

Mayo Heritage

Newsletter

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The Irish Wake

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Cover image: Funeral procession Inis Óirr 1968, Photo Jim Sugar/Getty Images



Five simple words – repeatedly conveyed to a bereaved family as a form of condolence, more often than not at a wake.

“I’m sorry for your trouble”



The term “wake” originates from the era when many unknown diseases circulated within the population and caused some people to appear dead. To the elation of many, during the mourning period, the “dead” would awaken. For this reason, a deceased person was waked in their home for at least one night in the hope they would awaken. Many wake customs came about as a type of appeasement of the dead from pre-Christian times when the dead were regarded with fear, writes *Seán Ó Suilleabháin* in Irish Wake Amusements.

Similar practices were adhered to at almost every wake. After the deceased was laid out by having their body washed and dressed, rosary beads were wrapped around their hands and a cross placed around their neck. Candles were placed at the head and foot of the coffin and stayed lit continuously. The wax was observed to see the pattern it would form, which could signify more death in the area.

Shoes belonging to the deceased were placed near the coffin in the belief that they would help them on their way through purgatory.

Custom dictated that crying could not begin until after the body was prepared, for fear that evil spirits would be attracted to the body and would take the soul of the deceased. In earlier times ‘keening’ would have taken place. This is when the female family members would cry and wail over the deceased.

Many customs associated with Irish wakes of bygone times still exist to this day.

The wearing of black by mourners is still common in modern Ireland, but folklore tells us that by wearing black the wearer would appear “in shadow” so the soul of the deceased did not enter their body.

The tradition of stopping the clocks at the time of death to prevent bad luck is still prevalent. Mirrors in the house are covered so the spirit of the deceased is not trapped inside. Windows are opened so the spirit of the deceased can leave. To prevent the body of the deceased falling prey to evil spirits, the body is never left alone.

In bygone days, it was believed that smoke would help keep spirits at bay hence clay pipes of tobacco and snuff were smoked always at wakes and often accompanied by alcohol.

The essence of the Irish wake is captured in the many stories recorded by the Irish Folklore Commission (duchas.ie). Mrs. C. McDonnell, Ross East explains “*When people go to the wake, they go over to the bed, kneel down, and say prayers for the repose of the soul. Then they take a seat, and they are handed a pipe, tobacco, matches, and some snuff.*”

Mrs McDonnell, Curryane, Swinford recalls that “*long ago the young people conducted themselves very badly at wakes.*”

The traditional wake has changed very little down through the years. Today, particularly in rural Ireland, the wake not only honours the person who has passed on and bids them farewell but comforts the bereaved family in their time of great sadness.

References: Rip.ie, Talkdeath.com, Yourirish.com, Irishurns.com

SEAN FHOCAIL
(old sayings associated with death)

Nollag ghlas, reilig mhéith.
A green Christmas, a fat graveyard.

Bíonn súil le muir ach ní bhíonn súil le tír.
There is hope from the sea but there is no hope from the grave.

Nuair a thiocas an bás, ní imeoidh sé folamh.
When death will come, it won't go away empty.

Maireann an duine ar aoibhneas croí agus is fad saoil dó an t-áthas.
Gladness of the heart is the very life of man, cheerfulness prolongs his days.

Ciorraíonn an t-éad agus an fhearg saol duine, agus déanann inmí an tseanaois a bhrostit.
Envy and anger shortens one's life, worry brings on premature old age!

Is ait an mac an saol.
Life is strange.

Source; daltai.com

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