An investigation into the food related traditions associated with the Christmas period in rural Ireland

Stephanie Byrne  
TU Dublin, stephanie.byrne@tudublin.ie

Kathleen Farrell  
TU Dublin, kathleen.farrell@tudublin.ie

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Recommended Citation
Stephanie Byrne & Kathleen Farrell (2021) An investigation into the food related traditions associated with the Christmas period in Rural Ireland, Folk Life, DOI: 10.1080/04308778.2021.1957427

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To cite this article: Stephanie Byrne & Kathleen Farrell (2021): An investigation into the food related traditions associated with the Christmas period in Rural Ireland, Folk Life, DOI: 10.1080/04308778.2021.1957427

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957427

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Published online: 24 Aug 2021.

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An investigation into the food related traditions associated with the Christmas period in Rural Ireland

Stephanie Byrne\textsuperscript{a} and Kathleen Farrell\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Gastronomy and Food Studies, TU Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; \textsuperscript{b}School of Culinary Arts & Food Technology, TU Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The interdisciplinary nature of food studies lends itself to the study of food through many avenues, most notably in this research, through folklore and the oral history transcripts of the Schools’ Collection made by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1937–1938. Folklore can give us an insight into sometimes overlooked features of society and how people’s lives can be studied and highlighted through their relationship with food. The Christmas period was an extremely important time in Irish tradition, and food was a main aspect of that celebration. This paper, therefore, at first delves into the literature surrounding Christmas, folklore, and food; diet and social class; gender, and food in rural Ireland, before comparing it with the oral history transcripts of the National Folklore Collection’s online archive, to unearth a better understanding of the relationship and the role of food in the Christmas festival in Ireland’s recent past.

\textbf{Introduction}

The Christmas period in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century rural Ireland, like today, was a time of family, food, and celebration. Even those who had very little throughout the year, had food to celebrate with at Christmas, as the spirit of \textit{meitheal} was alive and well in the rural Irish community.\footnote{Christmas Day was one of the most important feasts of the liturgical calendar. After the long fast of Advent and a year of hard work, Christmas was a time of rest, feasting and conviviality. However, it was also a time rich in ritual and custom, with a mix of both religious and secular beliefs centred around food, and a time where the gendered division of labour and celebration was most evident.} Christmas Day was one of the most important feasts of the liturgical calendar. After the long fast of Advent and a year of hard work, Christmas was a time of rest, feasting and conviviality. However, it was also a time rich in ritual and custom, with a mix of both religious and secular beliefs centred around food, and a time where the gendered division of labour and celebration was most evident.\footnote{This paper aims to investigate the food-related traditions associated with the Christmas period in rural Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century to determine what new knowledge can be added to the cultural history of Irish food. Taking the lead of previous scholars of folklore, this paper looks through a food lens at the most important period in the secular and religious Irish calendar, the Twelve Days of Christmas. It critically reviews the folkloric scholarship associated with Christmas, as well as recent work on food and folklore, in order to place this activity within a broad socio-historical context.}

This paper aims to investigate the food-related traditions associated with the Christmas period in rural Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century to determine what new knowledge can be added to the cultural history of Irish food. Taking the lead of previous scholars of folklore, this paper looks through a food lens at the most important period in the secular and religious Irish calendar, the Twelve Days of Christmas. It critically reviews the folkloric scholarship associated with Christmas, as well as recent work on food and folklore, in order to place this activity within a broad socio-historical context.
as the social and food histories of Ireland, before delving into the oral testimonies of the National Folklore Collection Schools’ Archive, to discover the true role of food at Christmas and reveal any nuances in the diet of the rural Irish community that may have been overlooked by more general studies of Irish food history and folklore.

Food and Folklore

Folkloristics began as a way of studying national and community identities through the oral histories of its peasants. Scholars used these oral histories to better understand the customs and traditions of a place and what these traditions meant to the people participating in them. The interdisciplinary nature of food makes it the perfect conduit to study these traditions, as not only does it play an integral role in a person’s daily life but also in their rituals, festivals, and celebrations. Folklore has been an essential element of Irish history for generations, particularly in the study of food and the foods of the middle and lower classes of Irish society, which deemed an everyday and unimportant topic, were excluded from historical record. The folklore archives, therefore, often the only record of these foods, have been used as primary source in several investigations into the everyday diet of Ireland, including Lysaght’s study of milk and milk magic, and Mac Con Iomaire’s research on the evolution of eggs and corned beef.

The archives of the National Folklore Collection have also been invaluable to the study of Irish customs and traditions. Folklorists, such as Kevin Danaher in his book *The Year in Ireland*, have drawn on these oral histories along with other contemporary sources to produce in-depth investigations of Irish calendar customs. Bríd Mahon, who built on Danaher’s investigation by looking at these customs from a food perspective, was also clearly influenced by L.M. Cullen’s in-depth analysis of the Irish diet. Mahon uses a similar approach adopted by Cullen to divide the history of the Irish diet into three stages: the Norman invasions in the twelfth century, the adoption of the potato in the seventeenth century, and the introduction of tea and white bread in the late nineteenth century. This is a common framework adopted in the study of the Irish diet, first implemented by A.T Lucas and it is this final stage, the late nineteenth and twentieth-century, that will be the focus of this paper.

Food in rural Ireland

By 1850, the diet of the rural Irish population, though less precarious, was relatively unchanged from before the Great Famine. Cheaper and imported goods were eaten by the lower classes, while home produced and high-quality goods were exported, as it was more profitable for farmers to sell their produce to pay their rents and feed their families on cheaper alternatives. Though Ireland avoided intense urbanization, rural Ireland still witnessed ‘sweeping changes in the second half of the century as far as bread was concerned’, with the consumption of flour doubling between 1860 and 1900. Tea, according to documentary evidence, which was an essential part of Christmas celebrations along with tarts, cakes, and jams, went from being a rare luxury item to becoming universally consumed ‘in the twenty years after 1850’. 

*Note:* The numbers in the text correspond to the numbered references at the end of the chapter.
**Celebratory foods**

This increase in ‘home and shop baking’ led to an increase in the consumption of baked goods and the introduction of high-tea. A progression of the well-established afternoon tea prepared for visitors, high tea included the addition of cold meats along with the home-baked soda breads, shop cakes and apple pies that had become and essential part of the evening meal. High-tea eventually replaced the evening meal in rural Irish homes when entertaining company. Shop bought products were considered superior to their home-produced counterparts. ‘Shop goods’ implied a higher standard of living and so were an essential part of social occasions and celebrations in the Irish home. This modernization of Irish food consumption, enabled by market and social forces, led to a more standardized diet overall with fewer regional differences, and continued, with little change in rural farming communities, until the late twentieth-century.

**Methodology**

As previously mentioned, the classic primary sources of historical information available, such as governmental records and contemporary diaries and media, do not suffice in a study of rural food, as historically, the lives, and especially the foods, of the rural Irish classes before the twentieth-century, were rarely deemed worthy of recording. The folkloric records, therefore, of the National Folklore Collection, where corroborated with secondary resources, have played an invaluable role in the current project.

Due to restrictions implemented by the Irish Government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, personal access to the archives was impossible. This research, therefore, availed of the National Folklore Collection’s (NFC) digital archive, available to the public through their website [http://www.dúchas.ie](http://www.dúchas.ie). The digitization of the Main Manuscript Collection, one of the largest collections of folklore in Europe, though progressing steadily, has yet to be completed, and so this research availed of the fully digitized and accessible manuscripts from the NFC’s, Schools’ Collection 1937-‘38.

**The schools’ collection 1937-’38**

The Schools’ Scheme, as it was originally known, was initiated in the mid-1930s by the then Irish Folklore Commission with the approval of the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers’ Organization. The aim of the scheme was to broaden the geographical scale of the Commission’s folkloric collections over the 26 counties of the Irish Free State, by using national school children as collectors.

Prior to the commencement of the scheme, the Irish Folklore Commission distributed a guiding booklet, published by the Department of Education, to all schools. The booklet, *Irish Folklore and Tradition* (1937) included clear instructions for the pupils to follow, including 55 subject headings. These ‘Subjects for Compositions’ included sample essay titles and questions as a guide for pupils when writing up their findings. The subject heading of most relevance to this research, ‘Festival Customs’, includes St. Stephen’s Day as the main example, laying out some of the customs and traditions associated with it.
Other ‘important festivals’ included were ‘the Twelve Days of Christmas, St. Stephen’s Day, New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day, [and] the Epiphany (“Little Christmas”)’ (see Figure 1).

Though the Commission did not specifically ask for the foods associated with these festivals, the responses to the ‘local customs and observances’ associated with ‘the Twelve Days of Christmas’ were resoundingly food related.

**Sampling**

These subject headings and topics were then used in the creation of the Schools’ Collection Subject List, which can be found on the Dúchas website. The topics from this list most relevant to this research include the topics of ‘Christmas’, ‘New Year’, ‘Feast of St. Stephen’ and ‘Epiphany’. The total number of transcripts included over these four topics was 983 (Figure 2) and varied in length from one paragraph to three pages.

However, as the authors level of Irish was insufficient for a proper analysis of the Irish language transcripts, a common limitation of studying folkloric material, this research focused on the English language transcripts only, reducing the number to 873. This data set was then broken down by relevance, to reveal the number of English transcripts that pertained to food, resulting in a sample size of 425 transcripts (Figure 3).
These 425 Christmas period transcripts were then organized by county in order of highest to lowest number of transcripts (Figure 4), and a thematic analysis was conducted. However, it became clear during analysis that additional quantitative methods were required to supplement and validate the qualitative findings and so a further quantification of the foods mentioned in the Christmas period transcripts was carried out.

Figure 2. ‘Christmas period’ transcripts divided by topic.

Figure 3. ‘Christmas period’ transcripts: English transcripts vs food related.
Christmas in Irish tradition

Christmas, as Danaher describes was, ‘Of all the Christian festivals’, ‘considered by the Irish people to be the most important’. The Christmas period, which runs from the 25th of December until the 6th of January, and is commonly known as the Twelve Days of Christmas, was observed as a time of rest, celebration, and indulgence. Prior to the 1900s, rural Irish families ‘toiled’ and saved all year to have money to spend on Christmas food and drink and even in the contemporary context of 1937 and 1938, where money was more ‘plentiful’, food still played a central role in the Christmas festivities.

Preparing for Christmas

Preparations for the Christmas period began weeks in advance and the food was organized with great precision. Women are traditionally viewed as the ‘gatekeepers of food’ and the women of rural Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries were no different. Irish farm women oversaw the milking and the rearing of poultry, for both sale and household consumption. This economic role was invaluable to rural Irish women and the income it provided was essential in the purchasing of coveted ‘shop goods’ for the family, and even on occasion for themselves during the festive period. The importance placed on the ‘woman of the house’ in the transcripts and her many preparations for Christmas, cannot be overstated. She fattened the fowl for market, which she either killed or sold live, keeping what she needed for her own Christmas feasts. She baked sweet cakes, currant cakes, breads, and puddings. She went to town to sell the fowl and to buy the Christmas provisions. She was the last to bed on Christmas Night, making sure everything was left in the proper order for the next morning, and the first to rise Christmas Day, ensuring the dinner would be ready. She was aided in her preparations by the other, younger women of the house, who helped with the baking of cakes and puddings, preparing tea and suppers, and collecting food for the poor.
**Buying the Christmas**

There was little mention of the man of the house when it came to food preparations for the Christmas. However, he played an important role in accompanying the woman of the house to ‘buy the Christmas’. Bringing home the Christmas, or the ‘Christmas grog’, as it was described by one transcript from Co. Mayo, was a much-anticipated ritual carried out by man and wife in the days or weeks leading up to the Christmas, with some in Cavan even leaving it as late as Christmas Eve. Travel was mainly conducted using animals and two wheels and so anything that was needed for the festive season was usually bought in one outing. The ‘Big Market’, which was held in the nearest town in the weeks leading up to Christmas was an opportunity for the family to sell their farm produce and use the proceeds to purchase ‘the biggest store of the year’ when ‘all of the provisions for Christmas’ were bought. These markets were of incredible importance as families came to sell their produce, of ‘butter, eggs, hens, geese, turkeys, [and] vegetables’, so they could use the proceeds to purchase the seasonal goods needed for the Christmas table including ‘meat, dried fruits, spices, sugar and tea’, as well as ‘candles, tobacco, whiskey, wine, and beer’.

The American letter also played an important part in buying the Christmas, with diligent expatriates making sure to have the money home in time for the market.

**The Christmas box**

These outings were also an opportunity to collect the ‘Christmas Box’ from the local shopkeeper who showed appreciation to their customers through the gift of ‘seasonal dainties’. The contents of the Christmas Box ranged from the ingredients for the Christmas pudding in old tradition, to sweet cakes and alcohol in the 1930s. The contents of these boxes were dependent on the amount spent by the customer throughout the year and were of great social importance. Once the provisions and the Christmas box were collected, and any additional gifts were purchased, everything was brought home to be ‘locked in a press until the great day’. It emerges that, by 1937, this custom of the Christmas box was showing signs of decline in some areas.

Some time ago too, a Christmas Box – a bottle of whiskey and some tea and sugar was given by shopkeepers. Now that is all done away with.

**Christmas feasting and mealtimes**

The most important and celebrated feasts of the Twelve Days of Christmas were that of Christmas Eve, or Christmas Night as it was more commonly known, and Christmas Day. The remaining feast days of St. Stephen’s Day, New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, and Epiphany were observed with feasts of a much smaller nature. It was common for the same foods to be consumed throughout the Christmas period and the most common meal enjoyed was that of a goose or turkey for dinner, followed by plum pudding or sweet cake and tea.

**Christmas night – ‘the greatest night of all the year’**

The anticipation that surrounded Christmas Eve, or Christmas Night as it was most referred to, is evident by the sheer volume of attention it received in the transcripts.
Christmas Night signalled the beginning of the festival, after the long fast of Advent and months of physical and spiritual preparations.\textsuperscript{31} It was customary for work outside of the home to finish before noon and for all family members to return to the family abode before dark. Those who could not make it home were present through their letters and packages.

Christmas Eve was usually spent cleaning, baking, and preparing the festive foods for dinner the next day. The lighting of candles at nightfall, however, was an extremely important tradition observed throughout the country and signalled the start of the Christmas festivities. Electricity did not come to rural Ireland until after World War II, with the first phase not completed until 1964,\textsuperscript{32} and so the lighting of the Christmas candles, commonly set in a turnip and lit by the youngest member of the family, was a much-anticipated custom.\textsuperscript{33} It was customary for everyone to remain home Christmas night and for the family to celebrate together with as much eating and drinking as they could possibly fit in before midnight. ‘Big Christmas Night’, as it was commonly known, was marked by two suppers.\textsuperscript{34} The first, consisted of salted fish such as hake, cod or ling served with potatoes and a butter and milk sauce. The second, a supper of sweet cakes and/or puddings, was later enjoyed with tea, punch, and other celebratory beverages.

There were, however, some unusual foods worth mentioning, such as one mention of bananas in Co. Meath\textsuperscript{35} and the making of ‘Hotballs’ in Co. Cavan where:

you first put a pan on the fire and grease it with butter and then add sugar, pepper, some butter and caraway seed. Keep it stirred until it melts out and take it up and have a plate ready covered with flour and take it out in spoonfuls on the plate and roll it in a ball.\textsuperscript{36}

There were those who observed the fast until midnight, enjoying a feast of pre-cooked goose, which the woman of the house had prepared, while there were others that enjoyed a third supper of rice pudding or tapioca before bed. It was a very special night when the excitement and anticipation that had been building up for the Christmas period could finally be realized and the special foods and beverages that had been purchased and locked away could finally be enjoyed.

\textit{Christmas day}

Christmas Day was spent in old tradition, like today, at home with family. Most fasted until after Mass, preferring to start their day with communion but once home, a meat breakfast, usually consisting of ham, was consumed, while others celebrated by cutting the currant cake. The preparations for the Christmas dinner began as early as possible and were the sole care of the women of the house, while the men took themselves outdoors to take part in the favoured pastimes of their locality such as hurling or hunting.\textsuperscript{37}

According to Danaher, Christmas dinner was ‘traditionally the most plentiful and elaborate of the year’. Beef, roasted or boiled, was a popular Christmas dish prior to the 1900s, while corned beef was commonly consumed more by the poor and working classes. Fowl, mainly chicken or goose, was a popular choice with well-to-do farmers in Leinster and Munster, along with ‘bacon and mutton or beef . . . cakes, puddings and pies.’\textsuperscript{38}

The most common Christmas dinner of 1930s rural Ireland, according to the transcripts was a turkey or goose, usually stuffed with a bread or potato stuffing, and served
with cabbage and potatoes. It was sometimes accompanied with beef or bacon. Chicken, though not frequently mentioned, was favoured by those of a lesser means, while ‘even the very poorest [had] bacon.’ Dinner was usually followed by plum pudding, or by those who preferred to keep the plum pudding for supper, by tea and cake, while others opted for the more traditional rice pudding.

The number of times people ate and the times at which they ate, were constantly highlighted throughout the transcripts. The usual mealtimes were not adhered to during the Christmas period as the people preferred to eat by candlelight and so feasting usually took place after 5pm, or ‘nightfall’. The frequency at which the people ate was also surprising, with some having three meals after 6pm, usually consisting of a dinner, followed by tea and sweet cakes, and a supper of plum pudding, rice pudding, or bread.

**Feast of St. Stephen**

The feast of St. Stephen is notable for its abstinence from meat as a preventative from illness for the coming year. The Wren Boys who traditionally went from door to door playing music and collecting donations on St. Stephen’s Day were commonly treated to sweet cakes, bread, and tea. Prior to 1900, any money collected was often used to buy food and drink for the ‘Wren party’ or spent ‘drinking out the sum total of the day’s collection’ in the nearest public house. According to the *Irish Times*’ Christmas Eve edition of 1874, drinking and drunkenness was a major issue during Christmas period, as even though consumption of spirits was down, beer drinking, a favourite of the Wren Boys, had greatly increased. By the late 1870s, however, overall alcohol consumption in Ireland had reduced and by the 1930s the Wren balls and feasts were declining in popularity. The Wren Boys were now younger in age and preferred to spend their money on fruit and sweets, rather than parties and alcohol, and the 1940s it was common to see both boys and girls taking part in the fun.

**New Year**

The new year was not celebrated with much fervour in old tradition, and there is very little mentioned on the foods eaten during New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day in the transcripts. There were, however, many food-related prognostications associated with these days. On New Year’s Eve for example, it was customary to eat as much as possible to ensure there would be plenty of food for the coming year as it was believed that whatever you were doing that night, you would be doing for the rest of the new year. Another custom associated with keeping hunger at bay, was the ‘hitting’ or ‘throwing’ of a cake, loaf, or brack, against the front door. This was also noted as a popular custom performed on the eve of the Twelfth Day and was commonly accompanied by a prayer or Irish saying. There were many iterations of this custom, but the reasoning was always the same – to protect those within from starvation and sickness for the coming year.

**Epiphany**

The 6th of January has many guises in folk memory dating from before, and after, its introduction by the Catholic Church as the Epiphany. Also known as the Twelfth Night, it carried many prognostications such as the widely performed death divination using 12 candles, or, in Co. Mayo, the belief that eating only 12 bites on the Twelfth night
protected from illness for the coming year. It was also widely believed that the waters
turned to wine at midnight on the Feast of the Epiphany, a phenomenon, like so many
others, that had very few witnesses.  

The preparation of a celebratory feast on Epiphany has survived from the Gregorian
calendar, when Christmas Day was celebrated on the 6th of January instead of the 25th of
December. This change from Gregorian to Julian calendar is considered by many to be
the probable origin of the name ‘Little Christmas’, by which Epiphany is more commonly
known in some parts of Ireland, though it also has connections to the gendering of feast
days. In the case of Nollaig na mBan or Women’s Christmas as the 6th was also known,
this celebratory feast mainly consisted of leftovers from the Christmas period or accord-
ing to Danaher, of ‘cake, tea, [and] wine’, the ‘dainties preferred by women. There are
only three mentions of Women’s Christmas in the English language transcripts, ‘Lady’s
Christmas’ in Offaly, ‘Nodlag na mBan’ in Limerick, and in Cork ‘the hard-working
mothers used to have their own day on “Little Christmas Day”’ and there were no
mentions of specific foods eaten that day. The lack of references to Women’s Christmas is
most likely due to its exclusion as an example in the list of festive days given in the
information booklet sent to schools.

The return to plain fare
According to the transcripts, an extra pudding was usually made to celebrate
St. Stephen’s Day, New Year’s Day, and Little Christmas, while a dinner of goose
or turkey was enjoyed, followed by the plum pudding and ‘plenty of sweet cakes.’
There was one mention of a chicken being prepared for St. Stephen’s Day, and one
mention of beef and fish bought for New Year’s Day, however, most foods men-
tioned were traditional Christmas fare, before returning to ‘plain fare’ after the 6th
of January.

Every effort, however, was made to make the meals of the Christmas period stand out
from the rest of the year. Whether this was done by eating in the parlour, pulling out the
table, eating at the big table, putting the candle in the middle of the table, or taking down
the delph; the meals of the Christmas Period were unlike any other meal eaten through-
out the year.

Commensality and community
Eating together as a family was an essential part of the Christmas feast. Those who were
abroad were remembered during the celebrations through the money, cards, letters and
presents they sent home, while relatives who had passed were always remembered, and
every effort made to include them in the celebrations. Mealtimes were considered ‘family
time’ and visiting during dinner or supper was frowned upon or considered ‘bad form’.
Outside of mealtimes, however, visiting with friends, family and neighbours was greatly
encouraged by the rural community. From the men making ‘calls’ on each other, to the
women meeting for tea; the children going from house to house looking for apples and
sweet cake, to the people leaving food out for the wandering souls; there was always an
abundance of commensality at Christmas.
Community spirit
There was also a great sense of community spirit centred around food at Christmas and neighbours took care of each other. Prior to the 1900s, when the local farmer killed a sheep, pig or cow for the Christmas, it was shared among friends, neighbours, and those less well off. In the 1930s, the poor were given gifts of fowl, butter, milk, vegetables, tea, and sugar by their rural neighbours. While in the town, the Christmas carollers collected money to buy provisions for the poor. There were ‘joins’ and parties, dances and balls, where everyone got a drink, and everyone was ‘fed’. This also included the postman who was offered food and drink in every house on Christmas Day, until 1936 when postal deliveries on Christmas Day were curtailed.

Religious and secular superstitions at Christmas
There were many religious and secular superstitions associated with food during the Christmas period with many folk tales surrounding food. Stories abounded about what happens when people did not give food, when they turned down food, when they stole food, and when they did not have enough food or drink. Like most Christmas customs, these legends, which served to reinforce social norms, whether religious or secular, had consequences for those who did not heed them. However, there were many instances where the culprit is never seen or heard from again, and one must wonder how the story was passed on.

Many of the food-related superstitions included in the transcripts date from before the 1900s. However, certain customs and superstitions persisted in different areas, therefore making the divide between pre-1900s and the 1930s difficult to determine. The custom of feeding the animals a little extra on Christmas Night, for example, was considered by many to have died out by the 1900s.\(^50\) However, there was still those who could be found carrying out the custom in the same localities in which it was believed to be extinct in the 1930s.\(^51\)

Plum pudding
There were many superstitions regarding the plum pudding in old tradition. The stirring of the pudding was very important, and some believed that everyone in the house should stir the pudding, as it would not boil well otherwise. This stirring of the pudding for good luck was a common custom and was occasionally accompanied by a wish and linked to the similar luck of churning. How well the pudding cooked was also important. In Louth, for example, if the pudding cracked while boiling ‘there would be a scatter in the family’ and if it broke, there would be a death.\(^52\) Other superstitions associated with the eating of the plum pudding in Kildare included the belief that if a person ‘tastes nine bits of plum puddings during the Christmas-time he will be much wealthier the following Christmas.\(^53\) It was also considered bad luck to cut the pudding before Christmas Day and once cut, everyone had to have a slice.

Other food related superstitions
There were less observed customs too, such as four references to the luck associated with mince pies, where: ‘in as many houses as you eat mince pies you will have as many happy months.\(^54\) Two of these references, however, mention the English origins of this custom and mince pies are not referenced in any other transcripts relating to Christmas food.
A few mentions of marriage divination regarding Christmas foods can be found in the transcripts. The baking of a barmbrack at Christmas, for example, carried the same importance as Halloween, where whoever found the ring would be the first to marry. There was also the belief that if a girl found the wish bone of the turkey and hung it over the door, the first man to walk under it would marry her.

**Religious superstitions**

Apart from the more preventative and divination superstitions, most superstitions relating to the Christmas period were religious in nature. The most religious observance, however, was pertaining to Christmas Night and the journey of the Holy Family to Bethlehem. It was widely believed that the Blessed Virgin and Child travelled the roads of Ireland on Christmas Night, visiting the many houses along the way. The Christmas candles, which were an extremely powerful reinforcement and symbol of hospitality, were thought of as lighting their way and some even left the doors of their houses unlocked, and food on the table for them to partake of, if they wished. This hospitality also extended to the poor and wandering souls that may be about on Christmas Night and, though a dying custom by the 1930s, and too dangerous to continue in towns like Faythe in Co. Wexford, there were still those who observed the custom into 1937 and 1938.

**Luxuries and novelties**

The much awaited ‘Christmas dainties’ were eaten only once a year and were therefore considered a great luxury and novelty. Prior to the 1900s, goose was the most common fowl eaten for Christmas dinner as turkeys had not yet been widely introduced to Ireland. The bird was served with bacon, cabbage, and potatoes, and was followed by potato cakes, boxty and currant cake, which were then considered luxuries, while as previously mentioned, tea was rarely consumed by the farming classes before 1850 and was considered a novelty only to be enjoyed on Christmas Night or morning. The most common vegetable mentioned, outside of potatoes, a few references to cabbage and one mention of parsnips, was the turnip. However, it was usually described as a candle holder for the larger than normal Christmas candles.

By the 1930s these foods had progressed to include more modern tastes. Table 1 highlights the top ten foods mentioned in the Schools’ Collection ‘long ago’ – at least 30 years prior to the 1937, and ‘nowadays’ – referring to the 1937-’38 period. Turkey and goose were widely eaten, and plum pudding had become a staple Christmas food. The potato cakes, boxty and currant cakes of long ago, had been replaced by Christmas cakes, sweet cakes, and puddings, while tea had become an essential and everyday commodity. Bread and fruit were widely consumed, especially apples and oranges, along with sweets for children, and bacon and beef were common accompaniments to the Christmas dinner. Fowl was consumed throughout the Christmas period, with some families killing three or four geese to last the season, while there were a few mentions of chicken or hen and one mention of duck. Fish on the other hand was kept for days of abstinence, with ling, salmon and hake mentioned. The flour, sugar, and dried fruit in the Christmas boxes, had been replaced by sweet cakes and Whiskey (Table 1) or wine, and lemonade had become a popular drink with children.
Table 1. Top ten Christmas foods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Long Ago'</th>
<th>No. of Mentions</th>
<th>'Nowadays'</th>
<th>No. of Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(At least 30 years prior to 1937)</td>
<td>(1936–37)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Plum Pudding</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>Potatoes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
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<td>Goose</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>Whiskey</td>
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<td>Fresh Fruit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sweet Cake</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cake</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alcohol at Christmas

Alcohol was still considered a luxury in the 1930s with references to price increases on beer, whiskey and stout compared with 'long ago' – prior to the 1900s. Wren parties which had previously ended with 'barrels of porter' and evenings spent in the public house were spent eating fruit and sweets as not only had the price of alcohol increased but the age of the Wren boys had decreased. Alcohol had however become more integrated into the celebration of Christmas, especially regarding Christmas visiting. Neighbours brought the ‘Christmas bottle’ with them or went from house to house trying the whiskey from each other’s Christmas Boxes. Punch was very popular, and though most households made a batch on Christmas Night, it was enjoyed by all throughout the season. Men were usually observed drinking whiskey, stout, or porter, with one reference to a hot whiskey, and another to a whiskey punch. Women most commonly drank wine and there were two mentions of claret. There were few references to beer outside of the lyrics of the Wren song and only one mention of port. However, despite such changes, alcohol remained an integral part of the Christmas celebrations and considered by all to be the measure of a good host.

Food as a socio-economic identifier

Certain foods were considered an identifier of lower and higher income families and the type of fowl consumed at Christmas was related to a person’s means. In Co. Mayo, prior to the 1900s, stuffed goose was considered an identifier of ‘the rich’ as was turkey in Co. Meath, while the poor could not afford turkey, but could afford bacon. By the 1930s it was considered uncommon not to be able to afford goose or turkey, but there were still those who could only afford a chicken, hen, or duck, at Christmas, and tea was still considered a luxury by the poor. The type of fowl consumed on Christmas Day was also a sign of the size of one’s family and a big family ate goose or turkey, while a small family had hen or cock. There were many mentions of eating Christmas dinner in the parlour, providing yet another indicator of a person’s means in 1930s rural Ireland, where the poorer classes only had one main room and two bedrooms.59

Conclusions and discussions

There is a wealth of literature written on the history of Christmas and the foods and traditions associated with the festival. However, there is a tendency to generalize the traditions, ignoring both their regionality and subtle differences in the celebration of
Christmas through the social classes. Therefore, material written from a folkloric perspective, dealing with the oral histories of rural dwellers has yielded greater detail regarding the food traditions of the rural population in Ireland\textsuperscript{60} as too did the many social and food histories of Ireland referenced in this paper. To more fully understand the food traditions of those underrepresented in official histories, the folkloric oral histories of the Schools’ Collection were analysed. These testimonies, collected by national school children in rural Ireland between 1937 and 1938 provide another invaluable source for Irish cultural history and give a voice to the people who informed them, a voice unheard of in contemporary historical literature which favoured the elite members of society.\textsuperscript{61}

As is the case today, food was integral to the celebration of Christmas, and this can be seen by the wealth of information provided on the foods and food traditions included in the Christmas period transcripts. This allowed for an in-depth analysis which revealed insights into the role of food at Christmas and provided a vivid and personalized picture of the Christmas period in rural Ireland during the nineteenth and twentieth-century. The history of Irish traditions is clear when read from the transcripts; staying home Christmas Day, Mass Christmas Eve, drinking and get togethers St. Stephen’s Day, proving that Yuletide traditions have not really changed very much, considering the material in the Schools’ Collection is over 80-years old. The foods and customs revealed in the findings corroborate those discussed in the literature, however, more detail is provided on the nuances of regionality, gender, class, and the differing time periods. This is the benefit of studying a specific celebration, where a smaller focus means nuances in the data can therefore be more readily revealed.

The transition of turkey from novelty food, eaten only by the rich, to its solidification as a Christmas staple, was clearly conveyed in this research as too was the evolution of the Christmas pudding to the position of number one Christmas food in rural Ireland, and the increased consumption of fresh fruit. The evolution of tea and sugar have both been documented in previous literature\textsuperscript{62} as well as many other ingredients included in the Christmas foods, but the evolution of the Christmas foods themselves from novelty in the 1900s to traditional in the 1930s is something this research highlights. There are, however, many opportunities for further research including a comparison study with the Irish language transcripts that were excluded from this study which would provide a more rounded view of life in rural Ireland during the Christmas period.

This paper, along with the work of Caítriona Nic Philibín and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire on their exploratory study of the food traditions associated with \textit{Imbolc} printed within this special Irish food issue of Folk Life, highlights the rich source of folkloric information and oral history that is available through the Schools’ Collection’s online archive. This resource is invaluable to the remote study of Irish food history, giving national and global researchers alike access to the vast amount of folkloric information available on the Dúchas website.

\textbf{Notes}


13. Cullen, p. 185.


15. Cullen, p. 186.


17. P. Lysaght, ‘Continuity and Change in Irish Diet,’ in Food in change: Eating Habits from the Middle Ages to the Present Day, ed. by Alexander Fenton and Eszter Kisbán (Scotland: John Donald Publishers, 1984), pp. 80–89.

18. R. Boland, “‘Men who could catch horses and rabbits by running after them”: The Schools’ Collection,’ in Treasures of the National Folklore Collection/Seoda as Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann, ed. by Críostóir Mac Cáthaigh, Séamas. Ó Catháin, Rionach Uí Ógáin and Seosamh Watson (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp. 133–41; P. Lysaght, ‘Collecting the Folklore of Ireland: The Schoolchildren’s Contribution,’ Folklore, 132.1 (2021), 1–33.


22. The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0277, Page 128’ by Dúchas © National Folklore Collection, UCD is licenced under CC BY-NC 4.0 <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4811617/4802327>.

23. A. McIntosh and M. Zey, ‘Women as Gatekeepers,’ in Food and Identity: Gender and Power ed. by Carole M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan, (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005),


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32. Further information on the Rural Electrification Scheme can be found at <https://esbarc.hives.ie/key-rural-facts/>. [accessed 6 July 2021].


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41. For information on the Wren Boys, see S. Muller, ‘The Irish Wren Tales and Ritual. To Pay or Not to Pay the Debt of Nature,’ *Béaloideas*, 64/65 (1996/1997), 131–169; a similar tradition of the wren boys – Biddy boys was associated with St. Brigid’s Day, see, Nic Philibín and Mac Con Iomaire, ‘An Exploratory Study’.

42. Danaher, *The year in Ireland*, p. 244.


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55. ‘The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0752, Page 103’ by Údarach Grúpaí Náisiúnta, UCD is licenced under CC BY-NC 4.0 <https://www.uchas.ie/en/cbes/5009143/4991094>
56. ‘The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0728, Page 129’ by Údarach Grúpaí Náisiúnta, UCD is licenced under CC BY-NC 4.0 <https://www.uchas.ie/en/cbes/5009054/4981573.>
58. For the celebratory nature of boxty and tea as foodstuffs associated with other Irish feast days, see Nic Philibin and Mac Con Iomaire, ‘An Exploratory Study’.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

*Stephanie Byrne* has just completed a Masters in Gastronomy and Food Studies with TU Dublin. She also holds a Diploma in History with the National University of Ireland Galway and a Bachelor of Business Degree in Culinary Arts with Galway Mayo Institute of Technology. She has worked in the hospitality industry for some years in both managerial roles and as a pastry chef before turning her focus to cake design and currently runs her own cake design business.

*Kathleen Farrell* works as a lecturer in Food Entrepreneurship and Management in the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology at TU Dublin. She holds a Masters in Business Studies and a PhD from Smurfit Business School, University College Dublin. In 2017, she worked on a joint project with representatives from various third-level institutions the purpose of which was to design a digital badge for entrepreneurship education. She has delivered a module in Strategic management in Hainan University, China.