

Memories of the Christmas Rhymers in Lissummon long ago

Minnie Savage

I sometimes hear children of today talking about Christmas and it's usually all about what Santa Claus is bringing them – mostly tractors, cars, bicycles and other things costing hundreds of pounds. They associate Christmas with lots of presents, parties, hotels, school concerts, pantomimes and so on. It's Christmas all year round! When I was a youngster, more than eighty years ago, it was very different. Christmas only began to be talked about from the middle of November and certainly Santa rarely came into it. We got a red apple or an orange or maybe a bar of chocolate.

I remember my mother making two golliwogs for my sister Sara and me. She cut the feet off two black stockings of her own. She stuffed the old feet with some old woollen material, made two arms and embroidered a red mouth on each. Finally to each she sewed two buttons for eyes. When they were dressed in something gay we got a great thrill and for many's a day we took them to bed with us. (Incidentally she later knit two new feet to add to the half legs of the stockings she had cut!) There were no school concerts and certainly no

pantomimes.

Our great entertainment was the arrival of the 'Christmas Rhymers' a week or so before Christmas. Rhyming was quite common in country areas all over Ireland at that time. For some weeks beforehand some young fellows of the district got together in a barn or suchlike. An older man who knew the rhymes acted as teacher and producer and licked them into shape. Then there was the business of procuring suitable costumes. This often proved difficult. Old curtains, bedspreads etc. were, many-a-time smuggled from under their mothers' noses! An aunt of my mother's once had a nice green poplin petticoat that went missing. She was later amazed to see it turning up, in her own kitchen, as a cloak for no less a person than Saint Patrick himself!

The local rhymers that I remember did the rounds with their show, visiting houses in each townland in turn. We had Tommy McGailey working on our farm at the time. He was one of the rhymers and he let our mother know when the local group was coming to our townland of Cullentragh. When they arrived at



St. Joseph's Primary School Children as the Christmas Rhymers

our house, at first I was afraid of them and took refuge in the hall but, when I saw that Tommy was in the troupe, I felt it mightn't be too bad and was brave enough to return to the kitchen. The kitchen, incidentally, had been prepared in advance and cleared with the chairs against the walls leaving a good space for the performance.

The performance began with the 'Captain', (also called 'Room! Room!'), knocking loudly on the door and then springing into the room brandishing a big stick and shouting, "Room! Room, my gallant boys and give us room to rhyme!" As each character entered and performed he then stepped back out of the way to leave room for the next "Here comes...."

The following is the 'script' as far as I remember it.

Captain: (*Hitting the door a couple of clouts with his stick.*)

Open the door and let us in
We hope your favour we will win.
(*Entering. He is dressed in tattered clothes and hat and carries a stick.*)

Stir up the fire and give us light
For in this house there'll be a fight!
Room! Room! My gallant boys
Give us room to rhyme
We'll show you some activity
Upon this Christmas time.
Active youth and active age,
The like was never acted on any stage:
If you don't believe what I say,
Call in Oliver Cromwell and he'll clear the way.

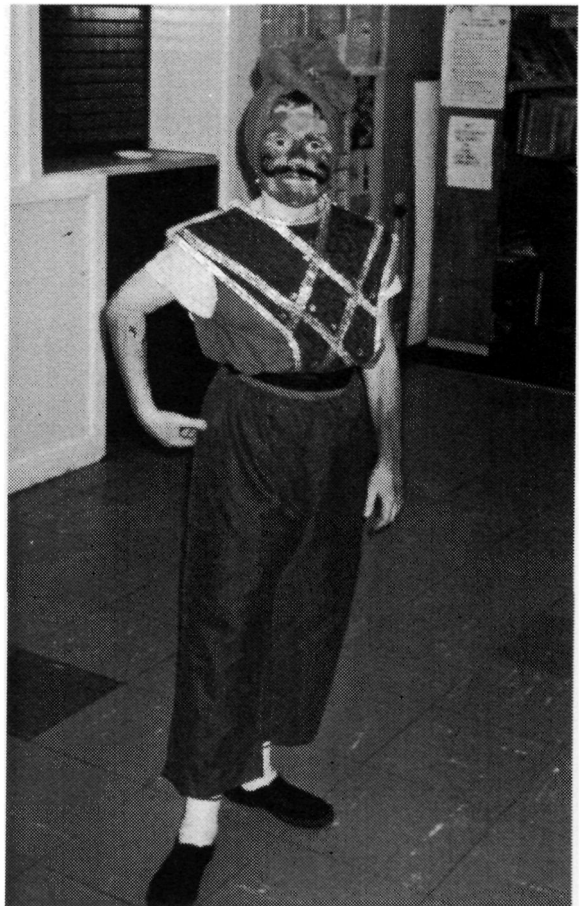
Oliver Cromwell: (*Very stiff and straight. He has a big nose and carries a sword.*)

Here comes I Oliver Cromwell,
As you may well suppose,
I've conquered many nations
With my long and copper nose.
I've caused the earth to tremble
And my enemies to quake
And I 'massacred' a gander
On the night of Paddy's wake!
If you don't believe what I say
Call in Beelzebub and he'll clear the way!
(*Enter Beelzebub. He is dressed in black with*

horns and a tail and carries a club and a frying pan.)

Beelzebub: Here comes I Beelzebub
And over my shoulder I carry my club;
And in my hand a frying pan,
And I think myself a funny wee man.
And if you don't believe what I say,
Call in Sergeant Straw and he'll clear the way!
(*Enter Sergeant Straw. Sergeant Straw wears a policeman's cap. His legs are wrapped in plaited straw ropes. Also straw ropes round his shoulders and arms*)

Sergeant Straw: Here comes I Sergeant Straw,
Such a man you never saw!
I am covered from head to toe
For to keep out the winter snow.
And if you don't believe what I say,
Call in Prince George and he'll clear the way!



Philip McClory as "The Turk"

Prince George:

Here comes I Prince George,
From Denmark have I sprung.
And many a noble deed of honour have I done.
For seven long years I was in prison bound,
From there into a cave of stone,
Where I received many a sad and grievous
moan.
Where is the man who dares before me stand?
I'll cut him down with my courageous hand!

Turk: (*Dressed in bright colours and wearing a turban.*)

I'm the man who dares before you stand!

Prince George:

Who are you but a poor silly boy, sir,
Who fed my father's horses for seven years
And then you ran away, sir!

Turk:

It's a lie, sir! I'm the Turkey champion,
From Turkey land I came
To fight with you, Prince George, by name.

Prince George:

I'll ram my dagger through your side,
And make your puddins fly sir!
(*They fight a duel and the Turk falls dead.*)

Turk's Mother: (*Rushing in.*)

Oh Geordie! Geordie! What have you done?
You've kilt and slain my only son.
My only son, my only heir
To see him lying bleeding there!
A doctor! A doctor!
Ten pounds for a doctor!
(*Enter Doctor Brown. He wears a top hat and carries a case.*)

Doctor Brown: Here comes I, wee Doctor
Brown,
The best wee doctor in the town.

Mother: What can you cure, doctor?

Doctor: I can cure the plague within, the plague
without;
The palsy or the gout.

If there's nine devils in,
I can knock ten out.
Bring me an old woman, three score and ten,
And if she's bendy, I'll straighten her again.

Turk: (*Jumping up and singing,- to the air of 'Master McGrath'*)

Once I was dead but now I'm alive!
Dear bless the wee doctor that made me survive
(Says) We'll all shake hands and fight no more,
And be as big brothers as we were before.

(**The above script formed the basis of several productions featuring children from St. Joseph's P.S. Poyntzpass**)



Conor Magill in The Christmas Rhymers