

Letter from Scotland

In Scotland, Halloween dates back to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhuinn, marking the end of summer and the beginning of winter and the spiritual transition from light to darkness. It begins with this weekend's Halloween parties and the clocks going back an hour as they struggle to keep the last of the daylight.



The straw men of Halloween. Dalkeith Country Park.
The Beltane Society has revived the Samhuinn Fire Festival with a parade beneath Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh on 31 October, followed by acrobatic performances, drumming, storytelling, visits by other-worldly creatures, and a battle re-enactment between summer and winter. (Tickets are sold out unfortunately.)



It's a time when the misty wall between the real world and the world of fantasy is particularly thin. Witches and Warlocks fly between them. You can be persuaded to believe strange things. In the 16th and 17th centuries Scotland went through a spell of witch-hunting, worse than in many other countries, when over 2,000 people (mainly women) were burned to death or strangled because they were believed to be possessed by the Devil. They could be blamed for every sort of calamity – crop failure, floods and heat-waves, pestilence, wars, or simple bad luck.

The King and Parliament encouraged such madness, with the Witchcraft Act of 1649 and James VI's book "Demonology" published in 1597. It's strange indeed that the land of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, when reason and science were re-discovered, should have fallen into the ditch of witch-hunting. And thereby hangs a warning, we can tilt into collective madness rather easily.

We are seeing it just now in the Middle East where vengeance

has taken possession of both the Israeli government and the Hamas government in Gaza. In the hunt for the Devil, innocent people are being killed. It's odd that Celtic supporters at their match against Atletico Madrid on Wednesday night were flying only Palestinians flags when the lessons of reconciliation nearer home, in Northern Ireland, have so recently been learned, or nearly learned.

There were examples of other-worldliness here in Scotland this week. We've been clearing up after the floods of Storm Babet but at the same time wishing that climate change would just go away of its own accord. We've seen fire brigade officers lining up outside parliament saying their service is being starved of resources. Local councils are complaining they cannot maintain services or pay their workers a decent wage. The health boards are saying that they are facing another tough winter without adequate numbers of staff. But none of the main political parties are proposing to raise taxes or cut services. They are relying on some sort of Halloween magic to cross the wall between fantasy and reality.



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Scotland's Covid inquisition began its first public sessions this week, with relatives telling the judge how their loved-ones died lonely deaths in the course of pandemic. Indeed, the effects of Covid are still with us, as the lawyer for "Long Covid Kids Scotland" pointed out. One effect it has had, according to experts from "Reform Scotland", is that school absence rates have soared since the Covid lockdowns. Their research has shown that 12 per cent of pupils are missing one day a week, compared with 7 per cent before Covid.

Finally, on these Halloween nights, have some sympathy for the Man in the Moon. We learned this week that he is 40 million years older than he looks. Scientists at the University of California have finally been able to establish the exact age

of the Moon by using "atom probe technology" on some of the Moon dust brought back by Apollo astronauts 51 years ago. The Man in the Moon is thus older than previously thought and is officially 4.46 billion years old. Luckily, age has not wearied him and he will keep us company through the long winter nights to come.