

## Irish Christmas Traditions

There are many customs and traditions surrounding Christmas in Ireland that have their roots in the distant past and are not aligned with our modern consumerist and sentimental interpretation of the holiday. The Irish as always put their own spin on the proceedings, and few if any of the traditions have anything to do with the birth of Christ. Christmas in Ireland is a season that starts anytime after December 10<sup>th</sup> and ends at the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup> of the following year.

**December 26** as we know in the United States is simply known as the day after Christmas and isn't really anything special. In Ireland it is known as St. Stephen's Day. St. Stephen is considered to be the first Christian martyr. He was stoned to death for not renouncing his faith. However, in Ireland it is also known as Lá an Dreolín or Day of the Wren. The wren is the smallest bird native to Ireland and is variously known as the King of



the Birds or the Devil Bird. Due to its drab appearance, diminutive size, and the volume of its singing it is more often heard than seen. On St. Stephen's Day a wren was hunted and killed by young men known as Wren Boys and attached to a pole or pitchfork. The Wren Boys would then go house to house asking for money to bury the unfortunate creature. Said money

was then used to buy poitín and beer. They would play instruments, sing and dance to persuade homeowners to part with a few coins. The modern iteration of this tradition thankfully does not require the wholesale slaughter of innocent birds, so an effigy is used. In some parts of the country men will dress up in elaborate straw hats to hide their identities. The hats cover the entire head – leaving the wearer with a small field of vision - sometimes coming halfway down the torso. Those who can make the hat are – at least for a brief time – highly valued members of the community. The tradition is very much alive in the west of Ireland, especially in Kerry. A large festival takes place in Dingle with a parade of Wren Boys who are judged on their costumes and performances.

There are various theories as to how this tradition started. At least two of them have warfare in common. One theory posits that Irish forces were getting ready to attack Vikings when a wren or wrens started tapping on drums and alerted the sleeping Vikings to an imminent attack. The other transposes this theory to penal times and English soldiers, but the drum pecking remains. An alternate theory that blends Irish pagan beliefs with Christianity posits that Clíodhna, a goddess of the Otherworld, seduced young men to



follow her into the sea where they drowned. A protective charm could be used to destroy her, and so her only way to escape was to transform into a wren. As punishment for her misdeeds, she was forced to become a wren every Christmas and die by human hand on Lá an Dreoilín.<sup>i</sup>

**The feast of the Epiphany** on January 6<sup>th</sup> is the last of the twelve days of Christmas. In Ireland it is known as Little Christmas or Women's Christmas. In Irish Nollaig na mBán.



Traditionally this has been a day of for the women. The men would mind the children, take care of the house, and take down the Christmas decorations while the wives and mothers went out and enjoyed themselves after their labors to ensure that the entire family enjoyed the Christmas season. In days gone by the ladies would meet at a designated house and enjoy tea with cakes and sweets. Card games would be played and gossip exchanged. Up until a decade or so ago this tradition was in great danger of dying out. It has been revived by a younger generation interested in the old ways of doing things. Today's version of Women's Christmas is a bit more elaborate and involves the ladies going to lunch or high tea and enjoying a few cocktails. The men still mind the kids and take down the decorations though!

Nollaig – Christmas

Dreolín – wren

Lá – Day

Na mBán – of women. Possessive case of Bean. Bean = Woman.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://letslearnirish.com>