

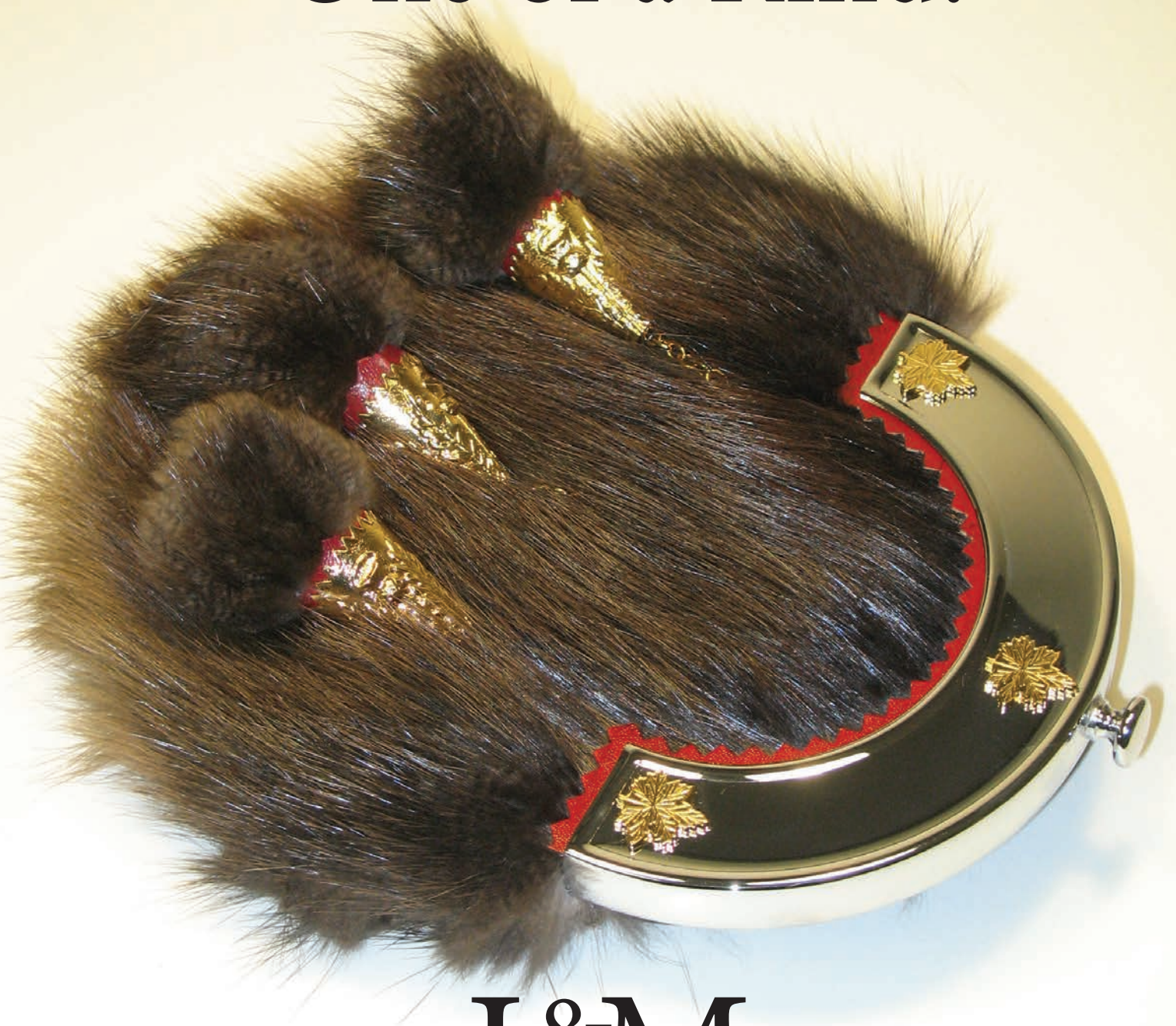
Special Edition ❄ December 2013 ❄ celticlif.com

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Clansman Publishing Ltd.
PO Box 8805, Station A, Halifax,
NS, Canada B3K 5M4

Celtic Life International is an ethnic journal
published in Canada six times a year by
Clansman Publishing Ltd.

Angus M. Macquarrie, Publisher
Stephen Patrick Clare, Managing Editor
Charles Mandel, Senior Editor
Michelle Brunet, Senior Writer
Catherine Green, Sales

Celtic Life International Office
Phone: 902-835-CELT (2358)
Toll-Free: 888-215-6850
Fax: 902-835-0080
Email: info@celticlife.ca
Website: www.celticlife.ca

Subscriptions
Phone: 902-835-CELT (2358)
Toll-Free: 888-215-6850
Fax: 902-835-0080
Email: subscribe@celticlife.ca

Advertising
Phone: 902-818-8051
Toll-Free: 888-215-6850
Fax: 902-835-0080
Email: sales@celticlife.ca

Please send review books and CDs to:
223 Bluewater Road, Bedford,
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Please return undeliverable
copies of Celtic Life International to:
PO Box 8805, Station A, Halifax,
NS, Canada B3K 5M4

Publication Mail Registration
No. 40050439 ISSN 1918-0497

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Nollaig Chridheil!

Growing up in eastern Canada, the cold and snow of early December meant that the arrival of Santa Claus and his big red sleigh full of goodies was not far away.

Years later, my first thoughts are no longer of Jolly Ole' St. Nick and the increasing commercialization of the Christmas Season, but rather a quote from American businessman and philanthropist Warren Buffett. "If you're in the luckiest one per cent of humanity, you owe it to the rest of humanity to think about the other 99 per cent."

Hardship can come in many shapes and sizes, especially this time of the year. We hear stories every day of families who cannot make ends meet, struggling to feed, clothe and house their families.

And while compassion has no season, generosity and good will are more vital than ever during the holidays, when expectations and expenses are higher.

Admittedly, most of us are not part of that one per cent – our wealth is measured by other means. Still, like Buffett, we can create 'win-win' scenarios in our lives by giving what we can over the next while – the rewards will bring both the true meaning of the holidays, and great joy, to our lives, and also shed some light and warmth during the long, wintry days of December.

On behalf of all of us here at Celtic Life International, I wish you and your families a wonderful holiday season, and I encourage you to be generous with others.

Enjoy and May God Bless!
Angus M. Macquarrie, Publisher



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Judi Dench

The Grande Dame of English cinema opens up about her Irish history and heritage!

Anthony Hopkins

In this exclusive interview, the reclusive Welsh actor opens up about his Celtic roots, his current projects and his future goals!

The Celtic Traveler

Whether you are heading south for the winter or staying close to home, there's something for everyone in our annual travel guide!

Wayne Johnston

The Irish-Canadian author calls upon the spirit of James Joyce for his latest novel Son of a Certain Woman!

Also! Alex Salmond, Celtic Connections, Dylan Thomas, Winter Fashion, Sheila MacLean, Fife Flyers, The Gathering, Ron James, the Northern Gammett, news, views, reviews, recipes, tradition, culture, heritage, history and more! Subscribe today!

Congratulations to Lisa Risley, winner of our Celtic Thunder Caribbean Cruise Contest!



Congratulations to some of our other winners in 2013!

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Q&A with **Bob Currie**

Though quick to defer credit, “The Pipes of Christmas” founder and organizer Bob Currie isn’t shy to share about one of his Clan’s many signature events.

What is your own ethnicity/heritage?

I am Scottish on my father’s side and French Canadian on my mother’s side. All my grandparents were born in Canada. I have had great success tracing my Currie ancestry back to the Isle of Arran off the coast of Scotland. My great-great-grandfather, Neill Currie immigrated to Aylmer, Quebec during the Arran Clearances in 1828. He left behind an invaluable and inspiring autobiography entitled, “The Religious Experience of Neill Currie,” published in Bytown (Ottawa) in 1846. Before first setting foot in Scotland over 30 years ago, my childhood summers were spent camping in Ontario and Quebec in some wonderful Provincial Parks.

What inspired you to create The Pipes of Christmas?

The Clan Currie Society had been producing a very popular Kirking of the Tartans service for several years. In the early ‘90’s when I discovered PM Kevin Blandford’s beautiful CDs entitled, “The Pipes of Christmas” and “Amazing Grace,” I immediately signed Blandford to bring his exceptional piping and arranging skills to our Kirking services. Over time, Blandford and I pondered what a live concert version of his Christmas CD might look and sound like. Building on that CD, we moved away from the annual Kirking service and debuted the re-imagined “live” “Pipes of Christmas” concert on December 11, 1999. I expanded Blandford’s repertoire to go beyond just pipe, organ and brass and added clàrsach, fiddle, uilleann pipes, guitar and cello. The presentation was extremely well received. Our first concert attracted over 800 for a hall that could only seat 700. It was incredible!

Are they the same reasons you continue to put it together each year?

We are blessed with a very loyal audience that I suspect would be upset if we didn't bring the "Pipes" back every year. It truly has become part of their Christmas tradition and we take that endorsement very seriously. Christmas is a time of giving and in that spirit, we are fortunate to be able to use concert proceeds to bestow a number of annual music and history scholarships at many leading institutions including the Gaelic College in Nova Scotia, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the National Piping Centre, both in Glasgow, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye and Lyon College in Arkansas. We've also used the concert as a platform to showcase new composers and aim towards having at least one or two new compositions debut each year. We also use the concert as one of our many platforms to showcase the Gaelic language through some truly lovely Gaelic carols. We donate tickets to local charities so they can be used in their own fundraising efforts. To date we've supported over 20 deserving non-profits in this manner like the American Red Cross and the Children's Aid Society of New York.

What are the challenges involved?

Like any major annual arts event, I suspect we share some the same challenges as other large-scale programs. Securing sponsors can be a challenge during tough economic times and ticket prices alone don't provide all the funding we require. Over the years we've been blessed with some wonderful sponsors that have contributed greatly to our success while also ensuring that we can maintain our high production standards. This year, we are delighted to have as our Title Sponsors, Edinburgh Napier University, Royal Bank of Canada Capital Markets and the Grand Summit Hotel. We are so grateful for their support! We like to vary the program from year to year (while keeping our core intact). This means you'll likely find me listening to Christmas music starting in February each year. We're also always on the look for new artists and composers to showcase.

What are the rewards?

The rewards are substantial and inspiring. The audience reaction to this program keeps me energized and engaged. For some, the concert becomes their Christmas celebration, opting to gather family and friends for "Pipes" before they travel back to their respective homes just a week later for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. One patron just purchased a block of 50

tickets for his entire family! There is a strong Sacred element to our concert. Hearing "O Come All Ye Faithful" performed on pipe, organ and brass is nothing short of majestic. Contrasted with "Silent Night" sung in Scots Gaelic accompanied by clàrsach, fiddle and guitar, is soul stirring. One patron described the concert as his vision for what the "finest Christmas Eve service would look and sound like at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh." Bringing new music to life is extremely satisfying.



Last year, we were compelled to honor the life and Scottish ancestry of astronaut Neil Armstrong who had died in August. I retained a brilliant young Scottish composer named James Ross of Wick, to compose a new chamber piece entitled, "Sea of Tranquility." The piece was beautiful. We had the honor of performing the work for Neil Armstrong's daughter at our NY concert. It's one of many "Pipes" moments I shall never forget. We also marked HM The Queen's Diamond Jubilee last year with a lovely new tune by Inverness-born Steve Gibb entitled, "Balmoral Snow." In years past, we've debuted other new works including, "Lament for the Lost," which was composed by PM Kevin Blandford on September 11, 2001 as he watched the tragedies unfold in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC. Of course, the other great reward for me personally is the opportunity to work with some truly outstanding performers. In addition to the Kevin Ray Blandford Memorial Pipe Band from Redlands, CA, we also host Gaelic Mod champion clarsach performer Jennifer Port originally from Golspie, Scotland, guitarist/composer Steve Gibb (now on Broadway with "Jersey Boys"), concert violinist and three-

time New England fiddle champion Paul Woodiel, uilleann piper Christopher Laver and one of the leading interpreters of Scottish Country Dance music, Susie Petrov as well as an entire company of top music industry professionals. I am honored and humbled to have this wonderful ensemble perform for our audiences year after year. The concert's narration, masterfully written and delivered by Susan Porterfield Currie is the glue that connects the musical selections and brings insight into the holiday traditions of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, further enhanced by our outstanding Readers."

Beyond that, I must admit that receiving a standing ovation for our debut concert in NYC (at the end of the first act, no less!) was especially rewarding. Before he passed away from cancer at the much too early age of 40 in 2003, Pipe Major Blandford and I had always wondered how the Big Apple would respond to the concert. Sadly, Kevin didn't live to see this, but I'm certain he was there with us in spirit on that first NY performance. We've since been named as one of New York's "Top Ten" holiday events.

Christmas

What is the event's core mandate, and who does it benefit?

Our principal mandate is to produce a world-class concert event which honors our Celtic heritage and faith. Too many events with all the best intentions can fall victim to the doctrine of "good enough." Quite the opposite, we constantly strive to be the best we can be. You never know who may be experiencing their Celtic heritage for the first time at "The Pipes of Christmas." We have an obligation to strive for excellence in all that we do. If we don't do all we can to protect and preserve our heritage, who will? So our audiences remain our primary responsibility. In addition to operating as a traditional clan society, the Clan Currie Society is also an international arts organization. We honor our clan's Bardic roots. Clan Currie (or Clan MacMhuirich as they were known in Gaelic) was the pre-eminent Bardic Dynasty in Scotland for over 700 years. We strive to keep our rich arts tradition alive in everything we do. Through programs like "The Pipes of Christmas," we get to demonstrate that commitment and generate a financial base that supports all our programs, which are intended for the general public as well as for our clans-folk. In addition to the "Pipes" and the resulting scholarships, we also produce Tartan Day on Ellis Island (one of the anchor programs of NY Tartan Week,) an annual MacMhuirich Academic Symposium, and the Harp Glen at the Seaside Highland Games in Ventura, CA. We are the Title Sponsor for the Scottish Harp Society of America's national championship and have just become the annual sponsor of the Young Writer's Literature Gaelic Award." at the Royal National Mod in Scotland. We keep pretty busy.

Who attends the event?

I'm always amazed to see where our audience hails from. When we first started in 1999, we generally drew from central New Jersey with occasional visitors from New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware - especially as the word got out. Since moving to Manhattan, we've added all five boroughs of NYC, along with Long Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Since NYC is an international travel destination, especially during the magical holiday season, we now play host to patrons from quite literally all around the world.

What can audiences expect this year?

For our 15th anniversary, we're delighted to be debuting three new compositions as well as the return of many of our audience favorites. One

of our anticipated premieres will be a new composition from a music student studying at Edinburgh Napier University. Through a generous gift, the university will award a cash prize to the winning composer for a new Christmas carol to be performed on the clàrsach. We're hopeful the student will be with us for the concerts to hear their work performed before a live audience in New York City. We are also producing our first music CD which draws from concert recordings made over the last 14 years. At the time of this writing, we have listened to over 500 recordings and have completed the near impossible task of selecting and mastering 15 tracks that represent some of our best work. Better still, we have a wealth of outstanding material for another two CDs! Last but not least, we are delighted to have two wonderful Honorary Chairs representing both sides of the pond this year. From Scotland, we welcome renowned author Alexander McCall Smith and from Canada we welcome Mark Standish from the Royal Bank of Canada Capital Markets. Both gentlemen have illustrious careers and exceptional reputations for supporting important causes.

Why is it an important event for the community?

It's become a holiday tradition for many, something special to look forward to year after year. That's key to celebrating Christmas - gathering together to enjoy this lovely and inspiring program. It's also a wonderful introduction to Celtic music performed on traditional instruments by top-notch performers.

Along with attending, how else can people get involved?

Experiencing the concert is - as the question suggests - the best way to become involved or engaged with The Pipes of Christmas. Many

people tell me they buy a block of tickets to give out as holiday gifts. A great idea! Beyond that, we welcome individual and corporate sponsors with gifts of any size. Donors can be assured their gifts are being put to good use. The Clan Currie Society is a registered not-for-profit organization so all donations are tax deductible in the USA. We also always welcome sweat equity support and have brought on interns interested in concert management and Celtic heritage for some real hands-on experience. Give us a call!





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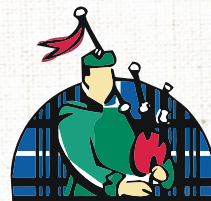
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Celtic

Holiday Traditions

The origins of Christmas, so the longstanding theory says, stems from pagan winter festivals. One main reason early Christians were able to spread their religion across Europe so quickly stemmed from their willingness to embrace celebrations so prevalent among regional populations.

One such example is the Celtic 'Alban Arthuan,' a Druidic festival that took place around December 21st, the Winter Solstice. This traditional fire celebration served to celebrate the re-birth of the Sun.

Although a celebration of the Son's birth replaced that of the Sun's, still a number of Christmas-tide traditions - including those the ancient Celts practiced - remain today.

As we look at the Celtic nations, it is interesting to note some similarities among Christmas traditions that cross geographic boundaries. They include, for example: Holly (a symbol of re-birth among Pagan Celts, but also of hospitality—it was believed fairies sought shelter inside the evergreen leaves to escape the cold); Mistletoe (believed to have healing powers so strong that it warded off evil spirits, cured illnesses and even facilitated a truce between enemies); fire and light (most notably the Yule log or candles placed in windows to light the way for strangers and symbolically welcoming Mary and Joseph); and door-to-door processions, from wassailing to Wren Hunts.

Each of the seven nations possesses its own variations of Celtic Christmas customs, of course, and surrounding cultures and local identity shape their practices as well.

Scotland

Christmas was not officially recognized in Scotland for nearly four centuries. The Puritan English Parliament banned Christmas in 1647 and it did not become a recognized public holiday in Scotland until 1958.

However, according to Andrew Halliday, in his 1833 piece "Christmas in Scotland," Scots were not discouraged. Halliday wrote:

"We remember it stated in a popular periodical, one Christmas season not long ago, that Christmas-day was not kept at all in Scotland. Such is not the case; the Scots do keep Christmas-day, and in the same kindly Christian spirit that we do, though the Presbyterian austerity of their church does not acknowledge it as a religious festival."

Halliday's 19th century account went on to describe festive sowens (sweetened oat gruel) ceremonies, "beggars" (actually "strapping fellows") singing yule song, dances and card parties and children teetotum games.

Despite Puritan rule, some long time Christmas traditions are preserved. These include burning the Cailleach (a piece of wood carved to look like an old woman's face or the Spirit of Winter) to start the new year fresh; or on Christmas Eve burning rowan tree branches to signify the resolution of any disputes. The Celtic tradition of placing candles in windows was also done in Scotland to welcome 'first footers' (strangers, bearing a small gift) into the home.

Traditional dishes also continue to be featured at Christmas lunch and throughout the holidays, including Cock-a-Leekie soup, smoked salmon, beef or duck, Cloutie dumplings, black buns, sun cakes, Christmas pudding and Crannachan.

Because Christmas was not an official holiday until the late '50s, it is no surprise that today, for some Scots, Hogmanay (New Year's Eve) is the most important event of the season. Arguably, locals ring in the new year with much more gusto than any other place on the planet.

Ireland

A Fall clean-up was a common practice in Irish homes to prepare for Christmas. Women looked after cleaning the interior, while men took care of the outdoors, including whitewashing all exterior surfaces. Then holly, grown wild in Ireland, was spread throughout the house with cheer. Contemporary Ireland also highlights this clean-up ritual; once complete, fresh Christmas linens are taken out of storage.

Other customs include the Bloc na Nollaig or Christmas Block (the Irish version of the Yule log), candles in the window (perhaps one for each family member), and leading up to Christmas, "Calling the Waites," where musicians would wake up townspeople through serenades and shouting out the morning hour.

Christmas Eve Mass is still a grand affair, a time for friends and family to reconnect. It is not uncommon for churchgoers to end up at the local pub after service to ring in Christmas morn.

On Christmas Day, traditional dishes include roast goose or ham and sausages, potatoes (such as champ), vegetables (such as cabbage with bacon) and plum pudding, whiskey Christmas cake and barmbrack (currant loaf) for sweets.

Traditionally on December 26th, St. Stephen's Day, Wren Boys with blackened faces, carrying a pole with the dead bird pierced at the top, tramped from house to house. Today the custom sometimes sees children carolling throughout the neighbourhood to raise money for charity. It is also quite common to go out visiting on this day.

One modern-day Irish tradition to note is gathering around the television to watch the "The Late Late Toy Show" in late November/early December, said to be the most watched program in Ireland.

Wales

Dylan Thomas' story, A Child's Christmas in Wales, is renowned around the world. An excerpt offers a glimpse of a traditional Welsh festive season:

"Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang 'Cherry Ripe,' and another uncle sang 'Drake's Drum'... Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steady falling night."

Music was and still is a major part of Welsh holidays. Plygain is a Christmas day church service, traditionally held between 3 and 6 a.m., featuring males singing a capella in three or four-part harmonies. While today this may be mainly practiced in rural areas, Eisteddfodde (carolling) is abundantly popular in homes, door-to-door and as part of annual song-writing competitions.

Other intriguing Welsh traditions include toffee making; drinking from a communal wassail bowl of fruit, spices, sugar and beer; children visiting homes on New Year's Day looking for their Callenig gift; and Mary Lwyd (Grey Mare) featuring wassail singers going door-to-door carrying a horse's skull and challenging residents to a contest of mocking rhymes.

Isle of Man

Carolling also holds a special place in Manx Christmas celebrations, but traditionally an unconventional twist characterized it. On Christmas Eve, large numbers attended church for Carval. While the congregation sang, all of a sudden women would begin the traditional food fight, having peas on hand to throw at their male counterparts!





Accounts from the 1700 and 1800s describe 12 days of non-stop Christmas celebrations where every barn was filled with dancers accompanied by fiddlers the local parish hired. "On the twelfth day the fiddler lays his head on one of the women's laps, which posture they look upon as a kind of oracle," recorded Reverend John Entick (as published in 1774). "For one of the company coming up and naming every maiden in the company, asks the fiddler, who shall this or that girl marry? And whatever he answers it is absolutely depended on as an oracle."

As in Celtic fashion, Hunting the Wren processions occurred on the Isle of Man and today the practice is going through a revival, characterized by costumes, singing and dancing.

Other Manx customs include Mollag Bands, wearing eccentric clothing, swinging a mollag (fishing float) and demanding money (a practice since outlawed); the kissing bush (a more elaborate ornament than a sprig of mistletoe); and Cammag, a sport that originated on the Isle of Man traditionally played on December 26th and/or Easter Monday.

Finally, in older times, but even as recently as the early 20th century, Christmas decorations were not taken down until Pancake Tuesday (when they were burnt under the pancake pan). Now holiday décor tends to be packed away on Old Christmas (January 6th).

Brittany

Brittany boasts a wealth of folklore and supernatural beliefs around Christmas time. Christmas Eve was known as a night of miraculous apparitions from fairies to korrigans, and at midnight, for just a brief moment, waters in the wells would turn into the most sweet-tasting wine. It was also at midnight, when families were either at mass or in bed, that ghosts would surface; traditionally food was left out for deceased loved ones just in case they visited.

During the holidays, Christmas markets come alive in many Breton towns vending hand-made crafts and toys, baked cakes and bread and ingredients for Christmas dinner. You can also buy Galette des Rois at stalls, as well as bakeries, which is traditionally eaten on January 6th (Epiphany). A tiny figurine (the fève) is hidden inside the puff pastry cake; the person who finds the figurine in their piece gets to be king or queen for the day and wear a crown. Another special tradition through all of France is a meal after Christmas Eve's midnight mass, called Réveillon. Specifically in Brittany, the traditional dish for this occasion is buckwheat crêpes with cream.

Cornwall

As a result of Oliver Cromwell's government banning Christmas, authentic holiday carols began to fade through much of Britain. However, throughout the 1800s, Cornish composers and collectors, sparked a revival of local Christmas song.

"Contrary to the effect Methodism might have had on the English carollers, in Cornwall its impact was to stimulate song," states the Cornwall Council (Cornish Christmas Carols – Or Curls, 2011). "In those areas where Methodism was strongest, music and singing had their greatest appeal, and notably so at Christmas. The singers would practice in chapels and school-rooms, some of them walking miles to be there."

Certain carols, well-known around the world, such as Hark the Herald Angels and While Shepherds, are credited to Cornish origins.

Today, Cornwall erupts in festivals, fairs and markets during the holidays. The Montol Festival in Penzance (named for Montol Eve on December 21st) is a six-day celebration highlighting many Cornish traditions. These include Mummers plays, lantern processions, Guise dancing (participants dressed in masks and costume, such as mock formal dress, to play music and dance).

Montol is also the time for burning the Mock (yule log). A stickman or woman is drawn on the block of wood with chalk. When the log burns, it symbolizes the death of the old year and birth of the year to come.

Galicia

Galicia has its own, unique Christmas gift-bearer that predates Christianity. He is called Apalpador, a giant who lives in the mountains. For Christmas, he descends into the villages below to make sure each child has a full belly. He brings treats, such as chestnuts, and well wishes for a year full of delicious sustenance. While Apalpador may not be widely observed in Galicia, his legend is seeing a revival.

Food is very important during the Galician holidays featuring at least two feasts (on Christmas Eve and Day). Unsurprisingly, seafood is on the menu, such as lobster, prawns, shrimp, sea bass, and cod with garlic and paprika sauce. Other culinary delights include cured meat, cheese and bread, roast beef with vegetables and for dessert tarta de Santiago (almond cake), filloas (stuffed pancakes) and turrões (nougats).

Throughout all of Spain, including Galicia, children anticipate the coming of the Three Kings or Magis who fill their shoes, left out on Epiphany Eve (January 5th) with gifts. Many Galician municipalities also host a parade featuring the Kings on January 5th.





A Child's Christmas in Wales

A contemporary Christmas classic, Dylan Thomas' poetic portrait of wide-eyed wonder is a must read by the fireplace this Holiday Season

One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now and out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.

All the Christmases roll down toward the two-tongued sea, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street; and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find. In goes my hand into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea, and out come Mrs. Prothero and the firemen.

It was on the afternoon of the Christmas Eve, and I was in Mrs. Prothero's garden, waiting for cats, with her son Jim. It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland, though there were no reindeers. But there were cats. Patient, cold and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and horrible-whiskered, spitting and snarling, they would slink and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson Bay, off Mumbles Road, would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes. The wise cats never appeared.

We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen in the muffling silence of the eternal snows - eternal, ever since Wednesday - that we never heard Mrs. Prothero's first cry from her igloo at the bottom of the garden. Or, if we heard it at all, it was, to us, like the far-off challenge of our enemy and prey, the neighbor's polar cat. But soon the voice grew louder.

"Fire!" cried Mrs. Prothero, and she beat the dinner-gong.

And we ran down the garden, with the snowballs in our arms, toward the house; and smoke, indeed, was pouring out of the dining-room, and the gong was bombilating, and Mrs. Prothero was announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii. This was better than all the cats in Wales standing on the wall in a row. We bounded into the house, laden with snowballs, and stopped at the open door of the smoke-filled room.

Something was burning all right; perhaps it was Mr. Prothero, who always slept there after midday dinner with a newspaper over his face. But he was standing in the middle of the room, saying, "A fine Christmas!" and smacking at the smoke with a slipper.

"Call the fire brigade," cried Mrs. Prothero as she beat the gong.

"There won't be there," said Mr. Prothero, "it's Christmas."

There was no fire to be seen, only clouds of smoke and Mr. Prothero standing in the middle of them, waving his slipper as though he were conducting.

"Do something," he said. And we threw all our snowballs into the smoke - I think we missed Mr. Prothero - and ran out of the house to the telephone box.

"Let's call the police as well," Jim said. "And the ambulance." "And Ernie Jenkins, he likes fires."

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the house and Mr. Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on. Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing



in the wet, smoky room, Jim's Aunt, Miss. Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them. She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs, and she said, "Would you like anything to read?"

Years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the color of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlors, and we chased, with the jawbones of deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, it snowed and it snowed. But here a small boy says: "It snowed last year, too. I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea."

"But that was not the same snow," I say. "Our snow was not only shaken from white wash buckets down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees; snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely - ivied the walls and settled on the postman, opening the gate, like a dumb, numb thunder-storm of white, torn Christmas cards."

"Were there postmen then, too?"

"With sprinkling eyes and wind-cherried noses, on spread, frozen feet they crunched up to the doors and mittened on them manfully. But all that the children could hear was a ringing of bells."

"You mean that the postman went rat-a-tat-tat and the doors rang?"

"I mean that the bells the children could hear were inside them."

"I only hear thunder sometimes, never bells."

"There were church bells, too."

"Inside them?"

"No, no, no, in the bat-black, snow-white belfries, tugged by bishops and storks. And they rang their tidings over the bandaged town, over the frozen

foam of the powder and ice-cream hills, over the crackling sea. It seemed that all the churches boomed for joy under my window; and the weathercocks crew for Christmas, on our fence."

"Get back to the postmen"

"They were just ordinary postmen, found of walking and dogs and Christmas and the snow. They knocked on the doors with blue knuckles"

"Ours has got a black knocker..."

"And then they stood on the white Welcome mat in the little, drifted porches and huffed and puffed, making ghosts with their breath, and jogged from foot to foot like small boys wanting to go out."

"And then the presents?"

"And then the Presents, after the Christmas box. And the cold postman, with a rose on his button-nose, tingled down the tea-tray-slithered run of the chilly glinting hill. He went in his ice-bound boots like a man on fishmonger's slabs. "He wagged his bag like a frozen camel's hump, dizzily turned the corner on one foot, and, by God, he was gone."

"Get back to the Presents."

"There were the Useful Presents: engulfing mufflers of the old coach days, and mittens made for giant sloths; zebra scarfs of a substance like silky gum that could be tug-o'-warred down to the galoshes; blinding tam-o'-shanters like patchwork tea cozies and bunny-suited busbies and balaclavas for victims of head-shrinking tribes; from aunts who always wore wool next to the skin there were mustached and rasping vests that made you wonder why the aunts had any skin left at all; and once I had a little crocheted nose bag from an aunt now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with quotations not to, would skate on Farmer Giles' pond and did and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp, except why."

"Go on the Useless Presents."

"Bags of moist and many-colored jelly babies and a folded flag and a false nose and a tram-conductor's cap and a machine that punched tickets and rang a bell; never a catapult; once, by mistake that no one could explain, a little hatchet; and a celluloid duck that made, when you pressed it, a most unducklike sound, a mewling moo that an ambitious cat might make who wished to be a cow; and a painting book in which I could make the grass, the trees, the sea and the animals any colour I pleased, and still the dazzling sky-blue sheep are grazing in the red field under the rainbow-billed and pea-green birds. Hardboileds, toffee, fudge and allsorts, crunches, cracknels, humbugs, glaciers, marzipan, and butterwelsh for the Welsh. And troops of bright tin soldiers who, if they could not fight, could always run. And



Snakes-and-Families and Happy Ladders. And Easy Hobbi-Games for Little Engineers, complete with instructions. Oh, easy for Leonardo! And a whistle to make the dogs bark to wake up the old man next door to make him beat on the wall with his stick to shake our picture off the wall. And a packet of cigarettes: you put one in your mouth and you stood at the corner of the street and you waited for hours, in vain, for an old lady to scold you for smoking a cigarette, and then with a smirk you ate it. And then it was breakfast under the balloons.”

“Were there Uncles like in our house?”

“There are always Uncles at Christmas. The same Uncles. And on Christmas morning, with dog-disturbing whistle and sugar fags, I would scour the swatched town for the news of the little world, and find always a dead bird by the Post Office or by the white deserted swings; perhaps a robin, all but one of his fires out. Men and women wading or scooping back from chapel, with taproom noses and wind-bussed cheeks, all albinos, huddles their stiff black jarring feathers against the irreligious snow. Mistletoe hung from the gas brackets in all the front parlors; there was sherry and walnuts and bottled beer and crackers by the dessertspoons; and cats in their fur-about watched the fires; and the high-heaped fire spat, all ready for the chestnuts and the mulling pokers. Some few large men sat in the front parlors, without their collars, Uncles almost certainly, trying their new cigars, holding them out judiciously at arms’ length, returning them to their mouths, coughing, then holding them out again as though waiting for the explosion; and some few small aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edge of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers.”

Not many those mornings trod the piling streets: an old man always, fawn-bowled, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green and back, as he would take it wet or fire on Christmas Day or Doomsday; sometimes two hale young men, with big pipes blazing, no overcoats and wind blown scarfs, would trudge, unspeaking, down to the forlorn sea, to work up an appetite, to blow away the fumes, who knows, to walk into the waves until nothing of them was left but the two furling smoke clouds of their inextinguishable briars. Then I would be slap-dashing home, the gravy smell of the dinners of others, the bird smell, the brandy, the pudding and mince, coiling up to my nostrils, when out of a snow-clogged side lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink-tipped cigarette and the violet past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch, leering all to himself.

I hated him on sight and sound, and would be about to put my dog whistle to my lips and blow him off the face of Christmas when suddenly he, with a violet wink, put his whistle to his lips and blew so stridently, so high, so exquisitely loud, that gobbling faces, their cheeks bulged with goose, would press against their tinsled windows, the whole length of the white echoing street. For dinner we had turkey and blazing pudding, and after dinner the Uncles sat in front of the fire, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little and slept. Mothers, aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Auntie Bessie, who had already been frightened, twice, by a clock-work mouse, whimpered at the sideboard and had some elderberry wine. The dog was sick. Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush. I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to; and, when they burst, which they all did, the Uncles jumped and rumbled. In the rich and heavy afternoon, the Uncles breathing like dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit among festoons and Chinese lanterns and nibble dates and try to make a model man-o’-war, following the Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tramcar.



Or I would go out, my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world, on to the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to pad through the still streets, leaving huge footprints on the hidden pavements.

“I bet people will think there’s been hippos.”

“What would you do if you saw a hippo coming down our street?”

“I’d go like this, bang! I’d throw him over the railings and roll him down the hill and then I’d tickle him under the ear and he’d wag his tail.”

“What would you do if you saw two hippos?”

Iron-flanked and bellowing he-hippos clanked and battered through the scudding snow toward us as we passed Mr. Daniel’s house.

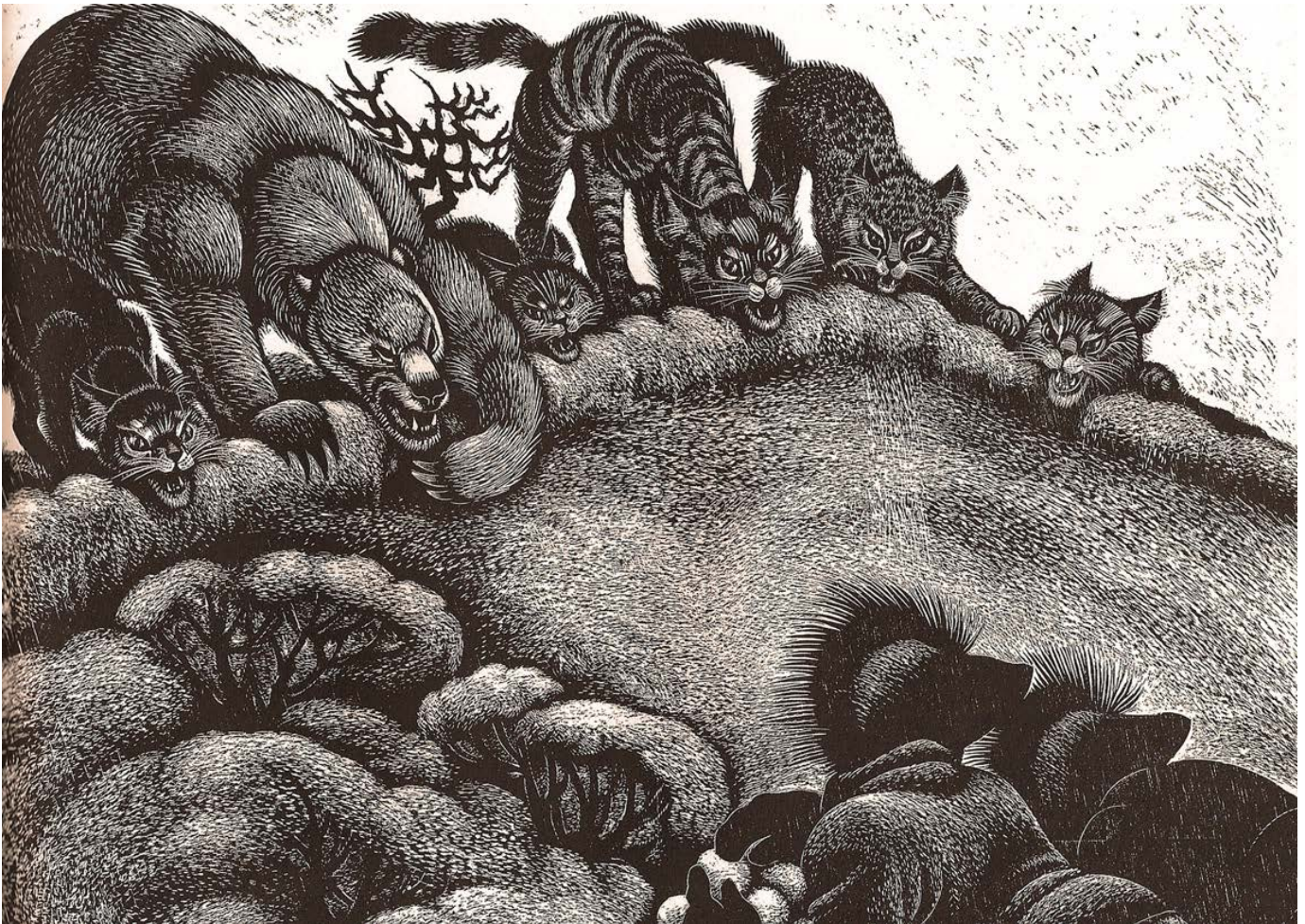
“Let’s post Mr. Daniel a snow-ball through his letter box.”

“Let’s write things in the snow.”

“Let’s write, ‘Mr. Daniel looks like a spaniel’ all over his lawn.”

Or we walked on the white shore. “Can the fishes see it’s snowing?” The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea. Now we were snow-





blind travelers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks round their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying “Excelsior.” We returned home through the poor streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries of the dock birds and the hooting of ships out in the whirling bay. And then, at tea the recovered Uncles would be jolly; and the ice cake loomed in the center of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year.

Bring out the tall tales now that we told by the fire as the gaslight bubbled like a diver. Ghosts whooped like owls in the long nights when I dared not look over my shoulder; animals lurked in the cubbyhole under the stairs and the gas meter ticked. And I remember that we went singing carols once, when there wasn’t the shaving of a moon to light the flying streets. At the end of a long road was a drive that led to a large house, and we stumbled up the darkness of the drive that night, each one of us afraid, each one holding a stone in his hand in case, and all of us too brave to say a word. The wind through the trees made noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe webfooted men wheezing in caves. We reached the black bulk of the house. “What shall we give them? Hark the Herald?”

“No,” Jack said, “Good King Wencelas. I’ll count three.” One, two three, and we began to sing, our voices high and seemingly distant in the snow-felted darkness round the house that was occupied by nobody we knew. We stood close together, near the dark door. Good King Wencelas looked out On the Feast of Stephen ... And then a small, dry voice, like the voice of someone who

has not spoken for a long time, joined our singing: a small, dry, eggshell voice from the other side of the door: a small dry voice through the keyhole. And when we stopped running we were outside our house; the front room was lovely; balloons floated under the hot-water-bottle-gulping gas; everything was good again and shone over the town.

“Perhaps it was a ghost,” Jim said.

“Perhaps it was trolls,” Dan said, who was always reading.

“Let’s go in and see if there’s any jelly left,” Jack said. And we did that.

Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang “Cherry Ripe,” and another uncle sang “Drake’s Drum.” It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird’s Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steady falling night. I turned the gas down. I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.

*Illustrations by Fritz Eichenberg
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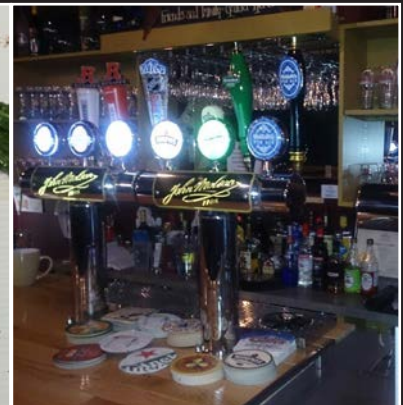
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When Fay Gourlay noticed products that a wealth of talented designers and producers had created were not readily available to those visiting Scotland or easily found online, she became frustrated. But rather than grumble about the fact that mass-produced tourist trinkets and souvenirs were overshadowing authentic Scottish crafts, Gourlay decided to do something about it.

"The idea for madefromscotland.com was born to bring together

designer-producers from across Scotland and provide a platform for them to showcase their design-led, stylish products to an audience on a national and international level," shares Gourlay.

Launched in September 2013, Gourlay's website features the work of designers and producers located throughout Scotland to showcase their fashion, housewares, jewellery, art and gifts. Products may be purchased directly from each business, all of whom can be contacted through the website if customers have questions.

"We ask that the business is based in Scotland and that the majority of the process and materials are also Scottish-based," says Gourlay. "For most of our producers everything is made and carried out in Scotland, for which we are very proud."

Gourlay has personally researched and met with the nearly 50 madefromscotland.com businesses. "The site is more than just an e-commerce platform," she continues. "We want visitors to the site to be able to engage with, and find out about, the designer-producer which is why we have a home page for each which details, in their own words, who they are, what their business is and in some cases their inspirations and information about their local area or materials they use."

Working with emerging talent is a particular passion of Gourlay's and she is currently engaged with two recent design graduates helping them establish their brands. She hopes to expand this into a structured mentorship program for new designers and crafters.

One of the featured businesses on madefromscotland.com is Ruth Alder's Couthie. Her company's name is a Scots adjective meaning sociable, friendly, comfortable, snug and authentic.

Always a lover of local vernacular, Alder was thrilled to discover (upon moving from the Isle of Wight to Scotland 20

years ago) that her new friends maintained Scottish expressions despite the fact that native dialect isn't used as much anymore.

"The more I moved in the company of Scots the more I assimilated the words that had so much charm, history and humour," Alder notes. "Scotland has a wealth of different dialects, all have favoured words and sayings and Couthie looks to draw on them all in some way."

Today, Couthie is based out of Dunbar on the East Lothian coast and has broadened out from creating stationery into a wide range of products, such as T-shirts, aprons, mugs, card games and candles bearing expressions like Dinnae Fash Yersel and Keep Yer Head or It's about time tae hae a partie!

"Our product lines tend to be designs that are traditional with a contemporary twist and we love to use humour," describes Alder. "We aim to make ranges that are truly 'Couthie'—that reflect a certain charm, quality and timelessness."

"Our Hoots! book is a wonderful gift and it features a collection of images and quips from our best-selling cards with translations," Alder recommends when asked about Christmas ideas. "Our Magnetic Scottish words are a treat and hours of fun and our website has a brow choice of gifts for every age and gender."

In fact, many of the businesses featured on madefromscotland.com offer affordable, quality Christmas items and gifts, from stocking stuffers, ceramic lantern tree ornaments and bunting to original greeting cards, cuff links, earrings, blankets and scarves. "Most of our designer-producers ship world-wide and the shipping destinations for each item are listed on the site," explains Gourlay, adding that all businesses adhere to the website's packaging and returns policy. Estimated shipping times are indicated under each product.

Gourlay says the response to madefromscotland.com, from both customers and designers-producers, has been very positive and within two months of the website launch, the number of featured businesses has nearly doubled.

"Scottish people, wherever they live, want to support its creative businesses and are still, perhaps a little surprised by the number and variation of designer-producers that we have here," says Gourlay. "It may not be obvious by looking at a product that it is uniquely Scottish, as many of them are not made of tweed or covered in tartan, but they are all inspired by Scotland, be it the landscape, way of life, or in some cases the language."

www.madefromscotland.com



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Ireland's Christmas Markets

Christmas and Ireland's fabulous festive markets are made for each other.

Countrywide, an astonishing array of venues are being pressed into service – abbeys, country estates, historic buildings, parks, town squares and main streets – creating scenes straight from a Christmas card.

Christmas spirit need recharging? Head to a Christmas market and be re-energised by the aromas of mulled wine and gingerbread, the songs, the twinkling fairy lights, the happy faces, the atmosphere.

Seeking the perfect unique present? A market is just the place to spot that authentic, one-off gift. Special somethings made with love that you won't find anywhere else.

Want something quintessentially Irish? Ireland has a growing reputation for quality artisan foods and gourmet specialties. And for craft excellence too, continuing a long tradition in ceramics, textile and jewellery design.

Only a marvellous market can tick so many boxes on everyone's festive must-do lists – and they provide the perfect opportunity to showcase Ireland's finest.

Waterford's wonderful Winterval Festival (29 Nov – 23 Dec) is a blizzard of activities, many set in the heritage sites of Ireland's oldest city. Waterford was founded by Vikings, so Norse elements are part of the mix.

It's everything we associate with Christmas and a lot more: the Winterval Express train, reindeer, illuminations, toy museum, theatre, choirs, icy crystal and ice skating, horse drawn sleighs, storytelling, 12 Days of Christmas Treasure Hunt – even a Polish Christmas Village and a giant snowglobe to climb inside.

The centrepiece, Winterval's market, has been inspired by the best Christmas markets throughout Europe. It also encompasses Waterford's much-loved own market making, the perfect combination of local character and continental flair.

That includes piping hot chocolate and crepes – very welcome after a turn or tumble on the ice!

Dublin Dockland is Christmas Central Imagine a Scandinavian waterfront village transplanted to Dublin's city centre financial HQ.

More than 80 traders will be tempting shoppers with their fun and quirky wares at the Dublin Docklands 12 Days of Christmas Market (12 – 23 Dec).

The festival combines favourites and new surprises; the biggest being the live entertainment on the event platform at George's Dock.

The charming Victorian funfair is back, along with the fantastic artisan food and craft market and Santa's Grotto.

A Cork Christmas Celebration Inspired by the Nutcracker, the city's main thoroughfare, the Grand Parade, becomes a glittering marketplace lined with Irish and international craft and food stalls. This year is bigger than ever with a vintage carousel and helter skelter (30 Nov – 23 Dec).

Cork is renowned for its English Market, Ireland's greatest food emporium. In the run-up to the big day, there's no better place to bag seasonal specialties.

Shopping spree Westport in Mayo makes a stunning setting for a market spree (13 – 15 Dec). Voted Ireland's favourite place, this lovely heritage town is a growing gourmet destination. Be there in time for Santa arriving by boat down the Carrowbeg River.

Northern lights Belfast knows: why have one market when two is even better?

There's the huge, lively Continental Market on the City Hall lawns (16 Nov - 23 Dec), where everyone comes to unwind and sample exotic tastes like ostrich burgers and eggnog.

And there's the Victorian-vintage St George's Food and Craft Market, opening additional days and hosting a colourful craft extravaganza (7 – 8 Dec).

Outside the Northern Irish capital, Derry-Londonderry ties the bow on its landmark year as UK City of Culture with a market that masters the art of Christmas enjoyment at the historic Guildhall (10 – 21 Dec), while the magnificent National Trust property, Mount Stewart in County Down, offers a festive Winter Fair (30 Nov – 1 Dec).

The granddaddy of them all, the market with everything under one roof, is at the RDS in Dublin. Be spoiled for choice at the annual National Crafts and Design Fair (4 – 8 Dec).

More than 500 designers, artists and craftspeople showcase everything from woodturning to high fashion. Not forgetting food and more food.

It takes at least a very full day to do it justice. And strong arms for carrying the treasures, both edible and collectable, you won't be able to resist.

Irish Christmas markets let you rediscover the adventure of real-life browsing and make refreshing change from online and superstore shopping.

It's all about touching, tasting, trying on and above all, talking to friendly stallholders eager to show how they make their handcrafts.

Plan a break around Ireland's best markets and like magic, Christmas shopping will be a celebration, not a chore.

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Wales' Christmas Markets

As Christmas nears, the markets are opening – helping to solve your shopping worries, feed you with festive foods and entertain you.

What better way to get in the festive spirit, and solve your gift dilemmas, than a trip to a Christmas market?

Cardiff is already celebrating Christmas – its market opened last month along with the Winter Wonderland on the grounds of the civic centre. Santa even made a quick stop.

But there are plenty of yuletide markets yet to set up their stalls across the country: you can go back in time with a trip to Caerphilly's Medieval-themed Christmas fair, or while away the hours tasting the food and admiring the crafts on offer at the National Botanical Garden's fair.

Just remember to wrap up warm and don't feel guilty about keeping the insides toasty with some mulled wine and roasted chestnuts – it is Christmas after all.

Cardiff Christmas Market

November 14 - December 23

Craftfolk's Cardiff Christmas Market is set in the Hayes, Trinity Street, Working Street and St John's Church.

www.cardiffchristmasmarket.com

Swansea Christmas Street Market

November 23 to December 16

A traditional German food quarter will be among the traditional wooden cabins selling arts, crafts, handmade goods and foods.

www.swanseachristmas.com

Erddig Christmas Market, Wrexham

November 23 - December 15 (weekends only)

The National Trust house is decked out for Christmas, enjoy mulled wine while you enjoy the various stalls and festive music.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/erddig

Royal Welsh Winter Fayre, Builth Wells, Powys

December 2 & 3

The main attraction is the livestock, but there is also a food hall, cookery, produce and handicrafts, floral art, antiques, demonstrations and Christmas gifts.

www.rwas.co.uk/winter-fair

Cardiff Bay Christmas Market

December 6 - 8

For the third year the Oval Basin will host traditional stalls selling gifts, decorations and food. There will be live music, street theatre, lantern workshops and a chance to meet Father Christmas. There will be a fireworks display on the Saturday night.

www.visitcardiffbay.info

Caerphilly Medieval Market

December 7 - 8

The 10th year of the market with 100 stalls around the two, including 25 within the castle's walls, and Medieval magician, dragon puppeteers, jester and stiltwalker.

www.visitcaerphilly.com

The National Botanic Garden's Christmas Craft Fair

December 7 - 8

The craft and food fairs will be held in the Great Glasshouse, with three Santa shows throughout the day.

www.gardenofwales.org.uk

Abergavenny Christmas Fair

December 8

Festive produce, specialist exhibitions, and SweetieFest - a celebration of the Great British Sweet.

www.abergavennyfoodfestival.com

Wrexham Victorian Christmas Market

December 12

Seventy stalls selling everything from toys to jewellery, crafts to decorations, with Welsh cakes, mulled wine and hot chestnuts.

www.wrexham.gov.uk

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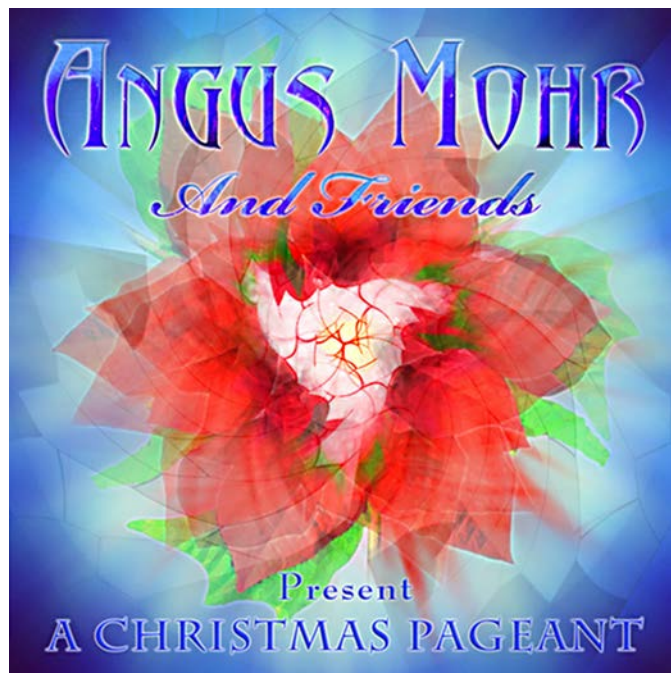
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Angus Mohr & Friends Present a Christmas Pageant

You might not normally envision hard rockers putting out a Christmas album...that is until you listen to Angus Mohr & Friends Present a Christmas Pageant, a balanced blend of edge and calm, of well-known carols and unearthed traditional tunes.

Angus Mohr's lead vocalist and bass player, Paul McDaniel (who describes his Colorado-based band as the "hard rock version of Celticity") had wanted to do a holiday album for years. The rest of the band was onboard. Well, almost...

"Our drummer [Steve Mossholder] who is an incredible personality as well as being a great drummer, really wasn't into it when the idea came up," laughs McDaniel. "But when we agreed to do the Little Drummer Boy he got behind it."

Song selection started with each band member (McDaniel, Mossholder, guitarist Mark 'Byrd' Tester and bagpiper/penny-whistler Matthew, McDaniel's son) picking their favourite Christmas carol or piece. The only stipulation was it could not be Silent Night. "Not that we don't like Silent Night," clarifies McDaniel. "We just didn't think the world needed another version."

Ultimately 16 tracks were selected, ranging from Oh Come Emmanuel (featuring a triumphant bagpipe solo) and the Irish upbeat classic, Christmas in Killarney to Fum Fum Fum (a traditional Catalan carol) and Dona Nobis Pacem (accentuated with gorgeous Celtic tones).

The album's title reflects McDaniel's fond memories of Christmas. "I suggested the name of the album based on the mixed bag of material that was part of the school and church Christmas Pageants I was part of and attended," McDaniel explains. "My father was a public school music teacher and church choir director, so...music and the inevitable pageants of my Christmas pasts have been the pivot point in my holiday traditions."

In fact, listening to a particular song, at "high volume," is a special custom initiated by McDaniel's father. "As a child, my first recollections of having a record player, we'd listen to Joy to the World by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir first thing on Christmas morning," McDaniel shares. "My kids grew up with it and we still do it."

Christmas Pageant was recorded during the summer of 2008 and McDaniel describes the process as a "logistical adventure." Over 15 additional musicians and artists (Angus Mohr's Friends) came from near and far to contribute to the album; plus all are featured on the final track, Auld Lang Syne.

"All of this personal and professional history was key in keeping a community pageant feel, as well as to pay homage to those who have been important to us in our musical journey," says McDaniel, adding he was touched that all were in the holiday spirit, as not a single musician charged for their services.

"It was an awful lot of fun but it was sort of interesting to do a take and go outside and have it be 90 degrees," laughs McDaniel as he recalls recording in June and July. To help get everyone in the mood, a Christmas tree was put up in the studio and remained until the final mix was done that September.

Angus Mohr (which still has the same members as five years ago, plus the recent addition of Michael Aggson, known as Michael O'Mandolin) are currently working on a sixth album. Christmas Pageant was their third. "I'm just really glad we did it," says McDaniel, still cherishing the holiday recording process.

Even drummer Mossholder now treasures the album. "Every year, when Christmas comes around, as it does, Steve says, 'You know I think in a lot of ways that's my favourite album,'" laughs McDaniel. "That makes me feel really, really good...to hear him say, 'Man, that's one of the best things we've ever done!' Musically it's probably not, but spiritually it probably is."

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Christmas Cake



It's not found in the music that plays in all the shopping malls and it's not in the hours spent shopping for the perfect gift which just doesn't cut it on Christmas morning. Nor is it found in the decorating that seems to need doing directly after Hallowe'en. No, one of the true markers of the festive season is the rich and full-flavored fruit cake that celebrates the holy birth of Christ.

When I got married, I made my own wedding cake with the help of my eldest sister, Mary. After it was removed from the oven, we wrapped the fruitcake in gauze, which had been soaked in brandy, and then put it in an 80 lb. steel milk can to age for a month. (The milk can was the same one we used to place in the little spring to keep the milk cool.) As you may not have an 80 lb. milk can in your cupboard, this cake uses fruit marinated in brandy and the top is brushed with brandy after baking.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup golden raisins
1 1/4 cups finely cut dried apricots
1/2 cup candied orange peel
1/2 cup candied lemon peel
1 cup candied pineapple
1/2 cup brandy
2 2/3 cups sifted all-purpose flour
1/4 tsp. salt
2 tsp. baking powder
1 cup butter cut into pieces
1 1/2 cups sugar
6 large eggs separated
1/4 cup whipping cream
1 small apple shredded
1/4 cup shredded almonds
1/4 cup candied cherries
1 1/2 tsp. vanilla

PREPARATION

Preheat the oven to 275 degrees.

An hour before baking the cake, marinate the raisins, apricots, orange and lemon peels and pineapple in 1/2 cup of brandy in a closed jar. Shake it several times.

Combine the sifted flour with the salt and baking powder and sift again.

Cream the butter and 1 cup of the sugar thoroughly with an electric mixer. Add the egg yolks and beat until the mixture is smooth.

Add the flour mixture in batches, alternating with the cream. Beat it with an electric mixer on low speed.

Fold in the marinated fruit and brandy. Fold in the apple, almonds, candied cherries and vanilla.

Beat the egg whites until they hold a peak. Add the remaining sugar and beat until they hold a stiff peak but are not grainy. Fold a few spoonfuls into the batter by hand with a rubber spatula then fold in the rest. If the batter looks the least bit curdled, fold in two or three extra tablespoons of sifted flour.

Spoon the batter into a 10-inch tube pan that has been greased. The pan should be no more than three quarters full.

Bake the cake until it springs back when touched, about 2-2 1/2 hours.

Remove the cake from the oven and brush the top with 1 1/2 tablespoons of brandy.

Let sit for 10 minutes in the pan and unmold it onto a rack to cool.



LASTword

Winter came, and frost webbed the windowpanes and veiled the heather on Mount Leinster. I was helping Gran make the Christmas pudding when we heard the novel putt-putt sound everyone in Graiguenamanagh talked about. I rushed to the window as Farmer Michael O'Shea's new black car stopped outside our gate. I ran to open the door.

"Mornin' Mrs. Earls," the farmer said, pulling off his cap. "I'm driving into Bagenalstown on Christmas Eve. Would yourself an' the child like ta drive - ya could see your daughter, Eileen, an' the child could see her mother..."

"Oh, what a grand surprise," Gran said, flashing her wide smile. "Now only for you Mike, we wouldn't be able to see Eileen. It's just too far for our old ass and cart and the bus doesn't get back 'til late."

The next few days we worked to get Mammy's presents ready. I was delighted with myself because I knit a pair of red mittens with round, wide thumbs for Mammy, who had just left hospital after a long sickness.

When Farmer O'Shea arrived, Gran chose the car's front seat, where she sat looking regal in her black, Napoleon-style-hat. Her grey eyes widened as the trees and hedges flew past, and she and Farmer O'Shea talked about Ireland having just been declared a Republic. They agreed times were hard and that we must remember that Ireland could quit the British Commonwealth in 1949.

When we arrived at my mother's, the door flew open and Mammy reached out and hugged me. "Come in!" she said, her green eyes glowing.

I placed Mammy's mittens in their special red wrapper on the hearth ready for Christmas Day.

"What's in the boxes?" Mammy asked Gran after she'd poured her a whiskey.

"Eileen, I've an apple dumpling in one, fresh cut holly in another, and two of the loveliest Rhode Island Reds in the big one," Gran said as she opened the large box and lifted the hens onto the kitchen floor.

They were handsome birds, with short crimson combs atop their heads and full mahogany skirts over white petticoats. They fanned their deep red plumed tails and cocked their heads nervously until Gran circled her hand over them, clucked her tongue and called their names. Then they relaxed, and sunk their necks into their shoulders, the shutters dropping over their eyes.

"This is Rosie, all eight pounds of her, and here's Jane, just as plump! They lay those lovely brown eggs you love," Gran said.

"The man from the council said we can't have hens in town," Mammy said, looking anxious.

"But they're for your Christmas dinner! Rosie'll make a lovely roast an' Jane'll make a bountiful chicken stew..."

"But, who'll kill 'em?" Mammy's voice rose.

"There's nothin' to it! "Just stretch their necks out nice an' long an' snap..." Gran said, miming.

"Oh I couldn't! Could you?" Mammy said.

"No." Gran shook her head. "Not me Eileen. Not a' tall. Sure they know me too well. Eileen, just ask Jimmy Farrell, the grocer... or Jim Jordan, the butcher. Even Tommy the postman would do it."

"I feel strange asking people to help me with my Christmas dinner," Mammy said, her eyes brimming.

"I'll ask Mike O'Shea when he comes back." Gran's face was growing flushed from the talk and the whiskey.

When the farmer returned, Gran asked him to kill the hens so Mammy could have a lovely Christmas dinner. I felt sad because the hens were my playmates. There being no other children around, I'd often pick them up, tuck their heads under their wings, twirl them around and they would sleep standing up. Farmer O'Shea looked down at the hens, then at Gran.

"Well ya know... I'm a hunter. The only way I could kill them hens is with a gun... after a fair chase."

Gran gulped her whiskey and pinned on her hat then swooped down and lifted the hens back into the box. "Girls, we're goin' home!" she said.

It was dark as we bumped over the Tinnahinch Bridge and into Graiguenamanagh. We passed the Anchor Hotel and saw silhouettes laughing beneath the purple-grey pipe and cigarette smoke. The long narrow street was thronged with shadowy people carrying parcels. We passed the Abbey and drove up Wood Road under a bright moon.

Back home, Gran lifted Rosie and Jane from their box.

"You've had a narrow escape, girls," she said. She glanced at me and we exchanged a long, relieved Christmas grin.



By Veronica Breen Hogle



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