



St John's Eve



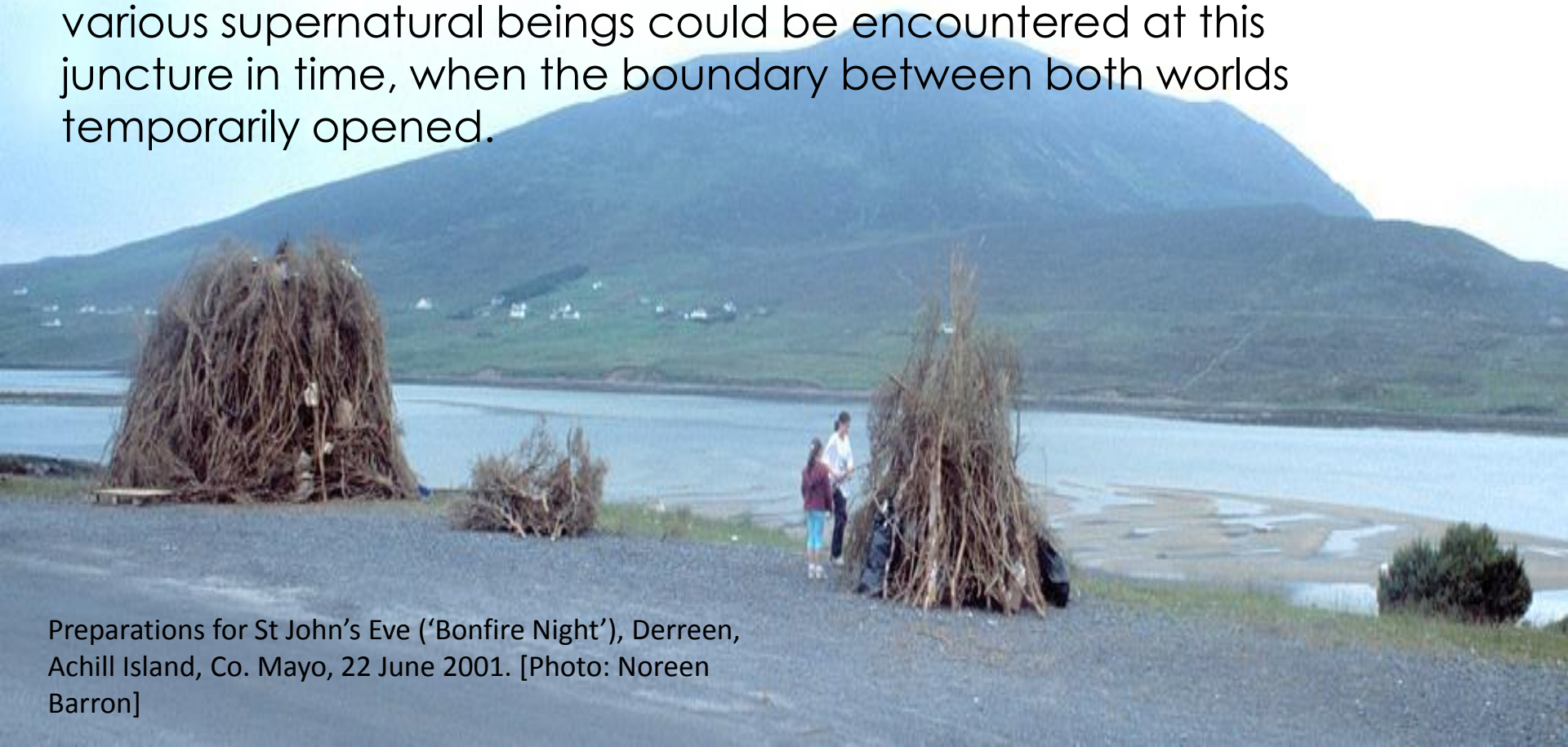


St John's Eve

The midsummer festival associated with the feast of St John the Baptist on the 24th June was once of great importance in many countries. The practice of kindling a ceremonial bonfire on the eve of the saint's feast day has persisted longest in Ireland and Scandinavia. The festival occurs at a time in the farming year when crops are at an advanced stage of growth and milk production at its highest. There is some evidence to suggest that certain features of the festival in Ireland are borrowings from the May Day (Bealtaine) festival.

St John's Eve Bonfires, seen from Glengad Hill, Erris, Co. Mayo, 23 June 2001. [Photo: Noreen Barron]

In the past, a number of rituals linked to farming and the home were associated with the bonfire. This included driving cattle through the embers of the bonfire, or between two bonfires. Embers from the bonfire were carried through the fields and scattered among the crops, as well as being carried around the dwelling-house and byre. Such practices may be considered purification rites. As was believed to happen at May Eve, various supernatural beings could be encountered at this juncture in time, when the boundary between both worlds temporarily opened.



Preparations for St John's Eve ('Bonfire Night'), Derreen, Achill Island, Co. Mayo, 22 June 2001. [Photo: Noreen Barron]

Bonfires were lit chiefly by individual families, but communal bonfires were also popular. Communal bonfires were important occasions for collective feasting, sport and propitious times for lovers to perform divination rites.



'St John's fireplace',
St John's Eve,
Athea, Co. Limerick,
23 June 1960. [Photo:
Caoimhín Ó Danachair]



Preparations for St John's Eve ('Bonfire Night'),
St Patrick's Estate,
Ballina, Co. Mayo, 21 June 2001.
[Photo: Noreen Barron]

The larger bonfires were (and continue to be) located in prominent places such as hilltops – from where they are visible for miles around – at natural meeting places such as crossroads, or in convenient open spaces in the towns. Where once it was widely celebrated in Ireland, today the tradition of midsummer bonfires is strongest in Connacht, and in western counties generally.

As night fell we lit ours and you'd think the sky was in a blaze with all the bonfires lit in Leitrim and Longford. Then we started to cheer and were answered from bonfires anear and far. Now and again we renewed the fire - the childer clapped hands. Songs were sung and dancing was in swing until twelve o'clock. As the fire was nearly burnt out we drove our cattle through it. Then everyone took a piece of burning cipín in his hand and ran round his crops praying that God might prosper them and bring us all safe to another bonfire night. ([Moyne Co. Longford](#))



St John's Eve Bonfire,
Mote Demesne, Parish of Kilmaine, Co. Roscommon,
23 June 2001.

[Photo: Bairbre Ní Fhloinn]

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