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CANADA

New Year's Eve: Edinburgh's Hogmanay

by D. Grant Black



Hogmanay Midnight Fireworks over Edinburgh Castle - VisitScotland.com

Canada prefers to stage New Year's Eve extravaganzas packed with the country's most popular musical groups and celebrities. But nothing beats the granddaddy of New Year's celebrations, Scotland's Hogmanay, in the ancestral land of five million Canadians: a four-night, pagan-originated party. Hogmanay

(pronounced hawg-mun-AY) is to Scots like me what Christmas is to the English.

Hogmanay is celebrated around Scotland yet the biggest party is held in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh, which host locals and guests for up to four nights. This spectacular event, set beneath the stunning backdrop of Edinburgh Castle, kicks off on December 30 with a torch lit procession that begins on High Street in Edinburgh's Old Town and ends at Calton Hill. Over the next two nights, 100,000 celebrants join the street parties, which run the length of the famous Princes Street and the Royal Mile, to enjoy the fireworks, live music, other entertainment – and plenty of eating and drinking (edinburghshogmanay.org).

The Midnight Fireworks ring in the New Year, an impressive, massive pyrotechnics display above Edinburgh Castle. For the last music gig of 2012, Edinburgh's Hogmanay Concert in the Gardens features Scottish headliners, Simple Minds, who will perform a set of their greatest hits in West Princes Street Gardens before they embark on a UK spring tour.

Simple Minds will be joined by The View, Scotland's most rock 'n' roll band and one of the UK's hottest indie bands of 2012. The Dundee quartet released their fourth album this year, which was not only critically acclaimed but also

stormed into the UK top ten. Concert in the Gardens 2012 will be opened by Edinburgh band Bwani Junction.



Not surprisingly, January 1 is a less robust day with activities that include concerts and other cultural events. Except for the Queensferry Loony Dook, the annual splash into the River Forth. Loony Dook, Scotland's version of Canada's Polar Bear Swim, is when participants, possibly still drunk from the night before or in need of a bracing swim to clear a hangover, splash into the icy water to celebrate the New Year in broad daylight.



Spectators welcome the brave Loony Dookers at various free vantage points along a parade route or down at the beach. Over the past 25 years, thousands of people have taken the plunge to raise thousands of pounds for charities across the UK.

Hogmanay stems from old pagan roots and many of the old customs went out with the introduction of Christianity to Scotland. Yet many have survived into the 21st century. Here are a few:



First Footing: Many traditional Scots still believe that the first person to set foot in a house after the New

Year begins sets the mood for that entire year. From this belief came the custom of "first-footing." This is when someone walks into a friend's home — preferably male and dark — just after midnight on New Year's day, carrying a gift to help bless the house for the coming year. This tradition started in Viking times when a blonde visitor usually meant trouble. Gifts in the past were often coal, salt or shortbread biscuits. Shortbread biscuits are still welcome, but, if guests bring a bottle of whisky, even better.

Auld Lang Syne: Throughout the English-speaking world, the sound most associated with New Year's Eve celebrations is the singing of "Auld Lang Syne." The lyrics, written in 1788 by the great Scottish poet Robert "Rabbie" Burns (robertburns.org), is actually a very old traditional instrumental. Now sung by millions every New Year's Eve around the Globe, few would recognize the original Scots-dialect version.

Parties: Scotland's Hogmanay, celebrated around the country, is the biggest party night of the year. From traditional music and dance, called a cèilidh (KAY-lee) in Highland Gaelic, to massive festivals in each of the major cities, Hogmanay is the one night each year that nearly everyone does something special. In gritty Glasgow, always trying to out-do the capital city, Hogmanay is only one night of Winterfest,

(glasgowloveschristmas.com) a five-week festival that includes a celebration of Christmas.

Wherever you find yourself in Scotland, Hogmanay is a good time to experience the legendary hospitality of the Scots, which only warms up over the holidays. The official Edinburgh Hogmanay site (edinburghshogmanay.org) lists all the best spots to raise a glass.

Fireballs: Singing Auld Lang Syne and hoisting your drink to a prosperous New Year is a safe, modern way to ring in the New Year. Then there are the less safe Scottish New Years customs, derived from this culture's martial origins. In Stonehaven, a small town in northeast Scotland, the townsfolk revived the Hogmanay fireballs tradition about a century ago.

Fireballs are created from wire and tar then lit on fire and swung by a chain, like a scene right out of the film *Braveheart*. A winner for this night-time version of the Highland Games, a test of strength, is decided by which crazy bastard can swing the fireball around their head for the longest time without stopping. Add alcohol, a dare, a gathered crowd and you could suddenly also witness a swirl of paramedics.

Biggar Bonfire: New York is big, but this is Biggar. For hundreds of years, the Lanarkshire

town of Biggar (pop. 2000) in southern Scotland has welcomed in the New Year with a massive bonfire in the town centre. This tradition dates back to when fire was worshipped as a purification rite to ward off evil spirits for the New Year.



Truckloads of wooden debris are dumped at the site over the weeks leading up to the event. A Hogmanay torch-lit procession winds its way through town and ends with a massive bonfire, lit at 9.30 pm by Biggar's oldest resident. To liven up the bonfire, traditional music and dancing has been added to the celebrations in recent years. Check out photos of past Biggar Bonfires (biggarbonfire.org.uk).

If you plan to attend Hogmanay, check out the official Scottish Tourism website for accommodations and more information (visitscotland.com/guide/where-to-stay).

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