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Halloween's Irish Roots

As Americans prep in ghoulish delight for Halloween, much we take for granted about this holiday favorite comes directly from Ireland and its Celtic heritage. Phil Ryan, owner and tour designer for Inroads Ireland tours, a small group, back roads tour company (www.inroadsireland.com), casts light on the Irish influence. "Customs from trick or treating to wearing costumes are all Irish traditions that have become part of the American culture. Even the most notable American part of Halloween, pumpkin carving or Jack O'Lanterns, has its roots in early Irish immigrants."

"Halloween goes back the Celtic tradition, Samhain, a celebration of the end of the harvest," states Ryan, a native Dubliner whose years of guiding tours built on a natural zeal for his country's history. "It was a time when spirits and the souls of the dead would roam the land causing mayhem. People dressed as spirits and ghosts so as not to be recognized by actually spectres."

Trick or treating goes back to a middle ages tradition when the poor would go 'Souling' - knocking on doors for food in exchange for prayers for the dead. It was also popular to leave food out to appease hungry spirits and fairies lest they curse you. In Ireland, children everywhere dress up in costumes and go door to door crying 'Help the Halloween party.'

In the early 1800s legend has it that, Jack, a blacksmith and known trickster was barred from entering heaven and hell for his misdoings. To light his way through the darkness he was given a burning ember from the devil which he placed in a hollowed turnip. In Ireland it was common to carve out a turnip and place a lighted candle inside to help ward of the dead. When early Irish immigrants came to the States, they found pumpkins more widespread and simpler to carve and thus the Jack O'Lantern was born!

But not all Irish traditions have translated to the States. As part of the ancient festival of Samhain, the druids would light large bonfires on the hills around Ireland bringing light to the night. "Today in Ireland before Halloween, excited kids knock on doors in their neighborhoods looking for old furniture and any flammables people are willing or eager to part with. This is all assembled into a large fire mound on an open green often up to 20 feet high. After the sun has gone down, the community gathers to enjoy the spectacle as the bonfire lights to cheers and merriment," says Ryan.

Another must-do custom in Ireland is the "Barnbrack," a type of fruit bread or cake usually served later in the day or after dinner sliced and buttered. "Small hidden gifts wrapped in paper are dropped in the mixture before baking. For kids it's less a tasty treat and more about the gifts so dissecting barnbrack to

reveal the hidden cache is the real goal. A ring usually predicts a romantic encounter or a coin might foresee a financial boost.”

To learn more about Ireland, check out the Special Event/Offer on the Inroads Ireland website, www.InroadsIreland.com, where you can discover upcoming talks and events with Phil on many Irish subjects or call 1-888-220-7711.

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