North Mayo Heritage Centre
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St. Martin's Eve
(Martinmas, November 10th)

We examine the traditions associated with this feast

Image: *Saint Martin Dividing his Cloak* by Jean Fouquet (galleryix.org)

ST. MARTIN'S MARKET IN BALLYHAUNIS.

St. Martin's market on Tuesday in Ballyhaunis was not as large as that of previous years. Geese averaged from 4/- to 5/-. Ducks fetched from 2/- to 2/6, while turkeys changed ownership as cheaply as 7d. per lb. Potatoes were about 4/- per cwt.; oats 8/- to 10/6 per cwt.

The Western People, the 08-Nov-1930

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TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

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The North Mayo Heritage Centre

Rialtas na hÉireann Government of Ireland

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FEATURE ARTICLE

St. Martin's Eve (Martinmas, November 10th).

Our ancestors observed several religious feast days throughout the year many of which have faded from modern life. Centuries ago, these feast days offered a welcome break from the back breaking routine of subsistence farming.

St. Martin's Eve had many traditions connected with it, many involving blood to commemorate the Saint's martyrdom (more on that later). Every family ritually killed an animal or bird for this feast. In large towns, such as Ballina, there was a St. Martin's Market, where those who kept no fowl could buy their own. The animal was fed specially in preparation for the day. The head of the household carried out the killing, and the blood sprinkled in the four corners of the house. In a parallel with the Passover story from the Gospel, doorposts were sometimes daubed in the blood too.

This was supposed to protect the household from misfortune for the coming year. If mild weather followed the feast day, it was known as St. Martin's summer.

Sometimes a piece of cloth dipped in the blood was used as a cure for aches and pains. This blood could never be used to make puddings. This was significant because it was the only time when such a stipulation applied. Puddings were a crucial source of nutrition in previous centuries in rural Ireland. If a bird was killed, its feathers were made into quills and given to children. If an animal fell sick on the feast day, a few drops of its blood was shed in honour of St. Martin and that animal was never sold or slaughtered.

The entire family assembled for the meal on St. Martin's Eve. The tradition for all of this bloodletting was that St. Martin of Tours (in France) had been martyred.

In fact, Martin died in his bed of natural causes and holds the distinction in the Catholic faith as the first non-martyr to be canonised.



Reliquary for the head of St. Martin, silver and copper, part gilt, from the church at Soudeilles in central France, late 14th century, Louvre *(Image from Wikipedia).*

Market scenes such as this, from Charlestown, were common sights in the run up to St. Martin's Eve.
(Image from *A Dominant Church* by Liam Swords (Columba Press)).



Legends of St. Martin

In 371 Martin was acclaimed Bishop of Tours, but reluctantly so. So reluctantly in fact, that he had to be tricked into coming to Tours, on the pretence that a sick person required ministry from a clergyman. One legend says that Martin hid in a barn full of geese in order to avoid being consecrated bishop, but the cackling of the fowl gave away his hiding place. Whether this is a foundation of the tradition of eating fowl on St. Martin's Eve is not known.

Martin's father was an army officer, which meant Martin was obliged to join an auxiliary unit in his teens. He was stationed at Amiens when he met a beggar dressed in rags. Martin divided his own cloak in two to provide clothing for the man. That night, Martin had a dream in which Jesus appeared wearing Martin's half cloak. Jesus said: 'Martin, who is still but a catechumen, clothed me with this robe'.

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