

North Mayo Heritage Centre **NEWSLETTER**



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Tel: 096 31809

www.northmayogenealogy.com

Email: nmhmanager@gmail.com

Email: northmayo@gmail.com



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St. John's Night and Midsummer Customs and Beliefs

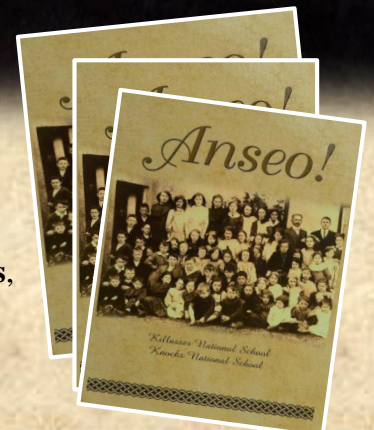
The 23rd of June, the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist was often called Midsummer as it fell close to the summer solstice, the longest day of the year ...

read about midsummer customs and beliefs on page 2.

Book of the Week **ANSEO**

This book is a record in picture and story of two schools, **Killasser and Knocks**, and is dedicated to the people who passed through their doors.

Buy from our ebay Bookstore or from Reception €15 (+postage)



The North Mayo Heritage Centre is dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich heritage of the region

Midsummer Customs and Beliefs

The 23rd of June is also known as Bonfire Night (*Oíche an teine chnámh*), when both small family and large communal bonfires were lit at sunset in celebration. They were commonly held at crossroads, town squares or on hillsides.

These Midsummer fires were considered to hold potent powers. In places, including Belmullet in County Mayo, sods of turf were thrown to the sky in the belief that the air would be purified through the motion of these smouldering sods. Other customs performed throughout Ireland included: Jumping over and through flames was believed to bring health, long life and protect the jumpers from accidents, ailments, disease and the effects of the evil eye.

All crops grown on the farm, corn, flax, potatoes, vegetables and fruit trees, were shielded from harm by the fire as it was considered to increase the yield, guarantee a good harvest, and keep away blight, rust, and other plant diseases.

Where possible the fire was lit where the smoke would be carried by the wind over the more important crops.

On Irish farms, the milking cattle were not only the most valuable of the livestock, but were also suspected of being the most prone to harm both by natural ailment and by magical influence.

Therefore, the protection of the Midsummer fire was extended to these animals in particular. Smoke was blown over them, or the embers or ashes from the fire were placed in the pasture fields or the dairy to bring good luck and keep milk and butter safe from evil magic.

Occasionally, charred sticks were used to mark a cross on the dairy door, the churns and firkins to act as a safeguard. The dwelling house and its inhabitants also joined in the protection of the fire. It was customary to bring back embers or charred fragments of turf or wood from the communal bonfire and put these on the domestic fire.

Some people kept the cinders or ashes in the house for luck, whilst others kept them to ensure a peaceful death to ailing old people. The ashes also had curative properties for humans. Mixed with water they were drunk for internal disorders and used to cleanse, bathe wounds, sores, and swellings.

The gathering of herbs such as St John's Wort, foxglove, figwort and mugwort were used for medicinal purposes, and many believed that they must be picked on Midsummer. Yarrow was used by girls at this time in marriage divination too. They plucked the plant whilst reciting poems and placed it under their pillows so they could dream of their future husbands.

Resources:

"The Year in Ireland – Irish Calendar Customs" by Kevin Danaher
www.irishtimes.com
www.museum.ie

Who was St. John?

St. John the Baptist was born near Judea, Palestine. He died between 28 and 36 CE. His feast day is June 24th. He was a Jewish prophet and baptised those who repented. He was son of Zechariah, a Jewish priest, and his wife Elizabeth. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

www.Britannica.com

A brief history of the surname

BROGAN

Descendants of the northern Connacht sept, O Brogain, who settled in Co. Mayo and in Co. Donegal. There has been a general dispersal, although the name is still well represented in those two counties.¹

Variants include O'Brogain, 'Brogane, O'Brogan, Brogan; 'descendant of Brogan' (diminutive of *brog*, sorrowful); an old surname in Mayo and Donegal; still common in both counties. The O'Brogans of Mayo anciently possessed estates at Breachmaigh and Cnoc Spealain, in the barony of Carra.²

Variants (O) Brogan, O'Brogain: A sept of the Ui Fiachrach located in north Connacht. The origin of the name is uncertain. Woulfe's derivation from *bron*, sorrow, is not accepted by Celtic Scholars.³

Of the 33 Brogan births in Ireland in 1890, 5 were in Leinster, 2 occurred in Munster, 16 occurred in Ulster, while 10 were in Connacht.

¹ 'Irish Family Names' by Brian De Breffny.

² 'Irish Names and Surnames' by Rev. Patrick Woulfe, 1993

³ 'The Surnames of Ireland' by MacLysaght

A brief history of ACHILL BEG

(Eacuil Bheag, little Achill)

This island is situated at the south-east extremity of Achill Island, and in the south-west of the parish. It contains 330 acres, 3 roods, 19 perches*.

The property of Sir Richard O'Donnel, Newport. Let to tenants by a lease of lives at £64 yearly for the townland. There are 25 families living on it. The cattle all graze in common on the uncultivated ground, their owners paying a sum proportionate to the number they respectively have grazing. The arable land is held in divisions respectively.

The island is in general very rocky, only 80 acres being capable of cultivation; the remainder is rocky mountain. There is a Coast Guard Station on the east of the island. In the south is a Triangulation Station, 360 feet above sea level.

* There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.
 Extract from Ordnance Survey Namebooks of 1838