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FROM MY DIARY – THINKING ABOUT ALL SAINTS DAY

Halloween is nearly upon us, and with it comes the incessant smug chanting that “Halloween is simply Samhain renamed”, and other cries of a similar kind.

Folklore is often a bit rubbish. All sorts of claims are made, of the wildest kind, and those who make them often take offence if you ask what evidence there might be for them. The truth is that a good many customs are of very recent coinage. I can personally attest that in England the custom of “trick and treat” was unknown in the 1960s and 70s. I first encountered it in the mid-1980s, and it was evidently borrowed from American TV shows.

But a claim that “Halloween is Samhain renamed” raises all sorts of questions. Who renamed it, if so? When? In what country?

Of course these questions are never asked, and the answers never supplied. This alone should make us very suspicious that an urban myth is involved.

Thinking about this led me to ask when All Saint’s Day is first attested. After all, Halloween can hardly predate it. This in turn led me into deep waters. One of these was [the Wikipedia page](#), which contained the following remarkable claim:

In the British Isles, it is known that churches were already celebrating All Saints on 1 November at the beginning of the 8th century to coincide with or replace the Celtic festival of [Samhain](#).^{[17][18][19][20]} James Frazer suggests that 1 November was chosen because it was the date of the Celtic festival of the dead (Samhain). However, Ronald Hutton points out that, according to [Óengus of Tallaght](#) (d. ca. 824), the 7th/8th century church in Ireland celebrated All Saints on 20 April. He suggests that 1 November date was a Germanic rather than a Celtic idea.^[17]

I was much more interested in the “references” than in the text, of course, and these were also interesting:

17. ^ ^a Hutton, p. 364

18. ^ Pseudo-Bede, *Homiliae subditiiae*; John Hennig, ‘The Meaning of All the Saints’, *Mediaeval Studies* 10 (1948), 147–61.

19. ^ “All Saints Day”, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: [Oxford University Press](#), 1997), 41–42; *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, *eo.loc*.

20. ^ Hennig, John (1946). “A Feast of All the Saints of Europe”. *Speculum*. **21** (1): 49–66. [JSTOR 2856837](#) .

“Hutton” proved to be Ronald Hutton, *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, Oxford, 1996. Three chapters were devoted to Samhain and Halloween, concluding that in the British Isles it was All Saints Day that had replaced whatever might have been done at Samhain, and that Halloween only develops after the Reformation. The author had plainly tried to get to the primary evidence for everything; and the sheer effort involved can only attract one’s admiration. Unfortunately the footnoting is rather more meagre than one would wish.

"Pseudo-Bede, *Homiliae subditiae*" turned out to be quite irrelevant, as well as incomplete. The reference should in fact be *Homiliae subditae* 69, in the *Patrologia Latina* 114; but in actual fact this has nothing to do with the points made. The mention of it is a digression by Hennig: that extracts from this (spurious) sermon are used in the readings for All Saints' Day in some modern service book. The Hennig article – in fact both of them – were grotesquely badly written and rambling horrors. An example will suffice:

The Collect for the feast of All the Saints says that we celebrate on it the memory of all the Saints *sub una*. The Collect for the Votive Mass says that we rejoice in the intercession of all the Saints *ubique*. The Office seems to pay a tribute to the first martyrologist to record the name of this feast, by taking the lessons for the second Nocturn from what is described as Bede's 18th *Sermon on the Saints*, the first of the two sermons for this feast listed by Migne as nos. lxxix and lxx of Bede's *sermones subditae*.^[47]

47. PL 114.

By contrast the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* article was concise and to the point.

All Saints' Day itself does not appear to have been established on November 1 until the mid-9th century. An important witness to this is often given as "Bede's Martyrology", stating that all the saints are honoured at the start of November. But in fact this text does NOT state this. It is found instead in a metrical text, slightly later than Bede, and sometimes referred to as "Bede's metrical martyrology".

Working with all this scruffy material is a trial to anyone historically minded!
