

Generations past - how Christmas was celebrated in years gone by.

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As Christmas is quickly approaching and we are caught up in the rush of buying presents and putting up Christmas decorations, take a few moments to consider how generations past celebrated Christmas in Ireland.

Many of these traditions and customs are represented in the National Folklife Collection which is on display in the Museum.

The Christmas Card.

John Horsley and Henry Cole produced the first Christmas card in England in 1843. Christmas cards became useful substitutes for the Christmas letter or personal visit. Their popularity increased with developments in colour printing, the introduction of the penny post in 1840 and the development of the Christmas card in America in 1875.

Christmas Tree and Decorations.

Christmas trees were introduced to the wealthy of Britain and Ireland in the 1840s by Prince Albert. Most other homes were decorated with evergreens such as holly, ivy and laurel. Children in Ireland were told that an angel stood on each spike of the holly leaves and that on Christmas Eve no prayer was left unanswered. Christmas trees became popular throughout Ireland from the mid-20th century onwards.

The Nativity.

Many believe that the first crib was created by St Francis of Assisi, to depict the birth of Christ. Most families in Ireland had a crib, and the children would collect moss to decorate it. The Baby Jesus would not be placed in the crib until Christmas Morning.

Christmas Eve.

On Christmas Eve many people in Ireland attended confession and midnight Mass. Following Mass many ate a supper of saltling (white fish), potatoes and onion sauce. After the Rosary was said, children were given treats, and the Christmas log (a symbol of light) was lit. In some homes, a dish of water was left on the windowsill. It was believed that the Holy Family would bless it as they passed by, giving it curative properties. Three places were also set at the table for the Holy Family.

Many families would light candles for relatives who had died that year and doors were left open to welcome the spirit of the deceased family members into the home.

Christmas Day.

Preparations for Christmas Day included a thorough cleaning of the house and farmyard and stocking up on special purchases of seasonal foods and other treats. After attending religious services on Christmas Day, the men played sports while the women cooked a special meal, and the children enjoyed the toys they had received as Christmas gifts. On Christmas night a candle is left lighting on the table. It is believed that the Blessed Virgin passes every door on Christmas Night and by having a candle lighting it brings great blessings to the family during the New Year.

- P. J. O'Sullivan, Annascaul, Co. Kerry, 1941 [Department of Irish Folklore, U.C.D. Ms. 782:257]

St. Stephen's Day.

Wren Boys.

On December 26, St. Stephen's Day, the 'Wren Boys' paraded the body of a small bird from house to house. Dressed in disguise, they carried the wren in a small, decorated box. At each home they asked for money to 'bury the Wren'. In return they entertained the household with their songs and jokes. The money collected was usually spent a few days later on a 'Wren Party'.

Up with the kettle and down with the pan: Give us some money to bury the wren.

Mummers.

Mummers were actors who, over the twelve days of Christmas, performed an ancient form of theatre in verse. The main characters in the performance were two battling heroes, and a doctor who revives the one that falls. This tradition continues today in some part of the country, particularly in the north of the country.

Women's Christmas 6th January – Nollaig na mBan.

The Feast of the Epiphany is a Christian festival celebrating the visit of the Three Wise Men to Baby Jesus. It is a holy day of obligation in Ireland. It is also popularly known as Twelfth Night, and it is considered unlucky to remove Christmas decorations before this date. In Ireland it is also known as 'Nollaig na mBan', 'Women's Christmas', as it is traditional for the men to cook and the women to rest.

Article by Clodagh Doyle, Curator, Irish Folklife Division National Museum of Ireland.