

Mayo

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“The wren, the wren the king of all birds
St. Stephen’s Day was caught in the furze.
Up with the kettle and down with the pan,
Give us something to honour the wren”.

Boys dress up as **WREN BOYS**

visiting houses

Athea, Co. Limerick, 26th December, 1947

*(Image: Caoimhín Ó Danachair School’s Folklore Collection
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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

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Wren Day – Lá an Dreoilín

The tradition of the Wren on St. Stephen's Day, celebrated on December 26th, is a well-known and vibrant cultural practice. This custom involves a group of merrymakers, often referred to as "Wren Boys," who dress in elaborate and very colourful costumes, sometimes adorned with masks and hats, parade through their local communities. They sing traditional songs and play musical instruments, all while carrying a decorated wren on a pole, symbolizing the capture of the bird.

Historically, the wren was associated with the Celtic festival of the winter solstice, and its killing was believed to bring bad luck. The practice of hunting the wren has evolved, and today, it often serves as a metaphor for the end of the old year and the welcoming of the new. The Wren Boys typically collect money for charity, emphasizing the communal spirit of the occasion.



In *The Journals of the Kildare Archaeological Society*, it mentions that if any of the wren boys were refused money when they visited houses, they would bury a wren (from their "wren bush") opposite the hall door into which no good luck could enter for twelve months (Danaher, 1972:247)

Originally the 'Wren Boys' carried a dead wren or wrens with them on their escapades. The wren is no longer part of modern celebrations which are a much more animal friendly affair.

In Britain the 26th of December is commonly referred to as Boxing Day, as this was the day servants and tradesmen would traditionally receive gifts known as a "Christmas Box" from their masters, employers or customers.

NEW YEAR TRADITIONS

New Year's Day is a secular feast, and was not really observed in Ireland until the 18th century. A new calendar introduced in 1751 set January 1st as the start of the New Year. Before that, your ancestors began a new year on the first day of Spring. In the Irish context, this was St. Bridget's Day, February 1st.

Similar to St. Bridget's Day, divination and portents of the future underpinned the traditions of New Year. Among these were: After midnight, the first person to enter the household should be a black haired male. This was known as the 'first footing' and was a sign of good luck.

New Year's Eve was 'Oíche na Coda Móire': the night of the big feast. Eating a very large supper ensured plentiful food for the whole year to come.

In parts of Ireland, a cake was baked and thrown against the door of the house to banish hunger.¹

In other places, the cake was pounded against the door by the woman of the house while she repeated a rhyme to banish famine.

Dust or dirty water must never be thrown out on New Year's Day; they were considered luck, and you were throwing your luck away by throwing them out.²

It was unlucky for a man to come into a house, light his pipe and walk out smoking it. Money should not be paid out on New Year's Day, you would be paying money out every day of the year that followed.³

Hansel Monday was the first Monday of the New Year. In parts of the west of Ireland, it was celebrated on New Year's Day itself. Children went from house to house and were given a small gift of money or a sweet cake. It was considered lucky to give the approaching child their gift before they asked for it.⁴

Sources:

¹ Danaher, K. 1972. *The Year in Ireland*. Mercier Press. 258-261

² *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0094, Page 265* (Patrick Dempsey, Loona More, Belcarra, Co. Mayo, 14-Jan-1937. From duchas.ie

³ *The Schools' Collection, Volume 0152, Page 413* (Seán MacGallachubar, Killacorraun, Co. Mayo. From duchas.ie

⁴ Danaher, K. 1972. *The Year in Ireland*. Mercier Press. 258-261

New Year Traditions

collected as part of the
Schools' Folklore Collection
([Dúchas.ie](http://Duchas.ie))

At dusk on New Year's Eve young girls would kneel facing the moon and say "If I see him ever I will see him now." Then they picked three grains of mud and put them into a stocking, go back home and did not speak. Then they put them into a little box under their pillow, and hoped to dream of the man they would marry.

Informant: Mrs Moran, Cartoon, Co. Mayo

On New Year's Day, it is not right to give away milk, money, or any utensil. It is not right to put out any ashes or to go a visiting, because it is said that you would be giving away the luck, if you gave away anything

Informant: Mrs. Joyce, Ballyglass, Co. Mayo

They used always watch the direction of the wind on New Year's Night because if it is from the west the Irish will have a fine year and if it is from the east the English will have a fine year and the Irish a wet year.

Informant: Pádraig Seóigneach, Ballyglass, Co. Mayo

Source: [Dúchas.ie](http://Duchas.ie)