

# Thanksgiving's Roots in Old World Harvest Feasts

by Carolyn Emerick  
USA



November hearkens the coming of that great American harvest feast wherein we express our gratitude for Nature's bounty, and for the indigenous people whose generous support ensured the survival of the progenitors of our nation. However, when we dig a little deeper we discover that the tradition of Thanksgiving extends far beyond the borders of the United States. Canada celebrates her own Thanksgiving in October, and Germany's version, called Erntedankfest, is celebrated either at the end of September or in early October. The November harvest festival that the British-American pilgrims would have been familiar with, prior to their emigration, is the Feast of Saint Martin, or Martinmas.

The first American settlers in New England were British separatists and largely Puritan. Recent history had seen the Protestant Reformation and the birth of the Anglican Church. The Puritans believed that the new Church of England's reforms did not go far enough in breaking from Catholic tradition; hence the journey to settle new lands and form

**T**HE Christianized Indians in some parts of *Plymouth*, have newly appointed a day of Thanksgiving to God for his Mercy in supplying their extream and pinching Necessities under their late want of Corn, & for His giving them now a prospect of a very Comfortable Harvest. Their Example may be worth Mentioning

*Painting above: 'The First Thanksgiving', by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, circa 1915. Newspaper clipping: Oldest known recording of the same event depicted in the painting, the very first Thanksgiving. This is from Monday, September 25, 1690, as published in the newspaper 'Publick Occurrences' at Boston, Massachusetts.*

what they hoped would be a religious utopian life in the New World. We all know the story from here.

Things didn't go as planned, crops failed, and the settlers were nearly starved out when the indigenous Americans stepped in with food as a gesture of good will.

Today, hundreds of years later, we honor the memory of this story every year with the ritual of the Thanksgiving feast.



*Illustration by E. Stuart Hardy  
for 'The Pigeon Tale' by Virginia Bennett.*

But, many Americans aren't aware that our own Thanksgiving feast has precedent in the ritual and ceremony of Old Europe.

It would be misleading not to point out that virtually all cultures around the world who's societies were built around agriculture had (and many still do have) their own harvest feasts wherein thanks is given to whichever gods are honored in that culture. And this was certainly true of Europe.

Virtually all people in all corners of Europe, barring perhaps hunting/herding societies such as the Saami in Lapland, celebrated the feast of the harvest. In fact, they usually celebrated more than one, as they were often stacked between August and November depending on climate, geography, and the crops grown in the area.

August sees the wheat harvest festival of Lammas which has been resurrected as a

religious holiday by neo-Pagan groups. The word Lammas comes from the old Anglo-Saxon hlaf-mas, meaning "loaf-mass." Its Irish counterpart was/is known as Lughnasadh, honoring the Celtic god Lugh.

Many regions around the world still have local festivals to celebrate the harvest of crops grown locally. In my region of Upstate New York, for example, the town of Hilton hosts the Hilton Apple Fest, and Naples (named for the Italian city) hosts a grape festival.



*Medieval Grape Harvest for the Royal Family*

In an age when the livelihood of the entire region depended on the success of the crops, one can imagine how important each crop was for the survival of the community, and so much ritual and ceremony built up around these events. The American Thanksgiving story emphasizes how dire it could be when a crop failed. Indeed, the generosity of the indigenous Americans in sharing their own harvest was truly something to give thanks for.

Martinmas, also called Martlemas, is one of the many harvest feasts described above, but it has the important distinction of being the very last one of the year. The cult of Saint Martin likely came to Britain during the earliest days of Christianity during Roman times. However, with the Anglo-Saxon migration came another period



of active paganism in England. Even when the Anglo-Saxons converted, it does not appear that they placed a great emphasis on Saint Martin or his holiday. In the old Anglo-Saxon calendar, November was called Blod-Monath, which means Blood Month. The name is a reference to the final slaughter of the season when the livestock that would not be kept through the winter were killed, and the records indicate oxen were a main animal culled at this time. What could not be preserved was eaten in a great feast. These feasts and festivals not only celebrated the harvesting of food, but they helped to brace people for the onset of winter. And in the case of Anglo-Saxon Blod-Monath, the feast was also a time of religious sacrifice (prior to conversion). After the Norman Conquest of 1066, churches dedicated to St. Martin began to spring up, and references to the feast of Saint Martin begin to appear again in the record.

The emphasis on the slaughter of cattle in November seems to have continued on through the Norman era and afterward. Just as Americans today reference the ubiquitous Thanksgiving turkey, mediaeval Britons made reference to the Martlemas beef. The term was apparently so common that it became a figure of speech to indicate a full pantry, a reference to the abundance of food after this large scale slaughter. As time progressed and farming techniques improved, the need for such a large cattle slaughter at Martinmas seems to have lessened. By the late Middle Ages, the Martlemas beef enjoyed the company of St. Martin's wine. This also became a time of a great grape harvest and the celebration of new wine. Hence, Martinmas became a time of revelry and merry-making.

Drunkenness appears to have thus been associated with Martinmas not only in Britain but also on the continent.



*Painting by William Holman Hunt - circa 1847 to 1857 - A scene of Medieval drunkenness, while revelry in the street is seen through the window . . . as might have taken place on the Martinmas holiday.*

There are accounts of surprise attacks being planned to take advantage of Martinmas drunkenness. Yet, Martinmas was a special holiday. It was considered the threshold of winter, the last great harvest of the year, and there was food and drink a plenty.

While Martinmas was apparently important enough to be given the suffix “mas” or “mass” (reserved for only the holiest of holidays, such as Christmas, Christ’s Mass), its celebration dissolved soon after the Protestant Reformation. Other harvest traditions, however, did manage to linger on much longer. The concept of the Corn Spirit was celebrated almost universally across Europe, and certainly in Britain and Ireland. In this context “corn” refers to kernels of wheat and other grains, not American maize. During wheat and grain harvests, often one sheath would be left remaining standing in the fields. Traditions varied by location, but it would typically symbolize the spirit of the crop, and many local traditions and rituals sprang up around it. Often, the spirit would be dubbed the Corn King or Queen (or both) who must be killed as a symbolic sacrifice.



*These ‘Corn Doll’ photos were provided by Pollyanna Jones, another contributor to the Celtic Guide. At left is a corn doll handmade by Pollyanna. At right is another corn doll given to her as a gift. In ancient European cultures it was believed that the spirit of the corn lived amongst the crop and was made homeless by the harvest. A corn doll was made to house the corn spirit and was often ploughed into the first furrow of the new season.*



*‘Crying the Neck’ is still re-enacted at harvest time especially in parts of Cornwall. These ceremonies in Cornwall date back thousands of years, but as farming became mechanized towards the end of the nineteenth century, the tradition died out. It was revived by the Old Cornwall Societies in 1928. Above: A Cornish farmer carries out the ceremony holding the final stook of corn. The religious ceremony traditionally marks the end of the harvest. Normally crowds gather in harvested fields to see the last ‘stook’ of corn or ‘neck’ scythed and everyone prays for a good harvest next year.*

Sometimes the corn spirit was seen as a malicious spirit embodying bad luck. This spirit had to be dealt with to ensure the prosperity of the coming season.

There are a whole host of traditions associated with the grain harvest. Like with many European folk festivals, role-playing and play-acting was often involved. In some areas two individuals would be chosen to represent the “Harvest Lord and Lady.” (One wonders if this particular practice bears any connection to the old Germanic sibling gods Frey and Freya,



for they were both associated with fertility and their names also mean “Lord” and “Lady” respectively.)



Illustration by William T. Van Dresser  
for 'The Golden Harvest' – 1908

Other traditions involve building a life sized figure out of stalks of grain to represent the Harvest Queen. The figure would be placed in the field during while the workers labored, and then paraded through the town on the final day of the harvest with music and celebration.

Similar customs continued well into the modern era. John Barleycorn is one example of a folk song that continues on the theme of the Corn Spirit from the Middle Ages well into modern times, and is still sung today. Related to this custom is the art of weaving corn dollies, sometimes called harvest dolls or kern babies. They could be modeled after the human form, shaped after animals, or simply decorative and abstract. If the dollies were made from the last sheaf of grain, they would be hung in the home to bring good luck for the coming year.

With our pumpkin pie, zucchini bread, roasted turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet candied yams, minced meat, and so on and so forth; we continue a long tradition of celebrating Nature's bounty with our families and loved ones. Our Thanksgiving décor today still places emphasis on the abundance of produce in season at this time of year. As we partake in our own cornucopia of plenty, lift a

glass in remembrance of the celebrations of our forbearers and take pride in knowing we are carrying on traditions that have continued for hundreds of years.

Does your family or community celebrate a harvest tradition you'd like to share with us? Post your photos on our Facebook wall: [www.facebook.com/celticguide](http://www.facebook.com/celticguide)

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