volunteered to be our unofficial nanny. Mr. Brewster took it upon himself to teach me to drive; Mrs. Davidson babysat without being asked and regularly provided us with the best apple tarts in all of Ireland.

We loved Northern Ireland. There is violence there, of course, but it is far less random or widespread than that which I have experienced in the United States. Moreover, the people of Ulster have not lost their capacity for outrage at outrageous acts. My son Ian attended first grade at Bangor Central Primary school, where he was fortunate to be a pupil of the late Mrs. Heather Armstrong.
Mrs. Armstrong was one of the most impressive women and best teachers I have ever met, and she loved Ian. My other son, Will Kiley, was only two years old. He attended preschool at St. Columcille’s, also in Bangor. He too had a wonderful experience there. My daughter, Hannah, took her first steps at our home at 35 Newtownards Road in Bangor. Today, at the age of six, she is an accomplished Irish step dancer. My wife, Lucy, joined many different church-sponsored “Mums and Tots” groups, through which I made many important discoveries about my research projects. She also initiated her own research on traditional dance and traditional foodways in Ulster. My family was heroically patient with me as well as supportive. They provided me with some of the best experiences I have had in my life, in the extraordinary place known as Northern Ireland.

I would also like to thank Elisabeth Nixon and all my students who have commented on various ideas in this book. Special thanks must go to Cristina Sánchez Carreteru who read and commented at length on a draft of the manuscript, and to Thomas Zimmerman, who proofread and indexed it.

The Hallowed Eve is dedicated to Lucy M. Long, who loves Northern Ireland, and to all our friends there.

Materials from the Folklore Archive of the University College, Dublin, are found in Vol. 953, pp. 8, 59, 60, 69-72, 81, 82, 110-14, 149-53, 247; and Vol. 1359, pp. 88-90; in the Main Manuscripts Collection, Department of Irish Folklore, and are used by permission of the head of the Department of Irish Folklore, UCD. Materials from the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum are found in the Department of Archival Collections, UFTM, and are used by permission of Michael Houlihan, Director, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Lines from Brian Ritchie’s poem “Firework Frolics” are reprinted here with permission of Adare Press, courtesy Doreen McBride.
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"First the gossip, then the games. Then we wandered out into the night . . . to do things."

—Sharon Herron, 1992

Sharon Herron sums up both the activities and the appeal of Halloween in Northern Ireland. First the gossip: when one is reunited with distant family members and friends for a Halloween evening, and one catches up on the news. Then the games: ducking for apples, burning the nuts, foretelling the future. Who will be married? Who will have long life? Then wandering out into the black night to tell ghost stories or play pranks. There is an aspect of family reunion to Halloween in Northern Ireland, and in more crowded urban areas, neighborhood ties are reinforced as doors are left open and neighbors come in and out of homes at will, conversing, playing with the children, watching a bonfire or a backgarden fireworks display. I lived with my family in Northern Ireland, researching Halloween traditions there, from August 1991 through June 1992. I returned every summer for the next five years to continue this research.

Northern Ireland is an anomaly. It is a country in the throes of contested identity, contested territory. The political allegiance of its population is split, with approximately 40 percent who would side with Irish nationalism, and 60 percent who consider themselves British and want to retain the union with Great Britain. These are relative terms, and some may think of themselves as Irish as well, albeit not nationalists. The British in Northern Ireland consider themselves doubly marginalized as simultaneously a major-
ity and a minority. They form the majority of the population in Northern Ireland but are a minority within the whole island of Ireland. To add insult to injury, the English tend to view all residents of Northern Ireland as Irish, regardless of the great care taken by many to construct and express a British identity.

In the political climate of the 1980s and 1990s, however, the anomalous nature of Ulster has been redefined as a separate culture rather than as a unique synthesis of many different cultures. As some unionists grow steadily more frustrated with successive British governments, an “independent Ulster” movement has grown. The Ulster flag has become more prominent, while the Union flag has become less popular. Many people have eagerly espoused the theories popularized by Ian Adamson (1974). These include the insistent declarations that Ulster has always been separate from the rest of Ireland, both politically and culturally; that the hero Cú Chulainn (known as the hound of Ulster) represented a pre-Celtic race known collectively as the Picts or Cruthins; that this society resisted Celtic inroads into Ulster; and that some parts of Ulster, most notably east Antrim and east Down, were never Celtized or Gaelicized. Not only do these theories maintain that Ulster’s cultural heritage is pre-Celtic, they also claim that most traditional Celtic design motifs and aesthetic contributions originated with the Picts. These issues of personal and social identity are manifested in a great many symbolic, public forms, including the year’s round of calendrical holidays. Halloween alone, however, is said to be entirely (and unusually) nonsectarian.

Halloween has always been a major calendrical festival throughout Ireland. In pre-Christian Celtic Ireland, the eve of November 1 was a high festival day known as Samhain (pronounced, roughly, Sah-wen). It was one of the four quarter days. Each quarter day marked the beginning of a season. Samhain, which was the first day of winter, was the most important day in the old pre-Christian Irish year.

The Celtic peoples once inhabited much of the European continent but were, by the time of Christ, pushed largely to the hinterlands. Today their descendants include the Irish, Welsh, and Scots, and inhabitants of Brittany in Northern France as well. Most if not all of what we know about Samhain is contained in the an-
cient Irish sagas, which were not written down until sometime between the ninth and twelfth centuries. The missionaries had arrived in the fifth century C.E. So the sagas reflect centuries of Christianity grafted onto native traditions. Nevertheless, the sagas were in oral tradition before and during the period of their being inscribed and the practices they document likely reflect both pre-Christian and Christian beliefs (Santino 1983). Today, the important seasonal, calendrical celebrations are usually referred to as “great days.” The perception of which days constitute the year’s great days varies somewhat from place to place, and from person to person, but Halloween is always one (see Glassie 1975, 94-121).

In 1992, a gentleman from the small County Down community of Greyabbey compared Halloween to Christmas: “It had that sense of anticipation to it. What else was there? After Halloween came Christmas, then Easter, and in the summer you had the Twelfth of July. That was it. That was all you had to look forward to. Also, the Market Fair at Newtownards.” Many people also count fairs or school outings as festive occasions. A Greyabbey woman told me:

We thought there was something to look forward to, because you know in the old days there was no money to do anything, so you made up your own fun out of nothing. It meant something. It was like there was Halloween and then the next thing there was Christmas, and even though on Christmas Eve you didn’t get very much, my goodness, the excitement. You were shivering and shaking and all you got were a couple of small things and an apple and an orange and a couple of new pennies and you really felt all excited. Well, you had that excitement at Halloween, and yet it wasn’t a great deal when you think about it. And then there was the Sunday school trip in June, to the Eleventh of July. Go and see the men walking on the Lisburn Road. That was another treat of ours. And apart from that there was one thing: Easter. Trundling the eggs. So your year was filled up just with those events in between. But Halloween was one of them, and it meant a lot. The candy apples—I still buy those!

These four calendar days mentioned do not officially mark the beginnings and endings of the seasons on the contemporary cal-
endar as the Celtic quarter days did. Plus, they share importance with other special days such as May Day (which, like Halloween, was an actual quarter day), fairs, fêtes, and outings. Testimony varies in terms of which days are mentioned. However, the idea of one great day emblematic of each season is intact.

In 1943 a fifty-five-year-old man said,

In my earliest days *Oiche Samna* [night of the spirits, i.e., Halloween] was the greatest feast of the year—even greater than Christmas. In those days, the supper was always “bruizzin,” nowadays mashed potatoes made with plenty of milk and melted butter. And then when all were filled began the storytelling, songs, etc., which lasted until sleep took over the children.

Hallowe’ve marked the end of the year’s work, there being little to do with the spade during the winter. The only work carried on during the winter was the threshing of the oats and making the oatmeal in the local mill at Dungloe. (University College of Dublin’s Folklore Archives)

Indeed, much of society is organized around Christmas, Easter, and Halloween. Schools have Halloween break in the same way that American schools, somewhat more clumsily, have delayed the first extended break of the year until Thanksgiving in late November. The Monday nearest Halloween is a bank holiday in the Republic of Ireland. The train schedule for that holiday in 1991 had a large American-style jack-o’-lantern on it to drive home the connection. At Christmas, everything closes: officially, for two days from Christmas Eve through Boxing Day or St. Stephen’s Day on December 26; in actuality, until the New Year and perhaps even for two full weeks. When I lived there, I was surprised at the extent to which business ceased during the Christmas–New Year’s holidays. Food and consumer products were not restocked in stores, the railroad ran on an altered schedule that everyone but I seemed to be aware of, and many commercial establishments remained closed. January 1, 1992, was on a Wednesday, so the ordinary work-a-day world did not resume until the following Monday.

Easter was similar to a slightly lesser extent. There are parades of the Orange Order—a Protestant fraternal organization—on Easter Monday and Tuesday, there is the special television programming that accompanies major calendrical holidays, and many
people go on car trips because the weather usually is good. In fact, Easter functions in this regard something like Memorial Day in the United States: it is the first outdoor holiday of the year. For the Orange Order, the Easter demonstrations begin what is called the marching season, which runs through the end of August and reaches its high point on the Twelfth of July (“see the men walking on the Lisburn Road”). Once again, the major calendrical festival—in this case, Easter—retains its connection to seasonal change.

Perhaps it was coincidence, but immediately after Halloween the year I lived in Northern Ireland (1991-92), the weather changed dramatically. While the days were always unpredictable, September and October were generally sunny and lovely. With November came consistently lower temperatures, grey skies, and continuous rain. In short, it was winter. Six months later, almost to the day, the weather turned sunny and warm again around May Day. It occurred to me why the older Celtic sense of season had existed: November 1 and May 1 were close calendrical approximations of the actual turnings of the seasons. In fact, another sign of the special quality of Halloween as a day, or time, when the past and the future meet is seen in the belief that, “with respect to the weather, it was thought and still is considered by many local people, that from whatever direction the wind blew on this night, that it remained there for the next quarter, having a bearing on the severity or otherwise of the weather, and on sickness if an easterly wind set in: that east being regarded as particularly bad in this respect” (Joseph Torrens, age seventy-five, County Donegal, 1943, University College of Dublin’s Folklore Archives).

In the old Celtic calendar, Samhain was the high point, the most important festival of the year. To the extent that Halloween is its successor, it predates Christmas as a major festival in the Irish calendar. Scholars debate whether or not Halloween is Samhain transformed, but people in Ireland today refer to Halloween as Samhain. In testimony collected in 1944, a woman in Omagh, County Tyrone, in referring to Halloweve, said, “The words Samhain and Michaelmas are more common with the older generation.” Fifty years later, I too found that people frequently use some form of the Irish-root word Samhain to refer to Halloween.

The modern Christmas, while extremely important in Northern Ireland, is thought to be a Victorian construct, whereas Hal-
Halloween is thought to comprise pre-Victorian customs and beliefs. Its relationship to an earlier calendar means that it has a certain analogous relationship with Christmas: each is the primary year’s-end festival of their respective calendars. Both are associated with certain customs and beliefs that have to do with the transitional nature of annual change and the accompanying ideas of liminality and personal renewal. For instance, ghostlore traditions are associated with both Halloween and Christmas. Both are major festive events that involve family and community, and they look to the past and the future simultaneously. It is not too surprising, then, that Halloween in all of Ireland, including Ulster, deals not only with death and the harvest but also with life and domesticity.

For instance, the elderly and the chronically ill were supposed to die more frequently at Halloween than at any other time of the year. Halloween is a time for death and for the return of the dead, yet alongside customs concerning the souls of dead ancestors are predictions of marriages and births. Halloween in Northern Ireland is a marriage of death and life, a seamless joining of cultural opposites: indoor and outdoor, domesticity and wildness, male and female, old and young. This mediation of oppositions continues into the political sphere as well. Halloween is universally considered by residents of Northern Ireland to belong to everyone, regardless of background or political leanings.

Further, the celebration seems to take on special ritual significance relating to important life transitions. The traditional Halloween customs are more or less age specific: children go rhyming, adolescents divine their future spouses, older boys build bonfires, and fathers oversee fireworks displays. And gender is implicit in these stage-of-life customs. Some are the domain of males, such as the fire-based activities, and some are the domain of females, such as baking and divination.

My first interviews were taped at the Bangor Abbey, which is affiliated with the Church of Ireland. Those early interviews mapped out Halloween traditions in Ulster in great detail. They also suggested some interesting areas of research, such as the relationship of Halloween in Ulster to Guy Fawkes Night in England: fireworks displays and bonfires are associated with both. Guy Fawkes Night, November 5, is also known in England as Bonfire Night. Until recently, Halloween was called Bonfire Night in
Northern Ireland, but that term now applies almost universally to what is known as the Eleventh Night, or the eve of the Twelfth of July: the commemoration of the victory of William III over James II at the battle of the Boyne in 1690. This victory ensured the British throne for Protestantism, and it is viewed as an almost mythic event by Ulster Protestants, one which is indirectly responsible for the Protestant control of what is now known as Northern Ireland. However, from the perspective of many nationalists, the largest public celebration of the year (with its Eleventh Night bonfires) celebrates the victory of Protestantism over Roman Catholicism and in so doing asks 40 percent of the population to celebrate its own defeat.

Bonfires are used in other highly politicized contexts as well. Thus, the bonfires of Halloween, a holiday universally viewed as nonsectarian in nature, have become stigmatized by their association with July 11 and the other politicized bonfires. We can see a distinction between the generally domestic, family-oriented activities and the more overtly politically charged occasions of bonfire activities.

When I asked people about Halloween, I noticed a sensitivity, a reluctance on the part of most to discuss bonfires. The parades on the Twelfth of July one might enjoy, especially as a youngster. The bonfires the night before were different—rowdy, often overtly sectarian, dangerous. On the other hand, I was repeatedly told that Halloween is nonsectarian, the only such festival of this magnitude that is notably apolitical. In fact, Halloween in Northern Ireland may represent an ideal state in which sectarian-based identity is not foregrounded but actually put aside, and it provides an occasion when otherwise clashing traditions coexist peaceably.

Anyone who has ever lived in or visited Northern Ireland is interested in seeing progress in the political stalemate that the small country seems doomed to endure indefinitely. Halloween allows people to find common ground even where meaning might otherwise be contested. The history of Ireland and the events that led to the creation of Northern Ireland are unique to that torn society, as are its problems. But they are at the very least analogous to other societal problems internationally, such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, the problems in South Africa, and race relations in the United States, to name only a few. Examining the way symbols have been
constructed and maintained in a way that allows conflicted populations to find identity meaningfully but not oppositionally may help us to understand and even deal with similar situations plaguing humanity throughout the world.
The Irish Christmas

I should say at the outset that this feast was held on the night of the 31st October, and that it was reckoned as one of the principal feasts of the year. In fact I think that the old folk seemed to think, and regarded it as the greatest festival of the year with the exception perhaps of Christmas. They, so to speak, regarded it as in a category by itself.

—Donegal, 1943, University College of Dublin’s Folklore Archives (UCD)

People I interviewed about Halloween invariably told me that it was a great family day, and they frequently likened it to Christmas. In fact, R.H. Buchanan calls Halloween “the Irish Christmas” in his pair of influential articles on Irish calendar customs (1962, 1963). To me, however, Christmas, with its divine child and cheerful lights, has a very different feel to it than Halloween, with its deathly images of ghosts, skeletons, and skulls. This is because I am American. Halloween in the United States, with its trick-or-treating and pranks outside at night, logically has nocturnal creatures such as cats, bats, and owls associated with it. Youngsters take great liberties, targeting and tormenting adults with tricks or, at the very least, approaching them and demanding treats. It is a festival that emphasizes inversion. In the United States, Halloween tends to be peer group oriented. While various age groups are involved, and parents do many things with their children (make costumes, carve jack-o’-lanterns, go trick-or-treating), the emphasis is on being outside with friends of one’s own age, going from house to house together, playing pranks and making mischief. Young people are
out of the home and allowed to break the ordinary rules of everyday social life, within reason. Domesticity and social order are abandoned temporarily.

Christmas, on the other hand, is a time for family gatherings, a big dinner, and the exchange of gifts. Peace on earth and goodwill toward all are the overtly expressed values. It is a sacred time for many. It takes place indoors around the hearth: Santa Claus comes down the chimney, and ideally this is where the stockings are hung. One's relationships with extended family, friends, and associates are reinforced with gifts and cards. It is a festival that intensifies an idealized social structure.

American Halloween is threatening: stories abound of poisoned candy or razor blades hidden inside apples. Some groups denounce the day as a satanic celebration, while heavy metal rock bands seize on Halloween for its imagery. In Detroit, the night before Halloween is called Devils Night, when the license of Halloween goes far beyond any reasonable limits. People light fires that burn entire city blocks to the ground. In this case, the liminality of Halloween, which allows for pranks and breaking rules, joins with the symbolism of devils and the fire of Hell to create an urban nightmare.

Further, the tendency in the United States is toward control of the inversive and subversive elements of Halloween. Towns regulate the times and even the day of trick-or-treating; one Ohio town in 1993 declared Saturday, October 23, 1-3 p.m., as the official hours for the children's ritual begging—more than one whole week in advance of Halloween and in daylight. In part, this was done to distance the children's trick-or-treat custom from the presumed satanic and dangerous elements of Halloween. In Northern Ireland, the parallel activity of Halloween rhyming takes place for several weeks before October 31, but in the United States, trick-or-treating on a day other than Halloween is highly unusual.

Another recent development in American Halloween is the attention paid to the nature of disguises worn. In a well-meaning attempt to increase sensitivity toward marginalized groups in American society, children in some regions are instructed not to dress as witches or as members of other ethnic groups, such as Gypsies. The use of blackface is forbidden. Such rules attempt to control elements that are central to Halloween as I experienced it as a child in the 1950s: the exhilaration of being out after dark,
safely exploring new territories, staying out late, and overstepping the bounds of good taste. The marginalized figure works as a Halloween costume because Halloween is about marginality, transition, anomaly, and pollution (Douglas 1966). It is a time when we do what is otherwise not allowed, when we recognize that which we usually avoid and, in so doing, make central the people who are social outcasts and that which is stigmatized and shunted off to the periphery of society.

The above describes the holiday I knew. However, what I knew was not true for Northern Ireland. Since I knew only the American version of Halloween, I was baffled. It was hard for me to imagine Halloween as a day that celebrated snug and cozy family values, yet this was precisely what I was being told. However, I have always felt Halloween to be the first of a series of holidays that culminate in the Christmas–New Year festival week (see Santino 1994a). In Northern Ireland I experienced not only Halloween but also Harvest Thanksgiving, Remembrance Day, Christmas, Boxing Day, and New Year’s Day. I also attended the December burning of the effigy of Robert Lundy (the seventeenth-century governor of Derry City said to be a traitor to the Williamite cause) and parades of the Orange Order on Easter Monday and Tuesday. I now saw Halloween as part of a complex set of festivals and rituals that guide this society through an intricate maze of cultural values and social issues having to do with family, society, politics, and identity.

The Importance of History

All Ireland is divided into four provinces: Connacht, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster. Ireland is further divided into thirty-two counties. Ulster consists of nine counties, six of which today form the discrete political entity called Northern Ireland. It is necessary to recount, however simplistically, the historical background of the contemporary political situation in Northern Ireland because virtually nothing there is truly untouched by it. Although northeastern Ireland is only twenty-seven miles from the coast of Scotland, and there have been movements of peoples back and forth for millennia, we begin this highly compressed historical narrative with King Dermot MacMurrough, who invited the English into Ire-
land in 1169 to help him fight against enemy tribes. Pope Adrian IV, the only English pope, granted Henry II possession of Ireland (1154), and within two years the English were firmly established and had a parliament in Dublin. In 1541 Henry VIII proclaimed himself king of Ireland and declared it forever a part of the realm of England. These actions were accompanied by a subjugation of the Irish people, many of whom were displaced from their land. In the seventeenth century, anglicization was heavily promoted in the north, along with the clearing of the land of the native peoples and the plantation of English and Scottish settlers. The suppression of the Irish language and the Catholic religion culminated in the arrival of Oliver Cromwell in 1650, who brutally suppressed Catholic uprisings. In 1688 James II was deposed, because of his Catholic sympathies, and replaced on the English throne by William, Prince of Orange. James fled to Ireland, where he was defeated by William at the battle of the Boyne in 1690. Most Protestants in Northern Ireland today see this battle as an almost mythic event, one that ensured the British throne for the Protestant religion and confirmed the British Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. Ironically, despite the perceptions of the various groups today, William had the pope's support in these wars.

With the Act of Union in 1800, the Irish parliament was removed and replaced by direct governance from Westminster. Throughout the nineteenth century, many people pushed for the return of home rule, which simply meant the reestablishment of the Irish parliament. This was not independence. Nevertheless, Ulster Protestants, who considered themselves British, opposed the 1913 Home Rule Bill, fearing the loss of Protestant power to the Catholic population. Under these circumstances, the Ulster Volunteer Force was formed to fight the English in order to retain Westminster rule. In the south, the Irish Volunteers were formed to oppose the UVF. This same UVF fought in World War I as the 36th Division and were massacred at the battle of the Somme. They are remembered as heroes today by Ulster Protestants. Some Irish Volunteers also joined the British army, recognizing the greater urgency of the war effort. The hardline Irish Republican Brotherhood gained control of the Irish Volunteers, leading to the 1916 Easter Rebellion centered in the Dublin general post office. The Volunteers were defeated within a week and were generally
unpopular with the Irish people until their leaders were killed in prison, an incident that made martyrs of them. Although the uprising failed, it set into motion a series of events that included the Anglo-Irish War in 1919. In 1921 the Government of Ireland Act established the six Ulster counties of Fermanagh, Down, Armagh, Antrim, Tyrone, and Londonderry as Northern Ireland, and Ireland accepted a truce. Ireland became a British dominion with its own government. This treaty sparked the Irish Civil War between those who were prepared to accept the partition and those who were not. By 1923 the antitreaty forces were defeated, but the IRA continued their campaign to reunite the North and the South. The 1921 establishment of the Republic of Ireland as a free state but a dominion of Great Britain was followed in 1949 by the severing of all links. The Republic of Ireland, now known as Eire, claimed jurisdiction over the six counties of Ulster, which had become a Protestant homeland, but had no realistic way of enforcing the claim. The IRA continued its campaign; Protestants responded with a reformed Ulster Volunteer Force in Belfast.

In the late 1960s, Catholics in Northern Ireland formed a civil rights movement modeled on that in the United States. After serious attacks occurred in Catholic communities, British troops arrived in Northern Ireland to protect the Catholics. At first they were cheered, but skirmishes soon began between the British and Catholic activists. The violence spun out of control, leading to atrocities on all sides, the formation of other paramilitary groups, and the removal of the Northern Ireland parliament at Stormont. Cease-fires on both sides as of late 1994 have led to a reduction of British troop levels and a sense of hope among the populations of Northern Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic, the majority of whom do not condone the violence and want peace through a fair and just political settlement of the age-old divisions and problems that have torn the island of Ireland. Agreement as to which political settlement is genuinely fair continues to be a problem.

Today, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. The Union flag, popularly referred to as the Union Jack, is the flag of the North, and Elizabeth II is recognized as monarch, at least by the Protestants. The Republic, generally referred to as the South, claims the six counties as legitimately its own. The 40 percent Roman Catholic population of Northern Ireland is generally
aligned, emotionally if not politically, with the Republic. Those wishing to remain a member of the British Commonwealth are called unionists; those wishing to join the Republic of Ireland are called nationalists. More militant unionists, including those who use violent means, are referred to as loyalists, while militant nationalists are called republicans. All Ireland, then, it can be said, is divided in two: North and South. At certain times and under certain circumstances, the North is divided into loyalist vs. republican, unionist vs. nationalist, and Protestant vs. Catholic. This is the underlying historical basis of the ongoing troubles that continue to plague Northern Ireland.

The six counties of Ulster cover only 5,452 square miles of land—slightly larger than the state of Connecticut—and support a population of only 2.5 million. Yet these six counties have had a far greater impact on the rest of Ireland, the United States, and Great Britain than their size would indicate. Historically, the Ulster Protestants (frequently referred to as Scotch-Irish) were among the principal settlers and shapers of American society. Northern Ireland today boasts that twelve American presidents trace their lineage to Protestant Ulster. There is a growing (if still minority) tendency to espouse Ulster as a unique cultural area through the purported heritage of the Picts, or Cruthins, who predated the Celts in Ireland. According to Ian Adamson (1974), much of what is considered today to be Celtic—design motifs, ironwork, and so forth—was adapted from the Cruthins. Further, some parts of Ireland, particularly the northeast area, were never entirely conquered by the Celts and never Gaelicized. The effect of these ideas is to posit Ulster as always having been separate from Gaelic Ireland as well as Anglo-Saxon Britain. This interpretation of history is used to support political claims of independence today.

There is a historical link between Halloween in the United States and in Ireland. Most scholars accept that many, if not most, American Halloween customs were brought to the United States by the Irish, first by the Ulster Protestants in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then by the great wave of Irish immigrants who fled the potato famine in the 1840s (see, e.g., Kerby Miller 1985). Conversely, as American culture today permeates societies around the world, carried chiefly by the electronic media, Irish
Halloween begins to show features of American popular culture. Less so than one might think, however. Even where they share many of the same features, the emphasis and symbolic meanings vary. Because so many Americans are of Ulster Protestant and Irish Catholic descent, and because of the historical connections of American Halloween to the Irish festival, I did not expect the differences to be as many and as varied as they were. Not only are the customs different, but Irish attitudes toward the day and its purpose in the celebratory calendar seem to be almost the inverse of American Halloween.

A comparison of similar customs is instructive. In the United States, one of the major Halloween activities is trick-or-treating. Children wear costumes, sometimes homemade but usually storebought (although some people combine the two, using the manufactured costumes as a base for an imaginative design) and go from house to house with a bag in hand. At each house they ring the doorbell and say, “Trick-or-treat,” to whoever opens it. Very rarely would anyone respond with anything other than a treat, which is most often factory-wrapped candy. Homemade treats are sometimes given, as are apples, but recent scares concerning poisoned treats have all but put an end to this. Storebought, wrapped candy is felt to be safer. The rumor, then, reinforces the commercialization of the holiday. Children go to as many homes as possible to get the largest amount of candy. Trick-or-treating is done on Halloween night itself, or on a weekend night near it. It is done on one night only, and as we have seen, the acceptable hours (6-8 P.M., for instance) are usually established by local officials.

The parallel to trick-or-treating in Northern Ireland is Halloween rhyming. Unlike trick-or-treating, however, rhyming is done for several nights or even weeks before Halloween and not on Halloween night itself. Children do not wear “fancy dress,” or costumes in the American sense. Instead, they may wear a black litter-bin liner (garbage bag) over the body, black or white makeup on the face, and perhaps a witch’s hat and wig. Some children wear a sheet, as a ghost, and some might wear the oversized discarded clothing of their parents. The emphasis is not on replicating a character from popular culture. Frequently children wear masks. One woman told me, “It’s the mask, not the costume, that’s important.” Children do not expect sweets, nor are they given any. Instead,
people give apples, nuts, or small amounts of money. The children do not carry bags. The most common Halloween rhyme in Northern Ireland is this:

Halloween is coming and the geese are getting fat.
Please put a penny in the old man’s hat.
If you haven’t got a penny, a ha’penny will do.
If you haven’t got a ha’penny, then God bless you,
And your old man, too!

Some children may start rhyming as early as September. In these cases, adults might refuse to give them anything. My friend Peter Harvey will not give them anything if the standard “geese” rhyme is all they do. He expects them to do more for the money. Maskers were once expected to perform a song or play a tune, and the concept of performance that links Halloween rhyming to an earlier mumming tradition is still prevalent, although many children are not allowed to engage in this activity because their parents consider it begging. In fact, the custom is also known as Halloween begging. Frequently, people describe it as a nuisance, since the children tend to ring the bell during the evening meal.

For several weeks before Halloween, then, and not on Halloween itself, children may interrupt someone’s daily routine by ringing the doorbell to ask, “Anything for Halloween?” or to chant a Halloween rhyme. Unlike trick-or-treating, which is restricted to a specific evening and a specific time and is thus predictable and expected, Halloween rhyming is unpredictable. It might take place at any time, sometimes long in advance of Halloween itself. Also, since money is the expected gift, most people do not welcome many visitors a night. If someone feels that a child has come rhyming too early in the season, that person feels free to refuse the child. Similarly, on nights nearer to October 31, if a person feels that enough children have visited for one night, then the children will be told so. In the United States, if people do not want to engage in the trick-or-treating ritual, they either go out for the evening or leave their porch lights off. A darkened door has become an accepted code indicating that there are no treats to be had within. Most children, eager to maximize their takings, will hurry on to the next inviting household rather than waste time devising some vengeful prank upon the house. The result is that trick-or-treating
in the United States is safe, despite rumors to the contrary, and generally those who engage in it do so because they enjoy it. The concept of performance for reward has for all intents and purposes been lost. In Northern Ireland, Halloween rhyming is essentially unpredictable, less bounded in time, and more mercenary. Therefore, it is viewed with ambivalence at best. In 1991 Agnes Jean Grindle told me this:

Coming to the door, they would torment you, you know. Children for about a month before. The minute you open the door, they start to sing, “Halloween is coming,” and if it’s too soon, I don’t give them any. I usually give them something, but not when they come a month before. Because I used to, and then there were different ones coming every evening because the one told the other, “You get something at that house.” So then I said I wouldn’t. I say, “Now it’s not it yet.” They’ll come maybe a dozen in one night. You’d get two now, and maybe three, and maybe one, and so on. Ah, well. You don’t give much because you’re going to have to give to a lot of them, and you used to give ‘em sixpence, but there’s no sixpences now. . . . Ah, they would have had more games and they’d have gone out, too, knocking doors, too. [laughs] Aye, they would have knocked on the doors and run. I remembered one occasion when one old lady told me, she said, “At my door there’s been knockin’ every now and then all evening. And every time I go I don’t see anybody.” And what they had done, they had got a black spool and a black thread and in the darkness tied this long thread to the door knocker, and then they would go away across, hiding somewhere beside the street and pull it. And she’d come out, and they would have great fun watching her coming out and looking up and down the street and then going back in again, and then it wasn’t five minutes before they would do it again.

Philip Robinson provided a detailed description:

There was usually only about two, three, four of us would go together, and what we would do is, we would always blacken our faces or do something to make some sort of partial disguise, maybe Halloween masks, and sometimes, well, we’d do it systematically. . . . We didn’t do it on Halloween night. It was the fortnight or so leading up to Halloween.
Timing was important because if you started your Halloween rhyming too early, people would simply turn you away and say it’s far too early for Halloween. You could do it as early as a fortnight. . . . In those days we got what were called potato picking holidays off school, so we were off school for perhaps ten days before Halloween. And that holiday period was really regarded as the period when you gathered material for the bonfire you were preparing for Halloween. So in that period your mind was oriented toward Halloween, and that was when you started in the evenings. It’s always at night time, of course. It’s always, always after dark. . . .

So, as I say, if you went too early in the season you were turned away. . . . And if you went too late, that is to say, the night before Halloween, you could expect all of the houses had been visited. Well, the night before Halloween would be regarded as late in the season, and certainly it was never done on Halloween itself.

Part of the reason is that we were otherwise engaged on Halloween night with the bonfire and other activities, and people tended not to be in. . . . So Halloween rhyming wasn’t really an activity, certainly for Halloween night, but even just before Halloween night you would be regarded as fighting a lost cause to be going around to houses as late as that, because other people were bound to have been there before and certainly you would have been there before. They’d say, “Well, I’ve already given.” Oh, yes.

And what we’re talking about giving is money. It was always money. Only on one occasion do I remember being offered anything other than money. I mean, it wasn’t a case of a choice being offered, but a man came to the door and we asked—we did our Halloween rhyming, and we asked him, and he said, “Okay, hold on,” and disappeared into the house, and instead of coming back with money as we normally expect, he came back with handfuls of mixed sweets. Candies and nuts mixed together. Gave us a handful each. And I think he had apples tucked under his arms as well. He would have given us an apple if we wanted. My reaction to that was one of definite surprise. Never heard of not being given any money. I mean, plenty of times you wouldn’t be given anything, but I’d never heard of being given anything other than money before. That came as a bit of a surprise. I also remember feeling slightly cheated; this is rather mean. It also registered with me that this is quite a good idea, you know. I must remember
when I’m grown up this alternative to money. [laughs] We regarded it as a slightly cheapskate option.

We were sometimes chased away, which was part of the fun thing to do with Halloween rhyming. The best example was . . . some form of trick played on the people Halloween rhyming, usually followed by giving them money. I mean, it wasn’t a case of playing a trick on you and not giving you anything. For instance, . . . throwing water out on the rhymers from an upstairs window is something I think I can remember happening once, and I am certain I’ve heard of it a number of times. And one occasion that sticks in my mind is that a man came to the door and said, “Well, hold on a minute,” and he disappeared. In fact, he came out of the front door and disappeared into a side door. And in his store[room] he had a bearskin on a bear head, a massive big grizzly bear head and bear skin, which he put on over his own head and arms, and burst the doors open and came roaring out at us and gave us chase. But as soon as we got to the gate he called us back and gave us money . . .

Well, I can tell you what my reaction was at the time to that, because I did regard that bear thing as unusual behavior, not to be expected, because usually it is the rhymers who play the tricks, not the people being visited. My reaction at the time was along the lines of, you know, attack is the best form of defense, that in doing that he was really protecting himself from us, reversing the role deliberately.

But in terms of being chased, the more usual scenario would be, you could call at the door, maybe you’d get money once, and then you’d go back again and you’d be told no, we’ve already given, or somebody else had been, and you would go and would have been told. Now, it would be quite usual for any individual’s house to be visited on maybe four, five, six occasions by Halloween rhymers over the space of two or three nights. Now you can imagine that the householder gets very annoyed maybe on the second or third visit on a single night. So what happens is the first time you get a sharp no, a sort of gradually increasing sharpness, but sometimes you’d deliberately go back to a place you had been before and had been refused before simply because you knew you were beginning to irritate the person, and on those occasions you might get a case where they’d open the door and say, “Look, I told you before!” You’re in the same disguise in a small community! In fact, even when Halloween rhymers went out together,
people rarely ventured outside their own district. It was very rare
to go out into someone else’s territory. It was very territorial.

There also seemed to be this idea that some adults who didn’t
have children assumed that the children, even though they were
only calling in [groups of] twos or threes, were all part of some
conspiracy, that they’d been gathering and sending each other in
relays and so on. So they were all assumed to be the same.

So when you knew the people were getting really cross, then
the idea was to go up again, using the doorbell, and it was really
like playing the equivalent of what we call thunder and lightning:
just knocking on the door, ringing the doorbell, and running, with
the expectation of being physically chased out and along. Some­
times we were chased for an hour and a half, you know, really
long, and it was a real sort of pumping exercise involving hiding
and people scouring backyards and hedges.

When the households really took it seriously, what they were
trying to do is catch the children, take them to their parents, and
complain or threaten them with the police or something. But re­
ally catch them, identify them, and give them a warning. Put an
end to them coming up to the door.

The comparison of the masked solicitation rituals (Vennum 1985)
of the two Halloweens would seem not to support the idea of Irish
Halloween as a domestic, family-oriented holiday, nor does it sup­
port the suggestion that American Halloween is dangerous in its
bending of social rules and mores. However, that is only superfi­
cially true. While it is very much a component of the Halloween
festivities for many young people in Northern Ireland, the rhym­
ing is done before October 31. Halloween night itself is reserved
for other activities, and these are significantly family oriented. And
while it is true that American trick-or-treating is parentally and
municipally controlled, its essence involves young people out on
the streets after dark and reversing their usual roles vis-à-vis adults:
that is, “trick-or-treat” is both a demand and a threat. While it can
be argued that these are threats in appearance only, that most chil­
dren simply expect to be given a treat and would not know what to
do if they were refused, there is a more interesting kind of social
inversion that sometimes occurs. Adults may use the occasion of
Halloween to scare children. We saw an unusual Irish example in
the above testimony, but this is, I think, more prevalent in the
United States, where I know of several occasions in which adults in costume scared trick-or-treaters (Santino 1994a, 152). Moreover, the rumors about poisoned treats imply a fictive but serious adult aggression and hostility toward children. So Halloween in the United States, even when restrained by community attempts to “clean it up” and to lessen its presumed dangers to children, still offers opportunities for playing with and transgressing some serious taboos in American society. In Northern Ireland, the analogous period of license precedes Halloween itself, leaving the night of October 31 free for a meal of fruits and grains, storytelling, family fireworks, and community bonfires. There is some license for adults, of course, to drink and to engage in masking and pranks. Nevertheless, these are well within social limits, or they reinforce the family structure. For instance, regarding drinking, one man explained to me, “In rural areas, everybody, but everybody, drank on social occasions, at harvest, and so on. Anyone who drank otherwise was obviously a drunk. Originally, Halloween was a time of license not to get plastered but to drink—period.” Another man then said, “I remember especially the special atmosphere of mothers and fathers being present. Sometimes the fathers would join in on the pranks, to the children’s delight.” The age-group differentiation is not so rigidly drawn, and adults still partake in the fun of wearing disguises and playing pranks on Halloween. The result is a more closely knit family bond.

American influences are creeping in: pumpkins, while not native to the area, are now sold in October at fruit shops. Moreover, manifestations of Halloween in more elite art forms such as poetry and drama are common throughout Ireland. Many local and dialect poets find inspiration in Halloween, and several playwrights have used the imagery of the returning spirits of the dead on All Souls’ Night. All of these cultural expressions, regardless of origin, tell us something of the ways that Halloween is understood and celebrated, and ultimately all were relevant to my work.

Since I was interested in the many manifestations of Halloween in the society, I paid attention to commercial products geared to the holiday, including the ways they were packaged and displayed. I was particularly surprised when I entered Hallmark shops in October to find absolutely no Halloween greeting cards available.
Nor have I found any from earlier decades. In the United States, Halloween cards are very popular, and judging from the postcard and greeting card collections I have researched, they have been popular since the early twentieth century. But when I entered greeting card shops, I was not met with the sea of orange and black I expected. In fact, when Halloween paraphernalia eventually was displayed in the stores in mid-October, the colors of these promotional materials were not orange and black at all. An immediate lesson then was that these two colors, which are to Halloween in the United States what red and green are to Christmas, are not symbolically coded to signify Halloween in Northern Ireland. There are several other differences between the two national traditions, many of which become obvious when we examine some of the commercial posters.

A series of window posters were produced for Thornton chocolates, which are sold throughout Great Britain. The images depicted on them, chosen for their appropriateness to Halloween, include a ghost, a bat, some sparklers, and fireworks. While the ghost and bat are traditionally associated with Halloween in America, fireworks have no relationship to the occasion whatsoever. So their presence on these promotional Halloween materials seemed curious. However, in Northern Ireland, fireworks are a major component of Halloween. Explosives were officially banned in the early 1970s with the acceleration of terrorist activities, since fireworks for purchase meant that gunpowder and explosive materials were easily available. Up until that time, however, the family fireworks display in the garden, in fields, or out on the street in urban areas was one of the primary activities that people today associate with Halloween and remember most nostalgically. One man told me why they are banned:

T. McKee: Fireworks aren’t banned. Explosive substances are banned. See, somebody was caught one day with a hundred pounds of explosives. They said it wasn’t [explosives]. It was fireworks!

Second man: That’s right. So they have to ban it all now. It’s a shame, you know, but I know a lot of fishermen brought them in. It’s amazing how many fireworks were exploded just around our place on Halloween.
Halloween window display for Thornton's chocolates. Note the use of rockets and fireworks in advertising and packaging as prominent Halloween symbolism.
Furthermore, the ban has not killed the custom. Official community fireworks displays are regularly held, and fireworks are brought into Northern Ireland illegally and sold on the streets before Halloween. It is not uncommon, then, to find the backgarden fireworks displays continuing to this day. In fact, in 1991, fireworks and rockets increased at Halloween, at a time when there was again an upsurge in terrorist activities. While this connection is most likely coincidental, it is nonetheless true that the ban on fireworks has not totally destroyed the custom. In the summer of 1994, a man explained to me that a person can approach the police for a permit for a fireworks display that would supposedly be for a large gathering of some kind. Referring to this as a quasi-legal way around the ban, the man went on to describe instances of police bringing fireworks to Halloween parties.

A poem by Billy Ritchie about fireworks was published in a book of monologues intended for oral performance. Called “Firework Frolics,” this humorous recitation contains some details of Belfast and Northern Irish life:

You can’t buy fireworks in Belfast.
They’ve been banned this few years past.
But none the less you’ll hear the din
Of those that have been smuggled in
From places over in the South,
Particularly County Louth.
This tale’s of such a smuggler’s load.
A lady from the Oldpark Road
Who went, according to the talk,
On an excursion to Dundalk.
It being near to Hallowe’en
Decided to procure a wheen
Of squibs and bangers from a store,
and powerful rockets by the score.
Such a bit of shopping being done,
Her problems really now begun,
To bring her haul North in one piece
Past customs, army, and the police.

The monologue then describes the increasingly improbable ad-
ventures of the lady. We will look at these Halloween customs—fireworks and rhyming—in greater detail in the next chapter. Here the point is simply to demonstrate that there are customs associated with Halloween in Northern Ireland that are not part of it in the United States. Second, by implication, the celebration is different in less obvious ways; nothing could be taken for granted about the nature of the holiday or the ways that people understood its symbols.

Also, it is important to note the use of widely disseminated commercial materials as indicators of some of these customs and meanings. In today’s world, there are a great many variables in any industrialized society that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The posters advertising Halloween products use carefully chosen icons designed to appeal to certain age and demographic groups. As such they contain information regarding the social attitudes and some of the ways that the holiday is celebrated. Viewed historically, such materials can reveal changes over time in customary behaviors and in beliefs and attitudes.

In this book, at least initially, Ulster Halloween is seen in contrast to American Halloween and other celebrations insofar as this was how I experienced it. The American holidays provided a backdrop from which those of Northern Ireland stood out as being unfamiliar or curiously similar without being precisely the same. For that reason, I begin by identifying the major customary behaviors associated with Halloween in Northern Ireland. Some of these are compared and contrasted with their counterparts in the United States. Although the listing is necessarily somewhat general, Halloween customs are highly localized and vary greatly from place to place, even from neighborhood to neighborhood. However, I am not intending to present a picture of an imaginary “perfect” Halloween. Instead, I am presenting an overall description of the ways in which Halloween is celebrated in Northern Ireland, recognizing that exceptions are the rule. I attempt to point these out. Finally, this study focuses on the six counties of Northern Ireland that constitute a small, highly distinctive area, made up of smaller regions. Halloween is different there than in the Republic of Ireland in both its customary behaviors and the ways that people perceive those activities and symbols. I hope to unravel some of the ways that people interpret these symbols—how politics and
gender are encoded, decoded, included, or excluded by various people; how people can read different, even contradictory, meanings in the same symbol as a result of varying perspectives and experiences—while retaining respect for diversity and complexity.
As a day of both fun and significance, Halloween has inspired a great deal of local poetry. These poems stand as artistic works that reflect their place and time and the aesthetic of both the poets and the audiences. The poems provide firsthand accounts of Halloween customs and performances for those of us who are removed by time and distance, and they are Halloween artifacts themselves, examples of tradition. The following is by B.M. Teggart and is dated 1898:

The wind is blowin’ from the hill
wi’ squally gusts between.
The night is dark and showers fill
The sheughs [ditches], this Hallowe’en.

Old granny has a handy press
where apples,—hoarded green,
divided out—the wee ones bless
An’ please at Halloween.

A few have nuts, a very few;
Poor withered ones, I ween,
An’ these when burnin, two and two,
Tell tales at Halloween.

And some have acorns—these once graced
By fairy king and queen,
Upon the low back hob are placed
For luck, at Halloween.

The older boys, the spruce young buck,
An’ girls about thirteen
For red-cheeked apples dip and duck
In tubs at Halloween.

Where there are neither sweets nor cakes
Nor mutton, fat or lean,
In a big pot the mother makes
Boxty, at Halloween.

Young Liza at her bobbin wheel
Tangles a cotton skene,
Then shuts her eyes, for Ham may steal
A kiss at Halloween.

Altho' outside it teems and pours,
The boys about sixteen
Are busy runnin' rappin' doors
With turf—at Halloween.

While speech and laughter both are stilled—
For all his cryin' keen
Pilgaric finds his cabin filled
Wi' smoke—at Halloween.

At witches grinnin' in their sarks,
at hags of gruesome mien,
The chained-up bandog growls and barks
An' howls at Halloween.

The boogles [ghosts] in their gravel hole,
Behind the brambly screen,
Just wait to grab body and soul—
Some boy—at Halloween.

False-face is laughin' in his sleeve
At sober Jock and Jean
An' at the wight who won't believe
in freets [superstition]—at Halloween.

But wind and wet have taken the route,
Stars peep the clouds between.
The house is hushed, the lights are out.
Down! Ghosts of Halloween.

The above poem nicely indexes Halloween food, pranks, and belief customs. Halloween has many other components, too, not
mentioned in the poem, such as rhyming, bonfires, and the more recent addition of fireworks. While each of these components is experienced at fairly proscribed times and places and under certain general conditions—that is, the particular components may vary as to when they occur (before or on Halloween, earlier or later in the evening, for example), where they occur (indoors or outdoors, at home or away), and by whom (old or young, male or female)—when people discussed Halloween with me, they tended to flow effortlessly between these subjects. Together they all make up Halloween. To describe the components adequately and comment on them, I am treating them separately. Each of these components of Ulster’s Halloween is perceived by the participants as more or less discrete, but it is important to remember that this rigid separation of the customs for descriptive and analytical purposes does not exist in the regular flow of life. When we consider Halloween in its entirety, we will do so within the accumulated meanings of each of its traditions.

Halloween traditions in Northern Ireland are highly localized and vary from region to region, town to town, village to village, city block to city block. Many of the customs I will describe are not restricted to Northern Ireland alone, but may also be practiced in the Republic of Ireland and to a lesser extent in England, Scotland, Wales, Canada, and even the United States. Nevertheless, they are important components of Northern Ireland’s traditions, whether exclusive to Ulster or not. A general picture of some of the more widespread and recurrent—that is to say, typical—aspects of Halloween in Ulster must necessarily precede any discussion and analysis. Halloween in Ulster, although it has English, Irish, and Scottish elements, is a creative amalgamation of customs that form a unique celebration. These customs include Halloween rhyming, collecting materials for bonfires, and playing pranks, all of which take place before Halloween and may begin as early as September. A special dinner and the lighting of bonfires and home fireworks displays take place on Halloween itself, although municipal fireworks events may be held on the weekend nearest the actual holiday. Cities and towns increasingly feature these to help fill the void caused by the banning of the sale of explosive materials.

In the “old days,” before the real fireworks were banned in 1972,
rhyming was the way to get money to buy “bangers” and “squibs,” that is, firecrackers for use in the home displays. Pranks may have been played on Halloween night, but it was more common before October 31, since most of that night is given over to a family party. Both the rhyming and the collecting of bonfire materials were activities that anticipated Halloween, then, but they were fun and part of the “personality of the season,” as my friend Philip Robinson put it.

**Rhyming**

On October 29, 1992, the Newtownards (County Down) *Chronicle* ran a lengthy article entitled “The Last Hallowe’en Rhymer.” The author expressed his fear that the tradition he loved so much as a child was in danger of disappearing. While I am not sure that I agree, his personal reminiscences are very pleasant to read. They reveal the ways so many of the components of Halloween are related to childhood pleasures such as reading comic books and experiencing the changing seasons:

But what excitement there was among us youngsters around the countryside when the spuds were all dug and the corn and haystacks had been brought into the safety and shelter of the stackyard. It was autumn, late autumn, and there could be no denying it . . . . The long dark nights were almost upon us. It was time. Time for Hallowe’en.

Hallowe’en. A time for fireworks and ghost stories around the fire, witches abroad on their broomsticks, monkey-nuts [peanuts] and apple-tarts and apple ducking. And of course Hallowe’en rhyming. How important that was. It wasn’t simply an optional extra to the celebration of the old festival. It was an essential and integral part of it because it was only by trekking around one countryside evening we stood any chance of earning a few coppers to buy the fireworks, which, as far as we were concerned, was what the whole thing was about. For weeks our favorite comics, the *Adventure*, *Wizard*, *Rover*, *Hotspur*, and *Eagle*, had been urging us to stock up early . . . . Anyway, we preferred to buy our fireworks individually over the counter so we could see what we were getting. A fancy box filled with Sparklers and Golden Rain wasn’t any use to us. One or two of those things were all right, especially
for the wee girls. But it was Bangers we wanted. The Mighty Atom. Or the Thundercrack. That’s what we were after. Something to cause the total collapse of your eardrums or knock out your sense of hearing for five or ten minutes after it went off.

We also noticed, thanks to our comics, that our mates across the water in England didn’t seem to know very much about Hallowe’en. November the Fifth seemed to be their big night, along with some old Guy called Fawkes. But Hallowe’en, the thirty-first of October, that was our time. And that’s what we celebrated. . . . Now, unlike our friends in the nearby town of Donaghadee, we had to work harder and travel farther for every penny we took. A quarter of a mile between dwelling houses was nothing to us and we didn’t always meet with success after a long trek up some steep and stony loaning. . . . But knowing exactly the right time to go out Hallowe’en rhyming was essential if we were to maximize the number of pennies available for entrepreneurs like ourselves.

Several days, or even weeks, before October 31, children begin to make the rounds from house to house, rhyming. As we have seen above, this is the parallel to the American trick-or-treating, but it differs in significant ways. Halloween rhyming in Northern Ireland involves performing for the treats or gifts. In fact, Halloween rhyming is closely related to mumming traditions during the Christmas–New Year season and to the performances of the Wren Boys on St. Stephen’s Day in the west of Ireland. For instance, in 1968, Michael McCaughan collected a fuller version of this common rhyme from Mrs. G. Stanford in Belfast, born circa 1925, which he recorded as follows:

Hallowe’en is coming on and the geese are getting fat.  
Will you please put a penny in the old lad’s hat?  
If you haven’t got a penny, a ha’penny will do.  
If you haven’t got a ha’penny, a farthing will do.  
If you haven’t got a farthing, then a piece of bread will do.  
If you haven’t got a piece of bread, God bless you,  
And your old lad, too.  
(Archives, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum)

This is a variation on a verbal formula used at Christmas elsewhere in Ireland, where Christmas rhyming rather than Hallowe–
een rhyming is the norm (see, e.g., Glassie 1975). It is derived from the mummers’ plays, and some northerners recall seeing mummers (troupes of men in costumes who performed the traditional dramas) at Halloween. Others equate the words *mumming* and *rhyming*.

I was talking one afternoon with a small group in the home of Elsbeth Barnes outside of Greyabbey. Miss Barnes shared her memories of Halloween before World War II. Will MacAvoy and Ivan Morrison then began discussing Halloween rhyming, which they agreed originated as Christmas rhyming. Miss Barnes thought there had been a time when it was done both at Halloween and Christmas, but the others were unsure on this point. They did seem to know the texts. The “rhyming” they referred to is the combat-hero play. I asked how they knew the rhymes so well. They said that, although they did not rhyme themselves, as boys they had followed the older men around. Girls did not go mumming. MacAvoy also remembered his father opening the door to the rhymers. “You were supposed to be afraid,” he said. They discussed the way individual characters would be introduced. Ivan remembered St. George, St. Patrick, Beelzebub, Oliver Cromwell, and
Mr. Funny, “the man who takes the money,” as prominent characters. They seemed to disdain the current version of rhyming, including the “Halloween is coming” rhyme.

There are other chants and variations on the one cited above. A woman from Larne, East Antrim, remembers the following:

Halloween knock, a penny a stock.
If you don’t let me in, I’ll knock, knock, knock.
If you haven’t got a penny, then a ha’penny will do.
If you haven’t got a ha’penny, then God bless you.

Martina Clark McCauley, twenty-three years old in 1992, mentioned that the traditional rhyme is changing to keep up with the times. Martina lives in the Andersonstown area of Belfast. Referring to the Halloween rhyme, she said, “Actually this year they changed it. ‘If you haven’t got a penny, a fiver or two will do.’ [A fiver is a five pound note.] And I looked at this child and said, ‘A fiver?’ Well, that is what I heard one say this year, and then she was a wee bit on the cheeky side, but it’s supposed to be a ha’penny. There’s no such thing as a ha’penny anymore. And these kids now wouldn’t even remember it. That would be like me talking about a threepenny bit. They went out in 1971. I think I remember carrying one, but apparently I was in a pram.”

People often would ask the rhymers for a performance of some kind, expecting a bit of entertainment before handing out any rewards. Children would respond with a snatch of popular song, or a traditional poem, or perhaps a quick tune on the tin whistle. A man from County Antrim I interviewed in 1992 remembered not rhyming, that is, saying the poem, but performing music in a band with his friends on Halloween:

CD: Ah, we don’t have rhymers at Hallow Eve. People go around together knocking on doors and asking, “Anything for Hallow Eve?” And we’d get nuts or apples or even money. You’d also get a sort of grouping together to form a makeshift band. Somebody might have an old bugle or a mouth-organ, or somebody would have a couple of saucers to bang together as cymbals. The leader would have a brush shaft. Somebody would have an old tea can with a stick, beat it like a drum. And the people playing paper and comb, the paper and comb buzzing sound. Playing such tunes as
“Swanee River” or “Dear Old Joe” and so on. That’s what was common in my young days. It wouldn’t be as common now, but it was very common.

SANTINO: Would you say that it is at all common now?
CD: Well, youngsters still dress up and go around with false faces.

SANTINO: Would they get together as a band?
CD: Well, you wouldn’t see them there as a band. Come in a group, maybe five or six youngsters together. And they’ll come to the door knocking, and the people inside would try to identify them from their voices. Who they were, from near about, another street.

SANTINO: In terms of the children running around, especially if they would do it together as a band as sometimes they did, they would come to somebody’s house. When did they play music? From house to house or after they asked?
CD: Oh, from house to house.

SANTINO: Walking down the street?
CD: Yeah, just walking along, yeah.

SANTINO: Would they have been required to do anything in return for what they were given?
CD: Well, sometimes you’d ask them to sing a song. I think you have something in America called like trick-or-treat. We hadn’t that phrase. You know, it was more, “Who are you? Would you sing us a song?” They do the performing anyway. It was just sort of a quid pro quo that we were going to give them their apples and nuts. You want to be entertained.

To maximize their profits, the rhymers frequently tailor their performances to suit their audiences. One man spoke in 1991 of a 1950s childhood experience:

Sometimes you’d say “Help the Halloween rhymers” or “Any money for Halloween?” “Help the Halloween rhymers,” you know, that was when you were in a hurry and were trying to go around to all the houses. And also, when you were a bit older, that sort of rhyme was regarded as a wee bit childish, you know. You just developed the “Help the Halloween rhymers” thing. Usually
if you did the Halloween chant, that’s all you were asked for, but if you said, “Help the Halloween rhymers,” quite often people would say, “I’m not just giving you money for that.” And you would have to sing a song, and it could be any song at all, you know, popular, and yes, we definitely did this. We didn’t even bother with the Halloween rhyme. As soon as the door was opened, we started to sing a song. I’d forgotten that. We definitely did that. We just had the song, whatever, “Davy Crockett,” a popular song of the day. You sung that, and that was all that was required. You didn’t need to say at the end of it, “Help the Halloween rhymers.” It was understood what you were there to do. It was like Christmas carol singing in a sense, you know.

I remember one occasion. It was an old people’s home, or it was shelter accommodations for people who were elderly. It was a terrace of houses—almshouses, we call them—where single elderly ladies were given these rent-free, but they had to look after themselves. These were just individual houses set in their own grounds.

We were very aware that these old dears were both frightened of us but also emotionally sensitive and so on. And they were usually very churchy type people. So I remember one occasion when we actually went around the almshouses singing “Jesus Loves Me.” [laughing] And the old dears would have tears in their eyes and bring you in and give you money and apples and all sorts of things. And that was pretty mercenary. I felt actually quite bad about doing that. You realize you’re taking these poor old women. I didn’t feel good about that. I only did it once. But certainly you would sing any song.

**Mumming**

Philip Robinson retains a distinct memory of what I have generally referred to as Christmas mumming performed in his youth at Halloween:

What I’m talking about now is a very, very distant snapshot memory when I was very young. I know it had to be one of two occasions: one was a farm in East Antrim near the town of Ballymoor, or Ballycarry; the other is at a farm near Portomenone in mid-Antrim. Both are relatively similar areas, very rural, not
near any town, and the second place is a place that I still visit—I have relations and so forth. The other one was a farm that we went to occasionally with next-door neighbors that have relations there. So I can’t remember at which of these two this incident took place, but I know it was Halloween. I know we went out of the farmhouse into the next farmhouse with some older children, youths and girls. There were definitely girls, but one of the girls was the girl of the house that we were at. And they were all dressed up with blackened faces and coats turned inside out, rags and feathers—including the girls. And we went into this little farmhouse which had an open traditional hearth with all the turf black in back of it, and they asked me if I wanted to come, and they asked the others if it would be all right if I came, too, and I think they asked my parents or something, and that was okay. And one of the girls reached into the back of the hearth [to reach] the soot in the back, and wiped it all over my face, did me up, too. And we all went out as a crowd, and I can remember going to other houses, and I can remember chanting and singing, but I can’t remember any of the content of it except that I’m sure, absolutely sure, that it was more than just the local Halloween rhyme we did. But that’s about the extent of my knowledge. I can’t remember them going through the whole Christmas rhyme, the mumming play. But if you ask me what it was, that’s what I think it was.

In 1976 folklorist Linda Ballard recorded this piece of testimony from a woman:

When I was small, like younger than these ones here, we lived down in Larne, and oh, an awful lot of ones came round, big boys and girls, you know, dressed up. And my mummy always did a big baking that day, you know. Sodas and potato bread and fruit. Got extra buttermilk in. You see, she came from Scotland, and it seems that this was what they did. And of course, we knew most of the boys, you know, came in, all painted up, and one of them was Dr. Blood, and there was one a witch, you know, dressed up as a witch. And they all said pieces—“Here am I, I’m Doctor Blood”—like, I don’t remember. As I say, I was very small, but, oh, we used to love this. And you didn’t give them money. They wouldn’t take money. You gave them something to eat. And my mother used to butter the hot sodas, you know, soda bread. And the big glasses of buttermilk and give them all some. You know? And they’d all do
a turn. They'd run about. I remember Jim Meeks, he was always Dr. Blood, and he was running about, you know, in this big hat and all the straw sticking out round below his hat.

The Halloween rhymers in Northern Ireland today embody old traditions of holiday mumming. “Halloween is coming and the geese are getting fat” is associated with Christmas mumming throughout the rest of Ireland and, more specifically, with the St. Steven’s Day custom of hunting the wren. A group of men called Wren Boys or Straw Boys, because of their costumes and masks of straw, traipse from house to house performing music for gifts of money. Some in Ulster think that the rhyme may have been associated with Halloween originally, since Halloween is perceived as an older festival. Although it is more likely that the rhyme was first associated with Christmas and adapted to Halloween in Ulster, the verse certainly indicates that rhyming has been associated with masked solicitation rituals (Vennum 1985) and with more elaborate performance traditions in the past and in some places today still. In an interview I conducted in 1992 in Greyabbey, County Down, the men present displayed a confusion over the origin of the Halloween rhyme:

VOICE: “Halloween is coming and the geese are getting fat.” You’ve heard of that?
TEDDY: That would be “Christmas is coming.” Oh, that would be right.
VOICE: “The geese are getting fat.” Yes, that’s wrong. That should be “Christmas is coming.”
SANTINO: Did you go out rhyming?
TEDDY: Every opportunity.
SANTINO: Did you say “Halloween is coming”?
TEDDY: Yes. “Halloween is coming.”
VOICE: No, it’s “Christmas is coming.”
[At this point they argue among themselves as to whether it was done at Christmas.]
VOICE: Was there not rhyming at Halloween?
VOICE: Aye, Christmas rhyming.
SANTINO: Did you go begging at all on Halloween?

VOICES: No, not then, but they do now. I think we said, “Halloween is coming.” That’s wrong.

WOMAN: No, no, it used to be that, then it was changed to “Christmas is coming,” but it was always “Halloween is coming and the goose is getting fat.”

This confusion and disagreement indicate differential experiences: some people know the rhyme as belonging to Halloween; others associate it with Christmas. One woman maintains that it changed from Christmas to Halloween during her lifetime, and this is quite possible. Many people have witnessed major changes in tradition, and it is very likely that the rhyme was associated with Christmas in Ulster, as it is elsewhere in Ireland, before becoming a part of Halloween activities. On a broader level, the conflict indicates the anomalous nature of Northern Ireland, which is reflected in its Halloween customs.

A note on the Christmas mummers’ play in Tromogagh, County Fermanagh, describes a version of the play “performed usually on December 26th or 27th by the family and friends of Mr. and Mrs. Terence McGovern. . . . They call it the ‘Christmas rhymes.’ . . . The collections pay for a ‘treat,’ often a dance, to end the Christmas festivities” (Rogers 1967). This January dance is usually called the Wren Dance. The text of the mummers’ play is the obvious source of the Halloween rhymes in Ulster today. The text, as transcribed by Mary Rogers, follows:

Enter the wran:
“The wran, the wran, the king of all birds,
Was caught in a forest last New Year’s night!
And I hope, Mr. ———,
You’ll give us the price of a trate.
If your trate is small,
It won’t go around the Wran Boys all.
But if your trate is big and if the best,
Then I hope in heaven your soul may rest.
If you don’t believe in what I say,
Enter Miss Funny, I’ll show the way!”
"Here comes I, Miss Funny,
With a long leather purse to carry the money!
Money I want and money I crave,
And money I'll have,
And if I can't get money,
I'll bring you all to the grave!"

Captain:
"We're not the daily beggars that go from door to door.
We're just your neighbors' children,
And you've seen us all before!
With our pockets full of money and our barrels full of beer,
We wish you a merry Christmas and a bright and
prosperous New Year!"

In the above testimony, the rhymers specifically ask for the price of a treat. The Wren Boys are still active in the west of Ireland. “Hunting the wren,” as it is called, reminds us that the older sense of Christmas as a twelve-day holiday is still very much in evidence throughout Ireland. The final few lines remind the audience that the rhymers are “your neighbors’ children.” In earlier times, the assorted Wren Boys, mummers, and rhymers in Ireland were men and youths; after World War II, children—usually boys—were the rhymers. The significant exception to this rule of male rhymers is found on Saint Bridget’s Day, February 1, where in some parts of Ireland processions of unmarried women or girls carried an effigy of that saint on the eve of her feast day. In Ulster, Hilliard (1962:102) describes “biddies” who visited houses on January 31, wearing straw, with black cloth and rabbit skin eye masks. After about 1920, however, the men began to wear women’s hats and colored blouses; some were clad in rags. One of the crowd carried the Biddy which was a short stick stuck in a turnip, sometimes a rag doll or a doll made with straw. Always it was dressed in white baby clothes. Latterly, Florrie O’Sullivan of Killarney tells me that the Biddy was a hollowed-out turnip stuck on a broom handle; it had eyes cut out and there was an electric bulb and battery inside. This shows what the custom has descended to!

I would strongly disagree with the author’s assumption of degeneration. To me, the fact that people have adapted the tradition to
modern conditions shows the strength of that tradition. In all other ways, though, this is a rich piece of information. The use of the turnip is very similar to the turnip lanterns of Halloween, with their carved faces. Also of great interest but beyond our purview here is the replacement of women by men in the processions and the very use of the term *Biddy* for the effigy and the participants. Men who go mumming frequently dress in women’s clothes or rags; this is part of the festive inversion of the traditions. The sight of women processing, wearing the traditional rags or straw, is much rarer and occurs at the feast of a major female saint. Along with St. Patrick and St. Columcille, Bridget is one of the most important Irish saints. Clearly, issues of gender are being dramatized here, both in the traditional practices and in the changes over time.

However, for our purposes, it is worth noting that the particular components of these various traditions overlap: Halloween, Christmas, and St. Bridget’s Day mumming. In Northern Ireland, some of the Halloween rhymes are taken directly from Christmas rhymes. For instance, a sixty-three-year-old woman from Ballydullaghan, County Derry, interviewed by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1944, remembered her Halloween rhyming tradition. Boys and girls went from house to house repeating the following:

Here comes I wee devil dought,
The worst wee devil that ever went out.
It’s money I want and money I crave.
If you don’t give me money, I’ll sweep you all to your graves.
Here comes I wee Johnny Funny.
I’m the boy who lifts the money. (UCD)

In the same year, a man from Magilligan, County Derry, age seventy, remembered the rhyme like this: “It’s money we want and money we crave. If you don’t give us money, you’ll go to your grave.” He says that the rhymers saw themselves as representing the fairy tricksters thought to be roaming on that night—“pretending they were wee folk”—an identification that validates the pranking and other license that the youngsters partake in. At the same time, they might rub salt and meal on their heads to protect themselves from real fairies. The American trick-or-treating custom is similar in this regard, insofar as real people wear costumes
that identify them with the marginal, dangerous, and tricky creatures associated with Halloween, and thus they can behave in socially inversive ways. Also, the rhyme makes it clear that the rhymers are seeking money. Finally, there is an association made with death—a threat, if you will: “If you don’t give us money, you’ll go to your grave.” So in this brief testimony, Halloween rhyming is shown to be related to fuller mumming traditions. It reflects fairy beliefs, manifests a social use of fairy belief (by pretending to be wee folk and behaving accordingly), involves the inversion of social roles (demanding money from neighbors), and involves death in one way or another.

But these old traditions, still performed, generate new variations. In 1976 Linda Ballard interviewed adolescents who made up their own Halloween rhymes. Their performances parallel the format of the mummers’ plays and incorporate the common “Halloween is coming and the geese are getting fat” rhyme. One boy said he had derived some of his ideas from a television production of *Macbeth*. Still, they used these influences creatively, consistent with the old idea of dramatic performance on Hallow Eve. According to a transcript in the archives of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Ballard interviewed twelve-year-old Lorna Graham, her mother, and her friends Colin and Pamela in March 1976. The children’s variation on the “Halloween is coming” rhyme went like this:

**PAMELA:** Hallowe’en is coming,
    So we’ll sing this merry song
    To help the lonely winter nights
    Merrily pass along.

**ALL:** Hallowe’en is coming,
    And the goose is getting fat.
    Would you please put a penny
    In the old man’s hat.
    If you haven’t got a penny,
    A ha’penny will do.
    If you haven’t got a ha’penny,
    God bless you,
    And your old man, too.

**COLIN:** I am the green-eyed witch.
When I was young from school did mitch
Frogs’ tongues, frogs’ legs, and dirty wooden pegs.
Upon your house I cast a spell
And ghosts and greees (?) will haunt it well. [cackling]

LORNA: Late at night, out of sight,
Works a wizard at casting spells.
In a pot, piping hot,
Steam is rising, with eerie smells.
Round the room, in the gloom,
Little can be seen except when a spark
Lights up the dark, revealing a mirky scene.

The children told Ballard they had disguised themselves in their parents’ clothing and hats. They also wore signs on their backs. One sign read, “Death Is Awakened.” On Halloween night the children passed out notes that warned, “The witches will haunt you tonight.” The notes were decorated with drawings of black crosses and upside-down candles. The children then asked for money.

COLIN: If they said no, we says, “Witches will haunt you forever.” And then I blew out the candle. And we put some wax on the posts.
LORNA: And we ran away!
COLIN: And if they did give generously, we put on another slip, with “Thank you” on it. And then I put wax on both the posts.
BALLARD: I see. Was this your idea?
LORNA: It was his.
BALLARD: The wax . . . that was your idea?
COLIN: Yes.
BALLARD: How did you think of that?
LORNA: Because he’s mad. [laughter]
COLIN: I don’t really know.
LORNA: Casting a spell.
COLIN: Oh, aye, I was thinking of spells . . . witch spells, and I says, “Why not do something that witches would do,” I says. Let’s
do that. And Lorna says, "All right." And she made up a poem, something about "You haven't been generous." What was it you said?

- You haven't been generous to us,
- Not at the very most,
- So all the eerie spirits
- Will always pass by this post.

**Pranks**

"Hallow E'en in the district is essentially a time of practical jokes. To my knowledge a farmer went into his byre one morning to find that he had his neighbor's cows and the neighbor some distance away had a similar find."

In the weeks preceding Halloween, children engage in pranks. Unlike the rhyming, however, young people will play pranks on Halloween night itself. Said one man writing in 1958,

In the late waning of Halloween we ducked in a tub of water for apples, made false faces, maybe dressed up in old clothes or women's garments, and then set out with turnip lanterns bent on mischief. If we could find a low thatched house, a wet piece of sacking placed over the chimney soon made the occupants uncomfortable. If we knew that the folk were out visiting, a few drum head cabbage were crushed down to lodge on the "crook tree" and again there was smog for the unfortunate tenants. One would have a large tin with a cord treated with resin inserted in the bottom and his part was to move silently to door or window and by drawing his fingers firmly down the cord produce unearthly noises then scamper. If the boys could get hold of a goat, they left her a comic sight by clipping one half of her beard away. (UFTM)

In general, boys were the perpetrators, but this is not always the case. Sometimes girls had their fun as well. In 1992 Susan McConnell and her granddaughter, Sharon Herron, both recalled hanging cabbage leaves on neighbors' clotheslines. Sharon was a friend of ours from Bangor, but her grandmother lived outside Kilkeel, in the Mourne Mountains.

I wondered if it was significant that this apparently traditional
prank seems in its own way to reaffirm the gender divisions in Northern Ireland in that, while inversive, the prank deals with domestic work, the stereotypical area of laundry. Sharon recounted other pranks she had engaged in, and discussed the difference between male and female pranks:

We did the thing of taking the washing off the line and replacing it with cabbage leaves. But I’m almost embarrassed to tell you this. There was an old fella up the street and we saw him go into his room and take his clothes off. And he was running about in long johns, you know, the all-in-ones. We were hiding behind the tree and we laughed and laughed. And we were really naughty to stay and actually watch what he had done. And then we come back and we talk about it still.

And then at home, well, you know, where I was growing up as a child, there was a shop nearby and there was a cross shopkeeper, and I remember we got mud and we smeared it all over his windows. And he had crates and crates of milk bottles and we lifted them all out and got them individually over the front yard, which meant he had to put them all back again, of course. And my sister was in the shop the next day and she heard another local little fella getting the rap for it—“You’re always up to something!” And there was us, the three normally innocent little things, probably at ten or eleven years old.

I asked if a boy got the blame because boys rather than girls were associated with mischief. Mrs. McConnell answered:

Boys were doing the vandalism. There’s a chap lived over in the next townland to us, and he and a few more went to a neighbor’s house and they had young sucklers, pigs, not very big, and they opened the door and let them all out Halloween night. Things like that. And then there was another farmhouse near Kilkeel, and they went to it and they spilled diesel, you know what that’s for, diesel for the tractors or diesel for lorries, all over the potatoes they were picking. Yes, that was bad.

An index of pranks is provided in the following testimony from the 1940s, which includes a version of a prank I heard in the 1990s from Charlie Fox in Bangor.
In county Cavan of Ulster and in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone I knew of several Halloween pranks carried on by the youthful fraternity, e.g., placing sods or wet bags on chimneys to smoke the inmates out, tying gates and door handles, taking gates off pillars and throwing them into streams or hiding them. Upsetting or hiding small wooden bridges. Placing or sticking notices or signs, e.g., of a Public house on to a Church Notice Board or a Public Library Notice on to a pub window.

I knew of one case where an old man was sleeping in his thatched two roomed cottage when the "boys" took the wheels off his donkey cart, took the body of the cart and wheels into the kitchen, and reassembled the cart. Then took the old man’s donkey, harnessed it and placed it into the cart shafts and closed the outer door. The "boys" then wakened the unsuspecting old man (having carried out their deed so silently) by throwing small stones at the window. One can guess the look of surprise on the old man’s face when he would see the donkey and cart in the kitchen. In his half-awakened eyes and mind, he would wonder if he was seeing a vision or if a miracle had occurred! (UCD)

These few weeks before Halloween are also the time for pranks involving fireworks. These are not the backgarden display but “penny bangers” and occasionally more powerful explosives, which feature largely in a young male culture. Philip Robinson spent an afternoon recounting Halloween pranks he remembered from his rural boyhood in Ballybefore. He said that fireworks were very strongly associated with pranks. They were equally associated with the culture of young manhood. Boys frequently took the explosive powder out of the fireworks, then tried to impress girls by holding the harmless banger with their teeth and lighting it, on the assumption that the girls did not know the gunpowder had been removed. Boys also combined the powder of several bangers to make their own rockets. “I really set a thatch roof on fire once by shooting a rocket at it,” says one man. “I made banger guns, too. You got a piece of pipe, or a toy metal gun, put the banger in, then a marble.” Says Philip, “In a boyish world, fireworks operated in a boys’ subculture. You could hold them in your hand for as long as you dared to show how brave you were.”

In Northern Ireland as in other places, during socially sanctioned periods of license such as Halloween, when young people
are allowed and expected to engage in disruptive behavior that would not otherwise be tolerated, the pranking can sometimes cross the line from play to something more dangerous. An account of such an instance follows:

Halloween was a great time for doing pranks on people, especially ones that were easily annoyed. One of these was scraping the door and running away. Then when the door was closed, doing the same over again, keeping the inmates in a stew. Another one worse was putting squibs into the house. There was a case of this sort happened not far from here. A few boys came late from another carry-on, and to finish the night went to a lone woman’s house and put squibs below the door, setting fire to a mat. If it hadn’t been for the good work of a neighbor, very likely she would have been burned to death. The boys were caught and prosecuted. (UCD)

In this case, the ludic nature of the pranks was transcended, however unintentionally, and the boys suffered serious consequences for an act that had caused real danger. There are limits to license, even during the most liminal times.

Some pranks are more sinister than others. A person from the Lecale district in County Down referred to “jokes of a malicious nature” that “disturbed the peace of the parish. Young wheat was plowed up, and farm machinery was often smashed beyond repair” (UCD). Assuming the accuracy of this account from the mid-1940s (I have not come across other similar descriptions), we see that the pranks could be the vehicles for anger and destruction. More often, if pranks resulted in bodily injury or real destruction, it was usually an accident. The same person from Lecale had this to say regarding pranks:

I remember boys building a pile of thorns outside the door of an eccentric old farmer. Having hidden behind a nearby wall they proceeded to pelt his door with stones. The farmer, rushing out in a rage with a loaded gun, fell headlong into the thorns. The gun went off, and fortunately nobody was hurt.

On another occasion, a farmer, on his way home from a fair with a donkey and cart, called at a country pub for a last drink. He had been imbibing rather freely all day, and to make sure the
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donkey would not leave him stranded, he tied it to an iron gate leading into a field. Some boys who knew him well unyoked the ass, brought it into the field, closed the gate, and having pushed the shafts of the cart through the bars of the gate, yoked the ass into the shafts again. The farmer, of course, could not understand how the ass managed to get into such a fix but insisted, with the help of an ash plant, on making him regain his status quo. (UFTM)

Pranks are intended to cause irritation, particularly to irritable (or otherwise marginal) individuals. “The young people throw cabbage and turf at the door of every house on this night. If there is an old man bachelor they play more on him,” said a twelve-year-old boy in 1943 (UCD). Being chased or being threatened is the desired outcome of many pranks. The fun is in the reaction. But when the prank unintentionally moves from being a kind of symbolic, dramatic enactment of social categories and instead results in a life-threatening situation, the social approbation also moves from a relatively harmless, informal (and ineffective) censuring to legal action representing the structure and authority of the state to control such actions.

The reaction of the victims of these pranks can be dangerous as well. The idea is to provoke a reaction, so the rhymers and pranksters know what they are getting themselves into, but sometimes a farmer will unload a round of buckshot at the tricksters or otherwise threaten real bodily harm. For instance, a woman writing to the Committee on Ulster Folk Life and Traditions in 1957 described pranks played on “an old man who lived the next house to us. . . . I have heard too about one Hallowe’en the boys were carrying on around his door. Suddenly a scythe blade was moved back and forward under the door which cleared the merrymakers.”

The pranks can have a touch of social commentary to them. When the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum was in the process of relocating some old buildings, stone by stone, from Coshkib, County Antrim, to the museum, somebody painted numbers on a neighboring farm building, causing the farmer to think his house was to be dismantled for the UFTM. That prank has become something of a legend around the museum, where it has particular relevance. Sometimes the pranks reflect the sectarian divide. This testimony was taken in 1943 from Ann Martin, age ninety, of
Donegal (UFTM). “When I was in Killyward the youngsters pulled up a whole field of cabbage. Father Nick would not give them absolution until they made restitution to the Protestant man who owned the field.” It is significant to recall here that Donegal is a predominantly Catholic county, one that, while part of Ulster, is not part of Northern Ireland.

Agnes Grindle recalled a time when a minister did not recognize a prank in progress:

GRINDLE: I lived in a pretty nice area. There were two little boys in front of me, and it was Halloween. There was a minister coming down, a nice young minister, and he saw these two little boys doing their best to stretch up to the bell. You know they knock doors. You’ve heard of that, have you? They knock doors. They get people up, then run. And he saw them, and he walked over to the door and said, “Can I help you, dear?” And he lifted the little boy up to ring the bell. And then they rung the bell and ran away as quick as they could. They ran, you see. They ran away as quick as they could, you see.

SANTINO: Did the minister run as well?

GRINDLE: Well, he didn’t run. [laughs] They just did this joke to get the lady to come to the door. And many times he told people about it, including me.

Mrs. Grindle emphasized that she was not of “the Irish tradition,” meaning that she considers herself British. The stories she told me tended to focus on individuals who are somehow outside the traditions and, as a result, do not recognize them. The minister here is not identified as being English, but some kind of class and ethnic identification is clearly involved in this story.

In reflecting, however faintly, the sectarian divide, and also by drawing attention to figures who in some way embody marginality in society, the pranks are rightly understood as social actions that reveal a sense of communal agreement regarding appropriate ways to behave in a relatively small-scale community and society. A piece of testimony from 1943 describes Halloween pranks as a means of social redistribution, as well as a way of publicly calling attention to greedy and miserly individuals: “An old custom that still prevails was the stealing and throwing of cabbages at doors. The cab-
bages were generally taken from those who were most greedy for the goods of this world. It is suggested that these cabbages were originally only thrown at the doors of those who had none and who could not afford to get them” (UCD).

And just as mentioning rhyming led us to a discussion of knocking on doors and playing pranks, so do the pranks lead us to a discussion of the dead who return on Halloween. Some adults, reminiscing about their youthful pranks, say that the idea of knocking and then disappearing is derived from the identification of the pranksters with ghosts. Also, I am struck by a statement that Patricia O’Neill made to me. After relating stories of the banshee, who is a portent of death (see chapter 5), Patricia said, “So there were wonderful stories, but it certainly was something that was not laughed at. A lot of people heard the banshee. Banshees would come up and tap on windows, knock on doors, and you’d open the door and there’d be nobody there, you know. You’d hear the knock, the Knock of Death, they’d call it.” Death comes knocking invisibly on the door. One opens it, and there is nobody there. On Halloween, a night when the dead visit the living, child pranksters knock on doors and disappear. Related to this is the practice of tying a thread to the knocker of a door and pulling on it from a nearby hiding place. The resident would hear the knocking at the door but open it to find emptiness. Experientially, at least, the knock of death and the knock of Halloween pranksters sound the same.

Writing in a fieldwork notebook, a collector for the Irish Folklore Commission described turnip lanterns, another icon of Halloween in most areas of Northern Ireland. It, too, is simultaneously physical and spiritual, vegetable and otherworldly, frightening and fun.

Rough lanterns hollowed out of turnips, having a lighted candle inside, and holes cut in the turnip for eyes, nose, and mouth, and carried by a string handle was deemed sufficient to scare people out of their wits. My father said he remembered two or three older boys putting on white sheets and going into the old graveyard with its ivy covered walls and ruins. . . . These boys made weird noises at the passing people, flitted about, and now and again placed lighted carved turnip lanterns (with human grinning faces) on top of the graveyard wall. (UCD)

John Quinn, who lived most of his life in Cushendall, County
Antrim, in the Glens of Antrim, remembered turnip lanterns fondly. After carving the faces, he would attach beards made of mattress stuffing.

Halloween pranks were legion. Rosining was one such trick. This involves attaching a strong thread to a needle and inserting the needle between the putty and the glass of a window. A piece of resin was rubbed briskly to and fro on the taut thread attached to a tin can, creating an eerie sound that was sure to annoy anyone inside the home.

There would even be homemade explosives, a rural equivalent to the fireworks and squibs prevalent today. “Another prank was to get an empty ‘Blacking’ tin, punch a small hole in the lid and insert a taper to act as a fuse when lighted. A piece of carbide had been placed in the tin and also a little water, and the tin replaced. When the taper was lighted, the tin was placed in a hallway, when shortly afterwards a mild explosion would occur—the lid ‘flying off’ ” (UCD).

Another individual writes, “One rather unpleasant trick which boys used to practice was to take a very dry ‘kale runt’—that is, a cabbage stalk—and hold it in the fire until it was smoldering. It would then be pushed under a door or in through a letter box or
keyhole. It was generally at the house of someone the boys wished to annoy” (UCD). Note that boys are the perpetrators of the pranks and that there is real annoyance involved. Even with the turnip lanterns, one man describes how an “old Presbyter” would unload a shotgun barrel into the graveyard to put an end to the boys’ antics.

As in the United States, older or unfriendly neighbors were the target of the licensed hostilities of Halloween, and these actions frequently resulted in aggression. Still, it is important to repeat that these tricks generally preceded the family night of Halloween itself, when much of this somewhat antisocial feeling was resolved. Again we see a dichotomy—in this case, that of indoor-outdoor. Pranks are directed at anomalous or cranky adults in a kind of social approbation by youngsters. The dramatization of generational conflict is done outdoors with peers, while the indoor activities are familial and socially reaffirming.

Halloween pranks could also be directed at courting couples as a kind of hazing, or shivaree (UFTM). “For instance, if a boy and girl were keeping company, living a few miles apart, and trying to keep this secret, his bicycle or farm machinery may be taken and left on her doorstep, and something belonging to her left on his. Or a barber, keeping company with a girl, a few nights before Halloween the pole or sign over his premises would be removed, and placed so as to point toward his home, in a prominent position” (UFTM). Here the prank takes on the dimension of public display, but the display is foisted on the unsuspecting victims.

Along the same lines, another informant wrote in 1957, “There were always a lot of tricks played on Halloween night, such as taking a cart from a house where a girl was keeping company with a boy. They would leave the cart at the boy’s house, to embarrass him when he saw his intended father-in-law or brother-in-law coming to take home the cart, or whatever was taken” (UFTM). With these activities members of the community—peers, presumably—publicly note a private relationship. The aggression of the prank lies in the revelation of the secret, which clearly was no secret at all, since others were aware of the relationship. Many Halloween traditions in Northern Ireland are integrative of the entirety of the life cycle, and while courting couples are vulnerable in their sensitivity, here too we see a tradition (pranking) that is used to
address not only social anomaly but also those stages of life crucial to the ongoing maintenance of the social group.

Perhaps because Northern Ireland has witnessed such extreme sectarian violence, this cohesiveness is all the more precious. The young men who populate paramilitary groups might, under other circumstances, take part in mumming traditions instead. Their activities are deadly serious. Family and community values are paramount in the rituals and customs of Halloween, which provides a model of social cohesion with a lack of foregrounded ethnic, religious, or political identity. Even when pranks are truly frightening, issues of neighborliness are dramatized and underscored, as are concepts of stranger and friend. For Martina McCauley, for instance, her “best memory” of Halloween involves a prank that got out of hand. Significantly she points out that her relatives did not know the victims:

I remember one year when everybody took part in one party, and my wee brothers’ schoolmates dressed up, and they scared these two girls so much that we had to take them into the house and give them a glass of water. They were absolutely spooked out. My brother, and I think it must have been my mum, had both gone out dressed up. I think this was the prank, because my brother had a fur coat and a horrible false face and a big army coat on. They scared these two girls, and they were screaming—in their teens, you know. We had to take them in and give them ice water, and that was really kind of exciting because they had actually scared anyone that much. Of course, they laughed—the girls were laughing then, but we sort of took them in. If we scared them that much, we’d better be nice to them, give them a wee sweet. You see, my mother would have known most of them on the street. These were kids she didn’t know. But mum would have taken great pride going round to her friends. Some of them would have known it was her, but this was earlier, like people going up to bang doors that she would scare.

Mum used to dress up, and she used to put on an old army coat. That’s like an army-type coat, like a big Gestapo kind of coat. And she used to put that on, with my dad’s cap, because he worked on the buses. He was a bus driver. She used to have his cap on, and her hair all, you know, down on her face, so she looked like a man. And she was saying that she went out in the street and
went up to this woman she knew. The woman didn’t know who she was. And kind of grabbed her, you know. Because of Halloween she’d have her face all painted and the moustache painted on, and the woman was screaming and everything. And she said she never did have the heart to tell her who she was. She just ran off, and you know years later she’d still see her. The woman had told her a couple of days later, “Some dirty old man grabbed me.” Mum thought this was hilarious. But she would still have gone out in recent years, you know, with this big ugly rubber false face on. We had one of the first ones with the hair and everything on it. And they were really expensive, and this was our pride and joy. And mum used to button up an old fur coat, with like a cushion stuffed up her back. And she’d go inside with these wee pellet bombs, you know, the wee, like they got caps on them. You throw them and they explode and stuff. She used to go out on the streets with those. My brothers would have dressed up as well, and they would go for the cars and things. We were at a junction, so people have to stop their car before they turn right, and they’d jump out of the hedge and goof around, go for them, you know. In our house that was a big kind of night, because I came from a family of eight. So there were loads of us around. And Halloween was a really, really big day. And even when the kids got older, it still was, because there was still me there. I am the youngest. So there would have been a ball, a party, just for me. But it was a bit of a lark, too, you know, just for the older ones. There was a chance for a bit of a carry on, just go crazy. And they would get dressed up as well. I think people thought we were a bit loopy, but we really enjoyed that kind of, you know, Halloween thing. We’d be behind the hedge and jump up to scare the people and get abuse shouted at us and stuff. But when most of us were young, we would have had the Halloween kind of games and stuff at that time. I mean, there were other ones in high school, in their teens and in their twenties, but they joined in, too. But we would have had dunking for apples and swinging the apple from your door... and loads of fruit and loads of nuts.

The door would be open all the time. We’d be running in and out. You know, it would be sort of like an open house. And especially, not so much when I was younger, but when older ones, that are older than me, you know, the ones that are in their thirties, late twenties now, when they were younger, it was sort of our house was like a collecting point for a lot of the kids, because
there was so many in the family and basically there were five or six extra kids mum wouldn’t notice at that stage. And they would all have come in from around the neighborhood.

In this account pranks, though disruptive and bothersome, generally do not threaten the larger social cohesion. In fact, they promote familiarity and commonality.

**Bonfires**

From late September on, boys collect materials for Halloween bonfires. The bonfires are a highly localized custom (Gailey 1977). For some people, bonfires were an important part of the celebration; others never even heard of the practice of lighting them at Halloween. In 1991, several Halloween bonfires were lit in East Belfast but not elsewhere in the city. As we will see below, bonfires in Northern Ireland are often associated with political celebrations and historical commemorations. While the term *Bonfire Night* once referred to Halloween, in Northern Ireland today it refers to the Eleventh Night, the eve of the Twelfth of July, the national holiday that celebrates the victory of the Protestant William III over the Catholic James II at the battle of the Boyne. In England, *Bonfire Night* refers to November 5, Guy Fawkes Night, which commemorates the apprehension and subsequent execution of the men who attempted to blow up Parliament in 1605. So the term *Bonfire Night* in Northern Ireland was used to refer to a custom on a night in close proximity to the English Guy Fawkes Night, but it now refers to a summer festival that is thematically similar to Guy Fawkes Night in that it celebrates the establishment and maintenance of the Protestant state. Indeed, many people see no Protestant-Catholic dimension in the Guy Fawkes traditions. Rather, they view the day as a celebration of the deliverance of Parliament from violent destruction. Other residents of Northern Ireland would view anything having to do with the maintenance of the British government as a necessarily political event.

Still, bonfires are an important part of Halloween throughout Ulster and are not viewed as political items on most occasions. Young men and boys spend a great deal of time gathering materials, constructing bonfires, and guarding the sites against marauders from other neighborhoods or nearby towns. These activities are felt to be very much a part of the season.
Peter Harvey of Bangor told me in 1994 about the Halloween bonfires he had in his backgarden:

I would have brought the boys that I played with into it. Most of it would have been hedging from the garden. It wouldn’t have been a bonfire in the sense it would have been sort of fifteen feet high. It would have been four or five feet high. The autumn cuttings would have been used to build the fire, and we would have collected old orange boxes and things to put in the middle of it, and all the rubbish you can find lying around. I can remember collecting newspapers for two or three weeks beforehand to put in the center of it. Then throwing paraffin over it to get it going. It’s pretty miserable if it rained. I can’t remember it actually pouring down. I remember it being pretty damp and miserable. The thing always got lit. It probably was a pretty small bonfire. It looked big to me. I was about seven or eight at the time. Probably burned for an hour or two, then by the summer the patch would grow over again. It was a very innocent time.

The weather here, although I talked about a few damp nights, it’s actually quite attractive for a fire because you can get the first frost in, you can get the dry, frosty weather, and you’re burning off all of the old rubble, and there’s a lovely bright cherry glow to the fire and that lovely crackling noise as it takes off and burns very, very brightly. It’s a very attractive thing.

Philip Robinson connected such bonfires with adolescent excitement:

ROBINSON: Most communities have a traditional bonfire site regardless of what bonfire it is, and where I lived there was a railway line immediately on the sea. It ran right along the seacoast, with what we call a stone battery wall to protect the railway line embankment from the sea. And everybody lived behind the railway line, so to get to the sea you had to cross the railway line.

Now just immediately opposite us there was a little neck of soil, of grassy land, that ran on the seaside and just had one point, just big enough for a bonfire. And on some occasions that’s where we would go down and sunbathe and swim and so on. It was just open common ground; just anybody owned it. That on a number of occasions was where we had our bonfire. But it wasn’t where it was on most occasions. There was another little bit of land that was actually on the edge of the village where a corner was cut off
Philip Robinson tends his Halloween bonfire, County Down, 1991.

by a new link road. Where it swept around the corner there's a little pocket of ground which is unfenced, at least at the roadside. We called it the wee field, and the wee field was where we almost always had a bonfire. And in later years when the Halloween bonfires died out and were replaced by a bonfire on the Eleventh Night, that is where the Eleventh bonfire was built.

When I was about eighteen I saw Bonfire Night move from Halloween to the Eleventh and with that a change of the sort of personality of the place with redevelopment, rehousing of people from Belfast in Carrickfergus; what I certainly regarded at the time as an urban Belfast tradition coming down. Although the Orange tradition was still very strong, Eleventh of July and the Twelfth of July were always associated with Orange celebrations. The Orange tradition was strong enough before the Belfast immigration, but there was just never an Eleventh Night bonfire lit on the eve of the Twelfth of July. And that was a completely different personality and so on. And indeed the curbstones of the road, the new road that goes about the wee field, if you go there today they're all painted red, white, and blue. That's all sort of
modern. Orange reflects, almost perpetuates the site as the site of the Eleventh Bonfire Night now, whereas for us it was always our Halloween bonfire.

Painting curbs is a well-known territorial marking, and in terms of the Bonfire Night it’s more than territorial because they’re not marking the territorial boundary. It’s more to mark the site of a shrine or a ritual place almost, where the bonfire site is. So anyway, that’s another story.

That fortnight before Halloween was a buildup to Halloween. It didn’t just involve Halloween rhyming at night. You wouldn’t be collecting it at night. And the only overlap that I can think of is that you did go around the doors asking for papers for Halloween. And quite often you’d have armfuls and armfuls of magazines and old newspapers. And you’d really collect cardboard boxes and bags and sacks and sacks and loads of papers—far more than you ever needed. And you would call at the door and you’d say, “Anything for the Halloween bonfire?” and they’d give papers for Bonfire Night. But it wasn’t regarded as begging. People just sort of knew what you were collecting for. But they were only papers needed to light the bonfire. There was all sorts of other rituals and things that we did to collect the actual burning materials. We went to a garage every year for old spare tires for the bonfire—these were car tires.

SANTINO: Did people give them to you?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. A battle always broke out in the gang trying to kick the tires along the road, you know, playing hoops and all of that. I mean, all the associations with tires would be because they were just used to make the bonfire go up. We were lucky in that we lived quite close to a big repair garage that had a lot of loose combustibles every year. But the main thing was the gathering of wood, which where we lived involved a mixture, but very little timber in the sense of old doors and that sort of worked wood. It was mostly trees and branches.

SANTINO: That had fallen?

ROBINSON: No, no. We lived in a village in the countryside. Our countryside is absolutely covered. If you look out at an oblique angle, it looks as if it’s all wooded because the fields are so small with hedgerows and lanes everywhere. The place just looks like
it's wooded. Actually, in practice there was no real woodland within three, four miles of us. What we did was we went up a lane every year. We called at one particular thatched house where my uncle, Tommy Donaldson, lived, and he was a farmer—one of the few farmers that actually lived in the village. And in the stables he had all of these ropes, and we thought of ourselves like cowboys. He had all these ropes, which we borrowed from him, plus axes, hatchets that we borrowed from him. He was a local grouch. And you would never have dreamed of asking him for anything except that it was almost traditional that he was the person who lent the ropes for dragging the trees back to the bonfire. So what we’d do is we’d set off with all these ropes and hatchets and knives and things, and a gang—usually there’d be eight or nine of us—would go way up into these lanes and certainly just look for trees and hedges to cut down. And quite often, you know, you had to do this surreptitiously, and you were looking out, and quite often you’d do it with all the hedges alongside the laneways. And I remember being on a lane. Quite a lot of our farmers still used horses and carts. That’s since only thirty years ago, but it’s true. And these were cart track lanes. And I remember on a number of occasions hauling piles, loads of these branches out onto the lane. Horror of horrors, didn’t the horse and cart and farmer come down from the fields, appear in the distance. So we all scattered to hide behind the hedge, but . . . of course, having left all the branches in the lane, he had to physically stop and throw these all over to the side to get past. But he didn’t spot us, and he had assumed that he had just come across them.

SANTINO: Did you go back and get them?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. We were actually hiding very close behind hedges. And then when he’d thrown those off the path, we eventually piled it all up. The cut end of the hedge or the tree, you would put all of those together, tie them round with rope and use the rest of the rope to actually trail these branches. I remember we used to think of ourselves again like cowboys and Indians; this was copying the way the Indians covered the trail, they say, by dragging the branches. And of course, the lads in the back would stand on the branches dragged. Pulled the shoulder off whoever was dragging. All the usual things we’d do. But that was all part of the personality of the season to me and of the nostalgia of the season. . . . I have more recollections about making and gathering
the bonfire and preparing the bonfire than I have, almost, as much as the bonfire itself later on.

But, anyway, the gathering of the wood for the bonfire was a big thing, you know. There was always a matter of pride. We regarded ourselves as tough guys, and it was a sort of gang thing gathering the bonfire. And then there’s this gang rivalry with the next community where there would be a bonfire being built. There it was always fair prey—either to try to steal their stuff or get their stuff and light it.

SANTINO: Before Halloween.

ROBINSON: Before Halloween, yes. So they’d have to start again. Of course, that meant that your own bonfire had to be guarded—and all night sometimes.

SANTINO: Were you allowed to stay out all night to guard the bonfire?

ROBINSON: Well, we weren’t allowed to stay out all night, but I’ll tell you what we did. We built a hut beside the bonfire, and usually the hut had a dual purpose. It was usually a hut made out of doors and bits of timber and cardboard boxes and things. But the idea is that you wouldn’t actually physically build up the bonfire until just before so it couldn’t be lit, so it’d be very difficult to light. Also, you didn’t put the papers on the bonfire, partly to keep them dry if it rained before Bonfire Night, and partly again so they couldn’t be easily lit. So all of these papers were kept inside the hut and we would all hang around the hut and eat nuts, and we would sit and read *Titbits*, which is one of our juicy magazines with rather revealing photographs, most likely of ladies wearing corsets and things which appealed to our excitement. But all of these things were pored over avidly, and you would leaf through the magazines and look at pictures and that sort of thing. You’d play other games and there were quite often a lot of games played with the girls—sort of risqué games at times with the girls. My memory is that that’s really the only time the girls started to figure in the Halloween preparations—in these gatherings at night, around the half-prepared bonfire. Of course, this is all at night. Now, you say all night. Well, I would say that it would be very rare. About half eleven was really as late as anybody was allowed out; but sometimes it was done and you’d have to stand guard all night, and what we would do is we’d all go home, but prearrange
what we called a “midnight feast.” And we sometimes did this outside the Halloween season; which is, you’d wait until your parents had gone to bed and you’d climb out the window, and you usually took some food you had prepared in your bedroom. And I could tell you a few amusing stories about Halloween midnight feasts, but basically that’s what you did. At midnight. The idea in theory was that it was midnight. Sometimes it was right before midnight. Sometimes it was just when it was safe to get out. You would rendezvous with your friends, and you would have all of these sweets, and you would just gather back in the hut. But it wasn’t really to keep guard. It was the excitement, you know. Your parents think that you’re snug in bed asleep.

SANTINO: Where would you sleep that night?

ROBINSON: Oh, I don’t ever remember sleeping at all at a midnight feast. I mean, it was just excitement, you know?

SANTINO: Did you ever get caught?

ROBINSON: Well, yeah. One night I was lying in bed and my brother was in—he was one of us, too, he used to go, too—and we were both in different bedrooms. My mother hadn’t yet gone to bed and I had gotten up and went into his bedroom, ready to go. We didn’t want to go out the door, actually. We weren’t going to climb out the window. We were going to go out the back door through the hall. But we had to wait until my mother went to bed. And we’d actually got ourselves out onto the landing when my mother came up the hall, and we had to actually hide, and that is good excitement. Mother went into the bedroom, saw nobody there, and started to say, “Where are you?” and we appeared, but we didn’t let on what was happening.

There was another occasion when Mother had gone to bed, sitting up in bed reading with her door open and her light on. And we had our lights out waiting for Mother to turn her light out so we could disappear. The rest of the gang were getting impatient and had come round to what they thought was my window—to knock the window—but unfortunately, instead of my window, it was my mother’s window that they knocked. And my mother got the fright of her life. All this rapping at the window at midnight, and I could hear her from my room. “Who’s there? Who’s there?” And I recognized this voice of a friend of mine, John Peter, saying, “Ah, is Philip coming out to play?” As if he was knocking the back door, you know, at six o’clock at night. But
my mother is saying, “What on earth?” So I went down and said, “Oh, no, it’s all right. We had just arranged to go out for a midnight feast.” Whereby my mother was so taken aback by that—faintly amused as well, but also greatly relieved—she actually let us go out for this strange ritual which she’d never heard of before.

One of our gang, who actually came from Belfast with his parents, was observed by his father getting out—climbing out his window at night. And his father followed us, caught him, gave him an absolute hiding, and dragged him on home screaming. And his father thought that we were all out to burglar houses, we were up to crime. He didn’t know about this strange ritual.

As we have seen, boys spend quite a lot of their time during the autumn in their bonfire huts, which function essentially as club-houses. Sometimes boys sleep in them through the night to protect them from marauding rivals, and stories circulate of boys who have received serious, even fatal injuries, because they were trapped inside huts that were set afire.

Adolescents frequently use the huts for sexual exploration. More frequently, boys sneak peeks at girlie magazines in the usually all-male environment, but at times young couples take advantage of the convenient huts. The early fumbling sexual encounters, so typical of this stage of life, can be seen as rehearsals toward later domestic roles, but they are also the means of moving from the gender-based peer groups of youth to the dyadic domesticity of maturity. Like the divination games that indicate future life roles, these adolescent activities are constitutive of the society as it already exists. They are not inversive. The sexual experimentation (playing with fire) that goes on in the huts is an important age-specific activity that ultimately reinforces the domestic unit and leads directly to it (Schwoeffermann 1994). Overall, the rituals and customary activities of Halloween not only dramatize idealized gender roles but bond the actors in those roles to each other, father to son, mother to daughter. Children bond with parents and grandparents. Parents join in children’s play, while adolescents rehearse adulthood.

**Family Fireworks**

After the weeks of rhyming and pranks and gathering bonfire materials, October 31 arrives. As I have stated, fireworks and rockets
are a major component of Northern Ireland's Halloween celebrations, and depictions of them are prominently featured on retail displays. Their importance is also measured by the fact that they frequently appear on other Halloween-related materials. For instance, on a poster for a drama entitled *October Song*, the only image overtly related to Halloween is one of rockets, Catherine wheels, and Roman candles. The actions of the play occur on All Souls’ Night, identified as Halloween, although October 31 is in actuality the eve of All Saints’ Day. All Souls’ Day is November 2. Generally speaking, I have found that in Ireland as in areas of Mexico (and I suspect elsewhere) these days together form a calendrical period, a kind of collective days of the dead, rather than a single day of the dead. *October Song* concerns characters coming to grips with unresolved aspects of their past, putting the ghosts and demons of their lives to rest, so to speak. The fireworks on the poster have already been ignited, bringing sensual reminders to people of their own childhoods.

An event I observed illustrates these connections very well. The fireworks display was set up by the men, several yards from the bonfire. After the fire was lit and had begun to burn down a bit, the fireworks were lit. Roman candles, Catherine wheels, and Jumpin’ Jennies flew, popped, and spun. Several people commented that the smell of the discharged fireworks reminded them of the Halloween of their youth. I have always considered fireworks to be primarily a visual entertainment, secondarily an auditory one: they sparkle, they spin, and they explode. Here, however, it was the olfactory aspect, the smell of the burnt fireworks hovering in the night air, that triggered the emotional reminiscences.

I learned just how sensual Halloween is when celebrated in this fashion. Not only did the fireworks delight visually and make a lot of noise as well, but the bonfire was mesmerizing. It showered sparks, a giant firecracker itself. Standing near it, I felt its great heat, away from it, the chill air. All of this occurs outside in the great black country night, after the pleasures of companionship over a tasty meal inside. This festival engages all senses.

Most people I interviewed thought that the family fireworks tradition had suffered greatly because of the ban, which is supposedly intended to prevent children from playing with dangerous explosives as much as to keep these materials out of the hands of
terrorists. Still, I saw a healthy business in the smuggled firework trade. The contraband materials were sold openly on the streets of Belfast in the few days before Halloween. After I had heard so much about the way the ban had all but destroyed Halloween, more and more people told me they would be lighting such fireworks. All of these people were law-abiding middle-class citizens. I asked if they thought they might get into trouble with the law. “Ach, no,” as they say in Northern Ireland. “No one will bother you for lighting a banger on Halloween.” So the custom continues with covert official toleration. No one seems to think that smuggling, in this case, is really wrong, and everyone seems to think that Halloween is a special time when it is all right to go a bit outside the law. Lighting a fireworks display is considered by many people to be almost mandatory, especially those with school-age children. It would not be Halloween without fireworks.

On the other hand, a generation of children have grown up with fireworks legally banned as a result of the troubles. Many of them attend the outdoor civic displays. Although members of an earlier generation assume that this change in the tradition represents a corruption of it, I have found that many young adults remember these events fondly. Martina McCauley recalls their festive nature:

They had them at Casement Park, a fireworks display with pantomimes and fancy dress that was organized by a leisure service. And they have kids from drama groups from the other leisure centers, because leisure centers tend to have drama groups for kiddies and stuff. I think there might have been schools involved in it as well. Probably more likely clubs, drama groups, that sort of thing. There were about eight different stages for the kids to perform on. There were things you could buy, sweeties in the center of this big hall. Then outside were these eight stages. One at a time they would have performed, you know; all the lights would have gone out. There’d be music in-between times, just spooky music, whatever. Green lights and red lights, a big, spooky-looking collection of, I don’t know, it looked like a big statue or something with cobwebs drooped around it. It was very, very well done. One at a time these wee groups would do their wee performances, and all the lights would go out, and there’d be a person over the intercom introducing whoever it was, the name of the youth club, and they would be putting on the performance, and it
would be like a pantomime or some sort of a dance or a wee drama that they'd made up or that they'd got from somewhere.

So one of them was the Wax Works I was telling you about. A kiddy gets trapped in the waxworks and turns into a waxwork himself. That was very good. And there was another one with two children getting lost in the forest. And there was this wee futuristic play. That's all I can remember. I know there were a couple of others. They all had to have the horror theme.
Martina’s Halloween sounds like an American psychedelic 1960s happening, but within its very contemporary form is a reliance on older performative modes. The pantomimes she refers to are otherwise very strongly associated with the Christmas season. These plays are not silent, as the name suggests, but humorous, almost burlesque renderings of traditional tales and children’s stories, such as Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, and the goose that laid the golden egg, related to both mumming and music hall traditions. Almost every church and school group performs these at Christmas, and they are a popular feature of the midwinter festivities. As Halloween came under more official direction in the 1970s in response to the dramatic increase in violence, the schools, churches, and leisure centers borrowed the tradition. By adding lights and changing the spatial dimensions of the performances, as well as focusing on certain themes, they created a liminal environment and experience more appropriate to Halloween. The idea of dramatic performance remains customary. Martina goes on to say that as she grew older, she most enjoyed the crowds and costumes. Perhaps succeeding generations will cherish their memories of these large fireworks displays as much as older generations recall family fireworks.

Although there is a substantial difference between the two types of fireworks events, one is not necessarily degenerate when compared with the other. The emphasis and experience of the backgarden displays is familial, while the town and city displays are more peer group oriented. Whole families might attend, but the crowds are big, and there are many strangers. Youngsters in their litter-bin liners and fancy dress roam the grounds, carrying turnip lanterns. At backgarden fireworks displays, neighboring families visit and children run in and out of the house all evening. The fireworks are set up by the father and the sons. One man explained to me why, like so many others, he always thought of Halloween as a big family holiday: “I always felt loved on Halloween. First we all had a meal, and that’s a statement, and then my father and I would go out back and set up the fireworks. I felt a special bond with him.”

Martina McCauley describes her West Belfast home as a Halloween haven, a place where her mother and even her more reserved father engaged in inversive behavior. They masqueraded and played pranks, as did her brothers. The house was open to
friends, neighbors, children, and even strangers. She says, “There’s loads of kids about, and they run in and out of each other’s houses. And you just live in anybody’s house. It doesn’t matter, you know, you sleep in your own house but there is this kind of you belong to the community, not just your family.” It is important to note Martina’s residence is in the Andersonstown area of West Belfast, an area she once described to me as “Little Beirut,” referring to the fact that it is a center of militant republicanism in Belfast. In fact, when talking about fireworks being illegally exploded, she mentions that police did not come into the area, especially over an issue as trivial as fireworks. Instead, Andersonstown was regularly patrolled by British soldiers.

Although experienced outdoors, backgarden fireworks are exploded in an area that is part of the domestic sphere. The people who freely come and go throughout the evening are not strangers; the community involved is a known one. In urban areas such as Belfast, backgarden displays are often impractical. Instead, they may be held in front or on the street, especially if one lives in a cul-de-sac. Terrace housing and apartment complexes have open areas that would be used. Where fireworks displays and bonfires are out in the front of the house or on the street, this too marks home turf. Both the unofficial family firework displays and the municipally sponsored celebrations coexist, and everyone hopes to see conditions improve enough to allow the ban to be lifted and the custom to regain full legal status.
From County Monaghan, the Irish Folklore Commission collected the following testimony from eighty-seven-year-old Edward McBride. His words are preserved for us in notebooks containing handwritten field reports dated 1943-44, and his memories extend well back into the nineteenth century.

Halloween is sometimes called November Eve. It is called the Feast of the autumn for then all the fruits are ripe and nuts too and the crops are safely gathered in. It is the season of Thanksgiving for the blessings of harvest and man rests secure that sufficient food for both man and beast is vouchsafed for another winter.

In 1991, John Quinn told me:

Well, we had all the grain in, all the potatoes, we used to houk [harvest] the potatoes all day and were finished by Halloween. There was a sort of custom that everything was finished up, out in the fields. All was supposed to be in before Halloween. A morning like that would be very cold, wouldn’t it, if you’re out pulling potatoes. I’ve seen snow in the Glens when we were digging the potatoes at Halloween, you know? Potato houkin’ was part of the October period. Everybody would try to be finished up in case of a hard frost. When it came to October, horses and cows mostly went in. Depends on the weather. The days are getting short for digging potatoes. . . . Halloween was felt to be the beginning of winter.

The connection of Halloween with the season of autumn, with the harvest, and even with the concept of thanksgiving is clearly very strong in these men’s minds. While the connections are not always
Sale items for Halloween demonstrate the harvest connection: candy apples, nuts, and as a special treat, coconuts.

stated as explicitly as above, the ubiquitous presence and central place of fruits and nuts in Halloween indicates that harvest symbolism is an important part of the celebration.

Also noteworthy is McBride's observation that enough food should be secured by Halloween for both man and beast. That is, there are agricultural and pastoral dimensions to the festival. The primary foodstuffs of the festival are grains, fruits, and vegetables; sometimes a fowl is cooked. Halloween does not involve the slaughter of an animal for meat. A 1961 report from a farmer in the Drumquinn district describes taking "the last sheaf of corn home, in Harvest time, hanging same in kitchen. Then later at Christmas time it was taken out and spread along top of a nearby hedge to feed the birds. This brought good luck." Many of the old beliefs and customs involve feeding, not slaughtering, the animals. The safety and nourishment of herd and grazing animals must be attended to in order to maintain even a relatively stable economy, let alone prosperity. The animals must be cared for over the winter;
their milk and wool are more valuable than their meat. The food symbolism of the festival has less to do with increase over the coming year and more to do with giving thanks for a successful harvest.

In the past, Halloween occurred during the potato harvesting holidays, when children were released from school. In 1963 Martha Spence of Broughdone, Cullybackey, reminisced about the potato harvest:

Soon potato digging and gathering came round again . . . . It was the custom to let every boy keep his earnings at the potato gathering and put it past until he would have the price of a pair of boots for the winter. He didn’t often have enough but it helped and after a while he could go to school in comfort with his new boots and heavy knit socks.

When the lovely autumn evenings came and the leaves were falling from the trees, it was dark early and the boys and girls of the village gathered the dry leaves of which there were plenty. There were huge beech trees growing along Main St. The leaves were carried to the far end of one of the gardens at the back of the cottages. All the dried potato tops were carried there, they were lit and a great bonfire was kept burning for hours. The children sang and pranced round it. “Call John the Boatman” was a favorite song for the bonfire. “John Peel” ran it close. They had plenty of fun out of it, it done nobody any harm, cost nothing, and got rid of the fallen leaves and rubbish. Those children never had a dull moment.

These ritualized events are enacted by people for whom the harvest is an immediate experience. The bonfire that Miss Spence described in 1963 sounds very much like a Halloween bonfire, with the dancing and singing. Perhaps it was a Halloween bonfire, and for some reason she did not identify it as such. Or perhaps such customs were, at least in some areas, more generally seasonal. In the above testimony I am interested in the seasonal relationships of the potato gathering, autumn leaves, and bonfires to Halloween. The connections of Halloween with harvest are both metonymic, as in the case of the potato harvest, and metaphoric, as seen in the use of apples, nuts, and turnips—even the “lovely autumn bonfires”—as symbols.
The following account from the *Belfast Newsletter* of 1860, entitled “Halloweave at Margymore,” identifies Halloween directly with the fruits of the harvest, as well as with revelry and a festive atmosphere of buying and selling:

The influx of country-folks to our town yesterday proved beyond doubt that they have by no means forgotten the time-honored festival which falls on Wednesday evening next, but that they are as anxious as ever to “burn their nuts,” and spend it pleasantly together. Although it was what nautical men would term a “dirty day,” the markets were all very largely attended, particularly that devoted to the sale of fruit &c. Although there is a great harvest of fruit, the quality is in general rather indifferent, and prices are moderate. Apples sold yesterday at 2s. to 6s. per cwt.; pears, 3s. to 5s. per do. Hostelry accommodation was at a premium, as the different yards were not only filled, but in some cases carts were lined along the street outside. Although an odd individual or two might be seen “working with sinuosities along,” under the influence of the spirit of the barley, it was very gratifying to witness the general sobriety and good humor which prevailed amongst the market-people.

In the old Celtic calendar, November 12 was the first day of the year. The adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1752, with its dropping of twelve days, meant that some traditions associated with November 11, Samhain Eve (later known as Old Halleve), were now observed on October 31. Hiring fairs were held on November 12 and May 12, and parties were given on Old Halleve to celebrate the end of the six-month hiring term. The tradition was also related to the potato harvest. This testimony was recorded in 1943 in Donegal:

I knew an old man, long since dead, who told me about one of the festivals he attended while a young man. The people of the district (several townlands) gathered in the evening. Each farmer brought his biggest potatoes of the year. These were cooked in a huge bonfire. The biggest potato was put on the very top of the heap as “King of the Potatoes.” These were cooked as a “preascail,” that is, roasted in the embers with a covering of red coals. The potatoes were eaten, “poteen” (moonshine) was liberally dis-
pensed, and dancing and singing were carried on ‘till morning. (UCD)

Even a simple anecdote like the one following illustrates the organic relationship among the Halloween customs. Ivan Morrison told me how he used to cut a hole in a turnip, insert a firecracker, and watch the vegetable explode. Then he’d eat some of the pieces, which he said were delicious.

Harvest Thanksgiving

Harvest Thanksgiving resembles the American Thanksgiving, but they are very different holidays. Not only is there no history or mythology concerning pilgrims, but the event is self-consciously sacred, having been grafted onto the church liturgical calendar in the nineteenth century. Most people in Northern Ireland are aware of Harvest Thanksgiving’s recent origins, but they also recognize connections with ancient and foreign harvest celebrations. A typical account of its history was published in the *Christian Herald and Signs of the Times*, September 13, 1925:

There is scarcely a church in which a harvest thanksgiving service is not now held. But probably the first to institute such a festival was the vicar of Morwenstow in 1843. In that year he issued a notice to his parishioners to draw their attention to the duty of thanking God for the harvest, and of announcing that he would set apart a Sunday for such a purpose. This was the letter he sent out: “To the parishioners of Morwenstow. . . . Brethren, God has been very merciful to us this year also. He hath filled our garners with increase, and satisfied our poor with bread. He opened His hand and filled all things living with plenteousness. Let us offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving among such as keep holy day. Let us gather together in the chancel of our church on the first Sunday of next month, and there receive, in the bread of the new corn, that blessed sacrament which was ordained to strengthen and refresh our souls. . . . Furthermore, let us remember that, as a multitude of grains of wheat are mingled into one loaf, so we, being many, are intended to be joined together into one in the holy sacrament of the Church of Jesus Christ. Brethren, on the first morning of October call to mind the word.”
The service began in the Anglican Church of England and was brought to Ireland by the Anglican Church of Ireland. In 1991 the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum had a Harvest Thanksgiving service on its grounds at the Kilmore Church. The church bulletin had this to say:

The Church of Ireland harvest thanksgiving service has its origin in the Cornish village of Morwenstow in 1843. From earliest times harvest had been an occasion for thanksgiving and celebration in most countries. Popular celebration of harvest in England had traditionally been associated with "beer and tumult." The vicar of Morwenstow, the Rev. Robert Hawker, therefore decided to bring some of the popular customs into the church in the hope of civilizing the occasion. The new festival proved so popular that when, in 1878, the newly disestablished Church of Ireland revised its prayer book, it made provision for special prayers, psalms, and collects appropriate for harvest.

As the practice of celebrating harvest grew in other denominations, it became the practice for individuals to share in the harvest thanksgiving services of other churches in their district.

In a similar vein is the following from the News Sheet of St. Mark’s Church in Newtownards, also Church of Ireland: "While Harvest Thanksgiving is not a Christian festival in the calendar year, church attendance figures suggest that it is as popular as well-known festivals like Christmas and Easter. To-day we thank God for the gifts he bestows upon us. It is a traditional occasion in a rapidly changing world."

With the perhaps significant exception of Roman Catholicism, churches of many denominations celebrate the Harvest Thanksgiving service. Churches schedule them so as not to conflict with neighboring churches’ events. In fact, the harvest thanksgivings of area churches are announced in other churches’ weekly bulletins. In 1991 Harvest Thanksgiving was celebrated at the Bangor Abbey on Sunday, October 13, at St. Columba’s, Kilcooley, on Sunday, October 20, and at Clandeboye Chapel, on Friday, October 25, and Sunday, October 27. All were announced in the magazine of the parish of Bangor Abbey, and I attended them. The churches were crowded with visitors and festooned with fruits, vegetables, breads, and canned goods, all donated by parishioners. The walls,
aisles, and pews were decorated with wheat, greens, and seasonal flowers from the fields. Some people donated large baked loaves that depicted sheaves of wheat and were entirely decorative. In Bangor Abbey, pumpkins formed part of the decorations. Although they were hollowed out, they were not carved as jack-o’-lanterns. Instead, inside the empty shell, a feast was depicted using tiny replicas of fruits.

At the Harvest Thanksgiving service I attended at the Clandeboye chapel, the minister preached about the difference between a harvest thanksgiving as celebrated in the church and other harvest celebrations generally. He emphasized the essential Christian nature of the event rather than its universal relationships to other harvest celebrations. Ministers often make this point, in part because they feel that the distinctively Christian dimension of the celebration could be lost in the multitude of secular harvest celebrations. Also, the harvest thanksgiving is the most popular service after those of Christmas and Easter. Some clergy are some-
what embarrassed by this, since there is no clear biblical model for the service. However, even the Reverend Ian Paisley, founder of the Free Presbyterians, accepts Harvest Thanksgiving services. (The Free Presbyterians do not recognize December 25 as Christmas or accept annual celebrations of Easter because, as Dr. Paisley told me, “We believe every Sunday is Easter.”) Dr. Paisley insisted that these thanksgiving services were to thank God, thus situating the ritual with identifiable secular origins in a sacred context. I
think the popularity of the ecclesiastical Harvest Thanksgiving is due to its nature as a seasonal festival in a country that is still largely agrarian. Christmas and Easter are winter and spring celebrations. Harvest Thanksgiving is an autumn festival. As such, it is a sacred equivalent to Halloween, which is secular.

**Snigging the Cailleach**

More generally speaking, secular and semisecular harvest customs are widespread throughout Ulster. Perhaps the most famous and widely documented of these involve the taking of the last sheaf, known variously as the Cailleach (pronounced kalya or kalyack), the churn (possibly derived from the word *corn*, referring to grain, but this etymology is disputed), the hare, the hag, or the old woman.

The following is a simple, direct description of winning the Cailleach at harvest:

When the last field of corn was cut, the last “swathe” or “sward” of corn was plaited on the ground (four plaits) and tied. One by one the workers threw their hooks or scythes at it. When cut it was carried into the house where a great feast was held. The plait of corn was placed first around the master’s neck and then the mistress’s. Afterwards it was placed in the center of the table. When the feasting and dancing were finished (this lasted until morning), the plait was hung from a rafter in the kitchen to ensure good luck in the following year. (UCD)

One informant in 1966 describes the activities as follows, with the punctuation and capitalization of the original retained:

The *harvest time* was a very jolly occasion especially at the finish. A long time ago when people shore their grain with their hook there were about a *sheaf left standing* and every shearer had a throw. Sometimes eight or nine or whatever number was, stood round at a short distance who threw their hook at the standing corn and whoever cut the most stalk got the *churn*. The boss gave him the first slug out of the bottle, for he didn’t throw but he judged the winner. A small portion of this last sheaf was plaited and hung up by the housewife and kept til the next churn came in. Then the old one was thrown out. A big harvest supper followed with plenty to
eat and plenty to drink. Later on with their neighbors and friends they hied to the barn for a good night's enjoyment which lasted until morning in lots of places. The churn is often kept tied but not to so big an extent. Harvest knots are not as much found now either. It's coming quickly to be a thing of the past, but with the good old staunch countryman it will always be remembered especially in his day. *The Harvest Home* was a very cheerful time when all the grain was put up nicely in stacks and the last sheaf gathered. It was common in some places for the good man of the house to repeat part of a poem in thankfulness for all of his benefits. Other parts were different, a good supper and a taste of mornin' dew, and finished up with the Harvest Home Reel. These old customs are nearly over now. (UITM)

In 1952 Michael J. Murphy reported to the Irish Folklore Commission that the Cailleach was "cut generally in this district until comparatively recent years, but the custom now appears to have lapsed. It represented the last straws of the harvest which were
plaited while still in the earth, with a straw binding on the top.” A barber in Ballycastle named McCambridge told Murphy that when the scythe replaced the sickle, contestants were blindfolded and instructed to “snig” the Cailleach in one sweep of the scythe. “But you might be snigging here and there and not near the Cailleach at all,” McCambridge concluded.

Murphy quoted Dan Hyndman in his report: “The man who cut the Cailleach was the best man, that was all. [No special award.] But I mind when them that had a wee tift [comparatively well-off] of money would have a bottle of whiskey for the Cutting of the Cailleach, and would treat the winner, and then all the harvesters; and anyone that happened to call into the house around that time would get a treat as well. That was the custom.”

Hyndman recalled a divination belief associated with the Cailleach: “It was cut with the hooks, as I’ve told you, and then taken home and hung above the door, the kitchen door. Well, if there was a girl in the house, the first boy to enter after it was put up he was to marry her; he’d have to marry her. The same with a boy: the first girl come in he’d have to marry her. That’s what they say: that’s what it was done for.”

Murphy included another account of the Cailleach by Mrs. Pat Kinney of Layde: “The Cailleach was supposed to be a wee, small woman in a green or red cloak; that’s what we’d be told. But The Cailleach, made out of the corn, was a small sheaf, platted in three and tied with ribbons. I remember only a green or a red ribbon on it. I never remember it being hung over the door. [Instead, it was] always behind a picture or a place like that. It would be left there for a time.”

The description of the Cailleach as a wee small woman in red or green essentially matches the description of a fairy (see, e.g., Lysaught 1986; Narvaez 1991). The identification of the Cailleach as an old woman and also as a hare is widespread, and the implications of those characterizations with regard to traditional beliefs regarding both fairy mythology and folk magic are obvious. Philip Robinson (1994) refers to some of these in his discussion of Halloween customs in Ulster, specifically within the context of plaited straw, new year wisps, and other items of woven grain. Robert H. Montgomery mentions these various traditions in his 1961 description of the celebration of the churn:
My Aunt Miss McCaughey (85 yrs), farmer of the Braid, Ballymena, told me recently (Jan 1961) that in her young days, when the Harvest of corn was ended, the last handful still in the ground ("grun") would be "pletted" and a "hag" was made at the "pletted corn" by the reapers throwing their hooks or sickles. The winner (who first cut it) brought it to the "hoose" (house), where it was hung up for good luck and was called the "Churn." In other cases in the Braid and Ballymena areas, the last Sheaf was usually brought into the house without "plettin" or "Haggin or such nonsense." Mr. McAllister (from Richhill area) corroborates this as the practice in parts of County Armagh, as also my Uncle John Henry (75), farmer, of Carrowlaverty, Armoy, North Antrim. The farmer, or owner of the harvested corn, usually had a "celebration," which included dancing, jigs, and games, etc. Also the singing of "come-all-ye's" and in some (rare) cases "Orange" and National (Irish) songs. A churn of "drink" (liquor) was kept for those "needing it." Also eatables. However among "temperance" farmers, unfermented "Wine" or lemonade was the "Drink" in parts of the country (considered a "great Novelty" in the middle of last century). The making of "St. Bridgid's Crosses ("Croses"—Ballymena) was practiced more among the "native Irish" (who also made them out of rushes) than among the others, who merely "pletted" "buttonholes" or "Harvest knots" out of the "Straw" (Straw) for "weerin" (wearing) or hanging up in the house. (UCD)

Mary McDowell Gilliland's notebook from 1961 mentions another old custom: "If you want a good day at the harvest, have an oat cake under your pillow, and eat it in the morning before opening your eyes" (UFTM). Likewise, the divination beliefs recounted by Dan Hyndman above are typical of those associated not only with the harvest but with other significant calendar dates as well, including the first of May and Halloween. As we will see, beliefs, customs, and games concerning the identification of one's future spouse are a significant feature of the celebration of Halloween. In this regard, one woman reported a use of the Cailleach not unlike that of mistletoe in the United States at Christmas: "At harvest-time, the last sheaf of corn was plaited, and hung up at the 'churn,' and the first woman to come in, was kissed under it" (UFTM). In this custom we can see the churn is directly associated with a playful fertility symbolism.

Likewise, the fairies are widely reported to be more active on
Halloween, and we see an identification of the Cailleach as a fairy-like creature associated with the harvest. Halloween follows harvest, and it is not surprising that there is an overlap of the symbols, customs, and beliefs associated with them.

An important connection between Halloween and the customs of harvest, particularly that of making corn dollies, is found in the 1944 description noted in Greencastle, Omagh, County Tyrone, of a “local old lady [who] is making a cross which she remembers having made years ago for All Souls’ Night.” Later, the fieldworker comments, “Special crosses were made of straw. This is a type I remember seeing myself very beautifully executed. As well as placing these along with the bowl of cream they seem to have been distributed around houses like the St. Bridget’s crosses.” (UCD)

Another similarity is found in a 1962 questionnaire at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, in which “the sprinkling of haystacks with holy water” is reported, along with prayers before the first sward of hay is cut, among the customs pertaining to the Last Sheaf and Harvest Supper. Like the holy water, prayers, and candles for the dead souls, these harvest traditions blend the religious and the secular. In fact, they frame the secular customs with religious ritual: the hay is blessed and the contest, which is very likely pre-Christian, is begun with a supplication to Christ.
The Feast of Autumn

Mrs. McKee heard from a stranger that girls stole a herring, roasted it, and ate it tail and all. Whoever brought a drink to the thirsty girl became her husband. Here, the consumption of food was part of the divination ritual. The use of foodstuffs related to harvest is intimately connected to the supernatural aspects of the season. In a sense, the harvested foods are transformed into objects of power.

The turnip lantern, analogous to the jack-o’-lantern, is one example. Representing skulls, they are placed on walls and gravestones to frighten passersby. The carved-out insides are mashed and eaten. Turnips lanterns are traditionally carved by fathers and sons together.

For some, Halloween has been an occasion for feasting on a roast, as seen in this 1958 account from the Forths district: “At Halloween we had a feast of apples and nuts and this day was always the occasion for a ‘special’ dinner usually a goose with perhaps a little roast meat. The evening tea was also a little above average, the extra being a small piece of cake or a slice of ‘currant loaf.’ Indeed we put the Halloween food on a level with Xmas. These were the two occasions out of about four per year when we got a little butcher’s meat” (UFTM).

It has been my experience, however, that the special foods of the Halloween meal are in fact most often grain- and fruit-based items. Oat cakes are both eaten and dreamed on, and apples are made into pies and tarts, breads, and dumplings. A recipe for apple pudding in the folklore archives at University College of Dublin describes it as follows:

The apple pudding was a special Hallow Eve supper. The pud-
A thematic continuity of death with the harvest: a skeleton sells Halloween nuts.

ding ingredients were boiled potatoes, flour, and apples (with sugar). The potatoes were bruised down with a tin into what we would call “mashed potatoes.” Some flour was mixed and three or four “cakes” rolled out fairly thin, same as for home made potato cake. First, one cake was placed in the pot. Then a layer of cut apples was laid down. This was covered with a second cake. Then more cut apples and another cake. This could be continued for another layer or two. Then the pot is put on the fire and a good supply of live coals kept on the pot lid. Roughly about an
hour was necessary for the cooking. When cooked it must be well-
stirred and served in plates with a kind of custard.

Another woman reported the same recipe to the Committee on Ulster Folk Life and Traditions in 1957, adding the following details:

Two rounds were shaped out of this. On one, apples were placed, sugar and cloves were added, and a thimble (old maid), a button (bachelor), and a ring and maybe a sixpence. Round the edge was damped and the second round placed on top. This was tied in a cloth sprinkled with flour before this. The pudding was then put into the boiling water and boiled for three or four hours. I still make it but I steam it in a bowl. I sometimes too make apple slim on the griddle. It is made in the same way but cooked on the griddle. It is delicious eaten hot with plenty of butter running over it. In fact I think it a meal fit for a king. It is very satisfying, but not everyone is able to enjoy this dish as it may be too heavy for delicate stomachs.

Hazelnuts and peanuts in the shell, called monkey nuts, are universally associated with Halloween. Surprisingly, so are coconuts. All of these are for sale and conspicuously displayed in grocery stores in the weeks before Halloween.

**Halloween Is Boxty**

The evening itself properly begins with a Halloween dinner of specially prepared foods. These include boxty, colcannon, barn brack, potato dumplings, apple dumplings, and apple tarts. In Ulster, as elsewhere, meat pies are savory and fruit pies are sweet. The sweet fruit pie is also known as a tart.

Potatoes are the basis of champ (mashed potatoes with milk, butter, and leeks), colcannon (mashed potatoes with cabbage), boxty (fried colcannon), potato bread, and potato pudding. These, along with the cabbage, turnip, and swede (what in America is called a rutabaga), are in season and so are the basis of the harvest. In 1957 a woman reported, “In olden times there were a lot of extra things made for Hallowe’en such as boxty, potato bread, and potato pudding. This potato pudding is still made in all country houses yet in
Clogher district. It’s eaten with butter in a little hole in the middle of it” (UITM).

These foods are strongly associated with Halloween, harvest, and memories of youth. In 1943 a seventy-seven-year-old man recalled, “The special dishes were colcannon and potato pudding. Colcannon was ‘champ’ with cabbage in it. I mind my father when we’d be digging out the potatoes marking out a particularly fine head of cabbage for the Halleve Colcannon. Potato pudding was made by mixing boiled potatoes with flour, adding apples if there were any, and boiling the mess like stirabout. For sauce there was a boiled mixture of flour, milk, and sugar” (UCD).

Charlie Fox and Randal Johnson reminisced in 1991:

CHARLIE: We always had a party on that night. I’m sure that maybe sixteen or eighteen people would come along, maybe more. Mother prepared the boxty and the apple tart and all that prepared, and we all ate in our dining room at the table, and she invited the shopkeepers, you know. The butchers, the bankers. All these people were invited from the local town. We lived out in the country. And in fact, I would say they were nearly all Protestant people that were invited to that party, but not that Mother wanted to differentiate between Protestant and Catholics, because we had equally as good Catholic friends as we had Protestant friends, but we were Methodist and these people that would come to our Methodist church, it would be a small church. They would all be invited out on Halloween in the country to our party, maybe ten, twelve, or fourteen of them.

RANDAL: Ours were usually apple dumplings. They were boiled. They lined the bowl with dough and then they put the apple in it, or a ring, or something and then on top of that, finished off with dough and put a piece of greaseproof paper over it, tied a string on it, put it in the oven. I can remember the steam in the kitchen from all these pots with apple dumplings boiling. Apple was the thing. It’s the season. Generally in the country you’d grow them. Town people could buy them. People would come at 7 P.M. Halloween, rhyming the night before that. But they wouldn’t stay up too late. We had a sit-down meal, boxty and tart or dumpling for dessert. Cup of tea, strong tea. Then start playing games.

SANTINO: Adults, too?
RANDAL: Oh, yes, definitely. I remember one of the games that we played on it. We got a light whistle on to somebody's coat like this, you see, and the person wouldn't know the whistle was there, you see, and then they'd all get round in a circle, you see. The person in the center would be trying to find that whistle, you see. Then they'd hear it over there, you'd go over there, and then you'd turn, and he'd go over here and blow it this way. It was very funny. He didn't know. He'd be looking for the whistle all over the place. Simple amusement. No harm in it. Or you'd have someone wearing a blindfold and he'd have to try to blow out a candle.

CHARLIE: My best thing was the Halloween party, us all collecting at home and having the meal at the dining room table and playing more games and going out to the fireworks display. It was all different. It was lovely. We were all just together as a family, I just enjoyed it.

RANDAL: To me, I can recall the difficulty. I was four years of age when the Dublin rebellion took place and, of course, that took place at Easter, which was a different story. But I can recall how things changed. For years afterwards we wouldn't be allowed to go out at night, roaming around. I can recall it gradually coming back after the troubles were over. There was a slow coming back, but there was a period when that sort of thing didn't seem to happen. You were very much confined to your own family, and you didn't go out lighting squibs in your backyard.

Overwhelmingly the memories are warm and good, but politics does interfere. The 1916 Easter Rising was more than just politics; it was armed rebellion. Note how politics in the extreme, sectarianism brought to a head, almost destroyed Halloween—the nonsectarian festival—and its family warmth. We have an indication here of the interrelatedness of all these customs. Festival is a genre formed of other genres, a fluid and shifting set of activities (Smith 1972). Along with the fond memories is the ever present specter of the political troubles. Charlie and Randal have lived in Northern Ireland for decades. Both lived in Dublin before settling in the north for professional reasons. The traditions and memories they recounted reflect these backgrounds and are representative of a fair number of people who live in Northern Ireland.

Still we are looking here at the food of Halloween, the feast of this fest. Along with the apple dumplings, tarts, and cakes, and
along with the nuts are boxty, colcannon, and champ. We cannot really separate the food from the beliefs and the customs. A woman remembers that rings, thimbles, coins, and buttons were placed in the champ. A man from Loughinisland in the 1940s (UCD) described a “strict fast” that was “observed on Hallow Eve in my district and no butter could be eaten by anyone until the first three stars were visible in the sky. What a watch for those first three stars was kept by the children! For whoever saw them first got a goodly portion of champ swimming with butter.”

I asked a man in 1992 about this fasting. He mentioned that the day before November 1 is, or was, a fast day in the Roman Catholic Church. To this he attributes the lack of meat eaten on Halloween:

Barn brack means a speckled bread. It’s a corn loaf, and in the corn loaf there’s a ring or some small token, usually a ring. Then there’s an apple tart or an apple dumpling and there would’ve been money in that, a sixpence or threepenny bit or something of that nature. Ah, there’s what you call colcannon, which was blanched potatoes on cabbage. Colcannon. Ah, well. Halloween, the eve of All Hallows’, was a day of fast and abstinence in the church, so any of the food that day was free of meat. So this is why you had potatoes and cabbage. No, no, it wasn’t to do with communion. Just fast. The church. The day before a feast was a fast and abstinence day. You could not eat meat that day, and you had limited meals. But it hadn’t to do with the Eucharist fast, which started at 12:00 at night of communion. It was a different thing. That’s disappeared, that fast. Yeah, you could have relatives visit, all right. You’d have what they called a slap-up tea on a Halleve. A real good meal. But no meat.

From 1943 comes the following description of the preparation and consumption of champ (UCD). Again we see the connection of the festive food to childhood memories, to family, and to religious custom. “At dusk on Halloween the full pot of potatoes was prepared for the evening meal of Halloween. Pounded to champ with a little milk. The champ was then transferred to a basin or large dish with a lump of butter 1/4 to 1/2 lb in the middle. The whole family then sat round the table each with a spoon. The spoonful of champ was dipped in the butter before being eaten. What remained in the basin or dish was left untouched until morning.
Immediately after the meal the Rosary was said for the deceased relatives.

K.M. Harris (1958) quotes a person from County Down who fondly remembered “chomp” on Hallow Eve and described “a lighted candle stuck on the table next to the chomp. If the candle fell...sign that someone in the house would die.” Harris recounts other supernatural beliefs in his *Ulster Folklife* article: “James Downey of Goward remembered his mother putting salt on the heads of her children to prevent the wee people taking them away on Hollow Eve. [She] also filled a thimble full of salt, turned it upside-down on a plate. She put a stack of salt like that, for each one, on the plate. If anybody’s stack happened to fall down in the night time, that person would die within the next twelve months.—Co. Down.”

M.J. Murphy of Newry, speaking to the Irish Folklore Commission of “Holly Eve,” said, “Every house/family made champ. Poor people were provided with milk and butter by neighbors. Many people left a plateful out for the fairies” (UCD).

We have moved from the uses of organic items in a supernatural context to a celebratory harvest meal. The Halloween dinner was a family affair. Sometimes guests were invited. Memories of it are sensual. The kitchen was warm, and the food smelled good and tasted delicious. These meals are remembered with real fondness, as is Halloween generally, even if politics occasionally do invade. For many, Halloween is embodied in the special foods. I talked about Halloween with a woman who ran a bed and breakfast in Fermanagh once. She gave me a recipe that read: “Boxty: mashed potatoes mixed with grated raw potatoes, with onion and cabbage. Stir until it’s a sticky gooey mess, then boiled. After this, cut into portions about three inches thick, three wide, five long, and fried.” She found it remarkable that she knew a man who made it. She made all her own breads: wheaten, soda, and loaf. When I asked her if she made anything special for Halloween, she responded, “Boxty,” without hesitation. “I don’t like it myself. I never have the boxty. My daughter, now, she likes boxty. She eats it all the time on Halloween. My granddaughter, she likes it, too, but my grandson, he doesn’t care for it either. But my daughter and granddaughter, oh, Halloween is boxty.”
Oiche Shamhana, Night of the Spirits

There is a story told of a person who did not believe in the return of the dead on that night and resolved in his ignorance to find out. Instead of brushing up the hearth as everyone else did, he strew ashes all around the hearth so that footprints would show. He went to bed. Next morning he was dead. The ashes showed prints of human feet.

—University College of Dublin’s Folklore Archives (UCD) 32, recorded in Tir Eoghain (County Tyrone) Greencastle, Omagh, Feb. 11, 1944

In this chapter I will examine beliefs, stories, and customs having to do with the spiritual and the supernatural aspects of Halloween. Some of this material—not all, but a good amount—originates from the three counties of Ulster that are predominantly Roman Catholic: Donegal, Monaghan, and Leinster. Many of the customs in those counties—part of Ulster, but not part of Northern Ireland—show a strong emphasis on belief and folk religious ritual. All of these customs and beliefs have to do with death, the souls of the departed, the supernatural, the future, the devil, and the otherworld. They involve fire, food, and family, death and life. Halloween is the night of the unquiet dead and for telling stories about them, such as the following:

There was an old tree on a town path; underneath was a kind of stone seat. It was called “the haunted tree” but reason [is] not known. A fellow came about who said he wasn’t afraid and that he’d stay under the tree. He came one night and sat down; a man dressed in black appeared to him and told him not to be afraid.
He had been a member of the “Molly Maguires” and was a spoilt priest. Government gave a score sovereigns (or guineas) as a bribe and he had informed and got nine comrades caught. That was the reason the tree was haunted. He said he had copied Judas and refused to use the money [and] hid it at an old ruin. “Go to the old church and you’ll get the gold, give it to the priest and have nine prayers said.” He got the gold. He was told to come back (under the tree) and “I’ll tell you all about it. It is no dream.” Man came back at the end of the year and told that his name was Shaun O’Hanlon. He was boss of the whole show. His name is to be found in old books. He was dressed in white (this time) the year after, on his way to heaven. He said he was sixty years a pilgrim. That happened on Halleve night. (UCD)

Not only death and life but sin and redemption are framed in this story, along with guilt and expiation. Halloween is the night of the dead, but it is about life.

**Old Halleve**

In Northern Ireland, Halloween is known by various names, including Hollandtide, Hallow Eve, even Holy Eve, but the most commonly used term is Halleve. From the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore comes the following poem, as remembered by Joe Redmond, which describes a dance held on Old Halleve, celebrated long ago on November 11.

On oul’ Halleve ah do believe, some hundreds did appear,
On Leverick Hill to dance their fill with music loud and clear—
With Allen in the corner sat—a whistle loud did blow
An’ how the dancin’ it went on, Ah mane to let ye know.

Ye’r welcome Mr. Crossen, ye’r welcome ah declare,
An’ when ye start yer dancin’ there’s the star of Bromly Fair.
For Allen on the corner sat and whistling loudly blew.
He played the Murphy’s hornpipe as they marched the Waterloo.

Redmond recited four verses, of which I have chosen to use two. The researcher, P. MacZiolla, remarks, “I record this poem be-
because of its relation to old Hallowe’en. Middy (Michael) Laird—the poet—was an uneducated man and made many poems on the happenings of the district, only odd snatches of them are to be had from the lips of the old people today. He is dead over sixty years” (UCD).

In introducing the poem, Redmond describes Old Halleve: “I believe, as far as I can remember, that it was like old Christmas—twelve days after the first November. I mine we used to get nuts and we used to watch them gathering for the dance. There was no fire at this dance, it was held in one of the houses on Leverick Hill. They came from all parts—Cromkill and the Shank, from the low road and the Crebily—But I can’t give ye any information about the dance itself, because we were all sent to bed. It must have been a great affair because the old people used to talk a great lot about it.” All the above material was recorded on November 3, 1943, from Redmond, described as a pensioner from Ballycreggy, a native of Ballycowan. Another individual interviewed in 1943 said regarding Old Halleve, “In the olden times the children always had a feast of nuts on that night. Whatever direction the wind is on that day it will remain for the whole winter.” A woman from Derry said in 1944 that “fleets of birds called snowbirds would be seen and was regarded as a sign that winter was coming.” This belief in a kind of auguring reflects the history of Halloween in Ireland as an ancient quarter day: a day that marked the transition between seasons, in this case autumn and winter. Moreover, November 1 was the first day of the new year, so the transition in question was an annual one as well as a seasonal one. Weather divination beliefs are found at each of the Irish quarter days, but actions and events that occur on Halloween or All Saints’ Day can affect the entire year to come.

Throughout my work I came across references to November 12 for Halloween, known as Old Halleve. In this section of the book, however, I am constructing a picture of Halloween based on my own fieldwork and archival sources from midcentury, some of which record memories dating to the late nineteenth century. These will provide a context for interpreting Halloween in Northern Ireland today. Much is the same; much has changed. The beliefs, the games, the food—all are part of the great day today.

Belief and religion have always played a large role in Halloween
traditions. Today it is not unusual, in America or in Ireland, to see Halloween accused of being satanic. To many Irish, however, Hallows Eve, or Halleve, is still celebrated by many as the eve of All Saints’ Day or it is viewed as the eve of All Souls’ Day (November 2). In some cases people specifically refer to October 31 as the Eve of All Souls’ Day, whereas others specify that “the night of Hollandtide Day,” or the night of November 1-2 is All Souls’ Eve. Perhaps this has to do with older, pre-Christian ideas of wandering spirits at Samhain. Maybe, to some, Halloween is more about the souls of the dead than about saints. “On this night most people tried to be indoors by twelve. They thought—and still do—that the souls in Purgatory are released that night and are at their freedom. It’s done in some houses the practice of not making a fire on Halloween night but instead to leave a row of coals—half burned turf—around the hearth for these souls to return to their various homes and give a heat once more. I know lots of houses where chairs are left along the fireside for them to sit on” (Mrs. McKenna, County Tyrone, 1960).

In 1944 a man from Loughinisland described the days of the dead of early November in the following terms: “Hallow Eve is not specifically associated with the dead, but the night of the 1st-2nd November is known as ‘oiche Feil na Marg’—‘All Souls’ Eve.’ It is believed that the dead whose souls are in Purgatory are permitted to return to the ancestral home on that night. In most houses the door is left on the latch [unlocked], a good fire is kept burning all night, the floor is swept, and all the chairs are set around the fire. The members of the household say the family rosary and go early to bed, but get up again about midnight, say a long rosary of fifteen decades, put more turf on the fire and go back to bed again, in order to leave the departed souls in undisturbed possession of the fireside” (UCD).

The care and attention paid to the dead is done in a Christian context, and the customs in question are sacred, not profane, solemn, not superstitious. For instance, Mrs. Lizzie O’Hara, age eighty in 1943, of Ballymena, County Antrim, reported, “Over seventy years ago almost everyone in this district believed that the souls in purgatory visited their ‘homes’ for one hour on the night of Nov. 1st (All Souls’ Night). Kitchens were cleaned, a large fire was put on. A bowl of water placed on the table and doors left ‘on the latch’ to
let [in] the poor souls” (UCD). The emphases are in the original. The souls are from Purgatory, the place in the afterlife where one is purified before entering Heaven. They are in no way diabolical. They are family members, returning home, the outdoor dead seeking the warmth and nourishment of indoor life.

These beliefs remind us why Halloween is also known as Holy Eve. Lizzie O’Hara said, “There was always three candles lighted and set in the winday and the reason of that was to show light to the Holy Souls. The people believed that the Holy Souls came that night.” People must leave something for these weary souls, and the revenants leave their mark as well. Said one woman in 1943, “I used to hear o’ them talkin’ of tracks of feet in the morning and if it was goin’ out it was the sign of a death and if it was comin’ in it was the sign of a birth.” Here again, death is associated with the outside and life with the inside.

It is not surprising that traditions recorded in the Roman Catholic areas of Ulster frequently reflect the dogma and liturgy of that faith. Homes were blessed inside and out with holy water, and candles were placed in windows to guide wandering spirits. “Here in Donegal the night of Nov. 1 is always reckoned as being the night of the dead.... [It is] customary to leave the fire well-lighted and the house well-swept to provide for their supposed coming. It is to this date the practice to have 15 decades of the rosary recited for the dead on this night. It is sometimes referred to as the night of the long Rosary” (UCD). This was recorded in 1943; the informant was sixty-nine years old. October 31 is referred to as Hallow Eve and November 1 as Haliday throughout the transcriptions of her testimony.

Religious and ethnic dimensions of Halloween are not restricted to Roman Catholics, however. For instance, in 1957 a woman from Lisdrumcher, County Down, told the Committee on Ulster Folk Life and Traditions: “The beginning of November was a time of importance in the Presbyterian Church. The Sacrament of Communion was observed twice yearly in May and November and in some country churches these two months still mark the time of Communion. Stipend was also paid on the Sabbath of Sacrament and last year only one lady in our local Presbyterian Church paid at that particular time, and she has died since” (UFTM). She then asked, “Would it be possible that as St. Patrick incorporated the
times of some of the heathen festivals into the Christian religion, so the Presbyterian Church incorporated some of the pre-Reformation festivals into its ritual?"

Playing pranks, baking, and building bonfires all reflect and create areas of gendered behavior. Likewise, differential Catholic and Protestant traditions are reflected in beliefs and attitudes concerning the souls of the dead. For instance, the poem “All Souls’ Night” by John O’ the North recounts the belief in the return of the souls of the dead but frames the event as fearsome:

The door’s on the latch,
The turf burns red,
Turn low the lamp
And go to bed.

For on this night
Them that’s away
Could be back again
Out of the clay.

They’ll come in the dark
To the warm turf,
From the coul’ sod
And the wet surf.

And you in the loft
Can breathe a prayer
For the wakin’ dead
That’s gathered there.

When the mornin’ comes
You’ll rise from bed,
And find on the hearth
The turf still red.

Poker and tongs,
And creepie and chair
Will be all the way
You left them there.

But you’ll draw the blind
With a touch of fear,
For you'll know in your heart
There was strangers here.

Peace to the soul
Of each wanderin' guest;
God be with them
And give them rest.

In a presentation to one of my graduate folklore courses, folklorist Linda Ballard interpreted this poem as being reflective of Protestant tradition. I had wondered about the use of the term strangers for the returning departed. Were they not family members? Ghosts of any sort would be frightening, to be sure, but this poem seemed to conflict with other beliefs and attitudes toward death I had encountered in Northern Ireland. According to Ballard, the discrepancies have to do with Protestants fearing the dead and Catholics welcoming them. This is due, at least in part, to the presence of the doctrine of Purgatory in Roman Catholicism and the absence of such a belief in Protestantism. Purgatory is a spiritual place of cleansing where souls do painful penance for their earthly sins, but they will eventually be freed to achieve eternal bliss in Heaven. Without such a doctrine, the returning souls cannot be journeying from Purgatory on their way to Heaven, as Catholics frequently believe and assert. Instead, the so-called ghosts are thought to be in actuality evil spirits. As such they are threatening. As both a native of Northern Ireland and a scholar of traditional belief, Linda Ballard immediately recognized these nuances in the poem in a way that I was not able to.

Residents of rural areas frequently commented to me about the lack of electric lights and the concomitant thick black darkness of night and its relationship to the belief in the spirits and malevolent creatures who inhabited it. “In the country,” one woman from Portrush told me in 1991, “at night it was absolutely dark, and you could imagine all sorts of creatures in it and coming out of it.” In some homes, holy water was sprinkled on the four outer walls for protection from these dangerous supernatural creatures.

These beliefs and customs are still found today. I interviewed one man from County Antrim, who prefers not to be named but is
A skeleton—a figure of death—dressed in the litter bin liner of a Halloween rhymer who will come visiting.
later identified as CD. He pointed out that people in his district still sprinkle holy water in their homes and barns.

The children were told not to eat blackberries after Hallow Eve, because the evil spirits had either spat on them or even eaten them on Hallow Eve night. I was told that as a child, which would suggest that evil spirits were abroad on Hallow Eve night. There's also the belief that deceased relatives came into your house on that occasion, the return of the dead, and there was a fire kept on, and there was bread and milk set out on the table, so there was a belief that the good spirits were around, too.

In Hollywood, County Down, in testimony collected by the Irish Folklore Commission on 10 November 1943 from a seventy-five-year-old man, it is recorded that “candles were lighted in the house for the festival (31st Oct) usually four. The mother lighted them and placed them on each side of the living room. Candles were put out at dawn.”

In 1943, at age eighty-seven, Edward McBride from County Monaghan stated, “The lighting of candles and placing them in all the windows of the house in memory of the dead is a usual custom” (UCD). Another man, age seventy-seven in 1943, explained, “Souls were said to be relieved from Purgatory on that night and to pass their homes on their way to Heaven” (UCD). Some sources maintain that the dead had only a brief chance to visit: “Over 70 yrs ago almost everyone in this district believed that the souls in purgatory visited their homes for one hour on the night of Nov 1st.” As we shall see throughout this book, while there is a tremendous amount of local variation in virtually every custom we investigate, broader patterns of consistencies emerge. The wandering souls are usually said to be souls from Purgatory who, having completed their time of penance, are on their way to Heaven. This is, of course, consistent with Roman Catholic theology, according to which the souls of the departed who are not condemned to Hell but are not yet ready to gain immediate entry into Heaven are assigned to a fiery place of purification for a finite period to pay for sins unconfessed at the time of their deaths. After these sins are recompensed through the cleansing, if painful, fires of Purgatory, they enter Heaven for eternity. Thus, Purgatory is the only place from which souls would be traveling. Many scholars see in this be-
lief a remnant of the Celtic belief that the souls of those who had died during the previous year were allowed entry to the otherworld during the time of the great quarter day. In the modern belief, Purgatory is, fittingly enough, a most liminal kind of otherworld—neither Heaven nor Hell—and the souls there are themselves broadly marginal, in that they were fit for neither Heaven nor Hell at the time of death. These themes of marginality, liminality, and transitional times, along with customs involving candles, fire, and holy water, and beliefs that involve the souls of family ancestors returning to their homes, suffuse Halloween with a spiritual dimension. These themes appear throughout the festival today, transformed into other identities (such as food and games) like mummers in their many guises. The sacred and the religious (which are not always the same thing; see, e.g., Moore and Myerhoff 1977) are a fundamental context for understanding Halloween in Northern Ireland, but there as throughout Ireland an uneasy truce exists between customs and beliefs associated with Christianity and those associated with religions that were Irish before Christianity arrived.

The belief that the dead return at Halloween gives rise to activities intended to welcome them around the hearth, the center of family communion. These spirits are, after all, family members. In 1962 a woman from Kilkeel echoed the testimony that began this chapter, but she also indicates that those who return are sometimes thought to be fairies rather than spirits (UITM). She said: "Before going to bed on this night, the fire was raked together, the hearth swept, everything made tidy, and a chair placed invitingly near the fire. Some people say this is 'to please the fairies' and others say, 'It's for them that's away,' i.e., one's dead relations." Fairies are here identified with, or at least seen as paralleling, the family ghosts of Halloween. At other times they are equated with Halloween devils. It would seem that supernatural creatures said to populate Halloween occupy the same structural slot and that regional variation occurs by the substitution of one for the other. In 1992 the Antrim man told me this:

CD: I think part of it, the whole notion of the returning dead, has to do with the proximity of All Souls' Day, which is the second of November, do you know. Ah, I think the two are closely linked. But the great sort of confusion or mixture or whatever you call it
between the ill notion that there are fairies running around on Halleve and that the dead are running around, and there’s not a clear cut between the two. It’s supposed to be that, on Hallow’s Eve, the fairies all come out of their forts, or forths as they’re called, and run around doing mischief. In fact, it was called in Gaelic “the night of the mischief.” And I think stemming from that you’ve this business of pranks, young men playing pranks. I’m sure you’ve heard plenty about people removing gates, or maybe dismantling farm instruments, taking an old fellow’s donkey and bringing it into the kitchen and dismantling the donkey cart, and they brought in the cart parts and assembled the whole thing and add the donkey into it, and he gets up in the morning and thinks that the fairies have been at work. This mischievousness in a sense has given credence to that.

Santino: Did you grow up in this area?
CD: I did, yes.
Santino: So you yourself have had firsthand knowledge of this kind of thing?
CD: Yes.
Santino: So, when you say the fairies and the dead were running around . . .
CD: Well, some people would say to you that it were the dead were abroad that night. Others say no, it were the fairies. And some people say both were abroad. And I think the notion of the false face is of the souls, don’t you know. The Gaelic name for the soul also means the false face. You know what a false face is? A mask. The notion of wearing those was that the dead and the living sort of—the mask was sort of a death head or a skeleton or something. You wouldn’t be distinguished from the dead who were moving around. . . . You didn’t want to be identified when you had the mask on you. You wouldn’t speak in your normal voice, so the people wouldn’t recognize you as being a living person that lived next door or up the street. You’re masquerading as somebody, as one of the dead. That’s what it was about.

An older example is this piece of testimony from County Down in 1943, in which a woman said that in the Dromara district, “the pranks are said to be done in the devil’s name.” She added, “About thirty-five years ago, and perhaps even yet, no person would throw
out boiling water on All Souls’ Night, for fear of scalding the poor souls who were crowded round the kitchen door seeking charitable prayers. (Truth to tell, this might have been on the night of November 1st. I’m not sure.) But Mrs. Morgan of Goward, aged seventy-two years, assures me the night known as Hallow Eve was 31st October, this being the night devoted to the Holy Souls as well as being the night of the pranks. Her own father, Mr. Patrick McAlindon of Kilcoo, never went to bed on any night of the year without leaving a bowl of clear spring water on the table for poor souls, also a chair at the fire for any soul who felt cold” (UCD).

**Fairies**

A man from Blundell’s Grange, County Armagh, explained in 1944 that at Halloween, along with the spirits of the dead, “Fairies [were] more active. Horses of farmers coming home late from market in Newry could not be got to pass certain places on the road. One particular called the ‘Cailleac Mor’s Rock.’ This is situated on the road from Whitecross Lislea, in the townland of Deburren, near Lislea Church” (UCD).

Fairies are universally said to be more active on Halleve. One person told the Irish Folklore Commission that “fairies were supposed to be at large on Halloween, at large until the New Year.” Said Edward McBride in 1944, “The fairies or little people are supposed to be more lively at this time of year than at any other. They are supposed to send out lights from their various raths and forts, and stories are told of folks who went out on messages and were led astray by the lights. People as far as possible avoid going out alone on Halloween night for this reason” (UCD). Fear of the fairies or little people, or other supernatural creatures, led people to take precautions on Halloween. Children appear to have been especially vulnerable. Babies might be stolen and replaced with a stock, a pseudochild that withers and dies. Or the human child is simply replaced with a fairy. A fifty-four-year-old Donegal man said in 1943, “Fairies were supposed to be active. No water thrown on doorstep (fairies might be drowned). Story. In Ballyholey a woman went out that night and when she came in the baby had been taken out of the cradle and a wee old man with a red beard left in its place. He always stayed the same and never got any big-
ger” (UCD). And in 1943 an eighty-year-old woman from the Hilltown district in County Down testified, “Oh yes. Fairies were very busy at Hilltown. I fear some still think that at Hilltown. A middle-aged lady that teaches here is regarded as a changeling. On that account, her ‘mother’ left the real baby in the cradle and forgot to put the tongs across it. This would have been about forty-eight to fifty years ago” (UCD).

Beyond babyhood, however, children continued to need protection from these wild, unpredictable creatures. Said a seventy-five-year-old woman in 1943, “Children were careful not to go out of doors on Hallowe’en because if they set foot on a certain weed known as ben-weed, they would be carried off to Fairyland. Sloes, or wild plums, were never eaten after Hallowe’en, as the devil was supposed to shake his crutches over them on that night” (UCD). A fifty-year-old man from Coleraine reported in 1944 that on “this evening the fairies came out to ride on the ben-weeds and to play the violin. Such playing as was never heard at other times” (UCD).

The following 1944 testimony from County Monaghan describes a special Halloween meal that uses religious ritual and iconography—holy water—to ward off the evil spirits. It is a good example of the ways these various customary aspects of Halloween overlap to a point where it is impossible to separate them. This meal simultaneously exemplifies fairy belief, protective rituals, and Halloween foodways.

Oaten meal and salt were mixed and sprinkled with holy water, and when the family sat round the table to this special meal on Halloweene, a pinch of the mixture was taken by the mother or some of the older members of the family, and the sign of the cross was made on the crown of the head of each member of the family. This was supposed to be a protection against evil spirits and the fairies would have no control over you during the year. (UCD)

Oatmeal and salt were commonly applied to children’s heads to keep the fairies from taking them away on Halloween. A twelve-year-old boy was recorded in 1943 telling this story:

There was a man named James Moore who lived in Glendow and there was a rock beside his house called Carrick-a-tumhan, and
on Halloween night he used to scatter a bucket full of oatmeal on this rock for the fairies, and when he was poor the fairies left a bag full of oatmeal for him on top of this rock. It is said that nobody should eat haws after Halloween for the devil shakes his old rags over them. It is said that the fairies are out that night. In olden times it was a custom that if you were going out on Halloween night to put a grain of oatmeal on the top of your head. [In different handwriting it is added] This was supposed to keep away the false-hunger during the year, which travelers were addicted to in passing certain road-paths and mountain paths. Men have been known to chew their laces to overcome it. (UCD)

These beliefs and practices do not reside entirely in a distant past. Certainly fairy belief is contemporary, and I talked to several people who grew up in the 1950s, such as a man from County Antrim who told me: "Mothers would rub salted oatmeal onto a young person’s hair, and that was supposed to protect them from the fairies for a while. Then they felt secure. A dry mixture, it wasn’t wet, you know, a dry mixture. The kid looked like he had a bad sense of dandruff. Nothing more than that."

The close relationship among ghosts, fairies, and other supernatural denizens of Halloween is demonstrated in the following story, which the narrator tells after mentioning Halloween ghost stories. It is, in fact, a belief legend concerning fairies rather than a fairy tale of the fanciful, entertaining variety. In fact, Edward McBride, the narrator, remarks that he does not usually put much faith in such beliefs, but he does in this one, for reasons revealed at the end.

It is the night of 1st-2nd November which is here regarded as All Souls’ Night and the general belief, and one which is taken very seriously around the district, is that the souls of departed friends and relations “walk abroad.” Arising out of this belief of course is the usual crop of Ghost stories which have had their origin in this annual vacation of our departed brethren.

As you can gather I am not a respecter of superstitious practices or beliefs, but there is one outstanding story which seems to have had some truth in it, because there were witnesses to whom I have actually spoken but who are now dead except the one who was most concerned. This is as I have heard it dozens of times:
It was a particularly stormy Halloween night of exceptional violence and a number of neighbors had gathered in this particular house. The doors had been heavily bolted against the gale and after consuming incredibly large quantities of 'sowans'—potato-cakes and boxty—they had gathered round a blazing fire and begun telling ghost stories. With astonishing suddenness the storm ceased, followed by a weird stillness. They all felt rather frightened, realizing an unseen presence in the kitchen. Suddenly they all became aware of a most extraordinary woman about two feet tall with a scarlet dress covered by a bright green cloak. Her eyes sparkled and she was beautiful beyond anything earthly. She looked in turn at each person present, smiling very sweetly at some and looking pathetically sad at others. (I should mention here that about 50 yds. from the house lies Glenshee, which is today the recognized abode of the little people. It's really a ravine cut by a burn and is about 60 yds. across.) After a little while she spoke, and her voice was like the tinkling of silver bells, and explained she had lost her way in the storm. The man of the house asked her where she lived and she answered that she lived in a little white house in Glenshee. He pointed in the direction of the glen telling her the distance at which she smiled and thanked him. She then went out through the door. The man soon unbolted the door and saw her disappear into the glen—Glenshee! No house, white or of any description, stands or ever stood in Glenshee!

The man of the house is living still and the house was that of my grandfather. The man who spoke to the little woman is my uncle. My aunt has on different occasions verified the story in every particular in my own hearing as did others who were present that night.

In many ways this is very typical of belief legends that are not firsthand accounts of supernatural experience; the tellers often point out that they themselves do not generally accept the stories but believe this one because the people who told it to them were credible. In other words, they have it on good authority that the events really occurred; they believe the persons from whom they heard the tale.

In 1992 John Cousins of the Mourne Mountains, age ninety-four, told me the following:
Out here on the west road. When my daughter was living here, she had nine in her family; she was wed very early. At that time there was no custom for when you wed. Times were very hard. She used to go down that road there. There was no bridge at the time or anything, no bridge. She was coming up that road. There was a big flood. It rained all the day before that. The water was swollen up. You couldn’t go across the middle of the road. There were stones to walk across. And late that night my daughter was going across the stones, the second step across, and standing way in front of her, there was a wee woman in front of her. And she says, “Keep up with them steps, mammy, and not wet your feet.” A wee woman about three feet high. But I thought that was a wonderful yarn. That was a fairy.

Some say fairies have big crocks of gold. . . . Some fella was coming through the forest one night and he caught this fairy. You see, if you knock them off their feet, they tell where the crock of gold is. And the fairy couldn’t get clear, and the fairy told him where the gold was. He got the gold the next day. He planted it under one tree, and he was satisfied he got the fairy gold. The next day he went to get the gold. And instead of one tree there was a hundred! And instead of getting the gold he got no gold! Good, good, isn’t it? We’d tell that at Halloween. Fairies all the time. And I’ll tell you something else. Out in the fields there are blackthorn bushes. Fairies stop there. They want to take a branch of that bush. There’s no man out there wants blackthorn bushes. I once cut a branch out. This man tells me, “See, John, you shouldn’t have done that. Because I know a man took a branch of the bush there, and the next day there was blood on the branch.” That was their belief. They believed in fairies. Wouldn’t touch a thorn bush.

Generally, fairies were to be feared. The following story, also from County Monaghan and written down in 1944, provides an example of how dangerous fairies could be.

A story is told that a girl was carried off or disappeared one Hallow Eve, and her brother, who lived with her, believed that the fairies had taken her. He was told that the fairies would ride by on Hallev night and that his sister would be with them. He was to
catch hold of her. He waited that night til the fairies rode by. He rushed out, caught his sister, but she changed into strange shapes and at last he got scared and let her go. In the morning there was blood on the doorstep. It was thought the fairies killed her in revenge.

From County Antrim, Bushmill district, comes this similar tale in 1943:

Story of woman being stolen by fairies and on that night she managed to let her husband know that she would be passing by the house with the fairy hunt. He was to catch her hand as she passed and the woman be saved. The man had remarried, however. His second wife saw what was happening and struck his hand away. Later they heard ghostly screams and in the morning the field opposite was stitched with blood. (UCD)

The British traditional ballad “Tam Lin” (Child 39) tells a similar story of how young Tam Lin had been stolen by the fairies. He tells his beloved, Janet, to come to Miles Cross at midnight on Halloween, for it is then that the fairies will ride. They will place him at the front of the wild procession. Janet must grab hold of him, pull him from his horse, and not let go. This she does, while Tam is transformed into a snake, a lion, and even molten lead. In the end, Janet wins. Tam Lin is hers once more, and the queen of fairies curses them both in exasperation. The UCD story above is obviously different, both in form and content. While the story is similar, it is not a ballad. It is not in stanza form, not intended to be sung. The archival material is a legend describing a set of events that illustrate some fairy beliefs. In this story, the man did not retain his hold as the woman changed shape, and as a result the fairies killed her. Portions of the Tam Lin ballad have been used in parts of Ulster as the Halloween rhyme.

Fairies were unpredictable and could be helpful, as seen in the following story:

One time it is told that there was a man, and he had cut down a fairy tree, and put it as a post in his byre. On Hallowe’en night when the man put in his cows, one of their heads turned round
and was like that all night. In the morning a wee woman came into his house and asked the man if anything was wrong, and the man told her about the cow and her head being twisted round. The wee woman told him to take out the post he put in and the cow would be all right. The man did as he was told, and as soon as he had the post out, the cow was all right. (UCD)

Another story illustrates the essential nature of fairies as tricksters. This UCD manuscript is entitled “A Fairy Tale.”

Told to me by JAMES COWAN 958 Stang on 5th November, 1944.

Peter Malone lived at the corner of the Stang Road about a hundred years ago. One Hallow Eve night he was coming home very late from the Tops of Stang when he heard the fairies in a field beside the loanen chanting “SADDLE AND BRIDLE! SADDLE AND BRIDLE!” Peter listened to them for a when and then he cut in with “SADDLE AND BRIDLE FOR ME.”

The words weren’t long out of his mouth till the fairies all on horseback drove up to him and gave him a horse and saddle and bridle ready on his back. So Peter jumped into the saddle and joined the crowd. Off went the whole of them on horseback and never paused till they landed in Spain. Passing through a large town there they met a funeral going to the chapel so they all turned round and went with it, and took their seats in the chapel and listened to the priest preaching. When the sermon was over somebody spoke up and asked “Who is going to lift the offerings?” And with that they all pitched on Peter. So up steps Peter and lifts the offerings and puts them in his pocket. Then when all was over Peter suddenly came to himself at his own gate, in Stang. So he walked softly up the street in front of the house and tapped at the window for the wife to let him in. The wife got up but not in very good humor. Anyway Peter started to tell her how he had spent the night and the big lab of money he had in his pocket. He could still feel his pockets bulging with the money. So he told her he had as much in his pockets as would make the two of them rich for the rest of their days. Then he put his hand in his pocket meaning to give her a handful of the offerings and what do you think he found—a pocket full of horse dung.

Scholars generally place the origins of fairies in the Celtic pan-
theon of deities (see Briggs 1967, 1978; Evans-Wentz 1911). The hypothesis is that the beliefs in the old gods and spirits mutated but did not die and that fairy belief is a remnant of the elder religion. Indeed, there is much evidence, etymological and otherwise, to support this theory. Otherwise, in some folk traditions fairies are described as fallen angels, which renders them the equivalent of devils. Sometimes they are described as evil. They are always creatures of an otherworld. Like the other creatures associated with Halloween, death, or the otherworld, they are clearly marginal creatures whose relationship to our world is marked by ambivalence. Throughout my fieldwork I found repeated references to fairy belief among people today, along with stories of the banshee. Although these were not always related to Halloween, people found them thematically appropriate stories to report.

Rather than separate narratives and testimony that were delivered as integrally related, I will include below some portions of transcriptions of conversations dealing with the supernatural on Halloween. To some extent, the kind of separation referred to above is a necessity in a book such as this one, however artificial such an exercise may be. The components of Halloween in Ulster, such as food, divination, supernatural belief, and rhyming, are intimately and seamlessly connected.

At Halloween, young people—mostly girls—play games that purport to predict future spouses. As we will see later, even these apparently innocent customs are often described as evil and diabolical. Halloween involves all of life, involving both the recognition of the deceased and the attention to future marriages and generations, too. It is actually the themes embodied and conveyed by the customs and beliefs, rather than the various genres of traditional activities, that are more useful for establishing categories for study. Also, it is worth emphasizing that, although most of what we have seen so far dates from approximately 1880 to 1940, one does not need to go to an archive to confront fairy belief and other supernatural belief systems in Northern Ireland today.

The following testimony is from Patricia O'Neill, age thirty-five in 1992. She is originally from the Republic, by way of Dublin, and now lives in Bangor, Northern Ireland. Her beliefs and background are typical of the rural Catholic South. She was born in
Kilkee, a small fishing village on the west coast of Clare, which she says is part of the “most superstitious” county in Ireland.

O’NEILL: We’ve always been aware of the surroundings. It’s called the pisherogue, which is really sort of “the spirit,” and people in Clare, they wouldn’t bring the May bush into the house before the first of May, because it’s supposed to be bad luck. They wouldn’t get married on a fairy fort. They wouldn’t have a house on a fairy fort. Houses have been burned around us because they are unlucky houses, and the devil has been known to appear. You should hear my father. My father could tell you stories you’d really enjoy. Telling stories of how the dead come back and they had to have priests exorcise them to have them out of the house.

But the reason I say Clare is well known. It’s the county of Biddy Early. Biddy Early was a well known—I won’t say witch, but she was like a soothsayer. She used to perform miracles, cure people, and my sister, doing a fancy dress once a year, dressed up as Biddy Early. And Biddy Early was, I think, finally wiped out. I’m not sure if she actually died at the stake. But she was a witch, she was the first real witch, and she came from Clare, and she was typical of the sort of people you meet in Clare. Very, very good healer of people. She healed people who were sick. So then, coming from that background, I think the tradition of superstition was very much alive and was not scoffed at. Coming to Dublin it would be.

Pisherogue. It is an Irish word. But it’s a county of the pisherogue. Pisherogue. It’s like a spirit. You know, like the banshee. The Pisherogue. “Oh, they are full of the Pisherogue; they are full of superstition.” It’s an expression. It’s a word that people have. It’s well known. You often hear people mention the Pisherogue in Clare. But my grandmother, who is dead now, and my father were fantastic at telling these stories. I mean, you would really enjoy them. And I enjoyed them.

But just getting back to Halloween. It kind of gives you a focus that they were very much aware of the dead. In Clare, the dead were always sort of acknowledged to still be around. Even after death, spirits and the haunted houses and all this kind of thing were accepted, understood and accepted. And the pictures falling off the wall before a death. All these traditions. So Halloween was to us getting ready for the dead. I was just thinking
what it meant to me when you mentioned Halloween. Getting ready for the dead. It was the night before All Souls', and it was the witching hour, like you've heard of midnight, the witching hour. Halloween was a time when you'd think of your dead and respect them and visit their graves. My mother, that was always a tradition that you visit the graves. The first of November was All Souls' Day, and that was when you visit the graves. But Halloween, October 31, was the night when you would remember them, say prayers, and expect the ghosts to appear. As a child, I remember always being more frightened on Halloween, particularly if I was going to see a ghost. . . . Your parents, you would hear them telling stories about the dead coming back, and my mother would always say a lot of prayers and get masses said for the dead and always, as I said, visit the graves.

SANTINO: The family would go? Would they bring flowers to the graves and so on?

O'NEILL: Generally, yes. Although that's the only time. My mother would make a rule. She has this superstition that if you visit a grave there will be a death. And she never visits graves now, never. And the last time she did, there was a death. So that's the only time she would make an exception is on Halloween. On All Souls' Day, I should say, the first of November.

You would be aware of their presence. I remember as a child we'd be sitting down, and if you felt a cold breeze in the air, or really cold, icy cold, you would feel that there was something there. And my mother [remembered] things like the picture fell off the wall outside my godmother's bedroom before she died. Things like that would happen. And my mother, when my godmother died, she went into her bedroom for a full night with a candle, hoping that she would reappear, but she never did.

But just to show you the belief, and they did appear to my mother. My mother, when her sister died, she said that her sister came back to her. She was only forty-one when she died of cancer. There were only three sisters. My mother had two sisters, three girls. And when my mother came back from the funeral, she laid on top of the bed. Her sister was actually laid out in this particular room, and she was very upset, and she was crying, and she saw my aunt. She knows she just saw her. No words. There was no voice. She was wearing a dress she used to wear going to
school, a gray dress, and the hands just came up, she said, and the expression was, There is nothing to worry about. That was the only time she actually saw a vision. She is very much into all this sort of thing.

So Halloween, for us, was an awareness of spirits and the dead, and particularly for my mother it was a sort of respecting and remembering the dead and getting masses said and visiting the graves, which is something she would not do the rest of the year. And then food; we had the food. And bonfires. Food, you had your snap apple games, you know, the apple with the string. The children would have to have it over a bowl of water, and you had to try and get a bite of the apple, so we called it snap apple. And blind man’s bluff.

SANTINO: Why did you have it over the bowl of water?

O’NEILL: I don’t know. It was something we just always did. So if it fell off them or something, it was hung by a string. I think the hope was the apple would fall into the water; it never did. The point was everybody’s heads tried to get a bite of the apple. That was one, snap apple. And then blind man’s bluff was the most frightening. Especially when the ghosts were around. You would have to put a scarf over your eyes and would have to find people who would go hide. Your eyes were covered, so it was quite scary, the blind man’s bluff. I recall those two and, of course, the barn brack. That was the real thing, the barn brack. You had the pea and you had the ring. And if you got the pea, you were going to die an old maid. I’m just recalling it. I wonder if it was something to do with the story of the little princess who went to bed with the pea. I’m not sure, but you also got the ring, which everyone wanted to get. It meant you were going to get married and be the first to get married in the family if you got the ring.

SANTINO: Were there any other things?

O’NEILL: Yeah. I’m trying to remember what else. The only thing I remember really was the pea and the ring, and eventually it just became the ring. Most people just had the ring. I think I recall cloth one year, a little piece of material, which meant tears, wiping your eyes, like if you had tears, for wiping your eyes. I think that happened once. I’m trying to recall because nowadays it’s just really the ring. The barn brack? It was always bought. It was a local bakery that used to make all these barn bracks. But that
was another thing, the barn brack, and I was trying to remember what else. The snap apple, the nuts, of course. A bag of nuts. A mixture. You would get these monkey nuts and all sorts of hazelnuts and almonds and quite a selection of nuts. And the fruit, oranges. You would have more fruit. So that was really the sort of food I remember from Halloween.

We used to call it *oiche shamhanna*. *Oiche* was the Irish Halloween. *Oiche shamhanna* [pronounced eeya howna]. Irish is like English: it's pronounced differently everywhere you go. Apparently the Irish spoken in Galway is completely different up in Mayo and places like Donegal. *Oiche shamhanna*—night of the ghosts, night of the spirits. I always took it as that. Night of the spooks, the night of the living dead. . . .

I recall one story very vividly that my father told me. It was the story of a place called Kilmihil. This one particularly, I'll tell you the two, these two that remain in my mind. There was this story about this girl who went to London in a house in Kilmihil. She came from an average family in Kilmihil, just an ordinary, sort of poor family. She went to London, and she got involved with spiritualism in London, and her parents died, and she came back to the house where they lived, and she was sitting by the fire and she brought them back from the dead. She had the two parents sitting in the fireplace. Everybody knew this story and believed it. And they could not be removed. The spirits stayed there. They had to get a priest after a week, try to exorcise them, before they were finally brought from the house. But this was a story that was very strong. My father always recalled that story, and he had so many stories.

But another story was the story of this fellow around my father, near my father, who used to sleepwalk. But he used to walk, he used to walk out of the house, right as far as the graveyard, and there was a place called hill of the dead. He who walked over that hill was dead, and he would stop there and walk right back again to the house.

Another one I recall, when he was a child, only about four, he had this fever, like yellow fever, or some very bad fever, and he was put to sleep in the kitchen near the fire. They had a huge big open fire for many years there, lovely, and he was put to sleep. And he recalls, one night, sleeping in this, beside the fire in what they called the old house, because they moved houses, they built a new house on the land, some years after this incident. And he
recalls hearing footsteps like empty shoes, heavy. Men always wore what we'd call the clodhoppers, but they were heavy, heavy shoes that made a lot of noise when they'd walk. I'm trying to recall the name of those now. It'll come to me later. But he recalls these footsteps walking up and down the kitchen. And they had stone flags on the floor, in that kitchen they were flags. And the sound of the empty shoes walking up and down the kitchen. And his heart nearly stopped. He was only a boy. And he was so frightened he nearly got sick. And he definitely said he wasn't imagining it but there was, definitely, and then he told the story to my Auntie Bubbles, his sister, who had a similar experience in her bedroom, feeling something in the room and hearing noises, and the curtains opening and the windows opening in the middle of the night and those sorts of things. They obviously were very much aware of that.

So you'd hear all these stories being recounted around Halloween. They would be told in the evening time. Mother would be coming off the tea. At about ten o'clock they'd sit down, nine, ten o'clock, they'd sit down to give a glass of sherry to the ladies and the men usually have a glass of beer or something. Or tea. Sometimes it was just tea and biscuits, sandwiches. I used to love the stories, particularly at Halloween. That was a great time. My father, he could tell wonderful stories. Just all the stories of his uncle. His uncle lived far away in Australia. And before his uncle died, his sister, my grandmother, had a vivid dream and woke up in a sweat, in pain. My grandmother had this pain. And around the time that she had this pain, he was killed in a train. But the time coincided. And all of these, there were numerous stories. But it all sort of made you aware of, certainly, of the dead. You know there was a great respect for the dead and we definitely firmly believed that they were still there and these would always be recounted.

The fairy forts were a well-known fact. They're mounds. I'll describe them. They're like mounds of earth. They're like little miniature hills and, like graveyards, they're sacred. And you just would not—and there was one in Kilkeel, and it's well known. The fairy fort, it was called. There was sort of a respect for that type of thing.

SANTINO: Did fairies live in it?

O'NEILL: Under it. It was a fairy fort. Yeah, it's interesting, the
traditions. And these were sacred. Sacred territory that you would not build on. And anybody who did never had any luck.

Not fairies as such but the banshees were very common, especially in houses that had O’s or Mac’s in them, surnames of O’ or Mac. . . . I remember my mother telling this story of how the town counselor—he was a very important person in the town—and a friend were walking. Walking was a form of entertainment then. People didn’t have television. They’d walk for miles and miles. And she told the story of how he and this other man were going for a long walk, and they walked maybe twelve miles that day, six miles to this lake and back again. Now the town counselor was aware that they were being followed by this black spirit. He said this was amazing. Like a black body, it was just a black vision. Now when they came back after the walk, the next day, the man he was walking with died, and he’s convinced his surname was either Mac or O. It was one of those surnames, he’s convinced that was it. They’re called the spirit of death, or the banshee. It wasn’t. He didn’t hear anything. But I remember being struck by that story. It was an eerie one, wasn’t it? That when he came back after his walk, he was conscious during the walk there was a black spirit behind him, walking, a woman, not saying anything, but black. A black vision. And then the next day, after all, that man he was walking with died. And he’s convinced that was the banshee.

The banshee is a female spirit, and some people even claim to have seen her, but I wouldn’t. What you hear is a howling. That’s very common. Quite a lot of people have heard that, the howling and the eerie sound. I have so many stories of these things. My grand-aunt was my godmother. My mother was very close to her. She was walking past this hotel in Kilkee. She heard this eerie, eerie sound as she was passing. So eerie was it that she remarked to somebody. And it was like a whole terrible crooning, crying, wailing sound. And the next day the man who lived in that hotel died. She’s convinced now that it was the banshee she heard.

Many of Ulster’s residents are, like Patricia, originally from the South. Including her testimony here raises the question of what qualifies as Ulster Halloween tradition. However, not only does she represent a valid dimension of the overall population and its traditions, but her beliefs, and beliefs analogous to them, are found among lifelong Ulster residents. For instance, in the testimony
below, Tom Cully freely relates a personal experience narrative concerning a supernatural encounter. Cully is a member of the Church of Ireland, a British unionist who sees Ulster as having a separate ancestral history from the rest of Ireland. He is also a natural storyteller. Below he relates incidents of unexplained visions and encounters with the devil, the banshee, and the morrigan. Some of these stories are of his own experiences. To Tom, the morrigan's appearance justifies his sense of lineage to the Cruthins, we will see. All are examples of stories that have been told at Halloween.

CULLY: I'll tell you a story that actually happened to me when I was in my late teens in the Glens of Antrim. It must have been about November time or so with my shooting dog. I had a big Labrador, and I'd gone out from my grandfather's place right away up to the hill and come across down onto the coast north of Carnlough, and I was walking up past where there was an old Catholic boys' school there, a college which is the ancestral home of the Londonderrys and actually connected to the Clandeboyes, too, which you probably know of, and there always were stories about this place. The school had been the ancestral home of the Londonderrys and the monastery, and there was an old graveyard on the other side of the road up at Carnlough, a graveyard. It was all overgrown and less used now. Well, my road took me up on the road between the school and the graveyard. That was a curious sort of a night, not moonlight, stars, not late on, about seven or eight in the evening, although dark at that time of year. I had my gun, and the dog was sniffing about the hedgerows, and on my arm I had the gun broken actually with the cartridges out of it. I was walking up the road. As I came up, there's a large stretch of open road with the high wall of the college on one side. It was about eight feet high and what we would call in the Glens of Antrim a scrubbery—now there's a good word for you—on the other side.

SANTINO: What does it mean?

CULLY: It's a thick overgrown hedge leading on to more thick overgrown hedge, impenetrable type stuff that you couldn't get through, that was about seven, eight feet high, too, in those days. I think somebody bought the land to build on last time I was up there. But I was walking up the road thinking of nothing particular, thinking of tea at that particular time because I'd been out all
day and I caught a couple birds, and coming towards me was a man in like a monk's robe, dressed like a Franciscan or Cistercian. I think he had a black robe on, or at least it looked black. He was just walking with the hood up. It was a cold night, and his hands seemed to be tucked into the sleeves of his robe and he was walking by with his head down, meditating, and I thought nothing of it. And he passed me as close as I would be to you, and as he went past me doing that I said, "Good evening, Father," and he didn't answer me. So I walked on, and I says maybe he didn't hear me or I wonder is he on a retreat of silence or something at the college because they have retreats at the college in their chapel there. So I must have been past him, oh, ten, fifteen yards, and I said, "That'll be it," and I just glanced back over my shoulder—and the road was empty. Nobody, not in sight at all. Now there was no gateway or anything for about a hundred yards of wall either way. And the funny thing was I looked back and wasn't even thinking of anything, you know, supernatural or anything like that. Has he taken it down, lying down or anything? And so where's me dog? Because he had been with me just before he passed us now. So I gave a whistle, never thinking, and the dog was about a hundred yards up the roads, crouched right down in a fear position, looking back up the road.

It was just about that point that I started to get the hairs prickle across the back of me neck, you know, and actually the thought I'm on my own here and this is strange. I actually took two cartridges out of my belt and put them in my gun and set the catch on my rifle. If anyone is messing about, they are going to get a charge of buckshot over their head, and I went down, and I got me dog, and I said, "I'll walk back up the road again," because I wasn't really frightened, just to see if this man's all right, and the thought was in my head maybe he's taken ill, fallen down or stumbled into the ditch or something where the overgrown bit was on that side of the road. If you didn't know it had a deep ditch which is usually filled with water and such, if you're not one from the area, you might walk to the other side of the road to see something and slip into that or something. So I went up and got me dog, and he was crouched right down, not resting or anything but real tense, and as I came up to him, he growled at me. I said, "Come on, Kim. It's me." Then he lifted his head and I put his lead on and said, "Come on, let's go back up the road now." He wouldn't come with me. He was reluctant, you know, dragging
his feet, dragging against the lead. Finally did I get him, and he stayed in close to heel to me, and I went right back up to the college gates and looking across this rock part to see if I could see if he had fallen in or anything. No sign of him, and just about then I took off with the dog. I got into the house actually, and me grandfather was in the kitchen, and I got the dog in, he come in, and he was all right by then. I had to put me gun down, and me grandfather picked it up and he said, “You should know better than that.” I said, “What?” He said, “There’s cartridge in this gun.” He said, “I always tell you never to bring a loaded gun.” Because he was very particular. He was a shooting, hunting man, and he was very, very particular about that specifically. I says, “Oh,” and I told him the story, and he says, “Oh, so you’ve seen the black man.” And I says aye, and then he told me the story that this man has been seen about that part. Now I don’t know why, where, or wherefore he should have been there, but apparently he’d been seen by people over the years, the same man.

SANTINO: That’s pretty amazing. Did you tell it as a story?

CULLY: Yes, I did, yes, and everyone just accepted it, you know, because the story of this man was well known in the area. And then just up, well, a fair bit away, although within a day’s walk, if you were shooting, you wouldn’t mind it, you could have went up over the quarry, onto the mountain, have gone sort of southeast, and that brought you back down to the Ballymena Road, over the hill. Good shooting. It brought you down to a place called Slane, just about a mile from Slane, to a place called the Devil’s Bridge.

Now, two miles up the road from there, there is a hostelry, an establishment used for drinking, known as the Halfway House because it’s halfway between Slane and Ballymena. Now, the story goes that an old man that was well known for liking his cups was coming home from here. This would has been about 1900 or so. This is one of those stories my grandfather told, and he actually knew the man. He was coming home from the Halfway House to his farm, which was, oh, up on the hill. It was in ruins when I knew it, but at one time it had been farmed.

I think the way my grandfather told it, this man was coming staggering home. And lo and behold, he had to cross this bridge. Standing in the middle of the bridge was the devil, saying, “I will request your soul of you to let you past.” So the old fella had enough wit of what’s left to him to think about this. Although it
was a bad night and raining and all and he was eager to get home, he said, “Well,” he said, “if that’s the way of it, that’s the way it’s got to be. But I’m standin’ here, with ditches both side of me, and I’ve had one or two, and I’m afraid I’m going to fall into one of the ditches. Tell you what you do,” he says. “You stand over a bit and let me come up and lean on the wall of the bridge.”

So apparently the devil done this, agreed to this. And he stepped back. “No,” he said to the devil. “Set up on the parapet of the bridge and let me lean beside you. Then I can come up and lean on the bridge so I won’t fall in.” So the devil done this. The devil jumped up on the parapet of the bridge, and he was sitting there, and the old man comes up, and when he come up to him he gives him a bit of a knock with his shoulder and knocks the devil into the water. Or this demon or whatever it was, because he had known that demons and devils and things like that cannot tolerate running water. And that’s the story of how he got past the demon or the devil on the bridge. And from that day it just was known as the Devil’s Bridge.

Well, my grandfather didn’t put too much store by this story because of the amount of spirits Danny Campbell had had, but again it was a good story. That was one of the ones my grandfather would have told at Halloween.

I can remember old folk up there still believing in the banshee and the headless coachman when someone died. My grandmother would have told stories of so-and-so, of hearing the banshee, before someone died, around the house of someone who’s sick, although I never heard it myself.

The headless coachman took the soul of the dead person away. In Irish stories, he was sort of the sidekick to the banshee. My grandmother told one story. She was reared in Slane, which is sort of a townland, and there’s flat bogland mostly all around. There was an old woman died, or was dying, and my grandmother told this story as happening when she was a girl. And, of course, as happens in the country then, people have gathered in the house to comfort the family, and all the rest of the family wait out the death literally. Ah, a different thing from a wake, now, this waiting out for someone to die. Just to greet out the family, comfort them, and all the rest of it.

I can’t remember if she said it was her cousin or a friend. They were young girls, probably in their teens. Maybe they were sixteen, seventeen. They went outside. And my grandmother says
she looked out over the moorland, over the bogland, and coming sort of a zag zag path, seeming to be coming towards them, was a blue light, sort of hovering over the bog. And they were frightened, and they ran in, excited as young girls would be. And they were immediately hushed up by their mother saying, “Old Sarah has just died.” Now it could have been marsh gas. Could have been anything. My grandmother always said she had seen the banshee.

An odd thing happened here actually. Now I count it all because I would be knowing the history and maybe the significance of it. An Irish goddess of death, a Celtic goddess of death was known as the morrigan, and one of her manifestations is a black raven. And the weekend my father died—my father died in May, be two years this May on Friday morning—I was sitting out the back there on a Sunday, and a raven came, and I’d never seen what a raven looks like. Funny if you look close at them.

Now they say that the morrigan visits the house of death the day one of the old families, the old Celtic clans, have a death, and we are Cully from the Red Hand of Ulster, one of the old Cruthin families. So the morrigan would visit our family on the day my father died.

In a way, Tom Cully’s words illustrate the fact that much traditional symbolism is contested in Northern Ireland. Cully refers to the “Irish ghosts” of his stories and his grandfather’s, and he traces the belief in the morrigan—a belief he himself espouses—to the Celtic (i.e., Irish) goddess of death. Certainly, death is associated with birds in Irish traditional culture. But Cully defines himself as Cruthin, as a descendant of a pre-Celtic race that populated Ulster and was responsible for much of what is today considered Celtic art and culture. Politically, this aligns him to an independent Ulster movement that considers itself British rather than Irish, and unionist rather than nationalist, and who feel betrayed by the British government because it has negotiated with the Dublin government concerning the fate of the North. Out of this sense of betrayal have arisen the idea of Ulster as a unique culture area and the elaboration of a very particularized history—an invented mythology—to support it (Adamson 1974; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

We will see other examples of this type of multiple readings of custom and tradition, most significantly in the area of bonfires. First, though, we will continue to follow the thread of supernatural belief as it is involved with divination.
Dinah McKeen of Ballycarry, speaking in 1958, mentioned that on Halloween night, “it was the custom for young ladies who were looking for husbands to go to a neighbor’s door, and the first man’s name they heard spoken was the name of their future husband.” In that same year, Mary McDowell Gilliland said, “At Halloween parties in most homes big apple pies or dumplings were made with a ring, a button, and a thimble, and the recipients were acclaimed as ‘first to be married,’ ‘going to be a bachelor,’ or ‘going to be an old maid.’ Even if there was no party, all the children would enjoy their own Halloween. After tea, [they played] games such as apple and nut ducking (rather a wetting game), trying to bite an apple hung from the ceiling by a string, burning nuts on the grate. This last game was most enjoyed by the girls and boys who were beginning to be ‘romantically inclined,’ as the behavior of the nuts could betoken most unexpected developments. Sometimes girls rose at midnight to gaze in the mirror where they were supposed to see the face of their lovers.”

Sometimes the games required impossible tasks, such as trying to pull a straw from a corn stack with your teeth while your mouth is filled with water. Charlie Fox, the Reverend Bob Sharpe, Randal Johnson, and others regaled me with stories of Halloween parties.

CHARLIE: You know it’s basically a religious feast. The All Saints’ Day is the following day. There was a bit of a bean feast the night before, and we had apples and oranges and nuts and party games—eating—trying to eat apples held on strings.

SANTINO: What would you have to do?

VOICE: Put your head in the basin of water.
VOICE: The apple—you know—was hanging on the string. Of course, it was very difficult to bite an apple when your hands were tied behind your back, you see, but there was also a treacle bun hanging from a string. If my memory serves me, your mother and father would put maybe a threepenny or a sixpenny piece so that—all the boys were looking at the apple to see which had the most valuable bite in it. So you were trying to bite the bit with the best coin.

BOB: Also, they were fairly big apples, so unless you had a very big mouth, you couldn’t get your mouth around the top or the bottom of it. But another interesting thing. In Ireland and other places, possibly in Wales, maybe in Scotland, the Isle of Man, Halloween was also known as All Souls’ Night. All the souls were supposed to be out and about—the dead, dead souls on Halloween or All Hallows’ Eve, but also All Souls’ Night—all kinds of we call them pisherogue—a tall yarn.

SANTINO: Did you say it was a bit of a bean fest? Is that the term you used?

VOICE: A bit of a party. Well, they have all sorts of names—“hooly” if you like. The games, I think, all seemed to hinge on ghosts.

BOB: Oh, yeah, All Souls’. The games really did concentrate on the talk with ghosts. They were telling stories. The stories they would tell would be ghost stories, frightening people really. The kids would all love it because they would all be screaming and frightened, pretending they were all terribly frightened.

BOB: Whoever got the ring, especially if it were a simple lass, she was the next to get married.

VOICE: She was the next to get married. She got all excited.

SANTINO: I have read that sometimes there would be other things in the cake.

VOICE: Oh, yeah, yeah. The ring would be one thing, the coin another.

VOICE: We put on false faces or blackened our faces and went out round the neighborhood to the different houses, knocking on the door, really, collecting money, you see. There was a rhyme, and then the occupiers of the house would come out and—

VOICE: You were expected to give them something, either an apple or an orange or maybe—
VOICE: A sixpence or a little bit of money.

VOICE: We would have been children of the twenties. Times were pretty bad all over the country so that whatever was done was very humble. That's my memory. You weren't doing marvelous things, but the very simplicity and the enjoyment was immeasur­able.

BOB: And the excitement.

VOICE: Yes, isn't it extraordinary, that with all the sophistication we have, and with all the money around, I doubt that the people are happier than we were.

BOB: So an apple and an orange or both was tremendous in those days.

VOICE: And you know, everything, everything that they did was to make people laugh, honestly, and one of the ways, they would have a game, you see, that you had to thread a needle with a piece of thread with one eye closed. Now the stunt was that the fellow running the thing was putting his hand up the chimney and he got his hand black, and he would then say, “You have that eye open. I know you are opening your eye,” and then he would say, “No, I’ll keep your eye closed,” and he put his hand around and, of course, the eye would be all black with this soot, you see. [Laughter] And, of course, when he’d take his hand away, everybody was roaring out, laughing. Half of the people were walking around, and fellows with black eyes were laughing at the other fellows who were having a black eye.

More often, party games concerned the future. A person from Ballymena in County Antrim described burning nuts in 1943: “Some hazelnuts were dried on a shovel. Each couple was named (a girl and her intended husband). A match was then set to light this, and whichever one died out first was supposed to die first. Sometimes the girl (Mary) lighted first. She sent her flames round the boy (John) and lighted him. It was great fun watching them” (UCD). Here is the ubiquitous association of divination, love, death, and fun. In this chapter we will look at these games and beliefs and the serious fun they provide people.

Halloween customs in Northern Ireland are gendered. Activities involving food preparation and divination customs are, generally speaking, the domain of women, while the construction and
maintenance of fireworks displays and bonfires are male activities. The testimonies given below were collected in midcentury or during my recent sabbatical. They give this study a certain continuity with past collection efforts, and the data can be assumed to be reasonably accurate, based on what we know of these beliefs from other sources. For instance, Lizzie O’Hara, age eighty in 1943, when asked, “How did the young people behave on that night,” responded, “We didn’t behave at all.” She described dressing up in old coats and trousers and reciting a rhyme at houses. Mrs. O’Hara’s report of the chant that she and her friends recited is interesting, because it is intended as an irritation, a bother, rather than a solicitation for food, money, or treats. It is part of the mischief-making license of Halloween. Girls were not actively excluded from these activities or from disguising themselves. However, she said that finding a man was the first priority, and she described many divination customs and beliefs. She began by reciting the verbal formula she remembered from her youth: “We’re rappin’ the doors, to waken the poor / To let them know Halleve’s comin’” (UCD).

Then somebody would come out and run after us. But the best fun was looking for a man. We used to go to the corn stacks and pull out a straw with the teeth: if the top pickle was on it, you were to get a young man, and if the top pickle was missing, it was a widower. Then they used to lay down three tins—one with clean water, one with dirty water, and the other empty. Then they put a clout over your eyes and you started grabbing for the tins. If you got a tin with very clean water it was a young man, and if you got the dirty water it was a widower, and the empty tin was nay man. Then there used to be another of going to your door and listening with a mouthful of water, and hold it in your mouth, and if they were talking of anybody, it was to be your man. Then they had another one—putting rowan tree above the door and the first man to come in under it was to be your husband.

The concepts of liminality and marginality are important to an understanding of Halloween traditions and how they function in society. The supernatural creatures associated with Halloween are liminal: for instance, fairies are sometimes said to be fallen angels who did not follow Lucifer into Hell and were thus abandoned on earth. They are between two worlds. Likewise, the souls of the
dead who return to visit on Halloween are in the process of traveling from this world, where they once belonged, to the next, where they will reside for eternity. The pranks of Halloween are sometimes perpetrated against members of a community who are marginal due to age, religion, temperament, or some other factor. The divination beliefs and practices may also reflect these principles, as in the following testimony from ninety-year-old Anne Martin of Donegal in 1943: “On Hallowe’ night take a mouthful of water from a boundary stream between 2 townlands, go to nearest house, listen at the door and the first male person mentioned was to be the name of future husband” (UCD). The stream has a special quality due to its betwixt and between status (Turner 1967). Mrs. Martin continued:

Myself, my sister Biddy, and Rose McGinty went up to Owen Caibeline’s of Ardstall on Hallow Eve with a mouthful of water each, from a boundary stream. Biddy began to laugh so she lost the water and had to go back again for another mouthful. Owen and the wife were a bit deaf and they had to talk very loud. We were not long at the door until Owen said that he would have to get corn threshed if he could get a barn to thresh it in. “And who would give you a barn,” said Maire, his wife. “I think I would get Billy Martin’s.” “And who would thresh it for you?” “Jimmy McGinty and Dan McLaughlin.”

The narrator married a man named Billy Martin, and her sister married Jimmy McGinty.

From Loughinisland in County Down came this male perspective on this tradition in 1944:

My own grandmother often told about going to listen at a house on Hallow Eve Night. As she listened she heard the mother of the house say while stirring the champ, say ‘I wonder what my poor Henry is doing tonight? Will he get any champ?’ Henry was working in England at the time but in due course returned and dutifully became my grandmother’s husband (my maternal grandfather). Of course I think the girls made it a point of listening at households only where they had an interest in the young man of the household. The above-mentioned coincidence is a case in point. (UCD)
Much of the testimony that I have quoted thus far from the Irish Folklore Commission was collected from elderly people. Transcripts that I find most interesting, however, are of interviews conducted with children, apparently also during the 1940s. A twelve-year-old describes the festival this way: “Halloween is celebrated on the 31st of October. The next day, 1st of November, is locally called New Halloday. . . . The young people throw cabbage and turf at the door of every house on this night. If there is an old man bachelor they play more on him. . . . They used to have a Masquerade Dance in this district in some appointed barn on this night” (UCD). An eleven-year-old describes a party game: “Then there are plates on the table. In the first plate there is clay, water in the second, rosary beads in the third, and one with nothing. Then there is a blind put on some girl’s eyes and then she chooses a plate. It is great fun watching which plate she selects. If she selects the plate with the rosary beads, that augers she will be a nun. If the ring plate—marriage—if the empty—an old maid—and the clay—death” (UCD).

In the following account, clay is again identified as signifying the absence of marriage.

When a girl desires to know whether her future husband may be a widower, or a man who has not been previously married, she must get another girl friend to assist her. The assisting friend prepares three vessels (saucers, bowls, or cups) one of which contains clean water, the second contains water mixed with clay, and the third contains clay. The vessels are set on a table. The girl is then blindfolded by her assisting friend and led to the table. She is told to reach out her hand and touch a vessel. If she touches the vessel containing the clean water, the future husband will not have been previously married, if she touches the vessel containing the dirty water, her future husband will be a widower, and should she happen to touch the vessel containing the clay, she will never marry.

The foregoing were regarded as harmless and were carried out more or less in fun. (UCD)

In “Clay,” one of the short stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Maria, the protagonist, plays this traditional Irish game on Halloween: blindfolded, she must choose a saucer from among three.
To the awkward embarrassment of all present, she chooses the one containing clay. The girls who put out the saucers are scolded for including clay; Maria takes another turn, this time choosing a prayer book. But there is no doubt. Clay is widely seen as a sign of death or else a sure hint she will never marry. From the details of Joyce’s description, it is likely he intended the latter signification. Either way, it is bad and fits the individual. All the other people at the Halloween party know it and treat Maria accordingly.

Joyce is widely known for his skillful use of Irish traditional custom for literary purposes. Here we see Halloween customs being used to reveal character and provide a sense of loneliness and desperation. Maria leads a lonely life. Earlier in the story, she shares a barn brack with her coworkers. “Lizzie Fleming said Maria was sure to get the ring and, though Fleming had said that for so many Hallow Eves, Maria had to laugh and say she didn’t want any ring or man either; and when she laughed her grey-green eyes sparkled with disappointed shyness” (Joyce 1966, 112). First she does not get the ring, and then she gets the clay. Maria is doomed to her fate, and it is not a happy one. The custom described is faithful to tradition, and the ambivalence is found among people who practice it. In Joyce, as in real-life enactments of the tradition, the practice is playful. Yet it is taken seriously, especially when the forecast is bad or fits the individual with a particularity that cannot be ignored.

Stories of these customs can take many turns. In 1992, Mrs. Grindle told me about an Englishwoman who was unfamiliar with Halloween and who found a ring in her tart during a visit to Northern Ireland:

She was a visitor over here. She was sort of a companion to a gentlemen. And this gentlemen, the companion’s gentleman, he died. And she had been such a faithful servant that his brother was elderly and got her to look after him. She was a dear person. She was so funny. She told me about this thing, this ring. She said, “I can’t understand this Halloween business.” Well, of course, I have told you she found the ring in the cake, and she thought there had been some mistake by someone at the bakery and she’d get them into terrible trouble if she said anything. She went up and watched them there the next day. She went up to the door
Halloween fare. Tarts, or pies, are sold in bake shops with the talismans for Halloween divination. The sign reads, “ALL TARTS WITH RINGS AND MOTTOES.”

and she told the story. “I didn’t mean to do anything to get anyone in trouble.” “Dear,” he said, “it’s Halloween!” And she had never heard of it. He explained what it was. It’s over here in Ireland more than England, you see. He said to her: “It’s celebrating Halloween to put things in.” You put sixpence in and a button and a ring. And the person that got the ring was going to get married first, you see, and the button would be a bachelor for the next person, and the sixpence meant you would be rich. But that’s just the saying.

Halloween games involve the fruits and nuts of the harvest: ducking for apples in tubs filled with flour or water, for instance, or snap apple. In addition to the apple and nut games, a woman from Beleek, County Armagh, age sixty in 1944, said that, in an effort to divine their future husbands, girls scattered salt in the four corners of a room and repeated the following lines: “Salt, salt, I sow thee until eternity / That in my first sleep I may see / The boy that is ordained for me” (UCD).
Many games are divinatory, such as nut crack: two nuts are named, one for a male and one for a female, and are placed next to the hearth. A lighted match is then dropped between the nuts. If a nut moves away from the flames, the person it represents will be matched first. If the nuts crack and pop, the future bodes poorly for the couple. Children often acted as judges and interpreted these games.

An elderly woman in Fermanagh told me that these games were usually played by girls but that two women in her family, both unmarried, still played the nut crack game whenever they visited on Halloween. "You could see it if they were young girls," she said, "but these women were in their fifties. Ah, well, it's all in good fun."

The seasonal nuts were also used in a kind of ritual exchange. One man recalled, "People had the habit of asking their Halloween nuts from each other. 'My Halloween nuts from you,' was a common expression. And no shopkeeper let a customer go without a bag of nuts."

These transcripts show that most Halloween customs are experienced together. Statements about meals include mention of the icons buried within the apple tart and of boys carving turnip lanterns and scaring others with them. These provide a good index to the many activities of the Halloween/All Souls' Day season. "Halloween was rich in customs," said a woman in 1972 (UFTM). "Traditional foods were apple tarts with coins or charms or rings. Rings betokened marriage, coins wealth, a button bachelorhood, a thimble for the old maid. Potato-apple cakes, roasted apples, barn brack or fruit loaf, and nuts were eaten. Apples floating in a tub, or pennies at the bottom, were to be caught in the teeth. So were apples swinging on strings. Boys made turnip lanterns and were fond of dressing up, often as ghosts." This shows the intimate interrelationships of these activities and the themes they embody: death and harvest. But life is also contained herein, since the future can be revealed, and this future frequently holds marriage and children. The harvest may signal the end of the growing season and the death of the crops, but this same harvest is the very life of the people. Fittingly, the seasonal harvest foods of apples, nuts, and cabbages provide the entry to the revelation of the future. For in-
stance, the same woman continues: “An apple was peeled so that the peel made one continuous strip. This was thrown over the shoulder and might fall into the shape of a letter, the initial of a future husband or wife. Two hazelnuts were named for a boy and girl, placed close together on the grate bars and lighted. If they burned steadily together they would remain true loves. If one jumped away, that person would jilt the other. The ashes of the nuts were placed under the pillow, to dream on.”

A woman in Derry recounts essentially the same customs. She also equates the turnip lanterns with skulls, thus making the harvest–organic item–death connection more specific. She also brings the devil into the account:

Halloween around these parts seems to have the same old traditions as other places in Ulster. Turnips were hollowed out to look like skulls, and candles were lit inside them and these were hung on bushes and trees and fences to scare people, for a joke. Apples were ducked for, nuts burned, trinkets hidden in the apple cakes, and a ring in the fruit loaf. Trinkets were usually a silver threepenny piece, a button, a wishbone, a plain ring, etc. To the finders these denoted wealth, no marriage, a wish to come true, and of course the ring finder was the envy of all as this meant he or she would marry soon.

Unmarried maidens often blew out the lamp, lit a candle, and as 12 o’clock midnight approached, stood fearfully in front of the mirror. If a man’s face appeared over their shoulder, it was the face of their future spouse. If on the last stroke of 12 no husband appeared, then the devil did! (UFTM)

These beliefs always seem to be placed at midnight, which is, of course, a liminal moment in the day. Midnight is neither yesterday, today, or tomorrow, yet it is all of these things at once. As a moment of transition, midnight has often attracted customary activities, ritual, and belief. Consistent with the ideas of van Gennep ([1906] 1960), as elaborated by Turner (1967), midnight is an instance of passage. Since it is both here and there but neither here nor there, so to speak, the moment is open to what Turner (1969) has termed antistructure or categorically inversive ideas and symbols. In many traditional societies, including in Northern Ireland, midnight is a time when the possibility exists of the other world
and its denizens entering this one. Throughout the western world, midnight is known as the witching hour.

Further, in many countries, New Year’s Eve is marked by widespread licentious and inversive traditions. This is an important consideration, because Halloween is associated with Samhain, the New Year’s Day of the ancient Celts. It still occupies a position of preeminence in Irish society and is widely regarded as a seasonal transitional point, marking the changeover from harvest to winter, consistent with the older calendar. Halloween was the midnight of the year, and so it is not too surprising that spirits of the deceased were said to be traveling on that night, along with fairies and the devil himself.

Transitional times and places such as bridges and thresholds often invite this sort of customary belief. Many of these elements are present in the following account, including the use of the organic seasonal item and the threshold: “A girl who wishes to find out the Christian name of her future husband selects a head of cabbage and hangs it up in the kitchen, over the door, on Hallow Eve. Her future husband will have the Christian name borne by the first man who enters the door under the cabbage the following morning” (UCD).

In 1958 a man from Kinawely wrote the following report, in which he provides a somewhat more masculine perspective:

At Halloween is a great time for taking a peek into the future. It is possible to find out who will be your future wife or husband. All you have to do is to go at midnight to a lime kiln or a deep dry well. Bring with you a ball of wool and drop it into the deep hole. Your future wife or husband will roll up the thread and hand the ball back up to you.

Another method which is infallible is to go up to your next neighbor’s house and listen at the door. The first name you hear mentioned by the people inside the house will be the name of your future partner.

Sometimes a man can find out the physique of his future wife in this wise. Provided the cabbage garden is near the house all he has to do is to walk into the cabbage garden back ways with his eyes shut and pull a cabbage stalk. If the stalk is long and thin so will his wife be and if the stalk is short and thick his future wife will be rather short and stout.
You may go out to the haystack and bring a rake with you. Go three times round the stack raking as you go and chanting,

"Round and round and round I go,
That my future husband I may know.
Tall or short let him be,
This Hallow E’en I must him see."

And round the stack will walk your future partner. If a girl went into a dark room exactly at the stroke of twelve [and] was seated before a mirror combing her hair, her future husband would surely look over her shoulder. (UCD)

In the beginning of this testimony, the man mentions ways of identifying one’s future spouse. When he discusses pulling the cabbage stalks, he refers to wives only, in terms of their body types. But the rhyme he recites is about one’s future husband. Although men can and sometimes do engage in these activities (younger men burn nuts, for instance), this area of Halloween belief and custom is largely the domain of women.

Not every divination custom involved harvested foodstuffs or even organic items. The following was recorded from a woman in Kilkeel in 1961:

If a girl wanted to find her future husband’s name, she collected snails, put them on a griddle, put a basin over them, to keep them from crawling away. The slimy trails were examined next morning and the girl would try to trace the letters from them, i.e., the letters spelling a man’s name.

Hallow-eve was a great time for spells and charms, and playing tricks on one’s neighbors. . . . Another spell practiced on Hallow-eve night was to melt lead which was then poured into three bowls of cold water. The lead congealed, and from the patterns formed in the hard lead, the future could be predicted. (UFTM)

Like so many of these beliefs and customs, the specific details seem to vary infinitely. Here is an account of the molten lead custom as recounted in 1943 by a seventy-year-old man from Donegal:

Lead is melted and poured very slowly by the fortune seekers into a bowl of cold water. Futures are foretold from the shapes taken by the solidifying metal. It may look like a ring, a young
man (woman), a clergyman, the postman—augury of marriage or news, or even a coffin—death. I saw the molten lead dropped into cold water, through the handle of a door-key in East Clare over thirty years ago. (UCD)

Mention is made occasionally in the Folklore Commission archival materials of young girls dressing as witches on Halloween. Since young people would sometimes disguise themselves as ghosts or other supernatural creatures, this in and of itself is not too surprising. However, there is also frequent testimony, both in the archives and in my research, of what appears to be a related tradition: girls riding broomsticks and rakes. This appears to have been done in conjunction with divination rituals, and it frequently involves the devil. It is important to note, however, that the term *witchcraft* is not used when describing these activities. In 1943 someone from Donegal stated: “The young people, especially girls, went riding on a broomstick to a neighborhood door having her mouth full of water. She listened at the keyhole and then heard the name of her future husband mentioned by the people” (UCD). Also, in 1944 a forty-five-year-old woman from Kilrea in County Londonderry said that when her mother was young, “the girls on Hallow Eve at midnight rode round the corn stacks on the shafts of wooden rakes” (UCD). This could be taken advantage of; beliefs, even if only playfully or tenuously held, render the believer or practitioner open to pranks. A farmer from Derry was recorded as having heard that “a girl was going to ‘ride the rake’ and decided that she should ‘see something.’ He guessed where she would start and hid himself. The girl came and started to ‘ride the rake’ and when she was nicely going he jumped out behind her and got hold of her by the neck. ‘She got the fright of her life and thought it was the devil’ ” (UCD).

This story is disconcerting. How frightening it must have been for the girl to have suddenly have her neck grabbed, especially under the circumstances. The divination stories, or accounts, reveal a cultural ambivalence. Frequently they involve the use of sacred materials such as holy water, which can be sprinkled on the four corners of the house for divinatory purposes as well as for protection. Other stories recount dangerous or disturbing events, such as invoking the devil. Most of the testimony I have encountered indicates the playful nature of the divinatory games; they are
usually played by younger adolescents. However, there is a strain of belief that identifies these attempts at divination as diabolical. These stories are cautionary in nature. They warn against dealing with the devil for a glimpse into the future, even if the future in question is one's own. One unusual account found in University College of Dublin’s Folklore Archives describes “persons going to a crossroads at midnight taking with them a live rooster, invoking the devil, who appeared and gave them a silver coin which always returned to them no matter how often they parted with it. For this they gave the fiend the live rooster” (from Coleraine, County Derry, 1944). Belief that the devil can be summoned at a crossroads at midnight is widespread, not only in Irish tradition but also in African American tradition. Both the time and the place mentioned are marginal, transitional points: the crossroads is both roads and neither road at the same time, and midnight belongs to neither today nor tomorrow but is simultaneously part of both. Human beings frequently symbolize such anomalies in order to name and control them, surrounding them with ritual and customary behavior (Douglas 1966). Calling forth the devil or attempting to see into the future is frequently depicted in these anecdotes as being dangerous. The following was transcribed in 1944; the man is from Loughinisland, County Down:

The walls of an old farmhouse in our district are still pointed out as the “Haunted House.” One of three foolish girls who lives there was said to have tried to find out if she was to have a husband. So she duly washed her chemise on Hallow Eve and put it before the fire to dry and duly awaited the entrance of the prospective husband who according to rule should enter the front door during the process of drying the garment and leave by the back.

In the above case, the man duly arrived, but as there was no back door on the house, he stayed in. Of course it was the devil who arrived and stayed.

At any rate tales were told about the horrifying experiences of that family until the day they died. A priest was said to have “lain the ghost” and indeed all those stories were current in my young days and were I think believed by most people. (UCD)

Many stories report people confronting portents of death that prove to be true.
In the following, the performance was done in the name of the devil, and any person who obtained the information sought was not expected to have much luck afterwards.

A girl desires to find out the name of her future husband. She takes two small clews of homespun woolen yarn, and goes to an old lime kiln at midnight on Hallow Eve. She holds the loose ends of the two threads in one hand, and drops the two clews into the lime kiln. She now begins to wind the threads to form a new clew. Suddenly she feels a tug, and the threads are held. She then asks, “In the name of the devil who is holding my yarn?” A voice from the kiln answers the future husband’s name—and calls her some uncomplimentary and offensive name. My mother used to tell the story of a girl who did the performance. Her brother suspected that she was going to do so, and unknown to her he went and hid himself in the lime kiln which was near their home. He meant to answer with a certain name which happened to be Michael, but before he had time to pronounce the word “Michael” the voice beside him shouted, “Fergus, ye dog ye!” Both got a terrible fright and rushed for home, she, thinking she was being pursued by the devil, collapsed on entering the house and the brother tripped over her, and fell in the middle of the floor, also in a faint.

She was married afterwards to a man named Fergus Callahan, and I knew a son of theirs, who was also named Fergus.

The following is another story my mother used to tell us, and she had known personally two of the persons concerned. Three girls went on a Hallow Eve and washed their shifts in a stream which formed the boundary where three parishes adjoined, namely, Termon, Meeragh, and Doe. The three girls had arranged to sleep together that night in the kitchen bed at the home of one of them. The shifts were taken to this house and set to dry on the backs of three chairs, ranged around the kitchen fire. A piece of buttered bread (ceapaine) was set upon each chair. The girls then went to bed—not to sleep but to wait and watch what would happen. The door was left on the latch.

About midnight the door was opened, a man entered, turned one of the shifts, took a bite from the ceapaine which was upon the chair, and walked out again, closing the door behind him.

After a short interval the door was opened a second time, a man walked in, turned the shift upon the second chair, took a bite of the ceapaine upon that chair, and walked out, closing the door
behind him, just as happened before. The men who came in were from the locality and were recognized by the girls, and it turned out that both girls got married afterwards respectively to the men who turned their shifts.

After a short interval the door opened a third time, and a coffin came sailing in, and passed over the third chair, and it was noticed that the coffin was dripping blood as it passed over the shift and disappeared out the door, which then closed of its own accord. The girls passed the remnants of the night in a terrified condition.

The girl whose shift was drying on the chair across which the coffin passed went to America some time afterwards and was killed in an accident. (UCD)

Halloween in Ulster is a complicated amalgam of the sacred and the profane, of Christian ritual and folk tradition deriving at least in part from pre-Christian religion. The linking of divination with organic, edible items is another example of the tendency in Halloween to combine opposites, by collapsing the natural and the supernatural symbolism into a single object, however playfully. The turnip becomes a face, its insides boiled and eaten; apple peels and hazelnuts predict future spouses; the apple tart contains talismans that indicate marriage, prosperity, or the lack thereof. It is tempting to take the custom of hiding a ring or sixpence in the cakes and pies and comparing it with American legends of razor blades in apples and sweet treats that mask poison. In both cases, the idea is that there is some object or foreign element secreted within the foodstuff, which will, it could be broadly said, affect one's future. The Irish customs rely on familiar themes such as marriage or death. The latter is frightening and unwelcome, but not ghastly. This constellation of activities and symbols draw upon domestic life and reasonable expectations of the life cycle, thus reaffirming it through ritualistic play. The United States material, legendary though it is, imagines items in Halloween foods that are deadly, unexpected, unwanted, and surprising. Like the axe-murderers of the horror films named for Halloween, the American legends refer to embodiments of uncontrollable forces—the uncontrollable itself—erupting into ordinary life. In short, they are consistent with the idea of American Halloween as a dangerous, liminal time during which social fears stemming from contemporary social strain are given symbolic form.
The American material indicates fear of strangers (at least), while the Irish material is home-oriented and reaffirming of conventional domestic behavior and expectations through the life cycle. The Irish beliefs, to the extent to which they are believed, are found in games that are played indoors with family by the hearth, while the American material is manifested in legends about trick-or-treating, which is done outdoors with friends. In the Irish material the most transgressive events seem to occur when women go out to lime kilns or old wells to perform the divination rituals. It is in these accounts that the devil’s name is used or people are truly terrified by pranks. Ghosts are invited into the home to sit by the hearth at Halloween, but to encounter the supernatural out-of-doors is a much more threatening matter.

The following story is unusual in that it deals with a domestic situation in which a man leaves his wife for another. Moreover, it is a Protestant man leaving his Catholic wife for a Protestant woman, thus touching, at least implicitly, on the religious sectarianism that divides Ulster. The lime kiln divination ritual is central to the story, which demonstrates how these traditions are a part of social life and interpersonal relationships:

I was a long time hired with J—— in Donegal. Every back end (autumn) he took Major Swan’s place near the seas for three months. This particular year he stopped there for a fortnight after Hallow Eve. There were two other servants in house; one a Catholic, the other Protestant. There was a big Protestant man on one of Major Swan’s farms. He was so big he was called The Sergeant and married to a beautiful Catholic girl whose maiden name was M——. They had a big family.

On Hallow Eve night the other two servants went to the nearest lime kiln. The Protestant girl threw in a clew and it was held. She asked who held the clew and The Sergeant answered his name. They were greatly frightened and made for the house quickly. When they arrived all the roosters about the place were crowing.

In about a fortnight’s time The Sergeant’s wife came to Swan’s in a state of great excitement looking for this Protestant maid, but she hid. The next thing we heard was that she [the wife] was sent to the Letterkenny asylum and she died there a fortnight afterwards. Shortly after this The Sergeant got married to this Protestant maid.
The stories tell not merely of superstitious customs. Both the sto­ries and the customs, like Halloween itself, deal with death and life, honoring the family deceased, looking forward to the future. Inasmuch as the continuance of any society depends on its ability to replicate itself, matters of mating and procreation are of para­mount importance personally, socially, and culturally. Halloween, traditionally the most important social festival in the Irish calen­dar—the Irish Christmas, as we have seen—is marked by story­telling and customary behavior that focuses on these central issues of life. The stories are usually humorous, sometimes disturbing. They demonstrate how the traditions themselves dramatize and deal with these concerns. A good example is this next story, told by Bell Kelly and transcribed in a way that reveals the Ulster Scots dialect, which is so prevalent in much of Northern Ireland. A divina­tory practice and its accompanying rhyme are described in detail and placed in the context of a particular anecdote of a person’s life, having to do with her marriage. Questions from the interviewer are included in the transcript:

“You know I was going wi’ Johnny when I was a cutty but he went away to Glasgow. Well after a year or so, there went around that Gouldie [Johnny] was kilt in a shipyard, and I thought I’d never see him again. I tuk another boy in me head (wasn’t we ‘foolich,’ Master, but til nigh fifty years agone) and the other cutties was crackin’ on Halloweve and asked me if I ‘Tie the Nine Knots’ for the other boy. I said I would and did. We went to the well and I tied the Nine Knots and said the Rhyme.”

“What rhyme, Bell?”

“God’s truth but I think I haven’t it right. Me mind’s away wi’ it but it’s like this. I put one leg on each side of the well and thought of me man [not Johnny] and said:

I tie this Knot that it should knit
To see the lad I ne’er saw yet,
‘To see the lad in his array,
The clothing he wears every day.’

“There are three or four lines more but not a one of me can mind them. I said it nine times, one for each knot on a bit of cord and promised I’d spake to no one until after me dream. That was the crack, me father noticed me saying nothing and said, ‘Ay they’re
at the Nine Knots the night. I went to bed in my room without saying nothing."

"And did you dream, Bell?"

"As sure as God sees me this night, Master, I did, and who was it but Gouldie—Johnny, and him kilt in Glasgow. I dreamed 'twas at our weddin' in that kitchen there and I dancin' with XY [a local man yet alive]."

"Well. Come Xmas eve and who walks in but AB [still alive] to treat me. Da [Dad] and I was sitting there. He looked quare like and I knew he was up to some devilment. We asked him to sit but he said, 'I'll call in an ould boy of Bell's,' and went to the door. Who did he place standin' in the flure wi' us but Gouldie! You could have knocked us down with a straw. I could say nothing but 'The dead come to life!' I was married on Johnny (Gouldie they called him) the following Shrove."

"And did XY dance at your wedding, Bell?"

"Aye, he and Johnny was as thick as thieves afore he went to Glasgow and he danced wi' me on that flure at our wedding."

(UCD)

This story illustrates the validity of the nine knots tradition. It worked. Cleverly, the story plays on the belief that the dead return on Halloween. Johnny, thought dead, returns, and Bell reacts appropriately: she identifies him as the dead come to life. The tale is drenched in Halloween motifs and draws meaning and impact from them.

I myself first heard of the tradition of washing the shift or shirt from the Reverend Bob Sharpe, who told me the following: "When some particularly spirited ladies would wash their night clothes, they'd put it in front of the room fire to dry and they would go out, outside the room and peer in, and they would see a future husband come, out of the steam." This is ironic in view of the following story, and it indicates the necessary ambivalence felt by organized religion toward any activities that in any way give the devil his due. This too is taken from Bell Kelly.

"Bell, did your aunty ever say anything about a shirt on Hallow Eve?"

"No, but she told me about a shift, savin' your presence. As I hope she's in heaven God rest her I wouldn't tell a lie on her. And
this was a time as true as gospel. Did you know Mrs. ——— and Mr. ———, her husband [mentioning two neighbors deceased five and fifteen years, respectively]? Well, Mrs. ——— ‘washed her shift’ for M—— when she was a young cutty about sixty years ago. She spread it on the chair back to dry and left bread and butter in the kitchen. She went to sleep in the settle to see what young man would eat her bread and butter and turn her shift. She nearly fainted in the bed when she saw M—— comin’ in and eatin’ her bread and butter and turnin’ her shift to dry the other side.

“She went to the parish priest, but he wouldn’t absolve her until she went to Lough Derg [a pilgrimage site]. He said it was the devil took the shape of the young man. But she married M—— all the same. Now that’s as true as I hope for heaven.” (UeD)

From Ballynahinch and Loughinisland in County Down comes another tale of the shift belief, this one with a distressing ending. “I was told one instance (Loughinisland) where a girl went up to where three townlands met at a small river. There she took off her shift (so the story was told to me), washed it in the river, squeezed it as dry as she could and put it on, hoping to meet her future husband on her way home. This girl appears to have gone into ill health, become insane, and died. This incident stopped the practice” (UCD).

Again, these stories are always validation of the beliefs. Failures are not reported. Further, we can begin to see that on one level the specifics of these customs and beliefs vary endlessly, while on another level they are closely related and tend to echo certain themes even while transforming them. In the next bit of testimony, for instance, we hear about pouring the lead through the key, and the speaker mentions that he has seen it take shape. For the first time we hear of three sods of peat used for divination, a custom reminiscent of the snails left under the bucket. Finally we hear the stereotypical belief in Gypsy people as possessing the ability to see the future:

I heard a woman tellin’ of the sods. On Halleve night ye cut three sods and in the morning when ye lifted them if there was any livin’ creature on them it was a sign, and if it was a deal-needle [darning needle or flying insect] ye got a bad man and if it was a crawling creature ye got a quiet man and so it happened with her—she got a very good man. I learned of the shift—it was to be
washed in south runnin’ water and put over a chair to dry and whoever came in and turned it—he was your man. I heard of the lead and the key. You were to melt the lead and run it thro’ the loop of the key into a basin of water and it made shapes. I saw it makin’ the shape of a cradle. I heard tell of a very nice girl going to a Gypsy on Halleve night and the Gypsy showed her a man in a glass and the girl said that it was only Willie Green—that was her boy’s name. The Gypsy said:

“I can’t give you but dark revealin’
A passionate love and wasted feelin’
A love that’s past like the Lareth Sea
A broken heart and an early grave.”

I used to hear them tellin’ that years ago.

Again, these stories are always validations of the beliefs. Failures are not reported. We can begin to see that on one level the specifics of the customs and beliefs vary endlessly, while on another level they are closely related and tend to echo certain themes even while transforming them.
Gender Construction and Cultural Hegemony in Northern Ireland

Hearths and Huts

Halloween in Northern Ireland is, in the terminology of Clifford Geertz (1971), both a model of that society and a model for behavior within it. This is most obviously true with regard to gender roles. Men’s customary activities take them outdoors, whereas women’s activities require them to remain indoors. Moreover, the nature of those activities are significantly gendered as well. Women bake, cook, prepare, and serve meals. Although both sexes enjoy the divination games such as burning nuts, these are thought to be properly a women’s pursuit. This 1992 testimony from John Quinn is, in its vagueness, a typical male view of the feminine nature of the divination customs. Quinn was otherwise very informative: he told me of a personal encounter with the banshee, shared some “real” fairy stories, and waxed eloquent on Halloween foods—from the perspective of a consumer. However, he was very sketchy and indeterminate when it came to reporting these games, in which he does not have much of an interest and presumably did not involve himself very frequently: “Some people used to roast nuts and whatever nuts would crack, I can’t remember now. There was something about nuts, but I can’t remember now. I think it was mostly the women used to put nuts in the fire, and they would crack them. Different things would happen. I never took much interest in that.”

Baked goods also were used to predict the future. Ferris Dennison recalls apple pie with threepenny pieces in it, along with barn brack with a ring in it. “You got one and you hoped you got engaged before the year was out. That’s what happened when the male got it, the boy. We never had anything else. The sixpenny or
a threepenny piece in the pie, oh aye, occasionally a nut. You had
nuts in the pie. One sixpenny piece and half a dozen nuts spread
through the pie. That way everybody gets something.”

Women were responsible for the food traditions. They also
maintained the spiritual dimensions of the foodway traditions such
as hiding the talismans, and they were the principal actors in the
nut crack customs and other divination traditions. As we have seen,
these involved gaining knowledge of one’s future spouse, along
with a general knowledge of one’s fate in life, including whether
one would be rich or poor, married or single, long- or short-lived.
In other words, the divination traditions address the life cycle.
Consistent with gender role stratification, the life cycle events are
domesticized and gendered within the domain of women’s roles
and activities; they become the cultural property of women.

On the other hand, boys and men rule the outdoors during
Halloween. They gather combustible materials for bonfires. They
build and guard the bonfires, then set them alight. Boys go rhym­
ing, and they spend their earnings on fireworks with which they
play pranks. They gather, build, protect, supervise, direct. In a sense
they are hunter-gatherers, while women are nurturers who main­
tain the hearth. Boy roam outside; they expand the regular com­
munity space by crossing the frontier of the usual territory. More
important, they are allowed, even expected, to explore. Women
remain indoors and care for the ongoing health of the family unit.
If males are expected to go out, range far afield, and build a major
community structure while women are expected to encourage them,
stay inside, and bake, then traditional gender roles are clearly be­
ing dramatized through the customs of this festival.

Halloween in Northern Ireland, despite some elements of in­
version, incorporates all ages and stages in the life cycle. It deals
not only with death and the underworld (as in the United States)
but also with love, courtship, marriage, and the reproduction
of the family unit; of growth, maturation, and progress through
the life cycle. This is consistent with the commonly stated perception
of Halloween as a great family-oriented day. Ultimately, Hallow­
een in Northern Ireland affirms social reality; it is what Handelman
(1990) refers to as a rite of re-presentation, in which elements of
everyday life may be inverted or subverted, but are set aright again
in a process that endorses their essential correctness.
The gender-based activities we have seen demonstrate this: they are everyday activities intensitized, everyday life writ large. The female domain is indoors, oriented toward home and hearth, especially when both baking and nut crack games took place at the hearth. The male domain is outdoors, mobile, and explorative. Males build bonfires and huts, which inversely replicate the home and the hearth. Boys and young men at Halloween leave home and set up their own temporary abodes next to or inside large fires. After their bonfires burn throughout Hallow Eve, people roast potatoes in the coals in the early morning of November 1. In this way the bonfire becomes a hearth: boys leave their mothers’ hearths to build their own.

Halloween in Northern Ireland is about food and fire, about family past and family yet to come. It is about bread, the staff of life (which at Halloween contains within it hints about the future disposition of life). It is about the harvest, about death and ghosts and ancestors, and grandparents and children and neighbors. It is about marriage, about sitting for meals and running from pranks outside; about the fire that bakes and nourishes inside, the fires that explode outside. The food, the girls and women, the hearth, the future—all are inside, and each category transforms into and belongs to the other. The bonfires, the fireworks, the pranks, the boys and men are outside. Still, even this gender differentiation is mediated (there is a lot of mediation going on in those huts). Halloween in Northern Ireland is a time when oppositions are mediated: young and old, male and female, past and future, inside and outside, domestic and wild. It is perhaps not too surprising then that the political oppositions, the religious, ethnic, social, and cultural divisions are mediated—or at least accommodated—during this time as well.

So Halloween is a great family holiday in Northern Ireland. The focus of certain activities before October 31 and others on that day partially explains this. The more inversive, peer-oriented, outdoor activities precede Halloween, while the family gatherings, meal, fireworks, and bonfire all take place on Halloween itself. These activities reinforce family identity, and some of them expand to include community as well, in a family context. The baking and cooking, although segregated according to gender, bond generations, as does the construction of the fireworks displays.
Ulster's Halleve is a meal with visiting relatives, close friends, and neighborhood children running in and out. It is doing special things with your father and mother. It is great family and community fun, self-made amusements, playing with cousins, telling ghost stories, perhaps visiting graves. While not as formal a part of Halloween as it is with, for instance, the Mexican *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), cleaning and visiting the graves of deceased family members is practiced.

A typical Halloween in Northern Ireland is not so typical of Halloween anywhere else. Not that there can be any such thing as a typical Halloween, of course, even in a relatively small area such as the six counties of Ulster that form Northern Ireland. In fact, there is enormous variation in customs and beliefs associated with the holiday throughout this geographical area, but within these there are thematic similarities. For instance, the foods prepared and consumed at Halloween vary from locale to locale, but are generally fruits, grains, and tuber vegetables such as turnips and potatoes. Likewise, the many divinatory beliefs and customs associated with Halloween are similar. Whether it's a button in the barn brack or a ring in the apple tart, the intent is to foretell the future course of one's life. Both foodways and games frequently revolve around divination, which focuses on aspects of the life cycle: Will one marry? Have children? Become wealthy? Live alone? Die young? Again we see the thematic continuities of divinatory customs that vary in the details of their components.

To me as an American, the most distinctive feature of the Northern Irish Halloween celebration is the presence of fireworks, the uses of which range from an essentially adolescent boys' culture surrounding bangers and squibs to large-scale public events. There are no such associations of fireworks with Halloween in the United States. As a visitor, I was surprised to find that rockets, Catherine wheels, and Roman candles are so much associated with the Halloween festival in Northern Ireland that fireworks are used iconographically in advertisements for groceries and candy.

As an outsider, I was aware that fireworks were exploded during the season, but it was not until I saw the use of these images in advertising that I realized the extent to which fireworks symbolize Halloween. I also noticed that the sensual aspects of backgarden fireworks triggered nostalgic childhood memories of that evening.
I was impressed that I was able to witness the actual fireworks that would have been exploded before the ban. Since 1971, fireworks have been banned as explosives for personal or family use. Official municipal fireworks displays, usually held on a weekend evening close to Halloween, are the only legal use of fireworks, but in reality they are widely available and used by private citizens. As October 31 approaches, they are openly hawked on city streets. In addition, newspaper accounts have reported apparent increases in the private uses of fireworks in recent years. Certainly I witnessed a great many in Bangor in 1991.

Policemen have been known to bring confiscated fireworks to Halloween parties they have attended. Sharon Herron, for instance, told me, “Last Halloween, we know that there were policemen and administration, both were at houses near us, and they were able to get hold of some fireworks. And they were going off between twelve and one o'clock in the morning. That really annoyed a lot of the neighbors, annoyed them because they were the people who were supposed to be enforcing the law, and they were doing it, and why should they enjoy it when everybody else was trying to sleep?”

In some regions of the United States, such as in the Appalachian Mountains, teenage boys may light firecrackers at that time of year as a prank, but fireworks are not generally connected with Halloween in any nostalgic or emotional way. Instead, Americans associate personal fireworks—legal or illegal, depending on which state you happen to live in—with the Fourth of July. Municipally sponsored firework displays are perhaps the most dramatic and pronounced of Independence Day traditions. Although children play with firecrackers (the equivalent of squibs and bangers) all summer long, I know of no equivalent to the family displays in Northern Ireland. These are truly displayed. They are set up for visual as well as auditory family pleasure. Furthermore, the displays are scripted, with attention given to which illuminations will be ignited in which order for maximum aesthetic effect.

In England, fireworks are popular on Guy Fawkes Night. In fact, the relationship of the British Guy Fawkes Night to Northern Ireland’s Halloween is central to both the presence and semiotics of fireworks in Ulster. Anthony D. Buckley and Philip Robinson have directed my attention to the apparent antipapist
names of some of these fireworks, popularly thought to have been borrowed from the Guy Fawkes celebration, which recalls the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605 by Fawkes and fellow conspirators to blow up the Houses of Parliament in revenge for penal laws against Catholics. The name “Roman candle” is thought by some to refer to the liturgical candles used in Catholic ritual. Likewise, the Catherine wheel is a reference to the martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria, who was crucified on a spiked wheel before she was beheaded. While there is no historical evidence for these claims, there is an implicit sense that the terms are a somewhat pejorative allusion to Roman Catholic liturgical practices and, by extension, to Catholics themselves.

Fireworks displays and bonfires are associated with both Guy Fawkes Night and Halloween. November 5 is also known in England as Bonfire Night. Within the past forty years, Halloween was called Bonfire Night in parts of Northern Ireland, but that term now applies almost universally to the Eleventh Night—the eve of the Twelfth of July commemoration of the 1690 victory of William III (a Protestant) over James II (a Catholic) at the battle of the Boyne. This victory is celebrated with massive bonfires on July 11 and parades on July 12.

Alternatively, Roman Catholics have celebrated Bonfire Night in August, formerly on the eve of the Assumption, August 15, and more recently on the eve of the anniversary of the imposition of the internment policy, August 8. These summer bonfire celebrations, both Protestant and Catholic, are clearly and manifestly political and often overtly sectarian events. Thus, my questions about bonfires—even Halloween bonfires—raised suspicions, because the very concept of the bonfire has been politicized.

Large fires are a staple feature of traditional celebratory life in Northern Ireland and throughout Great Britain, as documented by Cressy (1989.) Although part of a much larger European complex of celebratory traditions (including midsummer bonfires in Central and Eastern Europe), the fires are particularized and politicized to Northern Irish specifications. As we have seen, bonfires are used to mark diverse events. Effigies of unpopular people or representations of unpopular ideas are frequently immolated ritually on these bonfires. Effigies are also set afire on their own. The December burning of Lundy in Derry is one such occasion.
A family Halloween bonfire.

This festive event involves parades, bands, and public drinking, but it is centered around the dramatic burning of the fifteen-foot effigy of the "traitor" who wanted to come to terms with the forces of James II at the siege of Derry.

Bonfires are very much a part of Halloween, as are fireworks. There is, I believe, a thread that links bonfires, effigy burnings, fireworks, and other fire customs and allows us to look at them within the same analytical framework (see, e.g., Cressy 1989, 88). This thread is frequently recognized by the Northern Irish people themselves. Effigies, as mentioned, might be burned on bonfires or might be the basis of their own public fires. Although neither bonfires nor fireworks displays are always part of Halloween festivities (the bonfire tradition is highly localized, within both rural and urban areas), the ways in which these customs are enacted imply that people recognize at least a metonymic relationship between the two. For instance, family fireworks displays are often constructed next to Halloween bonfires. The relationship can be seen also as metaphoric: I have on several occasions overheard people identify the sparks flying heavenward from the fire as the probable inspiration for manufactured fireworks. Sometimes boys
load the bonfires with bangers for the thrill of hearing them explode as the fire roars, thus joining the two traditions. Michael McCaughan recalled soaking bulrushes in paraffin to make large torches, “theoretically to light the bonfires,” he said, “but we quite liked the torches.” Fire is a constant of traditional life in Northern Ireland, and it is an important component of Halloween.

Nevertheless, bonfires are not always a part of Halloween proceedings. Like other customs, the tradition varies (see Gailey 1977). However, even when bonfires are present at Halloween festivities, I found that the interpretations varied immensely. Likewise, garden fireworks displays were also interpreted in varying and often conflicting ways. While many Halloween customs vary from locality to locality, what I find more interesting are the varying interpretations of the same custom, or as in this case what I will approach as a bundle of related customs (see Charsley 1987; Handelman 1990). The relationships of these customs have to do in part with the particular history and ethnic settlement of Ulster. One unionist from Donegal told me he used to smuggle fireworks in from Strabane across the Northern Ireland border (fireworks were banned in the South earlier than in the North). He said he bought them as much for the fun of sneaking them past the customs people as for the explosions themselves. “There are all kinds of motivations,” he said. Nevertheless, fireworks seem to him to have an implicit association with Guy Fawkes, and bonfires always seem to have loyalist associations with the Eleventh Night.

I am interested in the multiple interpretations of Halloween customs having to do with fireworks and fire displays, in the context of the interrelationships of ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. By ethnic group, here I am referring to Catholics and Protestants generally without noting the very real cultural differences among Protestant denominations. (For religious groups as ethnic groups, see Buckley and Kenney 1995.) Generally it is said that members of these various Protestant denominations, such as Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, and Free Presbyterian, are united in their wish to retain the union with Great Britain rather than join the Republic of Ireland; that is, they are unionists rather than nationalists despite other differences of identity such as Scottish or English national background. It is precisely along the unionist/nationalist split that we find different uses and significant differ-
ences of interpretation of Halloween customs having to do with fire and explosives.

We will need to consider two problems: the question of the relationship of Guy Fawkes Night to Halloween in Northern Ireland, and the allegedly apolitical nature of Halloween. Throughout my field research in Ulster, I was repeatedly told that, as a social event, Halloween is a festival blessedly free of sectarianism. Halloween in Northern Ireland seems to be almost universally considered a nonpolitical event, perhaps the only large-scale social event that can make such a claim in this troubled place. Meanwhile, I was told by highly reputable scholars that Guy Fawkes Night was not celebrated in Northern Ireland and meant nothing to the people there. Yet, not only is Guy Fawkes Night celebrated publicly by some people in such towns as Kilkeel in the Mourne Mountains. It also serves as a model by which to interpret certain Halloween customs.

The first hint I had concerning a relationship between Guy Fawkes Night and Halloween in Northern Ireland came at the end of an invited public presentation I made to a group of gentlemen associated with Bangor Abbey. Probus is the name of the organization, an amalgam of the words professional and business. Following my talk, which dealt with my research on Halloween in Northern Ireland, I repeated my interest in the backgarden firework tradition, which was so different from my experiences in the United States. In the back of the room a man raised his hand. “Jack,” he said, “we have fireworks here because we celebrate Guy Fawkes Night on October 31.” I was taken aback by this very direct statement, because he was claiming October 31 for the British by declaring it a kind of local variant of the British Guy Fawkes Night commemoration. The gentleman in question, Ferris Dennison, repeated his assertion with great authority and assurance. I asked if he meant that October 31 was literally celebrated as Guy Fawkes Night, with the making of Guys (effigies), children asking for pennies, and so forth. He insisted it was. At this point some men in the room agreed with him about the Guys, while others stated that they, at least, had never seen Guys in evidence on October 31. Following is a transcription of some of that interchange:
DENNISON: Over here we simplify it. We just celebrate Guy Fawkes on Halloween. We have the fireworks here at Halloween as opposed to celebrating at the proper time. We celebrate it at the end of the month. Over in England and in America you celebrate it on the fifth of November, is it?

SANTINO: No. We don’t celebrate it in America at all. Do you have it here? I’m confused. Do you have November 5 in Northern Ireland?

DENNISON: We have it at the end of October. We have Guy Fawkes Night on October 31, Bonfire Night. We have Guy Fawkes Night every night. Go back and tell your friends in America we celebrate every night. More of them would be coming here. We celebrate the fact that Guy Fawkes didn’t blow up the Houses of Parliament. Halloween gives us an excuse to celebrate Guy Fawkes Night, an excuse to have fireworks. The children, of course, go round to homes asking for a penny for the Guy. If you give them too much, the word goes round.

SANTINO: Do they actually ask for a penny for the Guy?

DENNISON: Yes. “If you haven’t got a penny.” There’s a number of alternations. “If you haven’t got a ha’penny.”

SANTINO: But they don’t actually say “a penny for the Guy,” do they?

ANOTHER VOICE: Yes.

SANTINO: Do they have a Guy?

VOICE: No

JIM MULLER: The Irish people brought Halloween to America. The English people brought Guy Fawkes here.

An English gentleman in attendance explained to me afterward that questions of bonfires had to do with questions of class. He said that all the men present would have witnessed bonfires, despite what they had told me. They would even have brought their families to see them, but they would not have actually built bonfires themselves. When I asked the assembly if anyone associated bonfires with Halloween, they all said no. The English gentleman said they were interpreting the question closely, reading it as did
they ever *make* bonfires, and the answer here would be an honest no. Yet this man himself began referring to the July bonfires rather than those of Halloween.

I ran into similar situations frequently. Whenever I made public presentations to local history societies, women’s clubs, men’s clubs, etc., I asked about any connections between Guy Fawkes Night and Halloween. Invariably, some said they knew of no such connection and, in fact, thought of the two celebrations as very different, and others related and even equated them, as Dennison had. One man in Bangor specifically told me he used to make Guys for Halloween and take them around to people’s homes for money.

Philip Robinson told me of an incident in his childhood in which he and his friends used a Guy:

**ROBINSON:** I think there was a thing, you know, where these new people—in a sense—the outsiders, were fair game, you know, for pranks because they had this sort of distance and also you were less likely to get identified and so on. There were all sorts of reasons why you’d be more likely to play pranks on them. Ah, I also remember—an interesting thing—about these new houses, the bungalows they were. We tried to gear—because they were fertile ground for rhyming—we tried to gear what we did obviously. We were sort of market-conscious, and I remember one occasion we had the sort of sense that these people—I mean, our simple minds, middle class, couldn’t distinguish between what was meant by “middle class” and what was meant by “English,” for example. These people weren’t English, but we somehow thought the people were English. And I remember on one occasion we deliberately made a Guy Fawkes to take round with us. I think I had seen this in a comic, of somebody pulling in one of these buggies or children’s—what we called guiders—a little sort of four-wheeled, ah . . .

**SANTINO:** A cart?

**ROBINSON:** A cart or wagon, yeah, that’s the sort of thing. But I’d seen it in a comic with a Guy, spelled wrong in a comic, and assumed that this was a way of how they did it in England—how they Halloween rhymed in England. That’s what I thought—that’s what I assumed. So we made one of these things—in fact, we did but we didn’t. We got one of the smallest boys, we turned his coat
inside out and stuffed straw inside his cuffs—we put his hands right up and made him into a Guy. We made him like a scarecrow and sat him on this thing so that we wouldn’t have to carry him. Sat him on the guider and took him—wheeled him—to the front door of these bungalows. And I would never have dreamed of doing that but this, looking back on it now—and don’t try to analyze it—but looking back on it now, I think what we were trying to do was give these people what they wanted or what we thought they might have wanted, or what we thought they might have expected.

SANTINO: What happened?

ROBINSON: Well, I think we went to one door. [laughing] And, unfortunately, the door we went to was one place we were chased from, and the Guy had to get up and run, leaving the kids behind him. So it was a very unsuccessful visit. And it was just a sort of trial, and it didn’t work.

Robinson’s anecdote clearly relates an unusual incident and reflects more the influence of the media, in that he was aware of the British custom through magazine and newspaper reports, than it does the accretion of two separate traditions. However, other men were more insistent that the making of Guys was in fact something they had firsthand experience with and regularly did in their youth, sometimes for November 5 (thus challenging the scholars who said that Guy Fawkes Day meant nothing in Northern Ireland), or, more interestingly, for Halloween.

Guy Fawkes Night is celebrated apart from Halloween in some places in Northern Ireland. For instance, I interviewed a family who lived in the Mourne Mountains relatively near Kilkeel. Present were Mrs. McConnell, the grandmother, Sharon, her granddaughter (a woman in her thirties), and her great-grandson (and Sharon’s nephew), John, a nineteen-year-old. I asked if effigies were ever burned on the local Halloween bonfires.

JOHN: No. That’s more for Guy Fawkes.

SHARON: Guy Fawkes Night would have been the night for doing that, not Halloween.

SANTINO: Would they have done Guy Fawkes Night here?
SHARON AND MRS. MCCONNELL: Yes.

MRS. MCCONNELL: Well, they had something dressed up like—what would you call the man?

SHARON: The Guy?

MRS. MCCONNELL: The Guy, Guy Fawkes. They had one made up like that and take him way up to some field where it wouldn't cause harm and get it all alight there.

SHARON: Sometimes, though, in recent days, instead of seeing a Guy Fawkes being burned, you'll see an effigy of Margaret Thatcher's head, you know, a mask of her.

SANTINO: Where would you have seen it?

SHARON: I would have seen that on television, just from across the water.

SANTINO: But is Guy Fawkes celebrated here in Kilkeel?

MRS. MCCONNELL: Yes, yes. They'll have a parade through the streets first, and then they'll go to whatever field it was that was for the fire.

SANTINO: Was it a community, or town, bonfire?

MRS. MCCONNELL: Well, a lot of country boys do it as well.

SHARON: I remember being at one. I'm sure it's nearly ten years ago it was, when I remember. In Kilkeel and, you know, people with chip vans would come up and sell their chips. But I do remember that that night was also an excuse to play tricks on Roman Catholic folk, and I remember a slurry tank, that's like with manure, being taken out in the road because they knew that some Roman Catholics were going to be there. They were going to spray them with slurry.

SANTINO: What is slurry?

SHARON: Pig manure.

SANTINO: So they are really close to each other. You might have a bonfire for Halloween, then five, six days later you'd have an official one for Guy Fawkes Night.

SHARON: That would be a bigger thing, much bigger thing.

SANTINO: And there could be mischief again.

SHARON: Mm-hmm.
Santino: Although aimed specifically at the Roman Catholics. Would there likely be mischief straight through, like a week of children playing tricks?

Sharon: Yes.

Mrs. McConnell: Well, what day is Guy Fawkes? There's just a few days between each.

Santino: Did you feel that they were two different events altogether, though? Or did you feel that they were sort of alike?

Mrs. McConnell: No, just different.

Sharon: I thought they were different.

This point needs to be made: many people vigorously deny the connection between Halloween and Guy Fawkes Night. The testimony of the McConnell family demonstrates not only that Guy Fawkes Night is indeed celebrated, formally and officially, in Northern Ireland but also that it is the vehicle for sectarian pranks that strike outsiders (and presumably the victims) as quite ugly. Likewise, Philip Robinson's recollections indicate class-based childhood perceptions of the world, especially insofar as he interpreted middle-class Northern Irish people as being English. In other words, even though Guy Fawkes Night figures in one way or another in the lives of the different informants quoted so far, according to their testimonies it reflects very different aspects of their lives and has very different meanings to each of them (compare Beck 1982).

There are still other linkages between the two festivals. Both the terms *Lundy* and *Guy* have become synonymous with *effigy*. The term *Guy* probably predates the actual Gunpowder Plot and derives from *guiser*, referring to someone in disguise. *Lundy* as a generic term dates directly to the siege of Derry and the subsequent traditional burning of this unpopular (among unionists) figure.

Several residents of the Greyabbey area told me that they burned effigies on the Halloween bonfires, usually of the "traitor Lundy," governor of Derry at the time of the Jacobean siege. Robert Lundy had attempted to come to terms with the troops who had a stranglehold on the city, but he was prevented from doing so by a band of apprentice boys. In Derry, these events are commemorated twice a year, in December and in August. In December, Lundy is burned in effigy following a day of band parades. This day, the Saturday
closest to December 16, is known as Lundy Day and is the occasion for a public display of anti-Catholicism. That Lundys should be burned on Halloween elsewhere adds a political and sectarian dimension to the festival in those instances, and it is a direct contradiction of the supposed nonpolitical, nonsectarian nature of the celebration. It shows that the Halloween bonfires were sometimes used for effigy burning (i.e., as a means of making a public statement regarding political issues and figures). Archival materials in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum indicate that Lundys were burned as part of Halloween festivities in Belfast and Fermanagh in years past, and I recorded some testimony in 1992 in Greyabbey: “Ivan was talking about here they did have bonfires and they burned effigies, both he and Will. And he said on some occasions they played Lambeg drums as well. Because it was Lundy. He says they burned Lundy.” The Lambeg drum, an extremely large instrument, is universally thought by Roman Catholics to be an instrument used by Protestant unionists to intimidate them. While most Protestants deny anything this sinister, they do claim the Lambeg drum as very much a part of Protestant tradition. No one disputes this.

The following testimony was also recorded in Grey Abbey in 1992:

**McKee**: I’m Teddy “Bear” McKee from the holy city of Portavogie. There’s not a pub in it!

**Santino**: Did you burn a Lundy here?

**McKee**: Only in fun. But that’s years ago. I’m sure it’s years ago. I’ll tell you, Halloween went out here when the fireworks went out. [General agreement]. Aye, the squib, that was it. We used put them keyholes, in the keyhole and lighting them.

**Santino**: Did you light bonfires out in the back?

**McKee**: Yeah.

**Santino**: Did you have a dummy you would burn?

**McKee**: Yeah. Lundy, we called it. Lundy. Aye, that’s right. Halloween night.

**Santino**: Did it have anything to do with Guy Fawkes?

**General**: No, no.

**Santino**: When did you stop doing that?
GENERAL: When the fireworks went, all that went. That would be 1969.
SECOND VOICE: Fireworks were banned.
SANTINO: Were they burning Lundy up until then?
SECOND VOICE: No, I don't think so. They stopped for the war. [General agreement]
MCKEE: The fifties. 1950s. They called it a Guy. They wouldn't have bothered now to make the Guy. They wouldn't have time, you see. Before the days of television, there was more time in the house. Oh, aye, there was nothing else to do. The thing was, you were always knocking doors. Bang bang. Kick the door, you see, and run. And it was no good unless they chased you.
SANTINO: Where did you have the bonfire?
SECOND VOICE: I've seen them in the square over here, and I've seen them burned up on the top of the street, too.
SANTINO: What time?
MCKEE: Just after it got dark. Just early evening. Because everybody else would go back to their own house to play ducking for apples and games, stuff like that. Oh, just a few of the boys would get together and say, "C'mon and we'll make a Lundy." You get an old coat and a pair of trousers and you get some straw and you stuffed it with straw. In those days, you see, you went together with a gang of boys and you did everything. You just all went about together. You played football together. You did this and that together. And therefore, if there was anything happening, you were all in on it. But maybe somebody had more room at his place or his backyard. So you'd say, "We'll build it up in so-and-so's yard," so he went and got the straw. You build it before Halloween night. It was brought out on Halloween night and placed somewhere. Maybe depending on where it's placed, maybe if it was built on top of the street you didn't come any further than the top of the street, maybe it was brought down here to the square, and we set it alight.
OTHER VOICE: Did you bring it straight to the bonfire, or did you parade up and down?
MCKEE: No, you just brought it straight to the bonfire. You'd start—with that type of thing it's dark at that time. Of course, the
gang was all together. And then it took a week or so to collect the wood for the fire.

SECOND VOICE: Ah, no, I don’t think.

THIRD VOICE: No, Teddy, there would have been tar bars about somewhere.

MCKEE: Tar bars. Remember those? Wooden bars.

SECOND VOICE: Wooden bars burned well. You’d have got maybe some tires. There was no wood involved because some of it just burned up in a half an hour.

MCKEE: You would put squibs in it.

SECOND VOICE: Oh, you would put squibs in them.

MCKEE: The fingers, put squibs in the fingers. Put ‘em in the ends of the sleeve, you see? Then they went off. The bangers went off. You’d put the bangers in a bottle, an empty bottle, that took off up into the air. You’d use squibs and jumping jacks. They’d be jumping around your feet, you know.

OTHER VOICE: I remember jumping jacks on a thread, with a safety pin. You stuck it on your coat. [Great laughter]. Stick it on your coat and light it.

SECOND VOICE: And then there was the Catherine wheel. You’d set them onto a piece of wood or something. Do you have fireworks in America?

MCKEE: No, no, but you see, fireworks is Guy Fawkes. I wonder what they had before Guy Fawkes. They probably had Halloween before Guy Fawkes.

OTHER VOICE: Normally, yes. But we never had Guy Fawkes. It depends when fireworks were introduced in this country. Maybe we had more of a Scottish connection on the coast here. See, Guy Fawkes didn’t mean anything to us at all.

SECOND VOICE: You couldn’t hear a firework on Guy Fawkes, the fifth of November here. It’s only here for Halloween.

MCKEE: But, you see, Guy Fawkes wasn’t actually burned. Was he not hung?

SECOND VOICE: Well, I know they’ve got bonfires now in England.

MCKEE: No, I mean, what was his sentence? Was he hung? Or was he burned at the stake?
VOICE: He was burned at the stake, I'm sure.

McKee: I'm just wondering. I don't know about that, because I presume that Halloween had a bonfire maybe before Guy Fawkes's time, and then . . .

Second voice: Was there not rhyming at Halloween?

McKee: Yes, of course, we used to beg with a dummy. Took it around in a wheelbarrow. A Guy, penny for the Guy.

Second voice: Guy Fawkes never burned. There's no Guy at all. Just stuck a false face on. It's a penny for the Guy. Just a way of begging. We never knew anything about Guy Fawkes.

Santino: You still said, "Penny for the Guy"?

Voices: No, no, not in our town, not in our town. Lundy has no connection . . .

Santino: You did do the burning of a dummy, and you called it a Lundy?

Voice: Lundy.

Woman's voice: With Lundy, you see, you maybe got a tub of paraffin or something, and you just threw it in, and you lit Lundy, and away he went. You maybe had a time or something, you didn't, you never sung a song or anything. Somebody just went up to the fire, their fireworks lit off, squibs and that, and then everybody on the way back home we knew at every house there was a party, ducking for apples.

Santino: Did you have to guard it?

McKee: You just let it. Ten years ago you could have left the Twelfth bonfire with nobody near. But there's this attitude now you have to destroy things, so they would set it on fire before the day.

Other voice: Same thing, if you got stuck in a boat in Greyabbey, you could have let a boat upside down and left it for two or three days. You couldn't leave it for an hour now. They'd have it on the bonfire! [Laughter] Even if we burned one on the Twelfth of July, it was still called a Guy. It wasn't until we were quite a bit older when we realized it was Lundy. See, to us here, a bonfire's not right unless it has a dummy on it or a Guy.

The testimony above is typical in its internal contradictions.
People are simultaneously reminiscing about building dummies and asking, “A penny for the Guy?” which is a Guy Fawkes tradition, while others are insisting there are no Guy Fawkes customs in Northern Ireland, at least not in their town or experience. For instance, when I interviewed Ferris Dennison, whom I quoted earlier, in his home with his wife present, he was less insistent that Guy Fawkes Night was celebrated on October 31 in Northern Ireland. This was due entirely to the presence of his wife, who disagreed sharply with him on this point:

DENNISON: I guess Guy Fawkes Night, during the night time you have the fireworks. We refer to it as Guy Fawkes Day or Guy Fawkes Night. We don’t just say Guy Fawkes. It’s an overlap between Halloween, which is at the end of October, and Guy Fawkes, and we’re peculiar in N.I. because we really link the two together to a certain extent. . . . Well, there’s fireworks associated with it.

SANTINO: Where are you from?

DENNISON: Belfast.

SANTINO: All your life?

DENNISON: Uh-huh.

SANTINO: Where are you from?

MRS. DENNISON: County Caven.

SANTINO: No, I was just curious frankly in talking about Guy Fawkes Night. It is essentially an English holiday. Do you have an English background? No, no English background at all. Do you think you can tell me why these overlapped?

DENNISON: Well, at Halloween you have ducking for apples, you have nuts, and you dress up, and for a while beforehand you go around houses with a Guy, and the Guy is Guy Fawkes, and you have fireworks the night of Halloween, just like Guy Fawkes Night, which is Guy Fawkes Night and therefore it’s Guy Fawkes Night, and that’s what I say; therefore, there is a certain linkage.

Mr. Dennison’s wife insisted that the two were separate events, and in her presence Ferris did not disagree. Initially he had been making a claim for a kind of British authenticity to the Northern Irish October 31 celebration. People might call it Halloween, he
implied, but the use of fireworks proved that this was really the
Guy Fawkes Night celebration, albeit a few days early.

An interaction I had with a city official from Derry sheds some
light on this dynamic. I had been in Derry for the burning of the
Lundy in December and had arranged an interview with this offi­
cial regarding Derry’s famous citywide fancy dress Halloween fes­
tival. We met outside, after the day’s parade had ended but before
the lighting of the effigy at twilight. The city was alive with band
members and tourists wandering the streets and packing the bars.
We had been talking about Halloween for some time, and the offi­
cial repeatedly attributed the success of the Halloween event to
the fact that it was all-inclusive. Everyone could and did come, all
ages, all backgrounds. Only once had there been any trouble, when
some soldiers drove into the crowd and some people threw rocks at
them “They [the soldiers] shouldn’t have been there,” the official
said, with some vehemence. This should have indicated to me that
the crowd was predominantly Roman Catholic, but what was said
next was more revealing. Distracted by some noise made by Lundy
Day revelers, the official explained the events surrounding us. “That’s
fine. It’s all right. It’s a tradition for the other side, you know. Lundy
Day is theirs. Halloween is ours.” Halloween, due to its presumed
Celtic origins, falls into the cultural property claimed by Roman
Catholics. Guy Fawkes Night is clearly both British and often
antipapist. On one level, people see and experience Halloween as
nonsectarian, but in many instances, there is a struggle of definition
as to whose cultural property it really is, which “side” it belongs to,
whose hegemony it falls under. Ferris Dennison makes a claim for
Halloween as British by redefining it as Guy Fawkes Night. The
Derry official, while asserting the openness of Halloween, confided
to me personally that it really belonged to one group.

I have tried to demonstrate that the relationships between Guy
Fawkes Night and Halloween in Northern Ireland are several and
complex. The Halloween fireworks tradition is widely thought to
be an adaptation of a British custom associated with an early No­
vember celebration. Both holidays have been known as Bonfire
Night. Despite the assertions of some scholars and many residents,
Guy Fawkes Night is celebrated by some people in certain locali-
ties in Northern Ireland. Even in places where the residents deny any connection between the two events, we have seen the burning of effigies on Halloween bonfires, a custom that parallels the more politicized Guy Fawkes Night, and introduces political elements to a festival renowned for its absence of politics. Finally we have seen instances where individuals directly claimed the day for their “side.” According to one man, Halloween in Northern Ireland is in actuality Guy Fawkes Night, while to a city official in Derry, Halloween properly belongs to the Roman Catholic tradition. It seems the range of interpretations regarding the nature, function, and even the history of the customs of lighting bonfires and, perhaps more important, setting off fireworks displays is a classic example of the ways that symbols are infused with different meanings by different groups; sometimes they are infused with different meanings by the same group at different times under different circumstances.

And yet, in the face of all this, people maintain that Halloween is nonpolitical and nonsectarian. I do not doubt that they are right. What I have tried to show is that Halloween is not a neutral text: it contains symbolism that has the potential to be read in divisive sectarian terms, and on some occasions it is. There are, in fact, multiple readings of these symbolic forms. What is important is that usually these readings are not put forth as the single valid way to interpret the symbols. They are not used to validate one’s personal political, cultural, or ethnic allegiance or identity, although the potential exists for doing just that. Halloween could be another site of conflict (on all levels), but it is not. The opposite is the case. People universally relish it as a great family event, as the Irish Christmas, as a peaceful haven of nonsectarian sentiment. But if one scratches the surface, one finds potentially conflicting, oppositional readings that could lead to political strife. However, people choose not to assert specific conflictual or sectarian interpretations, nor do they attempt to impose them on others. Halloween allows for a peaceful coexistence of these interpretations and for the interpreters as well.

Perhaps the terrorist killings on October 31, 1993, in Greysteel should be mentioned as well in this context. The terrorists shouted, “Trick-or-treat,” as they murdered thirteen pub patrons, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The gunmen were loyalist, and the act was the culmination of a particularly bloody October. As we
have seen, issues of political identity are sublimated during Halloween. So when terrorists shoot several individuals on Halloween night while shouting “Trick-or-treat,” the act is even more horrifying: the peace and sanctity of Halloween have been violated by the troubles. Halloween is denied its status as a safe haven from such things. The shootings violated the understanding that Halloween is nonsectarian. The scene of the killings was a bar where Protestants and Roman Catholics intermingled. The act becomes a metaphor for the futility of all the killings on both sides. Moreover, based on the analysis above, the killings represent a genuine breaking of both the play frame and the life-affirming domestic qualities of Halloween in Northern Ireland. These are not the petty annoyances of rhyming or pranks. Real people were slaughtered. To murder people using Halloween customs as a motif is neither an inversion nor a subversion of the tradition. It is a perversion. Intriguingly, explosive valentines were sent the following February, in a kind of calendar-themed tit-for-tat: You perverted Halloween; we’ll respond with a deadly valentine.

I am also interested in the use of the phrase “trick-or-treat” in this case. It is not indigenous to Ireland, nor was it in general use when I was there for Halloween in 1991. The phrase was known, if it was known at all, through American television programs seen in Ireland such as Sesame Street. Of course, it is unlikely that a paramilitary “soldier” would recite “Halloween is coming and the geese are getting fat” under the circumstances, since it is both too long and does not contain the threat of danger or implied surprise of the American phrase. According to people I spoke with after the event, the phrase is seen as generally international, not specifically American, in much the same way that rock music is felt to be international in nature (a perspective that escapes most Americans). To shout, “Trick-or-treat!” while murdering people is to cynically subvert a playful tradition, which further exacerbates the revulsion felt toward the act by most citizens in Northern Ireland. Further, “trick-or-treat” is a foreign phrase, alien to Irish Halloween, just as politics, aggression, and confrontation are alien to Halloween in Northern Ireland (though certainly not throughout the rest of the year). Could the use of this phrase have at some level been perceived as representative of the invasive qualities of Americanization and internationalization? The attacks came at a time when
negotiations regarding the European Economic Community are on people's minds throughout Europe, including the two Irelands, and also when American popular culture is a steadily growing element in most European societies, welcome or not. The use of foreign holiday traditions adds several layers of violation to an act that is in itself despicable.

It might be worth noting once more that the rhyme most commonly used, "Halloween is coming," is borrowed from Christmas mumming traditions, although there is some possibility that the use of the rhyme at Halloween predates its more widespread use as a Christmas tradition. Again this is indicative of the ambiguous identity of Northern Ireland/Ulster society. It is a truly anomalous place, and this anomaly and ambiguity are reflected in its holiday traditions. Daniel Miller (1993) has suggested that the adaptability and internationalization of Christmas are due to the highly syncretic nature of that festival. Halloween, while also syncretic, has an elasticity to it, in that it embodies centuries-old traditions, but many of its customs allow for contemporary topical comment. Both the fancy dress costumes and the mumming (as witnessed in the tendency to alter the Halloween rhymes according to the religious persuasion of those entreated) are vehicles for social expression and parody. This elasticity, I think, has contributed to the longevity of the festival. Furthermore, the above-mentioned ambiguity actually aids in the universality of the holiday among various groups in Northern Ireland.

Horrific as it was, this event has not stigmatized Halloween in Northern Ireland. It remains free of the sectarianism that has otherwise troubled the annual calendar of ritual, festival, and celebration.

It would, of course, be silly to think that Halloween would not in some way reflect the deep and ubiquitous social divisions of Ulster. These troubles, as they are called, can be seen as a struggle by various groups to establish hegemony: according to one perspective, Ulster bows to the British queen, salutes the Union flag, and is governed by Westminster. This is contested with an alternative view: Ulster belongs to Ireland, is Celtic, and should be governed by Dublin. To that extent, Halloween reflects the diversity of population within Ulster, but the meanings of its symbols are not overtly contested, and this is the crucial point. Although perceived as nonsectarian, Halloween incorporates customs that
are felt to express or reflect considerations of political and sectarian identity. These considerations are articulated when called into question by the researcher. Initially I had no indication that Halloween was in any way sectarian, but as I developed my research, those aspects emerged.

The social interpretations of certain Halloween customs reflect a continuum of attitudes that, it must be remembered, suggest polarity at either end. The polarity is what we first see and hear in the electronic media: the many sectarian murals found throughout Northern Ireland, the bombs, the tit-for-tat killings. But between these poles are more moderate, more searching, more questioning attitudes, more hopeful souls. With its unique amalgamation of English, Scottish, and Irish customs, Halloween is a microcosm of Ulster society.

What is finally most important about the sectarian or nonsectarian nature of Halloween is that the potential for conflict is only rarely realized. One large-scale public demonstration in Derry resulted in fighting, largely because British soldiers drove into the liminal play space of the festivities, thus violating the ludic nature of it. As we have seen, Halloween in Northern Ireland includes symbolic forms and customs that can be interpreted in a variety of ways according to one's personal background and predilections but that are not contested. The symbols in question, whether they be objects or actions, are like all symbols multivocal and polysemous. It is the nature of that polysemy to sometimes obscure real differences in such a way that allows for agreement and progress. Halloween symbols are ambiguous enough to allow multiple readings that touch both sides of the unionist/nationalist debate, in ways that the burning of Lundy, a public fire on August 8 in West Belfast, most of the gable-end paintings, or a parade of the Orange Order do not. These may all be read differently, but they are semiotically limited as far as political allegiance and sentiment are concerned.

My impression is that people find a haven in Halloween. There seems to be almost an unspoken agreement that allows Halloween to remain a rich celebration but one free from sectarianism. I have written elsewhere that in the United States Halloween mediates oppositions or dichotomies having to do with nature and culture, transitional seasons, and life and death (Santino 1983, 1994b). In Northern Ireland, dichotomies having to do with indoor/outdoor
and male/female are also addressed. It is interesting to think that Halloween is capable of reconciling within its liminal time perhaps the greatest social division in Northern Ireland as well. Certainly before the cease-fire of 1994, Halloween provided an ideal model of how life could be: different traditions coexisting in a non-threatening, celebratory way.

Northern Ireland is an anomalous state whose relationship with England is both ambiguous and ambivalent, while Halloween in Ulster is a syncretic festival that combines elements associated with Halloween and Guy Fawkes Night. The personal interpretation of Halloween is not necessarily an indication of political leaning, but it is a symbolic picture of one's understanding of Ulster itself: as more Irish than British or more British than Irish; as a unique, discrete culture or a contrived, artificial state.

Halloween in Northern Ireland allows people to find common ground with each other even where meaning might otherwise be contested. The history of Ireland and the events that led to the creation of Northern Ireland are distinctive to that society, as are its problems. But they are at the very least analogous to other societal problems internationally, such as the Arab-Israeli disputes, the problems in South Africa, and race relations in the United States. The study of the customs and contemporary social dynamics of one major calendrical festival in this one place may help us understand the uses that people make of their expressive traditions in dealing with similar situations plaguing humanity throughout the world. Halloween in Northern Ireland is a dynamic, dramatic, and idealized model of how a fractured society might work.

Halloween may be the festive event that best captures the fundamental and everyday dimensions of life in Ulster and makes them extraordinary. No wonder it is so popular, so exciting, so central a celebration, so much a part of the fabric of life in the unique society that is Northern Ireland.
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