

Feile Na Marbh, Feast of the Dead

On the eve of All Souls' Day in Ireland, families lit a candle in the window to guide the souls of the Dead back to their old homes. As the veil between the worlds thinned, a *sluagh*, or host, of spirits walked the land, and encountered the same hospitality the Celts have always shown the living, Doors and windows were left unfastened, and any passage through the house that they once used was kept open. The table was laid with the best white cloth, and special food was left out for them to enjoy.

Until quite recently in the Irish Gaeltacht, families kept a *seomra thiar*, or “room to the West” — sometimes just an alcove or nook — where they placed objects that reminded them of departed ones. At sunset, the family solemnly turned towards the setting sun and spent time in loving remembrance of them. A candle was lit for each soul, then the whole family sat down to a communal feast in their honor.

It was once widely believed that the souls of the faithful departed would return to their family home on All Soul's Night. Great care was taken to make them feel welcome.

Rituals included sweeping the floor clean, lighting a good fire, and placing the poker and tongs in the shape of a cross on the hearth. A bowl of spring water was put on the table, along with a place setting for each deceased relative. In some areas, children would go “soul-caking” - they'd visit neighbors and beg for cakes in exchange for prayers to be said for the dead.

Families would usually retire early, but before they did, many of them went to the cemetery where their loved ones were buried. They would say prayers for each departed family member, make sure the gravesites were neat and tidy, and then they would leave a candle burning on each grave.

During evening prayers, the family would again light a candle for each of their departed relatives. Often, a candle would be placed in the window of a room where a relative had died. Or, it might be placed in a window that faced in the direction of the cemetery. Then, when evening prayers were over, the candles would either be extinguished or left to burn out. The door was always left unlatched.

Historically, the Celtic nations have always had a great respect for their ancestors and they believed that at certain times of year, the boundaries between mortals and the souls of the dead cease to exist. This is especially true of the “Three Nights of the End of Summer” — Hallowe’en, Samhain and All Soul’s Day. The ancients also believed that the dead were the repositories of wisdom and lore and that one of the reasons they return is to speak to their descendants.

It’s from these visits by a beloved ancestor that the more fortunate among us are given two very special gifts: the ability to remember old days and old ways, and a deeper understanding of how we are forever linked by blood to the past — and to the future.

“Samhain 1994”

by Cathal Ó Searcaigh

Anocht agus mé ag meabhrú go mór fá mo chroí
Gan de sholas ag lasadh an tí ach fannsholas gríosáí
Smaointím airsean a dtug mé gean dó fadó agus gnaoi.
A Dhia, dá mba fharraige an dorchadas a bhí eadrainn
Dhéanfainn long den leabaidh seo anois agus threabhfainn
Tonnta tréana na cumhaí anonn go cé a chléibhe...
Tá sé ar shiúl is cha philleann sé chugam go brách
Ach mar a bhunaíonn an t-éan san ubh, an crann sa dearcán;
Go lá a bhrátha, mairfidh i m'anamsa, gin dá ghrá.

Tonight as I search the depths of my heart,
in the dark of the house and the last ember-light,
I'm thinking of one I loved long ago.
And if the darkness between us became like the sea,
I'd make a boat of this bed, plunge its bow
through the waves that barge the heart's quay.
Although he is gone and won't ever be back,
I'll guard in my soul the last spark of his love,
like the bird in the egg and the tree in the nut.