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Christmas festivities
from yesteryear

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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE

How hunting the wren really took flight

IN the old days hunting the wren on Christmas day was widely practiced by schoolboys all over rural Ireland. In Park it was different: the schoolboys, like Peter Pan, never grew up and continued the annual hunt until the weight of years forced them to the sideline.

For them, the most important and strenuous event in their festive activities had nothing to do with their daily work. Through the pageantry of St Stephen's Day is still regarded as a special occasion in some parts of the country, in Park it had a significance all of its own.

The market gardeners had little time to waste on the birds all round them during 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; for the Parkmen, at this time, the only good wren was a dead one!

So, every Christmas 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 Rhebogoe and Singland would meet at Singland Cross. All were well-fortified against the wintry conditions. Each armed himself with two stout wattles, cut specially for the occasion. Such intimidating posses might be expected to be contending with a more dangerous and aggressive quarry than a tiny defenceless bird, the frailest and most inoffensive of all their king, a miracle of symmetry and song, with its gossamer feathers arrayed in beautiful pattern on its tiny body. This was the wren, the 'King of all birds,' which was to forfeit its life on this Christmas day.

The charm of the little bird, with its cheerful warblings, was no protection against the grim, determined hunters. The Parkmen treated their primeval mission with deadly seriousness. The wren must be hunted and killed on this day, for tomorrow only its dead body would

During the hunt, ten or twelve men would line up in formation on each side of a hedge and methodically beat the bushes

confirm the 'bona fides' of wren boys. The tuneful claim, "We followed the wren three miles and more" must not be known to be an idle one. Their fathers 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 as the betrayer of St Stephen to his perse-

cutors. Thus it was ordained that this bird must always suffer on Christmas Day so that its body could be gloated over and the first martyr avenged on the Saint's feast day.

With all the summer songsters long silent and only the lonesome robin to harmonise with, the wren unsuspectingly poured out its 'thimbleful' of melody, but on this day the sweet song excited no thoughts of admiration or sympathy in the eager hunters; it only served to betray the victim'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', the low lying fields stretching to the river at Lanahrone. They crossed the river at Athlunkard and on to the high ground by the river and on towards the broad plain of Clouncaree, with its long hedges stretching up from Lughshinnel and the 'Heights and hollows' towards Annaghbeg and always came to an end at Gollogue, and O'Shaughnessy's tavern (afterwards Jack Walshe's), whence, after some seasonable refreshment, the weary, sated lower Parkmen returned home by the easier route of Plassey Rank.

The Singland Contingent

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 blessed well of St. Mary Magdalene, the Patroness of the parish. The fields around the blood mill were usually fine-combed, and the force then swept on through Towlerton, and then to Maag's (now O'Shea's), where thirsts were slaked and strategies reviewed. After this rest, the homeward journey was made by the old Singland road.

During the hunt, ten or twelve men would line up in formation on each side of a hedge and methodically beat the bushes. At times when wrens were scarce, the pursuit took on both 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 sometime attempt a solo, haphazard effort in trying to make an individual kill, the exercise was invariably well ordered one. Teamwork was the rule of the day, with the order being given by an older, exper-

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Wren Boys in Athea in 1946 PICTURE: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND

64 ARCHIVE SPECIAL



The Glensharrold Wrenboys pictured hunting the wren in Carrigkerry on St Stephen's Day last year

Ancient tradition is still flying it

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enced 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 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 from sheer exhaustion. One more furious fusillade and the wren was released from its agony. The ritual went on until about four o'clock when usually three or four wrens would have been killed by each group.

The number of birds killed varied from year to year, the decisive factor being the weather leading up to Christmas. A hard, cold winter with much frost meant that even the hardy wren would be weak and hungry from the sheer struggle for survival. 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 loathed to give up the chase until at least one bird would be taken.

The Christmas day outing was also fraught with some danger for the Parkmen themselves, the flooded drains that abounded all over 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 homeward. All bore the scratches of briar and hawthorn on face and hands - the price of retrieving 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 St Stephen's morning, one of the wrens would be wrapped in a brown paper shroud, scalloped around the neck 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 to hunt and kill the wren

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's by killing his reputed betrayer - the hapless wren.

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,
Give 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 reverberate
From bank and brake.
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.



Three wren boys on the road to Athea are pictured in 1947

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