

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS IN IRELAND

"Laurels and Ivy, So Green, So Green"

By MARY MACKAY

Ireland is not like England in its celebration of Christmas; and many of our town customs, the Christmas tree and so forth, are purely Anglo-Irish, and hence of Saxon or Germanic origin. But go to the country parts of Ireland—to the West and South, jealous and tenacious of their own national customs and celebrations—and you will find the spirit of Christmas à l'Irlandaise.

There we have words and phrases lingering through centuries to tell us, with a lonely eloquence, that difference in blood should show difference in expression; and Christmas proper scarcely noticed as a feast, in favour of "Little Christmas," or Twelfth Day, the day on which the festival was observed in the Irish fashion before the change of calendar.

CUSTOMS THAT SURVIVE.

There, on St. Stephen's Day ("Boxing Day" is not known) the Wren-Boys perform their strange rites; the Christmas candles are kept burning from the twenty-fourth of December until Little Christmas night; and we are wished the season's wishes by a dark-haired man.

Holly, as a Christmas decoration, was formerly not altogether in general use in Ireland—probably because of its scarcity, and since only the almost complete anglicisation of Christmas customs brought the importation of extra decorations. Certain it is, however, that so recently as even a hundred years ago "green laurels and ivy" were cried as the standard season's greenery by the flower-women of Dublin. Certain it is, too, that at that time the Christmas candles and general "native" Irish tone, now only to be found in the west and south, was then as general in Dublin city and the eastern counties as anywhere else. Charles Dickens, with his popularising of the festival in England, is mainly responsible for the additional swamp- ing of Ireland with his old English sentiments.

THE CANDLES.

Strange as it may appear, there seems to be no definite knowledge of the origin of Christmas candles. It is a very old and purely Irish custom—that is all that is certain. Old people in the south-west say that it is in recollection of the Star of Bethlehem; but that is only supposition, and "the rumour of a doubt."

When the candles—one in each window, and on every table and prominent place in the house—are lit on Christmas Eve, custom says that it must be a man, preferably dark-haired, who will light the first; and all the others will be lit from that flame. They are supposed to be kept burning all night, though that is seldom found practicable; but it is extremely unlucky if one goes out or is quenched accidentally before its time. Then, for Christmas wishes—no one will welcome a first wish on the Day from a red-haired woman, and only less unlucky is a first wish from a red-haired man. But a dark-haired man gives luck; and the dark-haired woman is second best thing.

THE WREN-BOYS.

But perhaps the most curious of Christmas observances is that in connection with St. Stephen's Day. Scarcely has breakfast been finished when the "Wren Boys" appear, masked and beribboned and covered with green and coloured wreaths and garlands, chanting the story of the captured wren, which their leader is supposed to carry attached to the top of an ivied pole. As a matter of fact the wren is seldom, if ever, really there; but we are told that "the wren, the wren, the king of all birds, on St. Stephen's Day was caught in the furze," and asked for cake and coppers. When the latter are forthcoming, the wren-boys, generally merry little things from toddling size to about fourteen years of age, show their gratitude by the chosen among them solemnly dancing an Irish jig, after which they move off decorously in procession, breaking into a canter only when well off on the empty road to the next house. Why the wren should be chased is a disputed point. He is cunning enough, since he won his kingdom by strategy; but since the robin is loved because Christ's blood fell on his breast, and the swallow hated because of Satanic connection, I fancy the wren must have a disreputable secret history to earn such maltreatment. . . . And may we not meet a red-haired woman first thing on New Year's Day!