



## **BREHON LAW**

If you believe the Roman version of Irish history, Ireland and its people were a backward, barbaric lot who engaged in cannibalism and other uncivilized practices. The fact is, however, that the Romans were prejudiced against the Irish - and all Celts for that matter - so getting an objective view of Ireland demands that we look beyond the contemporary Roman perspective.

It was soon discovered that at the time of the Romans, Ireland was possibly **the** most advanced of all European cultures: it had an Iron Age culture which included bards, historians and judges and a set of laws that governed all aspects of life. This voluminous set of laws covered everything from hurting a chained dog to behavior while drinking. The set of laws was known as the Law of the Commoner or Freeman, or the ***Brehon Law***.

Although the age of these laws is unknown, they appear to be at least four thousand years old. The practitioners of these laws were called Brehons. They were not judges or lawyers, although many consider them so. In actuality, they were arbitrators whose responsibility was to settle disagreements. The Brehons had to study the laws for years before they were allowed to practice their art and this is due in part to the size or volume of the laws that were enforced. It was an oral code to the greatest extent, and they only started to write the laws down around the 3rd Century.

These laws were reviewed every three years at the Great Fair in Tara, and those deemed unfair were modified or reviewed. It was at this time that the proposed new laws were also reviewed and approved. Whenever possible, cases or matters of great importance were held for the Great Fair, where a gathering of the Brehons could best render a proper judgment. Therefore, every three years the volume of these laws increased until they covered almost every aspect of human relations.

Brehon law was extremely progressive in women's rights. Unlike most of the early legal systems, a female was allowed to own property and to obtain a divorce, depending on her status in society. A woman could obtain a divorce if she considered her husband a terrible lover, if he did not promptly make her pregnant, if he embarrassed her in front of visitors, if he struck or abused her physically or verbally or if he was unfaithful. Also, it was a more serious offense to kill a woman than a man. The murderer's sentence was to have a hand or a foot cut off and be put to death. The killer's kin then had to pay the price of 21 cows to the victim's family.

As an agricultural society, the Celts also respected their animals, endowing them with many of the same legal rights as humans. Brehon law stated, "It is illegal to override a horse, force a weakened ox to do excessive work, or threaten an animal with angry vehemence which breaks bones." Although protected by the law, animals were expected to refrain from criminal behavior as well. An animal that killed someone was hanged as quickly as a human. If a chicken left droppings in the kitchen, its feeding trough might be covered. However, if a cat attacked a member of its family, but "twas in the work of mousing that it did it", it was exempt from liability.

This system of justice remained in effect until Queen Elizabeth I banned the ancient laws. The manuscripts were buried beneath structures or hidden in secret "keeping holes" in stone hearths. Some have been unearthed and are currently preserved at Trinity College in Dublin and the British Museum of London. The Celts' love of the law has been an essential part of Irish culture over the centuries and remains so today.

**Check out:** *Traditional Irish Laws* by Mary Dowling Daley; *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Irish History and Culture* by Sonja Massie; and [www.draeconin.com/database/brehon2.htm](http://www.draeconin.com/database/brehon2.htm)



## HAPPY NEW YEAR ~ 2004!

I am the New Year.  
I am an unspoiled page in your book of time.  
I am your next chance at the art of living.  
I am your opportunity to practice what you have learned  
during the last twelve months about life.  
All that you sought the past year and failed to find  
is hidden in me;  
I am waiting for you to search it out again  
with more determination.  
All the good that you tried to do for others and didn't achieve  
last year is mine to grant providing you have  
fewer selfish and conflicting desires.  
In me lies the potential for  
all that you dreamed but didn't dare to do,  
all that you hoped but did not perform,  
all you prayed for but did not yet experience.  
These dreams slumber lightly,  
waiting to be awakened by the touch of an enduring purpose.  
I am your opportunity to renew your allegiance to Him who said,  
"Behold, I make all things new."  
I am the New Year.



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