



Hunting The Wren

It may be hoary with age and sanctioned by the priest; but this sample of foolish, meaningless, cruelty, based on a lie that only those deprived of the Word of God would believe, surely speaks to the shame of the Roman system that sanctioned it. Some of these articles refer to it as 'heart-warming' – sorry, to me it is heart sickening; a great way to encourage the young to have no compassion on the helpless, and no sense of decency and right. TC

HUNTING THE WREN

The following article and photographs are reproduced with permission from the November/December 1997 issue of "Cara", the Aer Lingus on-board magazine.

The article is written by Peter Wood, who is originally from Co. Monaghan, with photography of the Dingle Wren by Christy McNamara, who is originally from Co. Clare. Peter and Christy have collaborated on a book entitled "The Living Note: The Heartbeat of Irish Music", published by O'Brien Press and Robert Rinehart.

On St. Stephen's Day, December 26th, crowds of people take to the roads in various parts of Ireland, dressed in motley clothing, wearing masks or straw suits and accompanied by musicians – remembering a festival with antecedents that long predate Christmas. The Wren – sometimes pronounced and written, *wran* – was once common all over Ireland. In some areas, the Wrenboys are called Mummings and the festival has a strong English influence, incorporating characters like St. George.



Birds have great prominence in Irish mythology. They were seen as intermediaries, in pre-Christian times, between this world and the next. The flight patterns of birds, like the wren, were used as auguries by the Druids. Indeed, some believe, the Gaelic word for wren – *dreoilín* – derives from two words, *draoi ean*, or Druid bird.

When, according to legend, the birds held a parliament, it was



decided that whichever of them flew the highest would rule over all the others. The eagle soared higher than any, until it tired and the tiny wren emerged from its tail feathers and climbed far above it. Mysteriously, the wren has a reputation for treachery. A wren is said to have betrayed Irish soldiers fighting the Norsemen by beating its wings on their shields. The wren, too, is blamed for betraying St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. This is the usual explanation why the wren is the hunted bird on St. Stephen's day. It has also been argued that the antipathy shown towards the bird dates from early Christian opposition to the Druidic rites that



surrounded it. Today, the wren – as a feature of the event – survives only in the rhyme and in the name of the day, although, in former times, it was hunted and nailed to a pole at the head of the procession.

In West Kerry, the focal point of the Wrenboys parade is a hobby horse. A pantomime-type horse with a wooden head, snapping jaws and a body made from cloth stretched across a timber frame, it is worn on the shoulders of one of the members of the Wren – who whirls and capers at the head of the parade. The horse, for social and military reasons, was of great importance in ancient Ireland. Horses could be both lucky and unlucky, and they had strong associations with the rights to kingship and with fertility. The horse was so important that its introduction to Ireland was credited to the god Lugh. The greatest of the Celtic gods, his name occurs across the continent in placenames like Lyon and Leiden. The cult of the horse was also opposed by the early Christians.

The straw suits worn by the Wrenboys also have historical resonances, though more recent ones. In the 18th and 19th centuries, they were worn as disguises by the Whiteboys during Ireland's prolonged agrarian wars. The suit is woven in three parts: head, chest, and skirt. The straw of choice for the suits is that which comes from oats and, since there is little demand for oats, good straw is becoming increasingly difficult to find. In many cases, oats are grown specifically for the Wren.

The Wren, in common with many customs in rural Ireland, came close to extinction. From the twenties and thirties onward emigration took a great toll among those who would have taken part. There was strong clerical opposition – the money raised in the collections the Wrenboys took up went towards holding a ball in a local hotel or public house and naturally there was alcohol involved. The Church saw the Wren, as it saw the house dances that kept traditional music alive in those times, as an "occasion of sin."

That the Wren survived at all was due to the efforts of a few individuals and small groups of people working in isolation. Nowadays, the Wren is enjoying a revival. Listowel, County Kerry, holds an annual competition. The legendary Wrens of the Dingle Peninsula are the focus of intense local competition. Dublin, too, has a festival, held on Sandymount Green. Whatever its provenance (there is a similar festival in Lerwick on Shetland, and its form finds echoes across Europe in the hobby horse, and the hunting of a small



bird on one day of the year) the Wren in Ireland is not fixed in time. Like much else in Irish culture, the Wrenboys have adapted and changed. Their masks and costumes reflect change, and reflect too, perhaps, the current demonology of Irish society – long after her fall from power, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher still figures prominently in the masks worn in many a Wren.

Fundamentally though, the Wren is a local event, reflecting the communities it springs from – whether in the North of the country, or Wexford, Woodford in Galway or the west of Kerry. The Kerry writer and dramatist, Sigerson Clifford, was all his life a kind of exile in his own country from the town he loved, Cahirciveen. He's best remembered for his great ballad, *The Boys of Barr na Straide*, two lines of which formed his epitaph.

*I'll take my sleep in those green fields,
the place my life began,
Where the boys of Barr na Straide
went hunting for the wren.*

For many people in more distant exile, the 26th of December holds a special resonance – the day the whistles, fifes and drums thunder like waves, rising in crescendos to drive the dark of winter away. Pagans and Christians forgotten, all the one now. "Up Sraid Eoin! We never died a winter yet," as they say on at least one street in Dingle town.

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HUNTING THE WREN.

George Waldron, who wrote his *Description of the Isle of Man* about a century and a half ago, 'says, " On the 24th of December, towards evening, all the servants in general have a holiday ; they go not to bed all night, but ramble about till the bells ring in all the churches, which is at twelve o'clock; prayers being over, they go to hunt the wren, and after having found one of these poor birds, they kill her, and lay her on a bier with the utmost solemnity, bringing her to the parish church, and burying her with a whimsical kind of solemnity, singing dirges over her in the Manx language, which they call her knell, after which Christmas begins." This custom of " Hunting the Wren," has been a

pastime in the Isle of Man from time immemorial, and is still kept up on St. Stephen's Day, chiefly by, boys, who at early dawn sally out armed with long sticks, beating the bushes until they find one of these birds, when they commence the chase with great shoutings following it from bush to bush, and when killed it is suspended in a garland of ribbons, flowers, and evergreens. The procession then commences, carrying that "king of all birds," as the Druids called it, from house to house, soliciting contributions, and giving a feather for luck; these are considered an effectual preservative from shipwreck, and some fishermen will not yet venture out to sea without having first provided themselves with a few of these feathers to insure their safe return. The "dreadin," or wren's feathers, are considered an effectual preservative against witchcraft. It was formerly the custom in the evening to inter the naked body with great solemnity in a secluded corner of the churchyard, and conclude the evening with wrestling and all manner of sports.

The custom is not peculiar to the Isle of Man, for we find it mentioned by Sonnini in his travels, that "the inhabitants of the town of Cistat, near Marseilles, armed with sabres and pistols commence the anniversary by hunting the wren, and when captured is suspended, as though it were a heavy burden, from the middle of a long pole borne on the shoulders of two men, carried in procession through the streets, and weighed on a balance.

Crofton Croker, in his *Researches in the South of Ireland*, 1824, mentions this custom as prevailing there, and in *Hall's Ireland* (vol. i p. 23, 1841) it is also recorded, to which is added the air to the song as penned by Mr. Alexander D. Roche, as also a spirited woodcut of the wren-boys with their garland. The air is also given in Barrow's *Mona Melodies*, 1820.

Various versions of this song are to be met with, the following was taken down by me from a company of "wren-boys" in 1843:-

Hunting the Wren

Hunting The King of Birds:

A heart-warming Holiday tale of betrayal, retribution, pagan ritual sacrifices, anthropomorphic folklore, revolutionary high jinx, and Christmas Bird Counts

Contributed by Mike Busam

*The wren, the wren the king of all birds
St. Stephen's Day was caught in the firs.
Although he is little, his honor is great
Jump up me lads and give us a treat!*

All the wise Winter Wrens in the Medieval British Isles did their best to spend the day after Christmas, the feast of St. Stephen, hunkered down still and quiet, deep in their favorite hedgerow--for the "Wrenboys" were out to get them. Each year, on the morning of December 26th, a mob of boys chased the first Winter Wren they found through ditches and hedges, over hill and dale, until the bird dropped dead from

exhaustion and fright or one of the boys got close enough to deliver a good smack with a stick. Once they had their wren, the bird was stuck on a pole and paraded around town while the Wrenboys sang the Wren Song. If the people of the town knew what was good for them, when the Wrenboys appeared on their doorstep, they gave them a treat of food or drink in exchange for a feather plucked from the body of the wren.

This ritual called "Hunting the Wren" or sometimes just "The Wren," was held in honor of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. According to Irish folklore, when St. Stephen was running for his life from the mob intent on killing him, he saw a holly bush that he figured would make a perfect hiding place. Sure enough, the mob ran past the holly bush and Stephen breathed a sigh of relief. Just then, a Winter Wren began flapping his wings and calling noisily. The mob turned on its heels, found young Stephen, and made him a martyr. (Father Paul, my Junior High religion teacher, once observed that "St. Stephen was the first teenager to get stoned.")

Celtic tribes hunted the wren for centuries before the first Christian missionaries scraped the bottom of their boats on Ireland's shores. But their motivations were a little different from those of their descendents. Like many of our aspiring politicians today, the Celts were in favor of term limits for their leaders. Unlike our elected politicians, though, the Celts actually enforced term limits. Every seven years the Celtic king was ritually sacrificed at a public ceremony in order to make way for the new king. (It was easy for those in attendance to recognize the new king, even if they had never seen him: he was the guy holding the knife sticking out of his predecessor's back.) The wren, as king of the birds, was a protected creature, but on the day the king was killed, a wren would also be sacrificed and put on parade. If you couldn't get close enough to see the real sacrifice, you could at least take part in the symbolic sacrifice. As was the case with many pre-Christian rituals, The Wren was modified in order to comply with the new religious codes. Rather than celebrating the ritual sacrifice of a pagan king, the Christian Saint Stephen became the core around which The Wren practice revolved.

We have to take a couple more steps back in time--mythological time as well as historical time--in order to discover how the Celts came to hold the wren as king of the birds. According to folklore, the birds decided to hold a congress at which they would choose a king. History does not record which sub-committee came up with the election process, and the minutes have long since been lost to the ages, anyway, but it was put to a vote and agreed that the bird who could fly the highest for the longest amount of time would be crowned king. Off they went, each bird trying to out-bird the other birds. All the birds but the Eagle had soon given up, and the Eagle, too, though triumphant, finally tired and started his descent. At that very moment the Wren leapt from his hiding place in the Eagle's tail, circled up just a little bit higher than his royal raptoriness, and stole the crown. Thus the Wrenboys sing, "Although he is little, his honor is great."

People in the British Isles have gotten a lot of mileage out of The Wren myth. In a version of the story that echoes the St. Stephen myth, a band of Irish warriors sneaking up on a camp of sleeping Vikings were betrayed by a wren that beat its wings on their shields. Likewise, there are numerous versions of the song "Hunting the Wren." Since the wren is a symbol of royalty, singing The Wren song was a safe way for peasants to express their unhappiness with their king without being drawn and quartered--a very English way of dealing with those guilty of treason. In one particularly bloody version called "Cutty Wren," the wren is killed "With great guns and great cannon," carried away "On four strong men's shoulders," its wings and ribs divided up and given to the people. The revolutionary versions of the wren songs can be traced back to periods of English history marked by social unrest and peasant revolts. Often, characters such as Robin Hood are central figures. Wren songs like "Cutty Wren" are also a lot of fun to listen to if

you're in a bad mood, since malice and spite flow freely from every note.

Hunting the Wren didn't catch on in North America, despite the large number of immigrants from the British Isles, and Ireland in particular. Yet the large Christmas "side hunts" that were popular in the United States well into this century are similar in some respects to the ancient wren hunts. Teams of hunters competing for trophies slaughtered untold numbers of birds and mammals during these holiday hunts, and in 1900 Frank Chapman organized the first Audubon Christmas Bird Count in hopes that he could convince people to count birds at Christmas rather than shoot them. Today the data collected during CBCs are used by scientists to chart population trends of wintering birds. But the ancient spirit of The Wren remains with us as we break into groups and fan out into the country side, "hunt" the birds all day, then return at dusk to eat dinner and tell stories of the birds we tallied. This year, if you find the King of Birds, consider yourself lucky, and insist that the other birders in your group buy *you* the King of Beers, or at least a cup of coffee!

Following is just one version of the many different Wren songs. I think this one does a good job capturing the general spirit of The Wren myth. And while it's meant to be sung, it reads well as poetry. The next time a group of carolers arrives at your house demanding Christmas pudding and vowing "we won't go until we get some," answer them with this:

The Wren Song

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds
St. Stephen's Day was caught in the firs.
Although he is little, his honor is great
Jump up me lads and give us a treat!

We followed the wren three miles or more
Three miles or more, three miles or more;
Through hedges and ditches and heaps of snow
At six o'clock in the morning.

Rolley, Rolley, where is your nest?
It's in the bush that I love best.
It's in the bush, the holly tree
Where all the boys do follow me.

As I went out to hunt and all
I met a wren upon the wall.
Up with me wattle* and gave him a fall
And brought him here to show you all.

I have a little box under me arm
A tuppence or penny will do it no harm.
For we are the boys who come your way
To bring in the wren on St. Stephen's Day.

* A *wattle* is a stick or a bundle of sticks.

Digital Tradition Mirror

Hunting the Wren

We'll hunt the wren, says Robin to Bobin
We'll hunt the wren, says Richie the Robin
We'll hunt the wren, says Jack of the land
We'll hunt the wren says everyone

The wren, the wren is king of the birds
St. Stephen's Day he's caught in the furze
Although he is little, his family is great
We pray you, good people to give us a trate

Where, oh where?
In yonder green bush
How get him down?
With sticks and stones
How get him home?
The brewer's big cart
How'll we ate him?
With knives and forks
Who'll come to the dinner?
The king and the queen

Eyes to the blind, says Robin to Bobbin
Legs to the lame, says Richie the robin
(Pluck) to the poor, says Jack of the land
Bones to the dogs, says everyone