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LUGHNASADH

Lughnasadh or **Lughnasa** (/ˈl uːnəsə/ *ʟOO-nə-sə*, Irish: [ˈl̪ˠuːnˠəsˠə]) is a Gaelic festival marking the beginning of the harvest season. Historically, it was widely observed throughout Ireland, Scotland a nd the Isle of Man. In Modern Irish it is called *Lúnasa*, in Scottish Gaelic: *Lùnastal*, and in Manx: *Luanistyn*. Traditionally it is held on 1 August, or about halfway between the summer solstice and autumn equinox. In recent centuries some of the celebrations have been shifted to the Sunday nearest this date.

Lughnasadh is one of the four Gaelic seasonal festivals, along with Samhain, Imbolc and Belt ane. It corresponds to other European harvest festivals such as the Welsh *Gŵyl Awst* and the English Lammas.

Lughnasadh is mentioned in some of the earliest Irish literature and has pagan origins. The festival itself is named after the god Lugh. It inspired great gatherings that included religious ceremonies, ritual athletic contests (most notably the Tailteann Games), feasting, matchmaking, and trading. Traditionally there were also visits to holy wells. According to folklorist Máire MacNeill, evidence shows that the religious rites included an offering of the 'First Fruits', a feast of the new food and of bilberries, the sacrifice of a bull, and a ritual dance-play in which Lugh seizes the harvest for mankind and defeats the powers of blight. Many of the activities would have taken place on top of hills and mountains.

Lughnasadh customs persisted widely until the 20th century, with the event being variously named 'Garland Sunday', 'Bilberry Sunday', 'Mountain Sunday' and 'Crom Dubh Sunday'. The custom of climbing hills and mountains at Lughnasadh has survived in some areas, although it has been re-cast as a Christian pilgrimage. The best known is the 'Reek Sunday' pilgrimage to the top of Croagh Patrick on the last Sunday in July. A number of fairs are also believed to be survivals of Lughnasadh, for example, the Puck Fair.

Since the late 20th century, Celtic neopagans have observed Lughnasadh, or something based on it, as a religious holiday. In some places, elements of the festival have been revived as a cultural event.

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In Irish mythology, the Lughnasadh festival is said to have begun by the god Lugh (modern spelling: *Lú*) as a funeral feast and athletic competition (see funeral games) in commemoration of his mother or foster-mother Tailtiu.[8] She was said to have died of exhaustion after clearing the plains of Ireland for agriculture.[8] Tailtiu may have been an earth goddess who represented the dying vegetation that fed mankind.[9] The funeral games in her honour were called the *Óenach Tailten* or *Áenach*

Tailten (modern spelling: *Aonach Tailteann*) and were held each Lughnasadh at Tailtin in what is now County Meath. According to medieval writings, kings attended this *óenach* and a truce was declared for its duration. It was similar to the Ancient Olympic Games and included ritual athletic and sporting contests, horse racing, music and storytelling, trading, proclaiming laws and settling legal disputes, drawing-up contracts, and matchmaking.[8][10][11] At Tailtin, trial marriages were conducted, whereby young couples joined hands through a hole in a wooden door.[12] The trial marriage lasted a year and a day, at which time the marriage could be made permanent or broken without consequences.[8][13][14][15][16][17] A similar Lughnasadh festival, the *Óenach Carmain*, was held in what is now County Kildare. Carman is also believed to have been a goddess, perhaps one with a similar tale as Tailtiu.[18] The *Óenach Carmain* included a food market, a livestock market, and a market for foreign traders.[10] After the 9th century the *Óenach Tailten* was celebrated irregularly and it gradually died out.[19] It was revived for a period in the 20th century as the Tailteann Games.[13][18]

A 15th century version of the Irish legend *Tochmarc Emire* ("the Wooing of Emer") is one of the earliest documents to record these festivities.[20]

From the 18th century to the mid 20th century many accounts of Lughnasadh customs and folklore were recorded. In 1962 *The Festival of Lughnasa*, a study of Lughnasadh by folklorist Máire MacNeill, was published.[21] MacNeill studied surviving Lughnasadh customs and folklore as well as the earlier accounts and medieval writings about the festival. She concluded that the evidence testified to the existence of an ancient festival around 1 August that involved the following:

A solemn cutting of the first of the corn of which an offering would be made to the deity by bringing it up to a high place and burying it; a meal of the new food and of bilberries of which everyone must partake; a sacrifice of a sacred bull, a feast of its flesh, with some ceremony involving its hide, and its replacement by a young bull; a ritual dance-play perhaps telling of a struggle for a goddess and a ritual fight; an installation of a [carved stone] head on top of the hill and a triumphing over it by an actor impersonating Lugh; another play representing the confinement by Lugh of the monster blight or famine; a three-day celebration presided over by the brilliant young god [Lugh] or his human representative. Finally, a ceremony indicating that the interregnum was over, and the chief god in his right place again.[22]

According to MacNeill, the main theme that emerges from the folklore and rituals of Lughnasadh is a struggle for the harvest between two gods. One god – usually called Crom Dubh – guards the grain as his treasure. The other god – Lugh – must seize it for mankind.[23][24] Sometimes, this was portrayed as a struggle over a woman called Eithne, who represents the grain. Lugh also fights and defeats a figure representing blight.[23] MacNeill says that these themes can be seen in earlier Irish mythology, particularly in the tale of Lugh defeating Balor,[23] which seems to represent the overcoming of blight, drought and the scorching summer sun.[25] In surviving folklore, Lugh is usually replaced by Saint Patrick, while Crom Dubh is a pagan chief who owns a granary or a bull and who opposes Patrick, but is overcome and converted. Crom Dubh is likely the same figure as Crom Cruach and shares some traits with the Dagda and Donn.[23] He may be based on an underworld god like Hades and Pluto, who kidnaps the grain goddess Persephone but is forced to let her return to the world above before harvest time.[26]

Many of the customs described by MacNeill and by medieval writers were being practised into the modern era, though they were either Christianized or shorn of any pagan religious meaning. Many of Ireland's prominent mountains and hills were climbed at Lughnasadh. Some of the treks were eventually re-cast as Christian pilgrimages, the most well-known being Reek Sunday—the yearly pilgrimage to the top of Croagh Patrick in late July.[27] Other hilltop gatherings were secular and attended mostly by the youth. In Ireland, bilberries were gathered[28] and there was eating, drinking, dancing, folk music, games and matchmaking, as well as athletic and sporting contests such as weight-throwing, hurling and horse racing.[29] At some gatherings, everyone wore flowers while climbing the hill and then buried them at the summit as a sign that summer was ending.[30] In other places, the first sheaf of the harvest was buried.[31] There were also faction fights, whereby two groups of young men fought with sticks.[32] In 18th-century Lothian, rival groups of young men built towers of sods topped with a flag. For days, each group tried to sabotage the other's tower, and at Lughnasadh

they met each other in 'battle'.[33] Bull sacrifices around Lughnasadh time were recorded as late as the 18th century at Cois Fharraige in Ireland (where they were offered to Crom Dubh) and at Loch Maree in Scotland (where they were offered to Saint Máel Ruba).[34] Special meals were made with the first produce of the harvest.[35] In the Scottish Highlands, people made a special cake called the *lunastain*, which may have originated as an offering to the gods.[36]

Another custom that Lughnasadh shared with Imbolc and Beltane was visiting holy wells, some specifically clootie wells. Visitors to these wells would pray for health while walking sunwise around the well; they would then leave offerings, typically coins or clooties.[37] Although bonfires were lit at some of the open-air gatherings in Ireland, they were rare and incidental to the celebrations.[38]

Traditionally, Lughnasadh has always been reckoned as the first day of August.[39] In recent centuries, however, much of the gatherings and festivities associated with it shifted to the nearest Sundays – either the last Sunday in July or first Sunday in August. It is believed this is because the coming of the harvest was a busy time and the weather could be unpredictable, which meant work days were too important to give up. As Sunday would have been a day of rest anyway, it made sense to hold celebrations then. The festival may also have been affected by the shift to the Gregorian calendar.[

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