



## Danny's Celtic Kids

*"Ireland is where strange tales begin and happy endings are possible"*

Newsletter

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### Danny's Corner

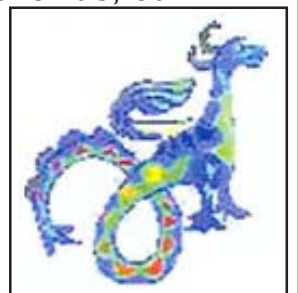
Greetings to all my friends! Christmas will soon be here. Are you getting excited? Me, too. Right now, though, I want to tell you about my experiences of Christmas when I was a lad. Life for us was very different from what you're used to. It was much simpler. First of all, there was no electricity where we lived, so there were no strings of Christmas lights or electric signs or displays.

It was the mid-1950's, and I was a little boy growing up in Ireland with my brothers and sisters. We lived in an area of Ireland on the west coast known as Connemara. For us, Christmas wasn't about games, or shopping, or fancy presents. Christmas was the celebration of the birth of Christ. It was a very holy time for all of us. But, don't think that means that we didn't have fun, because we did.

If the cold winds blowing in off the Atlantic Ocean brought snow, we would play in it, making snowmen, or having snowball fights. If there wasn't any snow, there were still fun things to do. The cold winds would freeze the big puddles of water standing in the fields. When that happened, we would go out in the fields to the frozen water and slide and slide. We didn't have ice skates, but for us, our shoes worked well enough. Sliding was lots of fun.

We didn't need a calendar to tell us that Christmas was coming, because the cold winds of Christmas has other ways of showing us that Christmas was near. People's faces got

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### A Traditional Irish Blessing

May the light always find you on a dreary day.  
When you need to be home, may you find your way.  
May you always have courage to take a chance  
And never find frogs in your underpants.



## Ireland

Ireland is an island in the northern Atlantic Ocean about 50 miles west of Britain across the Irish Sea. Much of the island's higher ground is close to the coast. Almost the entire Atlantic seaboard is made up of cliffs, hills and mountains. The center of the island is covered in farmland and raised peat bogs. This area is drained by the largest river, the Shannon River which is 161 miles long and empties out into the Atlantic Ocean west of Limerick.

The Irish weather is very rainy. But, because of the island's location, the Gulf Stream winds help keep the climate fairly mild. It rarely gets too cold. In the summer, the days are much longer than here in the U.S.A. The sun rises about 4:30 in the morning and doesn't set until around 11:00 at night.

The Irish landscape echoes with the voices of ancient myth. The island's history is alive in every stone, every lake and river, and in her people. Ireland has a few larger cities, like Dublin, Limerick, and Galway, but most of the people still live in smaller towns and villages.

The first humans in Ireland crossed over the sea in wooden boats from Scotland approximately 10,000 years ago. These first settlers were hunter/gatherers who used tools and weapons made from stone and bone. They lived mainly on the shores of the lakes, rivers, or along the coast.



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rosier, just like Santa Claus's face. People who may have been a little grumpy during the year got much nicer. It seemed the rosier their cheeks got, the nicer they got.

Now we didn't call the jolly, king man who came down our chimney and left treats for us, "Santa Claus". To us, he was "Father Christmas". And there were things that needed to be done before he came.

There were men who went around the parishes sweeping out the chimneys of all the houses. They were called "chimney sweeps" and some people believed that it was good luck to shake the hand of a chimney sweep. They swept the chimneys clean of all the soot tha had built up from the turf fires burning all year. That way Father Christmas would not have any trouble getting down the chimney.

A week before Christmas, our Mother would begin making the Christmas plum pudding. We kids picked out one of our socks to wash and get ready to hang from a line over the hearth. These weren't special Christmas stockings. We didn't have those. These were the wool socks knitted by our grandmother or our mother. We wore them to work in the firlds or wore them out in the boats when we were fishing.

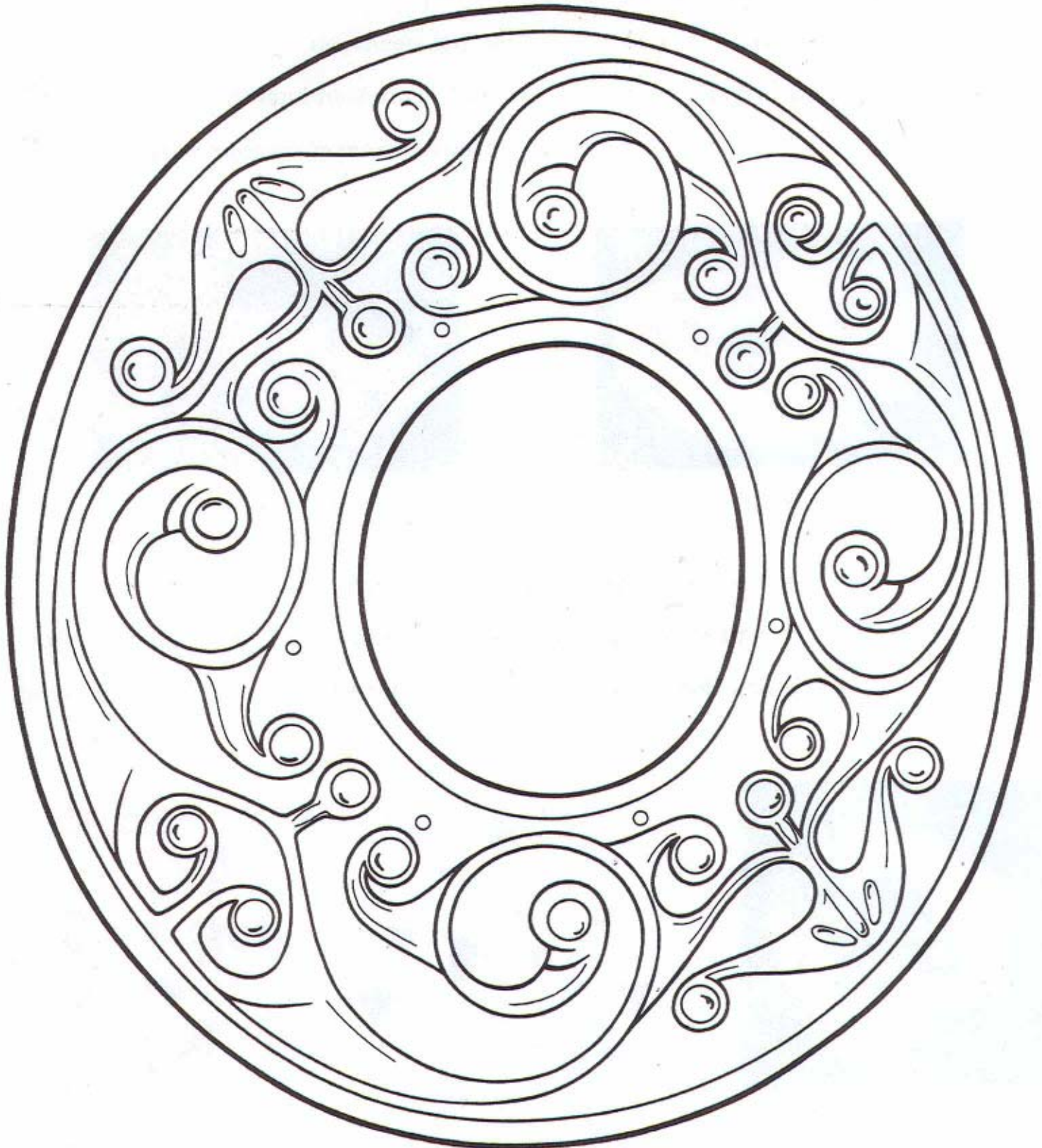
On Christmas Eve, we would hang up our socks. Then the whole family would go to church for midnight Mass. The church choir would sing songs in the Gaelic language. It was beautiful. After Mass we would go home. But, before we went to bed, we left mild and Irish soda bread for Father christmas to eat when he came. Then when we woke up on Christmas morning we would check our socks to see what Father Christmas left us. And sure enough, we'd find a small toy or a chocolate bar and an apple or an orange tucked into our socks.

Christmas evening was busy for us as well. We would get a big jam jar and punch air holes in the lid. We would put bread crumbs into the jar, then quietly and carefully hunt for sleeping wrens in the thatched roof of the house. When we found





Color your own Celtic shield.





Their homes were skin huts that they could pack up and move.

The people who migrated to Ireland around 4000 B.C. brought the knowledge of farming and the first cattle, sheep and goats. They moved inland away from the sea and started clearing the land for farms. They built permanent houses from wood and mud. They still used tools made mostly from stone.

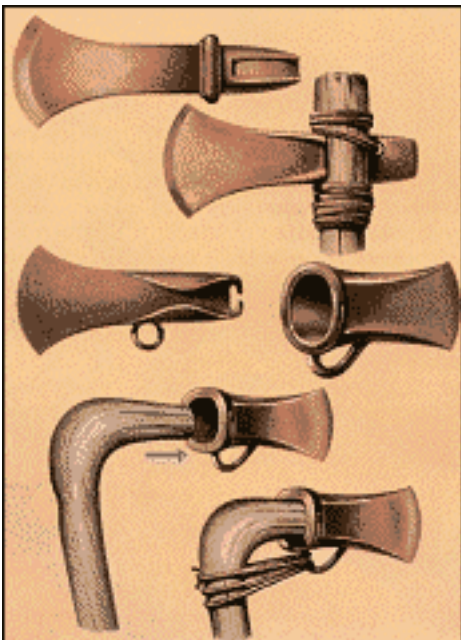


**Flint axe head**



**Stone axe head**

The about 2000 B.C., new settlers moving into Ireland brought something amazing with them. It was called "Bronze". Bronze was the first metal these ancient people used. It was much better than stone for making tools and weapons.



**Bronze tools**



**Bronze arrowheads**



**Bronze cauldron**



When the Celts arrived in Ireland about 2500 years ago, they brought an even better metal with them. Iron. The Celts moved into Ireland in such large numbers that the language and culture of the people already living on the island were replaced by the Celtic language and culture. The Celts were fierce warriors and controlled the country for the next 1000 years. Their legacy still exists throughout the entire island.



**Iron Celtic Shield**



**Aerial view of the royal site of Tara, County Meath**



**Statue of Celtic War Goddess**

Christianity arrived in Ireland during the 4th century A.D. When all the rest of European civilization sank into the Dark Ages, Ireland remained a beacon and a refuge for knowledge and learning.

The Irish people have always had a strong sense for rhythm and poetry. It shows up in all of Irish literature and music, especially in the music. For the Irish people, their music has always been the backbone of their culture. Most traditional music is performed on fiddle, tin whistle, goatskin drums and pipes. Almost every village seems to have a place renowned for its music, where anyone is free to join the musicians and play.



one, we caught it and placed it in the jar for St. Stephen's Day on December 26.

On St. Stephen's Day, we put ribbons around the jar with the wren in it. We tied the jar in a big bunch of holly we had cut. Then we would carry the bush and wren, and our musical instruments with us and visit as many houses as we could in



nearby parishes. We would play our instruments and sing the "Wren Song".



At each stop, someone in the house would drop some money in the box we carried with us. Sometimes we would collect at least a pound (which is about 2 dollars).

We would use the money we earned singing all during the rest of the year to buy little treats at our uncle's store. Most of the time they were sweets.

Here is one of the verses and the chorus of the "Wren Song"

I have a little box under me arm,  
Under me arm, under me arm.  
I have a little box under me arm,  
A penny or tuppence will do it no harm.

(Chorus)

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,  
Saint Stephen's Day was caught in the firs.  
Although he was little, his honor was great.  
Jump up me lad, and give him a treat.

Have a very Merry Christmas!

**Danny**



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