Upcoming Events

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January at the Museum!

Happy New Year!

Dear members and friends,

I hope everyone had a restful and happy holiday over the last few weeks. We are a little bit in limbo at the museum; we are open for our usual hours but depending on how the numbers of cases go, this might change at short notice. We will run all of our lectures online only for the present, through Zoom, and they will be recorded and shared to our YouTube page too.

New Year's and Women's Christmas, or the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th, have many different traditions and beliefs attached to them in Ireland. The archives at the Folklore Collection at University College Dublin contain fantastic little accounts - on this topic and many others. Dating from 1937-39, this remarkable collection is the outcome of an innovative project supervised by the Irish Folklore Commission. In conjunction with the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, senior Primary School children recorded in excess of 750,000 pages of local history and oral tradition from across the 26 counties of the Irish Free State. This collection has been digitized and is now available at www.duchas.ie

Here are some samples of the types of information contained in these records:

"On New Year's Day the old people gave an extra sheaf of corn to the horses and cows, to make them work better, and give more milk for the coming year. The old people never threw anything out on New Year's Day, but they kept all the leavings of tea in a bucket at the foot of the dresser. They did this so as to have a plentiness for the coming year. The water for the day after New Year's day was brought in before mid-night on New Year's Day. If anybody went to the well after that time he was drowned. If a person met a red-haired woman on New Year's Day, he would have bad luck during the year." The Schools' Collection, Volume 1034, Page 116

"It would be very unlucky for a woman (especially a red-haired woman) to come in first on New Year's Day. Bad luck for the year was certain. One of the boys of the house usually went out after twelve and returned again and wished everyone a Happy New Year saying
"Blow out the old,
Blow in the new,
Blow out the false
And blow in the true"

The ashes and sweepings were not thrown out on New Year's Day or any water. People didn't like to buy anything on that day – to put out any money at all on New Year's day, they believed if they did, they would be spending during the year. If the wnd blew from the west on New Year's Eve it was a good sign of the following year. If there is a flood in the (New Year's Day), it was a sign of rising prices. It isn't right to throw out water on New Year's Night on Christmas Night or to go to the well after twelve o'clock on either night."
The Schools' Collection, Volume 0117, Page 156.

Nollaig na mBan - Women's Christmas

The twelfth and final day of Christmas, January 6th, was known in Ireland as Nollaig na mBan or Women's Christmas or Little Christmas. As a reward for their hard work over the Christmas season, it was a day off from all house work for women and traditional roles were supposed to be reversed in the home: men did the women's work in the house while women rested and gathered together informally.

It is considered unlucky in Ireland to take down the Christmas tree and decorations before the twelfth day of Christmas, a custom which is still recognised and practised by many. While the rest of the decorations were taken down and put away for another year, the holly was traditionally retained for Shrove Tuesday, when it would be used in the fire for cooking the pancakes on that day. Copious amounts of holly was used in decorating houses in the past.

For some reason the tradition of celebrating Nollaig na mBan was always stronger in the west of Ireland, particularly in Gaeltacht areas. It is also a non-urban custom. Academic Alan Titley suggests that the slow demise of the Irish language has contributed to the fading of this custom with its Gaelic title. Nobody is certain when exactly the term Nollaig na mBan entered the language; perhaps at the same time as Christmas began being celebrated here.

Women enjoyed the day in different ways. "Most women in west Kerry would have raised five or six turkeys for sale at the Christmas market. They kept the money - like egg money - and if there was anything left over after Christmas they spent it on themselves," Titley says.
Siobhan Fahy has lived in Ballyferriter on the Dingle peninsula all her life. "All the special food you'd had in over the Christmas to eat would be gone by Nollaig na mBan. The men here used call it `Nollaig gan mhaith' (no good Christmas), " she says wryly. "But us women would go visiting that afternoon. It was a very simple celebration, just eating a slice of currant loaf in someone's house and having a cup of tea and a chat, but that was the day you'd do something for yourself and have a rest after all the Christmas work."

"An old and formerly widespread custom still carried on in a few places is the lighting of candles on this night," according to The Year In Ireland. The Connemara-based writer and publisher Micheal O Conghaile remembers his mother lighting candles for every room in the house on that night. "I had to go round all the rooms every so often

mother lighting candles for every room in the house on that night. "I had to go round all the rooms every so often to check on them," he remembers. This memory is the subject of a Martin O Direain poem in which the poet wishes he was present to watch his mother light the Nollaig na mBan candles.

Michael Gill, who still lives on Inis Mor where he was born, also remembers the lighting of candles. "Every house had 12 candles in the window on that night. My mother would light them. And what we did on Nollaig na mBan was walk the island to look at the houses all lit up. In the days before electricity it was the brightest night of the year." They still light candles on all the Aran islands in this way today.

Women's Christmas was also associated with the Irish death divination customs that were practised at Halloween. One tradition is that a "cake" of mud or clay was made and candles named for the family members in the house was placed into it. The order in which the candles burned out indicated the order in which the owners of those candles would die. The ritual was accompanied by prayer and was taken very seriously, with no light-heartedness allowed.

A notable Irish literary association is that the Epiphany is the date on which the events in James Joyce's short story The Dead from Dubliners (1914) takes place. Joyce featured the comparable Halloween death divination custom (known as "ask the saucers") in his short story Clay in the same collection.

(Thank you to the Irish Times, January 6th, 1998.)

Finally, as we look forward to 2021 with a renewed sense of purpose, I share this poem from John O' Donohue (from To Bless the Space Between Us) with you.

Beannacht: A Blessing for the New Year

"On the day when
The weight deadens
On your shoulders
And you stumble,
May the clay dance
To balance you.

And when your eyes
Freeze behind
The grey window
And the ghost of loss
Gets in to you,
May a flock of colours,
Indigo, red, green,
And azure blue,
Come to awaken in you
A meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
In the currach of thought
And a stain of ocean
Blackens beneath you,
May there come across the waters
A path of yellow moonlight
To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
May the clarity of light be yours,
May the fluency of the ocean be yours,
May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow
Wind work these words
Of love around you,
An invisible cloak
To mind your life."

Malachy Browne, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, in conversation. Wednesday January 13th 7pm - ZOOM

Malachy Browne grew up in County Limerick, in Ireland, attending University College Dublin and the University of Limerick. Prior to joining The New York Times in 2016, Mr. Browne worked as a reporter and editor at Storyful and Reported.ly, two social journalism startups; at Village, a current affairs magazine in Ireland; and as a computer programmer.

He has led investigations into Russian airstrikes on hospitals in Syria, the Las Vegas mass shooting, chemical weapons attacks in Syria, extra-judicial military shootings in Nigeria, the Saudi officials who killed journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey, and the killing of a young Palestinian medic along the Gaza-Israel border. These and other stories have received a George Polk Award, two News and Documentary Emmys, three Overseas Press Club of America Awards, and Investigative Reporters and Editors Award, a Pulitzer Prize (2020) and a Pulitzer finalist citation (2017). In 2020, Malachy's work focused on issues of race and policing in America and included investigations into the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, David McAtee and Rayshard Brooks.

Join Malachy in conversation with Elizabeth as he discusses his career and his experiences as a journalist and immigrant in America, and how technology and social media are changing the nature of modern journalism.

Zoom Event: Lives of Irish Women in Their Own Words. Tuesday, January 19th, 7pm

To celebrate Nollaig na mBan, join us to hear about how life for women in Ireland changed in the 20th century. De Valera's 1937 constitution established in Article 41.2 that a woman's place was in the home and governments later used these clauses to successfully justify tax and social welfare discriminations against women. Women would also bear the brunt of repressive church policies, as thousands of women were sent to the infamous

Magdalene Laundries. Mary Robinson was elected the first woman president in 1990. But had things really

Magdalene Laundries. Mary Robinson was elected the first woman president in 1990. But had things really changed?

This lecture will look at the changes women experienced in Ireland during the 20th century.

Lives of Irish Women

Lecture Series: The War of Independence: Violence and Reprisals
Elizabeth Stack, PhD, Tuesday January 26th, 7pm (Zoom)

Centenary Series: The War of Independence

January 1921: Reprisals and Escalations

We continue our Centenary series on the War of Independence, and examine the events of January 1921, the month official reprisals began in earnest, assassinations continued, and ambushes continued to mount up.

Kevin Barry had been executed in November and de Valera returned from America late December. The Irish War of Independence was now entering its final year, and there was a new intensity to the conflict in the coming months, as things hurtled towards a political conclusion.

As 1921 began both sides remained nominally committed to the armed struggle, but both sides were also confused about what that armed struggle was supposed to achieve. The Irish preached republicanism publicly, while high-ranking figures actively sought a more limited form of self-government. The British openly encouraged a greater military effort to annihilate the Republic while happily moving forward with the already arranged partitioned parliaments, of which they knew the southern one would inevitably be dominated by the members of that same Republic. The paradoxes built and built: the seeds of the next war were already planted.

This is the eighth lecture in our Centenary Series about the War of Independence.

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