

A Transatlantic Halloween

- Rebecca Twaalfhoven

Estimated spending of American consumers on Halloween decorations, candy, and costumes is approximately \$6.9 billion. In the United Kingdom, the estimate is roughly \$485 million. In terms of the proportion of Americans buying special decorations for their homes, Halloween is second only to Christmas, with an estimated \$1.96 billion spent on specific decorations. Statistics aside, the United States places much greater cultural significance on Halloween than the United Kingdom, among other countries. Perhaps the proximity of the British holiday on November 5 known as Bonfire Night – a national holiday commemorating the historical failed attempt at blowing up the House of Parliament – plays a part in the disparity of celebrations compared to the U.S. Whatever the cause, one thing is certain: Americans love Halloween.

Although Halloween originated from a Christian holiday to celebrate the dead, today it is celebrated in a largely secular fashion. There are aspects of the general festivities that betray the historical roots of the day – ghosts and tombstones in abundance – but generally these features are not viewed from a religious standpoint, as is true with witches. Door-to-door trick-or-treating is hugely popular, and it is customary for residents to provide some form of treat for the wandering children. Other traditions include haunted houses, parades, parties, and some truly amazing residential displays. An article in BBC News describes the American practice of whole-house decorations as being at the “extreme end of the Halloween spectrum,” but it is “easy to gauge how seriously the U.S. takes Halloween” based on these radical decorations.

Yet the United Kingdom has not remained unscathed by our obsession. Britons used to carve turnips to make into lanterns. Now it’s pumpkins. The British supermarket chain Waitrose has sold increasing percentages of decorations, pumpkin carving kits, and pumpkins. However, although the holiday has its roots in the U.K., Britain can no longer compete in terms of celebrations and importance. A cousin of mine in England lived in Houston, Texas for one year before moving back to England. She describes Halloween growing up as a fairly unimportant holiday – she never dressed up or went trick-or-treating. To many children in the United States, that is an almost inconceivable idea. She also mentions several classic Halloween traditions for us that many Britons do not participate in, such as house decorating and pumpkin-patch photography. During her tenure in Houston, as well as visits to Marblehead, she witnessed firsthand the spectacle of Halloween, especially relating to house decorations; one unforgettable memory is going for a walk in Marblehead and seeing “a house decorated with silver aliens all over it.” As a young mother, however, she can sense a slight shift in popularity across the Atlantic. The nursery that her young child attends is having Halloween celebrations, and a costume is in order for her son, a new custom for many parents in Britain.

In general, the popularity of Halloween in the U.K. is slowly growing, likely influenced by America. As far as spending is concerned, that, too, is growing, although yearly fluctuations depend on the state of the economy. As in other aspects of our culture, the United States seems to

have a love for exuberance; and when it comes to Halloween, compared to Britain, among other countries, we truly perform.

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