Walter Crane, 'The Masque of the Four Seasons'.

The 'Ancient Celtic Year' in Contemporary Children's Fantasy

Dimitra Fimi

In the medieval Irish tale of *Tochmarc Emire* ('The Wooing of Emer'), Emer challenges Cúchulainn to remain 'sleepless from Samain, when the summer goes to its rest, until Imbolc, when the ewes are milked at spring's beginning; from Imbolc to Beltine at the summer's beginning and from Beltine to Brón Trogain, earth's sorrowing autumn'.[1] This much-quoted extract neatly outlines what have come to be known as the four 'quarter-days' not only of the Irish medieval calendar, but – by extension – of the ancient 'Celtic' year more generally: Samhain (31 October/1 November), Imbolc (1 February), Beltaine (1 May), and Lughnasadh[2] (1 August). Each of these four festivals (or feast days) makes an appearance in a number of other Irish sources (though Samhain and Beltaine figure much more prominently), often becoming the setting for the main narrative action.

Among these four quarter-days, Samhain holds particular sway in the popular imagination, as it is often claimed to be the pagan 'origin' of modern Halloween, the latter celebration supposedly still retaining pre-Christian elements of its 'Celtic' predecessor. The argument for Samhain as an important 'pagan' festival usually rests on its association with supernatural occurrences in the Irish medieval tales, on the claim that it was the 'Celtic' festival of the dead (something that could point to religious observances), and on the widespread idea that is was the 'Celtic New Year', the beginning of the year, in contrast to the reckoning of years in the Roman calendar, starting on 1 January.[3] However, each of these threads of the 'pagan' argument can be (and have been) vigorously challenged.

The prominence of supernatural figures making their appearance on Samhain in the Irish medieval tales may not be linked with the remnants of a 'pagan' religious celebration at all. There is no doubt that Samhain was a time of agricultural significance, the end of the summer and the beginning of winter, when livestock would return from pasture and perishable food would be consumed in a community setting (such as a feast) ahead of a time of more scarcity of resources. The Irish material does refer to feasts of kings and warriors on this day, but – as Ronald Hutton has noted – having important legendary characters gathered together for a feast 'with time on their hands' is, naturally, an ideal time to begin a tale, 'in the same way [that] many of the Arthurian stories were to commence with a courtly assembly for Christmastide or Pentecost'.[4] In this scenario, it is not the feast

itself that invites the supernatural, but the fact that it provides the opportunity for a gathering of characters who will experience adventures involving the supernatural. This is not to belittle the anthropological/folkloric idea of liminality:[5] Samhain would also be a fertile setting for the supernatural by virtue of being a time of transition between one season to the other. But there is nothing particularly 'pagan' or exclusively 'Celtic' about this – rites of passage and liminal times are much wider motifs, common in a number of cultures.

Coming to Samhain as a festival of the dead, this contention has been based on 'working backwards' on the assumption that the Christian feasts of All Saints[6] (1 November) and All Souls (2 November) usurped a pre-existing pagan festival. Sir James Frazer's very popular work *The Golden Bough* (1906-15) supported this idea, which was then further reinforced by the sensation of Margaret Murray's theory for a (supposedly) female-centric, nature-focused 'Old Religion', eventually supplanted by Christianity.[7] But this hypothesis collapses when one delves into ecclesiastical history. The feast of All Saints did not have a consistent date until the ninth century, when it was consolidated as the 1 November, followed by the feast of All Souls (commemorating all the faithful departed) which also became very popular. The date was not established by the church in Ireland, or any other 'Celtic' region, but in the Germanic dioceses of Northern Europe.[8] It was, in fact, 'resisted for more than a generation' in Ireland, where the Church showed preference for the older date of 20 April.[9] There simply is no evidence for the Irish Samhain cunningly being 'taken over' by Christianity.

The third line of argument is equally shaky. It was Sir John Rhys who first suggested that Samhain was the 'Celtic New Year' in his 1901 work *Celtic Folklore*, based on very flimsy (and also *contemporary*, i.e. late 19th-/early 20th-century) folklore evidence from the Isle of Man, and having previously cited unreliable or 'corrected' Irish texts.[10] The *Tochmarc Emire* order of mentioning the festivals, beginning with Samhain, may have also played a role in this identification. But there is no evidence whatsoever that the New Year started on 1 November in 'pagan' Ireland or any other 'Celtic' region. The only pre-Christian 'Celtic' calendar in existence, the Coligny Calendar from second-century Gaul, seems to begin the year in the summer, although the calendar was found in fragments and has been reconstructed in different ways, none of them conclusive.[11]

The elephant in the room in all of this discussion so far, of course, is the term 'Celtic' itself, and the rather facile equation of 'Irish' with 'Celtic' in earlier scholarship (and, currently, in popular culture). I have recently surveyed the conventional narrative of the 'Celts', which seeks to create a linear history linking Iron Age cultures on the Continent and in the British Isles to medieval Ireland and Wales, all the way to modern 'Celtic' identities in speakers of Celtic languages (including Scots Gaelic and Breton) or their diasporas.[12] Against this narrative, modern scholarship has taken a 'revisionist' turn, pointing out a number of holes, assumptions, and assertions. First, the term 'Celts' was attributed to a variety of peoples by classical commentators (and never by these peoples themselves). Second, the archaeological evidence doesn't support the idea of mass migration of Continental 'Celts' to Britain and

Ireland, although there was certainly communication across the English Channel. Third, the medieval Irish and Welsh did not see each other as having common ancestry or a shared cultural and linguistic heritage. Fourth, the idea of the 'Celts' and 'Celtic literature' as popularly understood today was really a product of the early modern and Romantic periods, ideologically linked with the 'rediscovery' (or more often re-construction, and even forgery) of national 'epics' or mythological texts, often to support (or react against) political agendas. Recent scholarship has even questioned the validity of the terms 'Celt' and 'Celtic' themselves.[13]

The fact that the four 'quarter days' found in Irish medieval literature have become known as the 'ancient Celtic year' is a prime example of the problematic practice of assuming that all 'Celtic' regions (if we can still call them that) had a homogenous culture in all of their constituent areas and at all times. As discussed above, Samhain is, indeed, an important date in the Irish medieval material, but the Welsh festival taking place on the same date, Nos Calan Gaeaf (Winter's Eve), just doesn't share this significance. On the contrary, the Welsh medieval tales set magical adventures and supernatural intrusions on a different date: on 1 May, or the previous day, May Eve (Calan Mai), corresponding to Beltaine in Ireland.[14] Davis has drawn attention to the 'problematic dependence on exclusively Irish material for the entire record of Samhain customs' and has noted that customs associated with Samhain are not attested 'in any early Welsh or Scottish material, except in areas of heavy Irish migration'.[15] The fact that the Irish material is often richer, earlier, and more detailed, together with a facile pan-Celticism in earlier scholarship (and in modern popular understandings), has often made the equation Irish=(pan-)Celtic almost a default.

And this is where authors of Celtic-inspired children's fantasy come in. In my recent monograph,[16] I examined a selection of contemporary children's fantasy texts, ranging from the 1960s to the 2010s, analysing their creative adaptation of medieval Irish and Welsh narratives. Ultimately, I showed that each of these works of imaginative fiction constructed its own perception of 'Celticity', defined as 'the quality of being Celtic',[17] and added another approach to the notion of 'Celticism', the study of the 'reputation of [the Celts] and of the meanings and connotations ascribed to the term "Celtic"'.[18] The imaginative ways in which these fantasy novels use the 'ancient Celtic year' and the four 'Celtic' quarter-days offer evidence of one more instance of their engagement with the 'Celtic' past and illuminate their construction of 'Celticity'. In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss examples of the 'ancient Celtic year' and its appropriation in four fantasies: Mary Tannen's *Finn* novels (*The Wizard Children of Finn*, 1981; and *The Lost Legend of Finn*, 1982); Jenny Nimmo's *The Magician Trilogy* (*The Snow Spider*, 1986; *Emlyn's Moon*, 1987; and *The Chestnut Soldier*, 1989); Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising Sequence* (*Over Sea, Under Stone*, 1965; *The Dark is Rising*, 1973; *Greenwitch*, 1974; *The Grey King*, 1975; and *Silver on the Tree*, 1977); and Henry Neff's *The Tapestry* series (*The Hound of Rowan*, 2007; *The Second Siege*, 2008; *The Fiend and the Forge*, 2010; *The Maelstrom*, 2012; and *The Red Winter*, 2014).

The most straightforward case is Mary Tannen's *Finn* novels. This is a series of two books, in which two young American children, Fiona and her brother Bran, time-travel back to mythical Ireland at the time of legendary hero Finn mac Cumhall. Tannen is the only one of my chosen authors to mention all four 'Celtic' quarter-days. They are designated as 'magic nights' in both novels: they invite supernatural presences, facilitate the performance of magic, and allow a medieval Irish manuscript to become a portal that transports the children to ancient Ireland. Time-travel itself, therefore, is predicated upon the magical qualities of the quarter-days. In the first novel, Fiona and Bran time-travel to Ireland on Lugnasad on 1 August, and return on Samhain. The children also find out that Finn himself and his two female guardians, Bovmall (the Druid) and Lia (the warrior), have travelled forward in time to 20th-century USA on Beltaine, in late spring. In the sequel novel, Fiona and Bran access the past on Halloween/Samhain and return on Imbolc (1 February).

What is more, Finn uses the quarter-days in a conventional way, as often seen in medieval Irish literature, to mark the passage of time. When asked about his age he notes: "Tomorrow I will have passed through Lugnasad seventeen times".[19] At the same time, though, Finn's reliance on the quarter-days, rather than a Roman-style calendar and reckoning of the years, singles him out as pre-modern:

> "Hey, Deimne," Fiona said, acting on a hunch, "what year are we in?"
>
> Deimne gave her a blank look.
>
> "You know," Fiona prodded, "like back home it was 1981. What year is it here?"
>
> "You're a queer one," said Deimne, "giving numbers to years. It's just after Lugnasad. What more do you need to know?"[20]

Clearly, Finn, and by extension the 'ancient Celts' (as the book calls the ancient Irish), has a concept of time as cyclical, as part of an ever-repeated pattern, rather than our 'modern' idea of linear time. This plays into the hands of a common stereotype of the 'Celts' as both rather primitive *and* romanticised (more intuitive/artistic than rational, in touch with nature and its cycles).

Tannen doesn't give much information about Imbolc and Lugnasad (apart from their dates in winter and summer, and their status as 'magical nights'), but Beltaine is described a little more. Uncle Rupert calls it 'the most magic night of all on the Celtic calendar' and Finn gives the children a full account of rituals and customs practised on that day:

> "Beltaine?" interrupted Fiona. "What's that? A disaster of some kind?"
>
> "You know, Beltaine," Deimne said, "when you build the big fires and drive the cattle between them."

> The McCools responded with wide-eyed incredulity.
>
> "Beltaine, the most magic night of all, the night when the world goes from darkness to light, from winter to summer," Deimne went on, continuing to leave the children in total darkness.
>
> "In the morning, after Beltaine," Deimne said, as if explaining to people suffering from amnesia, "you rush up the hill to greet the sun. You wash in the dew, and you cut branches from the rowan tree and bring them into the house."[21]

The ritual of driving cattle between two fires at Beltaine is recorded in the tenth-century *Sanas Chormaic* (*Cormac's Glossary*) but the rowan branches and the morning dew are much later folklore customs from different 'Celtic' areas, such as the Isle of Man and Scotland.[22] The assumption here, once more, by Rhys and other Celticists, and eventually by Tannen, is that there is an unbroken chain of tradition between a tenth-century Irish custom (recorded only in one source) and May Day customs ten centuries later from across the British Isles.

Unsurprisingly, the quarter-day that gets most attention in Tannen's novels is Samhain. *The Wizard Children of Finn* follows Finn's 'heroic journey' not from its medieval sources, but as reconstructed (from a variety of manuscripts) and retold in the early 20th century by Lady Gregory in *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904). Like Gregory, Tannen treats as a climactic event of Finn's heroic career his defeat of the fire-breathing Aillen, who, every year on Samhain, burns down Temhair, the seat of the High King. The setting of the original story (narrated within the 12th-century *Acallam na Senórach*, 'Dialogue of [or with] the old men') is indeed Samhain, and Tannen utilises the frequent motif of warfare and feuds pausing to allow the feast of Samhain to take place. However, as the 20th-century Fiona walks with many other 'ancient Celts' towards Temhair for the festival, she makes a link with her contemporary Halloween:

> Fiona [. . .] thought this crowd was nothing compared to what she was used to on Fifth Avenue around Christmas time. She laughed to herself thinking of this same gang parading up Fifth Avenue. There were boys driving pigs, warriors carrying spears, an old man with a cow, a group of barefoot girls singing.
>
> "It looks like a Halloween party," Fiona said to herself. From what Finn had told her about Samhain, *it could be the great-grandfather of their Halloween*. It was the right time of year for it, and it was the night the ever-living ones were supposed to come out of the hills of Ireland and go

around committing mischief. No human dared step outside on Samhain night. "Like our witches and goblins," thought Fiona, although the possibility of supernatural beings walking around at night seemed much more real in ancient Ireland than back in New York City.[23]

Tannen, here, is very much taking for granted the idea that 'pagan' Samhain is the origin of modern Halloween. Indeed, in the sequel, *The Lost Legend of Finn*, Bran directly identifies Halloween with Samhain and uses this correlation to transport himself and his sister back to ancient Ireland 'on Halloween night'.[24]

A rather different representation of the Halloween/Samhain equation can be found in Jenny Nimmo's *The Magician Trilogy*. In the first book, *The Snow Spider*, Nimmo places two crucial events during Halloween: Gwyn's birth, and Bethan's disappearance. Gwyn is a young magician, who has inherited magical power that returns to his family 'once in every seven generations'.[25] His birth during the magical, liminal time of Halloween singles him out as special, but his Nain (Welsh for 'grandmother') also links this date with Gwyn's ancient heritage:

'And are you a witch too, Nain?' Gwyn ventured.

'No,' Nain shook her head regretfully. 'I haven't the power, I've tried, but it hasn't come to me.'

'And how do you know it has come to me?'

'Ah, I knew when you were born. *It was All Hallows Day*, don't forget, *the beginning of the Celtic New Year*. Such a bright dawn it was; all the birds in the world were singing. Like bells wasn't it? Bells ringing in the air. Your father came flying down the lane, "The baby's on the way, Mam," he cried. He was so anxious, so excited. By the time we got back to the house you were nearly in this world. And when you came and I saw your eyes, so bright, I knew. And little Bethan knew too, although she was only four. She was such a strange one, so knowing yet so wild, sometimes I thought she was hardly of this world; but how she loved you. And your da, so proud he was. What a morning!'[26]

The term 'Samhain' does not appear at all in the trilogy, and neither does the Welsh name of the same festival, 'Calan Gaeaf'. However, it is quite clear that Nimmo, just like Tannen, accepts the popular view that modern Halloween can trace its origins back to a pan-'Celtic' festival of the same date, which also signals the beginning of the 'Celtic' year. As we saw above, the claim that Samhain was the 'Celtic' New Year is based on very dubious evidence and the Welsh material does not yield any support for this theory.

But Nimmo's Halloween also seems to be a festival associated with the dead. Bethan, Gwyn's older sister, disappears in the mountains 'the night after Halloween' and her ghostly 'double', a girl who looks exactly like Bethan, only with pale skin and fair hair, returns to the family home via Gwyn's magic. She is, ostensibly, the ghost of his dead sister. Bethan's apparent death is linked with the melancholy imagery of modern Halloween, complete with American pumpkin jack-o'-lantern (as opposed to the native turnips used in earlier tradition): 'It was the night after Halloween and the pumpkin was still on the windowsill, grimacing with its dark gaping mouth and sorrowful eyes. Bethan had become curiously excited . . .'.[27] But it is important here to remember, as noted above, that the Halloween association with the dead is a Christian development, following the regularisation of All Saints and All Souls feasts on 1 and 2 November respectively. At the same time, Nimmo cannot quite escape its globalised homogenisation following Halloween's evolution in the USA, after it travelled there with the early immigrants before being subsequently re-imported to Britain in the 19th century, and latterly more so through popular culture references.

Halloween is mentioned one more time by Nimmo, in a pivotal moment of the third book in the series: *The Chestnut Soldier*. Towards the end of the novel, as Gwyn prepares to 'merge' with his ancestor Gwydion, the magician from the *Mabinogion*, in order to exorcise the destructive spirit of Efnisien from Evan Llyr (the eponymous 'chestnut soldier') his Nain notes that the next day is Halloween:

> When [Gwyn] reached his grandmother's cottage he found her in the garden, piling leaves ready for a bonfire. 'Are you coming down tomorrow, then, Gwydion Gwyn?' she asked. 'To share my Hallowe'en fire?'
>
> Hallowe'en? He'd forgotten. How appropriate, he thought wryly. But there would be no fire. 'It'll rain, Nain,' he told her, 'and I'm sorry, but I'll be busy.'[28]

Gwyn is now powerful enough to control the weather and be confident in his own abilities. But he does note the suitability of Halloween as a fitting time for a magical duel. Nain's mention of a fire is also significant. Folklore collections from the British Isles often include bonfires in Halloween customs, which Davis has linked to Christian iconography, especially after the development of the Catholic doctrine of the purgatory and the symbolic value of the imagery of cleansing by fire.[29] But this is one more example of a Christian-related custom that has been projected backwards and has been claimed to have pagan origins. Given the mention of fires at Beltain in *Sanas Chormaic* (see above) and the later evidence of bonfires on Halloween, Sir James Frazer claimed that Halloween was also a fire-festival, while Charles Hardwick extended this to all four quarter-days, giving rise to the popular idea of all four of them as pan-'Celtic' 'fire-festivals'.[30] Nain's magical ancestry, and her invitation to Gwyn to

'share' her 'Halloween fire' (rather than 'bonfire') points to the popular idea of Halloween as remnant of such a 'Celtic' 'fire-festival'.

As we saw above, Tannen's novel uses the framework of the four Irish quarter-days, but Susan Cooper's much-loved *The Dark is Rising Sequence* seems to be working with the idea of a looser, 'Old Religion' calendar, such as the one popularised by Margaret Murray and later endorsed by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1952). In this schema, the 'Old Religion' encompasses the quarter-days of the 'Celtic' calendar, but also syncretically merges them with similar festivals from other pre-Christian, 'pagan' cultures, and adds the two solstices:

> The ancient festivals remained all through, and to them were added the festivals of the succeeding religions. The original celebrations belonged to the May-November year, a division of time which follows neither the solstices nor the agricultural seasons; [...] The chief festivals were: in the spring, May Eve (April 30), called Roodmas or Rood Day in Britain and Walpurgis-Nacht in Germany; in the autumn, November Eve (October 31), called in Britain All hallow Eve. Between these two came: in the winter, Candlemas (February 2); and in the summer, the Gule of August (August 1), called Lammas in Britain. To these were added the festivals of the solstitial invaders, Beltane at midsummer and Yule at midwinter ...[31]

Robert Graves, whose work Cooper definitely read, lists the same range of dates and versions of names of these festivals: 'Candlemas, Lady Day, May Day, Midsummer Day, Lammas, Michaelmas, All-Hallowe'en, and Christmas' adding 'Samhain' as an alternative name to 'All Souls' Eve' and 'Lugh nasadh' as an alternative name for 'Lammas'.[32]

In Cooper's reflections on the genesis of the *Dark Is Rising Sequence* (especially on the moment when she realised that *Over Sea, Under Stone* would fit into a longer fantasy series with *The Dark is Rising* as the second book) she notes:

> So I took a piece of paper and wrote down the names of all five books, their characters, the places where they would be set, and the times of the year. *The Dark Is Rising* would be at the winter solstice and Christmas, the next book *Greenwitch* would be in the spring, at the old Celtic festival of Beltane ...[33]

This actual piece of paper has been made available by Cooper on her website,[34] and shows that her reminiscences of these early ideas are indeed structured around significant days of the British (and more generally North-Western European) calendar, very much agreeing with the dates and names given by Murray and Graves. I have reproduced Cooper's (then) projected book titles and the dates she attached to them in her 'plan' in the table:

I. *Over Sea, Under Stone*	Summer Lammas? Aug 2
II. *The Gift of Gramarye* (eventually titled *The Dark is Rising*)	Mid-winter
III. *Greenwitch*	May Eve (=Walpurgisnacht)
III. *Fire on the Mountain* (eventually titled *The Grey King*)	Hallowe'en
V. *The Dark is Rising* (eventually titled *Silver on the Tree*)	Midsummer

In the *Sequence*, therefore, the four 'Celtic' feasts fit seamlessly within the more general pre-Christian, 'pagan' scheme popularised by Murray and Graves (and later taken up by the emerging Wicca movement) and definitely form an underlying 'substratum' to the Christian festivals and rituals of the *Sequence*'s modern setting. This is especially apparent in the second book of the series, *The Dark is Rising*, in which Christmas celebrations are a rather superficial layer, while deeper significance is given to the 'pagan' winter solstice, which is presented as more authentic, primeval and 'natural'; the 'Old Religion' indeed, still clinging to the landscape of Britain.

The *Sequence* refers specifically to two of the feasts popularly considered as 'pan-Celtic', Samhain and Beltain. The latter is only referenced once in *The Dark is Rising*, when Will is told by Merriman to 'look into the fire' and 'make it his friend':

> Wondering, Will moved forward as if to warm himself, and did as he was told. Staring at the leaping flames of the enormous log fire in the hearth, he ran his fingers gently over the Sign of Iron, the Sign of Bronze, the Sign of Wood, the Sign of Stone. He spoke to the fire, not as he had done long ago, when challenged to put it out, but as an Old One, out of Gramarye. He spoke to it of the red fire in the king's hall, of the blue fire dancing over the marshes, of *the yellow fire lighted on the beacon hills for Beltane and Hallowe'en*; of wildfire and need-fire and the cold fire of the sea; of the sun and of the stars. The flames leaped.[35]

Here Cooper imaginatively responds to the idea of the 'Celtic' quarter-days as 'fire-festivals', taking for granted the erroneous extension of the Beltaine fires to Samhain/Halloween. But, of course, 'fire on the mountain' is also very much at the centre of the plot of *The Grey King*,[36] which is set on Halloween. Already at the end of *Greenwitch*, the prophecy the Drew children and Will Stanton discover on the Grail makes reference to 'the day of the dead, when the year too dies'.[37] When Will and Bran try to solve this riddle, the following dialogue ensues:

> 'I was thinking,' Will said, 'that the day of the dead might be All Hallows' Eve. Don't you think? Hallowe'en, when people used to believe all the ghosts walked.'
>
> 'I know some who still believe they do,' Bran said. 'Things like that last a long time, up here. There is one old lady I know puts out food for the spirits, at Hallowe'en. She says they eat it too, though if you ask me it is more likely the cats, she has four of them … Hallowe'en will be this next Saturday, you know.'
>
> 'Yes,' Will said. 'I do know. Very close.'
>
> 'Some people say that *if you go and sit in the church porch till midnight on Hallowe'en, you hear a voice calling out the names of everyone who will die in the next year,*' Bran grinned. 'I have never tried it.'
>
> But Will was not smiling as he listened. He said thoughtfully, 'You just said, in the *next year*. And the verse says, "On the day of the dead *when the year too dies*." But that doesn't make sense. Hallowe'en isn't the end of the year.'
>
> 'Maybe once upon a time it used to be,' Bran said. 'The end and the beginning both, once, instead of December. In Welsh, Hallowe'en is called *Calan Gaeaf*, and that means the first day of winter…'[38]

Here Cooper interposes local Welsh folklore with ideas about the ancient 'Celtic' year. On the one hand, she presents local superstitions and rituals, such as sitting in the churchyard on Halloween to find out who will die during the next year. This agrees nearly point-by-point with Marie Trevelyan's account of such a belief in her *Folk-lore and folk-stories of Wales*:

> If you sit in the church porch at midnight on Hallowe'en, or all through the night, you will see a procession of all the people who are to die in the parish during the year, and they will appear dressed in their best garments.[39]

But, on the other hand, we have in the words of Will and Bran once more the popular idea of Halloween as the 'Celtic' (or at least, 'pagan', pre-Christian) New Year, as well as its link with the dead as part and parcel of the supposed 'pagan' origins of the festival, rather than its Christian guise. In *Silver on the Tree*, Bran makes the case of a pan-'Celtic' festival even stronger. Asked by the Drew children exactly how long he had known Will, Bran replied: "*Calan Gaeaf* last year, I got to know Will. Last *Samain*. If you can work that out, you'll know how long".[40] Here the Welsh and Irish names of this seasonal festival are treated as interchangeable, and this knowledge singles out Will and Bran from the Drew children, who

Bran still perceives as 'English' and 'ignorant' at this point in the story. On the contrary, Will, as an Old One, and Bran as the son of King Arthur, are in the know – they are, themselves, remnants of the 'Old Religion' of Murray's and Graves's evocations.

The last and most recent Celtic-inspired text that makes an interesting use of the 'Celtic' quarter-days is Henry Neff's *The Tapestry* series. Neff's main protagonist, Max MacDaniels, is a creative reshaping of Cuchulainn from Irish medieval literature, and there is a clear Irish strand in the large canvas of Neff's world-building. Similar to Cooper, Neff has a larger vision of a looser calendar that syncretically combines 'pagan' festivals with Christian and later folkloric ones. In *The Hound of Rowan* we first see Max starting to be conscious of his abilities on All Hallows Eve (for which Neff uses the term Samhain in later books). In *The Second Siege*, Max and David fly aboard the Kestrel to the otherworldly Sidh on Christmas Eve, close to the winter solstice. In *The Fiend and the Forge* Max and David attack Astaroth on Walpurgisnacht, the same date as the eve of Beltaine. In *The Red Winter* Astaroth attempts to open a portal to another world on Imbolc; while Max finally departs for the Sidh on Midsummer. Again, rather expectedly, Halloween/All Hallows' Eve/the Feast of Samhain (called interchangeably with these names) features much more heavily in the series than any of the other festivals, and its syncretic nature is emphasised in the third book, *The Fiend and the Forge*:

> By the early evening, it was time to prepare for the Samhain Feast, and Max's attention shifted to the pressing issue of his costume. At Rowan, the celebration was officially called the Samhain Feast in memory of Solas, but the residents actually called this stretch of the calendar whatever they liked: Halloween, All Saint's Day, Día de los Muertos, Dia de Finados, Feralia. Whatever the holiday, costumes were a common tradition to honor the dead, chase away evil spirits, and celebrate the harvest.[41]

Neff does not invoke the idea of Halloween/Samhain as the 'Celtic' New Year, but he does associate it clearly with the dead, and he mentions more – mostly American – festivals taking place during the same period that share this concern for dead: the Mexican Día de los Muertos (31 October – 2 November), and the Brazilian Dia de Finados (2 November). Feralia is rather different: it was a Roman festival celebrating the spirits of the dead, but it took place in February, rather than October-November. Neff is clearly here catering for an American readership, but he is also highlighting the multi-cultural aspect of his fantasy world: just as he blends mythological motifs from various traditions (including Irish, Greek and Roman, Egyptian, Hebrew, Finnish and Anglo-Saxon) he also allows for this hybridisation of festivals and beliefs. However, in the parallel world of the Sidh, a version of mythical Ireland to which Max travels to be trained by Scathach, the female warrior that trained Cú Chulain, the festivals observed are very much the specific Irish quarter-days as they appear in

medieval Irish literature. While staying in the Sidh Max is asked to build 'bonfires for Beltaine'[42] and he also attends the Samhain and Imbolc festivals. The Samhain celebration includes 'feasting in Hearth Hall' and 'listening to songs of the faerie folk in Summervyne',[43] while Imbolc is described as 'a day for feasting and celebrating the upcoming spring'.[44]

Neff is clearly aware of the potential of festivals from different traditions to serve as loci of the supernatural, especially within the fantasy genre, where strict rules are needed to limit the temptation of solving every problem through random magic.[45] Interestingly, the one Irish festival not used in *The Tapestry* is Lughnasadh. When I interviewed Neff last year, I said that I had expected the final episode in Max's heroic journey to occur during Lughnasadh, rather than Midsummer. Neff explained:

> As far as Max's departure date is concerned, I chose Midsummer because it's an occasion that is commonly associated with faeries and magic. In retrospect, Lughnasadh — although less well known — would have been particularly fitting for the son of Lugh Lámhfhada.[46]

This comment is, for me, a reminder of the caveat with any study such as this one: writing fantasy literature isn't the same as writing a research paper on 'Celtic' religion or folklore. At the end of the day, artistic decisions are mostly based on aesthetic considerations rather than a concern for authenticity or evidence-based research. Nevertheless, by creatively reshaping their own, individual versions of the 'Celtic' past, each of the fantasy authors examined in this essay (and in my monograph) feed into the cultural processes that inform popular perceptions of 'Celticity'. In the case of the four 'Celtic' quarter-days, or 'fire festivals', and especially Samhain/Halloween, they contribute to wider popular beliefs about 'pagan' survivals in modern culture.

Dimitra Fimi

Notes

1. Thomas Kinsella (trans.), *The Tain* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 27.
2. The reference to 'Brón Trogain' in *Tochmarc Emire* is unusual; most other medieval Irish texts use 'Lughnasadh' for this fourth festival.
3. Stephen Roud, *The English Year: A Month-By-Month Guide to the Nation's Customs and Festivals, from May Day to Mischief Night* (Penguin, 2008), 439-40; Robert A. Davis, 'Escaping Through Flames: Halloween as a Christian Festival', in M. Foley and H. O'Donnell (eds), *Trick or Treat: Halloween in a Globalising World* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 28-44, 29.
4. Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 362.
5. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*", in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111.
6. The feast of All Saints is also known as All Hallows' Day, or Hallowmas, so All Hallows Eve became contracted as Hallowe'en.

7. Davis, 'Halloween as a Christian Festival', 30-1; Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, 363-4.
8. Davis, 'Halloween as a Christian Festival', 31-2; Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, 364.
9. Davis, 'Halloween as a Christian Festival', 32.
10. Davis, 'Halloween as a Christian Festival', 29-30; Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, 363.
11. Antone Minard, 'Coligny calendar', in John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. III (ABC-Clio, 2006), 463-5.
12. Dimitra Fimi, *Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy: Idealization, Identity, Ideology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 7-9.
13. For an overview see Fimi, *Celtic Myth*, 9-12.
14. E.g. in the tale of 'Culhwch ac Olwen', Gwyn son of Nudd and Gwythyr son of Greidol fight for the maiden Creiddylad every May Day until Judgement Day.
15. Davis, 'Halloween as a Christian Festival', 30.
16. Fimi, *Celtic Myth*.
17. Marion Löffler, 'Celticism', in John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. III (ABC-Clio, 2006), 387.
18. Joep Leerssen, 'Celticism', in Terrence Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Rodopi, 1996), 1-20.
19. Mary Tannen, *The Wizard Children of Finn* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 48.
20. Tannen, *The Wizard Children of Finn*, 77.
21. Tannen, *The Wizard Children of Finn*, 46-7.
22. See, for example, Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx* (Clarendon Press, 1901), 308-9; F. Marian Mcneil, *The Silver Bough*, vol. 2: A Calendar of Scottish National Festivals: Candlemass to Harvest Home (MacLellan, 1959), 63.
23. Tannen, *The Wizard Children of Finn*, 170-1, emphasis added.
24. Mary Tannen, *The Lost Legend of Finn* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 7.
25. Jenny Nimmo, *The Snow Spider*, *The Snow Spider Trilogy* (Egmont, 2003), 13.
26. Nimmo, *The Snow Spider*, 48-9.
27. Nimmo, *The Snow Spider*, 14.
28. Nimmo, *The Snow Spider*, 456-7.
29. Davis, 'Halloween as a Christian Festival', 33.
30. Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun*, 366, 408.
31 Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Clarendon Press, 1921), 109.
32. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, 3rd edn (Faber and Faber, 1952), 24, 103, 301.
33. Susan Cooper, *Interview*, available at http://www.thelostland.com/about/interview.html (accessed March 2017).
34. Ibid.
35. Susan Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising: The Complete Sequence* (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2010), 417-18, emphasis added.
36. In fact, Cooper wanted *Fire on the Mountain* as the title of this fourth book in the series, but had to scrap this idea because the title had already been used recently for a collection of Ethiopian folktales (see Fimi, *Celtic Myth*, 255).
37. Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising*, 620.
38. Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising*, 660-1, emphasis in the original.
39. Marie Trevelyan, *Folk-lore and Folk-stories of Wales* (E. Stock, 1909), 254.
40. Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising*, 876.
41. Henry H. Neff, *The Fiend and the Forge* (Random House, 2010), 200.
42. Henry H. Neff, *The Red Winter* (Random House [Kindle edition], 2014), chap. 5.
43. Ibid.
44. Neff, *The Red Winter*, chap. 24.
45. See Dimitra Fimi, 'An Interview with Henry Neff: Celtic Myth, Liminal Times and Fantastic Creatures', http://dimitrafimi.com/an-interview-with-henry-neff-celtic-myth-liminal-times-and-fantastic-creatures/ (2016; accessed March 2017)
46. Cited in Fimi, 'An Interview with Henry Neff'.