

It's Earlier 'tis Getting

The Christmas Book of Irish Mammies

*'Are you sure that
wasn't you? It came
up on the phone.
"Missed Call"
it said'*

'Is that a new stain?'

*'Don't throw out
that bit of string
at all, it might
come in handy
for something'*



*'I hope now you didn't use
the good scissors for that'*

*'I thought I heard a
mouse last night'*

*'Are THOSE the
jeans you're
wearing? Ah why
don't you put on
your nice ones?'*

the twitter sensation @irishmammies

COLM O'REGAN

About the Book

Christmas - a time for peace, joy and Mammies.

While others are focusing on Santa/Santy, the school nativity play, the office party and its wild cousin the Twelve Pubs, panicked present shopping and the delicate diplomacy of in-law visiting, the Irish Mammy is mobilized in her war-room - ready for the campaign. Electric blankets have been set to maximum power; cards have been despatched; the turkey has been ordered; the decorations have been retrieved from The Place Where The Decorations Go and the fifth Big Shop (to get breadcrumbs) has been completed.

There are homecomings from near and far, new arrivals, drama, bustle, tears and laughter, and Mammy at the heart of it all, directing operations.

There's bound to be something she's forgotten - but luckily, just like a certain someone, she's made a list.

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About the Author

Also by Colm O'Regan

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the Christmas book of
Irish Mammies

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A (very brief) Few Words from Mammy

Excuse me now, I'll be with you in a second. WILL YOU MIND WHERE YOU'RE GOING WITH THE TREE? You nearly had the Sacred Heart off the wall.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, Christmas. Well, as you can see it's all around me at the moment between lists and cards and IF A FEW PEOPLE GAVE A BIT MORE OF A HAND AROUND THE PLACE ... Oh look at them, as if butter wouldn't melt in their mou— which reminds me, I must get more butter for the ... anyway. I go. All. Out. For the Christmas, but that's just me. There's plenty of Mammies are far more sensible and take it in their stride. I was only talking to Sheila Carter the other day. Says I, 'Are you all set for the Christmas?' 'Oh Missus,' says she, 'I. Couldn't. Give. Two. Hoots. I don't let myself get stressed. I just let Himself take care of everything and I pick up what's left. There's no point in everyone being stressed.'

I envy her, I do. As you can see, 'tis all go here. And we've visitors as well. And would you believe, they have *dietary requirements*! In my day dietary requirements just meant you were hungry for your dinner. But shur anyway ...

We'll have a full house and I don't mind. It's good to have them. There's families missing people this time of year and it's tough.

Now if you'll excuse me I've a million and one things to be doing so I'll let the young lad tell the rest of it. He's better at the typing.

Mammy

Introduction

Mammy and Christmas - they go together like a stressed-out horse and carriage. In an Ireland where so much is changing, where so much is uncertain, Christmas^{fn1} is something constant to hold on to. It promises peace, joy and goodwill even though it might still spit us out the other side, exhausted, cranky and swearing we're not going to TOUCH another Quality Street.

This book is just a glimpse into the multifaceted world of the Irish Christmas and where the Irish Mammy fits into all of this.

You'll meet different types of Mammies as they negotiate their way through the minefields of competitive Christmas Lights, the string of visitors, the trips up to town, the white-hot meat of Christmas Dinner; later, of course, quite a few Mammies have to deal with the quiet of January when 'They' are all gone back.

And hopefully you'll learn about some Irish traditions that make our mild, damp Christmases *a little bit unique*, such as:

- The DHRINK. We beat ourselves up over our dhrinking in Ireland but behind the headlines there is much nuance to how we enjoy ourselves. Except the Twelve Pubs. That's definitely binge drinking.
- The 8th of December - the official start of the country Christmas. Marking the day when country Mammies still venture up to Dublin to wait for two hours to get parking.

- Stephens night – the social occasion of the year when you must return home to the town of your birth and be judged.
- The *Late Late Toy Show* – the time when the metaphorical Christmas lights of television are switched on and four-year-olds are allowed to stay up late. If you're one of the children fortunate enough to appear on it, it's the best way to make your mark on the TV-watching public's consciousness.
- The dos and don'ts of buying a goat as a charity gift and other buying guidelines.

We also welcome back some old favourites such as *Irish Mammy Magazine*. In 'The Christmas Edition' we join Mammy and Himself in their home as they prepare for 'the holiday season' (as Mammy never calls it).

Somewhere underneath the tinsel and stuffing, Christmas was of course originally a religious festival and the book explores all that that entails from the tense situation around choir practice for Christmas Eve mass (because the bishop'll be there and it's going out on the Internet) to how the Christmas story is re-enacted by all the little dotes in the primary school nativity play.

Speaking of which, finally we tell the greatest story that has never been told, the Christmas story of someone who has never been given a voice, who was excised from history – Joseph's Mammy.

So we begin our story of Christmas, not at the beginning but a little bit before it.

Colm O'Regan

^{fn1} Or, to give it its proper title 'The Christmas'. As in 'Are you all set for The Christmas?' Or 'How did you get over The Christmas?'

1

Ghosts of Christmases Past

Of course in my day, Christmas was very different.



Roman Holiday

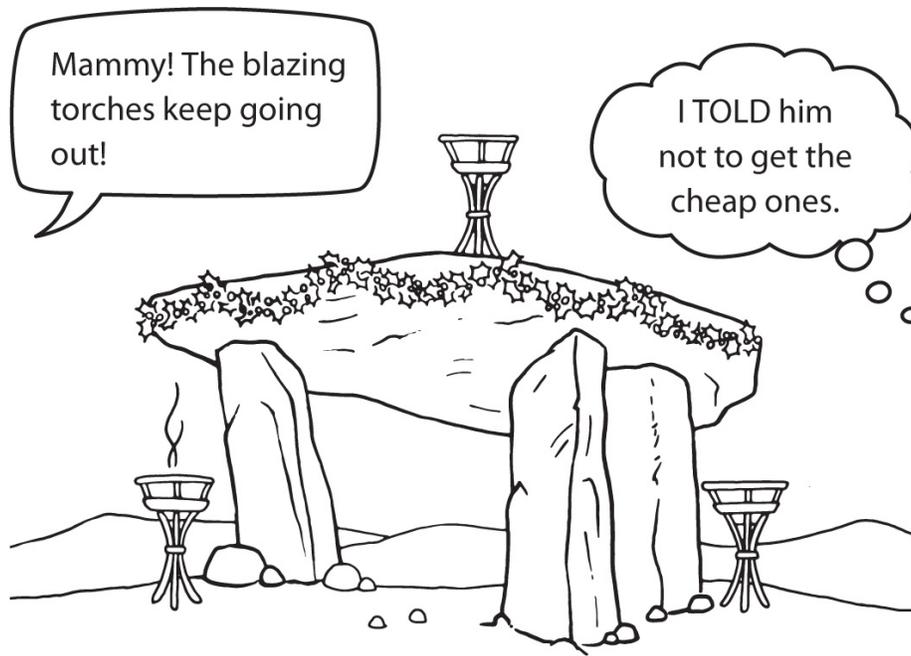


LIKE MOST CHRISTIAN feasts, Christmas has its origins deep in the pagan past. Although it was soon subsumed into the feast we recognize now, the mid-winter capers of our Roman and druidic forebears are still to be seen in how we celebrate today.

The Roman Empire was the origin of Saturnalia - a feast dedicated to the god Saturn that occurred around the time of the present-day Christmas holidays. Saturnalia was marked by a number of traditions that we continue today, most notably carolling and the giving of gifts. The gifts to children were often wax dolls. The dolls represented the humans whose lives had been offered up to appease the gods during the year; which, if you think about it, is Very Irish Mammy.



The Romans also celebrated *Dies Natalis Solis Invictus*, which means 'birthday of the undefeated sun'. There were many versions of this in Northern Europe as people celebrated the solstice. In Ireland this was marked as the Feast Of The Stretch In The Evenings - a rumbustious affair when villagers would cavort semi-naked and exchange whispered small talk about whether the days were getting longer or not. Archaeology has also unearthed some very early forms of Christmas decoration.



Within a few centuries, though, the Romans found their Invictus evicted and their Saturnalia slung out, because there was a new kid in town.

Mother of all Mothers-in-law



The Booker Prize shortlist always raises eyebrows and 2013 was no exception - not least because of the staggering omission of *That's More Of It Now: The Second Book Of Irish Mammies*, a decision born of pure jealousy, no doubt because *they* didn't think of writing it. That's the way with these judges. The other surprise was the brevity of one of the entries - at a little over 100 pages long, *The Testament of Mary* by Colm Toibin was the slimmest-ever book to make the list. It's a reimagining of the life of Jesus' mother Mary and it prompted a welcome examination of life around that time.

But there is another story that has not been told. What about Joseph's Mammy? If she was alive at the time of the Nativity, there's no doubt she would have had her own cross to bear. But we didn't know anything about her. Until now. The discovery of an ancient papyrus scroll has changed all that. It appears to have been written as early as a couple of days after the Nativity by Joseph's Mammy herself, judging by the shopping list scribbled on the back of it.

MILK & HONEY

TEA-TOWELS

NUTS FOR PUSS

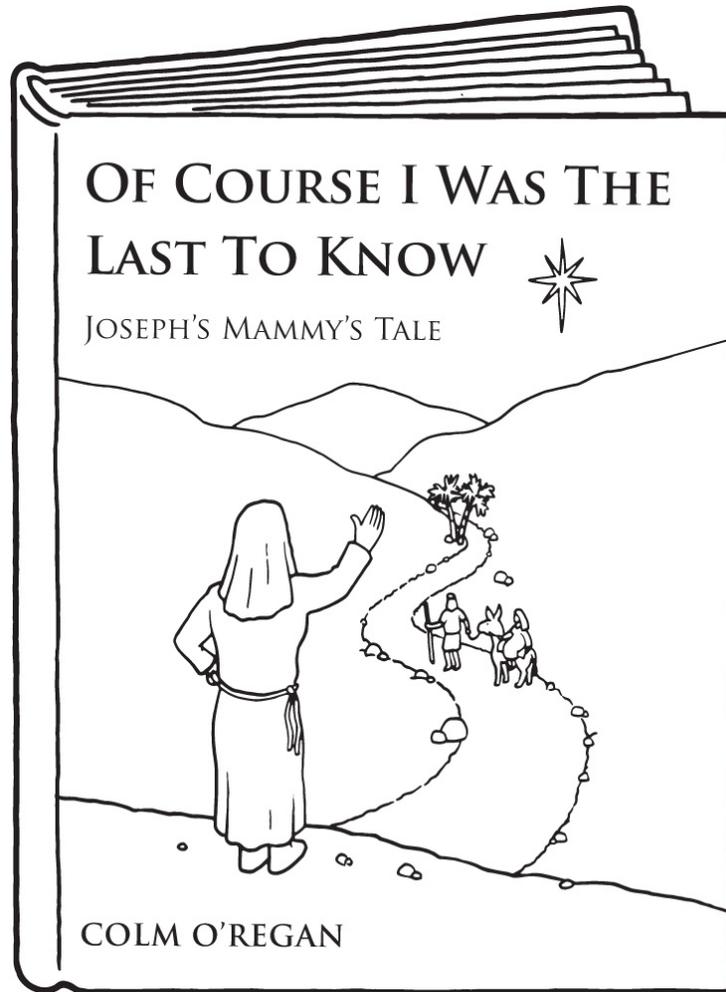
SPREAD

SLICED MANNA

SOMETHING FOR
THAT CHILD I SUPPOSE

Using these snippets, a truly unique historical account has been created. Here is an exclusive excerpt from the story of Eunice, mother-in-law of Mary.

And if this isn't nominated for the Booker, then the whole thing is a pure cod.



Excerpt 1: Talk

Eunice had a face on her. It was just one thing after another. And that boy of hers was responsible for most of the things that were following each other at the moment. Joseph sat fidgeting at the table, glancing up now and then from his food.

'Are you finished your olives?'

'Mammy ...'

'Because if you're not going to eat them I'll give them to the cat.'

'Mammy ... M-Mammy ...'

'Life goes on for Puss. She doesn't care about any news. Would you like a few olives, Puss?'

'Mammy, don't mind the cat. We need to talk about this.'

'What's there to talk about? How you got involved with that wan I don't know. If ye'd even have waited until ye were married ...'

'Mammy, it wasn't like that. It's a bit more complicated.'

'Complicated! It seems dead simple to me.'

'But Mammy ...'

'What your poor father lordamercyonim would say I don't know.'

Joseph almost told her the full truth but didn't think she was in the humour for understanding sacred mysteries and might just think that someone was making an eejit out of him. Eunice frowned but said nothing. He was a good lad despite it all and he'd done a lovely job with the shelves.

'Well, I suppose you'd better be off now. Have you some place to stay? You can't have that baby born in a stable somewhere.'

Excerpt 2: Inn Time

Joseph was sweating slightly as they stood in the doorway. The day had not gone well. Everywhere

was full. His mother's words were ringing in his ears: 'Whatever you do, don't leave it too late.' Now they were in the last inn.

The innkeeper regarded them suspiciously. 'A room – for the two of you. Have ye booked?'

'No, it was all a bit last minute.'

'Right, I see. We're fairly full with the census. We have one little room over the tavern but it's quiz night tonight so it won't be ideal. You're welcome to give it a go anyway.'

'We'll take it.'

She glanced at Mary.

'And herself, has she long to go?'

'Well, I don't know, to tell you the truth. I'm a bit new to this ...'

'I see.'

Her tone suggested she saw a lot but this was the kind of carry-on that she especially disapproved of.

'And what name shall I put on it?'

Joseph told her and immediately saw the innkeeper raise an eyebrow at the different surnames.

'Oh, so is she keeping her own name? Very modern.'

Joseph grimaced at his mistake. He supposed they were married now. Were they? That's what the angel had said in the dream anyway. If it even was a

dream. He'd have to stop eating cheese so late. The innkeeper made one last mutter of 'notions' under her breath and handed them a key.

'I'd suggest you get some sleep while you can. The quiz nights get fairly competitive around here. Especially the picture round. It's quite iconic.'

Excerpt 3: Labouring under a misapprehension

Six hours had passed. The noise from downstairs had not lessened. The quiz seemed to have stopped but now it looked like a band of Country 'n' Eastern musicians had started up. For the first time on this journey, Mary was cross.

'Joseph, this can't go on. Will you go down and tell them to whisht?'

He left. Mary listened as his voice came from below, earnest and pleading. The music stopped. As he returned, there was laughter and the music started up again. Except now the lyrics of the songs seemed to have been altered and directed at Joseph. But Mary couldn't worry about that now. By the time Joseph had returned he had bigger problems. She was walking around the room breathing heavily.

'I think the baby is on the way, Joseph.'

'How do you know?'

She looked at him. He understood.

'Right, "the angel said it". What do we do?'

They listened for a moment as the song 'Come out ye Nazarene bastards' filtered through the floor.

'I can't have him here, not with that going on.'

'How do you know it's going to be a b— sorry, OK, where is my head at today? Well, where do we go?'

'The stable? It'll be quiet. Can you run and get the innkeeper? She'll have to do as a midwife.'

They parted at the bottom of the stairs. Mary went to the shed. Joseph ran off to find the innkeeper. She was not happy at this further evidence of carry-on but was a practical woman and labour was labour so she went with him. When they both approached the byre, they could hear a baby crying. The innkeeper started running, shouting to Joseph over her shoulder to make himself useful and get some water. He was returning with the water when she intercepted him. The Face had returned.

'Are you trying to make an eejit out of me?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, either that baby can walk through walls or she wasn't carrying him in the first place. I went in, all set to clean up, and there she is, cool as a cucumber, feeding the baby, not a drop of sweat on her. She was glowing in fact - GLOWING! No blood, no cord, not so much as a SIGN of a birth ... and ... who's THIS?'

They both watched as some shepherds walked past them towards the stable.

'It's a bleddy circus. I want ye out of here as soon as she's fit. I don't know what way ye do things in Nazareth but I never saw a labour like it.'

As she walked away Joseph thought she might be due a visit from an angel in a dream fairly soon. As predicted, the innkeeper was all smiles the following day. Hot crusty bread and cheese arrived and the finest of swaddling clothes. When the cattle came in for the evening, it looked like someone had been shining their hooves. Which was just as well, as some high-powered visitors arrived shortly after.



Excerpt 4: Sinai Trouble

Meanwhile, Joseph's Mammy Eunice was in a perpetual state of Nawful as she confessed to a friend.

'... and by the way, Jesus they're calling him.'

'Jesus? I never heard that name before.'

'I think it's some name from her side.'

'And where are they now?'

'Oh stop! I'm after getting this scroll now and he says in it - Don't get mad Mammy but an angel appeared to me in a dream and told me to go to Egypt as it wasn't safe for us here.'

'He's a divil for the angels.'

'That shaggin' angel! Rachael, God forgive me but if I got my hands on that angel I'd wring his neck for him. If it's a him. You wouldn't know with their "get-up". Disrupting all our lives. I don't know what's got into my boy.'

'Ah, he'll turn out alright. I'm sure there's some plan for him with Himself.'

'Well, I wish he'd tell me. Where's my angel telling me what's going on? What are the neighbours going to think about all of this? You may be sure they're talking.'

'I haven't heard anyone say anything. Maybe it'll die down.'

'I don't know. Miracles do happen, I suppose. As long as The Ancient Chronicle don't get wind of it.'

Unfortunately for Eunice, the local paper had more than got wind of it. No thanks to Joseph.

INSIDE – SPORT: U-21 GLADIATORS MUST DO IT
ALL OVER AGAIN AS WILD BEASTS RECOVER

The Ancient **CHRONICLE**

NO COMMON CENSUS

Councillor fumes at Roman 'carry-on'

There were stormy scenes at Nazareth Urban District Council during the week as Michael Gall-Lae launched a strong attack on the census organized by the Roman Emperor.

A HAMES

'It's a hames,' he said. 'NO organization at all. Lads are going back to the place of their birth and there's no accommodation. I heard

one story of a child being born in a stable.'

A Roman spokesman said that while he could not comment on individual cases, Herod was very interested in any story of a child being born in a stable and would urge the parents to get in contact so that they can receive whatever assistance is available.

LOCAL MAN MEETS KINGS

It was a case of 'Hello there, your Majesthree' over the holiday period as local

The Kings were visiting the area on unspecified business when they bumped

'They were so down to earth, no airs or graces but you could tell they had a bit of

**Is your
transport
making an
ass of you?**

The national and international press weren't far behind. Even here in Ireland, the story received very prominent attention from hitherto unheard-of ancestors of our current national newspapers.

man Joseph ben into the local star quality? Heli from The man in a stable. It was a busy Glebe, Nazareth, on the edge couple of weeks had a surprise of the town. for the carpenter e n c o u n t e r Ben. Heli was as he became a with three in Bethlehem father. His 'wife' foreign Kings for the census Mary gave birth in a Bethlehem when he met the *contd page 7* stable. Royals.



**Use a horse
of course.**