

## **The Winter Solstice & The Hunting of the Wren**

Originally, the “Hunting of the Wren” festival was celebrated on the Winter Solstice, specifically the day after “Long Night” (the longest night of the year) when people celebrated the birth of the new Sun on December 21st.

Traditionally, men and boys hunted a wren, which was revered as the “king of the birds.” They beat the bushes and hedges with sticks, and when a wren flew out they tried to down the bird by throwing sticks, stones and other objects at it. Whoever killed the wren was believed to have good luck for a year. They placed it on top of a staff decorated with holly, ivy and ribbons, or displayed it in a decorated box on top of a pole. This was paraded around the neighborhood by a group of “Wrenboys” (or “Droluns:” *lucht an dreoilín*) and “Mummers” (or “Strawboys”), who typically dressed in straw masks or suits, greenery and colorful motley clothing. They formed music bands, played songs, and paraded through towns and villages in exchange for donations. This was meant to ensure prosperity for the coming year. The people afterwards held a funeral for the wren and danced around the "wren pole" or "wren bush."

Like many traditional seasonal festivals, Wren Day gradually died out following industrialization, but the custom has been undergoing revival since the late 20th century (although the

wren is no longer hunted and a stuffed wren is used instead). Wren Day has survived or been revived in a few towns and villages, mainly on the Isle of Man and in the southern parts of Ireland, such as in Dingle, County Kerry.

This tradition incorporates Indo-European religion and custom in various ways: (1) as the custom of “Burying the Wren” with a lament for the death of the Sun, (2) the custom of Hunting the Wren, which reenacts the myth of the celebration and naming of the new Sun, and (3) as a performance in which the death and revival of the Sun is reenacted in the many Mummers’ plays. All of these customs and traditions had a social element as well as a religious one, so that they provide an opportunity for people to visit their neighbors, share food, tell stories and participate in singing and dancing.

There are several European folk tales about the origin of the wren hunt. It is speculated that the tradition of the wren celebration derives from ancient Celtic paganism (i.e., from Celtic mythology) and was originally a sacrifice associated with the Winter Solstice. Celtic names of the wren (*draouennig*, *drean*, *dreathan*, *dryw* etc.) also suggest an association with Druidic rituals. Ultimately, however, the origin may be the cross-quarter festival of Samhain or midwinter sacrifice or celebration, as Celtic mythology considered the wren a symbol of the past year. Thus, since the wren is so considered, and since

Samhain is recognized as the start of the "Celtic New Year," Wren Day can be understood as a type of "New Year" festival. (The Wikipedia page for Wren Day strongly suggests as much: "There were similar New Year traditions in parts of western Britain and France until the nineteenth century" and "The European wren is known for its habit of singing even in midwinter, and its name in Celtic countries and in the Netherlands, 'Winter King,' reflects this.")

Traditionally, the "Wren King" is hunted at the Winter Solstice as a reenactment of the Celtic Myth that tells How Lleu Llaw Gyffes got his name, which is about the Goddess Arianrhod. The story is told in the Mabinogion, the collection of Welsh myth which was written down in the 12th century. This story is essential to an understanding of the custom of Hunting the Wren. Arianrhod is a major figure in this story and a Celtic form of one of the most important Proto-Indo-European Goddesses.