

CHRISTMAS IN IRELAND

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

The Christmas season in Ireland is a happy combination of modern and ancient customs that combine to bring a unique meaning to this special time of year. While Christmas shopping, decorated trees, and Santa Claus are evident everywhere, traditional customs that signify the true meaning of this holy season still remain, especially in the towns and villages where people still celebrate the holy feast as their ancestors had for generations.

On Christmas Eve, the windows of the house were decorated with garlands of holly and ivy, with candles centered in each – often in a hollowed-out turnip for support. This holly encircled candle should be familiar since the Christmas Wreath we know today is an outgrowth of an Irish tradition that began back in 16th century, when Penal Laws outlawed the Catholic religion and clergy. The Irish kept their faith though, and secretly met outlawed priests to celebrate Mass in the woods and mountains whenever they could. Mass might be celebrated once a month, or even less, but one time they never missed was Christmas. In spite of persecution, Christmas still brought hope. An alien power may have controlled the land, but they couldn't control the hearts of the Irish; they still had their customs, faith, and pride, and by God they would have their Mass.

Some of those customs, by the way, were older than the race that ruled them, originating back to pre-Christian days, like the ringing of doors and windows with holly and ivy. That came from the ancient Celtic custom of ringing the openings of a dwelling with those magical leaves to ward off the evils of winter. After all, holly and ivy remained green when all other plants died, so they were deemed immune to the killing force of winter. The custom carried into the Christian era as a decorative function, and the Brits marveled at the hope that still burned in hearts they had tried so hard to discourage. The source of that hope was their faith; and in each community, courageous families would risk fine and imprisonment to attend a mid-night Mass celebrated by an outlawed priest, and an especially brave family would host the celebration. Naturally, the house to be used was kept secret until just before the Mass was to begin, at which time a lighted candle was placed in the window to signal the faithful. Once the signal was given, candles were lit in every house window to confuse any who might try to interfere with the celebration. To the Irish, the meaning of the candle was clear, but to the stranger, it was merely an extension of the pagan custom of holiday decoration. The candle eventually became part of the custom, remaining long after its need as a signal disappeared. Today's wreath serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made by our ancestors who placed a candle in a holly-encircled window to send out the message "*The Lord is in this house tonight*"

As evening fell over the Irish hills on Christmas Eve, the candles in each window were lit casting a magical glow over the hillside like scattered jewels on Erin's cloak of evening, the largest of which were the churches dotting the landscape and beckoning the faithful to Midnight Mass. After Mass the people returned home and retired for the night leaving their doors slightly ajar all night as a symbol of hospitality insuring that no wandering couple seeking shelter would be turned away as was Joseph and Mary on that first Christmas Eve. A cup and saucer was placed on the table in each home with home-made soda bread for the wandering souls from Purgatory who were thought to come home for Christmas. On Christmas morning, the candles would be snuffed out, preferably by someone with the name of Mary.

On Christmas day came the Christmas meal - assorted vegetables and potatoes deliciously prepared to compliment the Christmas goose or turkey, followed by the Christmas pudding. After dinner, the children would play games while the adults sat about the fire, reminiscing about Christmases past until it was time to cut the Christmas cake amid much excitement. The reverent celebration of Christmas in Ireland did not conclude with the setting of the sun on Christmas day. The season would extend for a full twelve days, and any feast that fell within that period was considered a part of the overall Christmas celebration. Saint Stephen's Day, December 26, is one such feast.

In early times, the children of Ireland would begin St. Stephen's day with a hunt for a small wren which they would kill and place in a little box. Today, a box decorated with feathers simulates the victim satisfying bird-lovers as well as saving the boys the trouble of the hunt. These Wren Boys, as they are called, dress in old blouses, pajamas, flour sacks, sashes and colored ribbons in as many combinations as the imagination allows. They then set off carrying the 'victim' and a collection of musical instruments centering around the Bodhran (a one sided drum similar to a large tambourine) which is beaten with a wooden stick as they make their rounds from door to door, singing the traditional Wren Song and collecting pennies as a reward for their deed, and to 'bury the wren'. The Wren Boys are practicing a ritual that was old in western Europe before the Christian gospel was first preached in the hills of Galilee. Scholars suggest that it is of Celtic origin and that, with the coming of Christianity, its meaning was Christianized. What had the little wren done to be hunted down through history? The ancient Druidic version is that the wren was condemned to persecution by his fellow birds because, he used trickery to oust the eagle from the kingship of all birds; the story was used as a lesson to children about the virtues of honesty. The Christian version related that the wren flew from a bush betraying the hiding place of St. Stephen who was captured and martyred as a result, which explains the custom falling on St. Stephen's day, and why it is the duty of all good men to hunt and kill the little beast. The tale associated with St. Stephen adds one more measure of religious significance to the season which continues until Little Christmas on January 6, when the visit of the Magi, or the three wise men, is celebrated. Years ago in some areas of Ireland, as in many areas of western Europe, it was this day, rather than Christmas, when gifts were exchanged in remembrance of the gifts of the Magi.

Christmas is celebrated in various ways in various countries but nowhere is it more beautiful or meaningful than on God's emerald Isle where the true meaning of the season is not forgotten. Nollaig shona dhuit, (Happy Christmas to you).

