

Hunt the Wren

A short history of the Manx tradition for St. Stephen's Day



Culture
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Hunt the Wren is a tradition for St. Stephen's Day (26 December) which has been practised on the Isle of Man without a break since beyond written record. The tradition has undergone a number of changes over the centuries but today the custom is for groups of people to go around their local community with a decorated wren pole singing and dancing.



Origins:

Hunt the Wren was once practised across the British Isles and parts of Northern Europe, but it has long since died out in all but the Isle of Man and Ireland. It has also recently been revived in parts of England.

The custom is believed to have originated from earlier sacrificial practices. It is thought that the importance placed on receiving feathers for good luck, and the reverence traditionally maintained for the wren (referred to as the 'King of all Birds' in the Hunt the Wren song) throughout the rest of the year, support this idea.

The earliest and most common folklore story accounting for the origin of the tradition relates to an enchantress (or witch) sometimes identified as 'Tehi Tegi.' Her beauty lured the men of the Isle of Man to harm, and it was in punishment for this that she was changed into a wren to be hunted each St. Stephen's Day. A version of the tale is told by Mona Douglas:

Many years ago there came to the Island a beautiful woman of the fairy people. She went all through the land, and wherever she appeared she put such enchantment on the men, by her beauty and her wonderful attractive powers, that they one and all left their work and their homes to follow her. When she had them all collected in this way, she led them across an apparently shallow ford in a wide river. She herself went across almost dryshod, but when her followers attempted the fording, the river rose in fury and drowned nearly all of them. Upon this the survivors, brought to their senses by the disaster, gave chase to the woman, seeking vengeance upon her; but she, laughing in mockery, changed herself into the shape of a wren and flew away. Some say that this particular wren was the first to be hunted, killed, and carried round for exhibition, others that the actual witch-woman escaped; but it is generally believed to be in memory of this event that the wren is hunted and carried annually.

Other folklore accounts of the origins of the custom tell us that the wren is the form taken by a sea spirit which formerly attacked the herring fleet, or that the wren inadvertently awoke the slumbering enemy when pecking at some crumbs on a drum.

Early accounts:

Hunt the Wren was first noted on the Isle of Man in the 1720s, when it was said to have been practised since 'time immemorial.'

This account by George Waldron reports that the wren was hunted after midnight on 24 / 25 December as a part of the Christmas festivities. The bird was then lain on a bier and buried in the local churchyard with 'a whimsical kind of solemnity' including the singing of dirges in Manx. A later account reports that the words spoken at the interment were:

Shee er yn dreean, shee er yn cheer, shee er y cheeill, as shee er meehene

(Peace on the Wren, peace on the country, peace on the church, and peace on myself).

A report of 1816 notes the hunting of the wren taking place between sunrise and sunset, and that the bird on that day was 'pursued, pelted, fired at, and destroyed, without mercy.' It is in this account by H. A. Bullock that we first learn that the feathers of the bird were thought to bring good luck for the coming year, particularly against shipwreck. It was even noted that:

'a fisherman would be considered as extremely foolhardy, who should enter upon his occupation without such a safeguard.'

The melody to the Hunt the Wren song was first printed in *Mona's Melodies* in 1820, and the words first appeared in in print in an account of the tradition by Joseph Train, published in 1845. This version was noted as one of a number of versions of the song which existed at that time, and it remains almost unaltered today.



A flourishing custom:

Joseph Train's 1845 account of Hunt the Wren reported that 'for a century past' the practice was done on St Stephen's Day (*Laa'l Steaoín*). This was also the first account to mention dancing as a part of the custom, which apparently took place after the wren was buried in the churchyard:

'After the obsequies were performed, the company, outside the church-yard wall, formed a circle and danced to music which they had provided for the occasion.'

However, Train's account goes on to say that the burial of the bird in churchyards had 'long since been abandoned,' with the bird instead being buried at the sea shore or some other such wasteland. At that time, in the 1840s, the practice was popular mainly amongst boys. In fact, as many as four different groups paraded their wrens around Douglas in 1842. They are spoken of as going around with a horn:

from door to door with a wren, suspended by the legs, in the centre of two hoops, crossing each other at right angles, decorated with evergreens and ribbons, singing lines called "Hunt the Wren."

By the 1890s the practice of actually capturing a wren had become rare; instead just the wren pole was taken around the houses and accompanied with singing. The practice remained common in the 1900s, with numbers of separate groups going around to Hunt the Wren in Onchan, Castletown, Douglas, Peel, Port St. Mary and Kirk Michael, and one group going to Hunt the Wren in Ramsey. It was in 1904 that the first known photographs of the tradition were taken, on Waterloo Road in Ramsey [left], and in Douglas [right].



Rescue and Revival:

The Hunt the Wren dance had been thought to have been lost, but it had survived as a children's game in Lezayre, where Mona Douglas noted it in 1925. By this time Hunt the Wren was losing force and reports in the 1930s spoke of it as 'dying out.' However, the practice of singing a shortened version of the song around the houses with a wren pole continued through to 1975, when it was said to be 'done by children in Peel and occasionally in other places.'

During the Manx cultural revival of the 1970s and 80s Hunt the Wren was revived and revitalised with a new focus on the dance. It is in this form that the tradition has become firmly re-established today, with the practice now flourishing in a number of towns and villages across the Isle of Man.



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