Ghosts of October

by David R. Stewart in the November 1, 2003 issue

For many of us, Halloween is simply a matter of carving a pumpkin, arranging costumes for our kids and then accompanying them around the neighborhood for a couple of hours as they bulk up their supplies of treats. We may admire the simple pragmatism of their hunting-and-gathering strategies--"Which streets and houses give the most candy?" "Can we knock on the doors of those places more than once without being noticed?"--as they compare notes with other candy hunters. If we're especially attentive we may see a carload or two of kids from other parts of town, whose parents don't want them to miss out on the best pickings.

Nicholas Rogers's new study of the old festival shows the connection between such contemporary versions of the holiday and its antecedents. The Christian celebrations which are said to be precursors to our modern observance--All Hallows' Eve, All Saints Day, Harvest Festival--are of comparatively little interest to Rogers, a historian at Canada's York University. Rogers maintains that there is a unifying motif in related seasonal festivals as far back as the Celtic Samhain, an autumnal celebration originating in Ireland, which reflected rites for the protection of the harvest, apprehension at the onset of winter and a more general awareness of the season's shift toward increased darkness. That recurring motif is the celebration of transgressiveness. (While this is not a new term, a primary contemporary meaning is that of "exceeding a limit or boundary, especially of social acceptability." The related notion of liminality or liminal states--i.e., "consciousness or conduct related by proximity to the threshold of a physiological or psychological response"--is also significant here.)

Rogers energetically traces this entertaining thesis through various times, cultures and places. His extensive use of historic newspaper archives provides him with a vast array of anecdotes on how Halloween was celebrated in different places and periods. He describes early Druidic practices in autumn festivals; the rise of masques and mummery; disparate views on the revering of the dead; fortune-telling; fire rituals; and "souling" (the baking of "soul cakes" and their distribution to relatives or neighbors who offered to pray for the souls of the deceased in

purgatory).

As with so many other preexistent pagan festivals, Christian societies seem to have adopted some of these practices and gradually given them specifically religious shapes and meanings. Thus, by about the 12th century, the backdrop of general "spookiness" created by the "Samhain" festival had become imbued with the veneration of the dead and with asserting the enduring claims of the departed upon those still living. It expressed this through masses, processions and the lusty tolling of bells to ward off demonic spirits. Manifestations of this general theme varied considerably from place to place: the opening and decoration of tombs in Naples, the reconsecration of graves in Brittany, the purchasing of extra candles and torches to stave off the encircling darkness in Bristol, and so on.

Rogers maintains that it was all but impossible for the English Reformation to suppress such rituals, since so much of what went on in local parishes neither involved nor required clerical guidance. Folk-observances such as the lighting of bonfires on Hallowmass and the house-to-house selling of soul cakes, along with enthusiasm for spells, omens and fortune-telling, and a more general acknowledgment that this was a season of supernatural intensity all indicate that this festival (by whatever name it was observed) always seems to have corresponded with certain societal needs.

These and other old-country customs morphed and melded among immigrant populations in North America, gradually overwhelming the disdain for such celebrations among the Puritans and other early arrivals. Concerted efforts were made by immigrant leaders and societies to hold onto and even to rejuvenate old customs as a means of maintaining ethnic distinctiveness. Folk revelry in the form of pranks, music, costumes and so on proved far more adaptable to the New World than folk-religious traditions did.

By the early 20th century, the standardization and commercialization of Halloween were well under way, with most of what was needed for celebrating the event provided by shops rather than by the improvisation of neighborhoods and communities. More recent decades have witnessed an apparent increase in disturbing manifestations of Halloween, including tampering with snacks, increasing levels of vandalism, and the discovery of the holiday's entertainment potential by Hollywood. (The rise of the horror-movie genre receives a full chapter.)

Rogers sees the 1970s as a renaissance period for Halloween, chiefly as an outlet for the expression of "cultural inversion." In the final two chapters, he takes stock of Halloween at the end of the millennium, noting how some elements both of European and Latin American (El Día de los Muertos) antecedents have been assimilated and reshaped by U.S. popular culture.

An impulse to "kick over the traces," at least occasionally, has marked every society and has manifested itself in everything from forbidden rites to seasonal experimentation with folk religion to transvestite parades. One of Rogers's central points is that the fear and spookiness surrounding Halloween have always tended to engender both reverence and revelry, and that the two responses are not easily separated. Writing of the late medieval English Hallowtide, he observes that "in this season of misrule, choristers became boy bishops and urban leaders were temporarily usurped from power by mock-mayors and sheriffs in a ritualized topsy-turvy world replete with 'subtle disguises, masks, and mummeries.'"

If applied to our own time and extended to what we think our society might be like in a generation or so, what does this element of transgressiveness presage for Halloween's future meaning or appeal? The question assumes the presence of a fairly clear and resilient set of cultural values against which Halloween practices can be seen as reactions. But our culture's familiarity with a common church year, common customs and common rituals is not what it once was. If our cultural consensus has been eroded by a rising tide of consumerism and diminished by the blurring of cultural identities, the holiday's transgressive possibilities may soon be depleted.

Halloween "now grosses $6.8 billion, having more than doubled its revenue from candy, costumes, cards and party supplies in the last five years," Rogers states. He observes that in the aftermath of September 2001 what seemed to matter most about Halloween was whether it would fulfill its commercial potential in the threat of an economic recession. Rogers's overview of recent reactions to and adaptations of the festival doesn't leave much hope that Halloween will retain any coherent meaning. For both parents and children Halloween, like the consumption of too much candy, is likely to become less and less satisfying.