

# THE WINTER SOLSTICE

**Irish people have been marking the winter solstice for thousands of years**

**T**he Longest Night – a woman sits by her fire, wrapped in a blanket to keep out the chill, watching the flames in the quiet of a room. Her house is silent around her, family sleeping as she waits. Lights burn through the darkest hours. When the deep blackness begins to lessen, she makes her way outside, searching the horizon. A shaft of light appears, a bright lance across the land – winter is broken. Summer will return.

She smiles, then returns inside, sticks on the kettle and hops in the shower, before driving herself to work. What? Did you think we were looking at a scene from long ago? Perhaps, but come December 21, this ancient ritual will be repeated in houses all over Ireland. Meán Geimhridh, Midwinter, brings a vigil through the darkness, waiting for the newborn sun.

Irish people have been marking the return of the sun for at least 5,000 years. We have built vast and complex monuments around it, and not just Newgrange. Knockree Passage tomb in Co Kilkenny, which has been called 'the Newgrange of the Southeast', is a fine example, which contains extensive megalithic art,

and not one, but two, chambers with astrological alignments; showing light through the chambers at both sunrise and sunset on the Winter Solstice. Or take a look at Drombeg Circle in Co Cork, a beautiful ring of standing stones which frames a flat topped rock, aligning to the horizon where the sun sets on the Longest Night.

Many traditions, now associated with Christmas and the holiday season, have their origins in the pre-Christian past. We are lucky now to have such a beautiful blend of customs, fitted exactly to the Irish psyche and community spirit. In bringing the evergreen tree inside, we remind ourselves of life within the seeming death of winter, of sustenance and growth that continues through the darkest times. Plants such as holly and ivy compliment this theme, and not forgetting mistletoe, which was especially sacred to our Druidic ancestors as a fertility symbol. Be careful who you kiss under the mistletoe at this year's parties.

Decorating the tree with candles and reflective items such as mirrors and silver coins, in the past stood for an amplification of the natural energies of the living greenery; bringing more light and life to the darkness,

throwing it around the room. Today we use dodgy flickering fairy lights, glitter and tinsel, but the principle is the same. And they are safer, for the inevitable puppy or toddler tree attacks.

Green is the colour of life, and health, but so too is red – the bright blood of life that flows through our veins, keeping our hearts beating and our senses alive. Before a certain drinks company decided it'd look great on the jolly fat guy with the beard, the colour red was valued as a decoration and a reminder of life throughout our homes for the Winter Solstice season.

Wren Day, or Lá an Dreoilín in Irish, was continued until recent times on Stephen's Day, with troupes of children (known as wrenboys) going around the village or town with a fake bird on a decorated stick, singing or dancing and asking 'a penny for the wren'. A little further back, we see a more grizzly form of this, in the hunting and capture of a live bird, which was then used to decorate the pole and held pride of place as a centrepiece for the dance that followed.

In a time of sickness and death for the weak, this may be an echo of an older sacrifice to the Gods of Winter; take one life and spare the others through the darkness until the coming of Spring. Or with the 'winter-wren' being a symbol of the old year, maybe the people simply wanted to make sure that it was well and truly done with.

The singing and dancing part of that tradition is pleasant, at least, and brings us to another Winter Solstice favourite, the feasting and the parties. This is one that most of us keep up, to one degree or another, and having a good party to look forward to can get us through the darkest, coldest mornings. Winter is the time we naturally draw in on ourselves, it can be the loneliest, harshest time of year. It's not just the cold that brings us down, it's the lack of light, and company. In days gone by there was a serious food scarcity through the dark winter days too – but a bright feast, filled with family and friends, was the perfect reminder that the time of dark death still held strong seeds of light and life. So, enjoy your parties.

