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# Strange Spirits Roam on Nos Galan Gaeaf: A Roundup of Welsh Halloween Traditions



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Guest post written by author Marie Powell

Marie Powell's adventures in castle-hopping across North Wales resulted in her award-winning medieval fantasy series *Last of the Gifted*. The series starts with *Spirit Sight* (Book 1) in 1282 and continues into 1283 with *Water Sight* (Book 2). It tells the tale of two siblings who pledge their magical gifts to protect their people, with help from the last true Prince of Wales, after his murder. Marie is the author of more than 40 children's books with such publishers as Scholastic Education Canada, Amicus, Crabtree, and more. Her award-winning short stories and poetry appear in literary magazines and anthologies, and her thousands of nonfiction articles appear in print and online markets. Find her at [mariepowell.ca](http://mariepowell.ca)

Most of us learn in elementary school that Halloween is a Celtic tradition, tracing its origins to Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. It stands for All Hallows' Eve or "Hallowe'en."

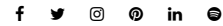
Welsh myths and legends are the basis of my award-winning medieval fantasy, *Last of the Gifted: Spirit Sight* (Book 1) and *Water Sight* (Book 2). Since *Water Sight* ends on Halloween night, I'm often asked about Welsh Halloween. My research has turned up a number of intriguing traditions, and they all begin with the idea that on this night, spirits are allowed free reign in the world. Spirits of the dead, and spirits of the strange.

The Welsh marked November 1 as *Calan Gaeaf*, or the first day of winter. It's associated with death as livestock are culled for food over the winter and days become shorter with the loss of sunlight. For those of us living where winter lasts about eight months of every year, this is not a cheerful thought.

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The night before *Calan Gaeaf* is called *Nos Galan Gaeaf*, to follow the phenomenon of mutations, which make sense to Welsh-speakers. (And here I must plead, “*Dw i’n dysgu Cymraeg*” or “I’m just learning Welsh!”)

My Welsh ancestors appear to have enjoyed cavorting around bonfires of an evening. That’s when stories would be told, often in song, and one can imagine what other mischief they got up to. According to some sources, on *Nos Galan Gaeaf*, as the bonfires died down, the villagers would race for home to avoid some of the stranger spirits that might be loosed into the world on that night.

For example, you might be being chased by a tailless black pig led by a headless woman, known as *Yr Hwch Ddu Gwta* or *nwch ddu gwta*. This spirit would attempt to catch the slowest person in the group. It had the power to devour souls, which would definitely cause anyone to run faster, especially given the omnivorous nature of pigs.

Or you might be chased by a woman wearing white: *Y Ladi Wen*. The Oxford online reference suggests she was “a common bogey reputed to warn children about bad behaviour.” So, you know, very scary. (Doubly so if she happened to be an English school teacher.)

Then there’s the tradition of villagers each choosing a rock to throw into the fire. The following morning, if their rock was missing, it was considered an omen that they would die within the year.

This leads me to a question, or rather a few questions: how did they identify their rocks the following day? Was there a fire-watcher to make sure someone didn’t kick someone’s rock out during the night? Who had the job of poking around in the soot? What if there was an argument about who owned a specific rock? Was there some ritual of rock-identification?

One source suggests they wrote their names on the rock, and finding it burned off the next day was a good omen. But could they actually write their names? Or did they use some identifying mark? Obviously, they didn’t have permanent markers, so did they scratch it on the rock? Perhaps they painted the rock in woad or plant dyes? Or did they spend time, in the days leading up to Halloween, searching for the perfect rock to call their own that would be naturally distinguished from all the other rocks? My research to date hasn’t turned up any answers.

Another tradition was to wear masks and costumes, presumably to scare off these strange spirits. Wouldn’t that also serve to disguise you from your neighbours and acquaintances? That again piques the imagination of what mischief they might have attempted. And that leads to the traditions of trick-or-treating around neighbourhoods that followed the Celts to North America.

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Some traditions rose naturally from their rural lifestyle, when villagers might gather for harvest. In some areas, corn husks would be fashioned into a horse shape, and the men would try to get this Harvest Mare into the houses. But they had to get it past the women, who would try to throw water on it to stop it from coming inside. (I can’t help wondering if the women were throwing the cooking and washing water at the men, to protest the fact that they had the time to play around with corn husks all day. But isn’t that the way of harvest everywhere?)

My book *Water Sight* is set in Meirionnydd, North Wales, near the spookiest mountain in the country: Cadair Idris (CAH-der EE-dris), or the chair of the legendary giant Idris. The giant lives on as a memory of the myths and legends that make up the spirit of the Welsh people. The mountain and the myths play a role in my story.



Cadair Idris is known to be a hunting ground for Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the *Tylwyth Teg* (Welsh faeries). In some medieval poems, Gwyn collects the spirits of fallen warriors and takes them to the Welsh OtherWorld, and in others he leads the souls of the dead in the Wild Hunt. To hear the howling of his hounds, *Cŵn Annwn*, meant someone would soon die, most likely the one who heard them. And of course, the most likely time to hear the hounds was on Halloween.

But the best stories stem from Idris himself, a warrior poet who is thought by some to have been one of King Arthur’s knights. To become a bard, so the story goes, you had to spend the night on the mountain. By morning, anyone who dared to challenge Idris would either be a poet or a madman.

And if you’d like to read more about these and other Welsh legends, check out my series, *Last of the Gifted*. I’ve also created a Reader’s Guide containing historical notes, a glossary, and further reading suggestions. It can be

downloaded for free with the audiobooks, or by joining my mailing list on my website at [mariepowell.ca](http://mariepowell.ca).

Find Marie on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), and at her [website](#). [Spirit Sight](#) and [Water Sight](#) are both available to purchase.

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