

# Nollaig Shona Daoibh



# IRISH CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

- Ireland is a predominantly Christian country and Christmas plays an important role in religious aspects of Irish life, taking the place of the pre-Christian festival on the [winter solstice](#). The earliest account of the Christian celebration of Christmas in Ireland are from 1171. The next account of a Dublin Christmas is from 1458 and focuses on religious dramas
- December 8<sup>th</sup>. The festive period begins on 8 December, where Christmas trees go up on that day, The second tradition associated with December 8th revolves around the beginning of Christmas shopping
- In the past, many people living outside of Dublin travel to the capital to do their Christmas shopping. Today the **Christmas markets in Ireland** have begun to appear. Many towns and cities across Ireland now boast their very own Yuletide Market. The most notable are the **Galway Christmas market**, the **Dublin Castle Christmas market**, the **Belfast Christmas market**, **Waterford Winterval** and **Glow Cork**.
- In modern times, *The Late Late Toy Show*, on the last Friday of November is viewed as the beginning of the Christmas festive period.
- The end of the Christmas season is January 6th, or Little Christmas
- The greeting for "Happy Christmas" in Irish is ***Nollaig Shona Duit*** [singular] or ***Nollaig Shona Daoibh*** [plural]. The literal translation of this is "Happy Christmas to you".



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- **Santa Claus**, or *Daidí na Nollag* (father of Christmas) in Irish, is known in The Republic of Ireland and Northern 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 pint of Guinness along with a carrot for Rudolph
- **Grave Sites**. It is traditional to decorate graves at Christmas with a wreath made of holly, ivy, yew, or other evergreens. It was believed that if anyone died in the period between Christmas Day and Little Christmas on 6 January, they would enter heaven immediately.
- **Big Christmas**. Christmas day was traditionally referred to as "Big Christmas" or *Nollaig Mhór* to differentiate it from Little Christmas. It was traditional in parts of Ulster for men to partake in an event called a "join", where they clubbed together to pay for food and drink, celebrating at any time in the 10 days of Christmas

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## Decorations

- **The big clean-up.** for many of our Irish ancestors, Advent (the four weeks leading up to Christmas) began with a bucket of whitewash in hand. This annual painting of outhouses was one of the most popular of rural Irish Christmas traditions. It was carried out mainly by the men folk while the women scrubbed the interiors. It dates back to pre-Christianity and is generally regarded as the ancient version of spring-cleaning, carried out prior to the Winter Solstice when daylight hours shrink to just under seven and a half hours. With the arrival of Christianity, the tradition was rebranded as a homely preparation for the arrival of Mary, Joseph and the new-born baby, Jesus
- The use of evergreen foliage such as holly was seen to represent Christ and his everlasting life, but also has pagan roots. Travelling people would sell paper decorations and "mottoes" door-to-door and at town markets from the late 19th century on. In [Munster](#), it was traditional to fashion a decoration out of holly sprigs on to a simple wooden cross. In rural homes, the byre or cow-shed, stables and other buildings for animals would be decorated to honor the role of animals in the nativity story. In parts of Ireland
- It was believed that at midnight on Christmas Eve, animals such as cows and donkeys could be heard to speak devotions in human speech. To hear a cockerel crow at midnight on Christmas Even was considered a good omen
- **Yule Log.** Irish rural homes would also procure a large log, called *bloc na Nollaig*
- **Mistletoe** was not part of traditional Irish Christmas decoration as it is not commonly found in Ireland, but, has become a feature in modern times. Some areas, such as [County Armagh](#) did have the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe
- **Christmas Trees.** Along with Great Britain, Ireland saw the introduction of [Christmas trees](#) during the reign of [Queen Victoria](#), with their prevalence increasing from the 1840s. Before this, a large branch or the top of a tree was used instead. Christmas trees officially go up on 8 December because according to Christian tradition the immaculate conception was on this date. Trees in towns and cities are erected in central locations every year along with lights.
- **Traditional Baby Jesus crib.** Typically made of wood or plaster. Traditionally the figure of the baby Jesus would not be added to the crib until Christmas morning, and the three wise men would be placed in the nativity scene on Little Christmas (Dec 25)
  - Leaving decorations up after 6 January was considered bad luck, and all the holly that had been used as decorations would be burnt
  - Local Catholic churches would often have a larger scale crib on display during the Advent period. Bringing home a few strands of straw from a church crib was thought to bring good luck, with those who lived in thatched houses adding the strands into the underside of the thatch



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- In rural areas, the local shopkeeper would give loyal patrons a "Christmas box" as a gift, which often included a Christmas candle and a Christmas jug. The Christmas jug was a china jug full of jam. The tradition of the Christmas box largely waned after the rationing during WWII, but, persists in some areas of Ireland with items such as calendars and vouchers for local businesses. While Christmas dinner was being prepared, it was customary across much of the country for men and boys to play a game of hurling. Other areas, such as in Ulster, shooting matches and hunting took place.
- **Christmas Candle.** The placing of a lighted candle in the window of a house on Christmas Eve is still practised. This is also called *Coinneal Mór na Nollag* is placed at the window to welcome people in need of shelter. Its primary purpose is to welcome Mary and Joseph. In some houses, it was traditional for the youngest child or the mother of the house to light the candle. In many parts of Ireland, including County Armagh, it was traditional to leave the door unlocked as well. In some areas of Ireland, it was customary to light 3 candles, representing the Holy Family
  - If the candle was extinguished unintentionally, this was perceived as a bad omen.
  - There are some traditions in which the candles burned at Christmas would be used for divining the future. The tradition still persists today



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- On Christmas Eve fish is traditionally eaten as a form of fasting before Christmas. In the mid 19th to 20th century, Irish families would have spent a number of weeks in the run up to Christmas "getting in the Christmas", slowly purchasing all the food and supplies needed for the holiday
- **Mass.** There have been traditionally large attendances at religious services for Christmas Day & Christmas Eve, with Midnight Mass a popular choice for Roman Catholics
  - There was also an early morning Christmas Day mass, that was believed to confer indulgences worth 20 masses. Even those who did not habitually attend mass, were generally expected to do on Christmas. It is also a time for remembering the dead in Ireland with prayers being offered for deceased at Mass.
- **Christmas Day.** The traditional Christmas dinner consisted of boiled, spiced, roast beef, a roast goose and ham with a selection of vegetables and roast potatoes. Beef remained the most popular Christmas meat in Ulster until into the 20th century, with boiled ox-head popular in Counties Armagh, Monaghan, and Tyrone. They also have round cake full of caraway seeds
  - Dessert often consisted of an array of dishes, with Christmas pudding a traditional choice. It was considered unlucky to cut the pudding before Christmas Day, and if the pudding broke during cooking the baker would be dead before next Christmas. In County Wexford a traditional dish known as "cuttlin pudding" was made on Christmas Eve. In County Donegal, pies in the shape of cradles to represent the manger were traditional



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- *St. Stephen's Day (Lá Fhéile Stiofáin), or the Day of the Wren (Lá an Dreoilín), is an occasion to commemorate the life of St Stephen, a Christian martyr*
- St Stephen is believed to be the first Christian martyr. He was stoned to death sometime around the year 33 CE. According to an Irish legend, he was betrayed by a wren while hiding from his enemies. Another legend tells of Viking raids on Ireland on St Stephen's Day sometime around the year 750 CE. Irish soldiers were approaching a Viking camp to drive out the intruders. However, a wren started eating crumbs from a drum and alerted the Vikings to the presence of the Irish soldiers.
- Hence, some people felt that wrens betrayed them and should be stoned to death, just as St Stephen was. Boys traditionally hunted a wren and threw stones at it. They tied it to a stick when it was dead and paraded it around the village. They did this to collect money for a dance or party for the whole village
- Although the custom of killing wrens on December 26 died out around 1900, St Stephen's Day is still known as the Day of the Wren, particularly in rural areas
- St Stephen's Day has been a holiday in Ireland for hundreds of years. It became a public holiday in 1871.



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## The Wren Boys

- Another legend has it that the wren revealed where Saint Stephen was hiding, resulting in him being stoned to death. The wren is therefore known as the devil's bird.
- This ancient custom is fading away in modern Ireland, but it still has a hold in Kerry, Cork and other rural parts of Ireland. It dates back to Irish mythology where birds were held in high regards.
- The tradition of the **Wren Boys** takes place on December 26th, otherwise known as 'St. Stephen's Day' and involves the hunting of a fake wren and popping it on top of a pole.
- The 'Wren Boys', dressed in straw suits and wearing masks then walk through the local town or village playing music.
- Two of the more notable Wren Day celebrations take place in Miltown in Clare and in Dingle in Kerry.

<https://youtu.be/V98ZInqQLOY?si=t5lekuaHKskVpN7c>



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## CHRISTMAS DAY VS OLD CHRISTMAS DAY

- Owing to differences in liturgical calendars, as early as the fourth century, the churches of the eastern Roman Empire were celebrating Christmas on 6 January, while those of the western Roman Empire were celebrating it on 25 December
- In October 1582, the Gregorian calendar was introduced as a correction of the Julian calendar, because the latter has too many leap years that cause it to drift out of alignment with the solar year. This has liturgical significance since calculation of the date of Easter assumes that spring Equinox in the Northern Hemisphere occurs on 21 March. To correct the accumulated error, he ordained the date be advanced by ten days. Most Roman Catholic countries adopted the new calendar immediately and Protestant countries followed suit over the following 200 years. In particular, the British Empire (including the American colonies) did so from 1752 with the Calendar (New Style) Act 1750, by which time the divergence had grown to eleven days. This meant that Christmas Day on 25 December ('New Style') was eleven days earlier than it would have been but for the Act, making "Old Christmas" [25 December ('Old Style')] happen on 5 January (NS)
  - In February 1800, the Julian calendar had another leap year, but the Gregorian did not, moving Old Christmas to 6 January (NS), which coincided with the Feast of the Epiphany.
- For this reason, in some parts of the world, the Feast of the Epiphany, which is traditionally observed on 6 January, is sometimes referred to as *Old Christmas* or *Old Christmas Day*. (Although 1900 was also not a leap year in the Gregorian calendar (and thus the Julian 25 December has since that year coincided with 7 January in the Gregorian calendar) the custom of celebrating Little Christmas on 6 January did not change.)
- In Ireland, Little Christmas (January 6<sup>th</sup>) is also called **Women's Christmas** (Irish: *Nollaig na mBan*), and sometimes *Women's Little Christmas*. The tradition, still strong in Cork and Kerry, is so called because Irish men take on household duties for the day. Goose was the traditional meat served on Women's Christmas. Some women hold parties or go out on 6 January with their friends, sisters, mothers and aunts. As a result, parties of women and girls are common in bars and restaurants on this night

