

Christmas at the Museum! Ho ho ho!



I love this essay by Jim Murphy, who was the first Director of the Irish Studies Program at Vilanova University. It appeared in Irish America Magazine in 2016. I'm sure many of you have similar memories, and I love his references to his parents' immigrant experiences. I know the years that I have not made it home for Christmas, I've experienced a little lump in my throat (and my parents have too), even though we can video-chat all day if we like. Traditions are set in stone in Ireland it seems, and change is hard!!

A Child's Christmas in Brooklyn.

In the Brooklyn world of my childhood, Ireland seemed especially close at Christmas. While we kids looked forward to Santa, Mom and Dad were looking back to Ireland. Cards would arrive and Mom would cherish each and every one, especially those from her sisters, my Aunts Una and Joan, who would include letters for her to linger over, her eyes growing all teary. My parents left home in the 1920s - Mom at age 16 from Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo, and Dad at 21 from Cloone, Co. Leitrim. They met in an Irish dance hall in Manhattan, courted, married, and worked hard to keep our family of five afloat. They are both long gone now, but each year at Christmas I hear their voices again.

One Christmas was so much like another in those years that they now all blur into one big ball of holidays. Let me pick one sometime in the late 1940s: our apartment on Newkirk Avenue is alive with expectation because today we will bring home our tree. It's sure to be a fine big tree because each year Dad helps Paddy Power sell trees after Sunday mass at St. Jerome's Church on Nostrand Avenue.

"Prime location, that's the key," Dad says. "The subway and church are right there so there's lots of traffic. After mass people are feeling good about things and they know you're one of their own since you're there at the church and Paddy is an usher. Sure you couldn't keep the man out of church, so naturally he gets the business instead of some huckster who might not even be a Christian. There's no flies on Paddy Power, that's for sure. He knows where his bread is buttered and, fair play to him, he's there all year with the ushering so why shouldn't he pick up a few dollars when the time comes? I must say, selling trees to a crowd spilling out of church is 'easy pickins,' as your man would say."

On Sundays leading up to Christmas, the streets are alive with families and trees moving in all directions. Sometimes a father would throw one up on his shoulder and march away, or maybe he'd hug the trunk of a bigger one, his kids grabbing the other end, and off they'd go. Lots of people from apartment buildings like ours have a tree so small they could tuck it under their arms and carry it home, but Dad doesn't approve of those trees. "Dwarfs," he says, "a poor excuse for a tree. You might as well bring home a twig or a stalk of celery."

For us, this year's tree is so big it has to come home by car. Paddy Power and Dad have it all roped up and hoisted up onto the roof of our old 1938 Plymouth and tied it down tight. I'm allowed to stand in the rumble seat to make sure it doesn't move. "Jimmy, hold tight to the seat. If the tree starts to move, give me a shout." Off we go, and I'm like a fireman on a hook and ladder or the lucky trash-man hanging on to the back of his truck. I cling to the seat with one hand and the tree with the other, but I'm able to give a quick wave to anyone who sees us go by. "You okay back there, cowboy?" shouts Dad.

When we get home, Mom and Joan have to come down to help us lug the tree up the flight of stairs to our place, apartment 2A.

"Joe, that's an enormous tree, my God. Where in the name of God will we fit such a tree? Have you gone mad?" Mom inquires.

"Joe, take any tree,' that's what Paddy Power said to me, and so I'd say he was a shocked man to see the one we took. Isn't that right, Jimmy? It's one he could have sold to a bishop, but it's here now, all ours. 'Take any tree you want, Joe' and so I took him at his word." And so we huff and puff our way up the stairs. Joan and I are as happy as Larry to have such a tree.

In the days leading up to Christmas the apartment building becomes a forest of evergreen as people lean their trees on the walls outside their doors. If there's no tree by a door, it must be the apartment of one of the Jewish families, or maybe a widow, or one of the atheists we heard about and prayed for in school, or maybe a Scrooge like Mr. Madden who lives in 3B and is always telling us kids not to play in the hallways on rainy days.

The ceilings in our apartment are high so our tree is always tall but this year's tree is bigger than ever. Dad has to nail it down so it won't topple over. Mom worries about the banging and

the holes in the floor, but Dad says the rug will be put back down after Christmas and who'll be the wiser.

"Joe Murphy, you're mad about Christmas trees. Next year you'll be drilling a hole in the ceiling."

Dad just laughs, "A good idea, Kathleen. Maybe 2A and 3A can share a tree. We'll just send it on up through the floor to them. We'll be like Rockefeller Center. What do you say to that?"

We all laugh to think of the Hurcombs up in 3A watching a tree poke up into their living room as we manage to make it stand and wait for Dad to cut the ropes. When he does, the branches spread like wings to nearly fill the living room.

"A redwood couldn't match it," he says with a big smile, proud as a peacock.

On the Victrola, our cherished Bing Crosby's "Merry Christmas" collection sets the tone. There are five of us and the album has five 78 rpm records so we take turns from oldest to youngest and stack up our choices on the turntable.

Dad picks "Silent Night," then Mom takes "I'll be Home for Christmas," a hard choice for her since "Danny Boy" is on the flip side of that one, even though it isn't a Christmas tune. I go for "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" instead of "Jingle Bells" on the flip side, and Joanie takes "White Christmas," leaving my baby sister Eileen, who doesn't know any tunes at all, with the only one left - "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen."

Dad says, "Let the concert begin." "Silent Night" fills the room as the tree awaits us.

First, my baby sister Eileen is held up and we pretend she puts the star at the top of the tree. Then Dad and I begin with the lights, each of us on a chair since the tree is so high. We slowly work our way down, passing the string of lights from hand to hand. He reaches through all the wide branches to me, with my fingers searching for his on the other side of the tree.

Behind us, Mom and Joan unpack the ornaments, waiting for Dad to signal that we're done and they can begin. Mom has two special ornaments, both from Ireland, and they are given a pride of place near the top of the tree - a crocheted star and a little cottage whose paint has chipped and dulled and whose chimney is missing. Once she has these placed on the tree, Joanie and I are free to add all the other ornaments and school cutouts wherever we wish. Then comes the finishing touch - the tinsel.

We hang a few tangled strands here and there on our own, but then we give way to Dad, as if by some unspoken signal. We don't quite measure up when it comes to hanging tinsel.

It's a special gift and Dad alone has it. His quiet patience, his silent introspection, humming as he works. "Take your pick," Paddy Power had said, and Dad had taken him at his word, so it was his tree. We all do our part to decorate it, but at heart it is his tree.

He spends hours at it, a strand of tinsel at a time, absorbed in it as we all go off to whatever else calls us. But he stays there stepping back and looking at his work, correcting some of the chaos we've created in our clumsy tinsel efforts, a man at peace with himself.

By now, we have heard all of Bing Crosby's Christmas songs at least twice, so our Irish records start to make their way onto the turntable, especially any one with a Christmas theme.

Because he works for Hostess Cakes and at Christmas he sells fruit cakes to one and all, Dad's favorite is the McNulty Family singing "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake." "Give us the Murphy Family version," says Dad, and we all sing along with the McNultys, waiting to change the last line:

*There were plums and prunes and cherries,
There were citrons and raisins and cinnamon too,
There was nutmeg, cloves and berries
And a crust that was nailed down with glue.
There were caraway seeds in abundance
That would work up a fine tummy ache
It would kill a man twice after eating a slice
Of a Hostess Christmas cake.*

Mom's favorite is "Christmas in Killarney" which, like "I'll Be Home for Christmas," makes her eyes fill up. "At home in Mayo," she tells us, "It's God's truth what the song says, 'The door is always open / The neighbors pay a call.'" Joanie and I like best when the song says "And Santa Claus you know, of course / Is one of the boys from home." But Dad says, "Santa's not a Mayo man at all, he's a likable, lovely Leitrim lad like myself."

When we have everything all ready for the lighting, we place our manger at the base of the tree. We have Mary and Joseph, but no Baby Jesus because that's Santa's job when he comes on Christmas Eve. We have two shepherds but only two wise men. Dad says the third one must have followed the wrong star. "He's like your Uncle Frank."

Last come the animals, there's a camel, a cow, and two sheep, all of them lying down. Mom says that's because at home in Ireland all the animals in the fields would lie down on Christmas Eve to wait for the Baby Jesus. We have no fields or animals on Newkirk Avenue, so I picture the animals in Prospect Park Zoo. Come Christmas Eve, surely the lions and tigers and elephants and rhinos will all be lying down for the Baby Jesus.

When the stage is all set, Dad says, "Ready now? Close your eyes and count to three." One, two, three, and we open. The tree fills the room with light, a waterfall of tinsel, and glistening ornaments. It is a Christmas tree of dreams.

"You know, Kathleen," Dad says, "at home in Leitrim we didn't have a tree at all. We hung some holly around the place, candles in the windows, but no tree. No room for one in small house with fifteen of us. So we settled for the holly and the ivy all over the place, just like in the tune."

He winks at us. "No tree, but you know what, Jimmie and Joanie? Santa found us each and every year. At least we had a chimney for him. No chimney here in this apartment, but, by God, we'll have a mighty tree for Santa when he comes."

The Irish American Heritage Museum

This year we want to thank you for supporting the museum. With your help, we have had over 4,000 visitors to our events, and reached 25,000 online. Let's make 2019 even bigger!

Please support our education mission which highlights the Irish-American immigrant experience.

Our events are open to non-members. Check our website and Facebook for updates.

All donations gratefully appreciated.

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\$50, \$75, or at any level. All checks can be made out to IAHM, or you can donate on our website,

www.irish-us.org.

Thank you for considering this request and please join us for all of programs in 2019! In the tradition of Irish hospitality and gratitude, we thank you. "Go raibh maith agat."

First Irish Christmas Market at the Museum!! December 1st, 11 a.m.



Avoid the mall and stock up on Irish food, crafts, books, jewelry, and more. We will be serving Shepherd's Pie, Mac and Cheese, and Potato soup too. Santa Claus will be here checking his list!

Rambling House at the Museum with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann Thursday December 6th 7.30 pm. Donations Appreciated.

After a very successful inaugural event in November, we are delighted to announce that the Rambling House will happen on the first Thursday of every month. We had a fantastic night last month with several musicians and performers who played together as if they had been doing it for years! Join us at the museum for our own rambling house and an informal music and song session by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

Bring your party piece or instrument! Audience participation welcome and encouraged.



Readings of An Irish Christmas
Friday December 7th 7.00 pm. Donations Appreciated.

Hear about old Irish traditions from Pádraig Ó Siochfradha, better known as An Seabhac ('The Hawk') and experience the humor and pathos of John B. Keane, famous Listowel writer. The Museum Ensemble will regale you with stories from simpler times with universal themes.



Repeat Showing of Black '47 at the Irish American Heritage Museum.

Monday December 10th 7.00 pm. \$8 members, \$10 non-members.

The first major movie about the Great Hunger, *Black '47* is a powerful film about the consequences for one family during this terrible time. Noteworthy for its use of Gaelic in the script, and filmed beautifully in Connemara, the movie has an almost classic Western style, and does not shy away from portraying the tragic and awful reality of privation and greed in nineteenth century Ireland. A must-see.



**Dr. Karen Sonnelitter - Book Launch and Lecture
Thursday December 13th 7.00 pm. Donations Appreciated.**

Dr. Sonnelitter will discuss the most provocative and informative primary sources of the Great Hunger. Her book is a documentary history of some of the most important aspects of the administration and experiences of the people at that time. Copies of the book will be available to buy.

“Poor Relief and the State during the Great Irish Famine”

Dr. Karen Sonnelitter
Siena College

Thursday, December 13th
7 p.m. at the
**Irish American Heritage
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370 Broadway
Albany, NY

Copies of the book will be for sale at the event.

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