

LUKE WADDINGE'S CHRISTMAS SONGS AND THE WEXFORD CAROL TRADITION

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Many people of all faiths – and none – enjoy the tradition of carol-singing at Christmas time. In fact, it's hard to avoid it, as so many TV and radio programmes feature carol services from all parts of the world. We Irish are used to hearing childhood favourites such as 'Away in a manger', 'Silent night' and 'An oíche úd i mBeithil', as well as classics such as 'In the bleak mid-winter', sung in the lead-up to Christmas, and we're generally well disposed to the tradition and its practice. What many of us may not be so aware of is an ancient collection of carols deeply rooted in the Irish tradition, carols that are closely associated with Wexford and still celebrated there.

The story begins with a man called Luke Waddinge, who was born in Ballycogly in the barony of Bargy, Co. Wexford in 1628. He was ordained a priest possibly sometime in the late 1650s, was appointed catholic bishop of Ferns in 1683 and remained in that office until his death in 1687. The Waddinge family belonged to the prosperous merchant class and were also descended from Old English catholic roots. However, this prosperity was not destined to last, as Luke Waddinge's father was killed in Cromwell's attack on Wexford town in 1649 and the family's estates were lost under the Cromwellian confiscation. The whole experience was to have a lifelong effect on him. Shortly after, Waddinge left Wexford and moved to Paris, where in late 1651, he enrolled in the Irish College to study for the priesthood.

In 1672, he returned to Ireland and settled in Wexford town, where he concentrated on rebuilding church structures. It was during a period of five or six years from 1678 onwards that he wrote several carols and poems. These were published in Ghent, Belgium, in 1684 as *A smale garland of pious and godly songs composed by a devout man for the solace of his friends and neighbours in their afflictions*. In many of the texts Waddinge drew parallels between the suffering of Christ and that of the Catholic people under the religious restrictions of the Cromwellian regime. He greatly resented these restrictions on

worship and wrote about them in his poem 'On Christmas Day, the Yeare 1678', in which the opening verse gives us a real sense of his frustration:

This is our Christmas day,
The day of Christ's birth
Yet we are far from joy
And far from Christmas mirth.
On Christmas to have no mass
Is our great discontent
That without mass this day should pass
Doth cause us to lament.

In spite of the tone of despondency that marks the poem, Waddinge adopts a more upbeat attitude in his other 'Christmas songs', in which he presents aspects of the story of Christmas and the birth of Christ, in particular, as a message of hope for all Christians. A good example of this is his carol 'First on Christ's Nativity', where he writes:

Here's all the hopes of earth
And the delights of heaven,
The joy of all the angels,
And the great price of men.
The ransom of all sinners,
All captives to set free;
How can we but rejoice,
and all must merry be.

Waddinge's text very quickly became popular and, despite the restrictions on printed Catholic material associated with the Penal Laws, his *Smale garland* was reprinted in London in 1728 and again in 1731 for Drogheda bookseller, James Connor. Around that time an unexpected development helped to encourage further the singing of carols in Wexford. Father William Devereux, who had been in the Irish College in Salamanca,

returned home to the county in 1728 as parish priest of Drinagh. He composed several carols and gathered them together in a manuscript entitled *A new garland containing songs for Christmas*. The manuscript included three of Waddinge's carols, and Diarmaid Ó Muirthe has shown that at least another of them was of English origin, although he accepts the local tradition that Devereux composed the rest.

Father Joseph Ranson, who in 1949 produced an edition of Devereux's collection of carols in the journal *The Past*, claimed that they were first sung in a little chapel at Killiane. The practice spread to other parishes and the carols were sung for many years in Ballymore, Lady's Island, Mayglass, Piercestown, Rathangan, and Tacumshane. The tradition died out in those parishes, however, owing primarily to lack of support from various clergymen, and the tradition now survives only in the parish of Kilmore. Ó Muirthe concurred with Ranson's assertion that they were sung in churches in south Wexford in the eighteenth century and even into the nineteenth century but that not all clergy approved of them. The fact that the carol tradition belonged to the people rather than the institutional church may have been one reason why some clergy disliked them, as there was a strong sense within the Catholic church at the time that the liturgy was the preserve of the clergy and not the people. In any event, the popularity of the carols among the people led to their frequently being copied by hand, and Ó Muirthe noted that this was still happening in the early 1980s as part of the long-established tradition around the singing and preservation of the carols.

Members of the Devereux family, who have been involved in singing the carols for many years in Kilmore, were interviewed as part of an *Irish Times* article in December 1998. They remarked that parish priests in Kilmore had largely been supportive of the singers. This was likely due to a growing appreciation for lay involvement in church ritual following the liturgical revisions of Vatican II, as well as a sense of the importance of preserving this long-established and venerable tradition. In the interview, however, Johnny Devereux recalled one priest who did not want them: 'They say if he'd ha' lived there'd be no carols. He gave us to understand it was our last year singing. Carols had always been sung during the collection or during communion but this priest changed that. He told us it was our last year. Then he died in November – just before Christmas!'

Father Ranson also explained that, traditionally, the choir consisted of six men. The practice for many years was that the six would divide into two groups of three and sing alternate stanzas of each carol. Harmonies or accompaniment are not used, and individual singers are free to ornament the melodies in their own way, as long as they don't stray too far from the others. Each song is initiated by a single voice and the others join in after a line or two. Johnny Devereux noted that the approach had evolved from the mid-1990s: the six no longer split into two trios, and all six now sing each verse.

The tradition of carol-singing in Kilmore, south Wexford, can trace its roots back to Luke Waddinge and his *Smale garland* of 1684. It's a celebration of a rich tradition that has survived through the centuries owing to the input and dedication of those who came after him – Fr Devereux initially and the men who initiated that amazing line of succession whereby the carols and the Christmas message itself were preserved not only in manuscript form but in an ongoing act of oral worship and celebration. The carol sung on Christmas Day, Devereux's 'On Christ's Nativity', illustrates this very succinctly:

The darkest night in December,
Snow nor hail nor winter's storm
Shall not hinder us for to remember
The babe that on this night was born.
With shepherds we are come to see
This lovely infant's glorious charms,
Born of a maid as prophets said,
The God of love in Mary's arms.

These Wexford carols not only act as a form of remembrance of the past – especially of those who sang them annually and thereby kept the tradition alive – but also speak to each new generation about the great Christian mystery of redemption and salvation through the birth and suffering of Christ as Saviour of humankind. The brief video clips included in the reading list below will provide readers with a real sense of this, as we see examples of the traditional style of singing and of more modern interpretation. While the sentiments in some of the carols reflect the dark and challenging times in which they were composed, the

central Christian message of faith and hope permeates through them all. In that respect, it is appropriate to leave the last word to Fr Devereux in his ‘Carol for Twelfth Day’:

Farewell, good Christians, farewell too,
Many a happy Christmas I wish you,
With a blessed end hence to ensue,
Through the merits of sweet Jesu.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

William Devereux, ‘A Carol for Twelfth Day’, performed by Giovanna Feeley
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mMEgdYpTxk>).

William Devereux, ‘On Christ’s Nativity’, performed by the Kilmore Carollers
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qV52t75mxWQ>).

Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *The Wexford carols assembled and edited* (Port Laoise, 1982).

Diarmaid Ó Muirthe provides the voice-over on a 1977 clip of the Kilmore Carollers
(<https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/922-christmas-tv-past/287756-kilmore-carols/>).

‘The Kilmore carollers’, *The Irish Times*, 2 December 1998
(<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/the-kilmore-carollers-1.228070>).

Joseph Ranson, ‘The Kilmore Carols’, *The Past* 5 (1949), 61-102.

Thomas Wall, *The Christmas songs of Luke Wadding (Bishop of Ferns, 1683-1688)*
(Dublin, 1960).