



The **Omaha Pipes and Drums**
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a Celtic tradition since 1970



Wren day (Irish: *Lá an Dreoilín*) celebrated on 26 December, St. Stephen's Day. The tradition consists of "hunting" a fake wren, and putting it on top of a decorated pole. Then the crowds of *mummers* or *strawboys* celebrate the Wren (also pronounced as the *Wran*) by dressing up in masks, straw suits and colorful motley clothing and, accompanied by traditional céilí music bands, parade through the towns and villages.

Some theorize that the Wren celebration has descended from Celtic mythology. Ultimately, the origin may be a Samhain or midwinter sacrifice and/or celebration, as Celtic mythology considered the Wren a symbol of the past year (the European wren is known for its habit of singing even in mid-winter, and sometimes explicitly called "Winter Wren").

The tradition may also have been influenced by Scandinavian settlers during the Viking invasions of the 8th-10th Centuries. Various associated legends exist, such as a Wren being responsible for betraying Irish soldiers who fought the Viking invaders by beating its wings on their shields, in the late first and early second millennia, and for betraying the Christian martyr Saint Stephen, after whom the day is named.



Christmas in Scotland and Ireland

Prior to the Reformation of 1560, Christmas in Scotland, then called Yule (alternative spellings include Yhoill, Yuil, ʒule and ʒoull; see Yogh), was celebrated in a similar fashion to the rest of Catholic Europe. Calderwood recorded that in 1545, a few months before his murder, Cardinal Beaton had "*passed over the Christmase dayes with games and feasting*". However, the Reformation transformed attitudes to traditional Christian feasting days, including Christmas, and led in practice to the abolition of festival days and other church holidays; the Kirk and the state being closely linked in Scotland during the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.

Christmas Day only became a public holiday in 1958, and Boxing Day in 1974. The New Year's Eve festivity, Hogmanay (see the January 2012 edition of OPD), was by far the largest celebration in Scotland. The gift-giving, public holidays and feasting associated with mid-winter were traditionally held between the 11th of December and 6 January. However, since the 1980s, the fading of the Church's influence and the increased influences from the rest of the UK and elsewhere, Christmas and its related festivities are now nearly on a par with Hogmanay and "Ne'erday". The capital city of Edinburgh now has a traditional German Christmas market from late November until Christmas Eve.

The placing of a lighted candle in the window of a house on Christmas Eve is still practiced today. It has a number of purposes but primarily it was a symbol of welcome to Mary and Joseph as they travelled looking for shelter. A further element of the tradition is that the candle should be lit by the youngest member of the household and only be extinguished by a girl bearing the name 'Mary'. The placing of a ring of Holly on doors originated in Ireland as Holly was one of the main plants that flourished at Christmas time and which gave the poor ample means with which to decorate their dwellings.

The traditional Irish Christmas dinner consists of turkey or goose and ham with a selection of vegetables and roast potatoes. In Cork and some surrounding areas, Spiced beef is traditionally eaten as part of the Christmas dinner. Dessert is very rich with a selection of Christmas pudding, (sometimes served with brandy being set alight and poured over it) Christmas cake, yule log and mince pies with equally rich sauces such as brandy butter.

Santa Claus, *Daidí na Nollag* (Daddy of Christmas) in Irish, is known in Ireland as *Santy* or *Santa*. He brings presents to children in Ireland, which are opened on Christmas morning. It is traditional to leave a mince pie and a bottle or a glass of Guinness along with a carrot for Rudolph, although in recent years Guinness has been replaced with milk and mince pies with cookies due to Americanization.

Little Christmas (*Nollaig Bheag*) is one of the traditional names in Ireland for January 6, more commonly known in the rest of the world as the Feast of the Epiphany. It is so called because under the older Julian calendar, Christmas Day celebrations fell on that day whereas under the Gregorian calendar it falls on December 25. It is the traditional end of the Christmas season and the last day of the Christmas holidays for both primary and secondary schools in Ireland.

In the Scottish Highlands the term *Little Christmas* is applied to New Year's Day, also known as *Là Challuinn*, or *Là na Bliadhna Ùire*, while Epiphany is known as *Là Féill nan Rìgh*, the feast-day of the Kings. The Transalpine Redemptorists who live on Papa Stronsay celebrate 'Little Christmas' on the twenty-fifth day of every month, except for December, when the twenty-fifth day is of course celebrated as Christmas Day.

Little Christmas is also called Women's Christmas (*Nollaig na mBan*), and sometimes *Women's Little Christmas*. The tradition, still very strong in Cork and Kerry is so called because of the Irish men taking on all the household duties for the day. Most women hold parties or go out to celebrate the day with their friends, sisters, mothers, and aunts. Bars and restaurants serve mostly women and girls on this night. Children often buy presents for their mothers and grandmothers.

Until next month,

Nollaig Shona agus Athbhliain faoi Mhaise Dhuit

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year