

Christmas

Christmas, from 'Christ's Mass' (a name first recorded in 1038), celebrates the nativity of Christ, and was universally regarded as the most important Christian festival of the year. The calendar date of Christmas – the 25th December – appears to have become established in Rome by the mid fourth century.

The cultural importance of Christmas in Ireland can be gauged from the range of customs and practices associated with it. Its approach is marked by enthusiastic shopping and cleaning of the home. In rural districts it involved a major outing to the big town or city to purchase essential foodstuffs (such as sugar, dried fruits, spices and tea) and beverages, as well as presents for loved ones. In Gaeltacht districts this pre-Christmas shopping excursion was often referred to as *Margadh Mór na Nollag* (The Big Christmas Market). The festive period has always been marked by a general spirit of generosity and kindness – the more fortunate shared a slaughtered animal with their less well off neighbours.

Significantly, the official date agreed for Christmas in the 4th century coincides with that of the pagan festival of the 'Birthday of the Sun' in imperial Rome. This latter festival was in turn preceded by the popular pagan feast of Saturnalia, honouring the Roman god Saturn. It is surely no coincidence that the early Christian Church chose to associate the birth of Christ with pre-existing pagan midwinter festivals, adding lustre and force to what was to become a key festival in the Christian calendar.

The Tuesday before Christmas day there is the biggest market of the year and that's the reason it is called An Margadh Mór. All the women round about here keep their turkeys and geese until that day. ([Gallagh, Galway](#))

The shops in Dublin are very busy selling toys to the children and Christmas boxes to the people such as sweet cakes, boxes of Players cigarettes and other presents. The real work for the boys is getting holly and ivy to prepare the house for Christmas. There are many sweet things made such as plum-puddings and sweet cakes. ([Lucan, Dublin](#))

About a week before Xmas the younger members of the family began to clean the house. It was whitewashed inside and outside, the furniture was newly painted, pictures taken out of the frames and dusted and put back in again.

([Drumbreanlis, Leitrim](#))



Perhaps the most distinctive Christmas decoration is the lighted candle (sometimes a three-branched candle) placed in the window to guide the Holy Family, and kept alight through the twelve days of Christmas. The gaily decorated Christmas tree is a relatively recent phenomenon, originating in Germany.

On Christmas night there are candles lighting on every window as a guide and an invitation to all, who, like Mary and Joseph on the first Christmas Eve, may be wandering about unable to find quarters for the night. In this place poor wanderers are welcomed everywhere and the door is left open for they say that the Blessed Virgin goes around to every house and if the door is open, she goes in and leaves a blessing on the house for the year.

(Glencalry, Mayo)

Mrs Barton would have a very big Christmas tree. There were sweets and toys on it. She would invite a lot of children to come on Christmas day and take the sweets and toys.

(Drumfad, Donegal)

The spirit of giving at Christmas is embodied in the emergence of the Santa Claus figure, said to visit every house in the land bearing presents for the younger members of the household. He is identified with Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children, whose feast day in Western Europe falls on December 6th (December 18th in Eastern Europe).

It is a custom for every child in the district of Adare to write a letter to Santa Claus, an old man dressed in a red coat and a red cap trimmed with white fur, who is supposed to come the whole way from the North Pole to Ireland for to spend Christmas and to give presents to all the good children. On Christmas Eve night when they are going to bed they hang up their stockings; then, when in the middle of the night when they are all asleep, he comes down the chimney and fills their stockings with the presents which they asked him for.

[\(Adare, Limerick\)](#)

The children hang up their stockings on the crane over the fire. They expect Santa Claus to put toys into them that night. The chimney is usually swept on Christmas Eve so that Santa Claus won't get sooty when coming into the house. He is supposed to come down the chimney.

[\(Ballyadams, Laois\)](#)

A tradition of this locality tells us that on Christmas night long ago, two men stayed up after midnight to see if the water changes into wine, as we are told it does. The two men put their fingers into the water to taste it and their fingers fell off. At twelve o'clock on that night the animals hang their heads to adore Our Lord.

(Kilmeedy, Limerick)

On Christmas morning crowds attend the early Mass and receive Holy Communion. Greetings of a 'Happy Christmas' and 'Many Happy Returns' are heard among young and old. The custom of giving presents prevails in this district. Turkeys and geese are killed for the Christmas dinners.

(Leckanvy, Mayo)

In many towns the townspeople were serenaded in the early mornings in the lead up to Christmas Day ('Calling the Waits'), most especially on Christmas morning itself, with horn blowing, drumming and fife playing, groups of young men going from street to street and village to village wishing people well. Local sporting events, such as hurling and football challenge games and sports of various kinds as well as hunting and shooting, also took place at Christmas time.

On St Stephen's Day each year a challenge camán match took place between the men of Fanad North and Fanad South. The match took place on a large flat piece of ground at Ballymastocker Bay. This match lasted sometimes practically all day. Very often disturbances took place at the matches.

(Kerrykeel, Donegal)

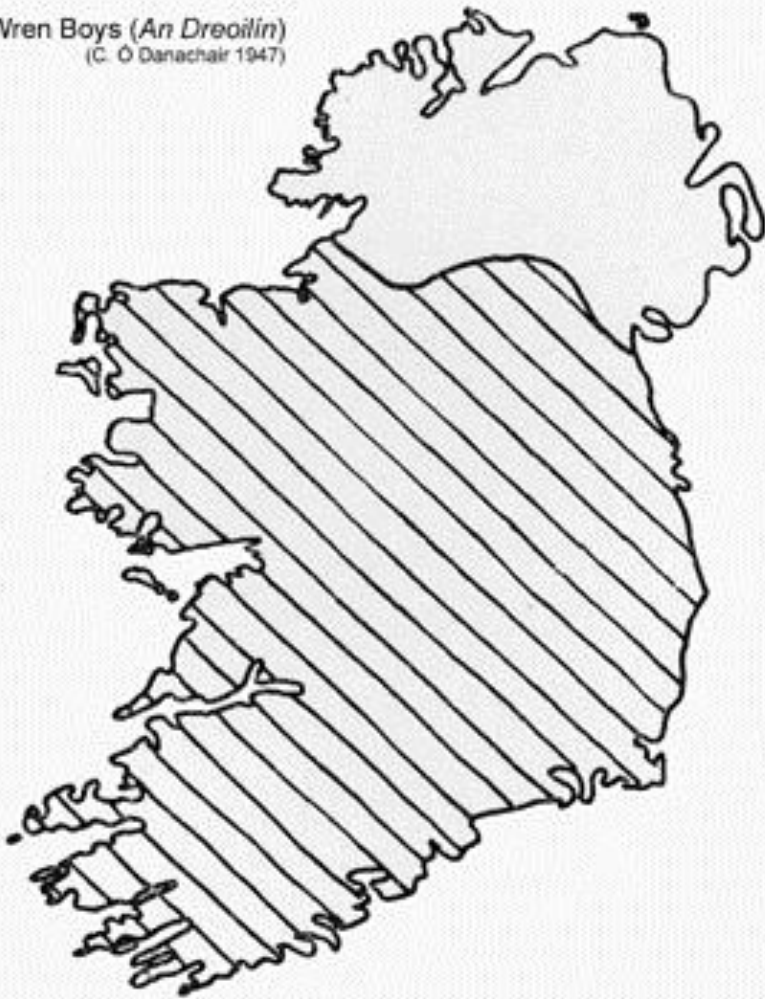
On St Stephen's Day each man takes his horn and goes out to hunt with dogs called beagles. A few men gather together and blow their horns and then a crowd of others come and bring their dogs also.

(Coraghan, Monaghan)

There was Christmas Day 'shooting' in Killydesert. A delph plate was set up and whoever broke the plate, with the lead bullet out of an old Queen Anne gun, won the games. There was usually a large crowd at these 'shootings'.

(Ednacarnan, Donegal)

Wren Boys (*An Dreoilín*)
(C. Ó Danachair 1947)



Saint Stephen's Day and Wren Boys

The 26th of December is celebrated in the Christian Church as the feast of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr to be so honoured. A notable element of the festivities on this day was the custom of house visiting, in which groups of mostly young men went from house to house reciting rhymes and performing elementary dramas accompanied by music, song and dance.

The Wren Boys tradition is to be found throughout much of Ireland, with the exception of the north east. Throughout Ulster, and to a lesser degree parts of the east coast, Wren Boys are supplanted by 'Mummers' and 'Rhymers'.

The Wren Boy custom still flourishes in many parts of the south west and western half of Ireland, and is also seeing a revival in other parts, including urban areas. But where the group was formerly comprised chiefly of young men, nowadays it features mainly younger groups of children whose movements are highly localized.



Wren boys, Co. Kerry, 1947. A group of visiting Wren Boys pause outside a house. The dead wren is carried atop the holly bush, to the left of picture. (Caoimhín Ó Danachair)

All the young boys disguise themselves with false faces and ragged clothes. They go around from house to house to hunt the wren. The leader goes first with the dead wren tied on to a stick and on arriving at every house they say:

**'The wren, the wren, the king of all birds
St Stephen's Day he was caught in the furze,
Although he is small his family is great
Rise up young ladies and give us a thrate,
And if your thrate is of the best
I hope in Heaven your soul will rest,
So up with the kettle and down with the pan
Give us an answer and we'll be gone.'**
[\(Tobercurry, Sligo\)](#)



Wren Boys, Co. Limerick, 1947. (Caoimhín Ó Danachair)



Wren boys, Co. Wicklow.
(Frank Stephens, c.1930, National Museum of Ireland)



Wren Boys and 'white mare', Ballyheige, Co. Kerry. The figure of a white mare is a feature of the Wren Boy tradition in the south west of Ireland.

On St Stephen's Day boys and girls go around from house to house collecting money. They do this for the purpose of burying the wren. When they go into a house they sing songs:

**'I hunted my wren through frost and snow
I hunted my wren through miles and more,
I hunted my wren through holly and lish
And I brought him home in a holly bush,
This is the wren as you may see
Well dressed upon a holly tree,
I brought the wren to visit ye here
I wish ye all a Happy Christmas and a Merry New Year
And when it comes it brings good cheer.'**

[\(Clashnagarrane, Kerry\)](#)

Mummers and Rhymers

In many parts of the east and north of Ireland 'mummers' or 'rhymers' take the place of Wren Boys. These groups, who perform a simple play consisting of a range of characters, varying from district to district, numbering up to a dozen players, each of whom recites a rhyme. The longest of these is the preserve of the 'Captain' or leader of the troupe who introduces two chief protagonists, often identified as representing the interests of England (Prince George) and a recognizably native Irish figure – typically Saint Patrick – who fight one another.



The Ederney Mummers, County Fermanagh (December 1999), one of the most established groups in Ireland.



Swords mummers, County Dublin, 1980 (George McClafferty)

A jester figure generally completes the long list of characters in the elementary drama, whose role it is to make fun of his audience and to beg (or demand) payment for the performance. These plays appear to have been introduced to Ireland in the 17th century, flourishing in the eastern half of the island, in many instances fusing with elements of native Gaelic folk drama. The impact of the Wren Boy tradition can be seen in the incorporation of a character in the Mummer's play known variously as 'The Wran', 'Jenny/Biddy the Wran', or similar, who also recites a rhyme.



The 'Blacktown Mummies', Aghyaran, Co. Tyrone
December 2001.

'Jack Straw' (right) is a foliage figure unique to Irish variants
of the Christmas Mummies play.



These are the Rhymes which the Mummers recite when they go round the parish at Christmas. When they go out they are dressed in white shirts, (worn over their ordinary clothing) green or red sashes, paper hats decked with long paper ribbons which hang downwards concealing their faces and other apparel according to the character they are playing.

When they came to a house the first man who is called 'Room' raps loudly on the door and shouts, 'Any admittance for Mummers?' The door is opened and 'Room' with a stick in his hand dashes in and walks round the room sweeping everything out of the way with his stick and shouting:

**'Room, Room, give me room,
Room to act, room to rhyme,
It is coming up to Christmas time,
Christmas comes but once a year,
And when it comes in it brings good cheer,
And if you don't believe what I say,
Enter the captain and he'll soon clear the way.'**

(Cill Bharainn, Dún na nGall)

On St Stephen's Night, the young men of this district start mumming. They meet at a fixed place and dress up in old clothes and put on false faces so that people will not recognise them. They bring a musical instrument with them such a French fiddle or a melodeon and they act, sing and dance in each house.

One acts as 'Prince George' and others as 'The Doctor', 'The Wren', 'Joe Butcher' and so on. Each one has a different rhyme. Nearly everybody gives them a shilling. They go round until the sixth of January and on that night they divide the proceeds equally. Sometimes if they have enough money they get up a party and dance.

([Ballyboghil, Dublin](#))

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