A Halloween Reader

A Halloween Reader

Poems, Stories, and Plays from Halloweens Past

Edited by
Lesley Pratt Bannatyne

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INTRODUCTION

This is not a horror anthology, though horror can be found here. Nor is it a collection of ghost stories, though there are ghosts. It's not meant to make you quake in your chair, but rather to have you feel the ground sink quietly, slowly under your feet, so you don't notice the shift.

Older Halloween literature serves up a holiday you might not recognize at first. There's a soulfulness we're not used to anymore. By virtue of the way lives were lived in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, there's a stronger bond between the living and the dead. Because of more primitive science and medicine, there's an acceptance of fate we may find foreign, a reliance on charms we have trouble imagining. Due to social notions popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Halloween has a romantic cast that may strike us as just plain odd.

Here the reader can find the bones of Halloween. Its literature over the past four hundred years exposes a time tied to the quickening dark, to seasonal change, to death, to the movement of beings—fairies, witches, dead souls—through the night. Halloween was once imagined as a rift in reality where time slipped by without the traveler knowing he'd gone missing. As a night to return home, dead or alive. There was fear, yes, but it was fear of loss—of children and family, of land, crops, and place. This night wasn't about murder or violence, but rather about the unquiet of guilt, anticipation of the unknown, of facing the consequences of meddling with things you couldn't—or shouldn't—control. These Halloweens meant something; they held a place in the year for magic, for mourning, for first love. For fear. In Halloween literature, the otherworld is always and uniquely present. On this night, it can be broached, or we, if we're willing, can open our eyes wide enough to see it.

A Halloween Reader is made up of poems, stories, and plays written by those with credentials neither you nor I can claim—they're dead. The anthology

contains a Halloween summoned by writers from the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries who conjure the night to set a scene, twist a plot, or explain the seemingly inexplicable, like madness or time travel. Here is Halloween as it was *imagined*: a time for games and storytelling; a portentous time to make amends and wishes; a solemn time to remember the dead. It was a time to come home and a time for adventure; a time of mourning, of dead souls, of rotting corpses that, like sin, won't release their grip. *A Halloween Reader* ends with selections from the early twentieth century, when the holiday is well on its way to becoming a big and boisterous fixture on the American calendar. It ends before much of Halloween literature becomes synonymous with horror; before it is folded into the literature of children.

Death and Plenty

The wings of the birds
Are clotted with ice.
I have but one story—
Summer is gone.

—ninth century Irish lyric, trans. Sean O'Faolain

Halloween originally emerged in the British Isles, where late autumn was gray and ominous, the beginning of the dead season. Poets from this part of the world filled their lines with funeral imagery: "And the year / On the earth, her deathbed, in shroud of leaves dead, / is lying (Shelley, "Autumn. A Dirge"). Halloween led off the season of loss—of birds, flowers, the warmth of the sun. It was also, poetically, a season of truth, for bare branches revealed the clearest view. The early dark of late October, too, was unsettling. It was a time of change: "there is a fearful spirit busy now" (Procter, "Autumn"). Earth clutched at dull gray covers, knowing full well that come November she would freeze to death.

But Halloween was also a time of plenty. All Hallows, or All Saints—a feast day in the Catholic Church placed on November 1 in the ninth century—marked the end of the farmer's year. Larders were full, flocks sheltered, and for the foreseeable future there was time enough for pleasure and, importantly, food enough to share. Throughout the old winter holidays, masking, tricks, performances, and processions were enacted in exchange for treats or money. All Hallows began the season.

The literature of Halloween reflects both death and plenty. The groaning board is full, but the night is windy, cold, and dark. People huddle congenially

around a hearth fire, but, outside, skeletal knuckles tap incessantly. There are two at this table, sitting opposite each other, sharing a bottle of wine. One is in full view, curiously probing the future. The other is in shadow, all-knowing, only occasionally letting out a shriek or a shred of information. Imagining Halloween begins with picturing what is just beyond the edge of light, outside the warm hut, just beyond the castle walls at night; what happens when you close your eyes to sleep; what goes on beneath fertile ground, under the mounds.

Like the folk history of Halloween, its literary history also tells a story.

Poets and Peat Fires

Scots poet Alexander Montgomerie's "The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart" etches a Halloween picture from 400 years ago. Already it is a creepy night when fairies and "elrich [weird, inhuman] Incubus" ride, and on this night is born the villainous Polwart, so stinking and foul that witches curse the devil for giving them such an odious baby.

Over two centuries later, Montgomerie's countryman Allan Cunningham published "The Maid of Elvar" (1832), in which all the elements we think of as belonging to modern Halloween are lined up in a row. There's a dramatic setting:

> The stars are sunk in heaven, a darksome cloud
> Conceals the moon, and mist conceals the brook:
> The mountain's swathed up in a snowy shroud . . .

Witches and jack-o-lantern lights:

> Hags on their ragwort chariots come abroad,
> Wild Will his treacherous lamp hangs o'er the pool . . .

Mischief:

> It's not for pious folks abiding
> The misrule in the air, and witches rudely riding.

And demonic creatures:

> While loosed from pangs in hell's hot penal clime,
> As a dark exhalation from the ground,
> Satan will rise and rule his grim conclave around.

What the old Scots literature left behind, aside from a list of Halloween charms and a taste of Scots country life, reeks of sulfur.

Yet just across the Irish sea, in the ballad "A Halloween Chant—The Midnight Flitting of the Corpse and Tomás MacGahan" (written down sometime between 200 and 350 years ago), Halloween has less to do with spirits of evil and more with finding a resting ground. Having and protecting a home, and homecoming, are themes that recur in Irish Halloween literature. Samhain ("summer's end," November 1) was the time herds migrated to their winter pastures; in Celtic mythology the fairies, likewise, were on the move. Starting no later than the eighteenth century, many Irishmen worked abroad in the summer and returned home at Samhain (some scholars propose "Sam" in the word Samhain refers to "together"). Mythological history also describes important gatherings at the central seats of Ireland: at Tara, warriors convened to fend off annual attacks from the otherworld. If an Ulsterman did not come to Emain at Samhain, he was believed to be mad, and his gravestone placed.

Unlike residents of Great Britain, most of whom converted to Protestantism during the Reformation, many Irish remained Roman Catholic. While Protestants rejected purgatory and diabolicized ghosts, Catholics kept up annual remembrance of the dead on All Souls' Day, November 2. The intersection of All Souls' and Halloween is well-traveled: disembodied souls and the imperative to provide for the dead are embedded in Irish Halloween literature. In Dora Sigerson Shorter's "The One Forgotten," a man forgets to put out a chair for his wife to visit on that night. When her spirit comes, he is asleep, and she leaves heartbroken. His granddaughters laugh at the old man's sudden remorse upon waking: "How he goes groaning, wrinkle-faced and hoar, / He is so old, and angry with his age— / Hush! hear the banshee sobbing past the door."

Celts reputedly believed death is at the center of a long life, and indeed, much of the literature of Halloween, especially Irish, concerns itself with who's dead and who's alive, who's both at once, and who's dead and doesn't know it.

But one island's literature can't be wholly separated from the other's. The original word for an inhabitant of Ireland was "Scot." Many Irish immigrated to the Scottish Highlands and Isles in the early Middle Ages, Scottish and English settlers were "planted" in northern Ireland in the seventeenth century, and workers often traveled between the countries. Writers from the British Isles—from all of its lands—have handed us a Halloween full of spunk, laced with the danger of last chances. If Janet can't pull Tam Lin from his horse on Halloween, she'll lose him. If you don't watch over your children at sunset in late October, the fairies will steal them. On Halloween night, keep one eye on your loved ones, and the other on the door bolt. It is a literature of loss and warning: don't stay too long in the world of fairy.

Never forget those who have gone before. Travel if you must, but always, always, come home.

The Bard of Ayrshire

In 1799 Englishman John Cross produced a play in the New Royal Circus in St. George's Fields called *Halloween; or, the Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne.* The play's plot was drawn from a similarly titled novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne. A Highland Story* (1789) by Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe, but Cross bookended his "Scotch Spectacle" with Halloween themes to add atmosphere and otherworldliness. He was likely capitalizing on the popularity of a Scots poet, and a Scots poem, recently published: Robert Burns' "Halloween."

Scottish independence had been defeated in 1707 with the Act of Union (uniting Scotland and England under British rule), and many Scots feared a loss of cultural integrity. Burns was one of a group of writers who mined his country's folklife for poetic material, both to preserve it and to bolster Scottish pride. His "Halloween" (1786) gives a detailed description of the night of October 31 in a cottage in southwestern Scotland.

Burns' poem included Halloween charms he said he learned from his mother's highlander maid: burning nuts, pulling cabbage stalks, eating apples in front of a mirror, and many more. What people were really doing on Halloween in the late 1700s and what Burns depicted them as doing are probably similar, but Burns' work was poetry, not history. Regardless, by the late nineteenth century Burns' "Halloween" had become a blueprint for both fictional and actual Halloween celebrations, attesting to how popular perception can be shaped by a single imaginative work. The charms Burns helped immortalize lasted, in popular literature at least, well into the twentieth century.

"Halloween" was included in the very first edition of *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect.* By 1787 there were editions published in Edinburgh and London, and by 1788 American booksellers had the book. Although Burns' work was widely enjoyed, it was read especially passionately by ex-patriot Scots in the United States and Canada, where his poetry came to stand for Scotland before the Act of Union. The Scottishness of "Halloween"—which includes more dialect than other Burns poem—may have made it more popular than it would have been otherwise.

On both sides of the Atlantic, "Halloween" inspired countless poems with and without credit to Burns. The poem dovetailed perfectly with Victorian interest in all things eerie, rustic, celebratory, and ancient, and the poem's images and sense of sport were imported full-bore into romantic stories and

light verse. Annotated calendars consistently drew Halloween content from sources such as John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities;* Brand footnotes Burns' "Halloween" as his main source. By the end of the nineteenth century, the eve of October 31 had a public face, and, more often than not, it was the face Burns had given it.

This Night of All Nights in the Year

"Said we, then—the two then—"Ah can it
Have been that the woodlandish ghouls—
The pitiful, the merciful ghouls—
To bar up our way and to ban it
From the secret that lies in these wolds—
Had drawn up the spectre of a planet
From the limbo of lunary souls—

—Edgar Allan Poe,
To_____. Ulalume: A Ballad (1847)

In what's considered America's first opera, *The Disappointment* (1767), a conjurer fools four Pennsylvania colony folks by convincing them he's got a magic divining rod "cut on All-Hallow's Eve, at twelve o'clock at night, with my back to the moon" that will lead them to pirate's treasure. Playwright Andrew Barton uses the Halloween reference, among many others, to clue in the audience: these folks are so gullible they'll believe anything. In "Fiend's Field" (1832, published in Philadelphia but set in Britain), we meet Tony Ryecroft, who practices Rosicrucian-style alchemy, spouts fake Latin, and conducts fiery Halloween rituals, all to hoodwink a land-rich neighbor. Here in very young America, Halloween is a code word for hoax, a night to prey on the naive with a wink to the wise. This is not the first time, or the last, that Halloween has been pressed into the service of satire and humor.

Sixteenth-century poet Montgomerie uses Halloween to yank on Polwart's grotesqueries by naming it his birthday. Burns pits encyclopedic divination notes to "Halloween" against the slapstick—and largely futile—antics of his country folk as they actually try the charms. In *A Hallowe'en Party* (Caroline Ticknor, 1896), the narrator, Dodge, is subjected to every torture a Victorian party can deal: the guests dunk for apples and Dodge nearly drowns; they share a cake filled with tokens and Dodge swallows a button; the men dash around the outside of the house and our hero nearly decapitates himself on a

clothesline. Halloween was a country phenomenon—with all its attendant stereotypes—and remained so in literature even after cities began to crowd in on ports and pasture land. Dodge lives in New York, but his party is outside the city, an "old fashioned" Halloween.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the world had been turned on its head. Darwin had published *The Origin of the Species* (1859), Freud had begun peeling back the brain to reveal an unconscious, and archeology, spurred by excavations in Egypt and Greece, excited the public imagination. Victorians began to see history as a series of layers, and set about finding old stories, ballads, and poems as if they were fossils that could tell what life was really like in the past. Surrounded by factories and machinery, the world's first industrial societies came to hunger for the country, for a simpler time they saw as more connected to nature and a deeper truth. Halloween, as imagined by Victorians—rural, rudimentary, and demanding a certain amount of innocence—was entrancing. In this culture, and in its literature, there was comfort in ancient traditions, in things that did not change. Halloween, as portrayed in much of the era's popular literature, reversed itself. Instead of a naïve fool being the butt of Halloween trickery, it was now the foolish sophisticate who refused to believe in the power of Halloween and received his or her comeuppance. Over and over again, Halloween's charms proved true, and only the arrogant and disillusioned refused to put faith in them.

Take, for example, "The Face in the Glass" (1891), in which a stodgy, absentminded writer spends a wakeful night convinced he sees the semi-opaque silhouette of a woman standing outside his bedroom on Halloween. Like a face-in-the-mirror charm that predicted a spouse, this silhouette—"like a creature turned to stone by some sudden bolt hurled from the hand of a swift fate"—prophesied the writer's future. Halloween trumps the disbeliever. Ethel Barton, the protagonist in "By Cupid's Trick" (1885), suffers from a common modern disease: she's all too practical, especially when it comes to Halloween. "Then what's the use of trying all these silly tricks?" she asks. But while eating an apple at midnight and looking into a mirror, Ethel's true love does, in fact, walk through the door. Ethel, not only reunited with her man, has now been initiated: she believes in Halloween.

In the late nineteenth-century—an age of reading dominated by the periodical press—how Halloween was described in print became as important as how it was actually practiced. While some people certainly celebrated the holiday, a much larger number read Halloween stories and poems, and studied illustrations published in magazines and newspapers. Halloween fell into the public domain, and as with the adoption of Christmas trees, people became enamored of the holiday simply by reading about it. And while the popular

press continued to mine Halloween for its fortunetelling details, another sort of writing had begun percolating, a literature of supernatural fiction and horror.

Halloween was enough of a presence in the nineteenth century that some writers—J.S. Le Fanu in the British Isles and Edgar Allan Poe in America—could submerge it in their work, hold it just under the surface to sharpen tension or etch atmosphere. In Le Fanu's "The Child That Went With The Fairies" (1870), All Hallows Eve is implied, but never mentioned. It's late autumn, leaves have fallen, it's getting dark, and the little ones are playing on the road. A carriage appears from a mountain well-known to harbor the supernatural. The reader knows what night it is, and knows this is not going to end well. It's all he can do to not shout, "Run!" In Poe's poem "Ulalume," the reader fills in the blanks of "this night of all nights of the year." A ghoul-haunted wood, a tomb, a man and his soul, a loss? By the time Le Fanu and Poe wrote their deliciously unnerving stories and poems, only a few creepy elements were needed to conjure Halloween.

Nocturne

So fancy takes the mind, and paints
The darkness with eidolon light,
And writes the dead's romance in night
On the dim Evening of All Saints.

—Madison J. Cawein, *Intimations of the Beautiful* (1911)

Dead souls, fairies, spirit creatures—it's no wonder they have secrets, they've been to places we can't imagine. To dark places. Vision, and lack of it, are intrinsic to Halloween literature: the dead can see the future; we can't. The dead live in darkness; we're afraid of darkness. Halloween is one time of the year when it can all come together, when the spirit world can be solicited, invaded, envisioned. What you need to be able to see, of course, is a pitch-black night.

James Stephens dissects the dark in his "The Feast of Samhain" (1924): "Here the light was golden, and here it became grey, and here, a step farther, it became blue or purple, and here, but two paces beyond, it was no longer a colour; it was a blackness, an invisibility." It's as if the darkness of Halloween is so dense that only on this blackest of nights can we see things that are normally dim—the ghostly shapes that surround us. It is as if we have to lose our sense of sight, our grasp of the familiar, and be lost—as so many characters are

in Halloween literature—to be able to see the otherworld. Keningale, in "Ken's Mystery" (1883), gets lost in the darkness outside an Irish barracks on his way home from a Halloween celebration; only then does he run into the sphinx-like Elsie, his guide to the other side. The protagonist of Yeats' "Red Hanrahan" (1904) follows a hare conjured by an old stranger on Samhain night, and finds himself outside in the dark, lost and exhausted. Only then does he notice the dim light on the hillside that leads him into the otherworld. Young and beautiful Nann (Le Braz, "All Souls' Eve in Lower Brittany," 1897), determined to search purgatory for her dead husband, goes missing for a year. When she returns, she's ancient and reeks of burnt flesh.

There is a sense of free-fall in this getting lost in the dark. Time is suspended; place is unrecognizable; characters must open themselves to new experience and let go of the ordinary. The protagonist in "Ken's Mystery" returns from the darkness haunted and drained, having lived through over 200 years in but one night. The narrator, upon hearing Ken's story, muses: "What is time? What is life? I felt myself begin to doubt the reality of all things." This journey into the dark—that is sometimes consciousness, sometimes the blackness of evil, sometimes death—is not easy. But the desire to know more drives the plots and poetic arcs of much of Halloween literature. Red Hanrahan comes back from the fairy world empty-handed, aged and starving, maddened. Most of us aren't meant to go there. Those who do return have changed, and they don't like to talk about it.

The 20th Century: When the Dead Can Yearn and the Dead Can Smite

> For the year's on the turn and it's All Souls' night,
> When the dead can burn and the dead can smite.
>
> —Edith Wharton, *All Souls* (1909)

The dead can be terrifying, but useful. Nineteenth-century writers fondly name them, or call them "my dear." They embrace and are embraced by the dead:

> That the night of all nights is this,
> When elm shall crack and lead shall part,
> When moulds shall sunder and shot bolts start
> To let you through to my kiss."
>
> —Edith Nesbit, *The Vain Spell* (1898)

The dead teach, they predict, they warn. James Russell Lowell's Reverend Dr. Death ("The Black Preacher," 1864) gives a sermon to the damned each year on All Souls' Eve, but it's meant for us: don't do as these wretched souls did, because if you wait for tomorrow to pray or love, you just might find yourself sitting in an abandoned church with a bunch of jittery bone-bags enduring the same sermon every year.

Then, early in the twentieth century, this familiarity began to erode. More and more in Halloween literature, the dead are adrift. They become separate, like Maria in James Joyce's "Clay" (1916). She's homeless, without family, making her way through a sea of souls to return to what passes for her family on Halloween night. Alive, but spiritually gutted, Maria is one of the walking dead of early twentieth century Dublin. And Halloween is the night she can, like a lonely spirit, return home. Alive, but not fully; dead, but not buried.

In this new century of burgeoning cities, crowds, and industry, the dead can become disconnected and terrifying, as if humans cut loose from their ancestors begin to fear them. More and more, writers use Halloween to evoke a sickening sense of evil under the surface, a subconscious dread:

> Something that lies there, under weed and ooze,
> with wide and awful eyes
> And matted hair, and limbs the waters bruise,
> That strives, yet can not rise."
>
> —Madison J. Cawein, *The Wood Water* (1905)

H.P. Lovecraft's dead are not instructive, they're aggressive. They spring from tombs: "And the dead leap gay in the pallid ray, / Sprung out of the tomb's black maw / To shake the world with awe." ("Hallowe'en In A Suburb," 1926)

In early twentieth-century Halloween literature, the dead are on the move again, riding from the realm of personal loss toward that of random horror. You can sense, as the new century grows, there are bodies stirring underground. Halloween's games and charms fade as the unquiet of real evil, real madness, dawns. This is a faceless evil, but not supernatural. It's human. Gas warfare was man-made, its victims powerless, and the world was aghast at its physical horror. By the end of World War I there were too many dead. Maybe they knew too much.

We are all dying, always. The boundary between the vibrant world we live in and the underground world of worms is thin and brittle; it's only a matter

of time. What makes the older Halloween literature so enthralling is that it lets us travel back and forth to the land of the dead without consequence. No coin under the tongue is necessary, no smell of sulfur to beat out of our clothes when we return.

Come closer to the fire, everyone, it's cold tonight. Everything I'm about to tell you is true.

It just might not have happened.

A Note on the Texts

All texts are reproduced as they were printed, with arcane punctuation and original spellings left intact. There are two exceptions: spellings that are clearly typographical errors have been corrected, and arcane characters such as the long "s" have been modernized.

Dates included are the publication dates of the editions whose text is reprinted here; additional information is sometimes included to place the pieces in chronological order.

The works are in chronological order within each section and subsection.

The selections were chosen for many reasons, including length and how representative a piece is, and some can't help but be chosen by personal taste. For each Halloween poem, story, or play you find here, there are many more. Sources listed in the bibliography may help direct the reader to additional reading.