



THE ORIGINS OF THE JACK-O'-LANTERN



Carved root vegetables – such as turnips and rutabagas – have been associated with harvest festivals and the cult of the dead since ancient times in Celtic culture, notably the Irish. Irish immigrants exported to America the tradition of carving monstrous faces into turnips on All Hallows' Eve in the 1880s; there and then, the European turnip got replaced by local squash plants like pumpkins. Even though the plant was different, the purpose it served stayed the same: an ember was placed inside the carved face to ward off evil spirits and protect the household.

The belief that the spirits of dead people roam the earth on the night between October 31st and November 1st dates back to the very origins of Samhain, the Gaelic festival celebrating the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the darker half of the year. Its connections with the cult of the dead is self-evident: once the harvest is over and the long days are left behind, what awaits us is a long winter night of barren nature and scarce food. This belief gave rise to a legend as early as the Middle Ages – the legend of Stingy Jack, a Cornish and English folklore hero connected to the origins of the Jack-o'-lantern (as the name itself suggests). The legend goes as follows.

Stingy Jack was an old drunkard who enjoyed playing tricks on everyone – so much so that, one day, he tricked the Devil himself into climbing up an apple tree and, once he was there, hurriedly placed crosses around the trunk of the tree to entrap him. After he had entrapped the Devil, Jack made him promise not to take his soul when he died – only after the Devil had acquiesced the request did Jack remove the crosses and set the Devil free. Many years later, Jack died; so, he went to the gates of Heaven, but Saint Peter told him he was mean and cruel, and didn't have a right to access the gate. Jack then turned to hell for admission there, but the Devil kept his promise and did not allow him in. Thereafter, Jack has been wandering in the dark netherworld between Heaven and Hell, a restless soul to which peace will never be granted. The Devil himself took pity on him and tossed him an ember from the flames of Hell so that Stingy Jack may light his way; Jack stored it inside his favorite food, a turnip, and has been roaming the earth with this lantern ever since.