

# IRISH MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

Margaret Connolly



HOW FREQUENTLY we hear the comment 'Times have changed'. Over the years Ireland has changed economically, socially and culturally. Facebook, Google, Amazon, LinkedIn and Twitter have become part of our everyday. We have witnessed the Celtic Tiger, women's liberation, the decline of religion, the relative peace and stability resulting from the Good Friday Agreement and we have also had to grapple with the culture of greed, the revelation of misdeeds and abuses, the extremes in our economy and the inadequacies in our governance. Through all of this, a constant has been the importance of our customs and traditions. Perhaps of these, Irish Marriage Customs have seen the greatest change.

In times past marriages were often dictated by economics rather than love, with both men and women conscious of the need to make a good match and keep poverty at bay. If a 19th century lady could have placed an advert in the personal columns, how might it have read? 'Woman seeks man with good sized farm and several livestock. Good personality and good looks not essential. Can supply good dowry'. Signed: Mary. A lady of our time in her online search for a perfect tailored-to-fit partner, on a sales or return basis, might seek a tall, dark, handsome man with larger than life personality and wallet to match.

The complexity of love and matters of the heart has not changed over the centuries but the marriage scene has changed greatly. Up to the early 19th century, many

Catholic weddings took place at the bride's home, a custom necessitated by the restrictions imposed by the Penal Laws of 1695. Although Catholic Emancipation was granted in the 1820s, the tradition of home weddings lingered for some time but from 1850 on all weddings were held in church. The Ireland of yesteryear was a very conservative society with a very strong emphasis on family and land. Marriages were preceded by economic bargaining and if the price wasn't right, then there was no deal. Parental control was a major issue and a man's marriage prospects quite often lay at the mercy of his father and mother. His wait to inherit the farm and thus be able to support a wife was often lengthy. Our people in times past didn't venture far from home. Up to the 1920s, house and cross-road dances provided the best opportunity for young people to meet. In the decade from 1920 to 1930 dancehalls became established, despite clerical opposition in some places. Bicycles, though still a luxury, became more plentiful so a young man who was lucky enough to have one could then offer transport, though not comfortable, to his girl on the bar of his bike.

Although the road from meeting to marriage (or in some cases not meeting at all) was paved with obstacles and negotiations, still early marriage was encouraged. In those times it was unlikely that a prospective groom would be any richer at twenty five than he was at eighteen. Up until the passing of the

Marriage Act in the Republic of Ireland in 1972, the legal age for marriages in this country was twelve for girls and fourteen for boys. In 1972 it became sixteen for both and from August 1st, 1996 eighteen became the legal marriage age. Our ancestors would never imagine that a woman would actually choose a single life. An unmarried woman past her prime, generally taken to be thirty, was quickly relegated to the infamous shelf but an unmarried man was forever looked on as an eligible bachelor, looking for the right woman to tame his wily ways. The title 'bachelor', without a shadow of doubt, sat more comfortably than the less flattering 'spinster'.

## What about the Matchmaker?

There were official and unofficial matchmakers. The unofficial matchmaker could be anybody—the dancehall owner, the shopkeeper, the postmistress, a local farmer. Official matchmakers followed a more structured procedure but still facilitated some flexibility. Some took a fee but most just took whiskey—a bit like the midwife. Under guidance from the matchmaker, a young man in search of a suitable bride set off with his mentor to the house of first choice, making sure to have the customary bottle of whiskey in hand. Sitting by the fire, the initial conversation was about such topics as the weather and the crops. The matchmaker then got round to praise of his client's family. If that got a warm reception the whiskey was produced and

the conversation focused on a particular girl in the house with a question like 'How would you feel about this young man as a good match for your daughter'? If that was well received the girl was released from the room to which she had been banished on the arrival of the visitors. It is said that if she reached for the boiling kettle, the pair at the fire got up and left and headed for the next house on the list. They might be unsuccessful there too but they had to finish their quest that night as by morning the news of their mission had spread and no girl wanted to take the 'leavings'.

This example of the matchmaking process seems to indicate that girls had some say in the procurement of a husband but this was not always the case. In John B Keane's play, 'Sive' the heartless matchmaker, Tomaisín Rua, matched the young girl, Sive, with Seán Dota, a man old enough to be her father or grandfather, with fatalistic consequences. There was more than an element of truth and reality in John B's play.

Every area had its wealth of amusing stories connected with the matchmaking process. One such story concerned a bachelor in the Manorhamilton area who had lived all his life with his mother. He was the kind of fellow who wouldn't be able to find his shirt on a Sunday morning and who had never, in all his life, made himself a cup of tea. When his mother died he was in a bad state and a concerned neighbour decided he'd try to do something about it. He considered who might be available locally and having picked out a certain lady, he approached both herself and the bachelor and neither objected. It was then agreed that on a certain morning the bachelor and his neighbour would come to town and sit on the windowsill at Gilbert's chemists. The lady would also cycle to town at the agreed time and as she

pedalled up Main Street she'd have a look at the man on Gilbert's windowsill and he at her. And, we are assured, that pair got married and lived a long and happy life together. It's not remembered whether the bachelor's domestic skills improved with time.

### **The Dowry**

If marriage was agreed, the dowry had to be settled. The dowry a bride brought to her new home was of great importance and was quite likely to be paid out again with an unmarried sister of the groom. In this way, it could serve its purpose five or six times. Joyce's book, 'A Social History of Ancient Ireland', describes the 'tinnscree' or dowry and we see that in those far-off days the dowry or portion thereof was paid by the prospective groom. In other words, he bought his wife from her parent or guardian. Over time this changed and the duty of payment passed to the bride's father. It might be money or, quite often, farm animals. Half the dowry was paid before the wedding and the second half on the birth of the first child. The payment of that second half was a matter of honour. There is a recorded case in Leitrim in 1893 of an unfortunate wife who was returned to her father to exact that second portion.

### **Old Customs that Remain**

*'Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue'.*

The saying dates back to Victorian times. Why blue? In Biblical times, blue, not white, was considered representative of purity and fidelity so we have the blue garter. Throwing the bouquet comes from the 14th century and originated in France. The custom of a bride always walking on her husband's left hand side arose from the necessity of leaving his right hand free to use his sword should

anyone attempt to steal his prize. Wedding music has changed greatly and, nowadays, despite efforts to keep the church ceremony religious, nearly anything goes. For a long time, 'The Wedding March' was standard. Mendelssohn composed that piece of music for Shakespeare's play 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and it was first used in Devon in 1847, the year in which Mendelssohn himself passed away at the young age of thirty seven.

### **The Circle of Love**

The ring signifies the unbroken circle of love and the custom of ring giving dates back to the ancient Romans. In the poverty stricken Ireland of yesteryear, a ring was not always affordable and something circular fashioned from wood or straw might be used. In the 17th century rings known as Faith rings were popular. The Claddagh ring belongs to that group. Richard Joyce from Connemara was captured by pirates and sold into slavery before he could marry his sweetheart. His master was a rich and skilled goldsmith who noticed Richard's aptitude for the craft and trained him to become a skilled craftsman. Richard set about designing the perfect ring. His master became so attached to him that he offered him his daughter in marriage, but he declined the offer. In 1689, when King William the third ascended the English throne, all British captives in Algiers were freed. Richard Joyce returned to Ireland and found his sweetheart had waited for him. He proposed to her with the ring he had fashioned—the Claddagh ring—two hands clasping a heart and surmounted by a crown. The hands signify faith, the heart love and the crown honour.

It is interesting to note the revival of handfasting, a tradition dating back to the Celtic Pre-Christian era. This marriage cus-

tom simply involved the tying of a couple's hands together with a cord or ribbon or, in Ireland, the crios, the traditional colourful belt of the Aran Islands, was used. Therein lies the origin of the phrase 'tying the knot'. Handfasting is one of the most common rituals in the growing number of Humanist weddings but may be used at any wedding ceremony.

Under British rule, which covered Scotland, Wales and Ireland, couples intending to marry had to have marriage banns read on three Sundays prior to the wedding. In times past, weddings might not be for just one couple. When Peig Sayers married Peatsaí Ó Guithín in the 1880s, on the Saturday before Shrove Tuesday, that ceremony facilitated seven couples. At that time and, indeed, until relatively recently, Catholic marriages were not permitted during Lent, apart from on Sceillig Mhíchil, off the coast of Kerry, where Lent was celebrated a month later than on the mainland.

Wedding photographs are a great window on the past. In many of the older wedding photos, it is clear that not all brides wore white. During the war years, many brides wore good serviceable suits that lasted for years. One cannot pass over the period of the Second World War without mention of the American soldiers in Ireland—the G I s. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7th, 1941, the U S A agreed to take over the defence of Northern Ireland thus freeing up the British troops for duty in the Middle and Far East. The first officers arrived in Belfast on January 23rd, 1942 followed by 3,900 troops on January 26th. By May of that year, 37,000 American servicemen were billeted in several towns and villages around Northern Ireland. That number increased significantly in 1943 in preparation for the D-Day landings. The

presence of these troops had a profound effect on life in the North. Apart from the employment they created, these guys had access to commodities not available to the locals—sweets, cigarettes, nylon stockings, cosmetics—all of which made them very popular with the ladies. Not a bit of wonder that the local lads were jealous of these glamorous foreigners. Indeed one fellow summed up the general male opinion of them by saying 'They're over paid, over sexed and over here'. Their presence accounted for at least 2,500 G I brides in Ireland.

### **Marry in May and you'll rue the day**

This is but one of the plethora of superstitions that surrounded the blessed union of marriage in the past. The bride was almost assured of good luck if, on her way to church, she saw a rainbow, met a black cat or chimney sweep or heard a cuckoo. However, disaster loomed if she were unfortunate enough to see a pig, a hare, or a lizard, spot an open grave or meet a monk or a nun. Brides today can rest easy with regard to those omens, both good and bad.

Fear of the fairies was another big issue. Fairies love beautiful things and what is lovelier than a radiant bride? It is said that the reason brides wore veils over their faces until they reached the altar was to protect them from being spirited away by the wee folk. A story told in the North Leitrim area concerned a groom who, when the veil was lifted, found, not the girl he intended to marry, but her sister. The brave man went ahead with the wedding and as the saying goes, the pair 'lived happily ever after'.

According to the most recent CSO statistics, 21,053 marriages took place in Ireland in 2018. Of these 664 were same-sex unions. Despite the decline in devotion to

religion, religious ceremonies still accounted for 61.2% of all weddings. Leitrim registered 173 weddings. 138 were religious of different faiths, 32 were civil and 3 were humanist. The average age of grooms has continued to rise and presently stands at thirty six. A similar trend is evident for brides with thirty four being the current average marriage age. In 2018 only 2% of grooms and 3% of brides were under twenty five. August has become the favourite month in which to wed and January remains the least popular. Fridays and Saturdays continue to be the most popular days and Sundays are rarely chosen. Couples who marry this year will, as in other years, become part of the next CSO statistics. *Guímis rath orthú siúd go léir.*

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### **THE WELL** *Kevin McManus*

Sean Moran lowered the  
sand coloured rope  
into the depths of water  
The aluminium bucket sank  
within the round dome of the  
whitewashed well.  
Ivy clung to its sides  
dug in through open fissures  
between stones.  
The green leaves of ivy proffered the  
only brightness  
in the grey surroundings of the  
February morning.  
As the silver sank into the dark,  
bubbles of air rose to the surface  
then, a gushing sound  
the silver rose again  
as Sean retracted the rope.

His long brown top coat swayed,  
rubbed against his earth stained wellies.  
Stained with the brown daub of the fields  
Sean had ploughed through day after day.