

Warning – this blog is only for those who don't believe in fairies (and other such things).

I don't like to be a Grinch but the scientificization of Santa in the closing piece on RTE's 9 o'clock News on Christmas Eve a few weeks ago was a bizarre conflation of science, nostalgia and infotainment that had me reeling. The first time River Dance was aired - during the interval of the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest - I had a similar confused reaction: was there something wrong with this new sexy version of Irish dancing? Could I admit to liking it or would it be cooler to exhibit my higher artistic credentials and condemn it as a slick (if brilliant) marketing plan for Ireland?

Back to Santa. The hard-core physics that was being used to sell his existence on Christmas Eve on RTE was a brave one - even the weather forecasters got in on the act by indicating conditions were good for his travels which was pretty rich considering they (the forecasters) do use the application of hard-core physics all the time to make their (scientific) forecasts. Here's my problem: as someone with a passion for teaching and high regard for the concept of a proof in mathematics and the scientific method as first articulated by Francis Bacon in 1620, I was somewhat disturbed by the national broadcaster's attempt to provide scientific evidence for Mr Claus being on his way. Is it right for RTE to collude in the great charade of the man in the red suit flying through the sky and coming down the chimney and for scientists to participate in the deceit by talking about the speed of light, cold temperature physics and the weather? Trying to prove that Santa exists is the same as trying to prove the existence (or non-existence) of God – not a research project that is likely to get grant-funded any time soon. Most smart kids, I suspect, would have seen through the ruse and if anything it would only have made them more certain that the whole thing was suspect - but then most smart kids aren't watching television these days so it probably didn't matter.

When my daughter was 3 years old we were living in Durham, North Carolina. With her recently born brother we went along to visit the Santa in the local shopping mall. She was nervous but allowed the large fat man in the red suit (with strong southern accent) pose with her for the photograph. He noted our non-local accents.

"Where are y'all from?" says Santa

"Ireland" we say. Daughter rigid in terrified silence.

"How 'bout that? Ah've never bin in that part of the world" says Santa.

Luckily the 3-year-old didn't notice his faux pas and we departed quickly without telling him that he was wrong. He *had* been in Ireland the previous year, and the year before that, and the year before that, ad infinitum (or at least he had while the 3-year old was listening.)

As for myself I must have been born a skeptic. I don't ever remember believing any of it (but kept quiet as long as the adults needed me to). Privately I was thinking: Down the chimney? Rudolf? Elves? Round the *whole* world? Yeah, right. Sure.

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