

An aerial photograph of New York City at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with some clouds. The city's dense skyline is visible, with many skyscrapers and buildings. In the background, the water of the harbor and the suspension bridges are visible. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

# THE CELTIC DIASPORA: BRITISH TRADITIONAL WICCA'S IRISH ROOTS AND NORTH AMERICAN WINGS

BY CHRISTA AVAMPATO



Lady Amanita visits New York City. Instead of taking in historic sites or a Broadway show, she slowly winds her way down Manhattan's Sixth Avenue. A small cedar-sage incense stick burns quietly by her side. Its wisps twirl in the air as she consciously notes the addresses of the skyscrapers she passes. She is blessing them, the architecture, and the people toiling away inside. She's also asking the universe to let the just among them rise, and the less-than-honorable to be held accountable. Such is the life of a witch, a Wiccan, practicing in secret in plain sight on the streets of New York.

British Traditional Wicca practiced today in North America shares many traits with Celtic culture and mythology. It is the purest form of Wicca because it has changed very little since its origins in the British Isles. During the Irish Diaspora, over 3.5 million people from Ireland emigrated to North America from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s. They have had an enormous influence on New York City, where many of them entered, and on North America as a whole as they spread to and settled in many other cities.

What is not well-known is that they also brought elements of British Traditional Wicca with them that are still practiced today. While many Irish Americans remain devout Christians, Wiccans exist alongside them in a sometimes uncomfortable but respected structure. In many ways, Christianity initially grew by adopting and incorporating traditions of the Celts and Wicca, and those shared rituals continue to connect them today.

They meditate by moonlight. They possess and display Celtic iconography, and continue to celebrate the holidays of Celtic culture that track closely to the change in seasons celebrated and marked by society at-large.

All of the solstice days were sacred points of transition for the Celts, and continue to be for Wiccans. Yule tracks with Christmas. Imbolc is that time in mid-winter when we begin to notice that the days are getting longer, and the light is finding its way back to us. Common sights, terms, and traditions such as like Yule logs, Christmas trees and wreaths, and even spring cleaning all stem from Celtic traditions. They are revered by those who practice Wicca, and have been incorporated into popular North American culture.

While there are many examples of links between the ancient Celts, Wiccans, and pop culture, Samhain (pronounced sow-in) provides us with one of the most powerful historical examples of the connection between the ancient Celtic traditions, today's Wicca, and non-Wiccans. It is the basis of our modern-day Halloween, a persistent link to our agrarian roots, and a reminder that we are not separate from nature, but rather just one part of it.

## An examination of Samhain



Photo by Bee Felten-Leidel on Unsplash

Modern-day Wiccans, and particularly young women who practice, are rediscovering this rich Celtic history and making it a potent part of their everyday lives. They spend time in nature, drawing strength and peace from a practice known as forest bathing which is exactly what it sounds like—letting the stillness and quiet of the forest wash over them as they hike and walk meditatively among the trees. (Or in Lady Amanita's case, the trees of human society—skyscrapers.)

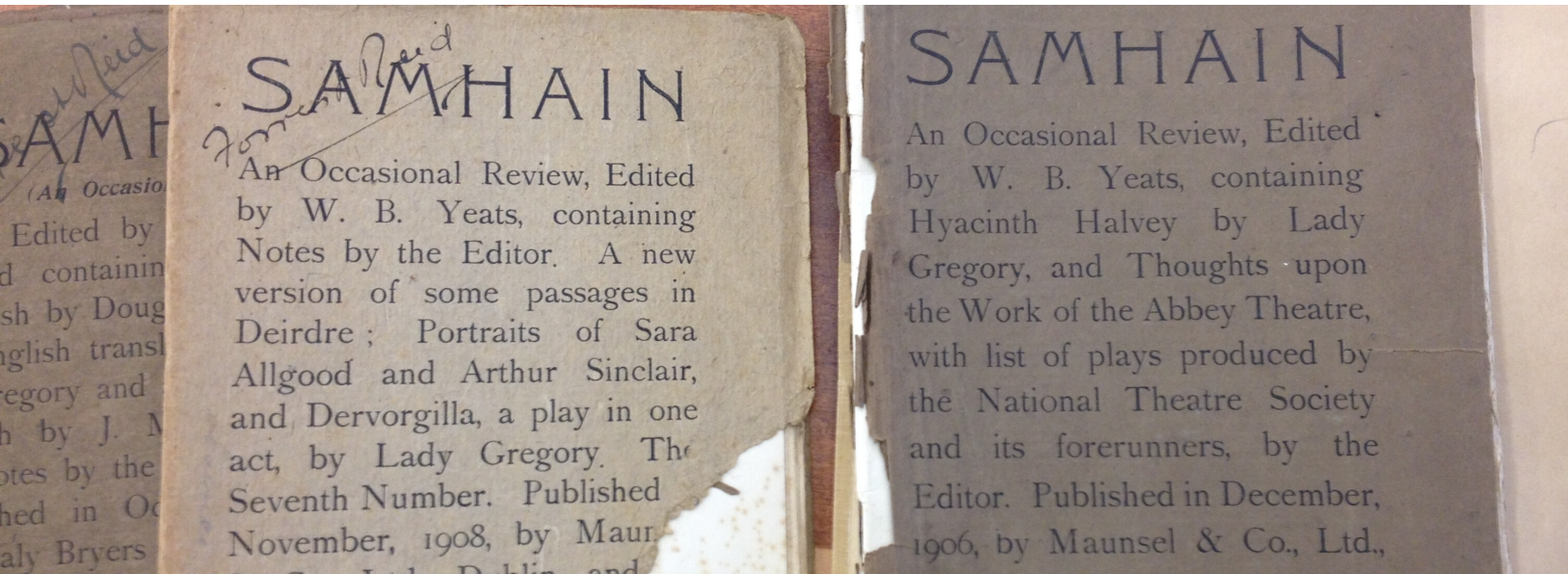
One of the hallmarks of practicing Wicca is a cultivation of a connection with the world beyond ours. They feel a visceral connection to people who have passed away, and feel the continued presence of the dead despite their physical absence. The divine will come to their aid when called and work in ways that do not mesh with human logic. This connection begets a synchronicity that empowers and comforts those who practice Wicca,

and those who practice many organized religions. They are fortified and nourished by a deep belief in their connection to that other world.

Samhain is a reflection and celebration of that belief. Archaeologists and anthropologists have discovered evidence of Samhain in what is now modern-day Ireland that date back over 2,000 years. In old Irish, the name means "end of summer". Though only about 20,000 people today speak Irish on a daily basis, it is still used today. In Irish the commonly-used term "mí na Samhain" means the "month of November". Samhain was the celebration of the end of the harvest season and the beginning of a well-deserved winter rest.

today reflect many of these protection practices. While Halloween costumes have been coopted by modern society's commercialism, they began with the Celts and Samhain. During Samhain, Celts would don animal skins to protect themselves from the evil spirits. They lit fires (similar to our bonfires today) to guide the good spirits to them during Samhain. Jack-o-lanterns began with the Celts, too. They carved faces into turnips and other hard root vegetables, leaving them on their doorsteps, to scare off the evil spirits during Samhain.

Today, Wiccans still carry magical objects of protection with them, as do many Christians the world over. Whether they are medallions of Celtic knots, Wiccan pentagrams, or



In ancient Celtic society, as in early North American history, everything hinged on the harvest. The strategic planning and all of the back-breaking work of the winter, spring, and summer culminated in the harvesting of (hopefully plentiful) crops in the fall. Until very recent history, this had always been the case from the time humans transitioned society from being one of hunting and gathering to farming. Without a successful harvest, their very survival the following year would be jeopardized, and so the harvest took on a sacred spirit all its own, worthy of celebration.

In Mexico and Mexican-American communities all over North America, the Day of the Dead is a sacred tradition that aligns with the traditions of Samhain and those of today's Wiccans. The Celts believed that on that one night of the festival, the veil that separated the living from the dead, the veil between this world and the netherworld, was so thin that the spirits of our ancestors could once again be with us. Just as the Celts did, those who mark the Day of the Dead build alters and homages to family members, honoring their memories and expressing gratitude.

Just as the ancestors could visit, so could evil spirits. The Celts devised ways to protect themselves from that evil. Halloween traditions and traditions practices by Wiccans

Christian crosses, all of them are meant to signify community, belief, and protection from the evils of this world by the divinity of another.

Lady Amanita's incense stick is also a link to the Celts and to Christianity. All of them used and continue to use it as a way to cleanse and restore, to honor the sacred in a sensual way, to ask for protection and healing. A thurible is the name given to the metal chamber suspended from chains, in which incense burn during Christian worship services. That tradition has existed for thousands of years and continues today.

Along New York City's Sixth Avenue now, in the times of coronavirus that have emptied the streets of people and laughter and life, that wisp of incense lingers as a bridge to the ancient Celts. A young and faithful witch, Lady Amanita asks for their protection not only for herself but for all who call this place home. Wiccan or Christian or any other belief system, coronavirus has shown the world that unity matters. This idea of community, interdependence, shared responsibility, and support is the clearest and most precious point of connection between the modern world and the ancient. Then, the survival of the Celts depended upon one another. People today are learning in no uncertain terms that ours does, too.