

Hunting the wren in Park

by Kevin Hannan

The Parkmen could not allow themselves the luxury of a rest even during Christmastide. But the most important and strenuous event in their festive activities had nothing to do with their daily work. Though the Wren's Day is still regarded as a special occasion throughout the country, in Park it had a significance all its own. The market-gardeners had little time to waste on the birds all round them during the rest of the year but for two days the wren dominated their thinking. And this was no celebration of the little bird's triumph over the hostile elements. No; for the Parkmen, at this time, the only good wren was a dead one.

So, every Christmas Day morning, men of all ages came together to hunt the wren. About twenty Lower Parkmen would meet at the Bun Ard, come rain, frost or snow. A similar number from Rhebogue and Singland would assemble at Singland Cross. All the men made sure to be well fortified against the wintry conditions. Each man armed himself with two stout wattles, especially cut for the occasion.

The quarry was one of the frailest and most inoffensive of all birds, a

miracle of symmetry and song, with its gossamer feathers arrayed in a beautiful pattern on its tiny body. This was the wren, 'the king of all birds', which was to forfeit its life on this Christian day of all days.

The charm of the little bird, with its cheerful winter warblings, was no protection against the grim, determined posse. The Parkmen treated their primeval mission with deadly seriousness. The wren must be hunted and killed on that day for tomorrow only its dead body could confirm the *bona fides* of the wren boys. The tuneful claim, "we followed the wren three miles and more..." must not be shown to be an idle one. Their fathers had hunted and killed the wren, as their fathers had done before them, back through the generations of two thousand years. As the 'perfidious' Jews were once accused of a similar treacherous act, so the wren was branded and hounded as the betrayer of St. Stephen to his persecutors. Thus

THE WREN

Amid the leafless thorn
The merry wren,
When icicles hang dripping
From the rock,
Apes her perennial lay;
Even when the flakes
Broad on her pinions fall,
She lightly flies
Athwart the shower
And sings upon the wing.

James Graham

it was ordained that this bird must always suffer on Christmas Day so that its body could be gloated over and the first martyr revenged on the saint's feastday.

With all the summer songsters long silent and only the lonesome robin to harmonise with, the wren unsuspectingly poured forth its 'thimbleful' of melody, but, on this day, the birdcall excited no thoughts of admiration or sympathy in the eager hunters: it only served to betray the wren's whereabouts and bring the wrath of the Parkmen on its head.

The itinerary of the journey over the traditional hunting-grounds never varied. The Bun Ard contingent always started off towards the 'Bottoms' remorselessly beating every hedge on the way. Moving downstream from the water meadows of the Shannon Fields, past the tail of Bealavunna, and the river draughts of Swan, Feehib and Poulahurra, the men crossed the Pike Bridge to the high ground of Athlun-



This well dressed group of wren-hunters, complete with wattles, was photographed outside the old Athlunkard Boat Club, before setting off on their day's outing in the early 1900s.

kard, before entering the broad plain of Clouncaree, with its long hedges, sloping up from Altabugga and the 'Heights and Hollows' to the 'Range' and the Bog Road. The hunt went on through Annabeg and usually came to an end at Gillogue, whence, after some seasonal refreshment, the weary, sated Lower Parkmen returned home by the easier route of Plassey Bank.

The Singland Cross group simultaneously traversed the valley of the Groody River, taking in the sloping hedges of Kilbane, only pausing to say a prayer at the holy well of St. Mary Magdalen, the patroness of the parish. The fields around the Bloodmill were usually fincombed, and the force then swept on through Towleron and 'Maags', where thirsts were often slaked and strategies reviewed. After this rest, the homeward journey was made by way of the old Singland Road.

During the hunt, ten or twelve men would line up in formation on each side of the ditch and methodically beat the bushes. At times, when wrens were scarce, the pursuit took on the appearance of a military operation, with the men deployed on the two flanks, a scouting party and a rearguard. Once the victim was 'raised', there was no let-up. "God help any wren that showed his little head," one shamefaced old Parkman recounted.

While a younger man might sometimes attempt a solo, haphazard effort in trying to make an individual kill, the exercise was, invariably, a well-ordered one. Teamwork was the rule of the day, with the word of command being given by an older, experienced leader, who saw that the time-honoured tactics were followed to the letter.

The wren's range of flight, being in proportion to its size, was never far, fast or high enough to put a distance between itself and its enemies. If it

THE WREN

*Dear tiny minstrel
Of the winter's chill
That cheers the heart
When everything is still;
From the quiet brake
Of leafless thorn
And frozen perch
Of frost-encrusted briar,
Thy warbling lay
Gives hope to everything,
When all is cold and grey,
And summer's balmy days
Have long gone by;
In the dreary twilight
Of shortening day
Thy silver notes reverbrate
From bank and brae.*

*Flitting the frozen drain
In fitful forays,
Seeking the tiny seed
Of groundsel,
Thou asketh nothing of man
Save his trust,
Which is given,
Every day but one—
The Eve of Stephen.
This is the day
When pacts are thrown away
And men of Park
Seek the frail wren
With murderous wattle
To destroy.*

*The fearsome falcon
Seeking his repast
May still the tiny heart,
But hunger is the reason
For the cruelty.
Not so the men of Park;
Their reason is to kill,
And nothing more,
Save to observe the practice
Of their fathers,
Who sought these little lives,
Each Christmas Day,
Down through the ages.*

Kevin Hannan

escaped the first barrage of flying wattles, it could only flit in short, fitful spurts along the hedge, or to an adjoining thicket. And its movements were always followed by the deadly, well-trained eyes of the Parkmen. Flushed out, again and again, amid the thunder of half-crazed yells, to run the gauntlet of the murderous wattles, the tiny creature's flights became shorter and shorter. The men relentlessly closed in on the terrified bird until it could no longer fly through sheer exhaustion. One more furious fusillade and the wren was finally released from its terrible terror. The ritual went on until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when usually two or three wrens would have been killed by each group.

The number of birds killed varied from year to year, the decisive factor being the nature of the weather in the months before Christmas. A hard, cold winter, with a lot of frost, meant that even the hardy wren would be weak and hungry from the sheer struggle for survival. After a brief flurry of low flights, the worn-out bird became completely exhausted and having been driven to a standstill, was a sitting target for the hunters. On such a day, five or six wrens would be done to death with the crashing wattles. A mild winter saw the wren in sprightly condition and difficult to corner. But the Parkmen were not easy to shake off and would be loath to give up the chase until at least one bird had been killed.

The Christmas Day outing was also fraught with some danger for the Parkmen themselves. The drains that abounded in the hunting-grounds claimed many casualties over the years, and it was not unusual to see a bedraggled hunter, soaked from the waist down, trudging his waterlogged way along the road home. Most of the men bore the scratches of briar and hawthorn on their faces and heads — the price of retrieving fallen wattles from bramble jungles. But, what matter? 'Twas Christmas Day and these trifles were soon forgotten at the festive table. The tired Parkmen were happy with their handiwork and the old tradition had been kept alive for yet another year.

On the following morning of St. Stephen's Day, one of the wrens would be dressed up in brown paper, scalloped around the dead bird, and surrounded by ivy. The men would then paint and disguise themselves in wren-boy clothes and set off from door to door 'collecting for the wren'. Even when the practice of 'collecting' was discontinued, Parkmen still hunted and killed the 'king of birds' right up to the present day.

The event is more a tribal custom than the deliberate act of annually avenging the death of St. Stephen by killing his reputed betrayer, the hapless wren.



A watercolour by Alannah Walsh of one of the last of the thatched Park houses.