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Opening extract from

Fireside Stories Tales For a Winter's Eve

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Fireside Stories

Tales for a Winter's Eve

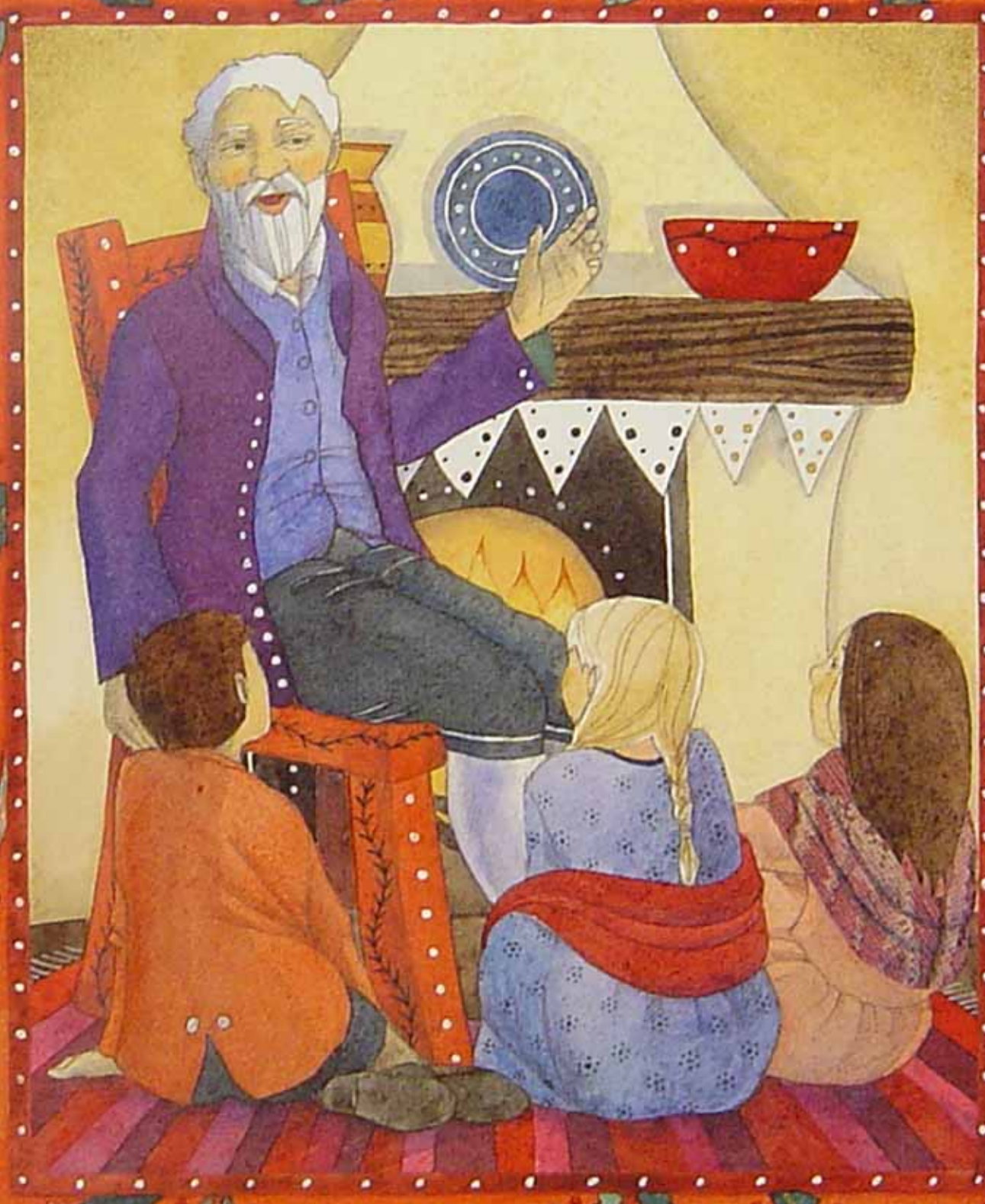


Retold by Caitlín Matthews

Illustrated by Helen Cann

Barefoot Books
Celebrating Art and Story





By The Fireside

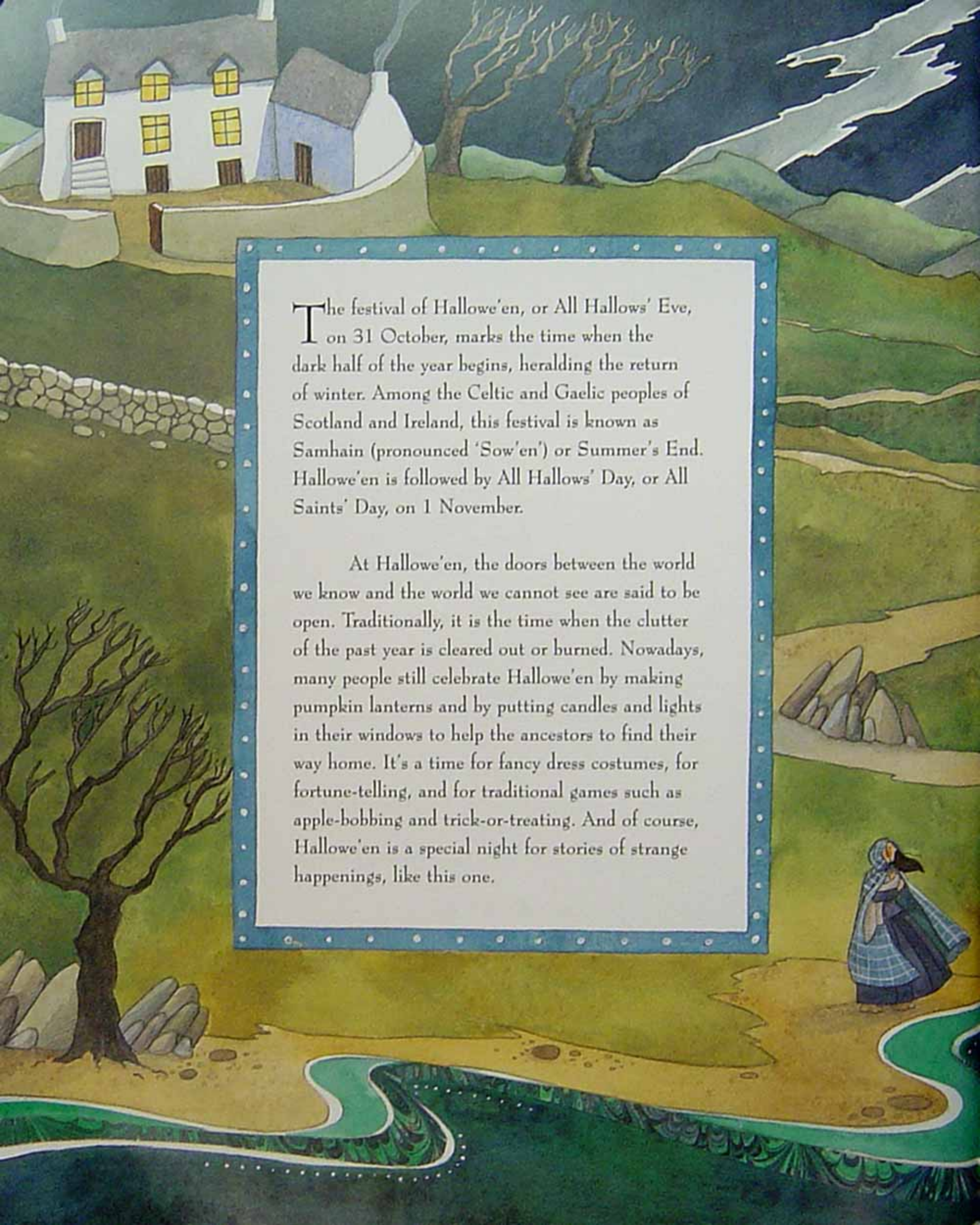


When the nights grow long and the days grow short, when summer is a distant memory and the cold and darkness of winter an ever-present reality, it is good to sit by the fireside and tell stories. The fire has a special magic. As we peer deeply into the red, glowing embers, we remember the stories from before our own time. We see castles and forests, the dens of witches and monsters, the path of the hero over rivers of flame, and smouldering caves where gold and jewels are hidden.

Stories make us feel safe, stories give us wisdom. And there is no better time for stories than in the winter. In some cultures, it is considered unlucky to tell stories about snow and winter at another time of year, or when there is no

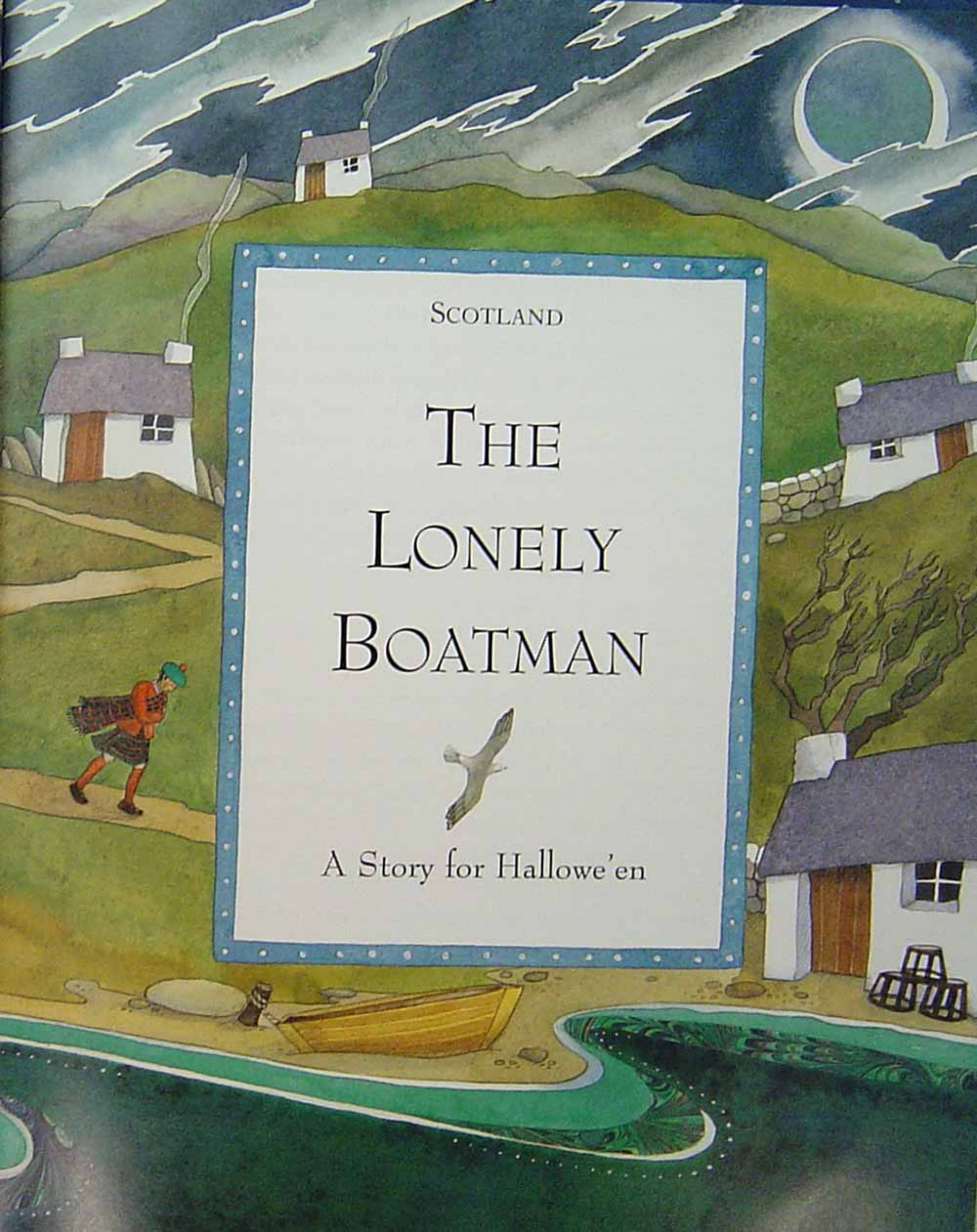
snow upon the ground. Why is this? Is it because there is a special blessing upon the winter months when life can be so hard for plants, trees, animals and humans alike? Or is it because this special time of ice and snow is where we find our greatest strength and wisdom?

Midwinter is the time of gathering together because, as the sun grows fainter and lower in the sky, so the days grow shorter and the nights longer. Even in the distant days of our ancestors, it was a time of gifts and of meetings with friends and family long parted. From our ancestors, all those mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, we have learned how to make the year turn once more. We gather together at the time of greatest darkness and greatest need to make a brave show of our hopes and longings. Instead of complaining about the cold, we bring in the evergreens of pine, holly and mistletoe to remind us of the far-off spring. Instead of fasting on a tiny handful of crumbs, we make a feast of the best food and drink we have in the house. Instead of sitting in the dark, we build up the fire and put up decorations that shine in the dancing light.



The festival of Hallowe'en, or All Hallows' Eve, on 31 October, marks the time when the dark half of the year begins, heralding the return of winter. Among the Celtic and Gaelic peoples of Scotland and Ireland, this festival is known as Samhain (pronounced 'Sow'en') or Summer's End. Hallowe'en is followed by All Hallows' Day, or All Saints' Day, on 1 November.

At Hallowe'en, the doors between the world we know and the world we cannot see are said to be open. Traditionally, it is the time when the clutter of the past year is cleared out or burned. Nowadays, many people still celebrate Hallowe'en by making pumpkin lanterns and by putting candles and lights in their windows to help the ancestors to find their way home. It's a time for fancy dress costumes, for fortune-telling, and for traditional games such as apple-bobbing and trick-or-treating. And of course, Hallowe'en is a special night for stories of strange happenings, like this one.


SCOTLAND
THE LONELY BOATMAN
A Story for Hallowe'en