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Irish Food History: A Companion

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2024

## Irish Food History: A Companion

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*Irish Food History*  
*A Companion*



# *Irish Food History* *A Companion*

**Edited by**  
**Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire**  
**Dorothy Cashman**



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann  
Royal Irish Academy



## Irish Food History: A Companion

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## **Na Prátaí Dubha**

Máire (Molly) Ní Dhroma (1847)

Is iad na prátaí dubha a dhein ár gcomharsana do  
scaipeadh orainn,  
Do chuir ins na poorhouse iad 's anonn thar na farraigí,  
I Reilig an tSléibhe atá na céadta acu treascartha,  
Is uaisle na bhflaitheas go ngabhair a bpáirt.

## **Máire Mhór**

(amhrán traidisiúnta)

Ó, grá mo chroí thú, a stóirín, mar is tú nach ndéarfadh tada liom  
Mar is tú a chuirfeadh na fataí móra i dtaisce ar leic an teallaigh dhom  
Is óra a Mháire Mhór, is a Mháire Mhór an dtiocfadh tú?



## Foreword

Professor James Kelly *Dublin City University*

In the course of his *Recollections*, the distinguished nineteenth-century Irish medical practitioner, Lombe Atthill (1827–1910) observed in the chapter he devoted to ‘Country Life’ during the decades ‘before the terrible potato famine of 1846–9’ that the residents of the typical ‘one-roomed cabin ... lived on potatoes’.<sup>1</sup> It is a familiar observation. Similar mentions are to be found in many of the multiplicity of pre-Famine travel narratives penned by visitors, social commentators, and professional men, underlining their utility as a source of information for the ‘food history’ of Ireland. Nonetheless, it is necessary that it is properly contextualised, for while generalisation is an imperative if history is not to drown in a welter of antiquarian detail there are inherent difficulties with summative observations that are grounded in contemporary observations. One does not seek in this instance to imply that Atthill’s sobering description of the ‘one-roomed cabin of peat sods’<sup>2</sup> he recalled from his early years in mid-Ulster is erroneous. There are too many comparable accounts, which suggest that the famous, and frequently reproduced, image drawn by Arthur Young of what many conceive to have been a ‘typical’ cabin was better appointed than many of the residences later occupied by the poor of rural Ireland.<sup>3</sup> It may be that there was a deterioration in the quality of one room cabins, comparable to the intensification of the severity of the rural crisis in the course of the three quarters of a century that spanned Young’s ‘tour’ and the Great Famine, but it may be also that Lombe Atthill oversimplifies. This is not to imply that the potato was not the staple foodstuff of the rural poor, or that Atthill mis-recalls when he describes a typical meal as ‘a basket of potatoes ... placed in the centre of the floor, around which the family sat’.<sup>4</sup> There are a myriad of similar mentions, but the reference to the presence of hens ‘sharing in the meals’<sup>5</sup> in the cabins that Atthill describes also points to the fact that even the poorest families had access to other foodstuffs—in this instance eggs, chicken and their derivatives—if not daily, at least on occasion. Moreover, one must not assume that because the potato was the staple foodstuff of the ‘mass of pauper and semi-pauper inhabitants’<sup>6</sup> that they were then unhappy. Echoing the observation gleaned from the narratives of others, Atthill specifically mentions

**1** Lombe Atthill, *Recollections of an Irish doctor* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1911), 41. <https://archive.org/details/recollectionsoflooatthiala>  
**2** Atthill, *Recollections*, 41.  
**3** Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland* (London; T. Cadell & J. Dodsley, 1780), part 2  
**4** Atthill, *Recollections*, facing page 25.  
**5** Atthill, *Recollections*, 42.  
**6** Atthill, *Recollections*, 41.

that their children, ‘though barefooted and dirty, were always bright, and, like their parents cheerful’.<sup>7</sup> There is reason, certainly, to suggest that they were not always more discontent with their lot than the ‘better class of farmer’. The latter had access to a greater dietetic variety, but its range ought not be exaggerated, for the simple reason that, other than breakfast, potato was the main constituent of their mid-day and evening meals:

They would frequently have porridge for breakfast; and as they kept a cow or cows, milk with it; but the dinner and supper would be of potatoes with butter-milk. On Sundays, there would be, perhaps, boiled bacon and cabbage for dinner. But potatoes remained the staple food.<sup>8</sup>

This caution against oversimplifying and, when we interpose our own preferences, assuming what we in the present interpret as gastronomically desirable, provides an important justification for food history and for the assembly of subject defining collections such as this. They are invaluable if we are to replace the enduring simplified understandings of the place of food (and the potato in particular) in the life of the people. They are vital also if we are to acquire a fuller appreciation of the food cultures that obtained in Irish society across time and are to avoid formulaic conclusions that the diet of a particular social group was ‘meagre and monotonous’ when we can aspire to a fuller and better informed assessment.<sup>9</sup> This cannot, and will not be achieved in the absence of sustained multi-disciplinary inquiry such as is provided in this volume, if for no other reason than that the variety of perspectives that food science brings to the subject will equip investigators with a greater range of vantages from which to provide a fuller appreciation of its multiple significances. This should be the object because for the same reason that one can demur from Lombe Atthill’s reflexive tendency to identify the banality of the pre-Famine potato diet with the ‘wretched cabins’ in which the people who depended on the potato resided, and (for example) to overlook the calories adult males acquired from alcohol and children from foraging in hedgerows, we must also aspire not to conclude that the situation was comparable in urban tenements because those who lived there were disproportionately reliant on ‘white bread and sugared tea’. It is the case, as has been made clear in an engaging recent study of tenement life in nineteenth-century Henrietta Street, Dublin, that ‘most carbohydrates and sugar came from bread’ and that ‘meat was rarely consumed’, but it was not

<sup>7</sup> Atthill, *Recollections*, 41; *grandeur and decline 1800–1922*  
James Kelly, ‘Interpreting late (Dublin: Dublin City Council  
early modern Ireland’, in James Culture Co., 2020), 38.  
Kelly (ed.), *The Cambridge  
History of Ireland volume 3:  
Ireland, 1730–1880* (Cambridge:  
Cambridge University  
Press, 2018), 4–6. <sup>8</sup> Atthill,  
*Recollections*, 43. <sup>9</sup> Timothy  
Murtagh, *Henrietta Street:*

absent. Tenement dwellers also had access to ‘common vegetables’ among which ‘potatoes, onions and cabbage’ were standard fare.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this ought not to come as a surprise, for the simple reason that Henrietta Street was located in a city that possessed a substantial lattice of food markets.

Though there are a number of useful studies of the establishment across Ireland of a network of monthly fairs and weekly markets beginning in the seventeenth century, this inquiry has been pursued at the expense of comparable investigation of daily markets and the vital role they played in the circulation of the foodstuffs required for sustenance.<sup>11</sup> This was crucial, for obvious reasons, in the island’s larger urban centres, particularly Dublin, where as well as various markets aimed at traders (dealing in poultry, fish, grain and other foodstuffs) and an expanding variety of retail outlets, one could theoretically choose in the early nineteenth century between ‘nine established markets for the sale of butcher’s meat, poultry, &c.’<sup>12</sup> These were dotted across the cityscape, but none equalled Ormond Market (opened in 1682), which not just functioned as the city’s central marketplace but was also ‘esteemed one of the first in Europe’ in 1821 when John James McGregor provided his summative account of ‘the consumption of provisions’ in Dublin that attests well to the range and variety of foods that could be readily purchased in the city. For example, as well as ‘butcher’s meat of prime quality’, Ormond Market was ‘well supplied with poultry, fresh and cured fish, bacon, butter, cheese, fruit, and vegetables, with every kind of sauce that luxury can require’.<sup>13</sup> None of the other markets operated on the same scale, but their existence, and the emergence then near Carlisle Bridge of ‘a new market... called Leinster Market’ provides a revealing window onto the importance then of the insufficiently explored market infrastructure to the provisioning of the city.

This would not have been possible, of course, if the ‘animal food’ that the city consumed in such volume was not available. It seems improbable that McGregor is correct when he concludes, based on the number of cattle that were sold at Smithfield Market that ‘the use [consumption] of animal food would appear to be more general in Dublin’ than it was in London. But his willingness to make the claim vindicates, if not echoes the observation of the editors of this volume that the expansion of an interdisciplinary approach to the history of food in Ireland has the potential to amplify and augment our comprehension of many aspects not just of the diet of the people who have lived in Ireland since the conclusion of the last Ice Age, but also of Ireland’s place in food history internationally.

**10** Murtagh, *Henrietta Street*. Four Courts Press, 2001).

**11** Patrick O’Flanagan, ‘Markets and fairs in Ireland, 1600–1800: index of economic development and regional growth’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 4: 11 (1985), 364–78; Denis A. Cronin, Jim Gilligan and Karina Holton (eds), *Irish fairs and markets* (Dublin:

**12** John James McGregor, *New picture of Dublin Comprehending a History of the City* (Dublin: C. Bentham, 1821), 63. **13** McGregor, *New picture of Dublin*, 63.

It echoes Myrtle Allen's key reminder that Ireland belongs 'to a geographical and culinary group with Wales, England and Scotland'.<sup>14</sup> If the continued currency of this point helps to explain why, having been all but ignored by a discipline (History) that was preoccupied with delineating the 'national question', food did not secure its proper prominence in the historical narrative, this is no longer the case. Indeed, one can justifiably suggest that we are well embarked on a new phase of food history building on the impressive (evidentially and interpretatively) foundations that were put in place by Cullen in 1981 and 1992, Sexton in 1998 and by Clarkson and Crawford in 2001.<sup>15</sup> While the disciplinary diversity, temporal range and thematic richness of this new phase is amply attested to in the twenty-eight articles that comprise this volume, it is doubly heartening to identify the new directions in which it is currently being brought by allied and related work. An interesting example is Juliana Adelman's *Civilised by Beasts: animals and urban change in nineteenth-century Dublin*,<sup>16</sup> for though this is manifestly not a study of 'Irish food history', its account of the place of animals in Dublin dovetails with and adds an additional and enhancing dimension. It also bears witness to the narrowing of the gap that may once have separated food history from, or perhaps differentiated it from, the historical mainstream. Ideally such divisions should not persist once an intellectually rigorous historically informed inquiry into any new or emerging area has found its way. Only time will tell if the preparation of *Irish Food History: A Companion* represents that moment in Ireland, but the auguries are positive. Whatever the outcome, this ambitious collection is a logical evolution from other works that have sought to provide a perspective over the *longue durée*.<sup>17</sup> It is a testament to the endeavour of the editors—and to what is now possible—that it provides some twenty-eight new and pertinent contributions to that history spanning the Mesolithic to Maura Laverty.

**14** Quoted in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman, 'Irish culinary manuscripts and printed cookbooks: a discussion', *Petits Propos Culinaires* 94 (2011), 81–101, 81–2. <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschafart/111/>  
**15** Louis Michael Cullen, *The emergence of modern Ireland 1600–1900* (London: Batsford Academic, 1981), 140–92;

Louis Michael Cullen, 'Comparative aspects of Irish diet, 1550–1850' in Hans J. Teuteberg (ed.), *European Food History: A Research Review* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 45–55; Regina Sexton, *A Little History of Irish Food* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1998); Leslie A. Clarkson

and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and famine: food and nutrition in Ireland, 1500–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

**16** Juliana Adelman, *Civilised by Beasts: animals and urban change in nineteenth-century Dublin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021). **17** James Kelly and Elizabeth FitzPatrick

(eds), *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C. Special Issue: Food and Drink in Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2016); Dara Downey, Liam Downey and Derry O'Donovan, *Historical Irish dairy products* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2021).

## **The Son of the King of Moy**

The son of the king of Moy in midsummer  
Found a girl in the greenwood.  
She gave him black fruit from thornbushes.  
She gave an armful of strawberries on rushes.

*Anonymous*

—7th or 8th century Irish

translated by Myles Dillon

## **The Solace of Artemis**

Paula Meehan

—*for Catriona Crowe*

I read that every polar bear alive today has mitochondrial DNA  
from a common mother, an Irish brown bear who once  
roved out across the last ice age, and I am comforted.  
It has been a long hot morning with the children of the machine,

their talk of memory, of buying it, of buying it cheap, but I,  
memory keeper by trade, scan time coded in the golden hive mind  
of eternity. I burn my books, I burn my whole archive:  
a blaze that sears, synapses flaring cell to cell where

memory sleeps in the wax hexagonals of my doomed and melting comb.  
I see him loping towards me across the vast ice field  
to where I wait in the cave mouth, dreaming my cubs about the den,  
my honied ones, smelling of snow and sweet oblivion.

## Introduction

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman

Food permeates every aspect of life and society, from birth to death—from the new-born’s first suckle to the food traditions associated with Irish wakes and funerals. Essential for survival, it has historically proven academically elusive, hidden in plain sight. Entangled with the domestic and the feminine, it was perhaps traditionally regarded as too mundane and too quotidian for consideration. Yet, consider what can be revealed by applying the ‘food lens’ to something as fundamental as our sense of place, our basic grounding in townland and byway. Consider the etymological richness of ‘*Bóthar*’, the Irish word for road (from ‘*bó*’—cow), defined in width by the length and breadth of a cow, a signifier of the long affair of our bovine past; extending also to our ‘*buachaillí*’ (boys) and ‘*cailíní*’ (girls), meaning, respectively, cowboy or herd boy and little herder, the suffix ‘*ín*’ denoting the diminutive. The true meaning of placenames such as Clonmel, Cappataggle, Glenageary, and Kanturk, all food-related, can only be unlocked through an understanding of their Irish language origins.<sup>1</sup> All are instances of what Martin Doyle succinctly explains as ‘a transliteration from the Irish, preserving the sound but obliterating the meaning’.<sup>2</sup> In a form of reverse colonisation, there are many Hiberno-English words for food we regularly use without ever considering their etymology. For example, we have made the much loved ‘spud’ (potato) our own, descending to us from ‘spuddle’, a small cheap knife, through to ‘spud’, an instrument for weeding, as wielded by Swift:

My love to Sheelah is more firmly fixt  
Than strongest Weeds that grow these stones betwixt:  
My Spud these Nettles from the Stones can part  
No Knife so keen to weed thee from my Heart.<sup>3</sup>

Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill memorialised her husband, Art, in the famous poem ‘*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*’,<sup>4</sup> re-rendered for the modern reader by the bilingual writer, Doireann Ní Ghriofa as *A Ghost in the Throat*.<sup>5</sup> Food was one of

**1** *Cluain Meala*—meadow of honey, *Ceapaigh an tSeagail*—tillage plot of the rye, *Gleanna na gCaorach*—the valley of the sheep, and *Ceann Toirc*—headland of the boar. All can be found on [www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)  
**2** Martin Doyle, *Dirty Linen: The Troubles in My Home Place* (Newbridge: Merrion Press, 2023), 38. **3** Thomas Roscoe, *The Works of Jonathan*

Swift, with copious notes and additions and a memoir of the author, six volumes (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1860), vol. I, ‘From Poems composed at Market Hill’, 599. **4** This lamenting poem composed by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill has been famously referred to by Peter Levi, Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, as ‘the greatest poem written in

either Ireland or Britain in the eighteenth century’. Art was murdered at *Carraig an Ime*—Butter Rock, Co. Cork, at the hands of Abraham Morris on 4 May 1773. See Sarah Nolan, “‘This is a female text, I think’: ‘New Words’ and Franco-Gaelic Sources in Doireann Ní Ghriofa’s *A Ghost in the Throat*” in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher

(eds.) *New Beginnings: Perspectives from France and Ireland* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023), 181–96.  
**5** Doireann Ní Ghriofa, *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2020).



the touchstones by which her late husband expressed his love and devotion to Eibhlín Dubh. She never repented that love, and expressed it thus:

I never repented it:  
 You whitened a parlour for me,  
 Painted rooms for me,  
 Reddened ovens for me,  
 Baked fine bread for me,  
 Basted meat for me,  
 Slaughtered beasts for me;  
 I slept in ducks' feathers  
 Till midday milking-time,  
 Or more if it pleased me.<sup>6</sup>

The name 'Art' means bear in Irish.<sup>7</sup> In 'The Solace of Artemis', the poet Paula Meehan is comforted by the realisation 'that every polar bear alive' in the world has a trace of mitochondrial DNA from a brown bear that lived in Ireland during the Ice Age.<sup>8</sup> Our food history lies in the folds and crevices as much as in the grand narratives. Take, for example, the butchery marks that were found on the knee-cap of a brown bear from a cave in Co. Clare, dating back to c. 10,500 BCE. We know that permanent human settlement in Ireland began c. 8000 BCE: however, again those butchery marks, this time on a reindeer bone found in Co. Cork, reveal traces of what have been presumed to be casual visitors (hunters) from as far back as c. 33,000 BCE, prompting J.P. Mallory to argue that the 'earliest known item on an Irish menu was venison'.

Recent scholarship reveals a very different story of this island's food history compared with some of the insular tales and myths peddled in the past. Our ancestors were no strangers to Continental luxuries; consider the pine-resin hair gel found on Clonycavan Man<sup>9</sup>—a bog body discovered in 2002 and radiocarbon dated to between 392 BCE and 201 BCE—which can be traced to northern Spain or southern France. While wine, spices, and various fabrics may have joined the pine-resin hair gel in the cargo holds of incoming merchant ships, the ballast on their return journeys probably included butter, herring, salmon, and wool. As the Bristol proverb attests: 'Heryng of Slegothe [Sligo] and salmon of Bame [the river Bann] heis made in Brystowe many a ryche man'.<sup>10</sup> Further afield, the trilingual ninth-century Irish scholar Johannes Scotus Eriugena,<sup>11</sup> working in

<sup>6</sup> Eilís Dillon, 'The Lament for Arthur O'Leary', *Irish University Review* 1: 2(1971), 198–210, 200. <sup>7</sup> <https://dil.ie/search?q=art> <sup>8</sup> Meehan, *The Solace of Artemis*. <sup>9</sup> Eamonn P. Kelly, 'An archaeological interpretation of Irish Iron Age bodies' in Sarah Ralph (ed),

*The Archaeology of Violence: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (New York: SUNY, 2013), 232–240, 234–235. <sup>10</sup> Eleanora Mary Carus-Wilson, 'The Overseas Trade of Bristol' in Eileen Power and Michael M. Postan (eds), *Studies in English Trade in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century*

(Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006 [1933]), 183–246, 196. <sup>11</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/john-scottus-eriugena-a4287>

the court of Emperor Charles the Bald in the year 858, translated the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite from Greek into Latin. As Michael Cronin has so cogently argued, Ireland, far from being peripheral, was ‘in translation terms, a cultural centre’, with a long tradition of Irish scholars transcribing various texts relating to the heroic wars of Graeco-Roman antiquity into Irish between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Cultural influences flowed, and continue to flow, both ways. From a food literature perspective, the vision (a story within the story) of the eleventh century *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* was arguably the earliest vernacular European deployment of the conceit of a land of plenty, derivatives of which are found in the later *Land of Cockayne* of English and French tradition, and also in the German *Schlaraffenland*.<sup>13</sup> This visionary land of plenty is one in which food and beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) play a central role. ‘Bragget’ (a honeyed beer), ale, and mead are among the beverages referenced, so it is apposite to note that this volume embraces Michael Dietler’s observation that ‘it is perhaps more appropriate to think of alcohol as a special class of food with psychoactive properties’.<sup>14</sup>

Arabic knowledge of distilling was translated from Latin texts by hereditary medical families of Gaelic Ireland, forming the basis of what would later become the whiskey industry. There is a remarkable abundance of explicit and detailed references to distillation as a process, and to *uisce beatha* as a therapeutic consumable, in the extensive Irish language medical literature that accompanied the c. 1350–1500 Gaelic Resurgence. Beyond this, Susan Flavin and her colleagues working on the FoodCult project are providing evidence of how connected Ireland was conceptually with Europe during the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, and how European ideas and symbols were integrated within Irish culture.<sup>15</sup>

This book brings the reader on a journey from prehistory and the Ice Ages in Ireland through to the arrival of fisher-gatherers, early farmers, the introduction of livestock, cultivation of crops and development of cooking technologies, to the setting up of schools of poetry, medicine, and music in the early Medieval period. The extraordinary hospitality of our Gaelic chieftains permeated all levels of society, with the Brehon Laws determining the rations and provisions (e.g., wheat, barley, or oat porridge—made on either new milk, buttermilk, or water) required for each class. Cattle predominated, but when butter became a commercial commodity, its consumption among the poorer citizens declined. With the

<sup>12</sup> Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland. Translations, Languages, Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 8–46.

<sup>13</sup> William Sayers, ‘Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’, in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and

Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 8, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Dietler, ‘Alcohol: Anthropological/ Archaeological Perspectives’,

*Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35 (2006), 229–49, 231.

<sup>15</sup> <https://foodcult.eu/>

arrival and adoption of the potato as a staple food the population of Ireland was transformed. Personal correspondences, diaries, literature, and linguistic analysis assist us in charting the rise in social and nutritional importance of the tuber and the ensuing calamity, the Great Famine of 1845–52. Late-nineteenth century technological changes modernised food production and society at large, and from the early decades of the twentieth century Ireland adopted this modernity in all its nuanced facets, from the proliferation of restaurants, hotels, tourism, to rural electrification, televisions and the rise in consumerism and globalisation.

This latest scholarship embraces new sources of evidence and recent developments in scientific practices such as refinements in radiocarbon dating, stable isotope analysis, and how the strontium values in teeth can pinpoint the geology underlying the food consumed. They augment previously used analysis of coprolites, cesspits, and waterlogged grains and indeed often reinforce and enlighten knowledge gleaned from folklore, mythological tales and our early medieval vernacular literature, one of the richest collections of vernacular literature in Europe. Alternative versions of the same stories are frequently found within different regions and groups throughout the island, disseminated like spores in the wind. In his book on Irish plant names and lore, Nicholas Williams tells of the longstanding practice of herbal medicine in the Irish mythological tradition.<sup>16</sup> Dian Céacht, renowned doctor and healer of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, would submerge the wounded men of the Tuatha Dé into a cauldron of boiled medicinal herbs during the Battle of Magh Tuireadh (Moytura), from which they would emerge fully healed and march back into battle against the Fomorians. Professional jealousy led Dian Céacht to kill his son, Miach, for surpassing his healing power, and the story outlines how Airmed, Miach's sister, learned the herbal remedies from her brother beyond the grave. Oein de Bhairdúin instances stories within the Irish Traveller community which tell of herbal medicine being handed down by Airmed to the Pavees, highlighting an unbroken tradition in our mythological origin stories down to the present day.<sup>17</sup>

Food, in its various manifestations, has been used as a weapon of war, a symbol of prestige, a mark of hospitality, and associated traditions are found in most calendar and feast days in societies around the world. Many of these traditions, from spilling blood on Martinmas, killing the Michaelmas goose, consuming nettles in the Spring (three times during May, and on three Fridays in March), pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, picking fraughans or bilberries at Lúghnasa, blackberry picking in late August (given heavy rain and sun), to eating barmbrack or

**16** Nicholas Williams, *Diolaim Luibheanna* (Baile Átha Cliath: Caoimhín Ó Marcaigh, 1993), v.  
**17** Personal communication (MMCI) with Oein de Bhairdúin 30 January 2023.  
**18** Personal communication (MMCI) with Angela Bourke 16 August 2023. **19** <https://>

[www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk/about-us/history/](http://www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk/about-us/history/)  
**20** Antony T. Lucas, 'Irish Food Before The Potato' *Gwerin* 3: 2 (1960), 8–43. **21** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, 1997). **22** Louis Michael Cullen, *The Emergence of*

*Modern Ireland 1600–1900* (London: Batsford Academic, 1981); Louis Michael Cullen, 'Comparative aspects of Irish diet, 1550–1850' in Hans J. Teuteberg (ed.), *European Food History: A Research Review* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 45–55.

**23** See for example Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr, Meriel McClatchie and Aidan O'Sullivan (eds), *Early Medieval Agriculture, Livestock and Cereal Production in Ireland, AD 400–1100* (Oxford: BAR International Series 2647, 2014). **24** Bríd Mahon, *Land*

colcannon at Halloween, still remain in living memory, and have been captured by folklorists. One possible reason for the late appearance of what could be considered Irish-authored cookbooks is that the traditional foodways and associated recipes were so strongly tied in with the calendar and the agricultural year, that they did not need to be written down.<sup>18</sup> At the other end of the social scale, the importance attached to orders of precedence and the rituals surrounding the performance of prestige are equally found in Katharine Simms' chapter on feasting in Medieval Ireland, and in Elaine Mahon's chapter on Irish State Dining in *Áras an Uachtaráin* in the twentieth century. The various visitors, monastics, planters, refugees, and people who have settled here from the Vikings through to the Huguenots and the Irish Palatines, on to the multi-ethnic make-up of the island today, have all played a role in shaping what we eat and how we perform the rituals surrounding that. The story of food and foodways has always been and remains dynamic—a dynamism that attests to the fact there is no one single narrative that can do justice to that rich tapestry of human history.

Food history has been gaining momentum globally for over half a century, greatly influenced by the French concept of '*histoire des mentalités*', principally associated with the Annales School. The oldest and longest-running food history conference is the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery (1979–present), founded and co-chaired by Alan Davidson (retired diplomat, food historian and editor of *The Oxford Companion to Food*), and the social historian Dr Theodore Zeldin.<sup>19</sup> Their spirit of generous curiosity and shared interest in the topic of food permeates this volume, and continues to influence similar gatherings to this day. Irish food history remained relatively under-explored until two decades ago, despite the work of some seminal researchers on Irish food before the potato,<sup>20</sup> early Irish farming,<sup>21</sup> economic history,<sup>22</sup> archaeology,<sup>23</sup> folklore, and folk traditions and customs.<sup>24</sup> The expansion of the field in Ireland coincided with the development of a new liberal / vocational paradigm of culinary education in the Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University Dublin) in the 1990s, and with the attendance of Irish scholars at the Oxford Symposium of Food and Cookery, influencing Regina Sexton's *A Little History of Irish Food*.<sup>25</sup> From this point on, it is evident that Irish food history was on a secure footing within academia and the wider community. Post-graduate and doctoral research into food history soon followed in the new millennium, research which is continuously expanding and developing.<sup>26</sup>

of *Milk and Honey* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1991); Patricia Lysaght, 'Bealtaine: Women, Milk, and Magic at the Boundary Festival of May', in Patricia Lysaght (ed.), *Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994),

208–29. <sup>25</sup> Regina Sexton, *A Little History of Irish Food* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> A general overview of the expansion of culinary arts, food studies and gastronomy education in Ireland with a list of food-related doctoral research is available in

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Applying the Food Lens to Irish Studies', in Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien (eds), *Reimagining Irish Studies for the Twenty-first century*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 19–38. doi:10.21427/nlj4-xh58

In 2012 the first biennial Dublin Gastronomy Symposium was held at the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology, Cathal Brugha Street, now relocated to the campus at Grangeegorman.<sup>27</sup> The Symposium is directly influenced by the Oxford example, that first gathering leading to the publication of *'Tickling the Palate': Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture*.<sup>28</sup> In 2015, a special issue of the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C*, was published, titled 'Food and Drink in Ireland', which was made available the following year in book form.<sup>29</sup> The special 'Food Issue' of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2018 further championed the importance of food in Irish scholarship, bringing it more into the mainstream.<sup>30</sup> That same year, Christopher Kissane observed that 'we are long past the days when food was not given serious attention by historians. But that does not mean we have figured out how to approach such a vast subject'.<sup>31</sup> This was also the year that Dr Susan Flavin of Trinity College Dublin, secured European Research Council (ERC) funding for the FoodCult project, a collaborative undertaking which commenced in 2019, aiming to establish both the fundamentals of everyday diet, and the cultural 'meaning' of food and drink in early modern Ireland (c. 1550–1650).<sup>32</sup> In 2021, a special issue of *Folk Life: Journal of Ethnological Studies* was published on Irish Food Ways.<sup>33</sup>

This exciting new companion to Irish food history builds on the existing work of scholars across the disciplines. It includes contributions from experts in the fields of archaeology, history, mythology, linguistics, literature, folklore, Irish studies, food studies, beverage studies, gastronomy, and culinary history, while also applying the latest thinking and scholarship to the history of Irish food from the earliest inhabitants to the twenty-first century. The book is divided into six sections. The first section, *Prehistory and Archaeology of Food in Ireland*, has four chapters. J.P. Mallory brings the reader on a journey from the last Ice Age through to the Iron Age, noting that a culinary revolution occurred during the Neolithic (4000–2500 BCE) which saw the introduction of domestic cattle, sheep/goats and pigs, along with the cultivation of wheat and barley. The chapter concludes by indicating the linguistic and literary evidence for foodstuffs and their preparation that was inherited from the Proto-Celtic language and introduced into Ireland with the arrival of the earliest speakers of Irish. Finbar McCormick, using osteoarchaeological evidence, notes that Mesolithic settlers in Ireland had a more restricted meat diet than encountered anywhere else in mainland Britain and Europe. The last glacial period had robbed the country of most of its medium and large-sized animals and the lack of a post-glacial

<sup>27</sup> <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/dgs/> <sup>28</sup> Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), *'Tickling the Palate': Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014). <sup>29</sup> Elizabeth FitzPatrick and James Kelly (eds), *Food and Drink in Ireland: Proceedings of the*

*Royal Irish Academy, Section C. Food and Drink in Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2016). <sup>30</sup> Rhona Richman Kenneally and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (eds), 'The Food Issue', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 41 (2018). <sup>31</sup> Christopher Kissane, *Food, Religion and Communities in*

*Early Modern Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 9. <sup>32</sup> <https://foodcult.eu/> <sup>33</sup> Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (guest ed.), *Folk Life: Journal of Ethnological Studies: Special Issue on Irish Food Ways* 59: 2 (2021).

land bridge to Ireland meant that it could not be repopulated by these animals after the glaciers retreated. It was with the introduction of agriculture in the Neolithic that cattle became the main source of meat, and have remained so until modern times. Our food history becomes a deeply personal matter with Seamas Caulfield's chapter on the landscape of the Céide Fields where he uses intergenerational local knowledge, practice, and memory, along with the most recent stable isotope and radiocarbon dating of lipids in potsherds, to understand ancient dairy farming in his native Co. Mayo. Concluding this section, Nikolah Gilligan reviews plant-based foods and agriculture in Medieval Ireland c. 500–1100 CE, using evidence from historical texts, archaeological excavation and archaeobotanical analysis.

The second section titled *Bog butter, Bees and Banqueting in Medieval Ireland* is self-explanatory. Maeve Sikora and Isabella Mulhall's chapter showcases the most recent analysis on bog butter finds in Ireland, ranging over 4,000 years, from the early Bronze Age to the post-medieval period. All of the radiocarbon dates for bog butter obtained by the National Museum of Ireland since the year 2000 are laid out for the reader, and a comprehensive overview is given of the type of vessels or coverings in which butter was deposited. The chapter also explores the complex and wide-ranging reasons why butter was deposited in Ireland's bogs in the first instance. Shane Lehane combines his background in history and folklore with his applied knowledge of beekeeping in his rich chapter on honey and beekeeping in ancient Ireland. Although evidence of bees and honey in the prehistoric archaeological record is purely circumstantial, the legendary association of the introduction of beekeeping into Ireland by St Modomnóc can be interpreted as an indication that more elaborate apicultural techniques were introduced by the cultural influences of Christianity. Katharine Simms' chapter reinforces the importance of banqueting among the Gaelic chiefs in medieval Ireland. One of the main sources of evidence of seating plans, prestige and precedence comes from the the legendary feasting-hall at Tara, the *Tech Midchuarta* ('House of Mead Circulation'), which had a large vat of mead or ale, either at one end, or in the middle, depending on which version of the text you consulted. Honey also features in William Sayers' chapter which provides a detailed account of one of the richest sources of Irish food history, the aforementioned *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*. In his vision of (literally) a land of milk and honey, a horse in this Otherworld is described thus: 'the bacon horse he sat on had legs of custard and hooves of coarse oat bread, ears of curds, and

eyes of honey. Its breath plumed sour cream from each of its nostrils, and there was an occasional gush of bragget from its bum’.

*Sources for Food History in Early Modern Ireland* begins with Fionnán O’Connor’s chapter on the history of distilling in Ireland and its link with both medicine and feudal hospitality. This is followed by John McCafferty’s chapter on the Franciscans and the power of fish in the seventeenth century before Toby Barnard brings the reader on a tour of food through all social classes in eighteenth-century Ireland, richly illustrated by drawings from Hugh Douglas Hamilton’s *Cries of Dublin*. Danielle Clarke’s chapter on the manuscript recipe books held at Birr Castle allows a unique glimpse into the food culture and culinary activity of the Parsons family over three centuries. In the final chapter in this section, Tara McConnell delves into the personal correspondence of Jonathan Swift, describing the heretofore unexplored gastronomic world of the much-studied satirist, essayist, poet, and cleric, highlighting the nuanced judgments he made about dining and his diet, while also explaining how his various health issues led him towards moderation in the consumption of both food and drink.

Section four, titled *Developments in Food Supply, Technology, and Trade*, begins with Grace Neville’s chapter drawing on the personal correspondences of the Irish political leader and activist Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847). Neville provides further insight into the feasting, fasting, and food passions of O’Connell, noting his efforts to assuage minor famines, cholera outbreaks, and food shortages in his home region of the Iveragh Peninsula (*Uíbh Ráthach*) in south-west Kerry. One of the technologies which benefitted O’Connell’s correspondences was the improved postal system, which became even more efficient with the enhancements of steam engine technology. This technology, powering both steamships and railways, enabled huge numbers of food packages to be sent into, across, and out of Ireland from 1845 to 1960, the subject of John Mulcahy’s chapter. Turkeys, geese, or chickens could be killed, posted from rural Ireland and delivered within eighteen hours to any one of England’s industrial cities. So plentiful was the dried fruit sent in packages from the United States of America at Christmas 1944 that a local Limerick newspaper reported that ‘the spotted dog<sup>34</sup> will this year be barking in an American accent’. Irish butter became a global brand in the nineteenth century, the subject of the following two chapters. Claudia Kinmonth forensically discusses the home production of butter using the dash churn, and the associated material culture and folklore, before the invention

**34** A variation on traditional Soda Bread, which adds in an egg along with dried fruit such as sultanas, raisins, or currants. The fruit, of course, are the spots referred to in the name.

of the cream separator made home churning uneconomical. This innovative separating technology and the subsequent rise of the cooperative movement in Ireland is outlined by Patrick Doyle, noting the influence of key figures such as Horace Plunkett and the work of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS). The alchemy of home butter making during his Co. Derry childhood was poetically revisited and captured by Seamus Heaney in 'Churning Day', the butter being described as 'coagulated sunlight' heaped up in a tin strainer like 'gilded gravel in the bowl'.<sup>35</sup>

The penultimate section is titled *Food, Folklore, Foclóirí, and Digital Humanities* and opens with a splendidly illustrated chapter on Irish hearth furniture by Clodagh Doyle, which discusses the rich folklore behind the artefacts, customs, and practices of cooking on the open fire in Ireland up until the arrival of rural and urban electrification. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dónall Ó Braonáin extol the various uses that can be made of Irish language sources in the study of food history and point out that many of these sources are now freely available online, thanks to the democratising effect of the digitisation of Dictionaries, the Schools' Collection of Folklore, and the Placenames Database. The aforementioned rituals of food at wakes and funerals in the twentieth century are explored next by Patricia Lysaght, drawing on the rich writing of Tomás Ó Criomhthain. Many international folklorists visited Ó Criomhthain's native Blasket Islands and the final chapter in this section, from Jonny Dillon and Ailbe van de Heide, outlines the origins of the Irish Folklore Commission, noting that it was a six-month visit to Sweden in 1928 by James Hamilton Delargy (Séamus Ó Duilearga), particularly the meeting with Åke Campbell (1891–1957), along with their various visits to folk museums, that revealed 'a new world which lay right under my nose in Ireland but which I never noticed'.<sup>36</sup> This new world included food, foodways and the material culture that was associated with its production, transformation, cooking, and consumption. The chapter outlines the different collections held at the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin, including the Urban Folklore Project (1979–1980), and notes that, along with the digitisation of the Schools' Collection, the Audio and Photographic Collections similarly offer huge scope to food researchers interested in Irish food history.

The final section, *The Development of Modern Irish Food and Identity*, is the largest and spans the entire twentieth century. In the first chapter, Dorothy Cashman uncovers the identity of the anonymous author of *Cookery Notes*, which may still be the best-selling cookbook in Irish history—it ran to multiple

**35** Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber & Faber, [1966] 2006), 9–10. © Estate of Seamus Heaney. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Limited. All rights reserved. **36** Séamus Ó Duilearga to Jack Delargy (16 June 1928) reproduced in:

Séamas Ó Catháin, *Formation of a Folklorist: The Visit of James Hamilton Delargy to Scandinavia, Finland, Estonia, and Germany*, Scribhinní Béaloideas / Folklore Studies 18 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 165.



reprints and was used in schools, training colleges and in homes for over half a century. The history of the Domestic Science/Economy movement in Ireland, its key instructresses and their publications are also discussed. This is followed by Ian Miller's chapter which outlines reports of starvation and death in Ireland, revealing a shocking story of poverty and hunger in the new Irish Free State, reminiscent of the worst elements of the previous century. Bryce Evans' chapter on food in the 1930s and 1940s discusses the economic war and the years of the Emergency, when rationing was introduced and Irish farmers were told to 'till or go to jail'. The outbreak of the Second World War put a premature halt to Douglas Hyde's planned series of official dinners aimed at bringing politicians, public servants, and representatives of other interests throughout the state, who were on opposite sides of the Civil War, together. This is outlined in Elaine Mahon's chapter titled "'The President requests the Pleasure': Dining with the Irish Head of State 1922–1940', which documents how the fledgling state developed diplomatic protocols to entertain foreign dignitaries, heads of state, and important guests in the first two decades post-independence. Food was used by de Valera, along with the magnificent setting of the Throne Room in Dublin Castle, 'as a stage for his own brand of majesty' at various state banquets.<sup>37</sup>

The novels and the cookbooks of Maura Laverty are discussed by Caitríona Clear. Laverty was described by the *Irish Press* journalist, Anna Kelly, as the writer who could not 'keep away from writing about food', even when writing about other things. In her cookbook *Kind Cooking*, Laverty famously declared that Ireland gave the world a four-leaf shamrock—one leaf was W.B. Yeats, another was boiled potatoes in their jackets, yet another was Barry Fitzgerald, and the fourth was soda bread: of them all, soda bread was the greatest. Irish food, to her mind, was equivalent to the work of its poets, writers, and actors. The final two chapters focus on recent changes in Irish food culture over the last six decades. Firstly, the growing transformation of food service in pubs is explored by Brian J. Murphy, ranging from the occasional bag of crisps, or toasted sandwich, to the full-scale carveries of the 1980s and the later phenomenon of the gastropub. The life and legacy of Myrtle Allen, of Ballymaloe House fame, is the subject matter of the final chapter. Margaret Connolly discusses how Mrs Allen's philosophy of using local, seasonable and sustainable food (which we can now appreciate as ultramodern), ran counter to the period within which she established her reputation, a period when packet soup, instant mash, and TV dinners were more in vogue. As one of the founding members of Euro-Toques

**37** William Derham, '(Re) Making Majesty: The Throne Room at Dublin Castle, 1911–2011' in Myles Campbell and William Derham (eds), *Making Majesty: The Throne Room at Dublin Castle, A Cultural History* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2017), 265–306, 286.

in 1986, Mrs Allen was active in defending European culinary heritage, but her actions began with leading by example at home in Ireland. She indirectly influenced the formation of the Nordic Food Movement, and who else but Myrtle Allen would have opened an Irish restaurant in Paris in the 1980s? She must undoubtedly rank as one of the most influential people in Irish food history in the last half century.

This interdisciplinary book will be a landmark publication within the growing fields of food studies, Irish studies, and Irish food history, and will also be of interest to the general reader who wishes to explore elements of Ireland's culinary history and heritage. In his introduction to the 2015 *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* special issue on Food and Drink in Ireland, Professor Stephen Mennell noted that any attempts at identifying an Irish national cuisine were futile, since from the 1980s, the age of national cuisines had passed. Fast food, mass catering, ethnic restaurants and the internationalisation of cooking and eating—or perhaps more accurately, not cooking and eating—was the reality, even in the 1980s, equally in Ireland as in every other European country and beyond. He noted that at the top of the culinary hierarchy, there was more emphasis on the 'brilliance of innovative individual chefs than on their location within national traditions', concluding that in all these respects, Ireland was part of the modern world.<sup>38</sup> There are of course many more chapters of Irish food history still waiting to be written. This volume in no way claims to be exhaustive, the opposite in fact, but we are gradually figuring out how to approach this vast subject. Augmenting previous publications, it provides a worthwhile introduction for both the novice and the established researcher to numerous aspects of Irish food history and aims to 'whet the appetite' for more in-depth research into facets of our culinary past, both ancient and more recent. The ever-changing dynamic nature of foodways means that the various contents and contexts of today's meals, fashioned significantly by present-day issues such as war and climate change, shape tomorrow's food history.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Mennell, 'Introduction' *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Section C: Food and Drink in Ireland (2015), xi–xix, xix.



Section 1

# Prehistory and archaeology of food in Ireland



## The Island, A Prospect

Paula Meehan

We learned that Ireland was a *temperate* island  
from our first geography books, the climate mild,  
the gulf stream a blessing that saved us from freezing  
though we live at the same latitude as Moscow.  
And the child I was found that word disappointing,  
no earthquakes, hurricanes, typhoons, volcanoes, floods.  
*Temperate!* A dreary wet city Sunday sound.

I took to astral travel out the school window,  
lift-off on the storied wings of myth and legend,  
and bitter tales of landlords and emigration,  
of plantation, rebellion, famine and ruin.  
They offered us a trope of the traumatised nation.  
They made us feel the land had failed us. They bludgeoned  
us with shame, left us lost, fearing our own shadows.

I grew up. I roved out in blue britches of denim.  
I walked the roads. I slept in ditches. I fell in love  
with a mountain tarn. Its black eye mirrored the stars.  
The island took hold of me: ice-sculpted valleys,  
glacial erratics, moraine, esker, bog, karst,  
her meadows, her rivers; and beamed down from above —  
Planet Earth — our grave mother as seen from above.

The mitochondrial tug of eternity,  
that slow pulse of evolutionary regard  
from deep within the ancient reptilian brain,  
seat of instinct; from such a critical distance,  
my neo-aboriginal imagination  
must dream new endings, must fashion prophetic words  
fearing they'll not be heard by our posterity.

Can we trust the visions teeming in the hours of trance,  
knowing art is toxic (little arrows of guilt!) —  
cadmium, chromium, cobalt, magnesium, lead?  
To make paper is to make poison, no hand's clean.  
All our craft work, all our magic, this we trade:  
for bee music, music of otter, hare, kite, stoat,  
the gold-nebbed blackbird's blissful song of happenstance.

Last week I walked to Feltrim in the pouring rain,  
considered the redundant nature of its name —  
*Faoldroim*, from the Irish, means Ridge of the Wolves.  
The wolves are long extinct and half gone is the ridge  
(its requiem the thud and blast of explosive),  
limestone lorried away to serve that beast, the boom,  
the turbo cycle over and over again.

High on Feltrim Hill Nathaniel Hone loved to sketch  
Lambay and Ireland's Eye, the wild coastal fractals;  
and Samuel Beckett's favourite view was down-  
wards to Saint Ita's psychiatric hospital.  
*You're on Earth. There's no cure for that ...* our human span  
an eyeblink. To save the world is not so simple  
as to mine an ocean for each salt tear we've wept.

**01**

*Food in Irish Prehistory:  
Archaeological, linguistic,  
and early literary evidence,  
with a note of caution*

**J.P. Mallory**

### Before settlement

The earliest known item on an Irish menu was venison. Although the earliest evidence for permanent human settlement in Ireland begins c. 8000 BCE, there are traces of what have been presumed to be casual visitors (hunters) back as far as c. 33,000 BCE, one of whom left a stone tool scratch mark on a reindeer bone from Castlepook Cave, Co. Cork.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by similar butchery marks on the knee-cap of a brown bear from Alice and Gwendoline Cave, Co. Clare, that dates c. 10,500 BCE.<sup>2</sup> These discoveries place the earliest potential date for modern humans in Ireland during the latter part of the Midlandian, a period running from 116,000 to about 11,700 years ago which saw the last of the ice ages. Conditions were not uniformly cold; about 50,000 years ago the weather had warmed to conditions comparable to today's before dropping again to see forests replaced by open grasslands, an environment that attracted both grazing animals as well as predators. But the temperature continued to fall, and although Ireland is believed to have remained free of ice up until 32,000 years ago, by 26,500 years ago it had entered what is known locally as the Glenavy Stadial or the Late Glacial Maximum. The surface and the surrounding off-coast areas were covered by ice sheets approximating a kilometre in height which (depending on the geomorphologist one follows) covered either the entire land surface of Ireland or, at best, left exposed only the peaks of some of its highest mountains. Once the Irish landscape had shifted from tundra to glaciers it would no longer offer a food source for the hunters who had spread across Atlantic Europe until the temperature improved once again and plants and animals were able to return. This occurred over a period where the ice margin moved progressively north again and about 15,000–14,000 years ago Ireland was essentially free of the glaciers that had once covered it and the land was again colonised by plants, particularly grasslands, which provided an environment to attract new grazers. So, might we consider what foods were available before the Late Glacial Maximum effectively closed Ireland's restaurants for thousands of years?

The evidence for the mammal population at this time is almost entirely derived from the protective context of cave deposits where, in very broad terms, we can list the species that were here before about 20,000 years ago. These would include grazing animals such as the mammoth, giant Irish deer, horse, red deer, reindeer, Irish hare, both Arctic and Norwegian lemmings and possibly musk ox (though last seen c. 73,000 BCE). And among the predators we have the brown bear, wolf, and Arctic fox.<sup>3</sup> While this is not as rich a resource as found

**1** *The Burren: Heart of Stone*, RTÉ Documentary. (18 April 2021) Episode 2 at 36 minutes in. Dr Ruth Carden radiocarbon dated the reindeer bone. **2** Marion Dowd and Ruth F. Carden, 'First evidence for Late Upper Palaeolithic human presence in Ireland', *Quaternary*

*Science Review* 139 (2016), 158–63. **3** Peter Sleeman and Derek Yalden, 'Ireland's mammals: An annotated list' in Nyree Finlay, Sinéad McCartan, Nicky Milner and Caroline Wickham-Jones (eds), *From Bann Flakes to Bushmills*. Prehistoric Society Monograph Series,

vol. 1, no. 1 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2009), 211–19.



in some Continental faunas, it would certainly have been sufficient to nourish Palaeolithic hunters of the time although, as we have just seen, the evidence of anyone actually setting foot in Ireland at this time is still pretty slim.

During the warming period that followed the Late Glacial Maximum, some of the earlier species managed to return to reclaim the land while new arrivals also colonised Ireland. This included the return of the giant Irish deer, reindeer, the Irish hare, lemmings and predators such as the brown bear, wolf, and stoat. But the recolonisation was interrupted c. 12,900 years ago for about a thousand years by what is known locally as the Nahanagan Stadial or, more widely, Younger Dryas, when temperatures again plunged into arctic conditions, reducing vegetation and eliminating some species. Among the most important mammals that apparently did not survive the Nahanagan Stadial were giant Irish deer, reindeer, and red deer.

### **Mesolithic (8000–4000 BCE)**

The first clear evidence for the permanent occupation of Ireland begins c. 8000 BCE during the Mesolithic, the Middle Stone Age which covers the period from the retreat of the ice to the introduction of domestic animals and livestock c. 4000 BCE.<sup>4</sup> The earliest human settlers appear to have been descendants of populations that had moved northward from earlier refuge areas in the central Mediterranean. While the earliest Mesolithic settlers in Britain could have crossed over from the Continent by land, the earliest settlers to Ireland had to have arrived by boats as the Irish Sea had already formed long before our evidence for Mesolithic colonisation.

It is during the Mesolithic that we move from potential foods to those actually attested on archaeological sites, although it must be acknowledged that the evidence for the first 4000 years of the Irish diet is extremely limited. It is not only limited with respect to the number of archaeological sites yielding evidence for foodstuffs but it is also extremely limited in terms of the menu itself. The opening of the Irish Sea at the end of the last Ice Age had cut the island off from the natural expansion of plants and animals from the Continent to Ireland, and a Mesolithic visitor from Britain or the Continent would have been struck by the lack of variety of food. Ireland is famously deficient in terms of biodiversity compared with its neighbours with respect to plants, mammals, birds, and fish and this was reflected in the range of foods that the island offered.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the diet would have been factored by location—the contrast between inland riverine

<sup>4</sup> Peter Woodman, *Ireland's First Settlers. Time and the Mesolithic* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015); Graeme Warren, *Hunter-Gatherer Ireland: Making Connections in an Island World* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2022)

<sup>5</sup> Frank Mitchell and Michael Ryan, *Reading the Irish Landscape* (Dublin: Town House, 1997), 106–19.

sites and coastal sites, and by season, which governed the availability of which meat, fish or plant products were on the menu.

### **Meat (mammals)**

A foreign visitor would have most likely been accustomed to beef from the aurochs, the large wild cattle of Europe, and venison from elk and red deer. In Ireland the meat menu would have been almost entirely confined to pork as the wild boar was the only major ungulate available to Ireland during the Mesolithic. Moreover, its absence in earlier faunas has suggested that it may not have made its own way over before the Irish Sea opened, which had prevented most mammals from colonising the newly formed island. Rather, it is quite possible that the wild pig had been introduced by early human settlers who would have been massively disappointed with what they could retrieve from the Irish forests.<sup>6</sup> The deliberate introduction of wild pigs would have made logistical sense because although it offers less meat than the aurochs, elk or red deer, it is far more prolific than any of the other species, producing a litter of anywhere between three to eight piglets every year.

The actual remains of wild pigs are neither abundant nor in a condition to permit archaeologists to perform the more intensive analysis undertaken in other parts of Europe. Of the remains that we have, most derive from younger animals, hunted in the summer at Lough Boora, Co. Offaly, and the winter at Mount Sandel, Co. Derry, suggesting that pork could have been on the menu throughout the year.<sup>7</sup> The remains from Mount Sandel were overwhelmingly derived from the foot bones of anywhere from three to thirty pigs. Our knowledge of the preparation of animals for consumption must largely be culled from contemporary regions of Europe that offer far more abundant evidence. For example, studies of wild boar bones from Mesolithic sites in Sweden<sup>8</sup> indicate that the initial preparation, the skinning of the animal, may have been done either with the animal lying on the ground or suspended with its head down. After removal of the skin there would be the dismemberment of the carcass, which tended to follow a predictable pattern. It might be carried out at the kill site to reduce the unit weight that had to be lugged back to camp, or at the camp site itself in preparation for further butchering. The butchering scheme in Sweden would see the following initial dismemberments, which appeared to have been accomplished with the use of a flint knife rather than a stone axe:

<sup>6</sup> Finbar McCormick, 'Lovely bones: Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press

and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 2, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>

<sup>7</sup> Louise H. Van Wijngaarden-Bakker, 'Faunal remains and the Irish Mesolithic' in Clive Bonsall (ed.), *The Mesolithic in Europe. Proceedings of the*

*3rd International Symposium* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1989), 125–33. <sup>8</sup> Ola Magnell, 'Butchering of wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) in the Mesolithic' in Lars Larsson, Hans Kindgren, Kjell Knutsson, David Loeffler and Agneta Akerlund (eds),

*Mesolithic on the Move. Papers presented at the Sixth International Conference on the Mesolithic in Europe, Stockholm 2000* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003), 671–79.

- Removal of the mandible from the skull
- Removal of the head from the trunk at the atlas
- Removal of the neck at the 5th or 6th vertebrae
- Removal of the ribs from the trunk
- Removal of the vertebral column and sacrum from the pelvis
- Removal of all the joints and extremities.

Once dismembered the long bones would be usually split for their marrow. Finally, the joints were filleted with the thinner slices of meat stripped from the bones making them easier to cook on the fire, or be set aside for preservation to provide stores of meat for the winter. The more elaborate process of butchering may have been confined to adults while the piglets, as was the case at Mount Sandel, may have been simply roasted on the fire.

Other than wild boar the other mammal on the menu was the Irish hare, a native who appeared after the Late Glacial Maximum c. 10,500 BCE. It has been estimated that when human colonisation began there may have been in the order of 42,000 Irish hares in the landscape.<sup>9</sup> The archaeological evidence so far does not suggest that the hare was particularly important in the diet (only six hare bones were recovered from Mount Sandel and they may have been only from a single individual) and it could just as easily have been hunted for its fur during the winter when the fur of the hare is thickest.

### ***Fish***

The evidence of bones on Irish Mesolithic sites indicates that a variety of fish was consumed. As salmonids, especially the Atlantic salmon, still play a major part in the Irish diet, we will begin with them.

Atlantic salmon have been recovered from the Early Mesolithic site of Mount Sandel (894 bones), Co. Derry, as well as the Later Mesolithic site of Ferriter's Cove, Co. Kerry, where a single bone was identified. While salmon were probably abundant (there are records from the 1850s that show 120 tonnes of salmon were caught each year near Coleraine in the vicinity of the Mount Sandel site),<sup>10</sup> their capture to a marked degree would require the use of traps or nets in an estuary environment where the salmon would be confined during their spring migration upstream. More widespread (and therefore perhaps more frequent on the Mesolithic menu) would have been trout which were found at both Mount

<sup>9</sup> Sleeman and Yalden, 'Ireland's mammals'.

<sup>10</sup> Woodman, *Ireland's First Settlers*.

Sandel (568) and inland at Lough Boora (709), the latter a location where salmon were not found.

It is probable that the eel was even more important to the Mesolithic menu. Eels were a seasonal resource in that they were caught during the autumn and early winter as they worked their way downstream to migrate out to sea. Eels were the dominant species captured at Lough Boora (1371 bones) while they were at least present in numbers (122) at Mount Sandel and are also traced at other Mesolithic sites. Their capture was accomplished either by nets or by some form of leister, i.e., a three-pronged fishing spear, but they may have also been trapped in fish-weirs such as those found in Dublin.<sup>11</sup> Eels are a valuable source of protein (100g provides nearly half of one's daily requirement) as well as fat (23%) and calories (12%) and are particularly high in vitamins A and B12.<sup>12</sup> Other riverine species of fish that could potentially have been caught like pike and lampreys have not, at least not so far, been recovered from Irish Mesolithic sites.

A range of fish remains have also been recovered from coastal sites where the commonest species (at least according to the number of bones) are wrasse, whiting, and other *Gadidae* 'cod' species such as pollock, saithe and, naturally, cod. In addition to fish we also have remains of shellfish which formed middens of shells of oysters, limpets, periwinkles, whelks, mussels, and other shellfish. The importance of shellfish in the diet has always been problematic since its nutritional value is so small that it would require about 700 oysters to satisfy the daily calorific requirements of a single adult.<sup>13</sup>

### **Birds**

A wide range of bird remains were also recovered from sites although many of the species occur in such small numbers that they suggest only chance encounters rather than intentional hunting. The commoner birds include wood pigeon, woodcock, and occasionally larger prey such as grouse and even capercaillie, while a variety of waterfowl are known from some sites.<sup>14</sup>

### **Plants**

Although the number of native wild plants in Ireland (815) is markedly less than that of Britain (1172) and less than a quarter of that of France (3500), at least 120 of them are not only edible but common enough to have been regarded as a potential source of nutrition.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the difficulty of recovering plant

<sup>11</sup> Marie Fitzgerald, 'Catch of the day at Clowanstown, Co. Meath', *Archaeology Ireland* 21: 4 (2007), 12–15. <sup>12</sup> James P. Mallory, *The Origins of the Irish* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 46. <sup>13</sup> Woodman, *Ireland's First Settlers*, 276–79.

<sup>14</sup> McCormick, 'Lovely bones: Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland'.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Maclean, 'Eat your greens: An examination of the potential diet available in Ireland during the Mesolithic', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 56 (1993), 1–8.

remains from Mesolithic sites where preservation is often limited to the accidental charring of seeds provides us with only a very restricted number of archaeologically attested species. Foremost among these are the remains of hazelnuts which are ubiquitous not only on Mesolithic sites but throughout Irish prehistory and also on historical sites.

Nutritionally, hazelnuts were an exceptional resource. Compared with eggs they contain five times the calories, seven times the fat and over 50% more protein.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, they were able to be stored and so, after their collection in the autumn, they could have been placed in pits where, experiments have suggested, they could have survived in an edible state for the three or four months necessary to carry one through the winter when most other resources tended to be depleted. Mount Sandel offered examples of potential storage pits that could have retained c.147,000 hazelnuts which, after discarding the shell, would have amounted to c.74 kg of edible nut,<sup>17</sup> which compares very favourably to the c. 53 kg of meat that one might acquire from a wild boar. What is not entirely clear is the extent to which the presence of charred nut shells indicates the typical preparation of the nuts for consumption or merely the discarding of nuts that were regarded as inedible.

Another plant is the water lily which appears to have been deliberately imported to the site of Mount Sandel from the river below the settlement. The

### Spring

**Bulbs, tubers & rhizomes:** wild onions, bistort, bracken, wild parsnip, dandelion, water-lily, arrowhead.  
**Tree sap:** birch and aspen.  
**Leaves:** bracken, fat-hen, common sorrel.  
**Cones:** Scot's pine.  
**Seaweeds:** carrageen, kelp.

### Summer

**Tubers:** pignut.  
**Leaves:** watercress, wood-sorrel, sea beet, comfrey, mallow.  
**Fruits and seeds:** raspberry, crab apple, vetch.  
**Buds:** water-lily.  
**Seaweeds:** dulse, bladderwrack.

### Winter

Stored hazelnuts.

### Autumn

**Fruits, nuts:** blackberry, wild cherry, dog rose, sloe, hazel.

**Table 1** Potential plants exploited during the Mesolithic according to season.<sup>18</sup>

**16** Anne M. G. McComb, 'The carbonised hazel nut shell fragments from feature no. 283 at Haughey's Fort, Co. Armagh', *Emania* 17 (1998), 41–44. **17** Anne M. G. McComb, 'The ecology of hazel (*Corylus avellana*) nuts in Mesolithic Ireland' in Sinéad McCartan, Rick Schulting, Graeme Warren and Peter Woodman (eds), *Mesolithic Horizons: Papers presented at the Seventh International Conference on the Mesolithic in Europe, Belfast 2005*, vol. 1 (Oxbow: Oxford, 2009), 225–31. **18** Maclean, 'Eat your greens', 3–6.

seeds of the water lily could be collected and ground into a meal (of course, today they are also eaten ‘popped’). Beyond these we encounter species that were known to grow on sites and were plausibly collected deliberately, such as crab apples and raspberries, but the full range of plants eaten was likely to have been much larger. Rachel McClean attempted to summarise the *potential* seasonal menus of the Irish Mesolithic, which included the plants that were most likely to have been exploited (Table 1).

### **Food preparation**

There is little evidence for the actual means of cooking other than the obvious use of fire indicated by the finds of hearths (Figure 1). Passing reference to small stakeholes in the vicinity of a hearth at Mount Sandel may indicate the presence of uprights to support a spit of some sort. A number of sites have produced burnt stones which have been interpreted as the possible residue of roasting pits, i. e., pits were dug and stones were heated over a fire and then placed in the pit and covered first by a plant layer and then by the food itself and possibly other layers of hot stones and plant material before being sealed by an earth covering.<sup>19</sup> In one case, at a Late Mesolithic site on Clonava Island in Lake Derravaragh, Co. Westmeath, it is suspected that the burnt stones had been fractured by being plunged into water in order to bring it to a boil.<sup>20</sup> If so, this is the first recording of a cooking technique being employed in Ireland which, by the Bronze Age, would lead to thousands of fire sites.

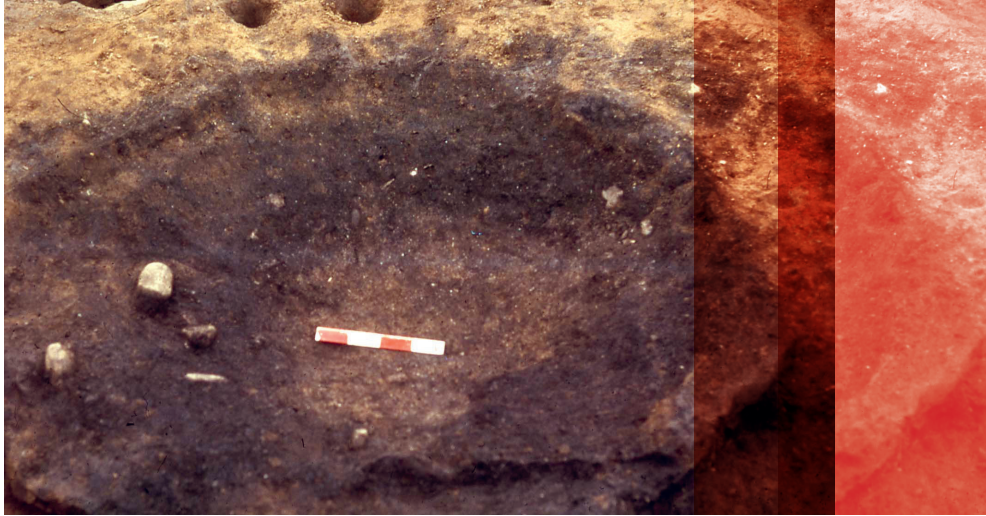
### **Neolithic c. 4000–2500 BCE**

The greatest revolution to the prehistoric Irish menu, both in terms of the content of the meals served and the way that they were prepared, occurred with the arrival of Neolithic settlers and the economy that they introduced to Ireland. The extremely limited range of a pork-based meat diet was expanded by the introduction of beef and mutton as well as dairy products. The wild plants were largely, although not entirely, replaced by domesticated cereals such as wheat and barley. The earlier emphasis on riverine resources, particularly fish, often completely disappeared. The cooking of food, which had been dominated by roasting directly over a fire, was augmented by the wet preparation of meals in clay vessels which were probably also employed in the serving of meals.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Hawkes, ‘The beginnings and evolution of the *fulacht fia* tradition in early prehistoric Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 114C (2014), 89–139.

<sup>20</sup> Aimée Little, ‘Clonava Island revisited: a story of

cooking, plants and re-occupation during the Irish Late Mesolithic’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 114C (2014), 35–55.



### **Meat (mammals)**

It is extremely difficult to determine the main focus of the meat economy of Neolithic Ireland because of the dearth of sizeable faunal samples from different environments. We can only be certain that cattle and sheep now appear in the faunal remains on Neolithic sites, and possibly mixed with the sheep remains there were also some goat (with the exception of horn cores and a restricted number of bones, the skeletons of sheep and goat are difficult to distinguish from one another and they are usually grouped together as caprovines or ovicaprids). To this we can add domestic pig which was introduced as part of the Neolithic package but, unlike the other species, its meat had been on the menu for the previous 4000 years. Geneticists have shown that it is very likely that Ireland's earliest farmers already possessed domesticated pigs that were genetically far removed from the earliest domestic pigs introduced to Europe from Anatolia, and that they had long been interbred with the local wild boars of Europe.<sup>21</sup> It is uncertain but perhaps probable that Ireland's Neolithic settlers continued the practice, although here we are still uncertain as to whether there was any interbreeding or local domestication of 'native' wild boars. In the very few sites

**Figure 1** Ireland's earliest known cooking place. One of the hearths from Mount Sandel, Co. Derry (Photo courtesy of Peter Woodman).

<sup>21</sup> Laurent A.F. Franz, James Haile, Audrey T. Lin and Greger Larson, 'Ancient pigs reveal a near-complete genomic turnover following their introduction to Europe', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science USA* 116: 35 (2019), 17231–38.

offering evidence of wild animals the wild boar (so far) is not represented but now we find remains of red deer, an animal that was a major staple of Mesolithic societies in Britain and on the Continent but apparently not introduced to Ireland until the Neolithic. Its paucity on Neolithic and subsequent sites where there is far more faunal evidence suggests that it was not introduced primarily as a food source but possibly because of its antlers that provided an extremely useful source for tools (and the average stag could produce about 15 pairs of antlers over its lifetime). Finally, there is some evidence that the hare was also occasionally hunted.

### **Dairy products**

Lipid analysis (i.e., the chemical analysis of fatty residues) of sherds of Neolithic pottery indicates overwhelmingly that many exhibited evidence for the processing of milk products which was persistent throughout the course of the Neolithic as well as over the geographical extent of the island.<sup>22</sup> While today Ireland is among the countries with the lowest percentage of lactose intolerance (4%), we should not expect to find Irish Neolithic populations exhibiting lactose persistence, the genetic mutation that permits adults to continue to produce lactase and consume raw dairy products without regrettable consequences. Sizeable studies of British Neolithic populations have revealed no trace of lactase persistence and suggest that although populations across Europe were consuming dairy products, they were not yet genetically evolved to take full advantage of dairy products. While the analysis of lipids indicates traces of milk in Neolithic ceramics, it does not indicate that it was actually consumed but chemical analysis of dental calculus from British Neolithic populations confirms that the milk products were indeed being consumed.<sup>23</sup> The degree to which milk featured in the diet and from what species of livestock (cattle, sheep, goats) remains problematic. Also, a person lacking lactase persistence still might be able to handle 240 ml of raw milk but the association of milk lipids with so much of the pottery suggests a greater importance. In addition, while sheep and goat may have also provided milk, the predominance of cattle on Neolithic sites does seem to point to cow's milk. Consequently, the disjuncture between the abundance of the evidence for milk products and the lack of the genetic constitution to actually consume it raw suggests that the milk was being processed to form more safely consumed dairy products such as cheese.

**22** Jessica Smyth and Richard P. Evershed, 'The molecules of meals: new insight into Neolithic foodways', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 115C: 1 (2015), 27–46. **23** Sophy J. Charlton, Abigail Ramsøe, Matthew J. Collins, Oliver Craig, Roman

Fischer, Michelle Alexander, and Camilla Speller, 'New insights into Neolithic milk consumption through proteomic analysis of dental calculus', *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 11 (2019), 6183–96.



### ***Fish and shellfish***

Although there are Neolithic sites situated near rivers from which fish may have been caught, so far the general evidence provided both by the meagre faunal remains recovered from sites, and also stable isotope analysis of about 30 Neolithic skeletons, is that fish played either no or only a minimal role in the Neolithic diet, although there is still evidence for the exploitation of shellfish.<sup>24</sup> The absence of fish has suggested that the Neolithic settlers had not only imported a new diet but may also have rejected, presumably for cultural reasons, one of the cornerstones of the diet of the earlier occupants of the island.

### ***Plants***

The primary plants consumed during the Neolithic were domestic cereals which were introduced by the first farmers and are especially abundant on the earlier Neolithic sites.<sup>25</sup> The most important cereal was emmer wheat with much smaller traces of other wheats (einkorn, naked) also recovered. In addition to wheat, barley (both naked and hulled) was also recovered in numbers.

On the basis of plant samples from more than 50 Neolithic sites, we know that hazelnuts were still very much on the menu as they were found at 87% of the examined sites. Moreover, various fruit remains were recovered from about 20% of the sites where the primary species were crabapple and bramble with some evidence of elder.

### ***Food preparation***

The Neolithic ushered in a technology of food preparation which, if not entirely new, was at least incomparably more visible than whatever had preceded it during the Mesolithic. Although earlier hunter-gatherers may have made vessels out of organic material such as wood, or pounded wild plants with stone or organic tools, the absence of preserved remains leaves this largely a moot point. On the other hand, the earliest farmers introduced fired clay vessels for the storage, cooking, and consumption of food as well as stone querns for grinding cereals and other plant remains.

With some notable exceptions such as a Neolithic settlement at Ballygalley, Co. Antrim, which yielded over 20 querns, most Neolithic sites show little or no evidence for grinding stones, which has suggested the possibility of the use of natural locations where flat stones provided a convenient substitute. Nor do the ceramic remains provide a clear-cut picture, at least if one imagines pots

<sup>24</sup> Smyth and Evershed, 'The molecules of meals', perspective', *Antiquity* 90: 350 (2016), 302–318.

<sup>25</sup> Meriel McClatchie, Amy Bogaard, Sue Colledge, Nicki J. Whitehouse, Rick J. Schulting, Philip Barratt and T. Rowan McLaughlin, 'Farming and foraging in Neolithic Ireland: an archaeobotanical



steaming with either a wheat or barley-based porridge, or a stew of meat joints coupled with either cereals or wild plants. The evidence of a residue analysis of the burnt remains embedded in the walls of Neolithic pots shows an overwhelming emphasis on dairy products with only a small percentage indicating the boiling of meat products (Figure 2).<sup>26</sup> But the fact that plants produce far less lipid residue than meat or dairy products may indicate that the evidence for stews or porridges involving cereals has simply been drowned out by the other ingredients. As for the production of bread, although it has been found on sites outside of Ireland, it has not yet been recovered on an Irish site.

In addition to ceramic pots, there is also evidence of pyrolithic boiling in the Neolithic, with around 40 sites showing evidence of hot-stone technology. This includes the actual containment architecture such as wooden troughs, which would be filled with water and to which hot stones would be added to bring the temperature up to boiling point. Although this technique is in evidence since the Early Neolithic, it will be in the Bronze Age that it becomes the most visible monument to Ireland's culinary prehistory.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Smyth and Evershed, 'The molecules of meals'.

<sup>27</sup> Hawkes, 'The beginnings and evolution of the *fulacht fia* tradition', 107.

**Figure 2** Irish Neolithic bowl from Donegore Hill, Co. Antrim. Sherds from this site indicated the presence of dairying (Photo courtesy of the author).

### Bronze Age (2500–600 BCE)

Although the Bronze Age is defined primarily on the basis of a technology based on metal (copper, tin, gold), there are a number of other innovations that mark this period in Ireland. To begin with, the population itself underwent a major change as immigrants, primarily males, successfully colonised Ireland. This resulted in a major shift in the Irish population, from one whose ancestors were predominantly drawn from the Mediterranean to males whose deep genetic ancestry lay far to the east in the steppelands of what is today Ukraine and south Russia.<sup>28</sup> The prevailing consensus is that this population shift, first encountered with the arrival of the so-called Beaker folk, marked the appearance of an Indo-European language in Ireland that was at least in part ancestral to Irish. It is also during this period that the domestic horse first appears in Ireland, which will occasionally appear on the Irish menu. The introduction of metal will not only result in the appearance of bronze weapons and tools but also metal containers and, at least occasionally, items associated with the culinary arts. It is suspected that with the Bronze Age we can see the spread of alcoholic beverages as a significant social institution.<sup>29</sup>

### Meat

The same species consumed during the Neolithic continued in the Bronze Age with beef and pork predominating, while lamb was generally a marginal dish except for where geography, such as Inis Mór in the Aran Islands, favoured the raising of sheep.<sup>30</sup> There is also clear evidence of the goat where a large goat horn-core, considerably larger than those found on mediaeval sites, was recovered from the Late Bronze Age Haughey's Fort, Co. Armagh.<sup>31</sup> It is also in the Late Bronze Age that we find our earliest solidly attested evidence for the domestic horse in Ireland;<sup>32</sup> a few sites indicate that it was not only employed as a draught animal but also was consumed. Also, again in small amounts, there is evidence that dogs might also be consumed.<sup>33</sup>

### Fish and shellfish

There is some evidence for fishing in the Bronze Age although the primary evidence rests with coastal locations such as Dún Aonghasa where wrasse and bream dominated among a variety of other species, while shellfish such as limpets and periwinkles were also collected.<sup>34</sup> As we will see below, it is the Bronze Age which sees the explosion of open-air cooking sites but so far there is no evidence that

**28** Lara M. Cassidy, Rui Martiniano, Eileen M. Murphy and Daniel G. Bradley, 'Neolithic and Bronze Age migration to Ireland and the establishment of the insular Atlantic genome', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113: 2 (2016), 368–73. **29** Mallory,

*The Origins of the Irish*, 113.

**30** McCormick, 'Lovely bones: Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland'.

**31** Finbar McCormick, 'The animal bones from Haughey's Fort: Second report', *Emania* 8 (1991), 27–33. **32** Robin Bendrey, Nick Thorpe, Alan Outram and Louise H. van

Wijngaarden-Bakker, 'The origins of domestic horses in North-west Europe: New direct dates on the horses of Newgrange, Ireland', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 79 (2013), 91–103.

**33** McCormick, 'The animal bones from Haughey's Fort', 31.

**34** McCormick, 'Lovely bones:

Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland'.

they were employed for the cooking of fish or shellfish, despite their tendency to be built near water sources.<sup>35</sup>

### **Plants**

Although there are examples of sites where emmer wheat has been found to predominate among the cereals, the course of the Bronze Age suggests a major reliance on barley. For example, at the Late Bronze Age site of Haughey's Fort, which yielded over 12,000 whole or fragmented cereal remains, 99% of the crop was identified as barley, of which most of that was naked barley (*Hordeum vulgare* var *nudum*; Figure 3).<sup>36</sup> There were slight traces of wheat while the few examples of oats and rye were regarded as weeds, although the ubiquitous hazelnut was found in large quantities. Haughey's Fort appears to defy a fairly widespread trend to shift from naked barley to hulled barley found elsewhere in Europe and for reasons that still remain rather opaque. It has been suggested that naked barley (because one does not need to deal with the attached hull), would lend itself more to being ground to flour and employed in baking bread, while hulled barley might have been employed where the target dish was a gruel or porridge as longer cooking could diminish the impact of the hard chaff. As for the presence of hazelnuts, a large pit at Haughey's Fort contained abundant remains of both charred barley and hazelnuts along with a stone rubber for processing plant remains that suggested a possible muesli production area. If the pit had indeed been employed for the storage of hazelnuts, it could have held in excess of 100 kg of nuts.<sup>37</sup>

### **Food preparation**

It is during the Bronze Age that we find the earlier techniques of roasting and boiling in a ceramic vessel augmented most spectacularly by the use of what is commonly known as a *fulachta fia* (plural *fulachtaí fia*), a problematic term drawn from Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* where it was employed on one occasion to the use of pyrolithic technology, the cooking of food in water that has been kept boiling by the application of heated stones. The characteristic archaeological signature of such sites are the troughs that contained the water that may have been unlined, or lined with stone, wood or clay, pits that may have served for dry roasting, and the mounds of burnt stones that mark out their surface presence (Figure 4).

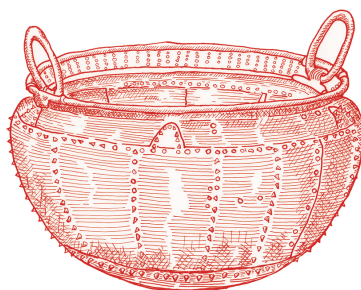
**35** Alan Hawkes, 'Fulachtaí fia and Bronze Age cooking in Ireland: Reappraising the evidence', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 115C (2015), 47–77. **36** Meriel McClatchie, 'Food production in the Bronze Age: analysis of plant macro-remains from Haughey's Fort, Co. Armagh',

*Emania* 22 (2014), 33–43.

**37** McComb, 'The carbonised hazel nut shell fragments'.

Their numbers are reckoned in the thousands and over one thousand *fulachtaí fia* have been excavated. Although their function as exclusively cooking sites has been challenged (alternatives range from washing, tanning, dyeing, and brewing to bathing and sweat houses),<sup>38</sup> that their use at least included cooking is supported by the discovery of bone on about one-quarter of the excavated sites, and of these 263 sites, butchery marks have been recorded at 30 sites. There is evidence that the animals were butchered on site and traces of stakeholes have been interpreted as possible tripods for suspending animals for butchering. The species recovered, in order of percentage, were predominantly cattle (67%) with much smaller amounts (11% or less) of sheep, then pig, deer, dog and horse. It is notable that red deer were recovered from 39 *fulachtaí fia* when they are relatively rare on Bronze Age sites. It is perhaps also notable that fish remains have not been recorded at such sites. There are some plant remains from sites, including the ubiquitous hazelnut that may have been boiled for its oil or simply to ease the removal of their shells. Experimental archaeology has shown that with malted grain and other items available to Bronze Age people one could produce beer in the large troughs.<sup>39</sup> The most famous application of experimental archaeology to the *fulachtaí fia* was Michael O'Kelly's roasting of a 4.5kg leg of lamb in a trough of 454 litres of water. The water was brought to a boil in 35 minutes by dropping in hot stones and the food was cooked in 3 hours and 40 minutes.<sup>40</sup>

It is also the Bronze Age that marks the appearance of metal vessels that could have been employed in the preparation, cooking and serving of both beverages and 'wet' meals.<sup>41</sup> These included bronze buckets with their flat bases and, on the basis of better contextualised Continental examples, have been presumed to have served as special drinking sets. Ireland was also a leading participant in the production of cauldrons in Atlantic Europe where several sheets of bronze would



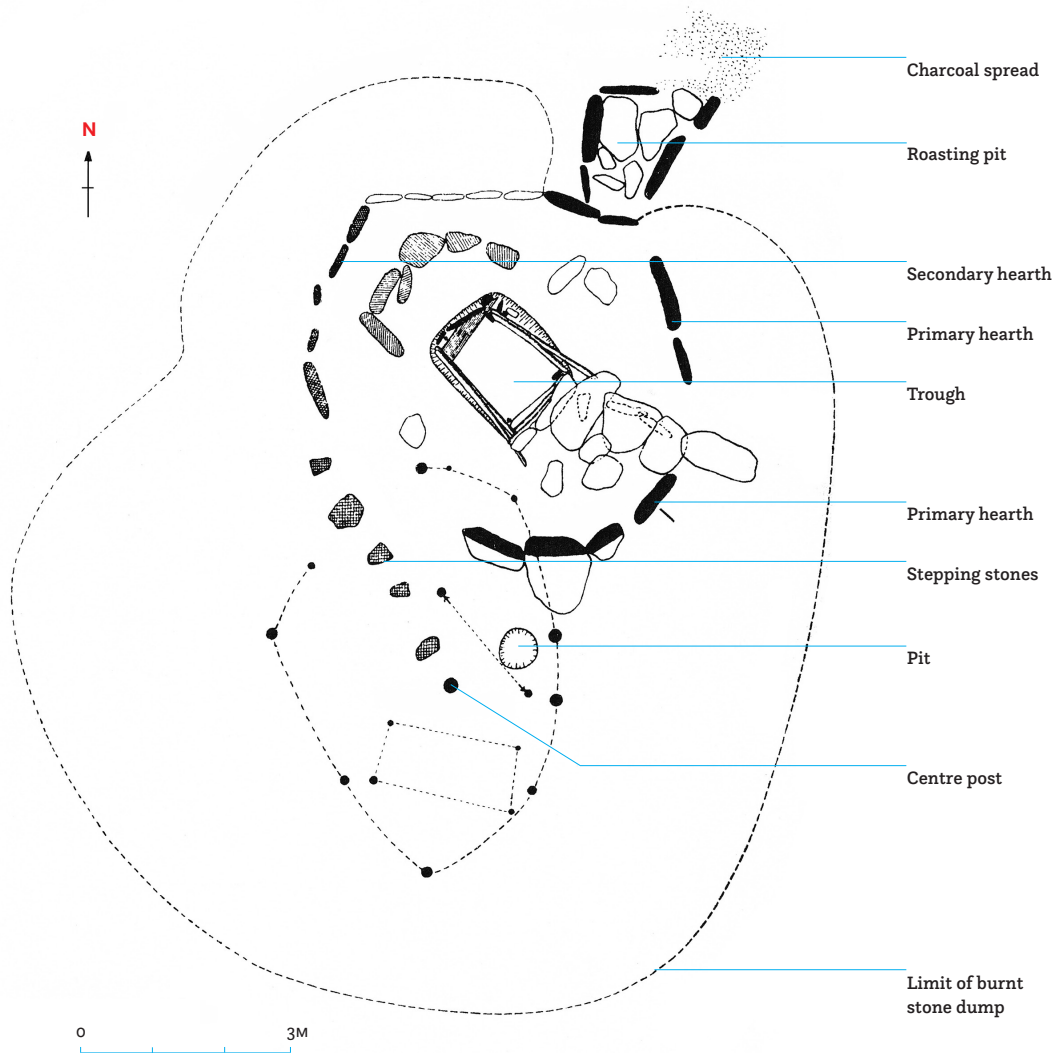
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**38** Hawkes, 'Fulachtaí fia and Bronze Age cooking in Ireland', 59. **39** Billy Quinn and Declan Moore, 'Fulachta fiadh and the beer experiment' in Michael Stanley, Ed Danaher and James Eogan (eds), *Dining and Dwelling*, Archaeology

and the National Roads Authority Monograph Series no. 6 (Dublin: National Roads Authority, 2009), 43–53.

**40** Michael J. O'Kelly, 'Excavations and experiments in Irish cooking-places', *Journal of the Royal Society*

*of Antiquaries of Ireland* 84 (1954), 105–55. **41** John Waddell, *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland* (Galway: Galway University Press, 1998), 226–33.



**Figure 3** Opposite left. Carbonised grains of barley from the Late Bronze Age hillfort site of Haughey's Fort, Co. Armagh (Photo courtesy of the author).

**Figure 4** Above. A *fulachta fia* from Ballyvourney, Co. Cork. Food could be prepared utilising pyrolithic (hot-stone) technology in the trough or by dry roasting in the pit to its north. From the number of

burnt stones, the excavator estimated that about fifty meals could have been prepared over time on the site (after J. Waddell, *Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland* (Galway: Galway University Press, 1998), 182)

**Figure 5** Opposite right. Late Bronze Age cauldron from Lisdrumturk, Co. Monaghan (after J.P. Mallory and T. E. McNeill, *The Archaeology of Ulster* [Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1991]), 137.

be rivetted into a round-based vessel capable of holding somewhere between 35 and 45 litres. Their actual use is elusive although they are suspected of having been employed for the boiling of meat (beef or pork) at major feasts (Figure 5).

In addition to the cauldrons, a bronze object that has been dubbed a ‘flesh-fork’ as one of its potential uses would have been fishing lumps of meat out of a boiling cauldron (such a flesh-fork was found together with a cauldron on a British site) has occasionally been recovered. It must be noted that some would interpret such implements as goads rather than ‘flesh-forks’ but the attraction of the latter explanation is certainly eased when one reflects on the early mediaeval description of the meal service at Mac Dathó’s hostel where we find that in the hall of the Leinster king there was:

*Dam ocus tinne i cach coiri. In fer nothéged iarsint shligid dobered in n-áel isin coire, ocus a taibred din chétgabáil, iss ed noithed. Mani tucad immurgu ní din chét-tadall, ni.bered a n-aill.*<sup>42</sup>

An ox and salted pork in each cauldron. The man who went along the way would stick the flesh-fork into the cauldron, and whatever he brought off from the first stab, this is what he ate. If he did not bring it away however on the first strike, he would not get a second [stab].

The social context of both the *fulachtaí fia*, which might require anywhere from three to eight hours to prepare both the cooking apparatus and cook the food,<sup>43</sup> and the use of large expensive bronze cauldrons, coupled with the problem of the economical disposal of large livestock,<sup>44</sup> all imply the presence of feasting on a communal scale. Such feasting has been seen as an integral part of the social systems of Bronze Age Europe in general.<sup>45</sup> This focussed not only on the consumption of food but also alcoholic beverages which, by this time in Ireland, should have included both beer and mead.

### Drinking

Hard evidence for the consumption of beer or mead in Bronze Age Ireland eludes us so far but there tends to be a presumption that, at least since the introduction of the Beaker culture c. 2400 BCE (Figure 6), alcoholic beverages had been introduced to Ireland from the Continent.<sup>46</sup> A Spanish beaker was described as containing the residue of beer mixed with a hallucinogen while a beaker from



**Figure 6** Beaker from Ballybriest, Co. Derry, which could have held c. 9.5 litres of liquid (Photo courtesy of Declan Hurl).

**42** *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* 1. [= Thurneysen, R. 1935 *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*. Dublin, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 6, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies].

**43** John Ó Néill, *Burnt Mounds in Northern and Western Europe* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Muller, 2009), 197.

**44** McCormick, ‘Lovely bones: Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland’ 2: 1 (2017), 23–41. **46** Mallory, *The Origins of the Irish*, 113.

**45** Hawkes, ‘*Fulachtaí fia* and Bronze Age cooking in Ireland’, 69–76; Dalia A. Pokutta, ‘Food, economy and social complexity in the Bronze Age world: A cross-cultural study’, *Musaica Archaeologica*

Scotland was believed to have contained either honey or mead. A major problem here (see below) is the disputed evidence concerning the introduction of the honey bee to Ireland.

### The Iron Age (600 BCE–400 CE)

The Iron Age did not see any marked changes in the range of species of either the animals or plants that had been previously consumed during the Late Bronze Age. However, there were a number of environmental and technological changes that may well have affected diet and how food was both processed and consumed during the Iron Age. It should also be emphasised that the evidence for Iron Age diets is skewed because much of it, certainly the larger faunal collections, derives from only a handful of large sites whose primary function has long been thought to have been ceremonial and, consequently, specifically associated with seasonal feasts rather than the day-to-day meals of the majority of the population. These are the so-called 'royal sites' of Knockaulin, Co. Kildare (*Dún Ailinne*), Navan Fort (*Emain Macha*), Co. Armagh, and Tara, Co. Meath. To these might be added the Connacht royal site, Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon (*Cruachain*), which has been extensively surveyed.

### Mammals

Beef dominated at Tara and Knockaulin while the number of pigs at Navan exceeded the number of cattle<sup>47</sup> and has been related to the evidence of early Irish literature which associated pork with feasting and the champion's portion. Nevertheless, in terms of available meat, the weight of the twenty-nine cattle at Navan far exceeded that of the sixty-two pigs.<sup>48</sup> Knockaulin was the only site where sheep occurred in any serious numbers. As McCormick indicates,<sup>49</sup> there is also evidence for the consumption of both horse and dogs and there is only very slight evidence for the consumption of venison.

### Plants

The small amount of cereal remains recovered from sites dating to the Iron Age reveals the continued exploitation of wheat and both naked and hulled barley, with the occasional discovery of oats and rye being explained as wild weeds that have become mixed with the domestic grains.<sup>50</sup> Hazelnuts are still recorded although it has been claimed that their frequency was greatly diminished by the Iron Age.<sup>51</sup>

**47** Finbar McCormick and Emily V. Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 144. **48** Finbar McCormick, 'Part 3: The animal bones from Site B' in Dudley M. Waterman and Chris J. Lynn (eds), *Excavations at Navan*

*Fort 1961–71* (Belfast: The Stationery Office, 1997), 117–20. **49** McCormick, 'Lovely bones: Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland'. **50** Michael A. Monk, 'Evidence from macroscopic plant remains for crop husbandry in prehistoric and early

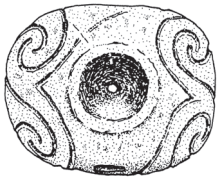
historic Ireland: A review', *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 3 (1985–86), 31–36. **51** Meriel McClatchie, 'The study of non-wood plant macro-remains' in Eileen M. Murphy and Nicki J. Whitehouse (eds), *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 211.



A key issue with the cereal diet of Iron Age Ireland is the so-called 'Iron Age lull', a period where the evidence of pollen sees a decline in species indicative of an open landscape, and the presence of cereal pollen and weeds associated with cultivated fields and the consequent rise in tree pollen, suggesting the abandonment of agriculture and the re-expansion of forests.<sup>52</sup> This has been variously explained by climate change and/or population collapse and generated models of a shift in the Iron Age economy to a primarily pastoral rather than agricultural basis. Yet it is apparent that cereal production appears throughout the Iron Age and it has also been argued that the dates for the 'lull' are hardly synchronous but appeared in different regions of Ireland at different times, raising the possibility of a social rather than environmental explanation.<sup>53</sup>

### Shellfish

The evidence for the exploitation of marine resources is slight but there are a number of shell middens that have been dated to the Iron Age.<sup>54</sup> Excavations at Mannin I, near Ballyconneely, Co. Galway, primarily exhibited winkles but also indicated the butchery of a whale.<sup>55</sup> A single whale vertebra was also recovered from an Iron Age shell midden at Ballymulholland, Co. Derry. Here the midden was dominated by the ocean quahog and limpets but there were no traces of fish remains.<sup>56</sup>



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### Food processing technology

It is during the Iron Age that a major improvement is made in the grinding of corn which was previously confined to the use of saddle querns.<sup>57</sup> But during the Iron Age (the date is indeterminate as no quern has been discovered in an absolutely dateable context) there appears the beehive quern, a rotary quern where a top stone with a funnel shaped hole and another for a wooden handle would be rotated over a flat base (Figure 7). Over 200 of these stones are known in Ireland but they are almost entirely confined to the northern half of the island and—thus far—counterintuitively never recovered from an actual settlement site, prompting suggestions that they were ultimately deposited as votive deposits or only employed for the special production of a ritual grain-based meal or beverage.<sup>58</sup> One of the most remarkable aspects of food processing in the Irish Iron Age is the apparent disappearance of ceramics.<sup>59</sup> All of the major excavations of Irish Iron Age sites have failed to provide certain evidence for the use of clay ceramics

**Figure 7** Beehive rotary quern (After Raftery 1994 *op. cit.*, 123).

**52** David A. Weir, 'A palynological study of landscape and agricultural development in County Louth from the second millennium BC to the first millennium AD', *Discovery Programme Reports*, 2 (1993), 77–126; Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 121–23. **53** Lisa Coyle McClung,

'The Late Iron Age lull— not so Late Iron Age after all!', *Emani* 21 (2013), 73–83.

**54** Emily V. Murray, 'Molluscs and middens' in Eileen M. Murphy, and Nicki J. Whitehouse (eds), *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 119–35. **55** Finbar McCormick,

Michael Gibbons, F. G. McCormac and J. Moore, 'Bronze Age to Medieval coastal shell middens near Ballyconneely, Co. Galway', *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 7 (1996), 81. **56** James P. Mallory and Finbar McCormick, 'Excavations at Ballymulholland, Co.

(although clay was obviously still being utilised in making moulds for bronze casting). It would appear that by c. 300 BCE, the Irish had abandoned the use of ceramics and would not begin producing native wares until about the 8th century CE. Obviously, for cooking, metal containers could have served although there are only about a dozen cauldrons known from the Iron Age. These were constructed of both bronze and iron and their number, no more than a quarter of those attributed to the Late Bronze Age, suggests that they were probably not available to the greater part of society. On comparable evidence elsewhere, it is presumed that they were suspended over a fire.<sup>60</sup> There is also evidence of wooden cauldrons and it is generally presumed that wet cooking would have been carried out with containers made of either wood or leather. Although there are also a few metal vessels that could have served for storage or dispensing liquids, there is enough evidence for wooden bowls and tankards and even possibly platters to suggest that the Irish Iron Age kitchen was primarily stocked with wooden containers.

### The linguistic and early literary evidence

There is a reasonable inference that the Indo-European language family had spread to Ireland by the Early Bronze Age c. 2400 BCE as it is at this time that we find the arrival of the Beaker culture whose bearers carried the same genetic signature from the European steppelands that had spread over most of Europe and is particularly associated with the distribution of many of the other Indo-European languages.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, whether this marked the entry of the direct ancestor of the Irish language is by no means so clear, and there is always the possibility that what became Proto-Irish was the result of a later migration from a population both genetically and linguistically similar to the Early Bronze Age immigrants.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, by the Irish Iron Age, few if any would doubt that an early direct ancestor of the Irish language was present on the island. Because we can compare the vocabulary of Irish with the other Celtic languages (e.g., Welsh, Breton, and the traces of the ancient language of the Gauls in France), we can reconstruct the parent Proto-Celtic language and establish what elements of the early Irish vocabulary were inherited from their Late Bronze Age or Iron Age ancestors. This includes all the semantic fields that one might expect of any language, e.g., kinship, architecture, weapons, religion, and, of course, food. In short, we can augment the evidence gained from archaeology

Londonderry', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 51 (1988), 103–114. **57** Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 123–24. **58** John Waddell, *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2010), 334–37. **59** Barry

Raftery, 'The conundrum of Irish Iron Age pottery' in Barry Raftery, John Vincent Stanley Megaw and Valery Rigby (eds), *Sites and Sights of the Iron Age: Essays on fieldwork and museum research presented to Ian Mathieson Stead* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1995), 149–56. **60** Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, 115.

**61** Jean Manco, *Blood of the Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015). **62** James P. Mallory, 'From the steppe to Ireland: the impact of aDNA research' in Kristian Kristiansen, Guus Kroonen and Eske Willersev (eds), *The Indo-European Puzzle Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

2023). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009261753.014>

and palaeo-environmental sciences with historical linguistics and recover something approaching the actual language of Ireland's occupants before they left their own written records.

There is a second additional source bearing on food of the late prehistoric period although it is of dubious validity. The earliest Irish tales, in particular those pertaining to the Ulster Cycle, have traditionally been projected as providing a 'window on the Iron Age'<sup>63</sup> but while there might be some elements that were originally rooted in that period, there is fairly overwhelming evidence that the cultural world of the tales was drawn largely from the early mediaeval period augmented by literary sources ranging from the Bible to classical literature.<sup>64</sup> So any inferences drawn from such literature may well be anachronistic. If we take into consideration the major means of obtaining sustenance, we know that the linguistic ancestors of the Irish engaged in plough agriculture, e.g., Proto-Celtic [=PC]<sup>65</sup> \**ar-yo-* 'to plough' > Old Irish [=OI] *airid*; PC \**aratro-* 'plough' (noun) > OI *arathar*; PC \**frikā* 'furrow' > Middle Irish [=MI] *etarche/etrige*; as well as pastoralism, e.g. PC \**bow-koli-* 'cowherd' > MI *búachail* 'herdsman'. But they also retained the hunt, e.g. PC *selgā* 'hunt' > OI *selg* 'hunt'. PC \**bēto-* 'food' originally indicated 'life' (it is cognate with Latin *vīta* 'life') and yielded OI *bíad* 'food' while PC *lawano-* 'provisions, sustenance' gave us OI *lón/lán* and comes from a verbal root meaning 'to cut', i.e. it was a 'share'. We can take a glance at the main semantic fields associated with what the early Irish ate and how they prepared their food.

In terms of meat, the Celts certainly supplied all the terms needed with respect to the raising and consumption of domestic livestock and the occasional evidence for the consumption of horses and dogs. To these we might add the presumably late linguistic evidence for domestic fowl (Table 2). While the Ulster Cycle frequently mentions the consumption of beef, milk, and pork, the references to sheep and goats do not specifically reference their consumption. Sheep are mentioned as occurring in large numbers<sup>66</sup> but without reference to their intended use (wool or meat?). Of course, the only references to the consumption of dog flesh is with relation to the violation of Cú Chulainn's taboo.<sup>67</sup>

The only two animals that provide us with more detailed culinary evidence are pigs and cattle. The pig is depicted a number of times as 'roasted' or 'singed'. A wounded and peckish Conchobor utters the immortal lines: *diandom thised mucc fonaithe robad-am béo* 'if to me would come a roast pig, I would be alive', so that Cú Chulainn goes off to retrieve a roasting boar from a particularly nasty

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth H. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

<sup>64</sup> James P. Mallory, *In Search of the Irish Dreamtime* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016). <sup>65</sup> All reconstructed forms here are drawn from

Ranko Matasović, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009) As Proto-Celtic forms are reconstructions and not actually attested forms, they are preceded by an asterisk in the text although this has been removed in

the accompanying tables.

<sup>66</sup> *Táin Bó Cuailnge II* 60, [= Cecile O' Rahilly, 1970 *Táin Bó Cuailnge from the Book of Leinster*. Dublin; *Amra Conroí* 4 [= Whitley Stokes, 1905 'The Eulogy of Cúroí (*Amra Chonroí*)', *Eriu* 2, 1–14. <sup>67</sup> *Book of Leinster* 120<sup>a</sup>, 13, 883–13,884.

**Table 2 The names of domestic mammals consumed by the early Irish**

Proto-Celtic	Old/Middle Irish	Modern Irish	English
agos-	ag	agh	cow
bow-	bó	bó	cow
damo-	dam	damh	bull
tarwo-	tarb	tarbh	bull
uxso-	oss	os	cow [stag]
samo-siskwī-	samaisc	samhaisc	heifer
lāfigo-	lóeg	lao	calf
owi-	oí		sheep
owigno-	úan	uan	lamb
molto-	molt	molt	ram
bukko-	boc	poc	goat
gabro-	gabor	gabhar	he-goat
menno-	menn	meann	kid
mokku-	mucc	muc	pig
sukko-	socc	soc	pig [snout; plough]
tworko-	torc	torc	boar
banwo-	banb	banbh	piglet
forko-	orc	orc	piglet
wessi-	feis		young sow
ekwo-	ech	each	horse
marko-	marc	marc	horse
kwon	cú	cú	dog
kanawon-	cana	cana	whelp
kownā	cúan	cuain	litter/pack [troop]
yaro-	eirín(e)?	eirín/eireog	chicken
kalyāko-	cailech	coileach	rooster

warrior who is roasting the pig at a *fulacht*.<sup>68</sup> At Dá Derga's hostel we find an Otherworldly character bringing a singed pig to the feast which appears to be roasted alive (it is continually squealing),<sup>69</sup> although this may be merely an extension of the motif of the renewable meal as we also find Otherworlders providing two pigs that may be killed each night but restored to life the next day,<sup>70</sup> the type of phenomenon that one also finds in *Tír na n-Óg*.<sup>71</sup> As for the butchering of the pig, this is, of course, the central issue of *Scéla Muicce Mac Dathó* where Conall Cearnach ultimately carves the pig to the benefit of the Ulstermen and to the insult of the Connachtmen who feel slighted in only getting *dá chois na-mmucce foa brágit* 'the two feet of the pig under the neck', i.e. the fore-trotters.<sup>72</sup> In addition to roasting pork we also find joints of pork presumably being boiled in a cauldron at Mac Dathó's hostel<sup>73</sup> and perhaps more explicitly boiled (*bruithe* which is usually employed for indicating 'boiling') on an island which Cú Chulainn visits.<sup>74</sup> The expression *dam ocus tinne* 'ox and salted pork' is repeated in other tales but elsewhere the references lack a cauldron.<sup>75</sup> Despite the overwhelming importance of cattle in early Irish society, the tales are largely silent as to how it was served, other than in combinations with pork where it is usually listed as the first element.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to domestic animals, we also have a partial list of the wild mammals consumed as well as some of the birds and the bee, but very few of the fish or any other marine species (Table 3). To these we could add PC \**bebru-* 'beaver' although the animal itself was nowhere attested in Ireland. On the other hand, PC \**kasni-* 'hare' (Welsh *ceinach*) did not survive in Irish although it was clearly consumed. In the tales we find Deirdre reminiscing how she dined on badger's fat (*sail bruic*) when she lived in Scotland.<sup>77</sup> References are naturally made to both the hunting of deer and the consumption of venison where we must recall that words in other Indo-European languages for cattle were also extended to deer in Irish. Hence, we find Cú Chulainn living off venison (*oss fheóil*) while defending Ulster,<sup>78</sup> while Deirdre dined on venison (*sideng*) when she was not tucking into her badger fat.<sup>79</sup>

Among the birds, we find Cú Chulainn offering Fergus a goose (*cauth* or *cadan*) and a half,<sup>80</sup> and we also encounter the roasting of a goose (*géd*) on a spit.<sup>81</sup> Swans were hunted<sup>82</sup> although there is no explicit statement of their being

**68** TBC I 513 [= Cecile O' Rahilly, 1976 *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*. Dublin, Institute for Advanced Studies].

**69** *Togail Brudhe Ui Dergae* 38: 352–53, 136: 1351–52, 140: 1390 [= Knott, E. 1936 *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Dublin, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies].

**70** *Imthechta Tuaithe Luachra* 7 *aided Fergusa* 2.49 [= Standish Hayes O'Grady, 1892] 'The

king of the Leprecans' journey to Emania, and how the death of Fergus mac Léide king of Ulster was brought about', *Silva Gadelica* II (New York: Lemma, 1970), 238–252, 269–285.

**71** *Da Gabáil int sída* (LL) 56 [= Vernam Hull, 1933] 'De Gabáil in t-sída', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 19, 53–58) **72** *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* 18: 1–2. **73** *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* 1: 12. **74** *Fled*

*Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait* 28 [= Kaarina Hollo, 2005 *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait*. Maynooth, Maynooth Medieval Irish Texts II].

**75** TBC I 1202; *Togail Brudhe Ui Dergae* 94: 923–24; *Táin bó Flidais* 2: 9 [= Ernst Windisch, 1887 'Táin bó Flidais', *Irische Texte*, ser 2, vol. 2, 206–23].

**76** Except for *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait* 28 where we have

*na mucca*, *na haigi*. **77** *Oided Mac n-Uisnig* 160 [= Whitley Stokes, 1887 'Death of the Sons of Uisnech', *Irische Texte* 2 ser, 2, 109–84]. **78** TBC II 1709.

**79** *Oided Mac n-Uisnig* 160.

**80** TBC I I 1171, 1313; TBC II 1596. **81** *Imtheacht na Tromdhámhe* 70 [= Owen Connellan, 1857 (1860) 'Imtheacht na Tromdhámhe', *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* 1857, 5: 2–132].

**Table 3 Wild mammals, birds, fish and insects exploited by the early Irish**

	Proto-Celtic	Old/Middle Irish	Modern Irish	English
Wild mammals	brokko-	brocc	broc	badger
	tasko-	tadg	tadhg [man in street]	badger
	arto	art	art [warrior<bear]	bear
	elantī	elit	eilit	doe, hind
	sido-	sed		stag
	lukot-	luch	luch	mouse
	waylo-	fáel	faol	wolf
	blVdV-	bled		monster < wolf
Birds	gexdo/ā	géd	gé	goose
	gansi-	géis	géis	swan
	elV-	elu	eala	swan
	garano-	garan		crane
	korxsā	corr	corr	heron, crane
	bodwo-	bodb	badhbh	crow
	brano-	bran	bran	raven
	wesākko	fiach	fiach	raven
	kowik-	cói	cuach	cuckoo
	truti-	truit	druid	starling
	wesnālā	fannal	fáinleog	swallow
	bunno-	bonnán	bonnán	bittern
	eriro-	irar/ilar	iolar	eagle
	teterV-	tethra		large bird
Fish	esok-	eó	eo	salmon
	ferko-	erc	earc	perch; salmon
	ikwori-	iuchair	eochair	roe, spawn
Insects	beko-	bech	beach	bee
	kinto-satio-	cétsaithe		first-swarm
	taruo-satio-	tarbsaithe		second-swarm

**Table 4 Words associated with secondary products derived from animals**

Proto-Celtic	Old/Middle Irish	Modern Irish	English
melgos-	melg	bleacht	milk
mlig-o-	miligid	bligh	to milk
mlixt-	mlicht	bliocht	milk
nūsso-	nús	nús	colostrum
amben-	imb	im	butter
gwered-	geir	geir	animal fat
mīros-	mír	mír	piece of meat
krokkeno-	croicenn	craiceann	skin
smeru-	smiur	smior	marrow
meli	mil	mil	honey
medu	mid	meá	mead

consumed. The crane is normally mentioned with reference to Cú Chulainn's distortion (not being able to reach his sunken eye), but on one occasion cranes are mentioned alongside geese<sup>83</sup> which we have seen were explicitly consumed.

Fish are mentioned both generically and specifically in the Ulster tales. For example, both Cú Chulainn and Deirdre (in Scotland) dined on fish (*iasc*).<sup>84</sup> The most often cited species was the salmon which, like the goose, was offered as a dish of one and a half.<sup>85</sup> In an essentially Finn Cycle text we read that the roe of salmon was kneaded in wheat flour.<sup>86</sup> There is an interesting culinary aspect to the etymology of OI *iuchair* as PC *\*ik<sup>w</sup>ori-* 'roe, spawn' actually derives from the Indo-European word for the 'liver' (compare Latin *iecur*). While the shift in the meaning from 'liver' to 'roe' may seem odd at first, precisely the same shift is found in Russian where we find what was originally designated the liver appears on the Russian menu as *ikra* 'caviar'. This also reminds us that more than the flesh of such fish as salmon was consumed.

In addition to the names of the animals we also have some evidence of the flesh and consumable secondary products of the domestic livestock (Table 4). What is clear from this list is the significance of milking in the early Irish vocabulary. Sustenance was regularly summarised in the tales<sup>87</sup> as 'corn and milk' (*ith 7 bliocht*). Moreover, Cú Chulainn routinely warns that 'if our milch cows

82 TBC I 781; TBC II 1160.

83 *Mesca Ulad* 467 [= J. Carmichael Watson, 1967 *Mesca Ulad*. Dublin, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 13, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies]. 84 TBC II 1708.

85 TBC I 1312–1313; TBC

II 1597. 86 *Imtheacht na Tromdháimhe* 72. 87 *De Gabáil in t-sída* 55; *Immacaldam in dá thuarad* 10/115 [= Whitley Stokes, 1905 'The Colloquy of the two sages', *Revue Celtique* 26, 4–64]; *Tochmarc Treblainne* 167: 21 [= Kuno

Meyer, 1921 'Tochmarc Treblainne', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 13, 166–75].

88 TBC I 1270.

**Table 5 List of domestic and wild plants that derived from Proto-Celtic**

	Proto-Celtic	Old/Middle Irish	Modern Irish	English
Grains	arawar	arbor	arbhar	grain
	fitu	ith	ioth	grain < food
	grāno-	grán	grán	grain
	kwāti-	cáith	cáith	chaff
	nixt-o-	cruth-necht ‘wheat’	cruithneacht	wheat [< winnowed]
	korkkyo-	corca/coerce	coirce	oats
Edible wild plants	abalo-	uball	úll	apple
	messu-	mess	meas	acorn
	koslo-	coll	coll	hazel
	knū-	cnú	cnó	nut
	agrinyo-	áirne	airne	sloe, blackthorn fruit
	skwiyat-	scé	sceach	hawthorn
	adā	aide [genitive sg]		hawthorn
	betu-	beithe	beith	birch
	lubī/ā	luib	luibh	herb
	lussu-	lus	lus	herb
	kasninā	cainnenn	cainneann	garlic, leek
	kremu-	crem	creamh	garlic
	subi-	sub	sú	berry
	smēro-	smér	sméar	blackberry
	ninati	nenaid	neantóg	nettle
	dristi-	driss	dris	bramble
	wroyko-	fróich	fraoch	heather
	sfiyonV-	sion		foxglove
	axtīno-	aitten	aiteann	furze
	beruro-	biror	biolar	watercress
dol-isko-	duilesc	duileasc	seaweed	
wimonā	femmain	feamainn	seaweed	



(*baí blichta*) are taken away we shall be without milk<sup>88</sup> and then forced to use the milch cows for meat in winter, while the bride-price set on the marriage between Froech and Findabair is ‘twelve milch cows from each of which may be milked a draught of milk (*ol n-aiss*)’.<sup>89</sup> But it might be emphasised that while milk appears to have been economically important, we do not actually encounter any of the various characters drinking milk but rather alcoholic beverages such as beer, mead, and wine. In fact, mead is only occasionally encountered and we find that it is usually described as a drink flavoured with hazelnuts and hence rendered *collan* from OIr *coll* ‘hazel’.<sup>90</sup> As for honey itself, it rarely occurs and tends to be tangential to the Irish menu. For example, it is one of the elements applied to the end of a hollow log to lure a savage hound to bite it so that Celtchair can reach his arm safely through the log to rip out the hound’s guts.<sup>91</sup> The use of honey does introduce the vexed problem of Irish bees. The date of the arrival of bees and honey products in Ireland is problematic. While the residue of bees’ wax has been recovered from Neolithic pottery across Europe, including Britain, none has yet been found in a Neolithic context in Ireland.<sup>92</sup> Although we lack such direct evidence it is argued that by our linguistic census date, the Iron Age, the evidence for employing wax in casting ornaments on bronze objects clearly supports the exploitation of bees in Ireland by that time.<sup>93</sup> It should be acknowledged that the linguistic evidence regarding bees and honey in Ireland is problematic in terms of specifying to what extent the population had progressed from simply exploiting the products of wild bees to developing apiculture with artificial hives. For example, although we can reconstruct two Proto-Celtic words for not only ‘a bee’ but ‘swarms of bees’, it is Latin that provides us with the Irish word for ‘wax’ (OI *céir* < Latin *cēra*).<sup>94</sup>

Among the plants listed (Table 5) are included only those that had the potential to offer a consumable product, whether or not we have any certain evidence that it was actually consumed, e.g., acorns, hawthorn haws, but we exclude species that are not normally regarded as edible, or worse, offer a fruit that is poisonous, e.g. PC *eburo-* > OI *ibar* ‘yew’ or PC *\*frati-* > MI *raith* ‘fern’ but it does include those with some medicinal use, e.g., PC *\*sfiyonV-* > MI *sion* ‘foxglove’.

Other than indicating their importance for sustenance (as with milk, see above) cereals are seldom mentioned, and even then, the references are as likely to relate to animal fodder (e.g., Cú Chulainn feeds his horse on barley grains [*grán éórna*] rather than timothy grass<sup>95</sup>) rather than specify a crop consumed by humans.

**89** *Táin bó Fraich* 14: 147 [= Wolfgang Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 22 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967)].  
**90** *Longas mac n-Uislienn* 17 [= Vernam Hull 1949 *Longes mac n-Uislienn: The exile of*

*the Sons of Uisliu*. New York: *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges mac nDuil Dermait* 166].  
**91** *Aided Cheltchair maic Uithechair* 10 [Kuno Meyer, 1906 ‘The death of Celtchar mac Uithechair’, *The Death-tales of the Ulster Heroes* = *Todd Lecture Series*, 14, 24–31].

**92** Mélanie Roffet-Salque, et al, ‘Widespread exploitation of the honeybee by early Neolithic farmers’, *Nature* (2015), 527, 229. **93** Raftery 1994 *op. cit.*, 126. **94** Paulus Van Sluis, ‘Beekeeping in Celtic and Indo-European’, *Studia Celtica* 56 (2022),

1–28. **95** *Fled Bricrenn* 63 [= George Henderson, 1899 *Fled Bricend*. London, Irish Texts Society, vol II].

**Table 6 Plant products**

Proto-Celtic	Old/Middle Irish	Modern Irish	English
flittV-	littiu	leite	pap, porridge
yutV-	íth		pap, porridge
yūsko-	úsc	úsc	broth > lard, fat
litu-	lith	lith	feast
wlidā	fled	fleá	feast
westā	feis(s)	feis	feast > spend night
taysto-	taís	taos	dough
mraki-	mraich	braich	malt
menā	men	min	flour
mezgo-	medg	meadhg	whey
kormi	cuirm	coirm	beer
brutu-	bruth	bruth	fermentation, boiling
barageno/ā	bairgen	bairín	(barley) bread
fib-o-	ibid	ibheann	drink
wisu-	fí?		poison

**Table 7 Material culture associated with food preparation and serving**

Proto-Celtic	Old/Middle Irish	Modern Irish	English
sītlā	sithal	síothal	vase
kelfurno-	cilornn	ciolarn	bucket
kwaryo-	coire	coire	cauldron
lestro-	lestar	leastar	vessel
fatnā	án		drinking vessel
kistā	cess	cis	basket
bolgo-	bolg	bolg	sack
krē-tro-	criathar	criathar	sieve
lēgā	liag/líach	liach	spoon
awsetlo-	aél		flesh fork
brawon-	brao	bró	quern
ankoto-	écath		(fish)hook
bakko-	bacc	bac	(bill-)hook

Of the edible wild plants there are frequent references to apples, although the majority of them relate to an aspect of their shape or play a part in describing what happens to Cú Chulainn's hair during his distortions (each hair would impale an apple). However, we do find Findabair seductively doling out apples over her breasts to help lure Fer Diad into fighting Cú Chulainn.<sup>96</sup> As we have already seen, hazelnuts were employed in flavouring an alcoholic drink. The sloe of the blackthorn is identified in a gloss referencing an enormous nut that a hungry servant covets, costing the King of Leinster his hand.<sup>97</sup> The juice of the sloe or berry is mentioned several times but in the context of providing Cú Chulainn with a false beard rather than as a means of sustenance.<sup>98</sup> Although fox-glove could have been used medicinally, in the Ulster tales it is entirely referenced for its colour.<sup>99</sup> Finally, both watercress and seaweed are identified as foods where Cú Chulainn offers them to Fergus along with salmon.<sup>100</sup>

If there is not much mention of the actual plants consumed, we do not fare much better with the names of plant-based products (Table 6). A primary problem here is that the Ulster tales are depicting the elevated realms of society which are shown consuming large quantities of meat rather than tucking into a bowl of porridge; they quaff ale, wine and mead, not milk. The usual word for 'ale' (*cuirm*) occurs across a number of tales where we find guests being offered *coirm 7 biad* 'ale and food'<sup>101</sup> or *lind 7 biad* 'liquor (ale) and food'.<sup>102</sup> We find that heroes from the Ulster Cycle often had the opportunity to mix their drinks: they were offered beer and wine<sup>103</sup> or mead and wine.<sup>104</sup> One very late tale indicates the social distinctions between the different alcoholic beverages: white wine (*fin*) to princes, old mead (*mid*) to the nobles, braggot (*brocóit*) to the hospitallers and ale (*cuirm*) to the lower classes.<sup>105</sup> It might be noted that if you wanted to get someone drunk, wine would appear to have been the favoured poison. There is some evidence for associating the different beverages with different vessels. For example, wine would be drunk from a *cuäch* but mead could be drunk from an *airdech*, *bleide*, *corn*, *cuäch*, or *lestar*.<sup>106</sup>

The final category of Celtic terminology that survived into early Irish are items of material culture associated with the culinary arts (Table 7). Of more than fifty terms for vessels recorded in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, only about five clearly derive directly from Proto-Celtic,<sup>107</sup> and only a fraction of the

**96** TBC I 2586. **97** *Cath Etair* 56 [= Whitley Stokes, 1887 'The Siege of Howth', *Revue Celtique* 8, 47–64. **98** TBC I 1901; TBC II 1974. **99** *Mesca Ulad* 589; *LMU* 4: 3. **100** TBC I 1314, 2730–31; TBC II 1598. **101** *Mesca Ulad* 920; *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loingses mac nDúil Dermait* 272. **102** *Fled Bricrenn* 32; *Togail Brudhe Uí Dergae* 132: 1307; *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* 30 [= Whitley Stokes, 1893

'The violent deaths of Goll and Garb', *Revue Celtique*, 14, 396–449; *Brisleach Mór Maige Muirtheimne (Aided ChonChulainn)* 3 [= Anton Gerard Van Hamel, 'Aided Con Culainn' in *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories Medieval and Modern Irish Series* 3 (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933), 72–133]. **103** *Tochmarc Ferbe (Fís Conchobair)* 36 = Ernst Windisch, (1897) 'Das

Freien um Ferb', *Irische Texte*, ser 3, heft 2, 462–529; *Amra Conroi* 5; **104** TBC II 1392–93; *Tochmarc Etáine* III 10 [= Osborn Bergin and Richard Irvine Best, 1934–38 'Tochmarc Etáine', *Ériu* 12, 137–196]. **105** *Táin bó Flidaise* II 1–304 [= Donald MacKinnon, (1905–08) *The Glenmasan manuscript. The Celtic Review*. I, 3–17, 104–31, 208–29, 296–315, II, 20–33, 100–21, 202–23, 300–13; III, 10–25, 114–37, (198–215,

294–317; IV, 10–27, 104–21, 202–19.] **106** Mallory, *In Search of the Irish Dreamtime*, 243. **107** James P. Mallory, 'The conundrum of Iron Age ceramics: The evidence of language' in Gabriel Cooney, Katharina Becker, John Coles, Michael Ryan and Susanne Sievers (eds), *Relics of Old Decency: archaeological studies in later prehistory*, *Festschrift for Barry Raftery* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2009), 181–92.

total is mentioned in the Ulster tales.<sup>108</sup> It should be emphasised that containers associated with the cooking and consumption of food in the Ulster tales are invariably described—if at all—as either metal or wood; there are no absolutely certain references to ceramic containers.

Of the containers, the cauldron (*coire*) is the most frequently cited. It is usually described as bronze and we are provided measurements reckoned by the size of its contents, e.g., *coire colpthaige* ‘calf/heifer-size’,<sup>109</sup> *coire rodaim* ‘ox-vat’,<sup>110</sup> and perhaps a four-ox cauldron.<sup>111</sup> Generally, only one cauldron is described in an establishment but Mac Dathó’s hostel contained seven of them, each on the boil, though the number was probably selected to echo the seven roads and seven doors into the hall.<sup>112</sup> There are other references to cauldrons being always on the boil.<sup>113</sup> As we have seen, there are descriptions of cooking both beef and pork in the same cauldron but there are very few other foodstuffs associated with cauldrons other than a considerably later tale’s reference to a porridge cauldron.<sup>114</sup> The sieve is usually employed with reference to the consequences of a wound but on one occasion its association with sieving cereal grain is indicated.<sup>115</sup> On several occasions we find references to the fact that one only enjoyed a single go with a flesh fork for skewering something from a cauldron.<sup>116</sup>

### Conclusion

This survey of food in Irish prehistory has been an attempt to briefly summarise over 8000 years of extremely poor and disparate evidence for what was consumed and how it may have been prepared. Any generalisations are perilous in the extreme and the number of problems to be resolved is enormous. We have little certain knowledge of the balance between meat and fish versus plant foods in any of the periods examined, the nature of dairying, the culinary traditions of the individual homestead versus that of communal feasting, the role of communal eating in the socialisation of a largely dispersed population, the disappearance of ceramics in the Iron Age and its impact on food preparation during this period, to name just a few of the major issues. There are many parts of Europe where the archaeological evidence for all the periods summarised here is vastly more abundant, often due to the far better preservation of organic remains or the very nature of prehistoric settlement itself. Fortunately, it is with

**108** Mallory, *In Search of the Irish Dreamtime*, 242–46.

**109** *Serglige ConCulainn* 4: 46; *Aided Guill Meic Carbadaocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* 10; *Togail Brudhe Ui Dergae* 58: 518; 128: 1234–35.

**110** *Fled Bricrenn*, 91.

**111** *Togail Brudhe Ui Dergae*, 87: 813. **112** *Scél Mucce Maic Dathó*, 1: 12. *Táin bó Flidaise* II 3–22 has 50 cauldrons on the boil but this is a very late tale saturated with bombastic

descriptions. **113** *Togail Brudhe Ui Dergae*, 133: 1313.

**114** *Imthechta Tuaithe Luachra 7 aided Fergusu*, 244. **115** *Togail Brudhe Ui Dergae*, 131: 1295–96.

**116** *Scél Mucce Maic Dathó*, 1: 13–14; *BDC* 31.

the following early mediaeval period that Ireland really does come into its own where we have access to both superbly preserved sites that do offer abundant archaeological remains<sup>117</sup> coupled with a rich store of contemporary written evidence.<sup>118</sup> It will be some time before our knowledge of Ireland's prehistoric culinary history even remotely approaches that of its later periods.

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**117** Harold Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 166–209; Nancy Edwards, *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (London: Batsford, 1990), 49–67; Aidan O'Sullivan, Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr, and Lorcan Harney, *Early Medieval Ireland,*

*AD 400–1100* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013), 179–214; Finbar McCormick and Emily Murray, *Excavations at Knowth 3: Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007).  
**118** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997).

## **From Marbán to Guaire**

Anonymous, 8th Century

To what meals the woods invite me  
All about!  
There are water, herbs and cresses,  
Salmon, trout.  
A clutch of eggs, sweet mast and honey  
Are my meat,  
Heathberries and whortleberries for a sweet.  
All that one could ask for comfort  
Round me grows,  
There are hips and haws and strawberries,  
Nuts and sloes.  
And when summer spreads its mantle  
What a sight!  
Marjoram and leeks and pignuts,  
Juicy, bright.

**02**

*Lovely Bones:  
Osteoarchaeological evidence  
of animal produce in Ireland*

**Finbar McCormick**

Prior to the introduction of written sources, our knowledge about the exploitation of animal resources is based almost exclusively on the presence of faunal remains on archaeological sites. This information, however, can be very partial. Many sites do not produce such remains, as adverse conditions, such as acidic soils, mean that bone material does not survive. In addition to this, very small bones are only retrieved if the soil from an archaeological site is sieved. This is especially the case with small fish where bones of frequently eaten species, such as eel and herring, are often overlooked. Furthermore, some bones simply do not survive. For instance, the bones of cartilaginous fish such as shark, ray and skate disappear although the teeth can survive. That said, the remains of medium and large size mammals, birds, and fish have survived on enough sites to allow us to reasonably envisage how animals were exploited over the millennia since humans first arrived in Ireland.

Until recently there was no definite evidence for humans in Ireland before the Mesolithic period. Re-examination of animal bones found in the early 20th century in a cave near Ennis, Co. Clare, identified a brown bear patella (knee cap) bearing a series of cutmarks which were radio-carbon dated to about 10,700 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The bear could have been killed for either its meat or hide, or most likely both. While there is no other evidence for animal exploitation at this time, contemporary mammal species that could have been killed for food included giant Irish deer, red deer, reindeer, and hares.<sup>2</sup> After this, the cold Younger Dryas period seems to have killed off much of the available mammal species. When humans again appear in Ireland at about 8,000 BCE all the deer species have disappeared. The Irish diet at this time, in contrast to that in Britain and Europe, was primarily dependent on the consumption of pork and it seems that the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers brought the wild pig with them when they came to Ireland, explaining the lack of evidence for them from before this.<sup>3</sup> The hare was present and was consumed in small quantities, and there is also evidence for the presence of the wild cat, brown bear, otter, and badger but it is unclear if these contributed to diet or were exploited primarily for their skins.

The late Mesolithic site at Moynagh, Co. Meath suggests that wild pigs were often hunted when they came to waterside locations in order to drink. The pig bones found at the site were comprised of very young pigs and adult males. It is extremely unlikely that very young pigs would have been hunted without their sows also being present in the vicinity and it's likely that adult females were deliberately avoided in order to conserve the population.<sup>4</sup>

**1** Marion A. Dowd and Ruth F. Carden, 'First evidence for Late Upper Palaeolithic human presence in Ireland', *Quaternary Science Review* 139 (2016), 158–63. **2** Peter Woodman, Margaret McCarthy and Nigel Monaghan, 'The Irish Quaternary Project', *Quaternary Science Review*

16 (1997), 129–59. **3** Finbar McCormick, 'Mammal bone studies from prehistoric Irish sites' in Eileen M. Murphy and Nicki J. Whitehouse (eds), *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 77–101. **4** Finbar McCormick, 'Hunting wild pig in the Late Mesolithic' in

Helen Roche, Eoin Grogan, John Bradley, John Coles and Barry Raftery (eds), *From Megaliths to Metal: Essays in Honour of George Eogan* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2004), 1–5.



Mesolithic people tended to settle on riverside, lakeside, or coastal locations which allowed them to augment their wild pig diet with fish. The range of fish exploited on the three sites that have produced significant bone assemblages are shown in Figure 1. The last glacial period in Ireland killed off most fresh-water species in Ireland so the fish exploited at lakeside Lough Boora, Co. Offaly, and Mount Sandel, Co. Derry, were comprised of species that could migrate to the sea, primarily salmonids and eel. The flatfish and sea bass found at Mount Sandel are likely to have come from the nearby tidal part of the River Bann. The coastal site at Ferriter's Cove, Co. Kerry provided evidence for a wide range of sea fish. The principal species was whiting, the majority of which were small specimens between 15cm and 35cm in length.<sup>5</sup> Young whiting such as these are easily caught in shallow inshore waters while the ballan wrasse can also easily be caught from the shore. How the individual fish species were caught is a matter of speculation, although we know that fish traps were used. Some wonderfully preserved late Mesolithic woven fish baskets (Figure 2) were found in a lakeside context at Clowanstown, Co. Meath, and are on display in the National Museum of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Margaret McCarthy notes, however, that the presence of mullet and herring bones at Ferriter's Cove implies the use of nets while the wrasse, who live in rock crevices, are most likely to have been caught on hook and line. The catching of tope and conger eel suggests offshore fishing with hook and line although they can be taken from the shore.<sup>7</sup> The fact that there was a Mesolithic settlement on the small island of Inisihtrahull, some 10km out from Malin Head, Co. Donegal, indicates that the people of the period could easily have accessed deep waters for fishing.<sup>8</sup>

The fish that dominated the faunal assemblage at Ferriter's Cove are most easily caught during summer and autumn. Therefore, it is likely that the settlers re-located to inland sites during the other parts of the year in order to concentrate on the exploitation of mammal resources for their food. Evidence for seasonal fishing has also been found at inland sites<sup>9</sup> and it seems certain that the continual hunt for meat caused people to live in different locations at various times of the year.

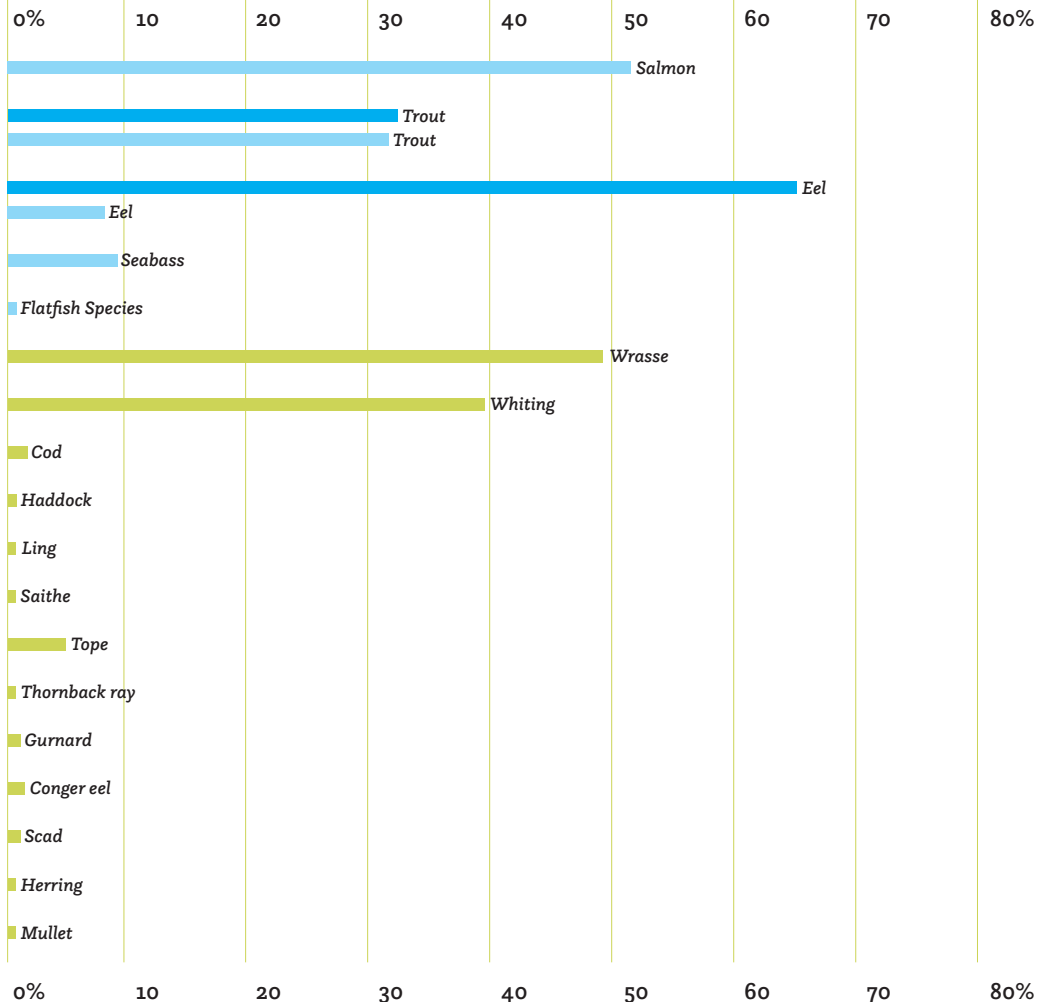
The late Mesolithic lakeside site at Derragh, Co. Longford produces a small fish assemblage which was dominated by eels of some 30–40cm in length, along with a few bones of small salmonids; it was not possible to ascertain if they were salmon or trout.<sup>11</sup> Twelve separate sediment samples from the site provided paleoparasitological evidence for the presence of eggs of the tapeworm genus

**5** Margaret McCarthy, 'Faunal remains' in Peter C. Woodman, Elizabeth Anderson and Nyree Finley (eds), *Excavations at Ferriter's Cove, 1983–95: Last foragers, first farmers in the Dingle Peninsula* (Bray: Wordwell, 1999), 85–93.  
**6** Maria Fitzgerald, 'Catch of the day at Clowanstown, Co.

Meath', *Archaeology Ireland* 21: 4 (2007), 12–15. **7** McCarthy, 'Faunal remains', 89. **8** Peter Woodman, *Ireland's first settlers: Time and the Mesolithic* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 241. **9** Woodman, *Ireland's first settlers: Time and the Mesolithic*, 271. **10** McCarthy, 'Faunal remains'; Louise H.

van Wijngaarden-Bakker, 'Faunal remains and the Irish Mesolithic' in Clive Bonsall (ed.), *The Mesolithic and Europe* (John Donald: Edinburgh, 1989), 125–33. **11** Sheila Hamilton-Dyer, forthcoming. *Fish remains from Derragh, Co. Longford*.

### Mesolithic fish exploitation



**% Fragments**

- Lough Boora (2080 fragments found)
- Mount Sandel (1741 fragments found)
- Ferriter's Cove (2916 fragments found)

**Figure 1** Fish bones from Irish Mesolithic sites.<sup>10</sup>

*Diphyllobothrium*, which indicates ‘that the residents of Derragh must have been consuming fish raw, undercooked, or processed by some other method that failed to kill the parasite (e.g. smoking, salting, curing)’.<sup>12</sup> One wonders if a recurring absence of dry material prohibited the lighting of fires and if the settlers were therefore obliged to eat their catch in a raw state. The regular consumption of such infected fish could have led to serious health problems such as B12 deficiency and anaemia.

The Mesolithic meat diet was also augmented by the consumption of birds (Figure 3) although very much in a minor capacity as far as the overall diet was concerned. At Ferriter’s Cove birds accounted for less than 1% of the assemblage.<sup>13</sup> The three species present, guillemot, herring gull, and gannet, could have all bred locally and been taken in their nests. At Lough Boora, wood pigeons predominate, suggesting that the birds were deliberately targeted but elsewhere the range is wider, with waterfowl such as teal, mallard, and red-throated diver, along with grouse and snipe/woodcock contributing palatable additions to the diet. Woodman suggests that raptor species were more likely to have been caught accidentally in traps or nets, although ‘it does seem possible that they may have been caught for their plumage, which could be used for display as trophies or even totemic symbols’.<sup>14</sup> The most surprising element of the bird bone assemblages is the absence of large water species such as swans and geese, as these species would have been relatively easy to catch if present.

Several Mesolithic sites have produced evidence for the consumption of shellfish but their importance in the overall diet can easily be overestimated. It has been estimated that 52,000 oysters or 31,000 limpets would need to be eaten to equate with the calorific consumption of a single red deer.<sup>16</sup> Their main advantage, however, is that they are generally available year-round and easy to access, while other meat sources may only be seasonally available. At Ferriter’s Cove, stable isotope analysis ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ) indicated that the periwinkles were consumed during the cold times of the year, the period in which fish were either unavailable or difficult to catch.<sup>17</sup> Their consumption, however, could occur at other times; the oysters at Rockmarshall, Co. Louth were consumed between March and August.<sup>18</sup>

### Later prehistory

Agriculture began in Ireland about 3,800 BCE and with it came the arrival of domesticated animals. Unfortunately, animal bones assemblages of this period are extremely scarce but it is clear that the exploitation of wild species almost

**12** Angela R. Perri, Robert C. Power, Ingelise Stuijts, Susann Heinrich, Sahra Talamo, Sheila Hamilton-Dyer, Charlotte Roberts, ‘Detecting hidden diets and diseases: Zoonotic parasites and fish consumption in Mesolithic Ireland’, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 97 (2018), 237–147, 144. **13** McCarthy,

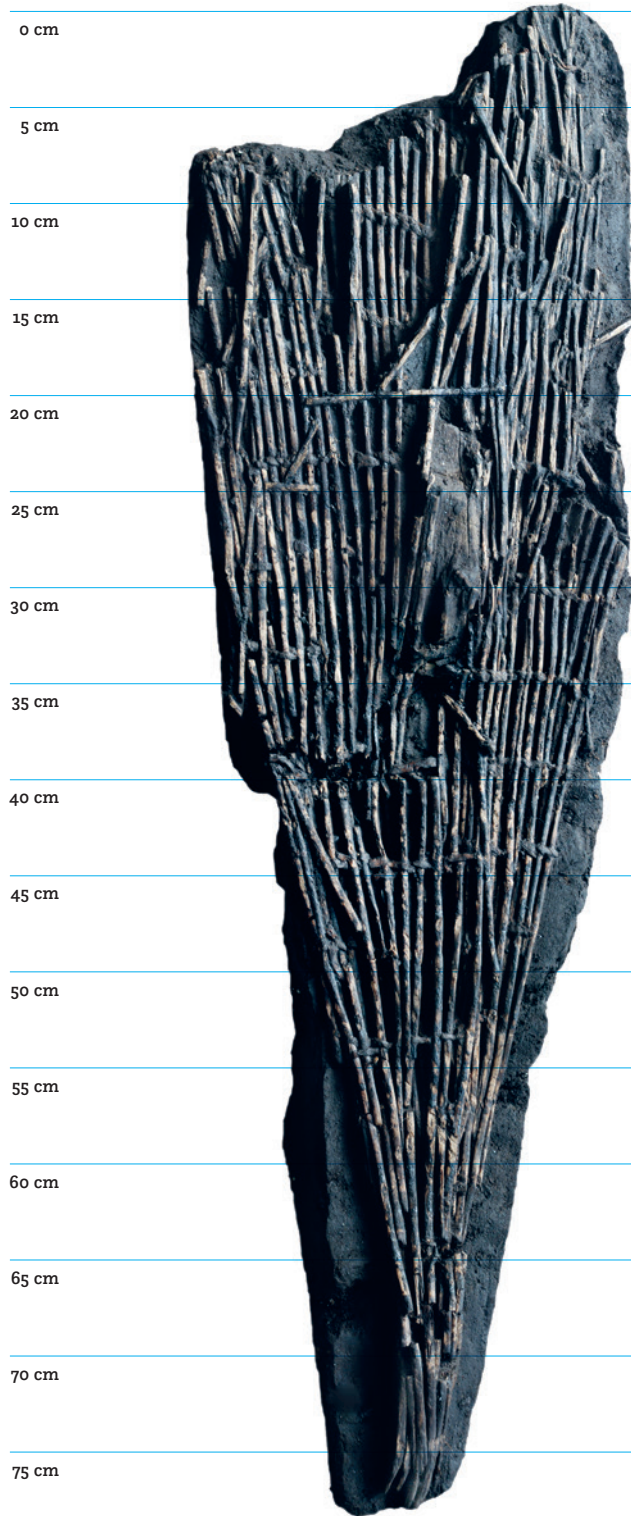
‘Faunal remains’, 90–91.

**14** Woodman, *Ireland’s first settlers*, 271. **15** McCarthy, ‘Faunal remains’; van Wignagaarden-Bakker, ‘Faunal remains and the Irish Mesolithic’. **16** Geoff N. Bailey, ‘Shell middens as indicators of postglacial economies: a territorial perspective’ in

Paul Mellors (ed.), *The early post-Glacial settlement of Northern Europe* (Duckworth: London, 1978), 37–64.

**17** Michael J. Kimball, William Showers, Sinead McCartan and Bernard J. Genna, ‘ $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  analysis of *Littorina littorea* Shells from Ferriter’s Cove, Dingle Peninsula: preliminary results

and interpretations’ in Nyree Finley, Sinead McCartan, Nicky Milner and Caroline Wickham-Jones (eds), *From Bann Flakes to Bushmills: Papers in honour of Peter Woodman* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2009), 189–97. **18** Peter Woodman, ‘Mesolithic middens—from famine to feasting’, *Archaeology Ireland*



**Figure 2** Clowanstown, Co. Meath. Mesolithic basket fish trap (John Sunderland, courtesy of TII).

disappears with the exception of extensive oyster and other shellfish exploitation in the Ballysadare Bay area of Co. Sligo and Strangford Lough, Co. Down.<sup>19</sup> Why the inhabitants of these areas continued with a Mesolithic way of life is unclear. Isotopic analysis of Neolithic human skeletal remains indicate that ‘there was no significant contribution of marine foods to the overall protein intake of Irish Neolithic communities’.<sup>20</sup> Red deer were re-introduced into Ireland at this time<sup>21</sup> but it may have been primarily for their antlers, rather than their meat or hides, as these materials could be much more easily obtained from domesticated animals. Cattle, pig, sheep, and possibly goat were the main species present. It is difficult to differentiate between many of the bones of sheep and goat and the first definite evidence for the presence of the latter is in the Bronze Age.

The importance of dairy foods in the Irish diet has been demonstrated by written sources since the Early Medieval Period.<sup>22</sup> In an analysis for fats residues on Neolithic Irish pottery, nearly 90% provided evidence for the presence of milk fats, while just over 10% contained meat fats or a mixture of meat and milk fats. The analysis provides ‘unequivocal evidence that dairying in Ireland began in the Neolithic’.<sup>23</sup> The low incidence of meat fats in the pottery could indicate that meat was generally cooked by roasting in open fires, or baking in fire pits, but it is more likely to indicate that meat was only rarely cooked and consumed.

In the absence of efficient ways of preserving meat, the slaughter of a large animal created a problem as far as its consumption was concerned. A large amount of meat, probably weighing about 200kg in the case of a bovine, suddenly became available and needed to be consumed within a relatively short period of time.<sup>24</sup> Recent studies have argued that meat consumption in prehistoric societies took place almost exclusively in ritual contexts incorporating sacrifice and feasting.<sup>25</sup> Evidence for feasting is difficult to identify, but the carefully deposited cattle remains at a mid-Neolithic site at Kilshane, Co. Dublin provides clear evidence for the practice. Food refuse on archaeological sites are usually comprised of the discarded remains of different species of animal. At Kilshane, the faunal deposits of bone along the base of an irregularly shaped ditched enclosure are made up almost exclusively of a dense layer of cattle bone comprising at least fifty-eight animals. The carcasses appear to have been dismembered into portions for cooking and consumption, and articulated sections of bone were then carefully deposited in the ditch. The bones were not broken for marrow extraction, a characteristic of ritual feasting deposits as it indicated that there

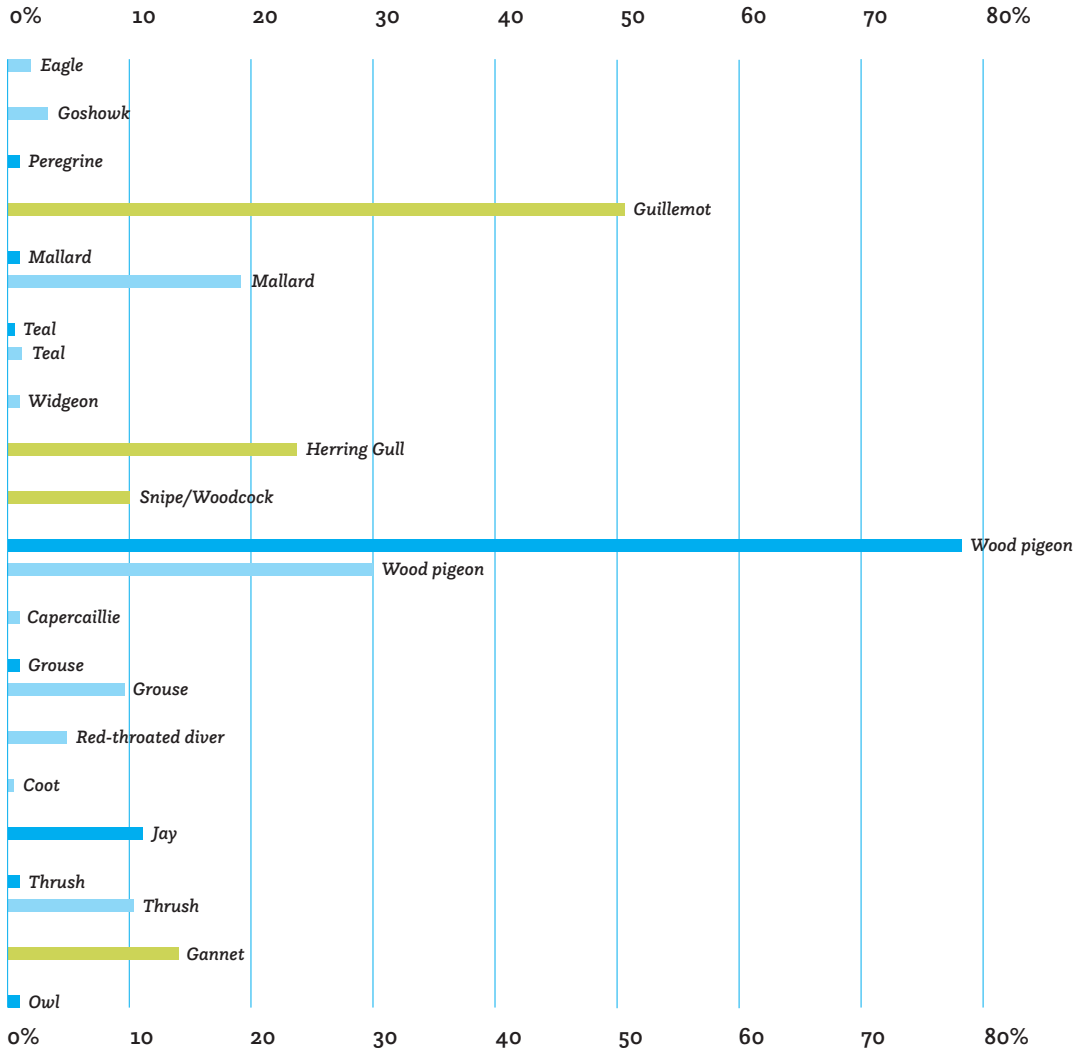
15: 3 (2021), 32–35. **19** Emily V. Murray, ‘Molluscs and Middens: The Archaeology of “Ireland’s Early Savage Race”?’ in Eileen M. Murphy and Nicki J. Whitehouse (eds), *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 119–35. **20** Jessica Smyth and Richard P. Evershed, ‘The molecules

of meals: new insight into Neolithic foodways’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, C, 115: 1 (2015), 27–46. **21** Finbar McCormick, ‘Early evidence for wild animals in Ireland’ in Norbert Benecke (ed.), *The Holocene History of European Vertebrate Fauna* (Berlin: Archäologie in Eurasien 6, 1999), 355–71.

**22** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, 1997), 323–30. **23** Smyth and Evershed, ‘The molecules of meals’, 17. **24** Finbar McCormick, ‘The distribution of meat in a Hierarchical Society: The Irish evidence’ in Preston Miracle and Nicky Milner (eds), *Consuming*

*Passions and Patterns of Consumption* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute Monographs, 2001), 25–31, 25. **25** Fabienne Pigière, Finbar McCormick, Lilly Olet, Dermot Moore, Finola O’Carroll and Jessica Smyth, ‘More than meat? Examining cattle slaughter, feasting and deposition in later 4th

### Mesolithic bird exploitation



**% Bone Fragments**

- Lough Boora (243 fragments found)
- Mount Sandel (79 fragments found)
- Ferriter's Cove (4 fragments found)

**Figure 3** Birds from Irish Mesolithic sites<sup>15</sup>

To horsemen a <i>cuinn</i>	To carvers a head	To butlers a head	To stewards a head	To charioteers <i>cuinn</i>
To harpists a tenderloin	To pipers a shank		To chessplayers a shank	To champions a pig's shoulder
To judges a tenderloin	To scholars a rump steak		To cupbearers a rump steak	To <i>aire forgill</i> 1st rank nobles a tenderloin
To literati a tenderloin 2nd rank literati a rumpsteak	To artisans a lower shank		To braziers a lower shank	To the king a tenderloin To the queen a rump steak
To <i>ollam filed</i> 1st rank poets a haunch <i>Anroth</i> 2nd rank poets a knee	To smiths a front shoulder		To physicians a knee	To <i>Aire ard</i> 2nd rank nobles a haunch To Clí 3rd rank poets
To hostlers a haunch	To armourers a belly piece		To pilots a belly piece	To <i>Aire túise</i> 3rd rank nobles and historians a haunch
To expert a <i>roichnech</i> To 2nd rank craftsmen a knee	To chariot makers a knee		To pirates a knee	To <i>Aire échta</i> 4th rank nobles a <i>roichneach</i> To <i>Cano</i> 4th rank poets a knee
To diviners, sorcerers and <i>Commlid</i> a shank	To jugglers a shank		To buffoons a shank	To <i>Aire désó</i> 5th rank noble and <i>Doss</i> 5th rank poets a shank
To plasterers and carpenters a lower shank	To satirists the thick part of the shoulder		To clowns the thick part of the shoulder	To <i>Mac fuirmid</i> 6th rank poets and <i>Fochloc</i> 7th rank poets a lower shank
To trumpeters and hornplayers an outpouring of mead				To cooks an outpouring of mead
To engravers and ringmakers a belly piece				To fort builders and <i>oblaire</i> a belly piece
To shoemakers and turners the thick part of the shoulder	To the Royal doorkeepers the <i>coccyx</i>	Entrance		To wallmakers and ditchdiggers the thickest part of the shoulder

Figure 4 Distribution of meat at a feast at Tara.<sup>30</sup>

was no attempt to exploit the nutritional value of the bones as one would expect if the consumption was purely for sustenance. The deposited bones also appear to have been quickly covered and there are no signs of carnivore gnawing marks, again a sign of ritual deposit.<sup>26</sup>

The carcass of a bovine is extremely hierarchical in terms of the quality of the cuts. Irish medieval sources indicate that the cuts of meat consumed at feasts were distributed on the basis of the status of a person. Figure 4 shows the imagined layout of the banqueting hall at Tara based on the Book of Leinster and The Yellow Book of Lecan.<sup>27</sup> The way that the individual portions of bones were deposited at Kilshane suggests that meat joints were being distributed in a similar way at a much earlier period in Ireland. The idea of distributing meat on the basis of a person's status is likely to have been the norm before the advent of retail meat markets and in Ireland there is evidence that the practice continued until post-medieval times. The late-sixteenth-century observer Meredith Hanmer (1543–1604) chronicled meat distribution in a similar way in an Irish chieftain's household.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that he notes that the head, tongue, and feet are given to the blacksmith, no doubt because they would have been in possession of a hammer big enough to pole-axe large beasts. Cattle markets in medieval towns were often named 'smithfield' for the same reason. Hanmer also outlines the distribution of smaller livestock. In the case of sheep, he states: 'Head to the horse boy, Neck to the garren-keeper. Liver, to the carpenter, Shoulder to the astronomer. Bag pooding, for the man that brings water. The hart and feet for the shepherd, skyne for the cook'.<sup>29</sup>

The Bronze Age (c. 2500–500 BCE) brought the arrival of the horse to Ireland. It was primarily used as a draft animal, as is attested by the many finds of bronze horse bits in the country. Few of their bones are found on archaeological excavations but the presence of cut marks at Ballyveelish, Co. Tipperary and Haughey's Fort, Co. Armagh, indicates that they were sometimes eaten, perhaps in times of severe food shortage.<sup>31</sup> Many of the bones are of older individuals, suggesting that they are likely only to have been eaten after their useful lives as beasts of burden were over.

In most Bronze Age sites wild species were only present in very small quantities, confirming their continued low importance in the post-Mesolithic diet. An exception to this was the Late Bronze settlement at Dún Aonghasa, perched

millennium BC Atlantic Europe: A case study from Kilshane, Ireland', *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* (2022), 41. **26** Finbar McCormick, 'Ritual feasting in Iron Age Ireland' in Gabriel Cooney, Katarina Becker, John Coles, Michael Ryan and Susanne Sievers (eds), *Relics of old decency: archaeological studies in later prehistory* (Bray: Wordwell, 2009), 405–12, 406.

**27** Figure 3. Based on Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and William Sayers, 'A cut above: ration and station in an Irish King's Hall', *Food and Foodways* 4: 2 (1990), 15–35. **28** Anon., 'Gaelic Domestics', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 3 (1855), (first series), 117–26. **29** Anon., 'Gaelic Domestics', 119–20. A 'garren' is a gelding,

from the Irish 'gearrán'—cut horse <https://www.focloir.ie/ga/dictionary/ei/Gelding> **30** Finbar McCormick, 'The distribution of meat in a hierarchical society: the Irish evidence' in Preston Miracle and Nicky Milner (eds), *Consuming passions and patterns of consumption* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute Monographs, 2002), 25–32, 28. **31** Finbar

McCormick (ND) Unpublished report on faunal remains from Ballyveelish; Eileen Murphy and Finbar McCormick, 'The faunal remains from the Inner Ditch at Haughey's fort, Third Report: 1991 Excavation', *Emania* 14 (1996), 47–50.



on a high Atlantic cliff on Inis Mór, one of the three Aran Islands.<sup>32</sup> This was a marginal landscape where raising domesticated animals for meat was difficult. In contrast to all other Irish Bronze Age sites, sheep were numerically the dominant species raised although beef still contributed more to the diet because of the larger size of cattle. There was no evidence for goat. The difficulty of raising cattle is reflected in the fact that they tended to be slaughtered as young calves, a much younger age than on mainland sites. There was simply not enough fodder to breed most cattle to maturity. It was a similar situation with sheep, as most of the bones present were of lambs. The lack of the availability of oak and beech mast also meant that pigs were kept in lower numbers than on mainland sites. Venison and wild pig were also occasionally consumed but it is likely that these carcasses were imported, as it is unlikely that such species lived on the island.

Fish contributed a significant component to the diet at Dún Aonghasa.<sup>33</sup> Fish remains were dominated by wrasse and bream, indicating exploitation of the inshore rocky habitats in the immediate vicinity of the site. They were probably caught on long lines from the cliffs in the same way as depicted in Robert Flaherty's 1934 movie *Man of Aran*. Other species caught include scad, pollock, salmon, hake, cod, gurnard, whiting, and dogfish. Grey seals were also occasionally hunted and the presence of bones of large cetaceans, including the tooth of a sperm whale, indicated that the stranding of whales, dolphins, or porpoises was exploited. It is unlikely that such large beasts were hunted.

The nests on the sea cliffs were likely to have been robbed<sup>34</sup> as guillemots (64%) and shags (19%) dominated the bird bone assemblage. A wide range of other birds including razorbill, cormorant, puffin, kittiwake, great auk, and curlew were present, but the small quantities present indicates that they were incidental to the diet. Molluscs were also consumed and predictably were dominated by rocky shore species; limpets and periwinkles.<sup>35</sup> The food remains from Dún Aonghasa indicate that coastal settlements enjoyed a much more varied diet than elsewhere, a phenomenon that was to endure through the centuries. It should be noted that no Irish archaeological sites have provided evidence for the consumption of lobster or crab, suggesting that pot fishing is a relatively recent development.

The Late Bronze and Iron Ages saw the emergence of large regional ceremonial centres, the most notable of which were Tara, Co. Meath, and Navan Fort, Co. Armagh. It is thought that these were places where large seasonal gatherings occurred, accompanied by animal sacrifice and feasting. Navan fort is the

**32** Finbar McCormick and Eileen Murphy, 'Mammal bones' in Claire Cotter (ed.), *The Western Stone Forts Project: Excavations at Dún Aonghasa and Dún Eoghanachta*, Vol 2. Discovery Programme (Bray: Wordwell, 2012), 153–166.

**33** Michael McCarty, 'Fish bone and sea mammal

bone' in Claire Cotter, *The Western Stone Forts Project: Excavations at Dún Aonghasa and Dún Eoghanachta*, Vol 2. Discovery Programme (Bray: Wordwell, 2012), 167–75.

**34** Michael McCarthy and Tanya O'Sullivan, 'Bird Bones' in Claire Cotter (ed.), *The Western Stone Forts Project:*

*Excavations at Dún Aonghasa and Dún Eoghanachta*, Vol 2. Discovery Programme (Bray: Wordwell, 2012), 175–80.

**35** M. O'Connell, 'Marine mollusca and other shore food from Dún Aonghasa' in Claire Cotter (ed.), *The Western Stone Forts Project: Excavations at Dún Aonghasa*

*and Dún Eoghanachta*, Vol 2. Discovery Programme (Bray: Wordwell, 2012) 180–88.

famous *Emain Macha* where many episodes of Ulster Cycle legends occurred. The faunal assemblage was dominated by pig, and pork was the food usually consumed at feasts in early legend.<sup>36</sup> Strontium analysis of teeth can be used to identify non-local animals and explore patterns of movement. Analysis of the Navan pig teeth indicated that most of the pigs came from distant places, while in comparison, the cattle and sheep tended to be raised more locally.<sup>37</sup> The pigs also came from a diverse range of areas. Strontium values are based on the geology underlying the food eaten by the animals and since similar types of geology can be found in different places it is difficult to definitely identify specific areas. That said, the results suggest the presence of pigs from south Co. Down, west Co. Tyrone, and north Co. Antrim. Others came from the west coast, with Co. Donegal or Co. Galway being most likely places. The diverse isotopic evidence suggested that the pigs were not brought from distinct supply centres 'but rather they were brought in small numbers from many locations'.<sup>38</sup> One is left with the impression of large numbers of people from a wide area travelling to occasional gatherings at Navan, bringing their pigs with them where they would be sacrificed and consumed during communal feasts.

These large ceremonial centres were also locations where kings were inaugurated. At Tara, the Neolithic Passage Tomb known as Mound of the Hostages was said to have been the site for such ceremonies. Excavation of the ditch of Ráth na Ríg adjacent to the mound produced horse bones that displayed knife marks and evidence of roasting.<sup>39</sup> It may well be that the horse consumption was part of the strange rituals that occurred during the inauguration of a king. Such inauguration rituals were described by Geraldus Cambrensis at the end of the twelfth century CE. The description is curious, to say the least, and worth quoting in full:

There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely the Kenelcunill, a certain people which is accustomed to appoint its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the people in that land had been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards by all

**36** Finbar McCormick, 'Ritual feasting in Iron Age Ireland' in Gabriel Cooney, Katarina Becker, John Coles, Michael Ryan and Susanne Sievers (eds), *Relics of old decency: archaeological studies in later prehistory* (Bray: Wordwell, 2009), 405–12.  
**37** Richard Madgwick,

Vaughan Grimes, Angela L. Lamb, Alexandra J. Nederbragt, Jane A. Evans, and Finbar McCormick, 'Feasting and Mobility in Iron Age Ireland: Multi-isotope analysis reveals the vast catchment of Navan Fort, Ulster', *Scientific Reports* 9: 1 (2019), 19792. **38** Madgwick, Grimes *et al*, *Scientific Reports*

9: 1 (2019), 19792, 7. **39** Finbar McCormick, 'The animal bones from Tara' in Helen Roche (ed.), *Discovery Programme Reports 6* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2002), 103–16.

his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it around him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred.<sup>40</sup>

Cambrensis' account of Ireland contains much material that is untrue as one of the aims of the book was to cast a poor light on the morals of the Irish in order to legitimise their reformation by the Anglo-Normans. Yet, there is likely to be truth in this description of the inauguration rite as the slaughter of horse, accompanied by sexual activities, forms part of the ritual of kingship in early Indo-European societies.<sup>41</sup>

The same deposits at Tara that contained the horse bones also contained a substantial number of dog bones, some displaying cut marks indicating the dismembering of a carcass, presumably for cooking purposes. While famine might account for the consumption of dog flesh, it is also likely that there was some religious explanation. Dog flesh, for instance, was sometimes consumed in Roman religious ceremonies with puppy flesh being eaten at feasts for the inauguration of priests.<sup>42</sup> It is also possible that the eating of dog flesh was associated with divination, a feature of many early religions. In the tenth century Cormac's Glossary<sup>43</sup> there is a description of a poet, or perhaps a druid (*filid*), consuming dog flesh as part of a ritual that would produce revelations from the pagan gods. It records that:

[t]he poet chews a piece of the flesh of a red pig, or of a dog or cat, and places it afterwards on the flagstone behind the door, and sings an incantation on it and offers it to the idol-gods and afterwards calls his idols to him ... and what he seeks is then revealed to him.

The association between animal produce and religious practices can be further demonstrated in the case of bog butter. While it was formerly believed that the deposition of butter in bogs was to help extend the lifespan of butter it is now known that butter deposited in this way was prone to rancidity.<sup>44</sup> Deposits of butter are now generally regarded as votive offerings, the earliest dating to c. 1,700 BCE.<sup>45</sup> It has been speculated that these deposits were associated with 'agricultural fertility', but this cannot be proven. What is clear, however, is that

40 John J. O'Meara, *Gerald of Wales: The history and topography of Ireland* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1982), 110.

41 Jaan Puhvel, 'Aspects of equine functionality', in Jaan Puhvel (ed.), *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans, Studies in Comparative Mythology* (University of

California Press: Berkeley, 1970), 157–72, 161. 42 Frederick J. Simoons, *Eat not this flesh* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1994), 238–40.

43 Whitley Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries* (Williams and Norgate: London, 1862), 25; Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (trans.), *The Sacred Isles—Belief and Religion*

in *pre-Christian Ireland* (Collins Press: Cork, 1999), 79. 44 Muiris O'Sullivan and Liam Downey, 'Bog butter: why was it buried?', *Archaeology Ireland* 33: 2 (2019), 27–29. 45 Jessica Smyth, Robert Berstan, Emmanuelle Casanova, Finbar McCormick, Isabella Mulhall, Maeve Sikora, Chris Synnott and Richard P.

Evershed, 'Four millennia of dairy surplus and deposition revealed through compound-specific stable isotope analysis and radiocarbon dating of Irish bog butters', *Scientific Reports* 9 (2019), Article number: 4559.

the coming of Christianity did not put an end to the practice as the latest examples date to the 17th century CE. The use of milk products as votive offerings, deposits made to gain favour from supernatural sources, reflects the continuing importance of dairy produce in the Irish diet since the early Neolithic. Bog butter has also been found in Scotland but an alternative dairy offering was recorded in the Outer Hebrides in the 17th century. On the Isle of Vallay in the Outer Hebrides it is recorded that the inhabitants 'offered a cow's milk every Sunday' on a flat stone near an old church.<sup>46</sup>

### Early Medieval period

The arrival of Christianity brought with it written historical sources, which greatly extends our knowledge of livestock rearing and meat consumption. The excavation of greatly increased numbers of settlements also allows us to on occasion identify regional patterns in livestock rearing.<sup>47</sup> Domestic fowl are a new addition to meat resources in the country and for the first time provided an easily available species that could be used for a family meal, without having a large quantity of meat being left over. First domesticated in the Far East, they were introduced into Western Europe during the Iron Age and were particularly popular among the Romans. There are numerous documentary references to hen's eggs in the monastic penitential literature, as they were eaten for protein when meat was forbidden.<sup>48</sup> Early texts also refer to capons indicating that male fowl were castrated for fattening.<sup>49</sup> Duck bones are often encountered but it is likely that they were wild rather than domesticated; it is difficult to differentiate between the two. Duck bones at Knowth, Co. Meath were similar in size to teal or widgeon. Fergus Kelly, in his wonderful monograph on the documentary evidence for early medieval Irish farming, finds little evidence for the domesticated duck but farmyard geese are documented. The geese bones present on excavations are, however, similar in appearance to the Greylag geese<sup>50</sup> so it is again difficult to know if they are wild or domesticated.

Beef continued to dominate the meat diet of early medieval Ireland. At Knowth, Co. Meath, sheep and pigs at times accounted for more than 50% of the animals slaughtered, but pork and mutton never accounted for more than 20%, in terms of weight, of the meat consumed.<sup>51</sup> Most of the beef came from animals of between twelve and thirty months, indicating that they were slower maturing than modern bovines.<sup>52</sup> The majority of the younger animals slaughtered were male as females tended to be kept for breeding and milk

**46** Martin Martin, *A description of the western islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, [1702] 1994), 282. **47** Thomas R. Kerr, 'Livestock farming' in Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr, Meriel McClatchie and Aidan O'Sullivan (eds), *Early Medieval Agriculture, Livestock and Cereal Production in Ireland, AD 400–1100* (Oxford: BAR International Series 2647, 2014), 61–100. **48** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 104. **49** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 103. **50** Finbar McCormick and Emily V. Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 74.

**51** McCormick and Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland*, Table A1.3.3. **52** McCormick and Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland*, 51–58.

production. Young calves were rarely slaughtered and early sources indicate that cows needed their calves to be present during milking.<sup>53</sup> There were occasional exceptions. Illaunloughan was a small island monastic community near Port Magee, Co. Kerry where most of the bovines present were young calves. While fodder shortage is a possible explanation, as in the case of Dún Aonghasa discussed previously, it is tempting to speculate that these calves represent 'firstborns' given as tribute to the monastery, as is stipulated in several early Irish canons.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, a high proportion of the beef consumed in Viking Dublin was from old animals—it seems that outside producers were selling animals past their prime for dairying and traction into the urban meat market.

The inhabitants of Viking Dublin were also trying to lower their dependence on outside producers by breeding large numbers of pigs within the town.<sup>55</sup> The incidence of pig remains in Dublin is higher than encountered in contemporary rural sites. Pigs, however, are destructive animals and it is notable that they were killed off at an earlier age than on rural sites rather than breeding them to full size. Later sources record pigs destroying gardens in Dublin in 1469 while in 1601 the eating of an infant by a pig is recorded.<sup>56</sup> Goats were also present in relatively large numbers in Viking Dublin. The horns indicate that most were female so it is likely that they were kept within the town primarily to provide fresh milk.<sup>57</sup>

Wild species again play a very minor role in the diet of early medieval Ireland. Interestingly, the two highest instances of red deer were at the monastic site of Moynes, Co. Mayo. Perhaps the consumption of venison was a mark of holiness. At the monastery at Tallaght, Co. Dublin, it was claimed that during the lifetime of St. Maelruain no flesh was eaten except deer or wild swine.<sup>58</sup> At the small island monastery of Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry, fish and birds played a significant role in the diet much more so than noted on coastal secular sites. The site also showed an unusual dominance of specific species indicating targeted hunting strategies. Fish remains were dominated by sea bream, comprising half the assemblage, while nearly three quarters of the bird bones were of Manx shearwater.<sup>59</sup> Large quantities of periwinkle and limpets were also consumed. Fergus Kelly has noted that the early texts indicate that monastic diets should be meagre with an emphasis on wild meat, as noted above,<sup>60</sup> and Illaunloughan provides a fine example of such a diet. The importance of fish in the monastic diet can also be demonstrated by Early Medieval fish traps present on the northern shore of Strangford Lough which are likely to have been controlled by the important monastery at Movilla, Co. Down.<sup>61</sup>

**53** McCormick and Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland*, 52.

**54** Emily Murray, Finbar McCormick and Gill Plunkett, 'The food economies of Atlantic Island Monasteries: The documentary and archaeo-environmental evidence', *Environmental*

*Archaeology* 9 (2004), 179–89, 186. **55** McCormick and Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland*, 62–64, 226. **56** Ian Cantwell, 'Anthropozoological relationships in Late Medieval Dublin', *Dublin Historical Record* 54: 1 (2001), 73–80, 76. **57** McCormick and

Murray, *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland*, 228–30.

**58** Edward J. Gwynn and Jalter W. Purton, 'The Monastery at Tallaght', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 29C, (1911/1912), 115–179, 129.

**59** Emily Murray and Finbar McCormick, 'Environmental

analysis and food supply' in Jenny White Marshall and Claire Walsh, *Illaghan Island: an early medieval monastery in County Kerry* (Bray: Wordwell, 2005), 67–80, 69. **60** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 343–346. **61** Thomas McErlean, Rosemary McConkey and Wes Forsythe, *Strangford*

### Late Medieval Period

The arrival of the Anglo-Normans led to an expansion of species available for consumption in Ireland. In 1213, the Archbishop of Dublin was given fallow deer from Coventry, presumably for stocking deer parks in Ireland. Fiona Beglane notes that there were more than forty known deer parks established in the 12th and 13th centuries, located mainly in the eastern part of the country.<sup>62</sup> The introduction of the rabbit allowed the establishment of warrens for their breeding, the earliest being one located on Lambay Island which was established in 1191.<sup>63</sup> The hedgehog also appears in the archaeological record for the first time during this period. It is unclear if it was regarded as a food animal although the flesh is quite edible.

The Anglo-Norman elite enjoyed a much more varied and exotic diet than those of the early medieval period. There was a much greater consistency in the bird bone assemblages, with greater emphasis on domestic fowl and domestic geese, which are now evidenced by the fact that they had more sturdy feet and shorter wing bones than noted on their wild counterparts.<sup>64</sup> Game birds such as quail, partridge and capercaillie also appear.<sup>65</sup> The Anglo-Normans also introduced pheasants,<sup>66</sup> and doves become a feature of the medieval landscape of manors and monastic granges.<sup>67</sup> Kevin Down notes that in 13th century Ireland, chickens, ducks, geese, swans and peacocks were present on most demesnes in the south-east of Ireland.<sup>68</sup> The native Irish, from the slender evidence available, do not seem to have taken to poultry with such enthusiasm. In a late 13th/early 14th century settlement at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, domestic fowl accounted for only 8% of the bird bones present, while domestic birds frequently account for over 80% on Anglo Norman sites.<sup>69</sup>

The Anglo-Normans, with their network of towns and markets, greatly expanded the commercialisation of meat and other foods. Prior to this, with the exception of the small number of Viking towns, most settlements were producer and consumer sites as far as food was concerned and transfer of food tended to be confined to tribute renders given as part of the clientship system, or consumed by way of feasting (see Katharine Simms this volume).<sup>70</sup> While rent was occasionally paid in chickens in Anglo-Norman times,<sup>71</sup> food was generally now a

*Lough: An archaeological survey of the maritime cultural landscape* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2002), 183. **62** Fiona Beglane, *Anglo-Norman parks in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 19. **63** Charles McNeill, *Calendar of Archbishop Aen's register, c.1172–1534* (Dublin: Royal Society of Antiquaries, 1950), 79. **64** Sheila Hamilton-Dyer, 'Exploitation of birds and fish in Historic Ireland: a brief review of the evidence' in Eileen M. Murphy and Nicki

J. Whitehouse, *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 102–118. **65** Hamilton-Dyer, 'Exploitation of birds and fish in Historic Ireland', in Murphy and Whitehouse, *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland*, 102–18. **66** Oliver Davis and David Beers Quinn, 'The pipe roll of 14 John', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 4 (3<sup>rd</sup> series), Supplement (1941), 1–76, 33. **67** Margaret Murphy and Michael Potterton, *The Dublin Region in the Middle*

*Ages: Settlement, Land-use and Economy, Discovery Programme Monograph* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 346. **68** Kevin Down, 'Colonial society and economy in the High Middle Ages' in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, Vol. 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 439–91, 478. **69** Janice Monk, 'The animal bones' in Rose M. Cleary 'Excavations at Lough Gur, 1877–1978: Part 4', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 89

(1984), 33–54, 44; Hamilton-Dyer, 'Exploitation of birds and fish', 109. **70** Katharine Simms, 'Banqueting and the medieval Gaelic chiefs' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 7, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>. **71** Murphy and Potterton, *The Dublin Region in the Middle Ages*, 345.

commercial commodity. For instance, a prior of Holy Trinity, Dublin (1337–46) who wished to have a capon for breakfast could simply purchase one for 2d.<sup>72</sup> Other records of the same prior indicate purchases for the table of beef, mutton, and pork; salmon, plaice, eels (salted), herrings, and oysters along with fowl, pigeons, geese (and goslings), and rabbit. Much of the food was already cooked and meat was also consumed in the form of pies. The prior washed down his food with ale, and red and white wine. The food could be flavoured with imported spices, including peppers, saffron, ginger, and mustard. Almonds were used as a sweetener. The purchase of a quart of olive oil suggests it was used for cooking rather than medical reasons.<sup>73</sup>

Commercialisation of fishing is evidenced by the building of extensive fish traps in estuary areas. Several traps dating to this period have been found in the Shannon, Fergus, and Deel estuaries, Co. Clare.<sup>74</sup> One of these was found adjacent to the borough of Bunratty which in 1287 is recorded as having ‘a weekly market, annual fair, rabbit warren, and fishpond’.<sup>75</sup> Extensive fish traps were also built on the north-eastern shore of Strangford Lough, and are clearly associated with the Cistercian foundation at Greyabbey, Co. Down, which was founded in 1193.<sup>76</sup> The association between fish traps and monasteries is likely to be a consequence of the monastic diet, as meat consumption would have been forbidden for much of the year. The association between fish and monasteries is further emphasised by the fact that ‘the majority of the fishing weirs of medieval Ireland were in the hands of monasteries, chiefly as a result of grants made by their founders’.<sup>77</sup> Fish could also form part of rent paid at this time. Timothy O’Neill notes that ‘the bishop of Cloyne was supplied with ling, cod and haddock at special rates by his tenants at Ballycotton, Co. Cork, as part of their rent’.<sup>78</sup> The archaeological evidence shows that the fish bone assemblages of the time were dominated by large Gadidae, including cod, ling, haddock, and hake.<sup>79</sup>

The advent of commercialism also allowed marine resources to be consumed far from the coast. Conger eel, cod, herring, hake, gurnard, seabream, and flatfish were present at Trim Castle, Co. Meath while oyster was found at Kells Priory, Co. Kilkenny and Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare.<sup>80</sup> Trim Castle also produced the earliest evidence for pike in Ireland; it is likely that the Anglo-Normans introduced it into the country and by the sixteenth century the species was being exported to England, presumably in a salted form.<sup>81</sup> One would have thought

**72** James Mills, *Account roll of the Priory of Holy Trinity, Dublin, 1337–1346* (Dublin: University Press, 1891), 100. **73** Mills, *Account roll of the Priory of Holy Trinity, Dublin, 1337–1346*, 100. **74** Aidan O’Sullivan and Colin Breen, *Maritime Ireland: An archaeology of Coastal Communities* (London: Tempus, 2007), 173. **75** O’Sullivan and Breen, *Maritime Ireland: An archaeology of Coastal*

*Communities*, 174. **76** McErlean et al., *Strangford Lough: An archaeological survey of the maritime cultural landscape*, 184–5. **77** Timothy O’Neill, *Merchants and Mariners in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987), 39. **78** O’Neill, *Merchants and Mariners in Medieval Ireland*, 37. **79** Hamilton-Dyer, ‘Exploitation of birds and fish in Historic Ireland’, 113.

**80** Hamilton-Dyer, ‘Exploitation of birds and fish in Historic Ireland’, 112; Finbar McCormick, ‘The effect of the Anglo-Norman settlement on Ireland’s wild and domesticated fauna’ in Pam J. Crabtree and Kathleen Ryan (eds), *Animal use and cultural change* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991), 40–52, 50; Teresa Bolger, *Colonising a Royal Landscape:*

*The history and archaeology of a medieval village at Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare* (Dublin: Transport Infrastructure Ireland, 2017), 6, 91. **81** Hamilton-Dyer, *Colonising a Royal Landscape*, 115; Ada K. Longfield, *Anglo-Irish Trade in the sixteenth century* (London: Routledge, 1929), 49.

that carp would have been introduced to stock the fish-ponds often associated with monasteries but as yet there is no archaeological or documentary evidence for this. The earliest reference to the species in Ireland is when Richard Boyle imported carp, along with tench, from Amsterdam to stock his ponds at Lismore, Co. Waterford, in 1626.<sup>82</sup> Perch, bream, roach, and rudd are later introductions.<sup>83</sup> In terms of the overall meat diet, beef continued to predominate with little change from the patterns noted during the early medieval period.<sup>84</sup> Castles, however, often demonstrate a high incidence of pig bones. Two reasons could account for this. Firstly, State Papers of the time indicate that pigs were often the main food used to provision armies. In the year 1170–71, for instance, some 3,200 pigs were sent to provision the King's army in Ireland while in 1211–12 some 160 pigs, along with fifteen cows, were sent 'for the larder at Dundrum' castle.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, pigs were often regarded as a high-status food (below) and the high incidence of their bones could reflect elite dining tastes at the castle sites. A high incidence of pig bone has also been noted at castles across Europe.<sup>86</sup> Looking across sites in general for this period a decline in pig and an increase in sheep has been noted, a trend that has also been noted in England during the late medieval period.<sup>87</sup>

### Conclusions

Mesolithic settlers in Ireland had a more restricted meat diet than encountered anywhere else in mainland Britain and Europe. The last glacial period had robbed the country of most of its medium and large-sized animals and the lack of a post-glacial land bridge to Ireland meant that it could not be repopulated by these animals after the glaciers retreated. The same applied to many freshwater fish that might have existed. The Irish had to survive almost exclusively on pork, while their European counterparts could have varied the meat diet with the availability of different species of deer, along with the flesh of wild cattle and wild horses. With the arrival of agriculture in the Neolithic, cattle became the main source of meat and have remained so until modern times. The temperate climate, coupled with the long grass growing season, created optimal conditions for the raising of beef and dairy cattle. Even the Romans knew of Ireland's cattle rearing qualities. The fourth century CE geographer Pomponius Mela stated rather fancifully that:

**82** Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), *The Lismore Papers, First Series, Vol 2* (London: Chiswick Press for private circulation, 1886–88), 207. **83** McCormick, 'Early evidence for wild animals', 367–368. **84** Finbar McCormick and Emily Murray, 'The zooarchaeology of medieval Ireland' in Umberto Albarella (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of archaeology* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), 201–02.

**85** McCormick, 'Anglo-Norman settlement', 48. **86** McCormick, 'Anglo-Norman settlement', 48. **87** McCormick and Murray, 'Zooarchaeology of Medieval Ireland', 202.



[t]he climate is unfavourable for the ripening of grain, but so luxuriant is the herbage, in quality both nutritious and savoury, that cattle eat their fill in a small part of the day, and if they are not restricted from feeding would by eating too long, burst.<sup>88</sup>

The 8th century English monk, The Venerable Bede, added that snow rarely lay on the ground for more than three days so there was no need to store hay or build stalls for wintering cattle.<sup>89</sup>

With the arrival of cattle came dairying and it is likely that cattle were kept primarily for milk and traction, with meat being essentially a secondary produce. There is direct evidence for butter making in the Bronze Age and the early medieval Irish texts provide evidence for a wide range of dairy products including fresh milk, cream, buttermilk, and cheeses ranging from curds to hard cheeses.<sup>90</sup> Sheep and goats milk was also consumed.<sup>91</sup> Dairy foods are referred to as *saim-biád*—summer food, while meat is regarded as a winter food—*gaim-biád*.<sup>92</sup> This makes sense in that the lactation period of cows would have ended in the autumn and excess livestock would have been slaughtered at the end of the summer grass growing season. Pigs fattened on oak and beech mast would also have been slaughtered in winter when dairy products were in short supply.

The food consumed was farmed, hunted and gathered locally during the prehistoric and early medieval period. There is little evidence for imported food. Imported walnuts and cultivated plums (probably dried) were present in Viking Dublin<sup>93</sup> while English salt is mentioned in the 11th century *Vision of MacConglinne*.<sup>94</sup> Imported wine from France, as well as being required for the celebration of the Eucharist, was considered a luxury drink at feasts.<sup>95</sup> The importation of foods, however, greatly expanded with the arrival of the Anglo-Normans and the arrival of spices made food much more palatable. The diet of the elite and poor must have differed greatly but this is difficult to demonstrate on the basis of the archaeological evidence. One would assume that the consumption of venison and game birds would have been limited to the rich but the faunal remains from the non-elite medieval village at Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare, included deer, pheasant, and grouse which the excavator suggested were likely to have been acquired by poaching.<sup>96</sup> A rare example of an elite diet in the archaeological record comes from 13th century Waterford where a collection of suckling pigs were found in association with high status imported German Pottery.<sup>97</sup> Beglane has also argued that the presence of fallow deer is indicative

**88** James F. Kenny, *The Sources of the Early History of Ireland: An introduction and guide*. Vol. I, Ecclesiastical (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 131. **89** Leo Sherley-Price (trans.), *Bede's History of the English Church and People* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 39. **90** Kelly, *Early Irish*

*Farming*, 323–30. **91** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 73. **92** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 318. **93** Patrick F. Wallace, *Viking Dublin: The Wood Quay Excavations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016), 365. **94** Kuno Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (London: David Nutt, 1892), 60. **95** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*,

219; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), 71. **96** Bolger, *Colonising a Royal Landscape*, 6, 91. **97** McCormick and Murray, 'The zooarchaeology of medieval Ireland', 205.

of an elite diet as their highest incidences have been noted on castle sites.<sup>98</sup> It is likely that the meat diet in the non-commercial pre-Norman times was much more egalitarian. It has been shown that evidence for communal feasting in Ireland can be traced back to early prehistoric times and after all, the attendees at a feast at the banqueting hall at Tara not only include the king and queen but also the lowly shoemakers, wood-turners and ditch diggers.

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<sup>98</sup> Beglane, Anglo-Norman parks in Medieval Ireland, 150–52.

**03**

*'A Landscape Fossilized':  
Céide Fields, dairy  
farming and food production  
in the Irish Neolithic*

**Seamas Caulfield**

### Introduction

In 1934, a young schoolteacher in Belderrig on the North Mayo coast wrote to Dr Adolf Mahr, Director of the National Museum of Ireland. He mentioned the wealth of monuments in the area, from the exotic, megalithic tombs to the mundane, stone walls. What made the very ordinary stone walls of archaeological interest was their location, covered by metres of growing bog and only coming to light when the bog over them was cut and harvested for fuel. The schoolteacher was my father, Patrick Caulfield. One of the walls was in the bog he himself cut every year in Belderg Beg townland, 'our' west side of Belderrig valley with many more walls visible in the cutaway bogs in Belderg More townland on the east side of the river. The main feature in our bog however was not the stone wall but an enormous fallen pine tree, blown down in a storm, over four thousand years ago (Figure 1) but now again erect as the centre piece in Céide Fields Visitor Centre (Figures 2a and b).

The reason my father was aware of so many archaeological sites for miles around Belderrig was his interest in game shooting, in particular of grouse. Every year from the 'glorious twelfth' (August) to late September he would cross and crisscross all the hills and valleys for miles around Belderrig, happy if he got in one or two shots a day. From the late 1940s, I often accompanied him on many of those days, and being barefooted, my experience of the landscape we traversed was not just through the usual senses of sight and sound and smell but also through the more intimate sense of touch, experienced twice in every metre we travelled. On some days, we might not rise even a lone cock grouse but would still return to the same ground the following day because of the fresh droppings we had seen. Because they had very recently left their calling card, there had to be a pack (of grouse) in the vicinity and the amount of droppings told us it was not a lone bird. We were rarely disappointed on our return.

Even when we failed to see a single bird or even any droppings, there was always the other great interest of archaeology. If we were shooting on *Cnoc a' Tower* we were sure to visit the Martello signalling tower and the recently installed 'EIRE' sign from the war just ended. If we were on *Tanaigh Bheag* we visited *Trench a Mhianaigh*, part of the industrial archaeology of the 19th century copper mining in Belderrig. On *Binn Bheag* we visited the tiny '*muchán*' of stones near the cliff edge where a man herding cattle had been found dead, and as was usual when a death occurred outdoors, a tiny cairn of small stones less than a metre across was gathered. We always (as I still do) took three stones from the

'They just kept turning up  
And were thought of as foreign' –  
One-eyed and benign,  
They lie about his house,  
Quernstones out of a bog.

To lift the lid of the peat  
And find this pupil dreaming  
Of Neolithic wheat!  
When he stripped off blanket bog  
The soft-piled centuries,

Fell open like a glib:  
There were the first plough-marks  
The stone-age fields, the tomb  
Corbelled, turfed and chambered,  
Floored with dry turf-coomb.

A landscape fossilized,  
Its stone-wall patternings  
Repeated before our eyes  
In the stone walls of Mayo ...

— **Excerpt from 'Belderg'**  
Seamus Heaney<sup>1</sup>

base of the cairn and placed them on the top while praying for the deceased and renewing the tiny monument at the same time. On days we hunted to the east on *Screig na mBróintí*,<sup>2</sup> we regularly came across walls in the cutaway bog or had lunch on the Belderg More court tomb. It would have been difficult to avoid catching the archaeology bug.

I know that there are armchair archaeologists who reject the idea that personal and local experience of the recent past can have any relevance to understanding the distant past. I disagree with their view, in particular when it involves research into ancient farming where local knowledge and practice and memory is as legitimate an avenue of study as are the archaeological and sciences avenues. I grew up in Belderrig, seven kilometres from Céide Fields, where in my childhood in the 1940s certain farming practices may not have been very different to what they were all those millennia earlier. With at most three milking cows and often only one, not every household kept a bull. One bull serviced all the cows in Belderrig, the bull kept in a stock-proof field, bull wire instead of the usual weaker barbed wire ensuring he could not escape and cows 'in matching' or 'in bulling' were driven on foot to the bull for service. In return for the service of the bull, the cow's owner gave a day's work, cutting hay with a scythe or saving the hay for the bull's owner. Another farmer owned the one implement that ensured the bull had no rivals in Belderrig. On the 19th of every month, fair day in Ballycastle, sixteen kilometres to the east, two-year-old and three-year-old cattle and older animals from the Belderrig herd were sold and younger animals bought from farmers from as far away as Lacken or Killala or Crossmolina. At other times, farmers would drive their cattle and sheep west to Glenamoy to trade with farmers from the Bangor and Belmullet region, guaranteeing that while the individual farms had very limited numbers of animals, the total number of cattle in North Mayo could be looked on as belonging to a single herd.

On Fair Day, farmers leaving Belderrig with their cattle at 6.00 am were trading with Lacken farmers before 10 o'clock and could be home again by 2 o'clock (though usually were not). An awareness of distance/time relationship such as this makes it easier for an 'insider' to appreciate why the entire Neolithic of North Mayo from Belderrig to Killala Bay should be considered as a single community.

While I have always placed a high value on my Belderrig childhood experiences, the most focused insight into how the first farmers who brought their cattle and cereal to Ireland may have felt on reaching these shores came to me

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975, Reprint 2001). Heaney wrote the poem 'Belderg' after visiting the Caulfield family in 1973 and sent the poem by post along with a thank you letter. © Estate of Seamus Heaney. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Limited. All

rights reserved. <sup>2</sup> This place name refers to the crag or rock of the quernstones. See Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Gastro-Topography: Exploring Food-Related Placenames in Ireland', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 28: 1–2 (2014) 126–57, 145. Heaney's poem 'Belderg' mentions

the 'one-eyed and benign' quernstones that were pulled out of the bog that 'lie about his house', Heaney, *North*.



**Figure 1** Centrepiece of Ancient Pine Tree in Céide Fields Visitor Centre

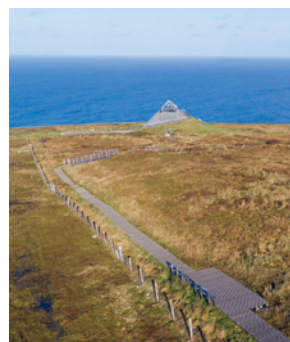


**Figure 2a** Aerial view of Céide cliffs and Visitor Centre with Belderrig skyline in background.

from a quite different and unexpected source. On a cold and wet November evening in the mid-1980s, I was descending Céide hill with a teenage son having spent the day rechecking some measurements from the autumn research programme on Céide Fields. After a lengthy walk in silence, the teenager offered the opinion 'wouldn't it have been fantastic to have been on the very first boat of the very first people to set foot in Ireland?' Delighted that he had caught the archaeology bug just as I had caught it from my father, I probed further, why did he feel it would be fantastic to be on that first boat? In the cold miserable circumstances, the reply made logical if disappointing sense. 'Because there was no archaeology'.

It would be easy to overlook the significance of this observation, even though offered in jest or frustration. The very first people to set foot in Ireland had departed an unbroken landmass that stretched all the way from the coast of what is now Britain to at least the Bering Straits, looking across at Alaska. The land they had left held traces of human activity from deserted camp sites and traces of long-quenched fires and kill sites, and even very ancient artifacts such as Palaeolithic hand axes stretching back more than half a million years. Not just humans, leaving their archaeological footprint behind them, but animals also literally leave their mark on the terrain they inhabit in ways that even humans can observe. The 'very first people' would have left a peninsula of Europe where as hunters they would have exploited a suite of large mammals; aurochs (wild cattle), elk, red deer, roe deer, and pigs. Even when not in view, the 'hoofprint' of those animals would be clearly observable by three signs, by their trodden paths and routes leading into and through the forest, by the cropped grass, and by their droppings. Moreover, for the hunter, the dung, preferably the steaming dung of the prize quarry, the aurochs, the most massive but slowest of the large mammals, would have been their most welcoming sight short of sighting the animals themselves.

The first hunters arriving here about ten thousand years ago, not seeing any animals, would have looked for that 'calling card,' their dung. Disappointed and exhausted, they would have put their heads down that first night with the strong expectation that between sunrise and sunset the next day, they would have found the cowpats. They would have found none and by nightfall had three options open to them; return from where they came, adapt quickly to 'hunting' for some other food other than animals, or continue to search for the large animals, and starve to death. They were not to know that the sun would



**Figure 2b** Céide Fields boardwalk with Visitor Centre in background.



rise and set more than a million times and there would still be no large animals to keep them alive on Irish soil.

Four thousand years after the first hunters arrived here to find no trace of grazing animals, the early farmers found the same, despite there now being evidence from rising smoke and man-made structures of a native human population. However, whereas the hunter of four thousand years earlier would have seen a catastrophic desert devoid of quarry in the un-grazed grass and lack of dung, the farmers would see the unbounded potential of uncontested grazing for the animals they brought with them. The big game hunter's desert was the farmer's El Dorado. Livestock farming in Ireland and on Britain's more remote offshore islands such as Outer Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland and the Isle of Man was at a significant advantage to similar farming on the mainland of Britain and its inshore islands where introduced cattle had to compete for grazing with the indigenous large herbivores.



### Researching the Neolithic of North Mayo 1963 to 1982

By summer 1963, I had had three years of primary teaching experience while attending evening lectures at University College Dublin and graduating that summer in Archaeology, Irish, and History. That summer saw the start of the involvement of University College Dublin's staff and students into research at what later came to be known as Céide Fields when Professor Ruaidhrí de Valera commenced excavation of the Behy<sup>3</sup> megalithic tomb on Céide hill and where I got my first experience of archaeological excavation. Six years later at the end of my first year on the staff of the Department of Archaeology, I was back with Professor de Valera at the Behy tomb. He was completing the final year of excavating the tomb and I, with my colleague Professor Michael Herity, beginning our excavations of pre-bog walls, he at Carrownaglogh<sup>4</sup> south of Ballina and I on Céide hill in the vicinity of the Behy tomb. In 1970 and 1971, I excavated a small oval enclosure (Figure 3) in a large field three hundred metres east of the Behy tomb and just across the townland border in Glenulra townland. The archaeological artifacts found in the excavation, though small in number, were indicative of an early Neolithic date and included both stone and pottery. The pottery was of a particular shape, which was immediately recognised by the experts as being early in the Neolithic and is today dated to before 3500 BCE. As will be explained below, we had to wait half a century before the real significance of this pottery and the story it contained was discovered.

**Figure 3** Oval enclosure excavated in 1970/71.

**3** Ruaidhrí de Valera and Seán Ó Nualláin, *Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland: Volume ii County Mayo* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1964), 3. **4** Michael Herity, 'Prehistoric Fields in Ireland', *Irish University Review* 1: 2 (1971), 258–65.

Our most important archaeological research in 1971 was not the excavation of the Glenulra enclosure but the survey and mapping of the many kilometres of walls already exposed by the 'free' excavation of over a square kilometre of fields by turf cutters in Behy and Glenulra townlands. The very regular plan of long parallel walls forming strips approximately 150 metres wide and then divided by crosswalls into large fields was named the Behy Glenulra field system because it extended across the two townlands on Céide hill.

From 1972 to 1982, we switched our research focus from the Behy/Glenulra field system to the much smaller and irregular fields in Belderrig about which my father had written to the National Museum in 1934. The excavations there turned up some surprises. Most of the walls exposed were Neolithic in date but there were also Bronze Age structures including one wall, which was built in part on the bog surface with almost half a metre of bog under it. What we thought before excavation was a ritual stone circle turned out to be a Bronze Age house dated to the second millennium BCE. The excavations yielded good evidence for cultivation of the soil. Plough marks in the subsoil, dark topsoil inlaid into grooves etched into the pale subsoil by a primitive plough, was evidence not just of tillage but of the use of animals for traction. In the same cultivation area beside the Bronze Age house, cultivation ridges, slightly raised beds circa 75cm wide with 'seochs' (dike or drain)<sup>5</sup> approximately 25cm wide and 5cm deep between them indicated spade cultivation.<sup>6</sup> It is most likely that both the plough and the spade cultivation discovered by us in Belderrig dates to the Bronze Age even though a recent paper has established evidence of Neolithic cattle bones displaying deformation caused by traction pressure from Kilshane, Co. Dublin.<sup>7</sup> Pollen analysis indicated that barley in particular had been grown on the ridges. In and around the round house there were a number of saddle querns and rubbing stones, the primitive method used to crush the grain to meal and flour. We also took many samples of soil from within the round house (Figure 6) and the cultivation area, which like the pottery from the Glenulra enclosure held interesting secrets only revealed by further research many years later.

### Neolithic food production

At the time the first disappointed hunters had come to Ireland about ten thousand years ago, by that stage, in Turkey and areas to the east, people were already rearing the animals as domesticated animals, no longer just going out and gathering plant food. They were sowing the seeds of these plants and harvesting them

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.teaglann.ie/en/fgb/seoch> <sup>6</sup> Seamas Caulfield, *A Guide to Belderrig's Ancient Farms* (Belderrig, belderrigvalley.com, 2015), 15. <sup>7</sup> Fabienne Pigiere and Jessica Smyth, 'First Evidence for Cattle Traction in Middle Neolithic

Ireland: A Pivotal Element for Resource Exploitation', *PLoS ONE* 18: 1 (2023), e0279556.

and conserving some of the harvest to be planted in the next season. They are Neolithic farmers, who over the next three thousand years spread throughout Europe as far as the Atlantic but fail to reach the islands of Ireland and Britain for a further thousand years after that.

The change from food procurement by way of gathering, hunting, and fishing to food production by way of crop cultivation and animal herding is still recognised as one of the great leaps forward by human society even when due recognition is now given to the achievements which preceded this momentous development. Before looking at the different strands of evidence for imported plant foods in the Neolithic we must remember that all the indigenous plant foods availed of by the native population prior to the arrival of the farmers were available to the newcomers and did form part of their diet. For example, the inevitable ubiquitous hazelnut shells found on Mesolithic sites are also found on most Neolithic sites, indicating that this natural harvest was not ignored. The shells are also a pointer that more perishable native plants such as fruits and leaves were probably gathered and formed part of the diet in season (Figure 4).

A study of Neolithic plant foods by McClatchie *et al.*<sup>8</sup> has highlighted the main identified exotic elements introduced by Neolithic farmers. The most important findings from this project are the limited range of plant foods introduced by Neolithic farmers in Ireland, also paralleled in Britain, compared to mainland Europe. Whereas on mainland Europe plants such as peas and lentils are relatively common along with wheat and barley, these plants are almost unknown outside of the European mainland. But in looking at this finer level of detail, it would be easy to miss out on two pertinent facts: Firstly, the different species and subspecies of domesticated grasses and grass seeds, wheat and barley, which were brought to Ireland and Britain about six thousand years ago had been cultivated crops for over four thousand years where they were originally domesticated, but when planted in Ireland and Britain were being planted over four thousand kilometres from the natural habitat of their wild ancestors. Secondly, food and drink, breads and pasta, beers and spirits in their many forms derived from these domesticated grasses, wheat and barley, still form a dominant part of our daily diet six thousand years later.

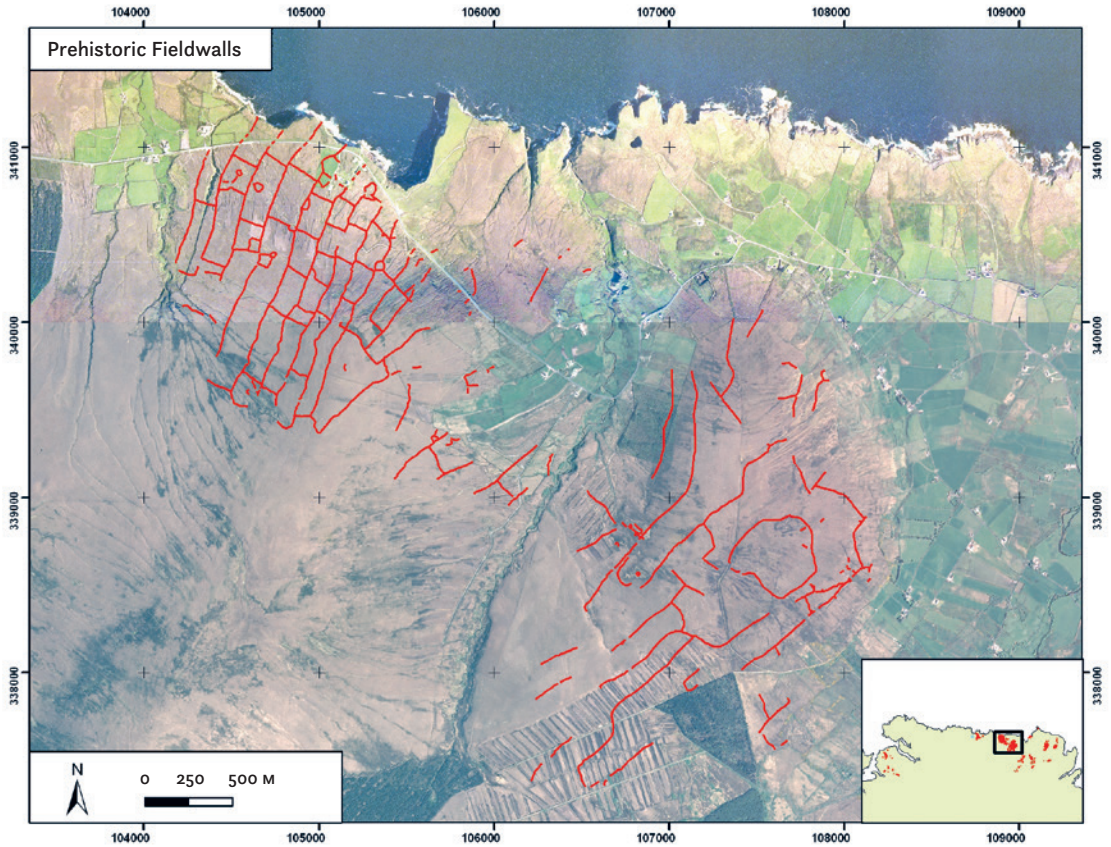
The McClatchie *et al.* study identified wheat and barley as the dominant cereal crops, with emmer wheat the dominant subspecies found in Ireland and in Britain. Einkorn, a common species in northern Europe, has been recorded at only one site in Ireland. In regards to barley, while not the dominant cereal

<sup>8</sup> Meriel McClatchie, Amy Bogaard, Sue Colledge, Nicki J. Whitehouse, Rick Schulting, Phil Barratt and T. Rowan McLaughlin, 'Neolithic Farming in North-Western Europe: Archaeobotanical Evidence from Ireland', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 51 (2014), 206–15.



**Figure 4** Inside the Neolithic Larder: Display of Einkorn wheat, blackberry, hazelnut, crab apple, cleaver plant, sloss, winter pepper plant, field mushroom and Atlantic cod from Céide Fields Visitor Centre—courtesy of OPW.

recorded on Irish Neolithic sites, the most common type of barley found here has a particularly interesting origin. Wild barley, native to Turkey and eastwards to beyond Iraq, is a hulled barley with the hull attached to the grain by a natural adhesive. There is no consensus as to whether barley was domesticated at one or multiple centres in that general region about ten thousand years ago. The dominant barley grown in Neolithic Ireland, and more so in Scotland, is the naked or hull-less variety so named because the hull merely encloses the grain but does not adhere to it. There is general agreement that naked barley had a single origin from one mutation in one ear of barley and that this mutation took place probably in the Zagros Mountains in south Iran. All naked barley comes from that one mutation about eight thousand years ago, and about two thousand years before it was brought as seed corn from mainland Europe to these islands. The bags of seed corn placed in a boat probably on the north or west coast of France bound for Britain or Ireland were probably harvested within reasonable distance of the coast. But where was the seed corn for the crop, part of which was in those bags, harvested and in turn the seed corn for that crop harvested, and the seed corn ...? I could repeat that question two thousand times without ever expecting an answer until the last one, when I expect the answer will be 'the Zagros Mountains in south Iran' some five thousand kilometres to the southeast. Plotted on a map, the two thousand dots mapping the two thousand 'fields of gold' would not be spaced evenly every 2.5 kilometres. Instead, one would expect as many as a hundred dots in the one field, a century of sowing in small plots within one reasonably sized field before being moved westwards fifty or more kilometres from where it was harvested to be planted the following year. Peaceful trading and voluntary migration, hostile raiding and aggressive displacement, all probably played a part in the two-thousand-year long, five-thousand-kilometre ancestry of the first bag of naked barley sown on the island of Ireland almost six thousand years ago. It was a further two thousand years and two thousand crops later before it was sown and harvested on the cultivation ridges and ground on the quernstones in the Bronze Age round house in Belderrig. Almost four thousand years later, a number of grains of the naked barley that escaped the quernstone were identified by Meriel McClatchie among the soil samples taken within the round house during the excavations fifty years ago.



### How Behy Glenulra expanded to become Céide Fields

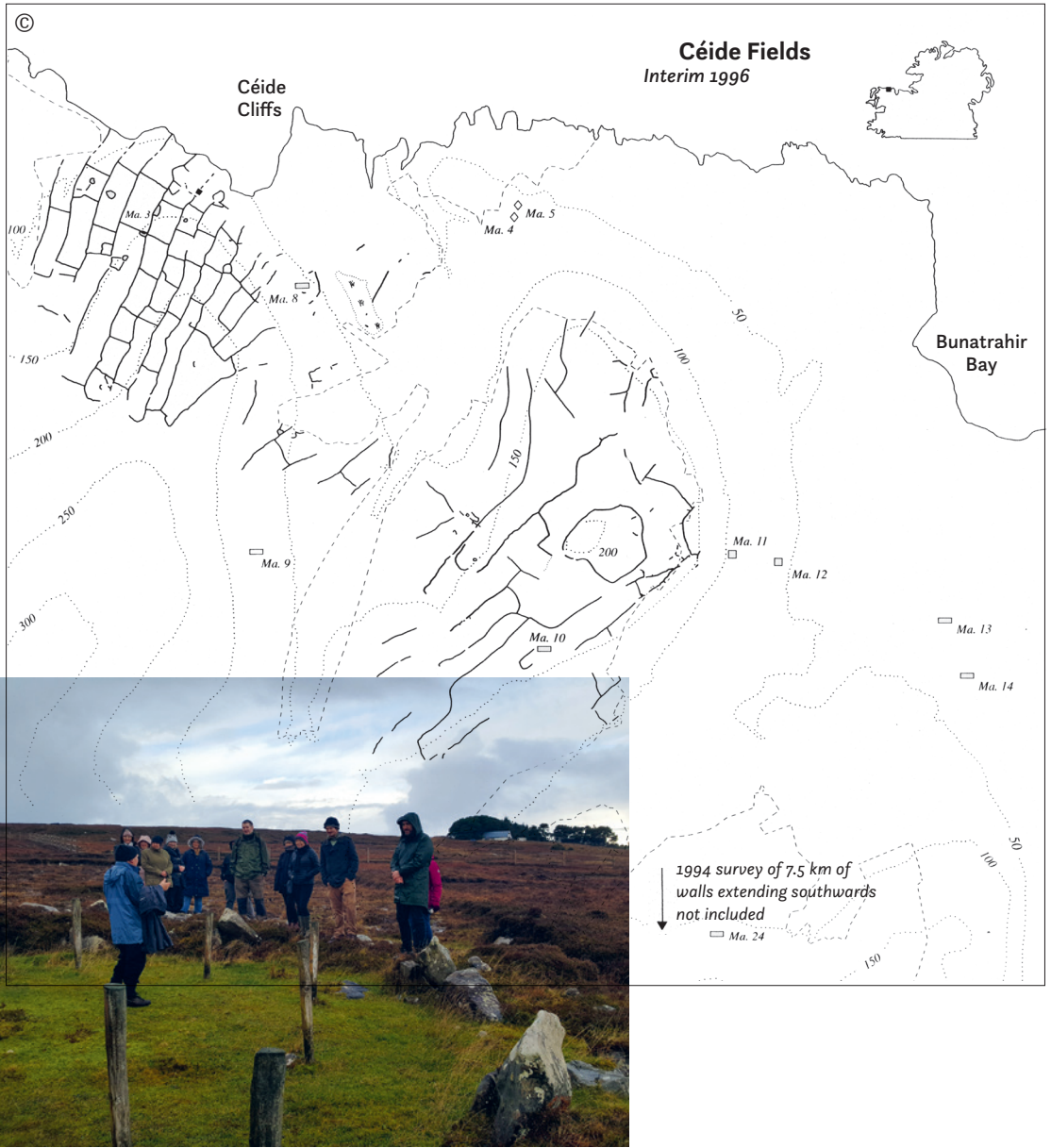
By the end of 1982 I had realised that the excavation programme in Belderrig could continue to yield further results on early agriculture, but could never exploit the unique opportunity offered by the extensive areas of turf cutting where the 'free' excavations by turf cutters over many decades had exposed field boundaries over many square kilometres. We had been able to map the Behy/

Figure 5 Field plans overlaid on Aerial image of North Mayo

Glenulra field system of regular parallel stone walls by observing and surveying the walls exposed by turf cutting in the cutaway bog. In addition, a method had been trialled which allowed us to successfully locate the field boundaries by probing with iron probes of appropriate length through the uncut bog. From 1983 onwards, rapid progress was made in extending our initial Behy Glenulra map of the exposed walls, to map the walls still buried under as much as four metres of bog, and to link the walls on Céide hill with those on Ballyknock hill two kilometres to the southeast. Like Céide hill, which straddles the townlands of Behy and Glenulra, Ballyknock hill also had the townlands of Muingelly, Doonfeeney Upper, Doonfeeney Lower, Ballyknock and Sralagagh extending high on the hill with walls forming part of the Ballyknock hill system found in all those townlands. Obviously, the usual method of naming archaeological monuments by their townland name, or even dual townland name as in Behy Glenulra, could no longer apply. 'Céide Fields' was coined to describe the two contiguous, or possibly overlapping coaxial field systems, one aligned on Ballyknock hill and the other on Céide hill. In 1994, we extended our research programme and Céide Fields interim map (Figure 7) further south into the townlands of Aghoo and Ballinglen and Ballykinlittera, but found that the walls there were much more irregular and were closer both in form and geographically to walls researched by Gretta Byrne on the opposite side of Ballinglen valley. Our definitive plan of Céide Fields at present is the 1996 plan, which has noted the exclusion of 7.5 linear kilometres of pre-bog walls surveyed and planned further to the south. The plans have always been titled 'Interim' to indicate that the plan makes no claim to have established the full extent of the fields even within the boundaries of the plan. The field plans overlaid on an aerial view of north Mayo landscape are shown in Figure 5.

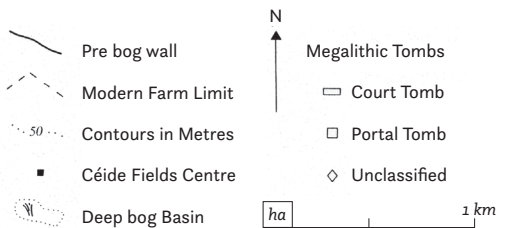
Even in the very earliest stages of our research into Céide Fields, it was obvious that the size of the fields precluded their being laid out for cultivation of a plant crop, though this did not preclude tillage of smaller plots within the large fields. Céide Fields therefore differed from the very widely occurring phenomenon of late second and first millennium BCE small 'Celtic fields' found in north western Europe, which, because of their small size, (0.1 to 0.6 ha) are inevitably interpreted as tillage related.<sup>9</sup> (The term 'Celtic fields' is an historical survival and today is not specifically associated with Celtic peoples.) Both the size of the individual fields and the overall extent of Céide Fields makes it obvious that these fields can only be for pasture. However, because every field does not

<sup>9</sup> Harries Collin Bowen, *Ancient Fields: A tentative analysis of vanishing earthworks and landscapes* (London: The British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1961), 20.



**Figure 6** Seamas standing in the Round House with visiting Students

**Figure 7** Interim Map of Céide Fields 1996





have direct access to water, animals grazing within these fields would have to be brought to water on a regular basis. If this were a beef economy, one major ranch boundary retaining the animals within a bounded terrain was all that was required. Subdivision of the terrain, even if into sizeable fields, could be seen as redundant and unnecessarily labour intensive for no good reason. In a paper in 1983 I had pointed out '[h]erd management, separation of bulls from cows and daily handling for milking would have been facilitated by the separate fields of the Behy type'.<sup>10</sup> The Behy fields now form the northwestern corner of Céide Fields.

### **Ante Mortem (AM) and Post Mortem (PM) Animal Products**

In 1981, British archaeologist Andrew Sherratt put forward the idea of the 'Secondary Products Revolution',<sup>11</sup> where he pointed out that domesticated animals provided much more than just meat after slaughter. Animal dung for fertilising tillage plots, animal traction for ploughing and load transport, hide, bone and horn from cattle, wool and sheep skin from sheep, milk from both cows and sheep, all fall under Sherratt's definition of 'secondary products'. The difficulty with the idea is in the use of the term 'secondary' which implies that the terminal food value of the animal after slaughter is, in all cases, the 'primary' product. With the advent of dairying, the term 'secondary' is an inappropriate term in that a dairy animal can provide much more food during its lifetime than in its terminal use. An alternative approach which avoids the ranking element contained in the use of 'secondary products' terminology is to consider the value of animals while alive (Ante Mortem), and after death (Post Mortem). Thus, the AM value of sheep is mainly their dung and wool, and in some regions, their milk, while their PM value lies in their meat and sheepskin. In the case of fowl, whether wild or tame, the significant AM value lies in their eggs while the PM value lies in their meat and feathers. Dung for fertiliser, traction for ploughing and load transport, and sporadic blood draw-off are some of the AM value of cattle while meat, bone, horn, and hide are the PM value. By far the most important AM value is milk. Once dairying is established, the dynamic of herd management is utterly changed. Where formerly male calves, because of their larger size and potential higher meat yield would be favoured over females, in dairy farming, all but a few males needed for breeding and traction are liabilities to be got rid of at the earliest opportunity (just as today).

<sup>10</sup> Seamas Caulfield, 'The Neolithic Settlement of North Connaught' in Terence Reeves-Smyth and Fred Hammond (eds), *Landscape Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: B.A.R., 1983), 200.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Sherratt, 'Plough and Pastoralism: aspects of the secondary products

revolution' in Ian Hodder, Glynn Isaac, and Norman Hammond (eds), *Pattern of the Past: Studies in honour of David Clarke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 261–305.

### Getting here: Neolithic voyages

The rapid spread of Neolithic farmers through the Irish and British main-lands and their offshore islands suggests a marine movement. But, what type of craft would have been used to transport the animals? Clearly, dugout canoes, no matter how large, would not be viable unless some form of rafting-up and lashing them together to form a large stable raft was employed. The most likely craft used was a hide covered currach type vessel, covering a frame of timber and/or wicker. Among the many different types of Irish currach, the one with the greatest displacement tonnage is the North Mayo five-man currach rowed by four oarsmen with one large oar each, and a fifth as steersman facing forward with a long steering oar over the stern. Named the Belderrig currach,<sup>12</sup> the seven-metre-long craft with a beam of 1.3 metres and a depth of 0.65 metres has a calculated displacement tonnage of 4.5 tonnes (Figure 8). It has the advantage over other currachs and small rowing boats that the fifth crew member, the steersman, is always facing forward and aware of oncoming heavy seas and steers and calls warnings accordingly. There is living memory proof that the Belderrig currach could survive high seas even with a load of over a tonne on board. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of July, 1953, my next-door neighbour Pat Regan put to sea with his crew from Belderrig pier in heavy seas, driftnetting for salmon. The five crew with five heavy oars and five lead-weighted salmon nets would have weighed in excess of half a tonne. They made a record haul of 146 salmon, weighing about half a tonne. Even in heavy seas, a one tonne load was possible with a currach of this size. A one-off 'super' currach built by Tim Severin in the 1960s was rowed, albeit with some sail assistance, across the Atlantic by a crew of five.<sup>13</sup> Travelling from Brandon Bay in Kerry, via the Hebrides, Iceland, Greenland to Canada, the voyage proved the effectiveness of the currach as an ocean-going craft. At over eleven metres in length and with other dimensions in proportion, Severin's currach, the Brendan, had a displacement tonnage of well over ten tonnes and would be capable of taking a cargo in excess of two tonnes with ease. Unbroken sea journeys of hundreds of kilometres, as for instance between Hebrides and Iceland, Iceland and Greenland, Greenland and Canada, proved the viability of such a craft crossing not just from Calais to Dover but also journeys from Brittany to Devon/Cornwall, or south Wales to Wexford, or even much further voyages.

A much longer sea journey from Brittany to the North Mayo coast was proposed when de Valera suggested a western origin for the Court Tomb builders by immigrant Neolithic farmers.<sup>14</sup> Even those who accepted the idea of a marine

<sup>12</sup> Breandán Mac Conamhna, *The Belderrig Currach and its People* (Sligo: The Institute of Technology, Sligo, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Severin, *The Brendan Voyage* (Ireland: Gill Books, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Ruaidhrí de Valéra, 'Transeptal Court Cairns', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 95: 1/2 (1965), 5–37.

rather than terrestrial spread of Neolithic farming did not necessarily envisage anything more than relatively short movements along the coasts. Two bits of new evidence now raise the likelihood of even longer uninterrupted sea journeys than that proposed by de Valera. DNA study of the Orkney vole, a mouse-like animal, has shown that it is unrelated to any vole on mainland Britain and its closest relative is on mainland Europe east of Calais. It is suggested that it was inadvertently introduced to Orkney in bedding for farm animals on board a craft that had come directly from the Belgium region. Even more surprising results have been found on the more remote Outer Hebrides.<sup>15</sup> Study of the red deer population there indicates that they are closely related to Orkney red deer but that both the Hebridean and Orkney red deer populations are unrelated to red deer in Ireland or on mainland Britain. Again, the link is directly to mainland Europe. Until alternative explanations are put forward to explain this isolation from their geographically closest neighbours, the data suggests that uninterrupted sea journeys of close to 1000 kilometres with livestock were possible in the Neolithic period.

It is unlikely that single craft would attempt the initial voyages of dispersal even on scouting trips. Three large currach-like craft, each with three young calves, say eight heifers and one bull calf, or seven heifers and two bulls, or possibly with one in-calf cow on one of the currachs, would be sufficient to form a foundation herd at landfall and within a decade have significant growth in herd numbers to allow further onward expansion.

### **Uncontested Grazing and Potential Explosive Herd Growth**

The prehistory of dairying in western Asia and Europe, identified by the milk lipids in pottery research, has pushed dairying back to the seventh millennium BCE in Turkey. Surprisingly, even though it had reached the Atlantic coast and the English Channel by seven thousand years ago, there is no definite evidence that it had reached Britain or Ireland for another thousand years. What makes this delay even more surprising is the fact that the Channel Islands and many of the Atlantic islands off the west coast of Brittany, from Ushant in the north to Teviec in the south, had been colonised by Neolithic farmers with their cattle shortly after farmers had arrived on the coast. With the ability to transport livestock by sea, the delay of about a thousand years before dairy farming manifests itself on our islands to the north is strange. Then, compared to the thousand years delay in moving from mainland Europe to these islands, the very rapid

<sup>15</sup> David Stanton, Jacqueline Mulville and Michael Bruford, 'Colonization of the Scottish islands via long-distance Neolithic transport of red deer (*Cervus elaphus*)', *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 283, (2016), 1–9.

Load: 1 tonne



Load displacement: 4.5 tonnes

Oarsmen: 5

Depth: 0.65 m

Beam: 1.3 m

Length: 7 m

54.3114° N, 9.5529° W  
Belderrig pier

**Figure 8** Belderrig  
five-man Currach

spread around Britain, Ireland, Isle of Man, Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland Islands, within a few centuries at most, suggests the increase and expansion of thriving communities, only made possible, in my view, by the rapidly increasing herd numbers.

This opinion runs contrary to a recent publication which suggests that initial herd growth (in south-east England) was extremely slow and that it would have taken up to two centuries for herd numbers to increase sufficiently to allow the expansion of farming communities beyond that region.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, the contradiction to the suggestion of slow herd growth rate lies in the very herd on which the slow growth was based. The herd in question was on Amsterdam Island, one of the most remote islands in the world in the south Indian Ocean, 3,000 kilometres from Antarctica, Australia and South Africa. At fifty-five square kilometres, the island is less than half the size of Achill Island and the central plateau is covered in bog. Following a cull of half the population of feral cattle on the island in 1988 and 1989, autopsies on fifty-three females over age two recorded all but one of the fifty-three were either in calf, lactating or both. Taking this fertility rate and equal male/female calf probability pre-calving, first female calf at age four and average mortality at age ten, the growth rate of a minimum herd of two cows and a bull was estimated to fail in a high percentage of cases, and in those that survived, to range between two and eighty-three cows with a mean of fifteen cows after fifty years. Even with larger foundation herds of seven females plus bull, or thirty females plus bull, the initial growth of herd to be able to progress to providing other foundation herds is calculated to be very slow.

The reality of the Amsterdam Island herd was very different to the pessimistic projections put forward by Cummings and Morris above.<sup>17</sup> In 1871 a Norwegian farmer brought four cows and a bull to Amsterdam Island to provide food for the small population on the island, but he abandoned the cattle within a year and they became feral. By 1950 the island herd had grown to 2000 when an unidentified disease reduced the numbers to 500. By 1988 the numbers had again reached 2000, necessitating a drastic cull and the fencing off of part of the island to protect the nesting grounds of a rare species of albatross that nest on the blanket bog on the central plateau. The fencing proved unsatisfactory, and due to a much more hostile attitude among conservationists in the 21st century to introduced species, in 2010 the entire Amsterdam Island herd of feral cattle was exterminated.

**16** Vicki Cummings and James Morris, 'Neolithic Explanations Revisited: Modelling the Arrival and Spread of Domesticated Cattle into Neolithic Britain', *Environmental Archaeology* 27: 1 (2022), 20–30.

reproduction of the feral cattle (*Bos taurus*) of Amsterdam Island, Indian Ocean', *Journal of The Zoological Society of London* 228 (1992), 265–76.

**17** Dominique Bertaux and T. Micol, 'Population studies and

The explosive growth of the Amsterdam Island cattle herd was not a unique occurrence. In Hawaii in 1793 a gift of six cows and a bull to King Kamehameha led to catastrophic growth of the herd so that by 1832 Mexican *vaqueros* (cowboys) had to be brought to Hawaii to train the native farm workers in trying to manage the herds but with little success. By 1850, there were an estimated 25,000 wild cattle in Hawaii.

A small herd of five cows and a bull brought ashore in Australia with the first colony in 1788 was put under the care of one of the convicts. Within a short time, the convict and the herd disappeared into the bush. The convict returned in an emaciated state a few weeks later and suffered the usual fate of recaptured escapees by being hanged a few days later. It was assumed the cattle had been killed by native Australian hunters but seven years later the herd was found at a place since known as Cowpastures. In the seven years the herd had grown from six to sixty-one. By 1801 they were estimated to have increased to 500 to 600 head and by 1810 were estimated to have increased to 4000 to 5000.

Small numbers of cattle were introduced to the Americas by Columbus as early as 1494, and their explosive growth on Curacao led to a hide industry where only the hide and tongue (obviously treated as a delicacy) were taken from the slaughtered animals and the otherwise intact carcasses left to rot.<sup>18</sup>

In the light of the above examples, I find it impossible to accept the idea of a snail's pace rate of increase of initial herds, no matter how small. Large mammals would have played a major role in maintaining pathways through the undergrowth, and the absence of those animals on this island left the Irish forests difficult if not impossible to traverse. Any opening of the forest in Ireland would have come from windthrow and natural fires, or from a natural change slowly over time due to climate factors. A recent paper by Whitehouse *et al.* suggests that central Mayo had up to 20% coverage by grass and herbs before the arrival of farmers, increasing to 30% by 3500 BCE, during the early stages of the Neolithic.<sup>19</sup> The early development of blanket bog in North Mayo suggests that the percentage of primeval grassland to forest could have been much higher at places like Céide Fields. This was in marked contrast to the Irish Midlands, where there was a very high percentage of forest at the beginning of the Neolithic that increased to virtually 100% by 3500 BCE.

There are reasons to suggest that dairy herd expansion in Neolithic Ireland would have been more rapid even than that seen among feral herds in the Caribbean, Australia, Hawaii, and Amsterdam Island. On Amsterdam Island,

<sup>18</sup> George Augustus Bowling, 'The introduction of cattle into Colonial North America', *Journal of Dairy Science* (1941), 131. <sup>19</sup> Nicki J. Whitehouse, M. Jane Bunting, Meriel McClatchie, Phil Barratt, Rowan McLaughlin, Rick Schulting and Amy Bogaard, 'Prehistoric land-cover and land-use history in Ireland at 6000 BP', *Pages Magazine* 26: 1 (2018), 24–25.

only a small number of male mature animals were culled for meat every year. In a dairying economy, a high percentage of male calves could be culled at an early age, apart from those retained for breeding and traction. This would reduce competition for grazing for the milk cows, and would make the milk of the culled juvenile males available for human consumption without the delay of waiting until the male calves were weaned. The most significant advantage husbanded dairy cows would have over their feral counterparts is by the farmer assisting in the calving, in particular the first calving of heifers. Calving a larger than average size, usually bull calf, without human assistance is not easily achieved and even the full strength of the farmer often failed to pull the calf and required the rush to a neighbour's house for an extra pair of pulling hands (a call I have had to answer on occasion). Not all females needed to be retained for replacement of culled, older animals, so the opportunity to move on by land or by sea was present within a decade due to the herd's natural growth. The speed and extent of expansion of a founding group of farmers would have depended on the rate of growth of the human population by natural growth or continuing immigration, and would not have been delayed by slow growth of their herds of cattle as suggested by Cummings and Morris.

### **Confirmation of Dairying at Céide Fields**

Our excavation of a small stone enclosure in Glenultra townland in Céide Fields half a century ago had produced a small but diagnostically significant assemblage of finds, including some sherds of a distinctive type of pottery. That pottery, referred to as Carinated Bowl pottery, is characterised by a round base, a marked shoulder, and concave upper part to the vessel. It has been found on early Neolithic sites throughout Britain and Ireland and is firmly dated to the first half of the fourth millennium BCE.<sup>20</sup> This pottery has gained added significance in recent years as a result of research by Dr Jessica Smyth, of the School of Archaeology, University College Dublin and her colleagues at Bristol University. This new research has identified the lipids of milk absorbed into the fabric of the pottery, including into the pottery from Céide Fields. Here is the new scientific evidence to prove that the occupants of the fields practised a dairying economy. What is more, it has been possible to obtain a Radiocarbon date for the milk residue absorbed into the fabric of the pottery. The Radiocarbon date fits with dates for other pottery from the Behy tomb a few hundred metres

<sup>20</sup> Alison Sheridan, 'From Picardie to Pickering and Pencraig Hill? New information on the "Carinated Bowl Neolithic" in northern Britain', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 144 (2007), 441–92.

west of the Glenultra enclosure, and dating, as expected, to the Early Neolithic circa 3500 Cal BCE.<sup>21</sup> Forty years after it was first suggested that the fields were best suited to a dairying economy, new methods of research by new researchers have now established beyond doubt that the farmers who divided Ballyknock and Céide hills into the two coaxial field systems that together make up Céide Fields were indeed, dairy farmers.

#### **Addendum: Whitefield's dating of Céide Fields to the later Bronze Age**

A paper published by Andrew Whitefield in the *European Journal of Archaeology* in 2017 asserted that there was no sustainable evidence for a Neolithic date for Céide Fields and that 'Céide Fields ... was established in the later Bronze Age'.<sup>22</sup> Whitefield's doctoral research, from which the paper arose, was laptop based and specifically excluded any fieldwork. I have nothing further to add at this juncture to what I said in 2018 re Whitefield's 'critical analysis' and rejection of the Neolithic age of the fields which are firmly dated to the Neolithic<sup>23</sup> by the Radiocarbon dating of pine trees growing in and on bog which overlies the fields.

The paper contains an extraordinary number of statements (about my research findings) which are simply not true.<sup>24</sup>

There has been a major re-evaluation by the two palaeobotanists whose original observations in 1995 were responsible for Whitefield's claim that Céide Fields was constructed in the later Bronze Age which is the reason for this brief addendum.

During the construction of Céide Fields Centre, an excavation through a pre-bog wall provided an opportunity for palaeobotanists Michael O'Connell and Karen Molloy to examine the soil both under the wall and soil from less than one metre away under basal peat that had been Radiocarbon dated to circa 900 BCE. They concluded that the pollen in the soil under the dated peat was of the same age as the dated peat, and that similarities between the pollen under the peat and pollen under the wall suggested that the wall had been constructed not more than a century or so before the peat began accumulating locally.<sup>25</sup> It must be emphasised that no archaeological or other chronological evidence ever existed for the construction of Céide Fields in the later Bronze Age. In

<sup>21</sup> Jessica Smyth, pers. comm. <sup>22</sup> Andrew Whitefield, 'Neolithic "Celtic" Fields? A Reinterpretation of the Chronological Evidence from Céide Fields in North-western Ireland', *European Journal of Archaeology* 20: 2 (2017), 257–79. <sup>23</sup> Seamas Caulfield, Ruairi O'Donnell and Peter Mitchell, '14C Dating of

a Neolithic Field System at Céide Fields, Co. Mayo', *Radiocarbon* 40: 2 (1998), 629–40. <sup>24</sup> Seamas Caulfield, 'Céide Fields and Belderrig Valley: Eighty-four years of research', in Patrizia Boschiero and Luigi Latini with Seamas Caulfield (eds), *The Céide Fields, Ireland* (Treviso: Fondazione Benetton, 2018), 55–73, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Molloy and Michael O'Connell, 'Palaeoecological investigations towards the reconstruction of environment and land-use changes during prehistory at Céide Fields, western Ireland', *Probleme der kustenforschung im sudlichen Nordseegebiet* 23 (1995), 187–225, 221.



a recent paper, O'Connell *et al.* have re-evaluated their pollen data and now suggest that the pollen under the wall indicates construction before 3000 BCE, over two thousand years earlier than they had proposed originally.<sup>26</sup>

**26** Michael O'Connell, Karen Molloy and Eneda Jennings, 'Long-term human impact and environmental change in mid-western Ireland, with particular reference to Céide Fields—an overview', *E&G Quaternary Science Journal* 69: 1 (2020), 1–32, 18.

Seamas Caulfield is Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at University College Dublin. Born in Belderrig, north Mayo, he received his primary schooling in a local two-teacher school where his father Patrick Caulfield was Principal. Following five years in St Nathy's second level boarding school, Ballaghaderreen, he trained as a primary school teacher and taught in a rural school near Dublin from 1960 to 1968. Seamas attended University College Dublin at night, completing his primary degree by 1963 and a postgraduate (MA in archaeology) in 1966. In 1968, he became a lecturer in Archaeology in University College Dublin. Seamas was awarded his PhD in 1976. His research has been devoted to the prehistory of early farming in Ireland and to the prehistory and history of hand milling, from the saddle querns of the Bronze Age to the most recent use of the rotary quern in Ireland and Scotland. He is married to Ann, has three adult children and seven grandchildren. He retired as professor from UCD in 2000. He was awarded the Europa Prize for 'major contribution to European Prehistory' by the Prehistoric Society in 2000; Conferred Honorary Fellow of Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology (now Atlantic Technological University) in 2013; Dublin Gastronomy Symposium Fellowship Award in 2024. His most prized award was Mayo Person of the Year 1990.

**04**

*Dishing up the Past:  
A review of plant foods,  
food products and agriculture  
in early medieval Ireland*

**Nikolah Gilligan**

This paper is a general review of plant foods, food products, and agriculture in early medieval Ireland (c. 500–1100 CE), based on evidence from historical texts, archaeological excavation and archaeobotanical analysis. The information is provided from the excavation of early medieval rural and urban sites and the analyses of charred and waterlogged archaeobotanical macrofossils from these excavations. A multi-disciplinary approach is taken which combines archaeobotanical results along with information derived from the extensive early medieval texts, including law tracts, as well as artefacts and additional environmental evidence which supplement this knowledge.

### Background/Landscape

Ireland was a hive of activity throughout the early medieval period (c. 500–1100 CE). Extensive upstanding and excavated rural sites indicate a population which lived in a diverse range of settlement sites.<sup>1</sup> Excavations of settlement sites such as ringforts suggest that in some cases ditches radiated from the main enclosures, forming smaller enclosed fields like those in Leggetsrath West, Co. Kilkenny.<sup>2</sup> Some sites produced external encircling enclosures or annexes which were likely to have been used as garden or pastoral plots. Examples include Carrigatogher, Co. Tipperary<sup>3</sup> and Balriggeran, Co. Louth.<sup>4</sup> Ploughed fields were probably located at a distance from the ringfort, as very little evidence of plough marks has been noted to date. Most of the ringfort sites provide evidence for settlement and associated activities within the main enclosure, while others indicate continuity in settlement with cemeteries emerging alongside, but respecting, the habitation areas. Camlin 3, Tipperary<sup>5</sup> is one example. Other sites indicate specialisms, such as the large milling complex in Raystown, Co. Meath<sup>6</sup> and the metal-working industry in Killackaweeny, Co. Meath.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the ecclesiastical sites were probably laid out in a similar manner; enclosing elements were noted in Oldtown, Swords, and Clonfad, Co. Westmeath.<sup>8</sup> Monasteries endeavoured to become self-sufficient,<sup>9</sup> and both documentary and archaeological sources suggest an important relationship between monasteries and cultivation, although secular sites have also produced swathes

**1** Aidan O'Sullivan, Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr, and Lorcan Harney, *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100. The evidence from archaeological excavations* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2013). **2** Anne-Marie Lennon, 'Excavation of a ringfort at Leggetsrath West, County Kilkenny', (2006) <https://repository.dri.ie/catalog/6to5gw89rr> **3** Kate Taylor, 'An early medieval enclosure and cemetery at Carrigatogher (Harding), Co. Tipperary', in Christiaan

Corlett and Michael Potterton (eds), *Death and Burial in Early Medieval Ireland in the light of Recent Excavations* (Bray: Wordwell, 2010), 281–94.

**4** Shane Delaney, 'An early medieval landscape at Balriggeran, Co. Louth', in Corlett and Potterton (eds), *Death and burial in early medieval Ireland*, 116–29.

**5** Colm Flynn, '13. Camlin 3: a cemetery-settlement in north Tipperary' in Michael Stanley, Ed Danaher and James Eogan (eds), *Dining and Dwelling* (Digital Repository of Ireland;

Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, 2009) <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.pg15qv805>.

**6** Matthew Seaver, Edward Bourke, Ian Doyle, Linda Fibiger, Denise Keating, Susan Lyons, Caitríona Moore, Emily Murray, *Meitheal. The Archaeology of Lives, Labours and Beliefs at Raystown, Co. Meath* (Dublin: Transport Infrastructure Ireland, 2016). **7** Neil Carlin, Linda Fibiger, and James Kinsella, 'The social and economic context of the enclosures' in Neil Carlin, Linda Clarke, and Fintan

Walsh (eds), *The Archaeology of Life and Death in the Boyne Floodplain* (Dublin: National Roads Authority, 2008), 113–28.

**8** Christine Baker, 'A Lost Ecclesiastical Site in Fingal', *Archaeology Ireland* 18: 3 (2004), 14–17. Paul Stevens and John Channing, *Settlement and Community in the Fir Tulach Kingdom* (Dublin: National Roads Authority with Westmeath County Council, 2012), 133. **9** Ann Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon food and drink: production, processing, distribution and consumption*

of evidence that indicate their association with arable activity.<sup>10</sup> Monastic orders may have introduced new agricultural techniques and methods to Ireland, as well as foodstuffs. The Irish translations for many words associated with farming and food indicate Latin, and therefore, ecclesiastical origins.<sup>11</sup> However, it is debatable how much technology was influenced or imported by ecclesiastical groups alone. Mick Monk notes such changes may have been the result of trading, or of information passing along elite social networks in post-Roman times which would have included ecclesiasts.<sup>12</sup>

The end of the early medieval period saw the emergence of larger urban centres, instigated by the influx of those of Norse origin in the twelfth century.<sup>13</sup> Here, the continuous layers of settlement created a well-sealed anoxic environment within which house-plots and streetscapes were preserved. It is likely that some grain was imported into the towns, although some arable cultivation and small-scale gardening probably took place within the town.<sup>14</sup> Cultivation tools were found in Viking Dublin which may have been used in the town and in the immediate hinterland.<sup>15</sup> Norse influences have been noted regarding the introduction of words and/or certain crops, including *punnann* (sheaf), *garðr* (enclosure/garden).<sup>16</sup>

Cereals and legumes were grown; flax was also cultivated and it was probably consumed as linseed and oil, as well as used for linen production. Vegetables, as well as plants which are considered weeds today, were important factors in the diet. Hedgerow fruits and nuts, as well as leafy greens, were foraged from the local countryside and sometimes further afield.

Alongside the plant foods, a variety of milk products (*banbiadh*) were consumed.<sup>17</sup> Meat, especially pork and bacon, was eaten<sup>18</sup> and beehives provided honey.<sup>19</sup> Drinks included water, milk, ale and mead. Minimal evidence for grapes<sup>20</sup> is available and it is likely that wine was imported.<sup>21</sup> Seaweed and eggs would also have been consumed.

(Cams.: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2010). **10** Michael A. Monk, 'Early medieval agriculture in Ireland: the case for tillage', in Emer Purcell, Paul MacCotter, Julianne Nyhan, John Sheehan (eds), *Clerics, Kings and Vikings, Essays on Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 309–22. **11** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: a study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Early Irish law series* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000). **12** Monk, 'Early medieval agriculture in Ireland: the case for tillage'. **13** O'Sullivan, McCormick,

Kerr, and Harney, *Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100*. **14** Ruth Johnson, *Viking Age Dublin* (Dublin: Town House, 2004), 29. **15** Michael Monk, 'Viking Age agriculture in Ireland and its settlement context', in Andrew Reynolds and Leslie E. Webster (eds), *Early Medieval Art and Archaeology in the Northern World: studies in honour of James Graham-Campbell* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 685–718. **16** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 249. **17** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*; Micheál Ó Sé, 'Old Irish cheeses and other milk products', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 53 (1948), 82–87. **18** See

Finbar McCormick, 'Lovely bones: Osteoarchaeological evidence of animal produce in Ireland' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 2, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>. **19** Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly (eds), *Bechbretha. An Old Irish Law-Tract on Beekeeping*. Early Irish Law Series, Vol. I (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983). See also Shane Lehane 'Beekeeping and Honey in Ancient Ireland' in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman

(eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 6, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>. **20** Nikolah Gilligan, 'Archaeobotanical analysis of plant remains', in Cólín Ó Drisceoil, *Excavation and Archaeological Building Survey at the Robing Room, Heritage Council Headquarters (former Bishop's Palace), Church Lane, Kilkenny 2011 & 2012 (11E157 & 11E157 ext.): Final Report* (Kilkenny Archaeology, unpublished report for the Heritage Council, 2013), 98–109; Susan Lyons, 'Food plants, fruits and foreign foodstuffs: the archaeological evidence from urban medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*:

## Sources

There are extensive multi-disciplinary sources with which we can piece together a coherent picture of the plant foods available in early medieval Ireland. Features excavated on archaeological sites, results of the subsequent environmental analyses, and textual material all provide a wealth of information regarding plant food accessed throughout the early medieval period.

## Environmental archaeology

This is a sub-discipline within archaeology which comprises the study of biological or geological remains.<sup>22</sup> These are organic artefacts which, through a variety of particular preservation events, survive for millennia to provide archaeologists with an extraordinary level of detail. Macroscopic environmental remains include animal bone, charcoal, plants parts and fossil insect remains; microscopic remains include molecular and chemical residues.<sup>23</sup> This chapter is concerned with non-wood waterlogged and charred plant remains. The analysis of plant macro-remains, archaeobotany, seeks to understand the remains which have become preserved through a variety of taphonomic factors, including charring, waterlogging, desiccation, and calcification. Assemblages retrieved from rural Irish sites are predominantly charred<sup>24</sup> (Figure 1), although early medieval *fulachta fiadh* and wetland sites occasionally produce waterlogged seeds. Urban deposits are typically waterlogged—although low frequencies of charred material occasionally occur in these sites. Waterlogged remains become preserved through anaerobic conditions.<sup>25</sup> Charring is the result of seeds becoming carbonised under oxygen-poor condition, resulting in carbon skeletons of the seeds.<sup>26</sup> Charred plant macro-remains noted on archaeological sites typically comprise cereal grains, chaff and weed seeds, while waterlogged seeds are typically more diverse and can comprise arable weeds, ruderal weeds, fruit-stones, leaves and suchlike. Typically, the common ‘modes of entry’<sup>27</sup> into the archaeological record include through food processing, preparation, consumption, and storage as well as through the use for fuel, building materials, animal dung (often used for fuel and building materials also), human excrement and ritual. Plant macro-remains can be suggestive of social and economic factors, cultural choices, and tastes, as well as indicators of changes in agricultural regimes.<sup>28</sup>

*Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 115C (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 111–66; Meriel McClatchie, ‘The plant remains’, in Rose M. Cleary and Maurice F. Hurley (eds), *Cork city excavations 1984–2000* (Cork: Cork City Council, 2003), 391–413. **21** Ian W. Doyle, ‘Mediterranean and Frankish pottery imports in early medieval Ireland’, *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 18 (2009), 17–62. **22** Keith

Wilkinson and Chris Stevens, *Environmental Archaeology. Approaches, Techniques and Applications*. (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2008). **23** Dena F. Dincauze, *Environmental Archaeology. Principles and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). **24** Meriel McClatchie, ‘The study of plant macro-remains: investigating past societies and landscapes’,

in Eileen M. Murphy and Nicki J. Whitehouse (eds), *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), 180–94. **25** Deborah M. Pearsall, *Paleoethnobotany: a handbook of procedures* (Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2015), 108. **26** Lisa Moffett, ‘The Archaeology of Medieval Plant Foods’, in Chris M. Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (eds), *Food in Medieval England* (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2009), 41. **27** Marijke van der Veen, ‘Formation processes of desiccated and carbonized plant remains—the identification of routine practice’, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 34: 6 (2007), 968–90. **28** McClatchie, ‘The study of plant macro-remains’.



**Figure 1** Processed flots prior to Archaeobotanical Analysis

**Figure 2** Charred grains and weed seeds during sorting and identification

## Literature

Ireland holds one of the richest collections in Europe of early medieval vernacular literature. The texts include law tracts and legal glosses, ecclesiastical legislation and penitential codes, as well as annals, wisdom-texts, sagas and poetry. These documentary sources are invaluable for reconstructing food practices as they provide a great deal of information about farming, buildings, and livestock management. They also provide some information about food preparation and consumption, as well as cultural preferences, tastes, and taboos regarding such. Food accoutrements and habits are recorded, as well as various themes which governed diet at this time, including status, hospitality, penitential diets and ‘intrasocietal diversity’.<sup>29</sup> It is important, of course, to note that the documentary sources differ in character and intent, and so they should be treated separately to recognise this.

Early Irish laws are amongst the most important sources we have for reconstructing ideas about social status, property, and legal compensations. These law tracts generally date to the seventh or eighth centuries CE and are probably most apposite to those centuries. The early medieval laws show that the political and economic structure that bound early Irish medieval society together was typically based upon farming and communities. Law tracts include the eighth century *Bretha Comaithchesa*, (‘judgements of neighbourhood’), which describes some key issues in disputes over land ownership and animals; the eighth century *Críth Gabhlach* (‘Branched purchase’); and the *Uraicecht Becc* (‘Small Primer’) a text on status,<sup>30</sup> both of which outline rules and worth regarding social rank in early medieval Ireland.

There are five main types of ecclesiastical literary sources that can be accessed for the study of food: the Canons, the *Cána* (‘Rules’), the Penitentials, the Saints’ *Lives*, and the monastic rules.<sup>31</sup> The texts were produced for different purposes, although some of the content overlaps. They provide a great deal of information regarding food, cooking methods, and associated material culture. It is noteworthy to mention that ecclesiastical law carried much weight in early medieval Ireland.

Early medieval narrative literature includes a range of forms,<sup>32</sup> including *Echtrae* (Adventure tales), *Immrama* (Voyage tales), and sagas. What are most important for our purposes in the sagas are the details regarding food products, cooking types, utensils, and consumption. While these tales are embellished, there are ancillary details which add a touch of realism. For example, there are many references to different meats being cooked in cauldrons, boiled and roasted

<sup>29</sup> Katheryn Twiss, ‘The Archaeology of Food and Social Diversity’, *Journal of Archaeological Research* 20: 4 (2012), 357–95. <sup>30</sup> Daniel Anthony Binchy, ‘The Date

and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*’, *Ériu* 18 (1958), 44–54.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 14.



in sections on a spit; various forms of milk-products, such as cheeses, butters, creams etc.; different types of grains and products; and vegetables, herbs, and fruit. The eleventh century tale or parody, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (The Vision of Mac Con Glinne) is extremely important for its large amount of information regarding foodstuffs. The 'world under potential gluttony'<sup>33</sup> outlines various forms of foodstuffs and serving methods, although it does concentrate on meats, dairy products, and grains.

## Cultivated foods

### Cereals

Grain was an important staple with a stable economic value; a bushel of grain (*míach*) was used as a form of currency for dry goods.<sup>34</sup> Cereals formed an important part of the early medieval diet across Europe; references to products appear in contemporary literature, such as the Irish and Welsh Law tracts.<sup>35</sup> Evidence for the importance of grain-based products is also visible in dental caries of medieval teeth remains.<sup>36</sup> Cereal remains are typically found in great numbers in charred form on early medieval sites, especially within features associated with primary deposits: cereal-drying kilns and hearths (Figure 2). Discarded insect-infested cereals and waste from crop-processing and kiln-cleaning are also noted in pits and ditches on these sites. However, the small amounts of cereals present in urban deposits have been noted by Geraghty, Mitchell *et al.* and Lyons.<sup>37</sup> Although, a cache of charred cultivated oats was found in Arundel Square,<sup>38</sup> Waterford, this is uncommon for such assemblages.

The cereals available were barley, wheat, oats, and rye. Barley was the most commonly occurring cereal in early medieval assemblages and varieties include two and six-row hulled and naked barley. Six-row hulled barley (*Hordeum vulgare* subsp. *vulgare*) occurs in higher numbers than its naked counterpart.<sup>39</sup> This barley is high in protein, but it produces low yields.<sup>40</sup> The hulls tightly adhere to the grain, protecting it against infestation and decay, but they require removal if the grains are to be prepared for the preparation of food products. However,

**33** William Sayers, 'Diet and fantasy in eleventh-century Ireland: The vision of Mac Con Glinne', *Food and Foodways* 6: 1 (1994), 1–17; See also William Sayers, 'Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*' in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 8, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>.

**34** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 582. **35** Aneurin Owen, *The Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales* (London: Public Record Commissioners,

1841); Daniel Anthony Binchy, 'Bretha Crólige', *Ériu* 12 (1938), 1–77; Daniel Anthony Binchy, 'Bretha Déin Chécht', *Ériu* 20 (1996), 1–66. **36** Catryn Power, 'A Demographic Study of Human Skeletal Populations from Historic Munster', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 57 (1994), 95–118. **37** Siobhán Geraghty, *Viking Dublin; Botanical Evidence from Fishamble Street. Medieval Dublin Excavations 1962–81* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1996); George F. Mitchell, Camilla A. Dickson, and James H. Dickson, *Archaeology and environment in early Dublin.*

*National Museum of Ireland. Medieval Dublin excavations 1962–1981 Series C.* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1987); Lyons, 'Food plants, fruits and foreign foodstuffs: the archaeological evidence from urban medieval Ireland'. **38** Penny Johnston, 'Plant remains from Arundel Square, Waterford.' figshare. Dataset. 2018 <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7235924.v1>

**39** Meriel McClatchie, Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr and Aidan O'Sullivan, 'Early medieval farming and food production: a review of the archaeobotanical

evidence from archaeological excavations in Ireland', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 24: 1 (2015), 179–86. **40** Lisa Moffett, 'The Archaeology of Medieval Plant Foods', in Chris M. Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson and Tony Waldron (eds), *Food in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

**41** René T. J. Cappers and Reinder Neef, *Handbook of Plant Palaeoecology* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.) Groningen Archaeological Studies, 19 (Groningen: Barkhuis and Groningen University Library, 2012).

the crop does not have to be threshed or processed further if it is to be used for animal fodder or brewing.<sup>41</sup> Dental attrition present on skeletal teeth<sup>42</sup> could also have been the result of tough inclusions such as glumes. Six-row hulled barley was also used for malting. Malt was widely produced in Ireland at this time with instructions provided by the *Cáin Aicillne*: the text on base client-ship.<sup>43</sup> Beer made from malted barley, as well as other cereals, was consumed widely across Europe at this time.<sup>44</sup>

Oats were also commonly consumed.<sup>45</sup> Oats are the main ingredient of an oat and whey biscuit retrieved during the excavation of a seventh-century ring-fort in Lisleagh 1, Co. Cork.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the oats found within the kiln in Arundel Square, Waterford, were still within glumes when they were imported into the town, thus providing evidence for the processing of oats within an urban context, showing that the grains were imported from the fields to the town.<sup>47</sup> Wild oat also commonly grows in arable fields<sup>48</sup> and it forms a large component of assemblages as it is of a similar morphology to its domesticated counterpart and would therefore have been difficult to remove. It is edible and was consumed in the past. *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* lists wild oats as consumed grains alongside oats, rye, wheat, and barley.<sup>49</sup>

Wheat is also commonly identified from early medieval sites. Three varieties are identified in archaeobotanical assemblages—emmer, spelt, and naked wheat (most likely to be bread-wheat). The former two comprise caryopses which are tightly enclosed by glumes (bracts), which provide protection from decay or infestation. Glume wheats can grow in adverse conditions, but they require additional processing to remove the glumes. Free-threshing or naked wheats produce grains which sit loosely in the chaff, thereby allowing easier harvesting. However, the lack of a protective cover renders the grains susceptible to decay or infestation, especially in the temperate oceanic climate of north-western Europe where there is no dry season.<sup>50</sup> Emmer and spelt have been tentatively identified from early medieval sites, although it can be difficult to definitively identify the grain without supporting chaff.<sup>51</sup> However, the data

**42** Power, 'A Demographic Study of Human Skeletal Populations from Historic Munster', 95–118. **43** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 246. **44** Karl-Ernst Behre, 'The history of beer additives in Europe—A review', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 8: 1 (1999), 35–48. **45** McClatchie, McCormick, Kerr, and O'Sullivan, 'Early Medieval Farming and Food Production', 179–86; Mick Monk, 'Arable agriculture and secular settlement in Early Medieval Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 74 (2019), 48–61. **46** Francis

McLaren, Mick Monk and Regina Sexton, "'Burning the Biscuit": Evidence from the Lisleagh Excavations Reveals New Secrets Twenty Years on', *Archaeology Ireland* 18: 3 (2004), 18–20. **47** Penny Johnston, 'Plant remains from Arundel Square, Waterford.' figshare. Dataset. 2018 <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7235924.v1> **48** Steve Jones, Jane Taylor and Felicity Ash (eds), *Seed identification handbook: agriculture, horticulture and weeds*. 2nd edn. (Cambridge: NIAB, 2004). **49** Sayers, 'Diet and fantasy in

eleventh-century Ireland: The vision of Mac Con Glinne'. **50** Murray C. Peel, Brian L. Finlayson and Thomas A. McMahon, 'Updated world map of the Köppen-Geiger climate classification', *Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci.* 11: 5 (2007), 1633–1644. **51** Penny Johnston, Jacinta Kiely and Ken Hanley, *Hidden Voices. The archaeology of M8 Fermoy-Mitchelstown Motorway*. Dublin 8.: Transport Infrastructure Ireland TII Heritage 7 (Dublin: Transport Infrastructure Ireland, 2019); Meriel McClatchie, 'A long tradition of cereal production', *Seanda* 6

(2011), 8–11; Nikolah Gilligan, 'Carbonised Plant Remains', in Shane Delaney and Eileen Murphy (eds), *The Forgotten Cemetery; Excavations at Ranelagh, Co. Roscommon* (Dublin: Transport Infrastructure Ireland, 2023), 148–151; Penny Johnston, 'Appendix 11: Analysis of the Plant Remains, Johnstown I, Co. Meath' in Linda Clarke, *Report on the archaeological resolution of a multi-period burial, settlement and industrial site at Johnstown 1, Enfield, Co. Meath. M4 Kinnegad–Enfield–Kilcock Motorway Scheme Contract 2. Licence*

gathered during the Early Medieval Archaeology Project indicated that naked wheat, typically that of bread wheat (*T. aestivum*) with evidence for a *T. aestivum/T. aestivum compactum* (club-wheat), was the most commonly encountered wheat in rural assemblages,<sup>52</sup> but it was also found in urban sites, including Peter Street/Arundel Square, Waterford.<sup>53</sup> The increase of free-threshing wheats throughout the medieval period probably led to the decline in glume wheats, such as emmer, and perhaps the complete replacement of other wild grasses which may have been consumed, such as lyme grass.<sup>54</sup>

Bran of either wheat or rye was noted in the Dublin Castle assemblage,<sup>55</sup> as well as in Viking Cork<sup>56</sup> and Waterford.<sup>57</sup> Rye is present in small numbers in early medieval Ireland, although it does appear in placenames; the Irish for rye is 'seagal' and it is found in the Galway placename Cappataggle, 'ceapaigh an tseagail', the tillage plot of the rye.<sup>58</sup> The lack of visibility associated with rye is often attributed to the status it is afforded in the law text *Bretha Déin Chécht* (which is considered eighth century by Kelly); here it is recorded that rye was the second highest valued grain, below bread-wheat, and was for 'a superior king'.<sup>59</sup> However, rye was suited to unfavourable soils and would have lent itself well to cultivation in Ireland. Rye was cultivated throughout early medieval Europe and is still an important grain for baking various breads; it produces an excellent sourdough. Perhaps this crop does not survive well in the archaeological record or perhaps it was simply not grown widely; one suggestion for the latter is that the ergot fungus, which grows predominantly on rye, tends to germinate in cool damp weather. Ergotism can cause painful swellings and death.<sup>60</sup>

Legumes were important in the early medieval periods and they were placed at eighth (peas) and ninth (broad bean) places in a hierarchical listing of crops in the eighth century law text *Bretha Déin Chécht*.<sup>61</sup> Remains of peas and beans have been found predominantly in early medieval sites in Leinster and only within enclosed settlements.<sup>62</sup> They were a source of protein for those who could not afford meat,<sup>63</sup> and were consumed fresh and kiln-dried<sup>64</sup> and in breads and potages. They were also used for fodder, as well as for grazing. It is likely that the

No. 02E0462. Unpublished excavation report prepared for ACS Ltd. 2004. **52** McClatchie, McCormick, Kerr, and O'Sullivan, 'Early medieval farming and food production', 179–186. **53** John Tierney and Martha Hannon, 'Plant remains', in Maurice Hurley and O.M.B. Scully (eds), *Late Viking Age and medieval Waterford: Excavations, 1986–1992* (Waterford: Waterford Corporation, 1997), 854–93. **54** Lisa C. Griffin and Ralph M. Rowlett, 'A "lost" Viking cereal grain', *Journal of Ethnobiology* 1: 2 (1981), 200–07. **55** Brenda

Collins and Nikolah Gilligan, 'Environmental remains', in Ann Lynch, Conleth Manning and Ken Wiggins (eds), *Dublin Castle: from fortress to palace. Vol. 2: The Viking-age archaeology* (Dublin: Wordwell, Forthcoming). **56** McClatchie, 'The plant remains'. **57** Tierney and Hannon, 'Plant remains'. **58** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Gastro-Topography: Exploring Food-Related Placenames in Ireland', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 38: 1/2 (2014), 126–157. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43410726> **59** Daniel A. Binchy, 'Bretha

Déin Chécht', *Ériu* 20 (1966), 1–66. **60** H.W. Youngken, 'Ergot: A Blessing and a Scourge', *Economic Botany* 1: 4 (1947), 372–80. **61** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 219. **62** Finbar McCormick, Thomas Kerr, Meriel McClatchie and Aidan O'Sullivan, *The Archaeology of Livestock and Cereal Production in Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100.*, Irish National Strategic Archaeological Research Programme (INSTAR) (2011), 58. **63** Yael Mahler-Slasky and Mordechai E. Kislav, 'Lathyrus

consumption in late Bronze and iron age sites in Israel: an Aegean affinity', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37: 10 (2010), 2477–85. **64** Nikolah Gilligan, *Archaeobotanical Report. Castlesize 2, Co. Kildare (E004860). M7 Naas-Newbridge Bypass Upgrade and M7 Osberstown Interchange & R407 Sallins Bypass. Unpublished Report for Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd, Co. Wicklow, 2020; Penny Johnston, 'Appendix iv. Analysis of Plant Remains', in Paul Stevens (ed.), *Archaeological Excavation,**

manure was subsequently ploughed back into the soil. Legumes also fix nitrogen into the soil through their root nodules and are therefore useful in crop-rotation systems, especially for intensive wheat cultivation. McCormick *et al.* note that they occur commonly where there is a high number of naked wheat grains; the latter (as noted above) requires healthy soil. Wheats require deep loam and rich fertile well-drained soils that are only slightly acid to neutral.<sup>65</sup>

Flax, in charred or waterlogged form, is only occasionally present in assemblages and very rarely dominant (Figure 3).<sup>66</sup> McCormick *et al.* note that flax is present on roughly 10% of early medieval rural sites, while seeds and capsules are often found on Hiberno-Norse/Viking sites.<sup>67</sup> Flax seeds were found in domestic deposits and cess-pits in Dublin.<sup>68</sup> The Latin binomial '*Linum usitatissimum*' is awarded to the plant as it can be used in a myriad of ways: they provide seeds and oil for consumption, cooking and lighting, while their stems also provide the raw material for flax/linen. Medieval sources indicate that the oil was used in place of animal fat during times of fasting.<sup>69</sup> Not much is known about the cultivation and consumption of flax/linseed in the early medieval period in comparison to cereals and pulses, but it has been frequently found on Irish and international sites.<sup>70</sup> However, little work has been carried out on flax cultivation and preservation in Ireland and it is not clear whether different varieties were grown in the past to produce the various products.<sup>71</sup> Flax may have been grown in garden plots during this period in a similar manner to contemporary Wales.<sup>72</sup> Gardens were present in Viking Dublin,<sup>73</sup> and evidence for such was noted on rural sites collated for The Early Medieval Archaeology Project. Flax was known to be a crop which required little attention during growing, which resulted in overgrown and weedy plots or fields.<sup>74</sup> Flax fibres were noted on the early medieval site of Deerpark Farms, Co. Antrim.<sup>75</sup> More recently, a sheaf of

Friary Street/Garden Row, Kilkenny. Unpublished Excavation Report on behalf of Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd., 2002. **65** Mick Monk *pers. comm.* **66** Mick Monk, 'Arable agriculture and secular settlement in Early Medieval Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 74 (2019), 48–61. **67** McCormick, Kerr, McClatchie and O'Sullivan, *The Archaeology of Livestock and Cereal Production in Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100*. **68** Collins and Gilligan, 'Environmental remains'; Geraghty, *Viking Dublin*; *Botanical Evidence from Fishamble Street*. **69** Ülle Sillasoo and Sirje Hiie, 'An archaeobotanical approach to investigating food of the Hanseatic period in

Estonia', in Sabine Kerg (ed.), *Medieval food traditions in northern Europe*. PNM Studies in Archaeology & History 12. (Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 2007), 73–96. **70** Radoslaw Grabowski, 'Changes in cereal cultivation during the Iron Age in southern Sweden: a compilation and interpretation of the archaeobotanical material', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 20: 5 (2011), 479–94; Mikael Larsson, 'Cultivation and processing of *Linum usitatissimum* and *Camelina sativa* in southern Scandinavia during the Roman Iron Age', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 22: 6 (2013), 509–20. **71** Daniel Zohary and Maria Hopf, *Domestication of Plants*

*in the Old World*. 3rd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lisa A. Lodwick, 'Agricultural innovations at a Late Iron Age oppidum: Archaeobotanical evidence for flax, food and fodder from Calleva Atrebatum, UK', *Quaternary International* 460 (2017), 198–219; Christoph Herbig and Ursula Maier, 'Flax for oil or fibre? Morphometric analysis of flax seeds and new aspects of flax cultivation in Late Neolithic wetland settlements in southwest Germany', *Vegetation history and archaeobotany* 20: 6 (2011), 527. **72** Owen, *The Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales*. **73** Johnson, *Viking Age Dublin*. **74** William J. Smyth, 'Flax Cultivation in Ireland: The Development

and Demise of a Regional Staple' in Alistair Fraser (ed.), *Anniversary Essays: Forty Years of Geography in Maynooth* (Maynooth: National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2012), 158–178. **75** Harry Kenward, Alan Hall, Enid Allison and John Carrott, 'Environment, activity and living conditions at Deer Park Farms: evidence from plant and invertebrate remains', *Reports from the Environmental Archaeology Unit, York* (2000), 57.



**Figure 3** View through microscope lens of charred flax bolls and weed seeds

flax and seeds was found on a ringfort in Lissaniska, Co. Kerry, which was associated with probable retting-pits.<sup>76</sup>

### **Leafy vegetables and seeds**

Leafy vegetables, such as cabbage and roots/tubers, are difficult to detect in the archaeological record. They do not tend to come into contact with fire frequently and do not preserve well. They can be found in waterlogged assemblages, but generally their frequency of detection is far lower than charred cereals. However, the possible gardens or cultivation plots associated with the ringforts, urban,<sup>77</sup> and ecclesiastical sites indicate that such foods were important in the diet. Documentary sources mention the cultivation of vegetables for both dietary and medicinal purposes. The *Bechbretha*<sup>78</sup> states that a garden was to be located outside the ringfort, while the *Bretha Crólige*<sup>79</sup> notes the importance of garden plants for medicine. Such vegetables include onion/garlic, celery, leek, cabbage/kale, carrots, and chives. Evidence for seeds associated with some of these vegetables, including celery, watercress, and cabbage/mustard/turnip was found on waterlogged Hiberno-Norse sites, such as Cork and Waterford.<sup>80</sup>

There are also leafy vegetables and seeds which were once arable weeds growing within plots of cultivated grains. They were often gathered with the grain and made their way into food; they eventually became tolerated as a food source, i.e., 'secondary cultivated plants'.<sup>81</sup> Some of the most commonly occurring 'weeds' are discussed below, although this list is not exhaustive. Fat-hen (*Chenopodium album*), has been found on early medieval rural and urban excavations and evidence for its consumption is suggested by its inclusion within a latrine pit at Winetavern Street.<sup>82</sup> It was present within a faecal mass of foodstuffs which were ground to flour for consumption. Another faecal mass associated with the pelvis of a young girl on High Street, Dublin also produced fat-hen. It is considered a cereal weed today; however, it was consumed in the past and there are finds of large numbers of the seeds on sites across Europe. It is not clear whether fat-hen was tolerated as a weed amongst cereals or if it was purposely cultivated as it grows widely on disturbed ground. Experimental work based upon the gathering of fat-hen seeds as a crop indicates that it would have been a suitable food-source: the seeds are gathered and processed as easily as cereals and would have provided a sufficient calorific return to have been a viable food product.<sup>83</sup> Mitchell<sup>84</sup> suggests that the seeds and leaves were consumed alongside species of *Polygynum* (buckwheat and knotweed family) to supplement the diet of the

**76** Ed Lyne, 'Lissaniska—location, location, location!', *Archaeology Ireland* 35: 1 (Spring 2021), 24–29.

**77** Johnson, *Viking Age Dublin*; Finbar McCormick, Thomas Kerr, Meriel McClatchie and Aidan O'Sullivan, *Early Medieval Agriculture, Livestock and Cereal Production in*

*Ireland, AD 400–1100* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2014).

**78** Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*. **79** Binchy, 'Bretha Crólige', 1–77. **80** McClatchie, 'The plant remains'; Tierney and Hannon, 'Plant remains'.

**81** Karl-Ernst Behre, 'Collected seeds and fruits from herbs as prehistoric food', *Vegetation*

*History and Archaeobotany* 17: 1 (2008), 65. **82** Mitchell,

Dickson and Dickson, *Archaeology and environment in early Dublin*. **83** Paul Stokes and Peter Rowley-Conwy, 'Iron Age cultigen? Experimental return rates for fat hen (*Chenopodium album*

L.)', *Environmental Archaeology*

7: 1 (2002), 95–99. **84** George F. Mitchell, *The Irish Landscape* (New York: HarperCollins, 1976), 171.

lower classes. The seeds of *Polygynum* species have been found in the stomachs of European bog-bodies, while there are records of their starchy rhizomes being consumed in areas as far apart as Siberia and England.<sup>85</sup>

Common orache is also noted on both rural sites<sup>86</sup> and Hiberno-Norse settlements in Ireland, including Dowdstown, Co. Meath<sup>87</sup> and Baldoyle, Co. Dublin.<sup>88</sup> Similar to fat-hen, orache grows in fields and gardens and evidence for its consumption appears to be widespread. It was probably eaten in both seed or leaf form. Serra and Tunberg<sup>89</sup> treat it as a consumable green alongside nettles and goosefoot, while the Anglo-Saxon Leechdoms also considered it a vegetable, along with mallow, spinach, and fat-hen.<sup>90</sup> Orache, similar to nettle, is rich in both vitamins and biologically active compounds and would have provided much nourishment as a condiment or within a stew.<sup>91</sup>

Other seeds and leaves were probably foraged and consumed leaving very little trace in the archaeological record. The charred seeds of nettles and docks are often found on early medieval sites such as Ranelagh, Co. Roscommon.<sup>92</sup> Nettles and sorrel were noted by Lucas<sup>93</sup> to have been consumed from the early medieval period up until the present day. It is also possible that nettles were used to produce cheese for ascetic monastic orders. Ó Sé<sup>94</sup> notes that certain types of cheeses—*millsen* and *druchtan*—were not consumed by early medieval monastic orders as they were made from animal rennet; cheese made from plant rennet was produced instead. Such plants which contain a suitable digestive enzyme include nettles, thistles, butterwort, and lady's bedstraw.<sup>95</sup>

It is worth noting that a great variety of seeds was noted during the collation of the Early Medieval Archaeology Project<sup>96</sup> which may have represented foods that are no longer consumed.

### Cultivation and harvesting

Fields would have required an extensive amount of work to cultivate and keep the soil in a healthy condition. The *Crith Gablach*<sup>97</sup> states that a farmer of *mruigfer* (highest commoner) rank was expected to have a full set of ploughing equipment and a plough team of six oxen. The lower grades of farmer within the kin

**85** Larry W. Mitich, 'Pale smartweed (*Polygonum lapathifolium* L.) and other Polygonums', *Weed technology* 12: 3 (1998), 560–62.

**86** McCormick, Kerr, McClatchie, and O'Sullivan, *Early Medieval Agriculture, Livestock and Cereal Production in Ireland, AD 400–1100*. **87** Lydia Cagney and Rob O'Hara, 'An early medieval complex at Dowdstown 2', in Mary Deevy and Donald Murphy (eds), *Places Along the Way: First Findings on the M3*. National Roads Authority

*Scheme Monograph* (Bray: Wordwell, 2010), 123–34.

**88** Nikolah Gilligan, *Archaeobotanical analysis of charred plant remains, Seagrange Road, Baldoyle, Co. Dublin*. Unpublished report produced for Grassroots Archaeology (2015). **89** Daniel Serra and Hannah Tunberg, *An Early Meal—a Viking Age Cookbook & Culinary Odyssey* (Sweden: ChronoCopia, 2013). **90** Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon food and drink*, 50. **91** Solvita Zeipiņa, Ina Alsiņa, Līga Lēpse and Māra Dūma, 'Antioxidant activity in nettle

(*Urtica dioica* L.) and garden orache (*Atriplex hortensis* L.) leaves during vegetation period', *Chemical Technology* 66: 1 (2015), 29–33, 30.

**92** Gilligan, 'Carbonised Plant Remains'. **93** Anthony T. Lucas, 'Irish Food Before The Potato', *Gwerin: A Half-Yearly Journal of Folk Life* 3: 2 (1960), 8–43.

**94** Ó Sé, 'Old Irish cheeses and other milk products'. **95** Camila Fiol, Diego Prado, Maria Mora, and J. Iñaki Alava, 'Nettle cheese: Using nettle leaves (*Urtica dioica*) to coagulate milk in the fresh

cheese making process', *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science* 4 (2016), 19–24; John Lindley, *The Vegetable Kingdom: The Structure, Classification and Uses of Plants* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1853).

**96** McCormick, Kerr, McClatchie, and O'Sullivan, *The Archaeology of Livestock and Cereal Production in Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100*. **97** Eoin MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish Law. The Law of Status or Franchise', *Proceedings*

group each had a share in the plough and the ploughing was distributed relative to the investment of each grade of farmer. It is likely that both ard and coulter ploughs were in use throughout the early medieval period.<sup>98</sup> Simpson<sup>99</sup> noted plough furrows during the excavations at Temple Bar West; these predated the overlying Viking structures, but were generally contemporary with Viking houses excavated on Parliament Street.<sup>100</sup> Plough irons and a spade were found in excavations at Fishamble Street.<sup>101</sup>

Island ecclesiastical sites, like Illanloughan Island, Co. Kerry, imported plagen soil presumably from the mainland which allowed them to grow vegetables and herbs in an otherwise rocky landscape.<sup>102</sup> They also imported grain but processed it on the island itself, as evidenced by the quern stones which were found there.

Early medieval crops in Great Britain were typically grown as various mixes of maslins (winter wheat and rye), dredges (spring barley and oat) and mix-tils (winter wheat and barley)<sup>103</sup> rather than in fields of a single crop. It is likely that it was similar in Ireland. This risk management strategy would also have allowed for mixed base ingredients rather than single grain products. Attempts were probably made to remove the most noxious weeds, such as thistle and corn-cockle—evidence for such activity is noted in the medieval period.<sup>104</sup> However, this would have been a laborious job and despite such efforts, weeds which were similar in size and appearance to grains would have remained within the crop even after threshing, winnowing, sieving and hand-sorting.<sup>105</sup>

Some weeds were eventually consumed as part of the product. Evidence for this is provided by the cesspits on Hiberno-Norse sites such as Waterford, where they may have been ground alongside other grains to form part of the bread.<sup>106</sup> Corncockle was known as a weed in the medieval period, but it was difficult to remove. Excessive consumption of this weed can cause diarrhoea, nausea, and even death, due to its saponins.<sup>107</sup> However, Lyons<sup>108</sup> surmises that it added flavour to the flour or bulked it up in times of shortage.

*of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 36C, 1921–1924 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1923), 265–316. **98** Niall Brady, 'What the Plough Can Reveal About the Role of Agrarian Technology in the Changing Nature of Early Medieval Ireland', in Jan Klapste (ed.), *Agrarian Technology in the Medieval Landscape*. Rurality, X (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016), 143–55; Colin Rynne, 'Technological change in the agrarian economy of early medieval Ireland: new archaeological evidence for the introduction

of the coulter plough', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 118C (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2018), 37–66. **99** Linzi Simpson, *Director's findings: Temple Bar west* (Dublin: Temple Bar Properties, 1999); Linzi Simpson, *96E245, excavations at Essex St. West/Temple Bar West* (Dublin: Margaret Gowen unpublished excavation report, 2002). **100** Johnson, *Viking Age Dublin*, 17. **101** Patrick Wallace, *Viking Dublin: The Wood Quay excavations* (Newbridge: Irish Academic, 2016). **102** Emily Murray and Finbar McCormick, 'Environmental

Analysis and the Food Supply' in Jenny White Marshall, Claire Walsh, Grellan D. Rourke, Emily V. Murray, Finbar McCormick (eds), *Illanloughan Island: an early Medieval monastery in County Kerry* (Wicklow: Wordwell, 2005). **103** Lisa Moffett, 'The Archaeology of Medieval Plant Foods', in Chris M. Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (eds), *Food in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch.4, 60. **104** Margaret Murphy and Michael Potterton, *The Dublin Region in the Middle Ages. Settlement, land-use and economy*. *Discovery*

*Programme Monograph* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010). **105** Gordon Hillman, 'Crop Husbandry Practices from Charred Remains', in Roger Mercer (ed.), *Farming Practice in British Prehistory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 123–62; Chris John Stevens, (1996) *Iron Age and Roman Agriculture in the Upper Thames Valley Archaeobotanical and Social Perspectives*. (Doctoral thesis). <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.19155> **106** Tierney and Hannon, 'Plant Remains', 889. **107** Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon food and drink*, 40. **108** Lyons,



Sickles have been recorded in early medieval assemblages.<sup>109</sup> However, there is little knowledge about the way that crops were harvested in early medieval Ireland. Reports suggest that the heads were gathered into baskets and the straw left for the cattle to consume as they spent all winter outside in Ireland's mild winters, rather than keep cattle inside supplied with hay.<sup>110</sup> It is suggested that the Vikings introduced the practice of the latter to Ireland; however, there is little chaff within the archaeological record, either on Viking or Irish sites, to verify this. Alternatively, Wallace states that they were cut low on the straw with scythes; there is no evidence to date for scythes at this time however.<sup>111</sup>

Equally there is minimal evidence for the storage of crops which could shed further light on this question. The type and location of cereal-harvesting affected the crop processing and storage. Threshing, and winnowing may have taken place in the fields, although it could have taken place in a rectangular building with opposing doors, which was needed to produce a controlled draught for the winnowing. Drying took place in cereal-drying kilns which were sometimes located at a distance from the main enclosure; others were set into enclosure ditches themselves. The semi-clean/fully-cleaned grain was then stored or exported to the large urban areas. Typically, crops are dried prior to storage in damp climates. Drying crops was necessary, and still is, after a damp harvest; to store grain over winter, as well as the seeds for the next season of planting; to fumigate against insects; to assist with threshing; and to halt germination associated with the malting process. Small-scale drying may have been carried out in a pot over a small hearth, as was carried out until recently in Ireland.<sup>112</sup> However, larger corn-drying kilns have been excavated and researched extensively. These structures are found along the Atlantic fringes of Northern Europe, where the climate is damp; they were used in Ireland from at least the Bronze Age.<sup>113</sup> They comprise a drying chamber for the crop to be dried; a fire to produce heat and a flue to carry the heat from the fire-pit to the drying chamber.<sup>114</sup> The basic function of a corn-drying kiln is to dry crops; possibly peas, beans and fruit were also dried. Kilns in the early medieval period typically consist of stone-lined, keyhole-shaped cuts, which had been preceded by the earth-cut figure of eight, ovoid or dumb-bell-shaped kilns. The early medieval kilns probably had a roof over the drying chamber, possibly made out of scutched straw<sup>115</sup> within which shelves of damp cereals were laid. The remnants of a possible daub roof were noted in Clonfad, Co. Westmeath,<sup>116</sup> while excavations in Ballyvass,

'Food plants, fruits and foreign foodstuffs: the archaeological evidence from urban medieval Ireland'. **109** Mick Monk, 'Arable agriculture and secular settlement in Early Medieval Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 74 (2017), 48–61. **110** Michael Duignan, 'Irish Agriculture in Early Historic Times',

*Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries* 74 (1944), 128–45, 140. **111** Wallace, 'Viking Dublin', 209. **112** Hubert T. Knox, 'Notes on Gig-Mills and Drying Kilns near Ballyhaunis, County Mayo', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 26 (Dublin: Hodges,

Figgis, & Co., Ltd. 1906–7), 265–274, 271. **113** Mick Monk and Orla Power, 'More Than A Grain Of Truth Emerges From A Rash Of Corn-Drying Kilns?', *Archaeology Ireland* 26: 2 (2012), 38–41. **114** Mick Monk and Ellen Kelleher, 'An Assessment of the Archaeological Evidence for Irish Corn-Drying Kilns

in the Light of the Results of Archaeological Experiments and Archaeobotanical Studies', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 14 (2005), 77–114. **115** Knox, 'Notes on Gig-Mills and Drying Kilns near Ballyhaunis, County Mayo', 271. **116** Paul Stevens and John Channing, *Settlement and Community in the Fir Tulach*

Co. Kildare, have revealed evidence of a mat woven from textiles and straw in the drying chamber.<sup>117</sup>

Corn-drying kilns are found on almost every excavation of a rural, early medieval settlement site and have also been found on Hiberno-Norse sites, including Golden Lane, Dublin.<sup>118</sup> The kilns have provided a wealth of information regarding crop-choice, weed management, and waste discard. Evidence for industrial-size cereal processing was uncovered in Raystown, Co. Meath,<sup>119</sup> where temporal differences in kiln assemblages were discernible.

Once the crops were dried, they were stored for the next season's crop and food production. The documentary sources noted that a *saball*<sup>120</sup> was used to store crops but there is very little evidence for storage in the Irish archaeological record and there are no descriptions as to how a *saball* was constructed.<sup>121</sup> Three examples of possible storage structures are provided by the nine and four-post structures noted in Sallymount, Co. Limerick<sup>122</sup> and six-post structure excavated by Delaney in Balriggeran, Co. Louth.<sup>123</sup> A site in Drumadoon, Co. Antrim, produced evidence for a circular clay and wicker structure which contained almost 20,000 charred oat grains and chaff, which is likely to have been a stored crop.<sup>124</sup>

The crop was then processed further using hand-grinding or a water-powered mill. Larger vertical and horizontal mills, such as those in Kilbegly, Co. Roscommon<sup>125</sup> were also in use in Ireland by the early medieval period, but hand-grinding continued alongside.<sup>126</sup> There were four main types of quern-stones, as categorised by Caulfield:<sup>127</sup> the saddle quern, and three types of rotary quern—pot, beehive and disc. The former and the latter are the most commonly found in Ireland, in rural and urban sites. Fragments of a rotary quern were noted in an early medieval/Viking burial in Golden Lane, Dublin,<sup>128</sup> while a saddle quern and a rotary quern were also found in the Viking longphort of Woodstown, Co. Waterford.<sup>129</sup> When using the quern or millstones, the grain would have been hummelled first to remove the chaff and subsequently fully crushed and ground.

Kingdom (Dublin: National Roads Authority with Westmeath County Council, 2012), 133. **117** Tara Doyle, 'Hair of the dog: evidence of early medieval food production and feasting at Ballyvass, Co. Kildare' in Michael Stanley, Ed Danaaher and James Eogan (eds), *Dining and Dwelling: Proceedings of a Public Seminar on Archaeological Discoveries on National Road Schemes, August 2008*, National Roads Authority, 55–6. <https://www.tii.ie/technical-services/archaeology/publications/archaeologymonographseries/Mon-6-Ch-6-Doyle.pdf>

**118** Edmund O'Donovan, 'The Irish, the Vikings and the English: new archaeological

evidence from excavations at Golden Lane, Dublin', in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin VIII, proceedings of the Friends of Medieval Dublin symposium, 2006* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 36–130.

**119** Matt Seaver, *Meitheal. The Archaeology of Lives, Labours and Beliefs at Raystown, Co. Meath* (Dublin: Transport Infrastructure Ireland, 2016).

**120** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 243. **121** The Irish word 'ithlann' or 'iothlann' meaning a threshing floor, barn, granary or storehouse is more common than *saball*, <https://dil.ie/search?q=ithlann>

**122** Patricia Long, Michael Stanley, Ed Danaaher, and James Eogan, 'Food for

thought: newly discovered cereal-drying kilns from the south-west midlands', in Stanley, Danaaher, and Eogan, *Dining and Dwelling*, 19–28.

**123** Shane Delaney and Niall Roycroft, 'Early Medieval Enclosure at Balriggeran, Co. Louth', *Archaeology Ireland* 17: 2 (2003), 16–19.

**124** Cormac McSparron, Brian Williams and Cormac Bourke, 'The excavation of an Early Christian rath with later medieval occupation at Drumadoon, Co. Antrim', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 109C (2009), 105–64.

**125** Neil Jackman, Cairtriona

Moore and Colin Rynne, *The mill at Kilbegly: an archaeological investigation on the route of the M6 Ballinasloe to Athlone national road scheme* (Dublin: National Roads Authority, 2013).

**126** Colin Rynne, 'Archaeology and the Early Irish Watermill', *Archaeology Ireland* 3: 3 (1989), 110–14. **127** Seamas Caulfield, *The rotary quern in Ireland*.

MA, UCD, 1996, Unpublished.

**128** O'Donovan, 'The Irish, the Vikings and the English: new archaeological evidence from excavations at Golden Lane, Dublin'.

**129** Anne Carey, '9.2 Stone', in Ian Russell and Maurice F. Hurlley (eds), *Woodstown; a Viking-Age settlement in*

The chaff may have been used as fodder or for kindling or fuel.<sup>130</sup> Quern or millstones would probably have been used to crush all foodstuffs which required processing, including seeds; Mitchell *et al.*<sup>131</sup> noted that contents of a latrine excavated on Winetavern Street had been crushed in such a manner (see below).

### Gathered foods and arable weeds

There is much evidence that fruits and nuts were consumed in the early medieval period. Wild fruits and nuts, such as wild strawberry, blackberry/raspberry, sloe, bilberry, and hazelnut, grow within scrubby hedgerow and would have provided additional nutrition and taste to the diet. Geraghty<sup>134</sup> suggests that fresh sloes, despite their sourness to modern palates, were consumed whole. Bilberries have also been noted on early medieval sites, although they are less common on Hiberno-Norse sites than other wild fruits, which could be an indicator of cultural preferences.<sup>135</sup> Their importance in Ireland was indicated by the traditional gathering of bilberries/*fraocháns* at the end of July, which coincides with a fusion of Christian and Pagan beliefs; that of the Festival of Lughnasa and the ritual ascension of ‘holy mountains’, such as Croagh Patrick on Reek Sunday.<sup>136</sup> Geraghty suggests that they were gathered in the Wicklow mountains. Other fruits which may have been consumed whole include wild cherries, the stones of which are noted in cess-pits and pits; examples include pits in Betaghstown, Co. Meath.<sup>137</sup>

Fruits were also probably processed further; fruit jams and preserves would have provided extra flavour during the winter months, when no fresh fruit or vegetables were available. A cesspit in Dublin Castle<sup>138</sup> may provide evidence for such processing, whereby a large amount of fruit, including blackthorn/sloe and blackberry/raspberry were present and the soil was stained red/purple. This deposit was covered with branches, wattle, and pieces of wood which would have sealed the deposit and prevented the attraction of pests. It may have been the result of fruit pressing. Other evidence for fruit processing was suggested by a large frequency of fruit-stones, some with pulp adhering, in an eleventh-century pit in Winetavern Street.<sup>139</sup>

Hazelnut endocarps are found frequently in assemblages from all periods. The outer shells are often found in assemblages as they tend to be purposefully

Co. Waterford (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 299–320.

**130** Gavin Bowie, ‘Corn drying kilns, meal milling and flour in Ireland’, *Folklife* 17: 1 (1979), 5–13. **131** Mitchell, Dickson and Dickson, *Archaeology and environment in early Dublin*.

**132** James Greig, ‘Plant foods in the past: A review of the evidence from northern Europe’, *Journal of Plant Foods* 5: 4 (1983), 179–214. **133** Collins and Gilligan, ‘Environmental

remains’. **134** Geraghty, *Viking Dublin; Botanical Evidence from Fishamble Street*. **135** Lyons, ‘Food plants, fruits and foreign foodstuffs: the archaeological evidence from urban medieval Ireland’.

**136** For food traditions around Lughnasa, see Caitriona Nic Philibín, ‘Exploring Food Traditions within the four Quarter Days of the Irish Calendar year’. (M.A. Thesis, Technological University

Dublin, 2021). DOI: 10.21427/TZ8N-NC09 **137** James Eogan, Bettystown, Co. Meath, Prehistoric/multi-period site. 1998 www.excavations.ie

**138** Collins and Gilligan, ‘Environmental remains’.

**139** Mitchell, Dickson and Dickson, *Archaeology and environment in early Dublin*.

**140** Monica Locatelli, Jean Daniel Coisson, Fabiano Travaglia, Matteo Bordiga and Marco Arlorio, ‘Impact

of Roasting on Identification of Hazelnut (*Corylus avellana* L.) Origin: A Chemometric Approach’, *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* 63: 32 (2015), 7294–7303. **141** Roberto Moscetti, Maria Teresa Frangipane, Danilo Monarca, Massimo Cecchini and Riccardo Massantini, ‘Maintaining the quality of unripe, fresh hazelnuts through storage under modified atmospheres’,

discarded after the nut is consumed or processed; the hard exocarp does not decay easily. Both charred and waterlogged hazelnuts are noted. Hazelnuts appear to have been a valuable food-source throughout history and prehistory, as is evidenced by the hundreds of shells found in urban and rural sites across the country. The nuts could have been consumed raw or roasted, although roasting improves their bioavailability.<sup>140</sup> However, it is noted that unripe nuts are also soft enough to process and consume fresh.<sup>141</sup> Some of those noted in Fishamble Street contained evidence for damage by the nut weevil *Curculio nucum*, which appears to be extinct in Ireland today.<sup>142</sup> Hazelnuts were often roasted, which helped to open them; however, experimental work carried out by McComb and Simpson<sup>143</sup> showed that unroasted nuts could be opened by crushing them with a hammerstone on a saddle quern, after which the nut could be ground to produce an oily meal. Apples are found rarely on early medieval sites which produce charred material. The low frequency of pips and apple flesh is unusual given the importance and ubiquity of apples in early medieval Ireland.<sup>144</sup> The *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*<sup>145</sup> also supplies information about the symbolism of apples at this time, whereby the consumption of poisoned apples by King Cathal of Munster results in a demonic gluttony. The fruit was used in a similar symbolic manner in Norse mythology where it is used as a love-token and a fertility symbol.<sup>146</sup> Evidence for crab-apples has been noted on prehistoric sites in Ireland.<sup>147</sup> However, by the early medieval period there was a distinction between the sour and sweet varieties; that of wild and cultivated. A distinction is made between 'a row of fragrant apple-trees' and 'a bushel of wild apples'<sup>148</sup> in the *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*. There are references to four fruits of cultivation in Ireland and apple was one; the craft of grafting new varieties was carried out within monasteries after their introduction to Ireland.<sup>149</sup> Apple endocarp was found on Fishamble Street, while pips were found on most Hiberno-Norse assemblages, including Waterford<sup>150</sup> and Wexford.<sup>151</sup>

It is not clear whether the fruit was gathered close to the area or further afield. Geraghty notes that the bilberries and sundew which were found in Fishamble Street were sourced from the Wicklow uplands.<sup>152</sup> This indicates that people were accessing foods locally and using resources from further afield.

*Postharvest Biology and Technology* 65 (2012), 33–38.

**142** Geraghty, *Viking Dublin; Botanical Evidence from Fishamble Street*, 44. **143** Anne M. G. McComb and Derek Simpson, 'The Wild Bunch: Exploitation of the Hazel in Prehistoric Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 58 (1999), 1–16. **144** Lindy Brady, 'Apples on Willow Trees: A Metaphor for Grafting and Spiritual Succession in the Early Irish Saints' "Lives"

of Berach and Coemgen', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 31 (2011), 56–73; Caroline McGrath, 'The Apple in Early Irish Narrative Tradition: A Thoroughly Christian Symbol?', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 7 (2010), 18–25. **145** Sayers, 'Diet and fantasy in eleventh-century Ireland: The vision of Mac Con Glinne', 1–17. **146** McGrath, 'The Apple in Early Irish Narrative Tradition: A Thoroughly Christian Symbol?'

**147** Meriel McClatchie, Amy Bogaard, Sue Colledge, Nicki Whitehouse, Rick J. Schulting, Philip Barratt, and T. Rowan McLaughlin, 'Farming and foraging in Neolithic Ireland: an archaeobotanical perspective', *Antiquity* 90: 350 (2016), 302–318. **148** *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* <http://celt.ucc.ie/published/G308002/index.html> **149** Brady, 'Apples on Willow Trees: A Metaphor for Grafting and Spiritual Succession in the Early Irish

Saints' "Lives" of Berach and Coemgen', 56–73. **150** Tierney and Hannon, 'Plant remains'. **151** Edmund Bourke, 'Life in the Sunny South-East: Housing and Domestic Economy in Viking and Medieval Wexford', *Archaeology Ireland* 9: 3 (1995), 33–36. **152** Geraghty, *Viking Dublin; Botanical Evidence from Fishamble Street*, 61.

### Food products

Detailed discussion of the food products made from the plants, leaves and seeds available in the early medieval period is beyond the scope of this paper. Work has been carried out in this area; for example, references to such foodstuffs in the early medieval Irish literature include Kelly's review of plant food products in early medieval Irish literature<sup>153</sup> and Irish grain-based products have been researched by Sexton.<sup>154</sup> Literary research into plant-based food in contemporary societies has also been completed by Hagen<sup>155</sup> and experimental archaeology based on archaeobotanical material has been carried out by Serra and Tunberg.<sup>156</sup>

Documentary sources discussed in Kelly<sup>157</sup> suggest that generally, the main meal (*proind*) was eaten in the afternoon or early evening, with light meals or snacks consumed at other times of the day. There is often a distinction made between the daytime meal (*díthat*) and the evening meal (*feis*); the latter may be consumed with beer. Another term (*lón*) suggests a snack which is taken on a journey. The supplementary food was most commonly known as *tarsann*, although there is a distinction made between *tarsann* and *anlann* in some texts. It would appear that the former comprised a wider variety than the latter; butter, dairy products, salted meat, seaweed, suet and cabbage.<sup>158</sup> Another less commonly used word in place of *tarsann* and *anlann* is *sercol*, as noted in *Críth Gabhlach*,<sup>159</sup> for seaweed, onions and salt. In general, the diet available to all consisted primarily of grain and milk with meats and vegetables as supplements and it seems to have been balanced. Carbohydrates (grain), protein and fat (meat and dairy), sugar (honey and flowers), vitamins and minerals (fruit, vegetables) were consumed. Despite the seasonality of the diet, there were many practices in the early medieval period which allowed some longevity in food storage, such as preservation by salting and by fermentation. This would have been necessary with seasonal cultivation. It is also important to note that there would have been times when the weather conditions would have led to plant diseases and food shortages. Social disruption and war would also have affected the food supply. The Annals referred to these times of stress, including summers of drought and cattle death due to high levels of snowfall.<sup>160</sup> Access to certain foods was also limited in certain societal circles. According to the practice of hospitality,

**153** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*.

**154** Regina Sexton, 'Porridges, Gruels and Breads; The Cereal Foodstuffs of Early Medieval Ireland', in Michael A. Monk, and John Sheehan (eds), *Early Medieval Munster. Archaeology, History and Archaeology* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 76–86. **155** Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon food and drink*.

**156** Serra and Tunberg, *An Early Meal—a Viking Age Cookbook & Culinary Odyssey*.

**157** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*.

**158** Edward J. Gwynn

and Walter J. Purton, 'The Monastery of Tallaght', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 29, (1911–1912), 115–79.

**159** Eoin MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish Law. The Law of Status or Franchise', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 36, (1921), 265–316.

**160** Francis Ludlow, 'Assessing non-climatic influences on

the record of extreme weather events in the Irish Annals', in Patrick J. Duffy and William Nolan (eds), *At the Anvil: Essays in Honour of William J. Smyth* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2012), 93–133.

**161** Cherie N. Peters, "'He is not entitled to butter": the diet of peasants and commoners in early medieval Ireland', in Elizabeth Fitzpatrick and James Kelly (eds), *Food and Drink in Ireland* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2016), 79–110.



**Figure 4** Picture of a Seventh-century oat and whey flat cake found in Lisleagh, Co. Cork (reproduced with permission of Regina Sexton and Stephen Bean, UCC)

particular foods were restricted to those below a certain social grade.<sup>161</sup> Other types of restricted diets were associated with monastic orders, who imposed their own rules according to their abbot.<sup>162</sup>

Direct evidence for food products has only been found on one Irish site; a seventh-century oat and whey flat cake was found in Lisleagh, Co. Cork (Figure 4).<sup>163</sup> Cesspits have also provided direct information as to consumed products; they vary from ground cereals, legume testae (outer coverings) and seeds to wild fruits.<sup>164</sup> These foods are believed to have been consumed in a variety of ways, including breads, pottage, and stews. The charred and waterlogged macrofossils found in Viking levels at Dublin Castle<sup>165</sup> and in various contemporary contexts indicate that there would have been a great amount of variety regarding flours and carbohydrates available, including oats, wheat, barley, rye, dock, goosefoot, and wild and cultivated legumes. Flax would have added flavour and moistness, while dairy products would have provided the same. Pollen present in cesspits elsewhere<sup>166</sup> suggests the consumption of other plants and flowers which could have been used in various breads and doughs.

Various types of grain products were consumed, including pastes, broths, porridges, risen and flatbreads, and cakes. These may have comprised a variety of cooking styles and ingredients. Sexton<sup>167</sup> notes that there were different sizes of breads.

Bread appears in various forms in the literature but can be generally summarised as flat and risen breads and cakes. They can also be further subdivided into standard and penitential breads. The law-text *Críth Gabhlach*<sup>168</sup> indicates that there were two types of bread, which were probably risen; a standard bread (*bairgean inraic*) and a bread baked by women (*bairgen banfuine*). Sexton<sup>169</sup> notes that there is also a reference to men's bread—*bairgen ferfuine*. Sexton surmises that this was a flat-bread (0.13–0.19mm thick), while the loaves produced by the women, which were used as food-rent (*bés tige*), were risen breads and measured 'two fists in width and one in thickness'. Kelly also notes that there are references to small wheaten loaves (*tortíne*) or buns (*scrúbán*); the latter was one eighth of a loaf. The *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*<sup>170</sup> suggests that at least seven types of bread were made in the early medieval period from seven cereal types, although Sexton points out that other sources commonly refer to the use of four cereals: wheat, oats, barley and rye. As noted earlier, the archaeobotanical evidence indicates the presence of free-threshing wheats, but hulled barley and oats

**162** Gwynn and Purton, 'The Monastery of Tallaght', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 115–179.

**163** McLaren, Monk, and Sexton, 'Burning the Biscuit'.

**164** McClatchie, 'The plant remains'; Mitchell, Dickson and Dickson, *Archaeology and environment in early Dublin*. **165** Collins and

Gilligan 'Environmental remains'. **166** Koen Deforce, Otto Brinkkemper, Henk van Haaster and Mark Van Waijjen, 'Small things can make a big difference: a comparison of pollen and macrobotanical records of some food plants from medieval and post-medieval cesspits in the

Netherlands and northern Belgium', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 28: 4 (2018), 447–448. **167** Sexton, 'Porridges, Gruels and Breads'. **168** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 330. **169** Sexton, 'Porridges, Gruels and Breads'. **170** *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*. <http://celt.ucc.ie/published/G308002/index.html>:

dominate early medieval assemblages. These statistics may reflect consumption practices. It is likely that various mixtures of grains, as well as the inclusion of other seeds and nuts such as flax, peas, beans, docks, acorns etc., were used in flour. The gluten content of the grain determines the volume and weight of a loaf; thus, wheaten breads were of a lighter quality than those produced from oat and barley. Sexton notes that penitential breads were coarse loaves of low-grade barley, oats, and pulse flour. The ingredients used to make breads are not documented, but there is archaeological evidence of an oat and whey flat cake produced in Lisleagh, Co. Cork.<sup>171</sup> Therefore it is likely that milk and milk products, such as buttermilk and whey, as well as water, were used to create a dough by mixing with ground or coarse flours. Ó Sé<sup>172</sup> suggests that *breacan* was a griddle cake that contained curds. Honey is recorded as being used as a sweetener in wheaten cakes; archaeological evidence of a honey and wheat bun was found in an Iron Age site in Glastonbury, England.<sup>173</sup>

It is not likely that salt was included as this appears to have been served with bread; other salty foods such as seaweeds and bacon would also have negated the need for it. The suggestion is that bread, or at least flour, was produced daily and would therefore not have been required to last for any length of time. However, oatcakes typically were consumed in Scotland as stored food, and this is something to be kept in mind. Butter or lard may also have been included in the recipe, which may also have been salted. Arguments have been made as to the inclusion of yeast within early medieval breads. Leavened breads were recorded in the past and there is often an association with baking and brewing, which may have provided barm yeast (*descad*) for both processes. Lucas notes that a sack of malt for yeast, and a sack of wheat, were kept in a wealthy landowner's house,<sup>174</sup> while Sexton discusses the textual contrasts between flat and risen breads.<sup>175</sup>

Cereals and nuts would also have been ground into porridges and soups. Ground hazelnuts were probably consumed within muesli, alongside fruits and honey in a dish known as *maothal*.<sup>176</sup> Gathering of hazelnuts and apples for such dishes was encouraged by Máel-Ruain in the Monastery of Tallaght.<sup>177</sup> Broths and porridges made of various meals were recorded in the texts.<sup>178</sup> Additions to these meals were dependent on one's age, status, or health profile.<sup>179</sup>

The laws indicate that much of the food preparation, including the baking of domestic breads and cakes, was carried out by women, especially daughters of land-owning farmers. A woman's property included a baking flag, kneading

**171** McLaren, Monk and Sexton, 'Burning the Biscuit'.

**172** Ó Sé, 'Old Irish Cheeses and other milk products', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 53: 178 (1948), 82–87. **173** Clement Reid, *Plants, Wild and Cultivated. The Glastonbury Lake-Village*. Glastonbury Antiquarian Society, 1917.

**174** Lucas, 'Irish Food Before The Potato', 12. **175** Sexton, 'Porridges, Gruels and Breads'.

**176** Sexton, 'Porridges, Gruels and Breads'. **177** Gwynn and Purton, 'The monastery of Tallaght'. **178** Gwynn and Purton, 'The monastery of Tallaght', 145. **179** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 351.



trough, kneading slab, griddle and griddle-turner.<sup>180</sup> Other items required for baking included a wooden vessel for measuring grain (*airmed*), bucket (*síthal*), and a sieve (*criathar*). Of course, the ingredients and textures of breads and cakes may have differed from place to place and season to season.

There were also various ways of producing plant-based foods, such as baking breads and cakes on stones close to a fire, cooking within a pot hanging over the fire and baking yeasty or sourdough breads within an upturned pot close to, or within a fire. Research regarding the use of souterrain ware pottery for the latter technique has been carried out by the Centre for Experimental Archaeology and Material Culture (CEAMC) in University College Dublin (UCD).

### Drinks

Minimal evidence has survived in the archaeological record regarding drinks. There are references to the consumption of water in the narrative literature; for example, vats of cold water are provided for the heroes in the *Fled Bricrend*.<sup>181</sup> MacConglinne also recounts drinking his fill of water during his time in his cell.<sup>182</sup>

It is possible that fruit was pressed to create a juice or alcoholic drink. It is also possible that fruit was dried for storage throughout lean winter months. Whole dried apples from a Neolithic site in Tankardstown, Co. Limerick<sup>183</sup> were thought to be dried and sliced and it is entirely plausible that similar practices were retained throughout history. They were wild crab apples which were sour and dried to concentrate the sugars. Monk noted that it was a practice seen by Gordon Hillman in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, whereby the apples were hung on the house to dry and were then consumed in winter with porridge.<sup>184</sup>

Oats, wheat, barley, and rye were used for the production of beer across medieval Europe<sup>185</sup> and Kelly<sup>186</sup> notes an early medieval reference to an Irish wheat beer. The steps of malt production were outlined in the early medieval texts of *Cáin Aicillne*.<sup>187</sup> They comprised the steeping of grains within water to encourage grain germination. The grains are then allowed to rest on a floor and are regularly raked. This results in the appearance of a coleoptile and coleorhizae which can be evident in the assemblage. They can be measured to determine whether they are all of a similar length; there is a specific ratio for the production of malt.<sup>188</sup> Once the starches have turned to sugars, the grains are then dried to terminate the germination process; this may have been one important function of kilns. Often the embryos are removed during the process and the

**180** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 322. **181** George Henderson (ed.), *Fled Bricrend: the feast of Bricriu*. Vol. 2. (London: D. Nutt for the Irish Texts Society, 1899). **182** Beatrix Färber, Audrey Murphy (electronic eds), *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*. <http://celt.ucc.ie/published/G308002/index.html> Corpus

of Electronic Texts (University College Cork). 1997–2021, 24. **183** Michael A. Monk, Appendix D: plant remains report on the samples from the 1987–1989 seasons, in M. Gowen (ed.), *Excavations at Tankardstown South*, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, 1987–1989. **184** Mick Monk

*pers. comm.* **185** Karl-Ernst Behre, 'The history of beer additives in Europe—A review', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 8: 1 (1999), 35–48. **186** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 334. **187** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 246. **188** Hans-Peter Stika, 'Traces of a possible Celtic brewery in

Eberdingen-Hochdorf, Kreis Ludwigsburg, southwest Germany', *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 5: 1 (1996), 81–88. **189** Paul Duffy, Sarah Cobain and Helen Kavanagh, "From skill to skill", evidence for medieval brewing at Balbriggan, Co. Dublin', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*

grains are brittle and fragmented as a result of this process. Germinated grains have been noted previously in association with kilns, including on a site in Co. Dublin which had mortared pits that may have been used to steep the grains.<sup>189</sup>

Another drink which was made from malted grains was that of bragget, which was a type of beer made with honey. It is noted by a tenth century glossator,<sup>190</sup> and is surmised to have been an imported style of drink, as the Irish name (*brocóit*) incorporates the Welsh name *bracaut*. A product which consisted of soaked and fermented cereal and chaff which was then heated with stones may have been a drink which later became known as sowens.<sup>191</sup> This practice continued into the post-medieval period amongst the poor and was recorded as *cáthbruith*. Evidence of *cáthbruith* is recorded in the Schools' Collection of Folklore. Interestingly, this concurs with the areas that produced most oats at this time—the north-western regions.<sup>192</sup>

Wine was consumed by ecclesiasts, but grapes are rarely noted on archaeological sites. A few scattered grapes have been identified on early medieval sites. One grape dated from the seventh/-ninth centuries was noted in a cereal-drying kiln in Kilkenny,<sup>193</sup> while a second was identified from a tenth or twelfth century pit in Bishop's Palace, Kilkenny.<sup>194</sup> No evidence for their cultivation in this period has been recorded to date.

As noted above, edible leaves, buds, or flowers are rarely recovered. Equally, evidence for roots and rhizomes are lacking from the record. While it can be tricky to align macrofossil finds and historical texts, they have been identified from deposits in Viking Sweden<sup>195</sup> and across medieval Europe.<sup>196</sup> One reason for the absence probably is that they break down in the gut; another is that the soft parts are harvested before seed production and tend to disintegrate easily.<sup>197</sup> However, a recent multi-proxy analysis of medieval latrines in the Netherlands and northern Belgium indicated that pollen analysis supplemented the information provided by macrofossils,<sup>198</sup> showing the presence of plants mentioned in historical texts but which did not survive as macrofossils. Identification of phytoliths present in dental calculus and in burial plots can serve to augment the picture,<sup>199</sup> and this may be interesting analysis to undertake

22 (2013), 59–76. **190** Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Sanas Cormaic: an Old-Irish glossary*. Vol. 5 of *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts* (Llanerch Publishers [reprint], 1994). **191** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 331. **192** Caitríona Nic Philibín and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'An exploratory study of food traditions associated with Imbolg (St. Brigid's Day) from The Irish Schools' Folklore Collection', *Folk Life* 59: 2 (2021), 141–60, DOI: 10.1080/04308778.2021.1957428 **193** P. Walsh, 2015, Gas

Pipeline to Great Island Site 7–12, Rathduff (Madden), Co. Kilkenny 12Eo409 Final Archaeological Excavation Report, TVAS Ltd., unpublished report. **194** Gilligan, 'Archaeobotanical analysis of plant remains', 98, 109. **195** Pernille Rohde Sloth, Ulla Lund Hansen and Sabine Karg, 'Viking Age garden plants from southern Scandinavia—diversity, taphonomy and cultural aspects', *Danish Journal of Archaeology* 1: 1 (2012), 27–38. **196** James Greig, 'Plant foods

in the past: A review of the evidence from northern Europe', *Journal of Plant Foods* 5: 4 (1983), 179–214. **197** Sabine Karg and David E. Robinson, 'Secondary food plants from medieval sites in Denmark: fruits, nuts, vegetables, herbs and spices', *Nordic Archaeobotany—NAG 2000 in Umeå. Archaeology and Environment*, 15.: Environmental Archaeology Laboratory, Department of Archaeology and Sami Studies, University of Umeå (2002), 133–142.

**198** Deforce, Brinkkemper, van Haaster and Van Waijjen, 'Small things can make a big difference'. **199** Carles Lalueza-Fox, Jordi T. Juan and Rosa Maria Albert, 'Phytolith analysis on dental calculus, enamel surface, and burial soil: Information about diet and paleoenvironment', *Am. J. Phys. Anthropol.* 101 (1996), 101–13.

should Viking skeletal remains be uncovered during future excavations. Equally, skeletal remains already found in Hiberno-Norse excavations could be reassessed if they have not been reinterred. Such analyses can augment existing proxy information; for example, isotopic analysis indicates a terrestrial and marine intake by Viking Dublin inhabitants.<sup>200</sup> The consumption of poisonous weeds, such as corncockle, may have compounded these nutritional stresses. As noted above, arable weeds probably made their way into products both accidentally and, in the case of some tolerated weeds, as a useful addition. The mix of cereals and weeds would have contributed to the flavour of foods, likely rendering them different to today's products. While there has been experimental work carried out with regard to the cultivation of historic cereal varieties, such as the work at Butser Ancient Farm, Hampshire, carried out by Peter Reynolds,<sup>201</sup> and cultivation work by Mick Monk<sup>202</sup> and Seamas Caulfield,<sup>203</sup> as well as analysis and reproduction of early medieval<sup>204</sup> and Viking cereal-based products,<sup>205</sup> further experimental work is required to understand the true nature and the flavours of mixed cereal and weed products. Research attempting to fill in such gaps was recently carried out by Steve Ashby (York) as a part of a UK-based project to understand food in Viking and Anglo-Saxon Britain.<sup>206</sup> Food analysis is currently experiencing a resurgence and is an area of research which has much yet to offer.

### Conclusion

This chapter summarises some of the vast plant food available to the people of early medieval Ireland, as well as the methods of production and preparation. A multi-disciplinary approach is taken to combine archaeological and environmental analysis along with textual sources to produce a comprehensive picture of how foods were cultivated, accessed, and prepared. It is not an exhaustive chapter and additional information can be found in Susan Lyons' paper on urban medieval foods,<sup>207</sup> the work of the Early Medieval Archaeology Project,<sup>208</sup> as well as in grey literature available on databases such as the National Monuments Service,<sup>209</sup> Transport Infrastructure Ireland Digital Repository,<sup>210</sup> and Penny Johnston's raw data Figshare account,<sup>211</sup> as well as a variety of papers within associated publications.

**200** Kelly J. Knudson, Barra O'Donnabhain, Charisse Carver, Robin Cleland and T. Douglas Price, 'Migration and Viking Dublin: paleomobility and paleodiet through isotopic analyses', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 39: 2 (2012), 308–320. **201** Peter J. Reynolds, 'Mediaeval cereal yields in Catalonia & England: an empirical challenge', *Acta*

*historica et archaeologica mediaevalia* (1997), 495–507.

**202** Mick Monk *pers. comm.*

**203** Seamas Caulfield *pers. comm.* **204** Sexton, 'Porridges, Gruels and Breads'.

**205** Serra and Tunberg, *An Early Meal—a Viking Age Cookbook & Culinary Odyssey*.

**206** <https://ashbysteve.wixsite.com/melting-pot>

**207** Lyons, 'Food plants, fruits

and foreign foodstuffs: the archaeological evidence from urban medieval Ireland'.

**208** McCormick, Kerr, McClatchie and O'Sullivan, *The Archaeology of Livestock and Cereal Production in Early Medieval Ireland, AD 400–1100*.

**209** <https://www.archaeology.ie/licences/excavation-reports>

**210** <https://www.tii.ie/technical-services/>

[archaeology/road-archaeology/](https://www.archaeology.ie/road-archaeology/) **211** <https://excavations.ie/>; <https://repository.dri.ie/catalog/v6936m966>; <https://figshare.com/search?q=penny%20johnston>

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Section 2

# Bog butter, bees and banqueting in medieval Ireland



## Bainis an tS'leacháin Mhóir

Antaine Raiftearaí (1784–1835)

Féasta a bhí ar an S'leachán Mór agus deir go leor gur mhair sé seachtain.  
Giní a rinneadh suas don cheol, cúig phunt is coróin a fuair an sagart.  
Is ann a scaipeadh sú na heorna, ale is pórtar agus uisce beatha,  
Teamhair na slógh ba samhail dó, an tráth a bhídís ag ól ó oíche go maidin.  
Is ann a d'fheicfeá an mathshlua mór, fir go leor is ógmhná deasa.  
Is fear gan croí nach leanfadh dóibh, ba gheall le seó iad ag gabháil trín mbaile.  
Bhí bia agus deoch don bheag agus don mhór, is gan gloach ná tóir ar  
    chótaí breaca,  
ach lucht cnótaí arda, bonnets, beavers, cantons, céimric is gúnaí geala.

Is iomdha cailín barrúil, spéisiúil a bhí ann gléasta i gcló is i bhfaisean,  
dá mbeadh a cleamhnas réitithe do mba deas an scéal é, a bheith ag comhrá  
    leí ar cholbha leapan.  
Éadaí cláir is boird da réir sin, i ndiadh a chéile bhí siad leagtha,  
miasa geala agus plátaí péatair, agus sceana géara le ghabháil ag gearradh.  
Briogúin is tine os coinne a chéile, is Máire Kane ag casadh an bheara,  
delf is china, túirín, teapot, agus mórán gréithre bána is breaca.  
Seacht sórt feola a tugadh ar bord ann, gléasta cóirithe ós comhair an tsagairt:  
muiceoil, mairteoil, caoireoil rósta, turcaithe, géabha, puiléid is cearca.

Patraiscí uisce ar phlátaí gléasta, cá bhfuil an t-éan nach bhfeicfí ann leagtha:  
lon dubh, feadóg, creabhar, céirseach, crotach, naoscach is péire lachan?  
In aimsir cóisir suí le chéile, iasc a fháil gléasta, ar ndóigh, ní fearg,  
breac is bradán, trosc más féidir, maiden ray agus cnúdán dearg.  
Turbard bíodh ar thosach méise, an langa, an bréam, an plás is an ballach,  
cadóg, ronnach, is scadáin úra, is beidh mé ag súil le liús is mangach.  
Níl an bord sách gléasta i ndiaidh an méid sin, go bhfaighidh gach aon ní  
    i dtrá is i gcladach,  
portán, gliomach, oistrí, séaclaí, is mar fuair sibh gach aon ní, faighigí  
    an tortoise.

## The Wedding at Slihaun More

Antaine Raiftearaí (1784–1835)

There was a feast at Slihaun More, and many say it lasted a week,  
A guinea allocated for the music, five pounds and a crown for the priest.  
‘Tis there was shared the juice of the barley, ale and porter, and uisce beatha  
Reminiscent of Tara of the hosting, when drink flowed well into the morning.  
It’s there you would see the great and the good, men galore and beautiful  
damsels,  
‘Tis a heartless man who wouldn’t follow, them like a show going through  
the townland.  
There was food and drink for high and low, with no call or need for  
patchwork garments,  
But the top-notch sort, beavers, bonnets, cantons, cambrics, and  
sparkling dresses.

There were many charming interesting maidens, dressed there in the  
height of fashion  
If a marriage match was made, it’d be a treat, with her on the edge of the  
bed to blather.  
Table cloths and serving linen, gradually one by one were brought in  
Dishes bright and pewter plates, and knives to cut the spread well sharpened.  
Skewers and fires they faced each other, and Mary Kane the spit a turning  
delf and china, tureens, teapots, and many dishes white and dappled.  
Seven sorts of meat brought to table, dressed and presented for the celebrant:  
Pork, beef, and mutton roasted, turkeys, geese, pullets and hens.

Water partridges dressed on plates, with every conceivable bird there placed:  
black bird, plover, grouse and song thrush, curlew, snipe, and ducks a brace.  
In time of feasting, commensal seating, to receive dressed seafood, ne’er  
a bother  
Trout and salmon, cod if available, maiden ray and fine red gurnard.  
Turbot there as a main plate, ling and bream, both plaice and wrasse  
haddock, mackerel, and fresh herrings, and I’ll be awaiting pike and pollack.  
The table insufficiently is laid, until all’s claimed from beach and shore side  
crabs, lobsters, oysters, and shrimp, and since so well provisioned, supply  
a tortoise.

—English translation by Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire



**05**

*A History of Bog Butter  
in Ireland*

**Maeve Sikora and  
Isabella Mulhall**

When we consider the central role that butter plays in the modern Irish diet, coupled with its diverse and extensive uses, it is unsurprising that it has had such a long and varied history of use and production in this country. Lucas notes that ‘virtually everyone in [early Irish] society was preoccupied with cows’,<sup>1</sup> which is reflected in our mythological tales,<sup>2</sup> and early literature.<sup>3</sup> Cattle were prized more for their white meats or *bánbhia* (milk, buttermilk, butter, curds, cheese, and various other dairy products) than their meat, since the former did not require the killing of the animal. This preoccupation with cattle and dairy is also evident in our placenames, with the Irish word for road ‘*bóthar*’ deriving from ‘*bó*’ and defined by the length and breadth of a cow. Butter related placenames range from *Coill Ime* (Kilimy, wood of the butter) in Laois, *Gort an Ime* (Butterfield) in Dublin and Limerick, to *Móin na dTobán* (Monadubbaun) in Kilkenny, meaning bog of the tubs, most likely referring to the tubs of bog butter.<sup>4</sup> Also, Smerwick Harbour in Kerry derives from the Norse *smjor uík* which means butter bay, referring to fertile land near the bay.<sup>5</sup> The recent identification and radiocarbon dating of lipids of milk absorbed into the pottery<sup>6</sup> found in the bogs of north Mayo’s Céide Fields proves scientifically that the early Neolithic farmer occupants of this field system practised dairy farming.<sup>7</sup> This chapter discusses the phenomenon of ‘bog butter’, that is, ancient butter that has been preserved by being buried in peat bogs. Bog butter has been shown to date from the Bronze Age<sup>8</sup> to the early modern period. New radiocarbon dates obtained by the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) for recent finds of bog butter are presented here for the first time. Recent scientific analyses of bog butter in the collections of the NMI are also discussed.

## Introduction

Bogs are remarkable repositories of archaeological, cultural, and environmental information, opening many windows onto Ireland’s distant past. Entire ancient landscapes, such as the vast field system known as the Céide Fields referred to above, can lie buried by peat for thousands of years before being brought to

**1** Anthony T. Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland* (Kilkenny: Boethius Press, 1989), 3. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **2** For example, *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, *Táin Bó Flidais*, or *Táin Bó Fraich*, see J.P. Mallory, ‘Food in Irish Prehistory: Archaeological, Linguistic, and early Literary Evidence, with a Note of Caution’ in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press, and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 1. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>

**3** This extensive exploitation of milk, ubiquitous in early Irish life, finds literary expression in the eleventh century satire *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* in a comic riff in which apparent exaggeration actually mirrors reality: ‘... very thick milk, milk that is not so thick, flowing and stiff milk, milk of medium thickness, yellow bubbling milk that you have to chew and swallow’. See William Sayers, ‘Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman

(eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 8. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **4** <https://www.logainm.ie/ga/s?xt=M%C3%B3in+na+dTob%C3%A1n&str=on> **5** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Gastro-Topography: Exploring Food-Related Placenames in Ireland’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 38: 1/2 (2014), 126–157, for cattle and dairy see 133–137. **6** For further details, see Jessica Smyth and Richard P. Evershed, ‘Milking the megafauna: Using organic residue analysis to understand early farming

practice’, *Environmental Archaeology* 21: 3 (2016), 214–229, DOI: 10.1179/1749631414Y.0000000045 **7** For further details on the Céide Fields, see Seamas Caulfield, ‘“A Landscape Fossilized”: The Céide Fields, Dairy farming and food production in the Irish Neolithic’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 3. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **8** The Bronze Age period began around 2500 BCE in Ireland.



light.<sup>9</sup> Since being discovered, extensive investigations at the Céide Fields, the oldest field system in the world, have shed much light on the nature of farming practices in the Neolithic period in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Owing to the extraordinary preservative qualities of peat, organic materials such as textiles, wooden objects, leather objects, plant material, trackways, and even human remains ('bog bodies') also survive down through the millennia in the cool, waterlogged anoxic conditions. These finds, many of which remain almost unchanged over time, provide us with unique insights into ancient practices, shedding light on the nature and social complexity of past societies.<sup>11</sup> The range of objects deposited in bogs and subsequently recovered as chance finds, or as part of archaeological excavations, is quite astonishing.<sup>12</sup> Archaeological finds from peatland contexts in the collections of the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) and elsewhere, range from mundane everyday items (e.g., shoes and tools) to highly elaborate (e.g., the ninth century CE gospel book known as The Faddan More Psalter; the late sixth century CE Springmount Bog waxed writing tablets; the eighth century CE Moylough Belt Shrine). Finds from bogs also include wooden platters and dishes, cooking utensils, deer traps, baskets, satchels, wheels, tridents, spades, buckets, ox and horse yokes, shields, capes, hurling balls, dug-out canoes, and wooden idols or figurines.

Bog butter is one such find that has come to light in quite large quantities by way of chance or stray finds in Ireland's bogs down through the last few centuries (Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> Finds of bog butter have also been unearthed in the bogs of Scotland, although in much smaller quantities.<sup>14</sup> The discovery of bog butter has come

**Figure 1** Bog butter and accompanying wooden vessel following discovery—Cloontuskert Bog, Moher townland, Co. Roscommon (NMI 2018:32–34). © National Museum of Ireland

**9** Caulfield, 'A Landscape Fossilized': The Céide Fields, Dairy farming and food production in the Irish Neolithic'. **10** The Neolithic period in Ireland dates from approximately 4000 to 2500 BCE. **11** Isabella Mulhall, 'Bog Bodies from Ireland's peatlands', in Gill

Plunkett, Ingelise Stuijts and Conor McDermott (eds), *Life and Adaptation in the Irish Wetlands during the Holocene*. XX INQUA Congress Field Guide (Dublin: INQUA, 2019), 80–90. **12** Caroline Earwood, *Domestic Wooden Artefacts in Britain and Ireland from Neolithic to Viking*

*Times* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993).

**13** Chris Synnott, 'A Survey of Published Reasons for Burying Butter in Bogs', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 69 (2010), 141–149, 141. **14** Caroline Earwood, 'Bog Butter: A Two Thousand Year History', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 8 (1997), 25–42, 25



**Figure 2** The find spot of the Altartate Glebe cauldron (NMI 1933:759) from Co. Monaghan. Pictured is the landowner, Mr William Mealiff demonstrating the hand-cutting of turf before mechanical harvesting commenced. © National Museum of Ireland

The sighting of birds flocking to an area of bog has often been quoted as the reason why finds of bog butter have been noticed by peat harvesting machine operators



**Figure 3** NMI staff recording a bog butter find in Cloontuskert Bog, Moher townland, Co. Roscommon. © National Museum of Ireland

about as a direct result of peat extraction (Figure 2), bog drainage or ‘reclamation’ works and, in more recent years, as a consequence of the ongoing peatland rehabilitation or restoration works. It is also worth noting at this juncture, that finds of bog butter are considered archaeological objects under the terms of the National Monuments Acts (1930 to 2014) and are accordingly afforded appropriate legal protection. The finder of an archaeological object such as bog butter has an obligation to report such a discovery to the NMI where it will be accessioned, curated and looked after for future generations to study and enjoy. The National Museum of Ireland regularly receives reports of discovery of butter from bogs around the country. In fulfilment of the National Museum’s role, staff inspect find spots and engage directly with finders to record the location of the find and to ensure that all relevant details of the discovery are documented for future reference (Figure 3). Bog butter is whitish in colour, and for this reason is one of the most frequently reported finds from peatland contexts as it is highly visible when exposed, in contrast to the dark brown peat that surrounds it. It is also noteworthy that, when exposed, bog butter attracts the attention of birds and mammals in the vicinity. Holes, claw marks, and occasional animal hairs are often seen on bog butter specimens as a result of animal or bird consumption prior to its accession to the NMI.<sup>15</sup> The sighting of birds flocking to an area of bog has often been quoted as the reason why finds of bog butter have been noticed by peat harvesting machine operators.

### What is bog butter?

As the name implies, bog butter is, in essence, butter that has been deposited or placed in bogs for a variety of possible reasons. In its surviving form, it consists of large whitish solid masses of fatty or waxy deposits. When discovered it has a distinctive pungent smell<sup>16</sup> akin to ‘ripe old cheese’<sup>17</sup> and ‘tasting like old spermaceti’.<sup>18</sup> Edward Clibborn, writing in 1859, declared that he had ‘tasted every specimen of bog-butter to which I have had access’ and found them all, with one exception, ‘rancid or acid’.<sup>19</sup> Bog butter has been referenced in the literature, amongst other things, as ancient butter, fossil butter, bog tallow, and adipocere.<sup>20</sup> Scientific analysis of nine Scottish bog butter samples confirmed that six of the samples derived from ruminant dairy (i.e., butter) and three were of adipose

<sup>15</sup> Carol Smith, Conservation Dept., NMI, pers. comm.  
<sup>16</sup> Earwood, ‘Bog Butter: A Two Thousand Year History’, 25; Jessica Smyth, Robert Berstan, Emmanuelle Casanova, Finbar McCormick, Isabella Mulhall, Maeve Sikora, Chris Synnott and Richard P. Evershed, ‘Four millennia of dairy surplus and deposition revealed through compound-specific stable isotope analysis and

radiocarbon dating of Irish bog butters’, *Scientific Reports* 9: 1 (Dec. 2019), 1–11, 5. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/four-millennia-dairy-surplus-deposition-revealed/docview/2191356109/se-2> (accessed July 2, 2023).  
<sup>17</sup> Estyn E. Evans, ‘Bog Butter: Another Explanation’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 10 (1947), 59–62. <sup>18</sup> William Frazer ‘I. Bog Butter: Its History, with Observations.

II. On a Dish of Wood Found in a Bog at Ballymoney. III. On a Primitive Wooden Milk Churn’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 1: 7 (1891), 583–588, 584. Spermaceti is found as a fatty substance in the head cavities of the sperm whale. It is used in the manufacture of candles.  
<sup>19</sup> Edward Clibborn and James O’Lavery, ‘Bog-Butter’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 7 (1859), 288–94. <sup>20</sup> Chris

Synnott and Liam Downey, ‘Bog Butter: Its Historical Context and Chemical Composition’, *Archaeology Ireland* 18: 2 (2004), 32–35; Chris Synnott, ‘Bog Butter—What is it, where was it found and when and why was it put there?’, in Peter Foyne, Colin Rynne and Chris Synnott (eds.), *Butter in Ireland: From Earliest Times to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cork: Cork Butter Museum, 2014), 171–194.

fat origin.<sup>21</sup> A recent study of Irish bog butters has shown conclusively that the butter in that study was also of dairy origin.<sup>22</sup> A 2007 study focusing on the compositional analysis of thirteen bog butter samples ranging in date from the Iron Age<sup>23</sup> to the late medieval period found that the chemical composition of the samples of different ages was remarkably similar.<sup>24</sup> This study by Cronin *et al.* found that the decomposition of protein to simpler molecules occurred in the first 200 years of deposition, as a sample with a latest date of 1800 CE had a similar composition to butter finds of much earlier date.<sup>25</sup> Bog butter has been found in a wide variety of containers including carved wooden vessels such as the one from Rosberry, Co. Kildare (Figure 4).<sup>26</sup> In addition, other organic coverings such as animal-derived material (skin or other membrane) (Figure 5), plant-derived coverings, or bark coverings (Figure 6) have been used in the past to contain and protect the butter. Butter has also been found encased within baskets or simply deposited without any apparent covering such as the example from Blakesmountain, Co. Clare<sup>27</sup> (Figure 7).<sup>28</sup>

### Chronology of bog butter deposition

Caroline Earwood's 1997 study of bog butter finds from Ireland and Scotland indicated that over half of the 274 bog butter finds analysed were contained within a wooden vessel.<sup>29</sup> Earwood proposed a typology of vessels containing bog butter using a combination of absolute dating and typological analysis.<sup>30</sup> The earliest in Earwood's series was a carved wooden keg of the type found at Rosberry, Co. Kildare, referred to above.<sup>31</sup> The Rosberry keg, which contained butter that has been dated to 400–350 BCE, is carved out of a single tree trunk and features a pair of opposed perforated handles which project above the rim. The vessel base is formed from a separate disc of carved wood, fitted into a groove carved on the inner wall of the vessel. The vessel also had a lid when found. Earwood has demonstrated that over time the morphology of vessel lids developed as did the side handles, which became more elaborate into the later Iron Age.<sup>32</sup> Earwood argued that developed kegs with convex sides and lug handles on the sides have

**21** Robert Berstan, Stephanie N. Dudd, Mark S. Copley, E. David Morgan, Anita Quye, and Richard P. Evershed, 'Characterisation of "Bog Butter" using a Combination of Molecular and Isotopic Techniques', *Analyst* 129: 3 (2004), 270–275. **22** Smyth, Berstan, Casanova *et al.*, 'Four Millennia of Dairy Surplus and Deposition'. **23** The Iron Age period in Ireland dates from approximately 800 BCE to 400 CE. **24** Thomas Cronin, Liam Downey, Chris Synnott, Paul McSweeney, Eamonn P. Kelly, Mary Cahill, Paul. R.

Ross, and Catherine Stanton, 'Composition of Ancient Irish Bog Butter', *International Dairy Journal* 17: 9 (2007), 1011–1020. **25** Cronin, Downey, Synnott, *et al.*, 'Composition of Ancient Irish Bog Butter'. **26** NMI registration number: NMI 1970:32 **27** NMI 2014:82 **28** Earwood, 'Bog butter: A Two Thousand Year History', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 8 (1997), 25–42. **29** Earwood, 'Bog Butter: A Two Thousand Year History', 25. **30** Earwood, 'Bog Butter: A Two Thousand Year History'. **31** Earwood, 'Bog Butter: A Two

Thousand Year History', 27; Isabella Mulhall and Elizabeth K. Briggs, 'Presenting a past society to a present day audience: bog bodies in Iron Age Ireland', *Museum Ireland* 17 (2007), 71–81, 78, 79. **32** The Iron Age period in Ireland dates from approximately 800 BCE to 400 CE. **33** Earwood, 'Bog Butter: A Two Thousand Year History', 29; The early medieval period in Ireland dates from approximately CE 400–1200 CE. **34** Refer to Table 1 for a list of dates where known. **35** NMI 1964:87. **36** Earwood, 'Bog Butter:

A Two Thousand Year History', 31. **37** Earwood, 'Bog butter: A Two Thousand Year History'; Chris Synnott and Maeve Sikora, 'New dates for old butter', *Archaeology Ireland* 32: 3 (2018), 26–29, 26. **38** Synnott and Sikora, 'New dates for old butter', 26; Liam Downey, Chris Synnott, Eamonn P. Kelly, and Catherine Stanton, 'Bog Butter: Dating Profile and Location', *Archaeology Ireland* 20: 1 (2006), 32–34 and Chris Synnott and Liam Downey, 'Bog Butter: Its Historical Context and Chemical Composition', *Archaeology*

a long period of use from the late Iron Age into the early medieval period.<sup>33</sup> Earwood's proposed vessel typology has largely been borne out by radiocarbon dates derived from new discoveries.<sup>34</sup>

The deposition of butter in bogs continued into the medieval period and later in Ireland. Butter from this period has been recovered in a range of wooden vessels including carved bowls, troughs, methers and churns (Figure 8). Earwood has described a typical medieval bog butter keg as having straight or curved sides, a pronounced shoulder and an upright neck. These kegs have carved vertical handles, which may be perforated. One such keg from Cuiltrasna, Co. Mayo,<sup>35</sup> though not containing butter, has been radiocarbon dated to 1280–1420 CE.<sup>36</sup>

More than 120 finds of bog butter have come to light since the publication of Earwood's survey and a comprehensive programme of regular radiocarbon dating of bog butter acquisitions at the NMI has contributed to a greater understanding of the chronology of bog butter deposition. In 1997, Earwood concluded that the earliest deposition of bog butter occurred in the Iron Age period and was dated to 400–350 BCE.<sup>37</sup> Since the publication of this seminal study, a radiocarbon dating programme initiated by Prof. Chris Synnott, (then of the Process and Chemical Engineering Department, University College Cork) and others, in collaboration with the NMI,<sup>38</sup> has produced dates of around 1600 BCE for bog butter. Synnott's study pushed the earliest date for bog butter deposition back some 1200 years into the middle Bronze Age period.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent analysis in this area in recent years as highlighted, for example, by the work of Smyth *et al.*<sup>40</sup> and Casanova *et al.*<sup>41</sup> with the NMI, has dated depositional activity to an even earlier time with early Bronze Age dates being recorded for the specimens from Knockdrin, Co. Offaly<sup>42</sup> (1745–1635 BCE) and Ballyduff, Co. Offaly<sup>43</sup> (2280–2038 BCE).<sup>44</sup>

Ongoing research by staff at the NMI on recently acquired bog butter finds has revealed that the earliest known dates for the deposition of butter in bogs can, in fact, be pushed back even further to around 2500 BCE. Table 1 provides details of bog butter finds and their corresponding dates, where known, which have been accessioned by the NMI since the year 2000. This research confirms

*Ireland* 18: 2 (2004), 32–35: 33.

**39** Synnott and Sikora, 'New dates for Old Butter'.

**40** Smyth, Berstan, Casanova, *et al.*, 'Four millennia of dairy surplus and deposition'.

**41** Emmanuelle Casanova, Timothy D. J. Knowles, Isabella Mulhall, Maeve Sikora, Jessica Smyth, and Richard P. Evershed, 'Generation of two new radiocarbon standards for compound-specific radiocarbon analyses of fatty acids from bog butter finds', *Radiocarbon* 63: 3 (2021), 771–83. **42** NMI 1998:63; Synnott and Sikora,

'New dates for old butter', 26; Smyth, Berstan, Casanova, *et al.*, 'Four millennia of dairy surplus and deposition', 5. **43** NMI 2014:159; All radiocarbon dates obtained directly from radiocarbon laboratories by the NMI are quoted as calibrated dates in the text, with the laboratory reference quoted in the footnote. All dates have been calibrated to 95.4% probability (2 sigma). The reference for the calibration dataset is Paula J. Reimer, William E. N. Austin, Edouard Bard, Alex Bayliss,

Paul G. Blackwell, Christopher Bronk Ramsey, Martin Butzin, *et al.*, 'The IntCal20 Northern Hemisphere Radiocarbon Age Calibration Curve (0–55 Cal kBP)', *Radiocarbon* 62: 4 (2020), 725–757. The laboratory reference for Ballyduff is UBA-30887. The laboratory reference for the Knockdrin date is UBA-33338. **44** Synnott and Sikora, 'New dates for Old Butter'; Casanova, Knowles, Mulhall *et al.*, 'Generation of two new radiocarbon standards'. While conventionally radiocarbon dates are quoted

as BP and BC/AD, CE and BCE are the convention for this publication and the radiocarbon dates have been amended accordingly. BP stands for before present and is used in the same way as it is in radiocarbon dating results.



The Rosberry keg, which contained butter that has been dated to 400–350 BCE, is carved out of a single tree trunk and features a pair of opposed perforated handles which project above the rim

Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



**Figure 4** Bog butter and wooden vessel from Rosberry, Co. Kildare (NMI 1970:32).  
© National Museum of Ireland

Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



**Figure 5** Animal membrane used in the wrapping of bog butter from Coologe, Co. Offaly (NMI 2014:231). © National Museum of Ireland

an incredibly long-lived tradition of the production of butter in Ireland and its deposition in bogs, which ranges in date from the early Bronze Age period<sup>45</sup> to the post-medieval period. This vast date range of over 4000 years, clearly demonstrates a long-lived tradition of the deposition of butter in bogs, further highlighting that it was a vitally important agricultural product<sup>46</sup> and an integral part of the Irish diet since prehistoric times.<sup>47</sup>

Synnott's research has also demonstrated that well in excess of five hundred finds of bog butter are recorded as having been recovered from the bogs of Ireland,<sup>48</sup> both from the raised bogs of the midlands and the blanket bogs in mountainous areas and along the western seaboard (Figure 9). Regrettably, however, many of these bog butter finds never made their way into museum collections and now only survive as 'paper finds'<sup>49</sup> or records in museums, newspapers, academic journals or in collections such as the Memoirs of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland.<sup>50</sup> Extensive research on bog butter is ongoing at the time of writing,<sup>51</sup> and the overall number of bog butter finds from Ireland will, in all likelihood, be considerably higher as a result of this with certain periods being markedly better represented than others,<sup>52</sup> as is the case with many other artefact types from peatland contexts.

Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



**Figure 6** bottom left. Bog butter in a bark covering from Shannagurraun, Co. Galway (NMI 1983:28). © National Museum of Ireland



**Figure 7** bottom right. Bog butter without any apparent covering from Blakesmountain, Co. Clare (NMI 2014:82). © National Museum of Ireland

### Why was butter buried in bogs?

Bog butter finds and their associated vessels or wrappings have a long history of being documented in the literature,<sup>53</sup> and the custom of burying butter in bogs has been of considerable interest to researchers and finders alike down through the years. Early descriptions of bog butter discoveries such as those which feature in the catalogues of the Royal Irish Academy and the National Museum of Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide vivid descriptions of the finds, many of which were not retained at the time owing to the fact that they were deemed to be such a common find. Antiquarians writing at this time often offered reasons as to why butter was deposited in bogs in the first instance,<sup>54</sup> and sought to date it by means of the vessel or firkin that contained it or, in the context of other comparable finds from peatland contexts and from neighbouring dryland sites. William Wilde, writing in 1853, suggested that butter was deposited in peat for security purposes or to allow it to develop a 'peculiar taste or consistence'.<sup>55</sup> Lucas refers to the practice of 'flavouring butter with some kind of garlic or onion' and speculated that it might be quite an ancient one.<sup>56</sup> Falkiner queried whether butter may have been used as boundary markers or 'land-marks',<sup>57</sup> a theory developed in great detail in later years by Eamonn P. Kelly in the context of bog-preserved human remains and other associated artefacts from peatland contexts.<sup>58</sup> Kelly suggested that the deposition of bog butter as well as other objects associated with food production, such as quernstones, could be interpreted as symbolic depositions reflecting the marriage of the king and the earth goddess, and the importance of ensuring the fertility of the land and the consequent survival of communities.<sup>59</sup>

Raftery put forward the suggestion that butter may have been buried in bogs to safeguard against leaner times or for preservation until the 'annual periods of shortage', being the equivalent of modern cold storage.<sup>60</sup> Synnott and Downey

**45** The early Bronze Age period in Ireland dates from approximately 2500 BCE to 1600/1500 BCE. **46** Smyth, Berstan, Casanova, et al., 'Four millennia of dairy surplus and deposition', 8. **47** Liam Downey and Ingelise Stuijts, 'Overview of Historical Irish Food Products—A.T. Lucas (1960–2) Revisited', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 22 (2013), 111–26. **48** Downey, Synnott, Kelly, and Stanton, 'Bog Butter: Dating Profile and Location'. **49** Benjamin Gearey and Henry Chapman, *An Introduction to Peatland Archaeology and Palaeoenvironments*, Studying Scientific Archaeology 6 (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2023), 4.

**50** Chris Synnott, 'Records of Bog Butter finds in the Memoirs of the Irish Ordnance Survey, 1830 to 1839', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 62 (2003), 143–60.

**51** Karen O'Toole, 'What, where, when, and why? Understanding the origins of bog butter in Ireland' (PhD thesis, University College Dublin, Ireland, forthcoming). **52** Gearey and Chapman, *An Introduction to Peatland Archaeology and Palaeoenvironments*.

**53** Synnott and Sikora, 'New Dates for Old Butter'.

**54** William R. Wilde, 'On the Introduction and Period of the General Use of the Potato in Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*

(1836–1869) 6 (1853), 356–72; Clibborn and O'Laverty, 'Bog-Butter'; Frazer, 'I. Bog Butter: Its History, with Observations. II. On a Dish of Wood Found in a Bog at Ballymoney. III. On a Primitive Wooden Milk Churn'; Francis Joseph Bigger, 'Irish Bog Butter', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 5: 2 (1899), 112. **55** Wilde, 'On the Introduction and Period of the General Use of the Potato in Ireland'. **56** Anthony T. Lucas, 'Irish Food Before the Potato', *Gwerin* 3 (1960–62), 30. **57** William Falkiner, 'Bog Butter', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 34: 4 (1904), 386–87.

**58** Eamonn P. Kelly, 'Secrets of the Bog Bodies: The Enigma of the Iron Age Explained',

*Archaeology Ireland* 20: 1 (2006), 26–30; Eamonn Kelly, 'An Archaeological Interpretation of Irish Iron Age Bog Bodies' in Sarah Ralph (ed.), *The archaeology of violence: interdisciplinary approaches*, The Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology Distinguished Monograph Series 2 (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), 232–40.

**59** Kelly, 'Secrets of the Bog Bodies: The Enigma of the Iron Age Explained', 30.

**60** Joseph Raftery, 'A Bog-Butter Vessel from near Tuam, Co. Galway', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 20: 1/2 (1942), 31–38.

also alluded to the importance of keeping butter as cool as possible, which, in combination with the anaerobic conditions of bogs and the antiseptic properties of sphagnum moss would have prevented mould growth.<sup>61</sup> Raftery, echoing Wilde, was also of the opinion that the flavour of butter was enhanced by periods of time spent in a bog and that, in addition, butter may also have been placed in bogs as an offering or votive deposition.<sup>62</sup> Estyn Evans described the practice of boleying, or transhumance, and that butter-making was the chief occupation in the boley houses. The unsalted butter would have been preserved by 'burying it in wooden, skin, bark or cloth containers in the bog'.<sup>63</sup> As milk was only produced when cows were in calf and therefore available only in summer and sometimes autumn,<sup>64</sup> butter production must have been intensive during this time. It seems likely that at least some butter was stored for future use, but the quantity of finds and the high quality of workmanship of many of the wooden vessels containing butter does suggest something more complex than mere storage. It also seems unlikely that all of these vessels were lost or forgotten about by those who buried them. The reasons for deposition are clearly complex and undoubtedly changed over time. Butter is frequently mentioned in Old and Middle Irish written sources. Fergus Kelly's study of early Irish farming, principally using law-texts of the seventh and eighth centuries CE, provides a number of important references to butter and also to wooden containers.<sup>65</sup> Kelly noted that there are references to dairy workers being women, and also to a person's right to cut wood on another's property for the purposes of making a churn-dash.<sup>66</sup> In the early medieval law-texts butter is portrayed as a luxury food which was not available to low-ranking persons.<sup>67</sup> The word *rúsc* refers to a bark container and Kelly noted that this word is commonly used to describe a receptacle for butter in the early medieval sources. The existence of bark-wrapped butter of early historic date—such as an example from Derraghan, Co. Offaly,<sup>68</sup> dated to the tenth to twelfth centuries CE—supports this historical evidence. A reference in the *Annals of Connacht* to the destruction of butter stores in the area around the monastery of Boyle, Co. Roscommon in the year 1296 CE suggests that the storage of butter was widely known in the medieval period.<sup>69</sup>

### The research potential of bog butter

Bog butter finds have revealed much about Ireland's distant past and have also afforded us invaluable opportunities to gain greater insights into food production and consumption in centuries past. The research possibilities provided by

**61** Synnott and Downey, 'Bog Butter: Its Historical Context and Chemical Composition'.  
**62** Raftery, 'A Bog-Butter Vessel from near Tuam, Co. Galway'.  
**63** Evans, 'Bog Butter: Another Explanation'.  
**64** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD*. Vol. 4 (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1997), 41.  
**65** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*.  
**66** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 325.  
**67** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 326.  
**68** NMI 2022:92.  
**69** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 326.

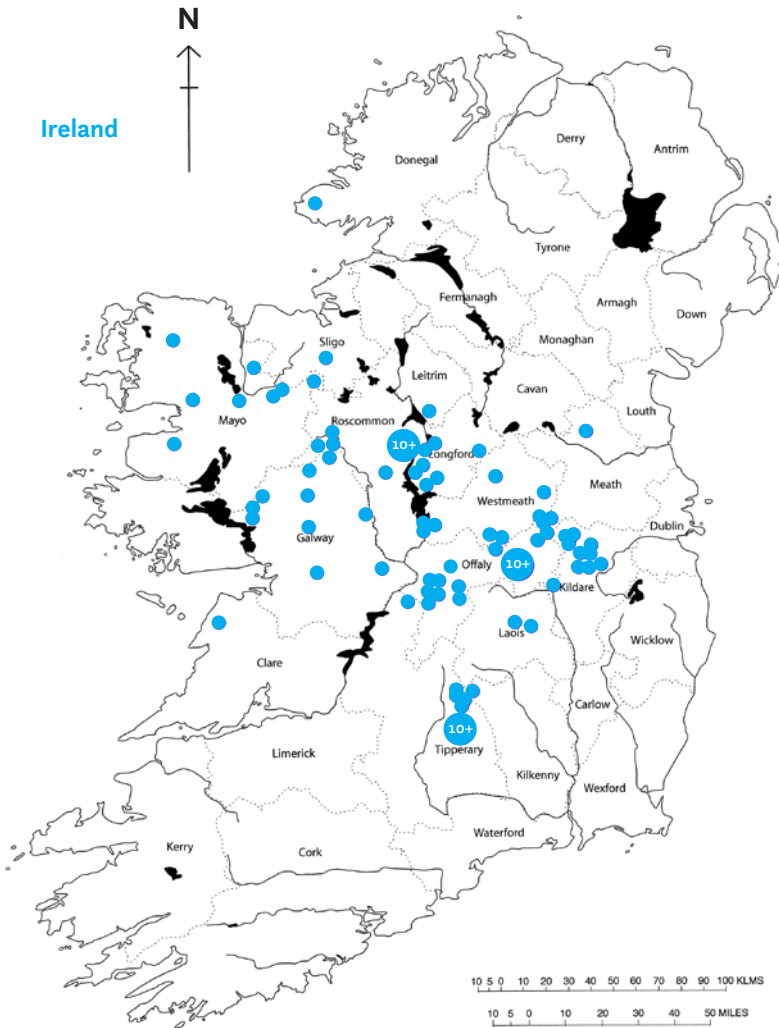


bog butter are significant and recent investigative programmes have clearly demonstrated the extent to which this has been borne out. A number of studies on the nature, composition and date of bog butter have been mentioned above. A recent collaborative pilot study between the Smurfit Institute of Genetics, Trinity College Dublin, the National Museum of Ireland and others, presented the first genetic analysis of bog butter using technological advances that demonstrated the ability to reveal new information from substrates previously untested for genetic data.<sup>70</sup> Three bog butter samples were selected for this pilot aDNA study to encapsulate the overall timespan represented by bog butter finds, their different geographic locations and also the different forms presented (e.g., the presence or absence of a container). The analysis revealed that milk from different species of ruminants, namely cow, sheep, and goat, may have been blended together to produce butter in the past. Although only three butters were sampled on this occasion and the results presented were therefore tentative, this

70 Valeria Mattiangeli, Niall P. Cooke, Ros Ó Maoldúin, Maeve Sikora, Isabella Mulhall, Daniel G. Bradley, Matthew D. Teasdale, 'Genomic analysis of Irish bog butter', *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 31 (2020), 102368.

**Figure 8** Bog butter vessels of medieval date on display in the National Museum of Ireland—Archaeology. © National Museum of Ireland

study nonetheless demonstrated the potential for further such research in this area. Research on bog butter shows the potential for new finds to yield important information and to add to the overall distribution of bog butter finds from Ireland. It also demonstrates that old finds can be revisited and new information garnered. In the case studies that follow, a number of new finds are presented for the first time and one study highlights the potential for new research on an old find. Finds from different time periods have been deliberately selected to highlight the long and varied history of bog butter deposition in Ireland.



**Figure 9** Distribution map of the bog butter finds registered by the NMI since 2000 (where 10+ appears it indicates that more than

ten finds of bog butter have been made at this location). © National Museum of Ireland

**An early Bronze Age bog butter find with organic casing from Baunmore Bog, Inchirourke townland, Co. Tipperary<sup>71</sup>**

This large specimen of bog butter came to light in 2012 during the course of peat milling activity in Baunmore Bog, Inchirourke townland, Co. Tipperary (Figure 10). The butter is roughly oval in shape and is completely covered in an organic casing consisting of grass or straw with accompanying withies.<sup>72</sup> The fibres, for the most part, run longitudinally along the butter sample and some withies are also visible running transversely. One side of the find is badly damaged having been struck by the milling machine and also as a result of bird/mammal activity following its exposure in the bog. A sample of the butter was submitted for radiocarbon dating and produced a date of 2470–2205 BCE,<sup>73</sup> placing it firmly in the early Bronze Age period.

This date is not the only early Bronze Age date for bog butter finds, which have been accessioned and radiocarbon dated since 2000, and broadly compares to other radiocarbon determinations obtained from bog butter finds in the NMI collections. Bog butter from Knockersally or Colehill, Co. Meath<sup>74</sup> was dated to 2455–2149 BCE<sup>75</sup> and similar early dates were obtained from bog butter finds from Turreen, Co. Offaly,<sup>76</sup> which dated to 2296–2040 BCE<sup>77</sup> and Ballykean, Co. Tipperary<sup>78</sup> which dated to 2280–2038 BCE.<sup>79</sup>

Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



**71** NMI 2012:239 (bog butter) and NMI 2012:240 (organic casing) **72** A withy is made from hazel or willow shoots bound together to

form a rope and was used for tying or binding. **73** UBA-30886 **74** NMI 2018:37. **75** UBA-39438

**76** NMI 2006:60. **77** UBA-33366 **78** NMI 2016:177. **79** UBA-33338

**Figure 10** Bog butter from Baunmore Bog, Inchirourke townland, Co. Tipperary (NMI 2012:239). © National Museum of Ireland



**An Iron Age wooden vessel containing bog butter from Gilltown Bog, Timahoe East townland, Co. Kildare<sup>80</sup>**

The beautifully carved wooden vessel or keg from Gilltown Bog, Timahoe East townland, Co. Kildare was brought to light by Bord na Móna in May 2009 during the course of peat milling activity.<sup>81</sup> The exceptionally well-preserved vessel, which was carved as a single piece out of an alder trunk, is cylindrical, almost straight-sided, and was filled to capacity with bog butter (Figure 11). A sample of butter was taken for the purposes of radiocarbon dating and the results confirmed that the butter dates from some time between 43 BCE and 202 CE, making it Iron Age in date.<sup>82</sup> The combined weight of the vessel and butter is approximately 37kgs in total. The vessel is 65cm in maximum height, 27cm in diameter at the base and is fitted with a lid, which rests upon the rim of the body. The lid, which is flat and roughly oval in shape, measures 26cm long by 20cm wide. Two lugs or handles project 4cm above the rim on opposite sides of the body, each bearing a single circular perforation through which a 1cm wide hazel withy passes securing the lid in place (Figure 12). The handles of the vessel are rectangular in shape with the corners rounded off. The body of the vessel, lid, and base all display very distinctive tool marks. Detailed analysis of the vessel has also revealed that traces of a cloth or other fine organic material are in evidence covering the top of the butter and the interior circumference of the vessel. The vessel, which is an Earwood Type 1 container,<sup>83</sup> is comparable in form to the vessel from Rosberry, Co. Kildare,<sup>84</sup> referred to above. This find is remarkable not only for its fine container but for the sheer quantity of butter that it contains.



**Figure 11** An Iron Age wooden vessel containing bog butter from Gilltown Bog, Timahoe East townland, Co. Kildare (NMI 2009:74–75) © National Museum of Ireland



**Figure 12** Detail of the lid of the wooden vessel from Gilltown Bog, Timahoe East townland, Co. Kildare (NMI 2009:74) © National Museum of Ireland

**80** NMI 2009:74 (butter) and NMI 2009:75 (wooden vessel)  
**81** Isabella Mulhall, 'Bogs' in Karen Bescherer Metheny and Mary C. Beaudry (eds), *Archaeology of Food: An Encyclopedia* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 64–67.

**82** UBA -18467. 1960 ±39 (43 BCE – 202 CE (2 sigma))  
**83** Earwood, 'Bog Butter: A Two Thousand Year History'.  
**84** NMI 1970:32 **85** Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *A corpus of late Celtic Hanging-bowls with an account of the bowls*

### An early medieval bog butter vessel: The Cuillard hanging-bowl from Cuillard townland, Co. Roscommon

The Cuillard hanging-bowl is one of the most remarkable wooden vessels in the collections of the NMI (Figure 13). The bowl is a triangular alderwood hanging-bowl and when found, contained bog butter. It is a unique find as all other known hanging-bowls are made of copper-alloy.<sup>85</sup> It was discovered in June 1963 during turf cutting in a bog near Boyle, Co. Roscommon, in the townland of Cuillard.<sup>86</sup> The finder, Mr John Flynn, described the vessel lying rim upwards, about four feet below the surface of the bog. The bowl was filled with butter that was, in turn, covered by a layer of material described by Mr Flynn as a 'fine skinney [*sic*] covering'. This covering was formally identified as sphagnum (possibly *S. palustre*) and graminaceous plants (grasses) by Ms Maura Scannell,

Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



*found in Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 337–339. <sup>86</sup> National Museum of Ireland topographical file 1963:62, Cuillard, Co. Roscommon.

**Figure 13** The Cuillard hanging bowl from Cuillard townland, Co. Roscommon (NMI 1963:42) © National Museum of Ireland



**Figure 14** Detail of one of the carved perforated lugs showing a surviving leather thong—Cuillard hanging bowl. © National Museum of Ireland

Natural History Division, NMI. Unfortunately, the butter was removed from the bowl in order to conserve the wood of the vessel and was not retained following analysis. According to the NMI file, the analysis, carried out at the Department of Agriculture Butter Testing Station, Harcourt Street, determined that the butter was unsalted.

While the butter does not survive in this case, a study of the bowl itself is illuminating. It was first described by Joseph Raftery,<sup>87</sup> and is a one-piece triangular bowl with three carved, perforated lugs, placed mid-way along each side. Each side measures 29cm in length and the bowl is 10.8cm high.<sup>88</sup> A leather thong survives in one of the perforated lugs suggesting that the vessel was suspended (Figure 14). Each of the three angles of the base is decorated by a triquetra pattern (Figure 15) and the base is outlined by a single incised line, which echoes the shape of the vessel.<sup>89</sup> Rupert Bruce-Mitford, in his corpus of hanging-bowls, dated the bowl on art-historical grounds to the 'seventh-eighth century'.<sup>90</sup>

As the bowl had been conserved after its discovery, it was not possible, until recently, to obtain an accurate radiocarbon date for it as materials used to conserve the wood affect the accuracy of the results. Recent dating of the wood using a novel technique of ramped pyrooxidation radiocarbon dating at the 14Chrono Centre, Queen's University Belfast,<sup>91</sup> has overcome this challenge and an accurate date to between 550 and 650 CE<sup>92</sup> has been achieved.<sup>93</sup> This date is significant, not only for the art-historical interpretation of the motifs featured on the vessel but also for the development of our understanding of bog butter deposition.

Although we cannot be certain of the contemporaneity of the butter and the vessel, the use of such a highly decorated and unusual vessel for containing butter is significant and may suggest that the Cuillard bowl was used for the presentation or storage of foodstuffs in a high-status context. This supports the evidence from some written sources that butter was the foodstuff of the wealthier echelons of early medieval Irish society.<sup>94</sup>



**Figure 15** Above. Detail of a triquetra pattern on the base of the Cuillard hanging bowl. © National Museum of Ireland

**87** Joseph Raftery, 'The Cuillard and Other Unpublished Hanging Bowls', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 96: 1 (1966), 29–38.

**88** Raftery, 'The Cuillard and Other Unpublished Hanging Bowls', 30. **89** Raftery, 'The Cuillard and Other Unpublished

Hanging Bowls'. **90** Bruce-Mitford, *A corpus of late Celtic Hanging-bowls*, 339. **91** Gerard T. Barrett, Evelyn Keaveney, Paula J. Reimer, Niamh O'Neill-Munro, Marie-Therese Barrett, Paul Mullarkey, and Matthew Seaver, 'Ramped Pyrooxidation Radiocarbon

Dating of a Preservative Contaminated Early Medieval Wooden Bowl', *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 50 (2021), 150–162. **92** UBA-41176 **93** Barrett, Keaveney, Reimer, et al., 'Ramped Pyrooxidation Radiocarbon Dating'. **94** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 326.

### Two previously unpublished medieval wooden methers containing bog butter from near Foxford, Co. Mayo and Cloonarkan, Co. Galway<sup>95</sup>

Elizabeth Grey has recently classified Irish medieval drinking vessels, including methers (quadrangular wooden vessels), and has identified a particular form of mether which was used to contain bog butter.<sup>96</sup> Grey noted that the word mether derives from the Latin *metrum*, meaning measure.<sup>97</sup> Typically, methers containing butter are straight-sided vessels and are generally less finely made than the methers made for drinking.<sup>98</sup> Grey argued that these vessels may be what is referred to in the written medieval sources as *Meadur Ime* or butter measures.<sup>99</sup> She enumerated thirty such vessels in the collections of Irish museums. Two such methers, which were undergoing conservation at the time of Grey's study and were consequently unavailable for assessment, are from near Foxford, Co. Mayo<sup>100</sup> and Cloonarkan, Co. Galway.<sup>101</sup>

The Foxford vessel is a carved wooden mether made of alder with an inserted base made of birch (Figure 16).<sup>102</sup> The vessel is carved from a single block of wood. It is straight-sided in profile and square in plan at the mouth while at the base the corners have been rounded. A large vertical split has occurred in the vessel wall and this has altered the overall dimensions of the vessel. It now measures 16.6cm x 18cm wide at the mouth and is 21cm in overall height. The remains of two large handles indicate that they would originally have measured 11–12cm high and approximately 3cm wide. These handles are located low down the vessel, close to the base. The vessel was originally filled to capacity with butter but some has been lost from the top. There is no trace of a vessel base but it is most likely that one did exist.

The Cloonarkan vessel (Figure 17), which was also found during the course of turf cutting activities, came to light in the parish of Clonbern, near Tuam, Co. Galway. The butter, which fills the vessel, appears to have expanded and cracked the vessel longitudinally and to have also probably pushed the base outwards. Where it protrudes over the rim of the vessel, the butter is covered with an animal skin or membrane, which survives in patches only. The vessel is a carved one-piece vessel with straight sides, which taper slightly towards the base. It is square in plan and measures 14cm x 15cm across at the mouth and 17cm in height. The walls are cracked vertically in many places and the vessel is no longer intact. A carved recess on the inner edge of the vessel at the base indicates that it originally would have had an inserted base, which does not survive. Despite the damage and loss, it is possible to determine that it was a very



**Figure 16** Overhead view of wooden vessel containing bog butter from near Foxford, Co. Mayo (NMI 2012:4-5). © National Museum of Ireland

<sup>95</sup> NMI 2012:4-5 (near Foxford, Co. Mayo) and NMI 2017:60-61 (Cloonarkan, Co. Galway) <sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Grey, 'Material culture of high-status drinking ritual in medieval and early modern Gaelic Ireland'. PhD thesis, NUI Galway, 2016, 75–6.

<sup>97</sup> Grey, 'Material culture of high-status drinking ritual', 1. <sup>98</sup> Grey, 'Material culture of high-status drinking ritual', 75–6.

<sup>99</sup> Grey, 'Material culture of high-status drinking ritual', 75–6. <sup>100</sup> NMI 2012:4-5

<sup>101</sup> NMI 2017:60-61

<sup>102</sup> Identifications by Mary Deevy as part of an unpublished report submitted on waterlogged material in treatment at an NMI facility at Cloontuskert, commissioned by the NMI.

finely made vessel, which originally had two carved handles located towards the base of the vessel on opposite sides. Only one handle survives, measuring 5cm long and approximately 1cm wide. The handle has a lateral perforation. There are some poorly executed linear motifs on the vessel wall, which were probably made using pyrography.<sup>103</sup> The visible motifs include three chevron motifs, which are filled with cross-hatched lines.

Neither the vessel nor the butter inside has been radiocarbon dated, though the potential to do this now exists due to the success of the dating of the Cuillard hanging-bowl discussed above. Both the Foxford and Cloonarkan vessels are comparable to other bog butter methers discussed by Grey. The only bog butter within a wooden mether for which a radiocarbon date has been obtained is that from Goolamore, Co. Mayo<sup>104</sup> which returned a date range of 1290–1410 CE.<sup>105</sup>



Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
5 cm

**Figure 17** Wooden vessel from Cloonarkan townland, Co. Galway (NMI 2017:60-61) © National Museum of Ireland

**103** Pyrography refers to the technique of decoration by pressing red hot metal rods against wood so that the wood turns black, see Raftery, 'A Bog-Butter Vessel from near Tuam, Co. Galway'; Grey, 'Material culture of

high status drinking ritual', 76.

**104** NMI 1955:45.1-.2

**105** Cronin, Downey, Synnott, *et al.*, 'Composition of Ancient Irish Bog Butter'.

A similar date range is likely for the Foxford and Cloonarkan vessels and these finds add to the significant corpus of bog butter methers known from medieval Ireland. The specific nature of these vessels and their contents suggests a particular significance for bog butter in the later medieval period. These finds are important physical evidence for literary references to butter measures in medieval written sources.<sup>106</sup>

### Conclusion

As Lucas has noted, ‘virtually everyone in [early Irish] society was preoccupied with cows’ and ‘they touched the lives of everyone from sunrise to sunset from birth to death’.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, cows were ‘of such overweening importance that they almost had a status of members of society’.<sup>108</sup> One of the main reasons for this was the fact that cows yielded milk, a foodstuff that formed a large part of the national diet.<sup>109</sup> Cows played a hugely significant role in the economy, ‘the cow was the measure of everything; it was the unit of value’.<sup>110</sup> Bog butter finds provide archaeological support for the historical sources, which emphasise the importance of cows and dairying in ancient Ireland.<sup>111</sup> Despite this, bog butter remains one of the most enigmatic of all known archaeological finds. It is the most striking physical expression for the vast range of milk products referenced in early Irish sources, which formed such an integral part of the diet in early Ireland. Its deposition in bogs has meant that it has survived, in some cases for thousands of years, where under other circumstances it would not have. A comprehensive programme of radiocarbon dating by the National Museum of Ireland has demonstrated that butter was being deposited in bogs from the early Bronze Age period,<sup>112</sup> and that deposition continued into the post-medieval period. While the reasons for deposition of butter in bogs undoubtedly varied over time and space, its burial over many millennia represents a remarkable phenomenon and underscores the importance of dairying in Ireland over the past four thousand years. Advances in scientific analyses have undoubtedly transformed our understanding of many aspects of bog butter and its composition. This paper has presented for the first time, all of the radiocarbon dates for bog butter obtained by the NMI since the year 2000 and provides a comprehensive overview of the type of vessels in which butter was deposited. As peat harvesting decreases on a national scale, the instances of the discovery of bog butter will also decline, making the national collection held in the National Museum of Ireland all the more precious as a resource, one to be treasured for many years to come.

**106** Grey, ‘Material culture of high-status drinking ritual’, 217. **107** Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 3. **108** Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 3. **109** Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 4; Lucas, ‘Irish Food Before the Potato’. **110** Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*, 4. **111** Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland*; Lucas, ‘Irish Food Before the Potato’. **112** The early Bronze Age period in Ireland dates from approximately 2500 BCE to 1600/1500 BCE.

**Table 1** Finds of bog butter registered by the National Museum of Ireland since 2000

NMI Reg. No.	Townland	County	Laboratory No. & uncalibrated date	Calibrated Date (2 sigma)	Container
NMI 2000:30	Kilgarriff	Galway	N/A	N/A	Fragmentary material adhering to the butter may represent a form of covering which is now very desiccated and not readily identifiable
NMI 2000:55	Clonmeen	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Fragmentary material adhering to the butter may represent a bark covering
NMI 2000:56	Corlea	Longford	N/A	N/A	A thin layer of dried out material adhering to the butter may represent a bark covering
NMI 2000:58	Rathfeston	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Carved wooden keg with projecting perforated handles and a separately manufactured lid
NMI 2000:175	Kilmakill	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Carved wooden vessel
NMI 2001:2	Cloonshannagh	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	Organic container (which no longer survives) and associated withy
NMI 2001:70	Annaghcorrib	Galway	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2001:71	Derryadd	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Bark covering and associated hazel withy
NMI 2001:72	Derryadd	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Hazel withy fragments
NMI 2001:75	Begnagh	Longford	N/A	N/A	Carved wooden vessel with separate lid and base
NMI 2002:75	Lanespark	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Carved wooden vessel with separate base and lid and a pair of projecting handles
NMI 2002C1:195.1	Clongowna	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a wooden vessel or container. Differential colour on the surface of the butter may be suggestive of a covering which no longer survives
NMI 2004:120	Moher	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	No vessel or container
NMI 2004:121	Cloonmore	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	No vessel or container
NMI 2004:123	Moydrum or Bogstown	Meath	N/A	N/A	Incomplete carved one piece wooden vessel
NMI 2004:124	Ballybeg	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Bark covering surviving in parts
NMI 2004:126	Ballynaskeagh	Westmeath	N/A	N/A	Carved one-piece wood vessel with two projecting perforated lug handles. Withies threaded through handle perforations
NMI 2004:128	Turreen	Longford	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container

**Table 1** *continued*

NMI Reg. No.	Townland	County	Laboratory No. & uncalibrated date	Calibrated Date (2 sigma)	Container
NMI 2004:130	Cooldine	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2004:152	Bracklin Big	Offaly	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2004:154	Cashel	Galway	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2004:179	Doughil	Roscommon	UBA-33361 3230±25 BP	1532–1438 BCE	No evidence for a container
NMI 2005:52	Ballybeg	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Withy present
NMI 2005:54	Derryville Bog	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No mention of a container
NMI 2006:59	Ballybeg	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2006:60	Tooreen	Offaly	UBA-33366 3772±34 BP	2296–2040 BCE	No evidence for a container
NMI 2006:85	Newtown	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Bark covering (traces surviving only)
NMI 2007:38	Clooncloose	Sligo	N/A	N/A	Remnants of possible animal membrane or bark on the underside
NMI 2007:39	Derragh	Mayo	N/A	N/A	Plant fibres on the surface may be the remnants of a covering
NMI 2007:40	Island/ Riverlyons	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Possible withy fragments associated with this butter
NMI 2007:42	Erenagh	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	Wicker container
NMI 2007:46	N/A	N/A	UBA-33365 1889±44 BP	26–241 CE	Grassy fibres/plant remains may indicate a possible covering
NMI 2007:47	Near Athlone	Westmeath	N/A	N/A	Possibly found associated with a wooden container
NMI 2007:48	Near Athlone	Westmeath	N/A	N/A	Wooden vessel without a lid
NMI 2007:119	Moher	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2007:120	Ballintogher	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2007:121	Ballintogher	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2007:220	Clonmeen	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Withy present
NMI 2008:2	Cloonaghboy	Mayo	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2008:39	Cloondorrigha	Sligo	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2008:40	Derricknew	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2008:41	Lurgoe	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2008:42	Ballintogher	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Some organic covering present which may represent the remnants of a container



**Table 1** *continued*

NMI Reg. No.	Townland	County	Laboratory No. & uncalibrated date	Calibrated Date (2 sigma)	Container
NMI 2008:43	Ballintogher	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2009:60	Cashel	Laois	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2009:74	Timahoe East	Kildare	UBA-18467 1960±39 BP	43 BCE–202 CE	Large carved vessel of Earwood type K2 with projecting roll-moulded perforated handles
NMI 2009:80	Killeen	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Bark covering and associated withy
NMI 2009:102	Creglahan	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	No container but associated withy
NMI 2009:265	Granaghan	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	No container present
NMI 2009:266	Oldtowndonore	Kildare	N/A	N/A	No container present
NMI 2010:162	Clooncashel Beg	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	Wood fragments present, probable vessel
NMI 2010:257	Moydrum or Bogstown	Meath	N/A	N/A	Carved one-piece tub shaped vessel with circular base inserted. No evidence for a lid but one may have originally been present
NMI 2010:325	Ballynakill	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2010:327	Anrittabeg	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	Bark covering and associated wooden stake
NMI 2010:329	Lyneen	Longford	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2010:422	Raheens	Kildare	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2010:423	Ballynakill	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2011:114	Clonagh East	Offaly	UBA-19124 (alder vessel— 2011:113 dated) 1955±28 BP	39 BCE–153 CE	Carved alder vessel with two projecting roll-moulded handles and separate base and lid.
NMI 2011:129	Derrymore	Galway	UBA-19117 2007±26 BP	50 BCE–106 CE	Associated wooden trough
NMI 2011:132	Timahoe	Kildare	UBA-33364 887±34 BP	1041–1224 CE	Traces of a withy on one side
NMI 2011:249	Ummeras More	Kildare	N/A	N/A	Withies possibly associated with this butter
NMI 2011:258	Colt	Laois	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2011:284	Cranalagh More	Longford	N/A	N/A	Wicker and bark container
NMI 2011:286	Timahoe East	Kildare	N/A	N/A	Fragments of possible bark covering in the dried peat adhering to the butter

**Table 1** *continued*

NMI Reg. No.	Townland	County	Laboratory No. & uncalibrated date	Calibrated Date (2 sigma)	Container
NMI 2011:287	Clooncrim	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	Carved wood vessel
NMI 2012:5	Foxford	Mayo	N/A	N/A	Mether (alder) with inserted birch base. Two lug handles.
NMI 2012:6	Longfordpass South	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2012:32	Pollnabrone	Galway	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2012:236	Baunmore	Kilkenny	N/A	N/A	Animal skin/membrane covering and associated withies
NMI 2012:239	Inchirourke	Tipperary	UBA-30886 3885±45 BP	2470–2205 BCE	Grass or straw covering and associated withies
NMI 2012:241	Baunmore	Kilkenny	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2013:48	Unknown (from Toar Bog)	Westmeath	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2013:98	Cappagh	Roscommon	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2013:132	Unknown (Bellacorrick area)	Mayo	N/A	N/A	No surviving covering
NMI 2013:133	Sonnagh	Mayo	UBA-9609 922±30 BP	1035–1207 CE	No surviving container/covering though the butter has perforations on the surface and some linear impressions which may suggest the former presence of same
NMI 2013:135 .1-.2	Farm	Galway	N/A	N/A	Carved one-piece wooden vessel, very fragmentary and desiccated
NMI 2013:137	Ballyduff South	Offaly	N/A	N/A	No container present
NMI 2013:140	Ballynakill	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Withy associated with the butter
NMI 2013:141	Broughal	Offaly	N/A	N/A	No container present
NMI 2013:142	Broughal	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Withy associated with the butter
NMI 2013:148 .1-.3	Muckanagh	Mayo	N/A	N/A	Carved wooden keg with projecting perforated handles. Associated fragments of leather also survive
NMI 2013:150	Derryhogan	Tipperary	UBA-9608 1436±22 BP	594–652 CE	Reportedly found in a wooden container which does not survive
NMI 2013:151	Clooncolry	Leitrim	N/A	N/A	Carved one-piece vessel with projecting, perforated lug handles
NMI 2013:152	Cashel	Donegal	N/A	N/A	Traces of a possible animal skin/membrane covering

**Table 1** *continued*

NMI Reg. No.	Townland	County	Laboratory No. & uncalibrated date	Calibrated Date (2 sigma)	Container
NMI 2013:153	Cahernagarry	Galway	N/A	N/A	Container present
NMI 2013:156	Cott	Kildare	N/A	N/A	Carved one-piece vessel with projecting lugs
NMI 2013:415	Ballybeg	Tipperary	N/A	N/A	Carved one piece vessel with projecting lugs and lid
NMI 2014:82	Blakesmountain	Clare	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2014:159	Ballyduff	Offaly	UBA-30887 3942±28 BP & UBA-33347 3721±29 BP	UBA-30887: 2566–2309 BCE UBA-33347: 2202–2029 BCE	Bark covering
NMI 2014:222	Ballinderry	Kildare	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2014:231	Coologe	Offaly	UBA-33346 1836±24 BP	127–306 CE	Possible animal membrane covering and associated withy
NMI 2015:19	Shancloon	Galway	N/A	N/A	Bark covering and associated withy
NMI 2015:24	Cott	Kildare	UBA-30888 2412±26 BP	733–402 BCE	Carved one piece vessel which would originally have had projecting lugs, now broken off
NMI 2015:27	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	The form of the butter suggests that a container once existed but none survives
NMI 2015:30	Begnagh	Longford	UBA-33340 2021±38 BP	148 BCE–115 CE	Hazel withy associated with butter
NMI 2016:117	Derryvulcaun	Mayo	UBA-9605 506±23 BP	1405–1442 CE	Fragments of a wooden vessel present
NMI 2016:126	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No evidence for a container
NMI 2016:127	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Possible bark covering
NMI 2016:138	Drakerath	Meath	UBA-33353 1926±33 BP	22–209 CE	Matted vegetation on surface may be the remains of a covering or container
NMI 2016:151	Barraglanna	Mayo	N/A	N/A	Wood or bark vessel (fragmentary)
NMI 2016:177	Ballykean	Offaly	UBA-33338 3748±26 BP	2280–2038 BCE	Bark covering
NMI 2016:182	Pallasboy	Westmeath	UBA-33339 1922±23BP	28–206 CE	Carved alder vessel with projecting lugs and a separate lid and base. Hazel stake lay across the butter
NMI 2016:223	Clonava	Westmeath	UBA-9610 3061±33 BP	1413–1225 BCE	Only a fragment of butter survives, no evidence for container on the surviving fragment
NMI 2017:60	Cloonarkan	Galway	N/A	N/A	Carved two-handled mether

**Table 1** *continued*

NMI Reg. No.	Townland	County	Laboratory No. & uncalibrated date	Calibrated Date (2 sigma)	Container
NMI 2017:73	Cloncoose North	Roscommon	UBA-33360 2473±35 BP	769–421 BCE	Animal membrane covering
NMI 2018:13	Broughal	Offaly	N/A	N/A	Wicker container (traces only)
NMI 2018:21	Cloonbar	Galway	UBA-39437 1963±31 BP	43 BCE–128 CE	Bark covering and associated withy
NMI 2018:27	Gowlaun	Mayo	UBA-33363 465±27 BP	1412–1458 CE	Bark covering
NMI 2018:29	N/A	Leitrim	N/A	N/A	Bark covering
NMI 2018:32	Moher	Roscommon	UBA-39436 2332±23 BP	452–371 BCE	Carved one-piece wooden vessel and withy
NMI 2018:35	Rossan	Meath	UBA-39439 3098±24 BP	1425–1290 BCE	Bark covering
NMI 2018:37	Knockersally or Colehill	Meath	UBA-39438 3833±35 BP	2455–2149 BCE	Bark covering
NMI 2018:50	Annaghmore and Annaghbeg	Offaly	UBA-39435 2045±25 BP	150 BCE–56 CE	Carved alder vessel (Earwood K2 type) with projecting perforated roll-moulded lugs
NMI 2018:52	Annaghmore and Annaghbeg	Offaly	UBA-39434 2028±23 BP	94 BCE–60 CE	Hazel withy associated with butter
NMI 2019:130	Hawkfield	Kildare	UBA-41824 1751±23 BP	242–377 CE	Bark covering
NMI 2021:10	Rathlumber	Offaly	UBA- 45188 2069±25 BP	166 BCE–7 CE	Carved alderwood vessel with projecting perforated roll-moulded lugs (Earwood K2?)
NMI 2022:92	Derraghan Beg	Longford	UBA-49626 1003±26 BP	993–1151 CE	Bark covering
NMI 2022:138	Muckloon	Galway	UBA-49627 2991±24 BP	1371–1125 BCE	Bark covering and associated hazel withy
NMI 2022:148	Carrowmore	Roscommon	UBA-49628 2915±24 BP	1207–1016 BCE	Bark covering
NMI 2022:165	Blyry Lower	Westmeath	UBA-49629 3023± 25 BP	1389–1134 BCE	Bark covering and associated hazel withy

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**06**

*Beekeeping and Honey  
in Ancient Ireland*

**Shane Lehane**

*Na trí ruda is deacra do thuigsint san domhan,  
–inntleacht na mban, obair na mbeach, teacht is imtheacht na taoide.*

The three most incomprehensible things in the world,  
–the mind of woman, the labour of the bees, the ebb and flow of the tide.<sup>1</sup>

An impressive host of pioneering historians and commentators, including the great figures of John O'Donovan,<sup>2</sup> Eugene O'Curry,<sup>3</sup> and Patrick Weston Joyce,<sup>4</sup> have filtered through the manuscripts and editions of texts relating to Early Medieval Ireland to elucidate and explore different aspects of Irish food traditions, including honey. It is a testament to their early scholarship that many of the references and inferences hereunder can be linked to their initial work. Equally, the editions, translations, and enquiring notes regarding these texts by scholars such as Whitley Stokes,<sup>5</sup> Kuno Meyer,<sup>6</sup> and Edward J. Gwynn<sup>7</sup> are very rich as primary sources. In terms of more recent culinary scholarship, A. T. Lucas's paper on 'Irish Food before the Potato' disappointingly makes but a passing remark on honey: 'Honey was, of course, the only sweetening agent and was so commonly used, it is unnecessary to refer to it in detail'.<sup>8</sup>

By far the most thorough and seminal work on beekeeping and honey in Early Medieval Ireland is *Bechbretha*, the highly detailed seventh century law-tract on beekeeping edited by Fergus Kelly and Thomas Charles-Edwards.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Kelly's *Early Irish Farming* is equally replete with thorough and hard-won detail.<sup>10</sup> This chapter draws heavily from Kelly's scholarship and that of Eva Crane (1912–2007),<sup>11</sup> whose life's work was the study of bees and honey through time and throughout the world.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis in this paper is to bring the collection of early medieval references to beekeeping and honey together and combine it with observations from the author's own beekeeping experience and also to bolster the hitherto unexplored applications of honey as a flavouring and as a culinary ingredient.

**1** Thomas Francis O'Rahilly, *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1922), 73.

**2** John O'Donovan, 'Pre-Christian Notices in Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 8 (1860), 239–51.

**3** Eugene O'Curry, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish* (New York: Lemma Pub. Corp., 1971).

**4** P. W. Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, 2nd edition (Limerick; Kansas

City: Irish Genealogical Foundation, 1997).

**5** Whitley Stokes, *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890).

**6** Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Vision of MacConglinne: A Middle-Irish Wonder Tale* (London: D. Nutt, 1892).

**7** Edward J. Gwynn, 'The Rule of Tallaght', *Second Supplemental Volume to Hermathena* 44 (1927).

**8** A. T. Lucas, 'Irish Food

before the Potato', *Gwerin: A Half-Yearly Journal of Folk Life* 3: 2 (1960), 40.

**9** Thomas M. Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly, *Bechbretha: an Old Irish law-tract on bee-keeping*, *Early Irish Law Series*, I (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983], 2008).

**10** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-Texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD* (School of Celtic Studies, Dublin

Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997). I am greatly indebted to Professor Fergus Kelly for reading a draft of this paper and making a number of valuable suggestions.

**11** 'About Eva Crane', accessed 30 June 2023, <https://www.evacrane.org/page/eva-crane>.

**12** Eva Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999).



### Bees and beekeeping in Early Ireland

At present, the prehistoric archaeological record of honey and bees is but circumstantial in nature. Some classical commentators suggested that Ireland was without bees before their introduction with Christianity. In a seemingly pejorative summary of *Hibernia* and her population c. 300 CE, Gaius Julius Solinus includes the following remark: ‘There is never a bee among them. If someone scatters dust or stones carried from that land among the hives, the swarms will abandon the honeycombs’.<sup>13</sup>

In and around 600, the Venerable Bede is more positive, stating ‘the island abounds with milk and honey’.<sup>14</sup> In the twelfth century, Giraldus Cambrensis attempts to set the record straight, reaffirming that ‘the island is rich in pastures and meadows, honey and milk’, while he corrects Solinus’s observation, adding:

[l]ike other countries, it has bees producing honey, and I think it would flow from their cells more abundantly, if the increase of the swarms were not checked by the bitter and poisonous yews with which the woods of the island abound; or rather, if the violent winds, and the moisture of the climate, in Ireland, did not disperse the swarms of so minute an animal, or cause them to perish.<sup>15</sup>

Ireland as a lush and idyllic environment for supporting a host of diverse domestic and wild fauna, including interesting detail of bees living in trees, is illustrated in an imaginative etching of 1654 as the title page of Sir James Ware’s *Hibernia Antiqua* (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup>

Grace McCormack, who has conducted significant research on the genetics of the Irish honeybees, asserts that there is no reason to indicate that the honeybee could not have arrived in Ireland in and around the time of post-Ice Age tree colonisation (c. 8,000 BCE) when either Ireland was connected to Britain or there was very little distance between the two islands.<sup>17</sup> In this prehistoric period the hollow cavities of dead trees of the mixed deciduous woodlands would have provided the perfect natural habitat for native bees. There is on-going research into beeswax residues detected in pottery vessels from the Neolithic (c. 4,000 BCE) and the Bronze Age (c. 2,500 BCE onwards) to determine if beeswax was used to seal the pots.<sup>18</sup> Such a residue may well be a result of the pots being used to separate honey from the wax but recent samples from Ireland have not yielded such evidence.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ‘ToposText’, accessed 14 March 2023, <https://topostext.org/work/747>.

<sup>14</sup> The Venerable Bede, *The Venerable Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England*, ed. J. A. (John Allen) Giles (London: H. G. Bohn, 1859), 7, <http://archive.org/details/venerablebedesecobede>.

<sup>15</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Topograpy of Ireland*, ed. T. Wright, trans. T. Forester (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications Medieval Latin Series, 2000).  
<sup>16</sup> Title-Page to Sir James Ware’s *De Hibernia & Antiquitatibus Ejus, Disquisitiones* (London: 1654,

also used in later editions), n.d., British Museum, accessed 22 June 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Grace McCormack, *The Origins and Diversity of Apis Mellifera in Ireland, 2021*, A Webinar hosted by the Irish Beekeepers’ Association, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPr6ny-y\\_kE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPr6ny-y_kE).

Personal Communication with Grace McCormack.

<sup>18</sup> Jessica Smyth and Richard P. Evershed, ‘The Molecules of Meals: New Insight into Neolithic Foodways’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics,*



Bees, beekeepers, and honey are firmly rooted in a number of distinctive Irish placenames.<sup>20</sup> *Cluain Meala* or Clonmel, ‘Honey Meadow’, and the nearby townland of *Carraig an tSaithe* or Carrigataha, ‘The Rock of the Swarm of ‘Bees’, both in Co. Tipperary, support a firm association with bees. To this day, this area is the stalwart of Irish beekeeping and has been to the fore in promoting the positive qualities of the distinctive genetic stock of the ‘Native Irish Honey Bee’.<sup>21</sup> A few miles from the honey meadows of Clonmel is the tower house of *Cill Chais*, Kilkash, well known to many Irish people for its famous early eighteenth-century lament marking the death of Margaret Magennis, Viscountess Iveagh (1673–1744), which begins ‘*Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid? Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár*’.<sup>22</sup> In the third verse, the loss of the habitual work of the bees in the locality is alluded to:

Literature 115C (2015), 27.  
**19** Mélanie Roffet-Salque et al., ‘Widespread Exploitation of the Honeybee by Early Neolithic Farmers’, *Nature* 527 (November 2015), 226–30, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature15757>. The well-known archaeological adage ‘the absence of evidence is not

evidence of absence’ should be noted here. **20** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Gastro-Topography: Exploring Food-Related Placenames in Ireland’, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 38: 1/2 (2014), 126–57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43410726>  
**21** ‘The Native Irish Honey

Bee Society—*Apis Mellifera Mellifera*’, accessed 13 July 2023, <https://nihbs.org/>.  
**22** Angela Bourke (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. IV (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 443. ‘Now what will we do for timber, with the last of the woods laid low?’.

**Figure 1** Title-Page to Sir James Ware’s *De Hibernia & Antiquitatibus Ejus, Disquisitiones* (London: 1654, also used in later editions) © The Trustees of the British Museum.

*ná fiú na beacha chun saothair,  
thabharfadh mil agus céir don tslua.*

nor even the bees at their labour,  
bringing honey and wax to us all.

The Cistercian Mellifont Abbey in Co. Louth, founded in 1142, boasts an interesting etymology with Mellifont deriving from Latin *Fons Mellis*, ‘fountain of honey’. In Co. Westmeath there is *Corr na mbeach*, Cornamagh, ‘The round hill/hollow of the bees’, and in Co. Cork *Cúil na mbeach*, Coolnamagh, ‘The bee nook’, while the well-known Co. Clare town *Baile uí Bheacháin*, Ballyvaughan, takes its name from the family name *Ó Beacháin* (Behan), whose name means ‘bee-keeper’.<sup>23</sup> Such detail in itself does little to establish the extent of any antiquity of beekeeping but the philological pedigree of bee-related words is more definitive.

The linguistic evidence clearly supports a prehistoric antiquity for bees in Ireland with the Irish words *bech* ‘bee’, *mil* ‘honey’, and *mid* ‘mead’ all cognates of a common ancient Indo-European root.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the terms *tarbsaithe*, ‘bull-swarm’, and *betham*, ‘colony of bees’, glossed to the seventh century law tract on beekeeping, *Bechbretha*, are clearly rooted in the pre-Christian Common Celtic language, demonstrating that a knowledge of bees and their swarms was well established in the Celtic pre-Christian period.<sup>25</sup>

There is no doubt that bees were in Ireland before the fifth century; it is reasonable to suggest that newly settled Christian culture coming from the late Roman world and the Mediterranean would have built upon the existing traditions and perhaps applied new apicultural approaches and methods. The shift from a reliance on honey sourced in the wilds of the woodlands to keeping bees in wooden or wicker hives in a controlled domestic context may have been accentuated by the new cultural demands. The emphasis on keeping bees in a specific Christian monastic context may have been to produce beeswax rather than honey. Christianity provided a new demand for beeswax for its candles: the beeswax candle providing a pure, smokeless, bright flame suited to the sacred rituals of the church rather than the inferior everyday tallow candles that smoked and spluttered.<sup>26</sup> The beeswax was also used for items like the *pólaire*, ‘wax writing tablets’, central to the new literacy and learning.<sup>27</sup>

**23** I am indebted to Dr Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire for his suggestions relating to bee and honey related toponymy.

**24** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 109.

**25** Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*, 41.

**26** The tenth century Welsh law reads ‘The origin of Bees

is from Paradise, and on account of the sin of man they came hence, and God conferred his blessing upon them, therefore the mass cannot be said without the wax,’ quoted in Hilda M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (London: Bee Books

New & Old, 1986). 196.

**27** Shane Lehane, ‘The Original IPad: The Irish Medieval BeePad’, *An Beachaire: The Irish Beekeeper* 69: 7/8 (2014), 250–52. and *An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, based on the Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language

(Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–1976) ([www.dil.ie](http://www.dil.ie) 2019) hereafter eDIL s.v. pólaire



**Figure 2** Stained glass window design of St Gobnait by Harry Clarke, for Honan Hostel and Chapel, Cork, Ireland, Collection of the Rakow Research Library, The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York.

The Christian association with domesticated apiculture is exemplified in that a number of Irish saints are portrayed as established beekeepers. St Gobnait of Ballyvourney, Co. Cork (Figure 2), whose legend tells us that she repelled a raiding party by sending her bees after them is perhaps the best known.<sup>28</sup> The tale of Gobnait and the bees from the Irish Folklore Schools' Collection is shown in Figure 4. In addition, St Modomnóc of Tibberaghney, Co. Kilkenny, whom *Féilire Óengusso* marks as his feast day of 13th February, makes the claim that he brought the first honeybees to Ireland from St David's monastery in Wales. This story is captured in a County Leitrim stained-glass window shown in Figure 3.

*Hi Curchán mo Domnóc, anair tar muir nglédenn, dobert,  
brígach núalann síl, mbúadach mbech n-Ereinn*

In a little boat from the east, over the pure-coloured sea, Mo Domnóc brought—vigorous cry!—the gifted race of Ireland's bees.<sup>29</sup>

As St Modomnóc was returning home to Ireland, the bees continued to follow him and despite numerous efforts to re-establish them in their hives, eventually with St David's blessing, they followed him, leaving the Welsh church bereft of its stock of bees.<sup>30</sup> St Molaga of Fermoy shares a very similar hagiography with Modomnóc and he too is given the gift of bees from St David and brings them to Ireland. Both saints have a connection with the site of *Lann Bechaire* (Breemount near Balbriggan, Co. Dublin).<sup>31</sup> Molaga's feast day is on the 20th January.<sup>32</sup> Modomnóc's feast day is the thirteenth February while Gobnait's is celebrated on the 11th February;<sup>33</sup> following the abstraction of 11 days in the calendar in 1752, Gobnait is clearly contiguous with Brigid, the saint and goddess figure who marks the beginning of the new cycle of life on 1st February, the ancient festival of Imbolc.<sup>34</sup> All Irish beekeepers are keenly aware of this time of the year when the first crocuses and dandelions appear and the hives show the first signs of life following the period of stasis. That the prime beekeeping saints, Modomnóc and/or Molaga and Gobnait are fixed in the calendar when the bees reawaken from the winter of hibernation is highly significant.

**28** IFCS 342:116–24 Collector: Bridie O'Riordan, Seanbhaile Sheáin, Co. Cork offers an excellent account of the inherited traditions of Gobnait and the account of her associations with bees. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4811665/4810573>; See also M.T. Kelly, 'Saint Gobnata, and Her Hive of Bees', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 2: 3 (1897): 100–106. and Edith M. Guest, 'Ballyvourney and Its

Sheela-Na-Gig', *Folklore* 48: 4 (1 December 1937), 374–84.

**29** Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Óengusso Celi De: Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984), 60. <https://archive.org/details/felireoengussoceooounse/page/n5/mode/2up> **30** Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 477–78. **31** Máire Herbert, 'Observations on the Life of Molaga', in John

Carey, Máire Herbert, and Kevin Murray (eds), *Cín Chille Cúile: Essays in Honour of Pádraig Ó Riain* (Cork: Celtic Studies Publications, 2004), 133–34. **32** Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, 480–82. **33** Whitley Stokes (ed.), 'On the Calendar of Oengus', *The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 1 (1880), 42. **34** Séamas Ó Catháin, *The Festival of Brigid: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman* (Blackrock, Co.

Dublin: DBA Publications, 1995). Shane Lehane, 'Sheelah Take a Bow: St Patrick's Wife? Probably Not—She Was Far More Important than That', *Irish Times*, 15 March 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/sheelah-take-a-bow-st-patrick-s-wife-probably-not-she-was-far-more-important-than-that-1.3825942>



**Figure 3** Image of St Modomnóc surrounded by bees from a stained-glass window by An Túr Gloine in Farnaught Church, Lough Rynn, Co. Leitrim, in honour of Revd Joseph Digges (1885–1933) who was rector there and a prominent beekeeper. © Reproduced with the permission of the Representative Church Body of the Church of Ireland; photograph by David Lawrence

As insects that are vital for pollination and providing honey, bees are singled out in the *Annals of Ulster*, which notes ‘a mortality of bees’ in the year 950, and in 992 it states: ‘Great mortality upon men, and upon cattle and bees throughout all Ireland in this year’.<sup>35</sup> Such entries may well be symbolic, incorporating a mythological reflection of bad kingship that expounds the infertility and destitution of a badly governed kingdom. Equally, it might be representative of one of many diseases that have devastated bee populations, such as foulbrood or acarine. The latter killed a huge percentage of bees in Britain and Europe from when it was first discovered in 1906.<sup>36</sup> It might also take cognisance of very poor weather conditions over a span of years that may have affected the ability of the bees to reproduce; excessive rainfall often causing unmated virgin queens and a general lack of pollen and nectar sources.

A considerable contribution to the understanding of beekeeping in early medieval Ireland is contained in the seventh century Irish legal text *Bechbretha*, ‘Bee Judgements’.<sup>37</sup> The complexity of keeping bees and the associated intricate responses to the permutations of the ownership of a hive; the liabilities for injury caused by bees; the right to ownership of swarms and their produce and a whole host of detail is included and elucidated in extraordinary detail (See Figure 5). From this early text and its ninth century glosses, it can be appreciated that whatever about bees in the wild, the keeping of domesticated bees was well established in Ireland by this time. It might be suggested that the references to beehives made of wood in *Bechbretha*, as in *crand*, ‘tree hives’,<sup>38</sup> and *lestar*, ‘hollowed-out logs’,<sup>39</sup> may draw from an earlier tradition cognisant of the wild bees’ natural habitat. In several of the lives of the saints, bringing home honey from the wild seems to have been a popular activity: in the Life of St Patrick, we read:

At another time, the little boys of the place were bringing their mothers honey from the comb. So his nurse said to him, ‘Thou bringest no honey to me, my boy, even as the boys of the hamlet bring it to their mothers.’ Then, taking a vessel, he goes to the water, and sained the water so that it became honey; and relics [?] were made of that honey, and it used to heal every disease.<sup>40</sup>

Kelly makes the point that *lestar*, ‘a beehive’, and the collective *lestrae*, ‘a collection of hives, an apiary’,<sup>41</sup> is a borrowing from British (Welsh *llestr*, Cornish *lester*, Breton *lestr*) and entered the Irish language around the fifth–sixth centuries,<sup>42</sup>

**35** William M. Hennessy (ed.), *Annals of Ulster, a Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 431, to A.D. 1540*, Vol. 1 (Dublin: Printed for H.M. Stationery Off., by A. Thom & Co. (Limited), 1887), 469 and 501.  
**36** Brother Adam, “Isle of Wight” or Acariñe Disease:

Its Historical and Practical Aspects’, *Bee World* 49: 1 (1 March 1968), 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0005772X.1968.11097180>. **37** Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*. **38** Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*. Appendix 4, 184–5 *Diri craind becc*, ‘the

penalty for a tree of bees’.

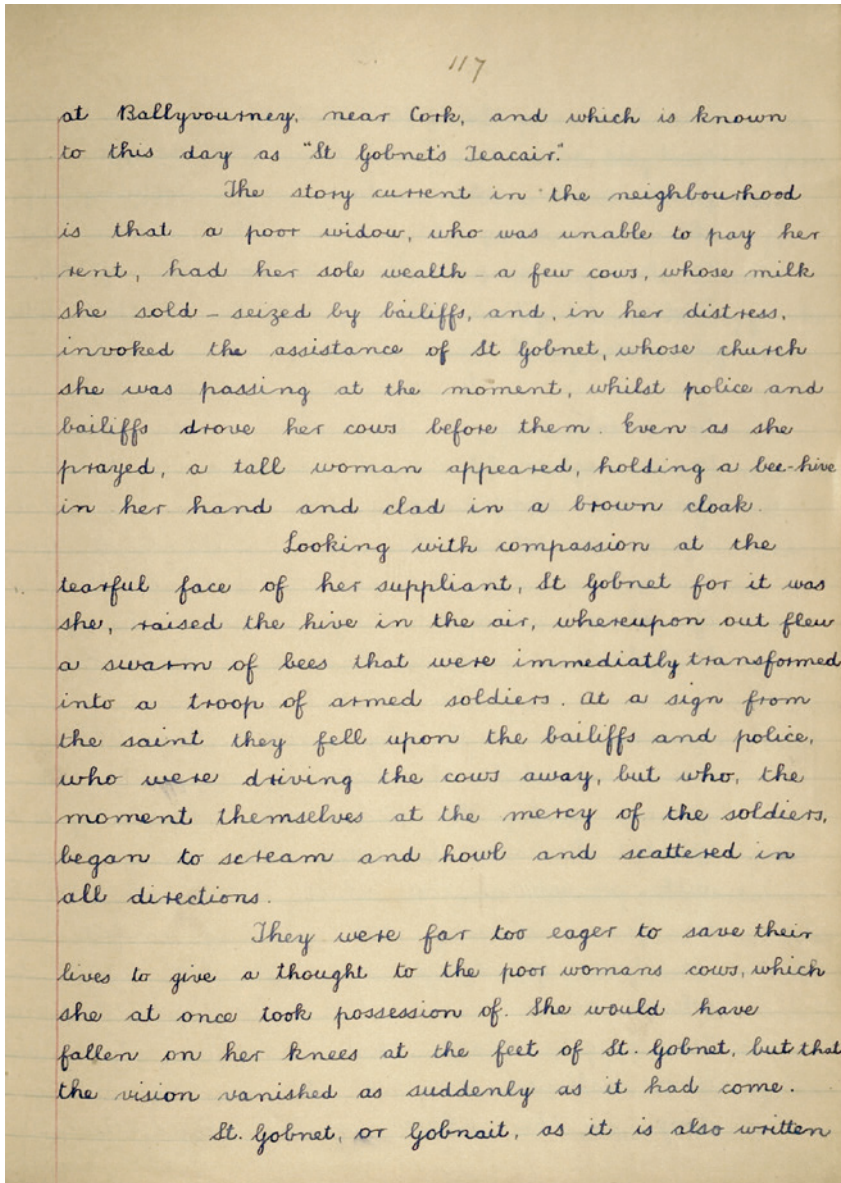
**39** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 110.

**40** Stokes, *Lives of Saints, from the Book of Lismore*, 152.

‘Sained’, to make the sign of the cross over so as to bless or protect from evil.

**41** *Bechbretha* §30

(*Bechbretha* hereafter BB). **42** Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*. 44.



**Figure 4** St Gobnait's Beehive from The Irish Folklore Schools' Collection Volume 0342, Page 117, Collector: Bridie O'Riordan, Seanbhaile Sheáin, Co. Cork.



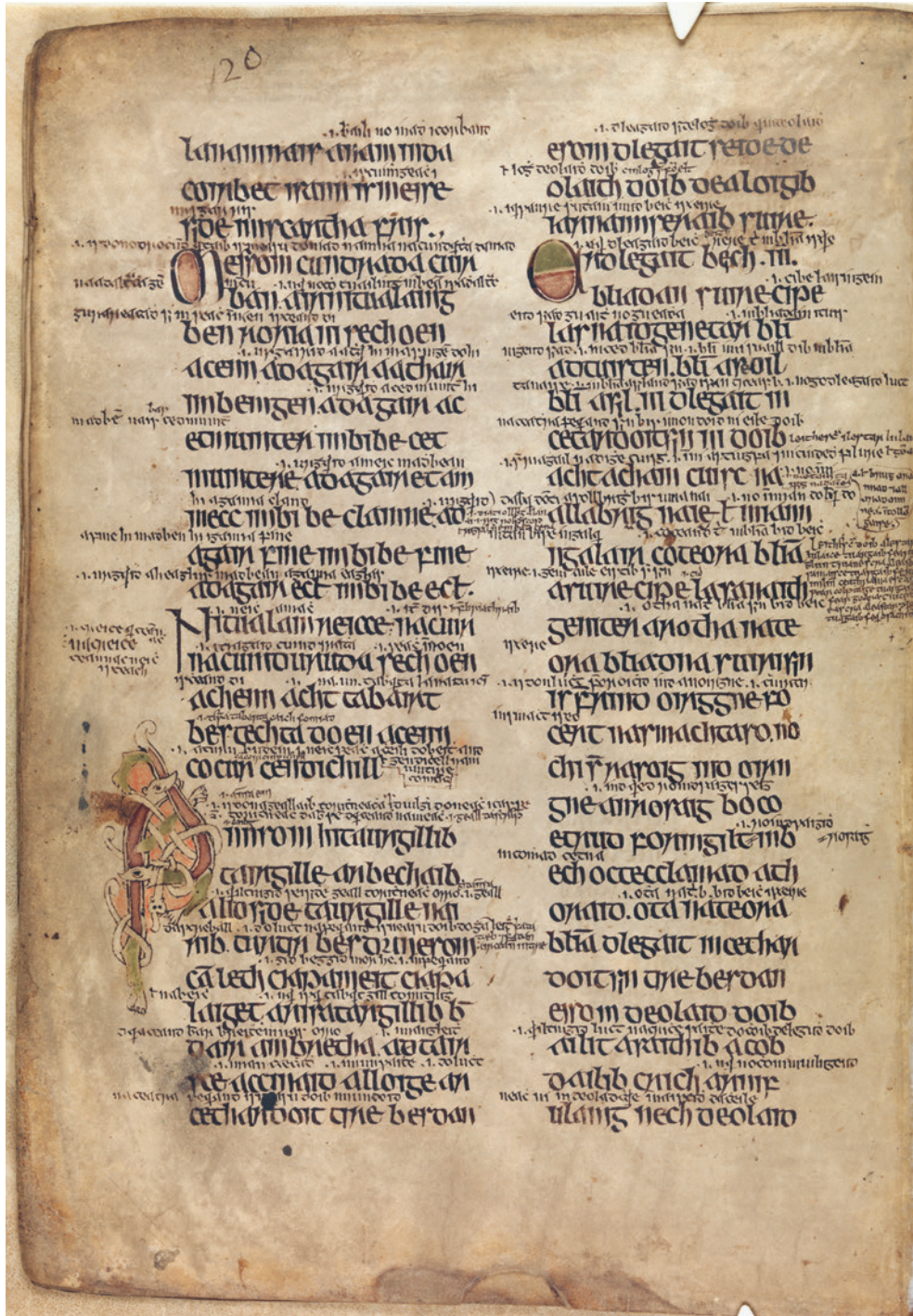


Figure 5 The opening section of Bechbretha: Ansam hi tairgillib tairgille ar beachaib 'Most difficult among fore-pledges is a fore-pledge for bees' from TCD MS 1316; H. 2. 15a, p. 20.

supporting the idea that a more refined approach to apiculture came in the wake of the Roman empire and the introduction of Christianity.

The law tract *Bechbretha* tells us that bees were kept variously in the *lubgort*, ‘orchard/herb garden’,<sup>43</sup> in an *llius*, ‘a courtyard’, or/and in the *faithche*, ‘a field near the house’. There is a mention of hens eating bees, *máethslucud bech*, ‘the soft swallowing of bees’<sup>44</sup> suggesting that the bees were kept within a short distance from the home. Bees were also kept in a *sechtar faithchi*, ‘a distant place’, well away from the house.<sup>45</sup> The extent of their foraging territory equates with the distance that a cow might wander freely until it returns for milking.<sup>46</sup> Correspondingly, the bees can forage and/or swarm on what is termed *faithche téchtae*, ‘a lawful green’ (cleared grazing land around the farm),<sup>47</sup> the extent of which is colourfully described as far as the sound of a bell<sup>48</sup> or the crowing of a cock reaches.<sup>49</sup> There is mention that on occasion a number of beekeepers kept their beehives in one place,<sup>50</sup> suggesting that there was an awareness of providing a context for queens to be mated by drones from diverse hives rather than inbreeding from one’s own isolated hives, causing the bees to be angry and unmanageable. This issue of homozygosity is of concern for modern beekeepers<sup>51</sup> and while such scientific reasoning was certainly not there in antiquity, it is possible that an evolved vernacular wisdom of hiving arrangements resulting in calm, wieldy bees was in practice.

The mention in *Bechbretha* of a swarm of bees settling on *brat scarthae*, ‘a spread cloth’—a practice still universal amongst beekeepers everywhere—is testament to established apicultural techniques. The same cloth would have been integral to any medieval beekeepers’ kit, important for keeping the bees intact by covering the mouth of the skep (a straw or wicker beehive) when moving the hive. Equally, the once widespread practice of ‘driving the bees by drumming’ i.e., transferring them from one bee skep to another, calls for the two skeps to be covered with a cloth.<sup>52</sup> In *Bechbretha*, there is also mention of the bees kept at a distance from the home.<sup>53</sup> The ninth century glossator remarks that ‘doubtless they were put out for a good reason’ and Kelly suggests that this might refer to the practice of moving hives to the bogland in late summer to source heather honey.<sup>54</sup> In Ireland, the nectars of hawthorn, clover, and blackberry provide the source for the main summer honey flow. Early and late honeys on either side of this

43 BB §50 & §51. 44 W. Neilson Hancock, Thaddeus O’Mahony, Alexander George Richey, and Robert Atkinson (eds), *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, 6 Vols. (Dublin: Printed for H. M. Stationery Office; A. Thom, 1865), Vol. IV, 116–7. The author’s own hens regularly make their way to the author’s apiary and gladly eat the dead bees that fall on the ground at the entrance of the hives. 45 BB §53 *Beich bite sechtar*

*faithchi* ‘Bees which are outside a green’ i.e., bees that are kept at a distance from the farm/abode.

46 BB §8 *a rro-saig bó co etrud for ingilt ro-saig in bech oc tecmallad a thoraid.*

47 Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*. See note on *faithche* 154–5.

48 The sound of a bell may reflect a monastic beekeeping context. 49 BB §46. 50 BB §45 *Mad airm I mbi imbed*

*mbech*, ‘if it be a place where there are many bees’. 51 Jamal Usefi *et al.*, ‘Homozygosity of Sex Determination Locus and It’s Correlation with Population and Honey Production of Honeybee (*Apis Mellifera* Meda) Populations in West-Azerbaijan and Kurdistan Provinces’, *Rap* 12: 32 (1 July 2021), 131–39.

52 Chris Park, ‘Skep Beekeeping: Looking to the Past to Look to the Future’,

*NBH The International Journal for Bee-Centred Beekeeping*, Special Issue Incorporating Bees for Development Journal Issue 144 (September 2022): [https://issuu.com/beesfd/docs/144\\_bfdj\\_sep2022/s/17150545](https://issuu.com/beesfd/docs/144_bfdj_sep2022/s/17150545) 53 BB §53 see note 16 above. 54 Charles-Edwards and Kelly, BB. 45.

main flow have characteristically different tastes and qualities. Early foraging from February to May on the pollen and nectar of willow, dandelion, and gorse furze produces a very special light and flavoursome honey. This early willow honey and the late heather honey are known as ‘Ireland’s champagne honeys’, not only for their distinctive tastes but because of their positive health properties. To produce the heather honey, the beehives are moved to the wetlands in August and September where the bees forage on the ling heathers. The heather honey does not flow but forms a jelly (thixotropic) and in the past, given this quality, it was consumed from the comb. It has a dark brown colour and has through time become a much sought-after honey. Recent analysis has shown Irish heather honey to be on a par with the beneficial health qualities of Manuka honey.<sup>55</sup>

Equally, moving hives to distant places takes cognisance of the need for beekeepers to have an out-apiary at the proverbial distance of ‘more than three miles’,<sup>56</sup> necessary when splitting hives and bringing on new queens. In either case, it is clear from the detail above that proven methodologies and refined knowledge of domesticated beekeeping was in practice at this early stage.

By the eleventh century, the word used for a beehive was *ceis*,<sup>57</sup> literally meaning a ‘basket’ and it is likely these were woven from willow or coiled straw.<sup>58</sup> *Clíab*, ‘a basket or creel’, is also used for a beehive.<sup>59</sup> Given Ireland’s wet climate and incessant rain, these hives and their bees would have had to be protected, and as in other parts of the world a covering of cow-dung or clay made the structure weather-proof.<sup>60</sup> There is a mention of *bech-dín*, ‘a bee-shelter’,<sup>61</sup> suggesting that it was necessary to place the hives in some shelter from the falling rain. The need to provide shelter for the bee skep is evidenced—albeit in a much later context—in the special recesses or ‘bee boles’ built in to the walls of castles and walled gardens throughout Britain and Ireland from the sixteenth century onwards.<sup>62</sup> In accounts of the two beekeeping saints, the domed shape of the hive is implicit: Gobnait throws her hive of straw and rushes after the cattle-raiders and when all is settled the hive returns in the shape of a soldier’s helmet or a bell.<sup>63</sup> Equally, Modomnóc is said to have carried the bees from St David’s monastery in Wales in his bell. In this context, it can be envisaged that the hives took on the same shape and size of the *coirceóg*, ‘the straw bee skep’, that was in use in Ireland up to the introduction of the bar hives in the nineteenth century (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>64</sup>



**55** Saorla Kavanagh et al., ‘Physicochemical Properties and Phenolic Content of Honey from Different Floral Origins and from Rural versus Urban Landscapes’, *Food Chemistry* 272 (30 January 2019), 66–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodchem.2018.08.035>.  
**56** Ted Hooper, *Guide to Bees and Honey*, 4th Edition (Mytholmroyd: Northern Bee Books, 2008), 79.

**57** Charles-Edwards and Kelly, *Bechbretha*, 44. eDIL s.v. 2 ces. **58** The later term *corcóg*, ‘straw bee skep’, derives from the corca ‘oats’ and was either plaited or coiled and fixed with bark or split brier. See David Shaw-Smith, *Traditional Crafts of Ireland* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 138. and Anne O’Dowd, *Straw, Hay & Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition* (Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2015),

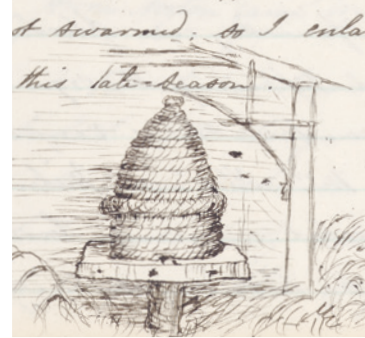
264–65. **59** eDIL s.v. *clíab*.  
**60** Eva Crane has made an extensive survey of the different types of beehives (coiled straw, woven wicker, hollowed log, board, and barrel &c.) and has illustrations of different methods of keeping them weatherproof in antiquity and in different traditions. Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*. **61** Hancock et al., (eds), *Ancient Laws of*

*Ireland*, Vol. I, 166–7. **62** ‘The Bee Boles Register at The Bee Boles Register’, accessed 14 July 2023, <http://www.beeboles.org.uk/>. **63** Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* [by T.C. Croker] (London: John Murray, 1825), 273–74. **64** HANDS is a unique, multi-award-winning series of thirty-seven documentaries on Irish crafts. Made by the renowned filmmaking team,



**Figure 6** Opposite. A modern reproduction of a traditional *coirceóg* straw bee skep made by Louise McLean.

**Figure 8** Jack Carey of Clonakilty, Co. Cork making bee skeps from straw and blackberry briar from David and Sally Shaw-Smith's *Of Bees & Bee Skeps—Hands*, vol. 36, 1983.



**Figure 7** A nineteenth century illustration by Rev. John Plunket Joly of coiled straw skep with an additional extension providing extra room to stop potential swarming.<sup>65</sup>

The up-turned bell shape of the woven straw skeps accommodates the natural profile of the bees when they cluster in a swarm while also mirroring the pattern of the bee brood in a modern beehive. That hives of a small size were best is echoed in the triad: *Tri beaga is fearr: beag na curcóige, beag na caereach, beag na mná*, ‘Three things that are best if small: a beehive, a sheep, a woman’.<sup>66</sup> Small hives were best in skep beekeeping as they encouraged swarming,<sup>67</sup> a fundamental methodology of beekeeping fully expounded in *Bechbretha*. One aspect of old wooden, wicker and straw bee skeps is that they would also have functioned to store the honey in a domestic context. Once the bees have been driven out or killed by smothering,<sup>68</sup> the store of honey on the comb attached within could be cut out as needed. This might be the context where the makings of a hive are mentioned as part compensation for a woman separating from a man in *Cáin Lánamhna*, ‘the law of couples’.<sup>69</sup> Accepting the female association with domesticity and the preparation of food, if she is leaving the marriage, she leaves the kitchen bee skep store of honey behind, but is recompensed with the materials to make a new bee skep. Figure 8 shows Jack Carey making bee skeps from straw and blackberry briar, and the full *Hands* programme can be watched online.

Honey was produced in a variety of different quantities, and this is clear from the detail in *Bechbretha* about the size of the vessels in which the honey was kept. The value and the weight describe four different containers full of honey. The largest, *lestar lulaice*, is the value of a milch cow and when this container is full, a man of ordinary strength can manage to lift it only to the height of his knees. The author has found that a modern, plastic, 25kg bucket of honey is just about manageable. This amount of honey would equate with the expected amount of honey produced in a modern large hive in a good year. The likelihood here is that the *lestar lulaice* is a hollowed log or a large wooden hive. Whatever its material, if we accept as an indicator of size that the average capacity of a straw bee skep is c. eighteen litres,<sup>70</sup> with the density of honey averaging 1.415 kg/m<sup>3</sup>,<sup>71</sup> a hive of this size full of honey will weigh c. 25kg. Next is the *lestar samaisce*, a vessel the value of a heifer that can be lifted to the navel, followed by the *lestar colpthaige*, a vessel the value of a two-year old heifer that can be lifted as high as his temple, and finally *lestar dairte*, a vessel that is the value of a yearling heifer that can be lifted easily above one’s head.<sup>72</sup> The containers here may very well be the hives themselves, now devoid of bees, with the various quantities and weights corresponding to the amount of honey on the comb.

David and Sally Shaw-Smith, it was originally produced for Irish television (RTÉ). Imbued by a sense of urgency, the Shaw-Smiths travelled the length and breadth of Ireland during the 1970s and '80s, capturing on film the final years of traditional rural and urban life. In 1983 they recorded Jack Carey

of Clonakilty, Co. Cork making bee skeps using blackberry briar to fix the straw of the skeps in place. *Of Bees & Bee Skeps—Hands*, vol. 36, 1983. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99MBkslFhGU> **65** TCD. MS 2299/1 (1843–1848) and MS 2299/2 (1852–1858). **66** Thomas Francis

O’Rahilly (ed.), *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1922), 68. <https://archive.org/details/miscellanyofirisooorah> **67** Eva Crane, ‘Ancient Apiculture’, 1985, 212a, ECTD. **68** Hancock *et al.*, (eds), *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. IV, 115. **69** Hancock *et al.*, (eds), *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol.

II, 420–21. **70** Park, ‘Skep Beekeeping: Looking to the Past to Look to the Future’, 31. **71** <https://kg-m3.com/material/honey> **72** BB §53 and Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 580. **73** Clare McCutcheon and Rosanne Meehan, ‘Pots on the Hearth: Domestic Pottery in Historic Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*

If they were not contained in wooden, wicker, or straw hives, the presumption is that the containing vessels were made of wood as the archaeological record affirms that Ireland was almost entirely aceramic from 600 BCE to the eighth century. Pottery did exist in the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Early Iron Age but the widespread use of pottery that characterises the Roman world is not mirrored in Ireland. From the eighth century until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth century Ireland relies mainly on imported pottery.<sup>73</sup> One such pottery jar, *escop*, is defined as ‘a jar for measuring wine among the merchants of the Gauls and Franks’,<sup>74</sup> while in the legal text *Muirbretha*, ‘sea judgments’, it is specifically linked to honey: *escup fina no mela* ‘a jar of wine or honey’,<sup>75</sup> opening the door to the idea that some honey was imported into Ireland in ceramic vessels along with wine. This suggestion is supported by archaeologists interpreting the E ware pottery with lids imported from the west coast of France in the sixth to the eighth centuries.<sup>76</sup> The eleventh-century tale *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* mentions *midbuilce mela*, ‘honey bag’, suggesting that honey may have been kept in a skin bag.<sup>77</sup> Equally, ‘honey bag’ may refer to the use of a bag of linen or other fabric used to extract the honey from the wax by squeezing and/or utilising gravity to let the free-flowing liquid honey run out.

### Honey as a foodstuff

Seven chattels of *díre* for an *aire déso*, and protection for three days, four men’s food provision for him, and four cakes to each man with their condiment and their seasoning. If it be true *caindenn* [garlic, onion, leek], sixteen flakes to each cake, or four stalks of true *candenn* to each cake; or honey, or fish, or curds; or a *cammchnáim* [lit. ‘bent bone’ – salted joint/ham] with every twenty cakes. In like measure up to a king.<sup>78</sup>

Honey is here mentioned in *Críth Gablach*, ‘The Law of Status’,<sup>79</sup> in the context of a regular and expected condiment—along with garlic/onion, fish or curds or bacon—to accompany quantities of bread that need to be provided when different grades of nobility came to stay in the complex system of *bes-tige*, ‘house provisioning’, that existed in medieval Ireland. The later gloss to this detail offers further insight as to the size of the vessel and the quantity of honey per person.

Section C Vol. 111C, Special Issue: Domestic life in Ireland (2011): 91–113. **74** Kuno Meyer, ‘Sanas Cormaic. An Old-Irish Glossary Compiled by Cormac Ua Cuileinnáin, King-Bishop of Cashel in the Tenth Century’, in Osborn Bergin, R.I. Best, Kuno Meyer, and J.G. O’Keefe (eds), *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, Vol. 4, 1912 • CODECS: Online Database and e-Resources

for Celtic Studies, accessed 19 March 2023, [https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Meyer\\_1912c](https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Meyer_1912c). **75** Charlene M. Eska, *Lost and Found in Early Irish Law: Aibred, Heptad 64, and Muirbretha* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022), 335 and Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 581. **76** Ian W. Doyle, ‘Mediterranean and Frankish Pottery Imports in Early Medieval Ireland’, *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*

18 (2009), 17–62, 23.

**77** Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*. Deerskin and goatskin bags have been used to collect honeycomb and a photograph of a leather honey bag used by the Hamite/Masai from Mt. Elgon; region of Elgongi, Uganda now at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology can be viewed online. ‘Honey

Bag—Leather with Wooden Stopper Top’, accessed 16 July 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.10805050>.

**78** Eoin Mac Neill (ed.), ‘Ancient Irish Law. The Law of Status or Franchise’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C* 36 (1923), 274.

**79** *Críth Gablach* is an eighth century legal tract on status. It elaborates the

... in honey as it is said:-

A vessel of a hand of the root of his fingers

Two fingers in its certain depth, I conceal it not.

And the breath of its mouth to the bottom:

Its full of honey without deficiency

To every man-cake; permanent the rule.<sup>80</sup>

A reasonable estimation based on the above is that the vessel that holds the honey is c. 10cm in diameter (the dimensions of the palm of the author's hand), and 4cm in depth with straight sides, and this equates to c. 6 fluid ounces. *Meisrín*, *seísrae*, and *bochtán* are all terms used to describe this specific quantity<sup>81</sup> and it is envisaged that a low, round, wooden ramekin-type dish with low sides was the form.<sup>82</sup> One can speculate that the bread was broken and dipped into the honey in the wooden dish. The sense here is that the honey was run honey and had been extracted from the comb, most likely using the method of wrapping the honeyed wax comb in linen sheets and squeezing until the honey ran out.<sup>83</sup> It is customary to leave such newly extracted honey settle for a day or two while it clarifies, resulting in a distinctive frothy scum of aerated wax and other impurities that settles on the top. The Irish word *spúmáil*,<sup>84</sup> occurring in a number of medical texts,<sup>85</sup> refers to the necessary process of skimming this layer off the top to leave a pure, clear run honey. Alternatively, honey might have been left in the comb and this is the case for the monastic community whose diet is often strictly regulated. On occasion, they are given honey in the comb which is one inch in thickness:

When they [the monks] sit down at table, let there be brought [i.e., served] herbs or roots washed with water, in clean baskets, also apples, beer, and honey from the hive, the breadth of an inch, i.e., so much of honey-combs.<sup>86</sup>

Whether run honey or in the comb, it seems that there was an established prerequisite quantity of honey that should be given on certain occasions. In *Bretha Éitgid*, 'Judgements concerning Irresponsible Acts'<sup>87</sup> which has a very complicated text dealing with compensations for different injuries to and by bees, a regular recompense is *saith fir do mil*, 'a man's full meal of honey'.<sup>88</sup> This

status of different grades of commoners and nobles including kings and the contractual relationships between them including the specific hospitality and food that each grade should receive when visiting on their winter circuit. **80** Hancock *et al.*, (eds), *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. V, 41

**81** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 577. **82** Caroline Earwood, 'Turned Wooden Vessels of the Early Historic Period from Ireland and Western Scotland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 54/55 (1991), 154–59. Earwood remarks that the turned wooden vessels mimicked the imported e-ware pottery.

**83** There is an informative painting showing this timeless method by Swedish folk artist Carol Gustaf Bernardsson reproduced in Lotte Möller, *Bees and Their Keepers: Through the Seasons and Centuries, from Waggle-Dancing to Killer Bees, from Aristotle to Winnie-the-Pooh*, trans. Frank

Perry, First Edition (London: MacLehose Press, 2020), 126. **84** eDIL s.v. *spúmáil*.

**85** James Carney, *Regimen na sláinte: Regimen sanitatis magnini Mediolanensis* (Baile Átha Cliath: [Oifig Díolta Foillseacháin Rialtais], 1942), 36. **86** Quoted in O'Donovan, 'Pre-Christian Notices

text elaborates on the different compensations for bee stings of different severity, one which may have caused an infection and necessitated the removal of a limb.

A man's full meal of honey is the fine for drawing blood; a fifth of the full meal for an injury which leaves a lump, a three-fourths of it for a white blow which leaves a sinew in pain, or green, or swollen, or red; if it be one or two of these injuries that are present, it (the penalty) is one-fifth with half one-fifth; one-fifth only for his natural white wound. A hive is the fine for the death-maim necessitating the removal of a limb, but if there be no removal of a limb, it (the fine) is a hive, less one-seventh.<sup>89</sup>

It also indicates that compensation of a hive was due if the bee sting blinded someone and a compensation of two hives if a person died from a sting. The former seems to be inspired by the figure *Congal Cáech*, 'Congal the One-eyed', who according to *Bechbretha* lost the kingship of Tara after bees blinded him in one eye,<sup>90</sup> while the latter may evidence the occurrence of anaphylaxis, the main cause of death following a sting.

That honey was one of the chief and expected food items for *bés tige*, 'household rent/provisioning', demanded that special reference be made in *Bretha Crólige*, 'the law of sick maintenance',<sup>91</sup> when it is specified that in the case of sickness, fresh meat, honey, and garlic along with *imus*, 'smallage or wild celery *Apium graveolens*', were considered the normal condiments or relishes to be served.<sup>92</sup> However, in this case, honey was restricted, as it 'disturbs the stomach in which there is a looseness of the bowels' causing diarrhoea.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, honey is considered a necessity in some cases of sickness. In *Bechbretha* there is mention of the need to give honey in the case of *mían ngalair*, 'the desire of [one in] sickness',<sup>94</sup> establishing it as an important substance that afforded immediate relief. In the saga tale *Fled Bricrenn*, 'Bricriu's Feast', the champion's portion includes large cakes of wheaten bread baked with honey.

*Atad .u.xx. bairgen cruithnechta and ier na fuine trie mil; .u. meich .xx. tra ised dopronnad frisna .u. fichtiu bairgen sin, & cetri bairgena in cech miach*

Four [Add to this] fivescore cakes of wheat, cooked in honey withal.  
Five-and-twenty bushels, that is what was supplied for these fivescore cakes—four cakes from each bushel.<sup>95</sup>

in Ireland', 250. **87** *Bretha éitgid Judgements concerning Irresponsible Acts* (formerly entitled *Lebar Aiclé* 'The Book of Aicill') is a disjointed and sometimes contradictory law text which offers different examples of criminal law and the necessary compensations. **88** Hancock et al., (eds),

*Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. III, 433–41. **89** Hancock et al., (eds), *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. III, 433–34. **90** BB §30–33 and notes 121–34. **91** *Bretha Crólige* 'The Law of Sick Maintenance' details the extent of provisioning and the conditions, according to status, afforded to those

who have been injured and bedridden over the period of their recovery. Food for their retinue who accompany them is also specified.

**92** D.A. Binchy, 'Bretha Crólige', *Ériu* 12 (1938), 1–77.

**93** Binchy, 21. **94** BB §25.

**95** 'Fled Bricrend', accessed 14 March 2023, <https://>

[celt.ucc.ie/published/G301022/index.html](https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G301022/index.html)



Twenty-five bushels/sacks of wheat were used to make one hundred of these, utilising a quarter of a sack of wheat per cake. The size of a *miach*, ‘sack or bushel’, measurement is estimated at c. 22.3kg,<sup>96</sup> making the quantity of flour in each cake c. 5.5kg, resulting in very large cakes, indicative of the champion’s portion. Whatever about their size, it is the fact that they have been made kneaded with and/or finished with honey that raises them to their superior luxury status. *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* also mentions cakes of wheaten bread flavoured with salt and honey: ‘every wheaten cake would grow together with another, after having been strewn with fine salt and honey’.<sup>97</sup>

### Honey in cooking

Honey would have been a highly prized ingredient that provided a sought-after note in the spectrum of taste in the medieval period. There was nothing other than honey that could provide the depth and experience of the sense of sweetness. Honey was the distinctive flavouring in the huge cauldron of milk boiled together with butter as the luxuriant final repast for the king Cathal mac Finguine suffering from the demon of gluttony in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*.

‘Let new milk and fresh butter be boiled along with honey, and drunk for a new drink by the King.’ That was done. A cauldron of a hundred measures of fully-boiled milk was given as a special drink to the King. It was the last great bellyful that Cathal took because of the demon.<sup>98</sup>

It is clear that it was used as a flavouring in both cold and hot preparations. In the ninth century *Riagail na Céle nDé*, ‘the rule of the *Céili Dé*,<sup>99</sup> a meagre collation of heated thick milk, sweetened with honey, is the specified restricted food taken before the important high Christian festivals: ‘It is usual to make a brew of thick milk, with honey added, on the eves of the chief festivals, namely Christmas and the two Easters’.<sup>100</sup>

The consumption of milk and honey on the eve of the great festivals by the *Céili Dé* is a vestige of early Christian religious ritual. Crane outlines that up to about CE 600, milk and honey were part of the Christian Eucharist. Clement of Alexandria compared milk and honey as the food immediately after spiritual rebirth with milk as the food after earthly birth.<sup>101</sup> Crane continues:

<sup>96</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 582–3. <sup>97</sup> Meyer, *The Vision of MacConglinne*, 152. <sup>98</sup> Meyer, *The Vision of MacConglinne*, 106. <sup>99</sup> The *Céili Dé* or Culdees were an ascetic Christian monastic and eremitical community of the late eighth and early

ninth century. One of its chief advocates was Máel Rúain, who founded the Monastery of Tallaght in Co. Dublin, and he compiled a harsh monastic rule specifying the various devotions, prayers, fasts, and penances for those who followed him. <sup>100</sup>

Gwynn, ‘The Rule of Tallaght’, 64–65. <sup>101</sup> Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*, 597.

during the early centuries of the Christian Church, milk and honey was given to neophytes immediately after baptism, to symbolise the promised land, and this was still the practice of the Coptic and Ethiopian churches in 1912. In the Regulations of the Egyptian Church, after the congregation had taken communion with bread and wine; then they communicate with the milk and honey as a foretaste of the coming time and the sweetness of the treasures therein.<sup>102</sup>

It is within this context of milk and honey that the unusual provision of honey by the saint, Colman Ela, might be understood.<sup>103</sup> Following an incestuous union, two baby boys are rejected but Colman Ela intervenes, miraculously supplying nourishment of milk and honey from his paps:

‘My advice is soon given’, said Colman, ‘give them to me to nourish and to foster. And let us make a covenant respecting them, for I have two paps such as no saint ever had before, a pap with milk, and a pap with honey, and these I will give to them (to suck)’. And the children were given to Colman.<sup>104</sup>

A later seventeenth century, modern Irish commentary on *The Rule of Tallaght* text, *Teagasg Maoil Ruain*, ‘The teaching of Máel Rúain’, includes an interesting passage that again features honey as a sweetener taken with hot milk and bread as an extra treat allowed on the festival days themselves and on Sundays. In a modern context, bread, softened with hot milk and sweetened with sugar or honey, was known as ‘Goody’ and was a distinct favourite of young and old as a frugal, yet special, treat.<sup>105</sup> In the penitential context, milky bread or porridge flavoured with honey was literally a taste of the promised land.<sup>106</sup>

It was their usage to add a fourth part of water to new milk, unless it was mixed with other milk. When it was boiled, they mixed it with water to boil it. They used to get a bit of the ‘broken loaf’ [that is a small measure of bread] and a drink before midday office on Sunday: and they used to get half this same loaf and a bit of bread with a spoonful of honey, when God brought it to them, after the midday office on

**102** Crane, 597. **103** <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T201000G/texto10.html> **104** Charles Plummer, *Bethada Náem Nérenn = lives of Irish Saints*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 168. **105** IFCS 209:163-4 Collector: Kathleen Carr, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim/Co. Roscommon <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4649684/4646590> **106** Etan Levine, ‘The Symbolism of Milk and Honey’, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 41: 1 (1984), 33–37.

Sunday. They got three fills of the vessel or measure called a *bochtan* of ale, with a half portion of condiment, and if they happened to be given a spoonful of honey as well, it was put on their helping of porridge.<sup>107</sup>

The diet of the *Céili Dé* restricted the eating of the fatty produce of pigs or sheep but allowed consumption of fare from the wild in the form of fish, game, wild swine, and birds.<sup>108</sup> The phrase governing the availability of honey, ‘when God brought it to them’, suggests that availability of honey was haphazard. This might suggest that like their hunted or gathered fare, honey was gleaned from the wild, from a wild honeybee’s nest in the woodland rather than from a domestic hive. Equally, it may mean that the unpredictable domestic honey crop was at the mercy of the seasons or might have been the produce of a fortunate swarm to which the community was entitled, as per the scenarios outlined in *Bechbretha*.

In addition to the account of St Patrick as a child gathering honey quoted above,<sup>109</sup> another passage from the Life of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise supports the sense that gathering honey from the wild was a regular playtime activity for young boys:

On a certain day his mother blamed him: ‘So’, saith she, ‘the little lads of the hamlet bring honey out of the honeycombs home to their households, and thou bringest none to us’. When Ciarán heard that he went to a certain well, and fills his vessel out of it, and blesses it, so that it became choice honey, and gives that honey to his mother, and she was thankful. And that is the honey which was given to deacon Justus as his fee for baptizing Ciaran.<sup>110</sup>

If not from the wild, it is still clear that it served as a gift/fee to the religious communities.

According to *Lebor na Cert*, ‘Six month’s refectation in honey’ is the very generous and high-status requirement provided to the hero of Munster by the King of Cashel on his accompanying of him to Tír Connail.<sup>111</sup> A gift of *fiche cliabh I mbitís beich*, ‘twenty hives in which bees used to be’, given at the same time with twenty bunches of herbs and twenty glistening seagull’s eggs is also mentioned.<sup>112</sup> Another manuscript version of this passage uses the present tense, making this a direct gift of twenty hives of bees. However, if the past tense is correct, the intended sense here is that this is a gift of honey in the comb, contained in the

<sup>107</sup> Gwynn, ‘The Rule of Tallaght’, 28–29. <sup>108</sup> Gwynn, 28–29. <sup>109</sup> See note 40 above.

<sup>110</sup> Stokes, *Lives of Saints*, from the *Book of Lismore*, 265.

<sup>111</sup> Myles Dillon, *Lebor Na Cert. The Book of Rights*, Vol. 46 (Irish Texts Society, 1962), 7.

<sup>112</sup> Dillon, 46, 128–29.

hives now devoid of bees. The comb honey is presented along with shining seagulls' eggs and the flavouring herbs suggest that such relished but rare condiments were highly valued.

In the legal text *Cáin Íarraith*, 'the law of fosterage fee', it is specified that the children of different grades should be given *littiu*, 'porridge or stirabout', made with either oatmeal, barley or wheat and flavoured with either salted butter, fresh butter or honey according to their rank.

What are their victuals? Stirabout? is given to them all; but the flavouring which goes into it is different, i.e., salt butter for the sons them all of the inferior grades, fresh butter for the sons of chieftains, honey for the sons of kings. The food of them all is alike, until the end of a year, or three years, viz., salt butter, and afterwards fresh butter, i.e., to the sons of chieftains, and honey to the sons of kings. Stirabout made of oatmeal on buttermilk or water is given to the sons of the Feini grades, and a bare sufficiency of it merely, and salt butter for flavouring. Stirabout made on new milk is given to the sons of the chieftain grades, and fresh butter for flavouring, and a full sufficiency of it is given them; and barley meal upon it (i.e., is put on new milk to make it. Stirabout made on new milk is given to the sons of kings, and wheaten meal upon it, and honey for flavouring.)<sup>113</sup>

In this instance, honey, along with wheat, is specified to signify the high status of the king's children.

Honey is an integral part of what must be considered one of the earliest, most detailed and intriguing accounts of food preparation and cooking in an Irish medieval context. In the eleventh century tale, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, 'The Vision of MacConglinne', honey mixed with imported English salt is used as a glaze that seals in the juices of huge pieces of bacon, corned beef, and a sumptuous joint of mutton/goat. With all the expertise of a highly competent chef, he rubs the meats with the honey and salt before fixing them on spits of hazel before the fire. The hazel is white, so its bark has been peeled off. The pieces of meat are spiked on the spits and fixed either vertically or horizontally before the fire and such is his swiftness and attention to each, one imagines, continually basting and sealing the outside with the honey and salt glaze, all the moist juices and fats of the meats remain within.

<sup>113</sup> Hancock *et al.*, (eds), *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, Vol. II, 149–51.

'Get up', said MacConglinne. And he called for juicy old bacon, and tender corned-beef, and full-fleshed wether, and honey in the comb, and English salt on a beautiful polished dish of white silver, along with four perfectly straight white hazel spits to support the joints. The viands which he enumerated were procured for him, and he fixed unspeakable, huge pieces on the spits. Then putting a linen apron about him below, and placing a flat linen cap on the crown of his head, he lighted a fair four-ridged, four-apertured, four-cleft fire of ash-wood, without smoke, without fume, without sparks. He stuck a spit into each of the portions, and as quick was he about the spits and fire as a hind about her first fawn, or as a roe, or a swallow, or a bare spring wind in the flank of March. He rubbed the honey and the salt into one piece after another. And big as the pieces were that were before the fire, there dropped not to the ground out of these four pieces as much as would quench a spark of a candle; but what there was of relish in them went into their very centre.<sup>114</sup>

In addition to the sealing of the meat, spit cooking the meat allowed the honey and salt to fuse with the external meat fats producing a distinctive sweet/salty, nutty, caramelised crust. In the *Táin bó Fraích*<sup>115</sup> there is a reference to salmon cooked with honey: *Int éicne fonaithe fuirre, is é fuillechta fo mil*,<sup>116</sup> and while it is certainly dressed in honey, whatever the exact method of its cooking, *fonaithe* (cooked, baked, roasted, scorched),<sup>117</sup> it is presented with a honey glaze, possibly resulting from a similar caramelising process. In both cases the culinary use of honey elevates the dishes to a level of savouring that is fully appreciated by the audience.

In *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, when the meat is cooked, Aneír takes the spits to the king's bed where he is tied, and teases and tortures him by cutting off tasty morsels of the cooked meats with his knife. On each occasion he dips a mouthful into the honey before passing it by the king's mouth and putting it into his own.<sup>118</sup> Honey is both the transforming culinary ingredient imbuing the spit-roasted meat with flavour while also serving as a luscious flavouring condiment. The complex and novel sensory experience arising from the simultaneous combination of sweet and salty tastes is a relish of rarity and high luxury.

**114** Meyer, *The Vision of MacConglinne*, 60–62; Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1990), 23–24; William Sayers, 'Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*' in

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUt+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2023), chapter 8, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>. **115** *Táin Bó Fraích* 'The Cattle Raid of Fraech' is a tale from the Ulster Cycle and is a

foretale of the great epic saga *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. In a complicated narrative Fraech sets out to woo Findabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, and is presented with a set of difficult challenges.

**116** Wolfgang Meid (ed.), *Táin Bó Fraích*, 2nd Ed., Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series,

Vol. 22 (Dublin, 1974), 12.

**117** eDIL s.v. *fonaithe*.

**118** *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, 64.

### Mead, Bragget, Hydromil

In the context of food and feasting in medieval Ireland, it is fair to say that honey played a crucial role. In *Tochmarc Étaín*, ‘The Wooing of Étaín’, Midir includes honey in his list of tempting delicacies all in the form of beverages.

a crown of gold shall be upon thy head  
honey, wine, ale, fresh milk, and drink,  
thou shalt have with me there, O Bé Find.<sup>119</sup>

Honey was the core ingredient in the intoxicating beverages of mead and bragget and they are a ubiquitous presence in the literary sources. Two early manuscripts illustrate *Suidigud Tigi Midchúarda*, ‘the seating of the house of the mead-circuit’, showing the seating arrangements and cuts of meat for different ranks at the feast.<sup>120</sup> In addition to the long spit for cooking the meat, equally central to proceedings is a large vat (*dabach*) with two handles that contained the all-important mead. This fermented honey inebriant was the principal player in what Toussaint-Samat terms ‘sacramental drunkenness—a communal experience which seals alliances ... an experience of shared intoxication which ... takes a group out of their normal state of mind, out of time, freeing them from the conditioning of the outside world’.<sup>121</sup> Mead, in comparison to beer, cider or wine is both the most ancient<sup>122</sup> and natural of all intoxicating beverages and its sacred, mind-altering, otherworldly qualities are directly linked to important ideas of libation and the conferring of sovereignty in ancient Ireland. It should be noted that the much-quoted idea that the legendary figure of Medb being a direct cognate of mead and understood to mean ‘the intoxicating one’ has been convincingly revised by Britta Irslinger.<sup>123</sup> Whatever its potential ritual uses, in reality it is clear that it was the preserve of the higher grades in society: in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* it is described as *sercoll socheneóil*, ‘the relish of the noble stock’.<sup>124</sup>

Its high status is evident in the following passage from the life of Brigid where she gives the King’s mead away to the poor and relies on her miracle-working abilities to replenish the stock:

A certain man of Brigit’s family once made (some) mead for the King of Leinster. When the King came to consume it, not

**119** Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best [ed. and tr.], ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, *Ériu* 12 (1934–1938), 183. **120** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 356. **121** Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *A History of Food* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 35. **122** John Ayto, *An A–Z of Food and Drink* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2002). **123** Britta Irslinger, ‘Medb “the Intoxicating One”?’ (Re-) Constructing the Past through Etymology’, in Micheál Ó Mainnín and Gregory Toner (eds), *Ulidia Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* Vol. 4 (Dublin: Four

Courts Press, 2017), 38–94. Medb is not directly related to mead but etymologically derived from \*Med-wa the female form of *-meduos* meaning ‘she who rules’ or ‘(Female) ruler’. **124** Meyer, *The Vision of MacConglinne*, 99.

a drop thereof was found, for Brigit had given all the mead to the poor. Brigit at once rose up to protect the host, and blessed the vessels, and they were at once full of choice mead.<sup>125</sup>

There are some indications that there were different types and qualities of mead, ranging from *ól meda mind*, ‘clear mead’ drunk from clean vessels<sup>126</sup> to *doínn-mhíodh*, ‘dark mead’.<sup>127</sup> The latter may well come from the dark honeys produced when the bees forage in the woodlands and the heathers of the boglands. Equally, there is the intriguing mention of hazel flavoured mead. In the ninth century poem, *King and Hermit*, amongst the many wonderful foods and drinks enjoyed in the woodland, Marbán mentions *cuach meda, colláin cunnla co ndáil daith*, ‘a cup of excellent hazel mead, swiftly served’.<sup>128</sup> Mead, brewed with or flavoured with hazelnuts, *míodh cuill*, is one of the delicacies mentioned by Fionnuala in *The Story of the Children of Lir*: ‘Yet oft we feasted in days of old, and hazel-mead drank from cups of gold’.<sup>129</sup> It is instructive to note that the archaeobotanical analysis of prehistoric drinking vessels in Northern Europe has revealed complex combinations of different honeyed meads and herbal flavourings. In Neolithic Scotland the palynological analysis of residues in pottery vessels revealed pollen from small-leaved lime trees (*Tilia cordata*), heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), and meadow-sweet (*Filipendula vulgaris*).<sup>130</sup> It is suggested that the meadowsweet pollen may not have come directly from the honey or mead but the flower may have been added as a flavouring in itself.<sup>131</sup> In Bronze Age Denmark a birch bark bucket accompanying the burial of a young woman was found to contain the remains of a fermented drink made up of mead, barley beer, and fermented cowberry and crowberry.<sup>132</sup> Such combinations of honey and beer in medieval Ireland were known as *brocóit*, ‘bragget’.<sup>133</sup> Bragget/honey-beer was superior to ordinary beer and had a higher alcoholic value. In Welsh law, one vat of mead was worth two vats of bragget or four vats of beer.<sup>134</sup> The inebriating value of the beverage is exemplified in the *Triads of Ireland* where the individual charged with the dispensing of the honey-beer and by implication, helping himself freely to the drink, is described as a *bolcscrónach brocóite*, a ‘swollen-nosed bragget-swigger’.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, the *Dindshenchas* forewarns, *baeth briathra brócoite*, ‘foolish are the words of bragget’.<sup>136</sup> One other honey-based alcoholic beverage is mentioned in the law tracts: *somuine bech ... ian oil lan di mellit*, ‘profit from bees ... an ól-measure cup full of mellit’.<sup>137</sup> Mellit (Latin: *mellitus*) differs from mead and bragget and is most likely hydromel,<sup>138</sup> a sparkling, quickly made, honey-based

**125** ‘On the Life of St Brigit’, accessed 10 August 2018, <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/T201010/index.html>. **126** Kenneth Jackson, ‘The Adventure of Laeghaire Mac Crimthainn’, *Speculum* 17: 3 (1942), 377–89. **127** ‘Dark mead is specifically mentioned as one of the

drinks served in the house of Fearghal Mór Ó hEadhara’, Sharon Arbutnot, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, and Gregory Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2019), 51. **128** Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics: Eighth to Twelfth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press,

1998), 14–15. A tenth century version of the poem reads ‘*cúach co medh collain condla*’ ‘a cup with mead of hazelnut’ in Kuno Meyer, *King and Hermit. A Colloquy between King Guaire of Aidne and His Brother Marban. Being an Irish Poem of the 10th Century* (London: David Nutt, 1901).

**129** P. W. (Patrick Weston) Joyce, *Old Celtic Romances* (Dublin: Educational Co. of Ireland; London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1920), 24. **130** Patrick E. McGovern, *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

mead with a low alcoholic content. Hydromel is made by adding one part honey and eight parts water along with some natural flavourings and leaving it to ferment by means of either brewer's or natural yeasts over a period of about ten days.<sup>139</sup> Further fermentation in a closed container produces a sparkling honey drink within two to three weeks. By contrast, mead takes two to three months to ferment and is best left to mature for one year. Between mead and the honeyed bragget and hydromel, throughout the medieval period, the Irish nobility relied heavily on honey as the centrepiece of their hospitality. Large quantities were kept at hand, as evidenced in 1107, when the castle of the O'Briens at Kincora in Co. Clare went on fire having been struck by lightning, and it and sixty vats of mead and bragget were destroyed.<sup>140</sup>

### Conclusions

While most of the evidence points to well-founded and developed systems of domestic apiculture, it is likely that wild honey was still exploited. This is evidenced in the lives of the saints when the collection of honey is represented as a play activity among young boys. Equally, the *Céili Dé* were open to eating honey as it was considered something obtained from the wild. Some of the dark meads may well have been the result of honeys made from wild bees' nests. Notwithstanding such possibilities, it is clearly evident that the keeping of bees and the provision of honey was a widespread and involved activity in early medieval Ireland. The legendary association of the introduction of beekeeping into Ireland by St Modomnóc can be interpreted as an indication that more elaborate apicultural techniques were introduced by the cultural influences of Christianity. The considerable detail, focusing on the swarming of bees in *Bechbretha*, suggests that small wooden, wicker or straw beehives that promoted such activities were in use. Likewise, mention of out-apiaries, collective apiaries and swarm cloths acknowledge a sophisticated, inherited, body of beekeeping knowledge won from practical experience and an established tradition.

Honey is commonplace and yet the unpredictability of its availability makes it special and luxuriant. The status of honey in the ancient past is much the same as it is today. It is the product of an extremely involved and complex process, and the quantity and quality of honey is dependent on the skill, knowledge, and aptitude of the beekeeper and the varied weather conditions of each year. The detail contained in *Bechbretha* and the other references are all cognisant of the skills and capacity of the beekeeper: acquiring stocks of bees from swarming;

2009), 138–39. **131** McGovern, *Uncorking the Past*, 138–39. **132** McGovern, *Uncorking the Past*, 144–45. **133** eDIL s.v. brocóit **134** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 335. **135** Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 335; Kuno Meyer, *The Triads of Ireland*, Vol. XIII, Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series (Dublin:

Hodges Figgis & Co., 1906), 28. **136** E. J. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, Vol. 5, Todd Lecture Series (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1935), 364. **137** CIH iii 920.32–3 in Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 113. n. 74. **138** eDIL s.v. mellit **139** Claude Viel and J. C. Doré, 'Histoire et Emplois Du Miel, de

l'hydromel et Des Produits de La Ruche', *Revue d'Histoire de La Pharmacie*, 91 (2003), 13–15. Hydromel is not always fermented and can be a simple mixture of honey and water. **140** Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'Killaloe: Its Ancient Palaces and Cathedral. (Part I)', *The Journal of the*

*Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 2: 4 (1892), 408.



establishing ownership of such bees; making suitable functioning bee skeps from wood or wicker or straw; protecting them from the harsh Irish elements of wind and rain; housing them in a suitable apiary conveniently located; ensuring people do not get stung; having access to a distant out-apiary to manage swarms. As it is today, an experienced and diligent beekeeper will be in a good position to get honey while maintaining their stock of bees for the next season.

In turn, each year the vagaries of the weather dictate the character and abundance of the honey crop. A warm, sunny summer in Ireland is best and can produce bumper honey harvests but wet and cold weather can severely affect nectar sources and the ability to forage. Not only is there no honey to speak of, in the past the bees would have no winter food and the colony would die out. In severe cases, perhaps with a combination of weather and disease, great declines in the bee populations took place as evidenced in the annals.<sup>141</sup>

There is the important issue of how the honey was stored and whether it was extracted or not. The reference from *Lebor na Cert*, ‘twenty hives in which bees used to be’,<sup>142</sup> suggests that the sealed honey was left in the comb and stored in the bee skep. This would have been the most practical solution, allowing a portion of the honey in the comb to be cut from the skep as needed. Even if there were bees still present, it would have been an easy matter to cut a section from the skep.<sup>143</sup> Whichever the case, the *Céili Dé* had honey in the comb of one inch thickness.<sup>144</sup> Such a skep would equate with the more manageable hives (the *lestar colpthaige* liftable to the shoulder and the *lestar dairte* lifted easily above one’s head).<sup>145</sup> Cutting a piece of honeycomb from the skep dispensed with the need for large storage containers and when honeycomb is left on a wooden plate in this manner, the clear honey runs by force of gravity from it once the cappings are broken by a knife.<sup>146</sup> MacConglinne’s dipping of each morsel of meat into the silver plate of honey and salt<sup>147</sup> most likely comes from honeycomb treated in this way.

There is no doubt that honey was something special in early Ireland and was looked upon as a treat or luxury. It was an indulgence that was demanded by the elite in society as a flavouring in the porridge of the children of the king when in fosterage. In addition, it was an expected condiment for those entitled to *bés tige*, ‘food rents’ as part of the complex systems of guesting and feasting.<sup>148</sup> There was a recognised measure of honey, noted as ‘a man’s full meal of honey’ either in comb or run honey, that was served sometimes in a small dish containing

**141** William M. Hennessy (ed.), *Annals of Ulster, a Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 431, to A.D. 1540*, vol. 1 (Dublin: Printed for H.M. Stationery Off., by A. Thom & Co. [Limited], 1887), 469 and 501. **142** Dillon, *Lebor Na Cert. The Book of Rights*, 46, 128–29. **143** Park, ‘Skep Beekeeping: Looking to the Past to

Look to the Future’, 28.

**144** Quoted in O’Donovan, ‘Pre-Christian Notices in Ireland’, 250. **145** BB §53 and Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 580.

**146** This is the regular manner in which the sections of comb honey were consumed in the recent past. The author remembers the square section of honey—reserved for his

father—sitting upright on a plate on the kitchen table and when no one was looking stealing a treat by dipping his finger into the clear honey. **147** Meyer, *The Vision of MacConglinne*, 64. **148** Katharine Simms, ‘Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of*

*Antiquaries of Ireland* 108 (1978), 67–100. **149** O’Curry, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, 377.

c. 6 fluid ounces or 175 ml. In the penitential rules of the *Céili Dé* a spoon of honey was specified and mixed with milk on the eve of the great festivals and then mixed with 'goody' or porridge on Sundays and the festivals themselves.

O'Curry has suggested that the greater part of honey produced in Ireland in ancient times was fermented into mead.<sup>149</sup> It was the drink of status and the ability to offer the sweet intoxicant was an important signifier of privilege and prestige. But it was not only in mead. Honey was regarded as a very welcome and desirable luxury when it was available and elevated certain preparations and dishes to the highest level. This can be appreciated in the account of honey being used to seal in the juices of the meat in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*. The moist, spit-cooked joints, encased in the honey-caramelised, salty, glaze, presented with a honey dip is a preparation of distinct relish. This account affirms honey as a core provider of luxurious flavour and special taste. This and the other references to beekeeping and honey in early medieval Ireland, prompt a review of Lucas's statement 'honey was so commonly used that it is unnecessary to refer to it in detail'. The elaboration of the detail reveals that honey has an informative part to play in expounding the involved and complex story of Irish food culture.

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**07**

*Banqueting and the  
Medieval Gaelic Chiefs*

**Katharine Simms**

Royal banquets were important events in medieval Ireland. As is well known, Ireland had a multitude of local kings, each ruling a barony-sized territory (*tuath*) extending to a quarter or a sixth of a modern county, but in the high middle ages major banquets were hosted by an over-king (*ruiri* or *tighearna*) ruling a territory approximating to a modern county, with the local rulers or chieftains (*taoisigh*) and their families attending as honoured guests.

This meant that seating arrangements had to follow strict rules of precedence, with great stress laid on which lordly guest was recognised as more important than another. A chief officer of any king's household was the *reachtaire* or ruler of the feast, who organised the sequence in which guests were served. Sometimes this person was also known as the *ronnadóir*,<sup>1</sup> the king's carver, because not only was the order of serving important, but the choicest portions of the roast had to be served to each guest according to their status. Modern scholars have argued that the legendary feasting-hall at Tara, the *Tech Midchuarta* ('House of Mead Circulation'), would have been originally visualised as a circular structure, since that was the shape of early houses, but as rectangular buildings became the norm in the period after the Viking invasions, the oldest diagram of the *Tech Midchuarta*, found in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (LL), seems to depict an extended rectangular hall with a vat of mead at one end and the guests ranged on banks against the wall on either side in two tiers (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> References in the law-texts indicate that the front tiers are composed of lowly servants sitting on the ground with their backs against the knees of the noble guests on the banks or benches.<sup>3</sup> The labels on the Book of Leinster diagram refer to waiters, porters, fishermen, jesters, students, professional chess-players, and instrumentalists. The honoured guests, in spite of the fact that this is supposed to be a feast held by the high-king at Tara, are only nobles and scholars rather than subject kings. They are labelled as judges, historians, wealthy hospitallers, master poets, military commanders, and nobles with authority over fifteen or twenty-five clients. Down the middle of the hall runs a long spit, and each grade and profession in society is allotted a particular cut of meat. There are no tables or chairs.

The implication in this diagram that the meat hung on spits before the guests in the twelfth century receives some support from a fantastic tale from this period, *The Vision of Mac Conglinne*. In this story the king of Munster, Cathal mac Finguine, is cured of a demon of greed by being roped against the wall, while the eccentric scholar Mac Conglinne deliberately tempts him with delicious food:

<sup>1</sup> Katharine Simms, *From Kings to Warlords* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1987), 79, 81. <sup>2</sup> Clodagh Downey, 'Dindshenchas and the *Tech Midchúarta*', *Ériu* 60 (2010), 1–35; Catherine M. O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in medieval Ireland, 900–1500* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 83–6, 89–91.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Simms, *Gaelic Ulster in the Middle Ages: History, Culture and Society* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2020), 364.

He called for juicy old bacon, and tender corned-beef, and full-fleshed wether, and honey in the comb, and English salt on a beautiful polished dish of white silver, along with four perfectly straight white-hazel spits to support the joints ... Then putting a linen apron about him below, and placing a flat linen cap on the crown of his head, he lighted a ... four-cleft fire of ash-wood without smoke, without fume, without sparks. He stuck a spit into each of the portions ... [h]e rubbed the honey and the salt into one piece after another. And big as the pieces were that were before the fire, there dropped not to the ground out of these four pieces as much as would quench the spark of a candle; but what there was of relish in them went into their very centre ... [w]hen this was ended, he came into the house, with his four spits raised high on his back, and his white wide-spread cloak hanging behind, its two peaks round his neck ... [a]nd he stuck the spits into the bed before Cathal's eyes, and sat himself down in his seat, with his two legs crossed, Then taking his knife out of his girdle, he cut a bit off the piece that was nearest to him, and dipped it in the honey that was on the aforesaid dish of white silver ... putting it into his own mouth ... He cut a morsel from the next piece, and dipping it in the honey, put it past Cathal's mouth into his own.<sup>4</sup>

The text seems to be somewhat defective, in that the context clearly implies the scholar cooked four different varieties of meat, whereas only three are named, so perhaps a fourth such as fresh beef or pork was originally included. However, there are many points of interest in the description, not least the implication that professional cooks wore white aprons and linen caps when they worked. The fact that the king is tied to a 'bed' (*leba*) while the scholar sits cross-legged in his seat (*suide*) may imply that, as in the LL diagram (Figure 1), the king was on the raised bank against the wall and the scholar crouched on the floor in front of him, in an optimal position to carve portions from the spits stuck into the wickerwork edge of the couch and wave them in front of the frustrated king's mouth, a treatment that eventually tempted the demon of greed to leap out of the king's throat. Once the king was cured, he was treated to a drink of 'new milk and fresh butter ... boiled along with honey'.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere there is a reference to the king demanding as a second course (*frithairigid*) for his feast 'a bushel of oats, a bushel of wild apples and a bushel of flour-cakes'.<sup>6</sup>




<sup>4</sup> Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: the Vision of MacConglinne* (London: Nutt, 1892), 62–4. <https://archive.org/details/aislingemeiccongomeye/page/64/mode/2up>; See also William Sayers, 'Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*'

in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUT+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 8, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>.  
<sup>5</sup> Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, 106. <sup>6</sup> Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, 44.

**Figure 1** Diagram of the legendary banqueting-hall of Tara found in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (then erroneously styled 'the Book of Glendalough'). Drawing by George Petrie in 'The History and antiquities of Tara Hill', RIA Transactions of 18 (1839), plate 8.

Tech mbéuqba.

Nuabo mé pgléon mé allboite mé éuaáab  
 mé eaire caoetchno éfna pñi laf nbñmad  
 etch moí mbéuapba 4 éí in híí.

<p>qñacais          cumb doib</p> <p>Cñucepi          mé. f. mun          doib.</p> <p>ðñichmā          lonépuāc          doib</p> <p>Suib liceti          lon chpuā          éair doib.</p> <p>Tanape ruab          lífpuācāc          .b.</p> <p>Ollan pílō          loaps doib</p> <p>ámpoch pít          cam énaí .b.</p> <p>ðzuga eteoc          loaps vó.</p> <p>Augerqñi          poichmech vó</p> <p>Fávi 7 vñmō          7 cōmilō          colpcha doib</p> <p>Éltaipe 7 íá          cruachair .b.</p>	<p>Rama          ipe mel          doib.</p> <p>Cuplñ          nauš col          pba doib</p> <p>Scola          ze líf          chpuā          chare .b.</p> <p>ðobāñ          mēcl .b.</p> <p>Tuēāc          milge          eam .b.</p> <p>Cappac          pēep cā          chnāí .b.</p> <p>Clññān          aig colp          cha .b.</p> <p>Cqmāp          7 bunni          pi. mibi          mup eomb          .b.</p> <p>Rannāp          7 iapca          pi. milge          tan doib</p> <p>Caipē          main 7          eorēp          pñmup          mmba          doib.</p>	<p>Dabach</p>  <p>Dalem          an mel          doib</p> <p>Castan</p>  <p>bip bzuññí</p> <p>Danl</p> 	<p>Reēcē          mel doib</p> <p>Fibēllais          colpcha .b.</p> <p>Deogbāc          líf chpuā          chare doib</p> <p>Umabiv          mchpuā          chare .b.</p> <p>Éb mel          doib</p> <p>Éuamapñ          milgeān          .b.</p> <p>Cneccam          cam énam          .b.</p> <p>ðzargēo          pi pñmup          mmba .b.</p> <p>Opuch pñš          vñmā .b.</p> <p>Dozapan          pñš vñm          na doib</p> <p>qñapñš          7 clabapñ          pñmup m          ba .b.</p>	<p>ápaib cuib          vóib.</p> <p>Sñgūm mé          pozmū doib</p> <p>ámpš fñail          lon épuachair          .b.</p> <p>qñupñš lon          épuācāc .b.</p> <p>áipe áb lo          apš vó.</p> <p>ápu vñpa          loaps vó.</p> <p>Clí. cāchnāí          vó.</p> <p>Sñécaib cā          chnam .bó.</p> <p>áipe echra          mé fñmū vó</p> <p>Cano cā énaí .b.</p> <p>ápu vñpa 7          boí colpcha          doib.</p> <p>qñēc pñmmb          7 pochlōc m          chpuachair .b.</p> <p>Cuehchapñ 7          moimup pe          mup mmba .b.</p> <p>Rachbūige 7          obzage mil          geān doib.</p>
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TEACH—MÍDCHUARTA from the BOOK OF GLENDALOUGH

The Catalan pilgrim, Ramon de Perellós, tells us that rushes served O'Neill for a table, with a heap of finer grass on which to wipe his hands

A second version of the *Tech Midchuarta* diagram is found in the late fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL). The ranked professions of the guests are virtually identical, but the lay-out is a little different (Figure 2). This time there is a possible reference to a host, a *ruiri* ‘over-king’, but he is seated a third of the way down one wall in the spot where the Book of Leinster has *muirig*, ‘military commanders’, so it may be a scribal error.<sup>7</sup> The long roasting spit is gone, replaced by a series of fires and an enormous candelabra, and the vat of ale or mead has been moved to the centre of the aisle. In addition, the different ranks of guests are fitted into rectangular boxes along the walls. These little squares could be simply scribal, but there is literary and archaeological support for vertical wickerwork partitions, converting the long banks against the walls into a series of opera boxes, so to speak, called *imdada*<sup>8</sup> and much social significance was attached to who shared an *imda* (or *leba*) with whom, especially who shared the king’s box, a privilege normally claimed by the chief poet. Tables and chairs are still lacking, and there is supporting evidence for their absence from the account of an eye-witness guest at the feast of the Great O’Neill in 1397 CE. The Catalan pilgrim, Ramon de Perellós, tells us that rushes served O’Neill for a table, with a heap of finer grass on which to wipe his hands. The meat, he says, was carried in on spits. As in the *Vision of MacConglinne* the actual cooking took place outside the hall, whether in the open air or in a frequently mentioned building called the larder or food-store (*cuile*), or ‘back-house’ (*cúiltech*).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the pilgrim guest refers to the nobles drinking milk rather than alcohol, recalling the milk drink mentioned in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, and says the O’Neill sent him as a great delicacy two oatcakes burnt black and full of ashes, ‘as thin as wafers and as pliable as raw dough’, which proved to be very tasty—a probable reference to ‘quickbread’, made by burning the corn in the sheaf as a quick way of drying and hardening the grain so that it could be milled immediately after it was reaped.<sup>10</sup>

De Perellós was not the only foreign observer who claimed the Irish drank milk, water, or beef broth rather than alcohol, but native Irish sources show this was rather misleading. Feasts might be accompanied by bragget (a sweetened beer), ale, or mead in the early period, and at the end of the twelfth century the chronicler Gerald of Wales (Cambrensis), assures us that ample supplies



<sup>7</sup> Downey, 'Dindshenchas and the *Tech Midchuarta*', 17–18. See George Petrie's drawings of the LL and YBL diagrams in Simms, *Gaelic Ulster*, plates XIV, XV.

<sup>8</sup> O'Sullivan, *Hospitality*, 88–94; Katharine Simms, 'Native sources for Gaelic settlement: the house poems' in Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland: Land, Lordship and Settlement c. 1250–c. 1650* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 246–67, 250–1. See also

Kaarina Hollo, 'Conchobar's "Sceptre": the growth of a literary topos', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 29 (1995), 11–25, 12–15. <sup>9</sup> Ernest G. Quin (ed.), *Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials, Compact edition* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1998), s.v. 'cuile'; Simms, 'Native sources for Gaelic settlement', 252. <sup>10</sup> Dorothy Carpenter, 'The Pilgrim from Catalonia/Aragon: Ramon de Perellós' in Michael Haren

and Yolande de Pontfarcy (eds), *The Medieval Pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory: Lough Derg and the European tradition* (Enniskillen: Clogher Historical Society, 1988), 99–119, 109, 111; Edward MacLysaght, *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 171, 317, 336.

**Figure 2** Diagram of the *Tech Midchuarta* or banquet hall of Tara in the late fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL). Drawing by George Petrie in 'The History and antiquities of Tara Hill', RIA Transactions 18 (1839), plate 9.

<p>Φαρμακ no 4αδ εγνν βοιβ 7 μοιρ</p>	<p>Rannape mel βοιβ</p>	<p>Θαλμᾶ mæl βοιβ</p>	<p>Ῥέχταπε mæl βοιβ</p>	<p>Διαβ cā ἐνάδ- ῤῥορ ευνδ-δ.</p>
<p>Ἰέρε ἦν ἦμῶ βο ιβ 7 τιμπαταχ</p>	<p>Κυρῖμναῖς colpcha βοιβ</p>	<p>Tene</p>	<p>Ἰροcheallaῖς colpcha βοιβ</p>	<p>Sequinní mē Poz muim-δ.</p>
<p>Ὀπιχῖμᾶι lonch poichra βοιβ</p>	<p>Scolage ἕρ epoichte βοιβ</p>	<p>Tene</p>	<p>Θεογβαπε ἕρ chpoichra βοιβ</p>	<p>ἄρε ἦῖll lón chr oichte-δ.</p>
<p>Συῖε loncpó ταν. ruad ἕρ epó no ppimchpochat</p>	<p>Ἐάροδα ἡρ epoichte βοιβ</p>	<p>Tene</p>	<p>humaatib ἡρ epó-δ. Oímmte ἡρ epó-δ.</p>	<p>Ῥυρῖ lón epó-δ. Ῥῖgan ἕρ epó. 7 ἦι pupcach</p>
<p>Ὀτ pít loapee τό Δηρῦδ eamenaí</p>	<p>Ἰοβαῖν mæl δ.</p>	<p>Tene Dabaç</p>	<p>Zeῖḡ 7 luamape mæl βοιβ</p>	<p>Δηρ apó loq-δ. Clí cāchnaí-δ.</p>
<p>Ὀρμυζ 7 απῖ τυ ρ lapace βοιβ</p>	<p>Ῥαχαιε mίḡε an βοιβ</p>	<p>Cammel</p>	<p>Ῥαamḡ mίḡεαí βοιβ.</p>	<p>Δηρ τυη cācnaí Sencha loq-δ.</p>
<p>Δυζεαρῖ ἦν ἦm. Δεαααρ eamenaí</p>	<p>Σάρ cappat mί ḡεaín βοιβ.</p>	<p>Cammel</p>	<p>Ἐαοίρε cācnaí-δ. Ἐ colpcha muiceí.</p>	<p>Δηρ vḡa colp-δ. Oor ἦν ἦm-ἕρε poy 7 ḡḡ tacha</p>
<p>Ῥαech ḡδ 7 oáleo lpeha βοιβ</p>	<p>Clíḡamnaῖς colpḡa muice βοιβ</p>	<p>Locann</p>	<p>Ῥυρρεοιρε colpḡa mucc βοιβ</p>	<p>Ῥóeloε ἡρ epó-δ. ἕape vḡa</p>
<p>Δαῖα ἦḡ 7 ἦḡ chupá 7 paxhbuge ἡρ epóca βοιβ</p>	<p>Caḡce pemuy nimda βοιβ</p>	<p>heplapcach</p>	<p>Ὀραḡεοιρε pe muy nimda βοιβ</p>	<p>Cuechḡ 7 Ἐοιρε mó mῖr ἕαḡḡḡ</p>
<p>Coρnḡ 7 buḡḡḡ mó mῖr-δ.ἕaḡḡḡ</p>				<p>Ῥachbḡḡ 7 obla ἡpe mίḡεaín-δ.</p>
<p>Ῥῖḡape 7 napḡ mίḡεaín βοιβ</p>				<p>Δῖρ ḡca ἦν ἦm-ḡa nu cam enaim</p>
<p>Caρῖmᾶ 7 eopnoε pḡmuy nimda δ.</p>	<p>Doρḡape pḡḡ 7 oρoim βοιβ</p>	<p>Doρḡḡ</p>	<p>Ὀρḡuch pḡḡ oρo manna βοιβ.</p>	<p>ḡḡmῖḡḡ 7 clapḡḡḡ pemuy nimda</p>

TEACH-MIODCHUARTA from the LEABHAR BUIDE LECAIN



of wine were imported from Poitou, so that Ireland's lack of its own vineyards would go unnoticed. French wine is again referred to in a thirteenth-century poem about King Aodh O'Connor (d. 1274) and his feasts. In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we hear of wine being imported directly from Spain or Gascony, or arriving in English merchant ships. The apparent contradiction between native and foreign observations can be explained by assuming that alcohol consumption was largely confined to formal feasts. Consignments of ale or bragget were freshly brewed in the days immediately before a festival, and wine was only available when a merchant ship had arrived on the coast. There were no hotels or public houses before the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly Catherine O'Sullivan cites a possible reference in a Middle Irish saga to 'milk-water' (*assen*) being served as a drink along with bragget and new ale to middle-ranking guests at an imaginary feast held at Tara.<sup>12</sup>

This problem of intermittent supply changed radically with the introduction of whiskey. Distilled liquor from grapes first appears on the Continent between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in a medical context. The first published instructions on how to make it are found in the *Consilia medicinalis* of Taddeo Alderotti (d. c. 1295).<sup>13</sup> It seems probable that Irish medical students who travelled to study in Montpellier and Salamanca<sup>14</sup> were responsible for developing a native version of *aqua vitae* ('water of life'), distilled from grain rather than grapes, at some point in the fourteenth century. The first reference to a pot still (one aquavite distiller called "Corkan"), comes in a Brehon law charter from the area which is now County Clare, dated 1453.<sup>15</sup> and before that date we read that Richard Mag Ragnail (or 'Reynolds') chief of Muinter Eolais in the Longford area died in 1405 'at Christmas by takeing a surfeit of *aqua vitae*, to him *aqua mortis*' (i.e. 'water of death', rather than 'water of life').<sup>16</sup>

The reference here to Christmas shows that *aquae vitae* or whiskey had already expanded beyond medicinal to festive use by the turn of the fifteenth century. Around 1600 Fynes Moryson in his account of his travels around Europe, praises the comparative virtues of Irish whiskey:

The Irish *aquae vitae*, vulgarly called usquebaugh, is held the best in the world of that kind; which is made also in England, but nothing so good as that which is brought out of Ireland. And the usquebaugh is preferred before our *aqua vitae* because the mingling of raisins, fennel-seed, and other things, mitigating the heat and

<sup>11</sup> Simms, *Gaelic Ulster*, 480–3.  
<sup>12</sup> Richard I. Best (ed.), 'The settling of the manor of Tara', *Ériu* 4 (1908–10), 124–5; O'Sullivan, *Hospitality*, 91. <sup>13</sup> Robert P. Multhauf, 'Distilled liquors' in Joseph R. Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 4 (New York: Joseph Reese, 1984), 219–20; see

also Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997), 335. <sup>14</sup> Mairéad Dunlevy, 'The medical families of medieval Ireland' in William Doolin and Oliver Fitzgerald (eds), *What's past is prologue: a retrospect of Irish medicine* (Dublin: Monument Press,

1952), 15–22; See also Fionnán O'Connor, 'The Humours of Whiskey: *Uisce Beatha* in Feudal Irish Hospitality and Medicine' in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 9, <https://doi.org/10.21427/SWHY-0K87>. <sup>15</sup> James Hardiman

(ed.), 'Ancient Irish Deeds', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 15 [Antiquities] (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1825–8), 2–95, 51. <sup>16</sup> Denis Murphy (ed.), *The Annals of Clonmacnoise, From the creation to A.D. 1408* (Dublin: University Press 1896, reprinted LLanerch Publishers

making the taste pleasant, makes it less inflame, and yet refresh the weak stomach with moderate heat and a good relish.<sup>17</sup>

Even at that late date, Moryson tells us there were no hotels or taverns in rural Ireland, although shortly afterwards under James I a flurry of liquor licences were issued to establishments across the country.<sup>18</sup> In 1620 Luke Gernon found the castles of nobles in Munster regularly stocked with a wide variety of alcoholic liquors for the entertainment of visitors: ‘salutation past, you shall be presented with all the drinks in the house, first beer, then aquavita, then sack, then old ale ... the lady tastes it. You must not refuse it’.<sup>19</sup>

An anonymous bardic poet predictably insists that the recitation of professional poets at a banquet is as indispensable as the drink provided, even in the case of the ‘heavenly feast’ awaiting redeemed sinners. He adjures the Virgin Mary: ‘thou, O Virgin, wouldst not wish, I am sure, thy banquet to be enjoyed [i.e., ‘drunk’] while the song at it goes unpaid’.<sup>20</sup> As part of his ‘heavenly feast’ metaphor, this author describes himself as God’s *ollamh*, or official court poet, arriving to the banquet with his supporting cast, which includes a professional reciter, or *reacaire*, and various attendants (perhaps including a harper or timpanist), though in this instance his team is formed by the Five Wounds of the Crucifixion, Christ’s heart’s blood representing the reciter.<sup>21</sup>

A more prosaic description of the performance of poetry at an Irish chief’s feast is given by the Dublin apothecary, Thomas Smith, in 1561:

Now comes the Rymer that made the Ryme, with his Rakry [*reacaire*]. The Rakry is he that shall utter the ryme; and the Rymer himself sits by with the captain verie proudlye. He brings with him also his harper, who please [plays] all the while that the raker sings the ryme. Also he hath his Barde, which is a kinde of folise fellowe; who also must have a horse geven him; the harper must have a new safern [saffron-coloured] shurte, and a mantel, and a hacnaye; and the rakry muste have XX or XXX kine, and the Rymer himself horse and harnes [suit of armour] with a nag to ride on, a silver goblett, a pair of bedes of coral, with buttons of silver;-and this, with more, they loke for to have, for reducinge distruxione of the Comenwealth, and to the blasfemye of God.<sup>22</sup>

1993), 325 (1405 A.D.). See also A. Martin Freeman (ed.), *Annála Connacht, the Annals of Connacht* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944), 392–3, 514–15 (1405, 1463 A.D.). **17** Henry Morley, *Ireland under Elizabeth and James I* (London: New York: G. Routledge & Sons, 1890), 425.

**18** Simms, *Gaelic Ulster*, 483. **19** C. Litton Falkiner (ed.), *Illustrations of Irish history and topography* (London: Longmans Green, 1904), 360. See Mary McAuliffe, ‘The lady in the tower: the social and political role of women in tower-houses’ in Christine E. Meek and Mary K. Simms

(eds), *The fragility of her sex: medieval Irishwomen in their European context* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 153–62, 156. **20** ‘*dóigh nach eadh dob ál, a ógh. do fhleadh d’ól gan dán do dhíol*’. Lambert McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim Dána: a miscellany of Irish bardic poetry* (2 vols) (Dublin: Irish

Texts Society, 1939, 1940), poem 96 verse 17. My square brackets. **21** McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim Dána*, verses 3–9. **22** Herbert F. Hore, ‘Irish bardism in 1561’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 1<sup>st</sup> series 6 (1858), 165–7, 202–12: 167. First two square brackets mine, third and fourth are editorial.

In spite of the negative moral judgements, this description tallies well with the figurative picture drawn by the religious poet, of a clear distinction between the court poet himself, who takes a seat beside the chieftain giving the feast, and the professional reciter or *reacaire*, who actually performs the poem, singing or chanting it to the accompaniment of music, and it mentions the presence of further lesser entertainers. The reference to the bard as ‘a kind of foolish fellow’, suggests he may have provided the comic relief, and perhaps engaged in clowning, as we know the *cáinte* or *croasán*, other lesser grades of poet did, even baring buttocks and mooning their audience, as the fictional scholar Mac Conglinne did when aping the performance of a *cáinte*, and as we see illustrated (Figure 3) in John Derricke’s picture of MacSweeney’s open-air feast at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Mac Conglinne we are told:

[he] tied his shirt over the rounds of his fork ... in this wise he began juggling for the host from the floor of the royal house (a thing not fit for an ecclesiastic) and practising satire and buffoonery [*bragitoracht*, lit. ‘farting’] and singing songs; and it has been said that there came not before his time, nor since, one more renowned in the arts of satire.<sup>24</sup>

Thomas Smith’s reference to the lavish rewards issued to every member of the poetic band is a major theme in many poems. As early as the first half of the eleventh century, a band of poets performing for the bishop of Armagh, Aodh Ua Forréidh (d. 1056), remind him that he has promised them a jewelled goblet as payment for their praise.<sup>25</sup> The high prices paid for their art demonstrate the high social status of the more learned poets and musicians. In contrast to the minstrels who played at feasts in England and France as background music to the merry chatter of the guests, the sixteenth century writer Richard Stanihurst tells us:

Amid the dining a harper is at hand; often blind, he has no education in music, but he soothes the minds of the guests by strumming on the strings. (These however are woven from steel or brass threads, and not from gut, as is the practice elsewhere). He draws forth the sound not with any plectrum, but with hooked nails. And although in his music he observes neither metre nor mode, nor does he pay any attention

<sup>23</sup> John Derricke, *The image of Irelande* (London: John Day, 1581), Figure 3, reprinted Edmund Hogan (ed.), *The Description of Ireland* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1878).

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, 42. My square brackets. On the buffoonery of the lesser orders of poets

see further Alan Harrison, *The Irish Trickster* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press for the Folklore Society, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Gerard Murphy, ‘A poem in praise of Aodh Ua Foirréidh, bishop of Armagh (1032–1056)’ in Silvester O’Brien (ed.), *Measgra i gcuimhne Mhíchíl Uí Chléirigh*

(Dublin: Three Candles Press, 1944), 140–64.

to the pitch of the sounds he makes (indeed he offends the sensitive ears of the expert like the screech of a saw, as he dins on every class of guests), yet the lower classes are singularly delighted by his crude harmony. But if, once he has hit the strings, he notices your attention is wandering, or if you fall short in any way of praising the man, then you will see him rage and rave like someone half mad; for he not only asks, he demands that you mark his skill with fulsome praise.<sup>26</sup>

Stanihurst was mistaken in thinking there was no systematic study of the Irish harp, it is found closely linked to the schools of history and poetry, master musicians were drawn from the ranks of the clergy and minor nobility, and were accompanied by troops of apprentices.<sup>27</sup> However, it seems even the Irish themselves found something amusing about the sensitivity of musicians to any criticism. In the early sixteenth-century comic tale, 'O'Donnell's Kern', criticism of the harpists' performance leads to wholesale slaughter (followed by miraculous cure of those killed):

Now in the king of Leinster's house [i.e. in Mac Murrough-Kavanagh's] just at this time a banquet was held ... In the king of Leinster's mansion were sixteen men that were harpers, and the Gilla Decair [when he had heard them] said to him: 'my word I pledge that since the time when in the lower-most Hell I listened to the sledge-hammers' thunder, aught so vile as thy music I never have heard'.

'Thou greasy rogue', the burliest of the string-folk cried, 'a bad right it is thou hast to tell us that!' and to him the Gilla Decair returned: 'hard as it were in execrable strumming to outdo those fifteen others, thine own self positively it is that for discord and for harshness overtops them all'. The man of strings raised his sword and, striking the Gilla Decair [as he thought] on his crown's fair apex, judged that he had made of him two even halves; but what befell him in reality was this: that his own proper sponce proved to be the spot on which his cut impinged, and by the same it was split in two. So also with the remaining string-folk, who (so many of them as could get at the Gilla Decair) discharged at him each man his handful, yet in their own persons received the punishment of every blow.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> John Barry and Hiram Morgan (eds), *Great Deeds in Ireland: Richard Stanihurst's De Rebus in Hibernia Gestis* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), 120. <sup>27</sup> Simms, *Gaelic Ulster*, 396–9. <sup>28</sup> Standish H. O'Grady (ed.), *Silva Gadelica I–XXXI, a collection of tales in Irish*, 2 vols (London

and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1892), Vol. 2, 322–3.

**Figure 3** Overleaf. Open-air feast presided over by the MacSweeney of Fanad and his wife. Woodcut illustration from John Derricke, *The image of Irelande* (1581).



- A Now when into their fenced holdes, the knaves are entred in,  
 To smite and knocke the cattell do wone, the hangmen doe beginne.  
 One plucketh off the Oxes cote, which he euen now did weare:  
 Another lacking pannes, to boyle the flesh, his hide prepare.
- C These threees attend vpon the fire, for seruing by the feast:  
 B And fryer smel feast sneaking in, doth pryce amongst the best.



3  
 who play' th in Romish toyes the Ape, by counterfetting Daull:  
 For which they doe a ward him then, the highest roome of all.  
 who being set, because the cheere, is deemed little worth:  
 Except the same be intermixt, and lac'de with Irish myeth.  
 D Both Barde, and Harper, is preparde, which by their cunning art,  
 Doe strike and cheare by all the gesses, with comfozt at the hart.

The same comic tale testifies that the host's gift-giving at banquets was not confined to rewarding the professional entertainers. Earlier in the story, at O'Donnell's banquet, the mysterious trickster is invited to come and sit nearer his host, and demurs because he is dressed in rags: 'By the man of service therefore they transmitted to the Kern a jerkin, a hat, a striped shirt and a mantle. "Here," said the servitor, "is a suit that O'Donnell sends thee".' A tract on the traditional rights of MacMahon, lord of Oirghialla [Monaghan], over his subjects tells us, 'each chief must provide a banquet for two full days each winter after Christmas, and Ó Connalaigh [the chief marshal of Oirghialla] a banquet for one full day after Easter ... The following is part of the emoluments which the chieftains of Oirghialla receive from MacMahon. Each chief gets a rider's suit from MacMahon and each chief's wife a suit of clothes from MacMahon's wife'.<sup>29</sup> Since so many of the gifts consisted of clothing (besides the more martial ones of horses, weapons, and armour) the lord's wife had a prominent role in their distribution. According to one eminent sixteenth-century poet, Tadhg mac Daire, a true lady should excel in 'majesty of gait, in gentle, rare-spoken voice, or, in reconciling nobles, in giving many goodly gifts'.<sup>30</sup>

The chieftain's wife who most nearly met the ideal of all poets was Margaret O'Carroll (d. 1451), 'a woman that never refused any man in the world for anything that shee might command, onely besides her own body'.<sup>31</sup> She organised two spectacularly successful banquets for all the learned classes of Ireland in 1433, a year of famine, which had presumably reduced the hospitality being offered to the poets, historians and other men of art elsewhere in the country. The two feasts were attended, we are told, by over two thousand seven hundred learned guests from both Ireland and Scotland, besides a fringe attendance of 'gamesters and poor men'. What was particularly striking was the efficient organisation of these two occasions. For the first one, 26 March at Killeigh, she commandeered the church of Dasinchell, because it was much larger, one presumes, than her own banqueting hall. She set her husband, the chief Calbhach O'Connor of Offaly, to ride up and down outside the church marshalling the guests into an orderly queue. Her chief judge, Giolla na Naomh MacEgan, stood at the entrance and recorded the name of each guest in a parchment roll, after which they were given their payment ('both meate and moneyes with all other manner of guifts'), also duly recorded, and then were led to their seats to be fed clan by clan in correct order of status. The Ó Maoil Chonaire, hereditary historians to the kings of Connacht, were served first of all, we are told. The lady Margaret herself, clad

<sup>29</sup> Seosamh Ó Dufaigh (ed.), 'Cíos Mhic Mhathghamhna', *Clogher Record* 4 (1962), 125–33, 132. <sup>30</sup> McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghlúim Dána*, poem no. 41, verses 13, 14.

<sup>31</sup> John O'Donovan (ed.), 'The Annals of Ireland, from the year 1443 to 1468, translated from the Irish by ... Duald

MacFirbis' in *Miscellany of the Irish Archaeological Society* Vol. 1 (Dublin: for the Irish Archaeological Society, 1846), 108–302, 227.

The chieftain's wife who most nearly met the ideal of all poets was Margaret O'Carroll (d. 1451), 'a woman that never refused any man in the world for anything that shee might command, onely besides her own body'

in cloth of gold, and surrounded by her chief officers, surveyed the scene from the gallery of the church. She then held a second feast, on 15 August, for all men of art who had missed the first one.<sup>32</sup>

As well as banquets given by the overlord for his nobles and their families, principally on great Church holidays, such as Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide, or for special occasions such as weddings, house-warmings, or the inauguration of a new chief, each subject chief was bound to supply a feast of one or two days in duration to the overlord and his retinue in the 'coshering season', between Christmas and Shrovetide. The rationale underlying this custom was the seasonality of the food-supply. In the summer the population relied heavily on 'white meats'—dairy products, milk, curds and whey, cheese, butter, buttermilk and so forth—and in the autumn they slaughtered pigs and bullocks and salted their meat for the winter, while preserving a reduced breeding stock for next spring. Pigs in particular were not usually slaughtered until they had been fattened on the forest 'mast', principally the fallen acorns and beech-nuts in autumn. Consequently, there was a glut of fresh pork, sausages, sweetbreads and blood-puddings in November and December, but after the Christmas season the stores were running down, and it was more convenient for the overlord to feast at the expense of his vassals, a custom that became known as a 'cosher' (Ir. *cóisir*, 'a party'). Knowing this exaction was expected of them, each vassal made sure to set aside stores dedicated to this one occasion, and the law-tracts remark that an adult son still living in his father's house who would normally require his father's sanction for any commercial transaction, could act on his own responsibility if he needed an emergency supply of beef cattle to provide for the lord's coshering feast.<sup>33</sup> We are told the mythical hospitaller Mac Da Thó had saved up for special occasions what has been described as 'an over-sized *cochon au lait*', a giant pig which had 'three-score milch cows feeding it for seven

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–8; A. Martin Freeman (ed.), *Annala Connacht, the Annals of Connacht* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944), 472–3; see further Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, 'Mairgréag an-Einigh Ó Cearbhaill, "The best of the Women of the Gaedhil"',

*Journal of the Kildare Archaeological and Historical Society* 18 (1992), 20–38. <sup>33</sup> Daniel A. Binchy, 'Aimser Chue' in J. Ryan (ed.), *Féilsgribhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* (Dublin: Three Candles, 1940; repr. 1995), 18–22.





The two feasts were attended, we are told, by over two thousand seven hundred learned guests from both Ireland and Scotland, besides a fringe attendance of ‘gamesters and poor men’

years’.<sup>34</sup> This is reminiscent of Richard Stanihurst’s observation, ‘No meat they fansie so much as porke, and the fatter the better’. As with the lord’s banquets, guests at the coshering feasts, according to Stanihurst, were entertained with the usual range of poets, tale-tellers and temperamental harpers. The lesser nobility who had to entertain forty or a hundred guests on such occasions did not possess banqueting halls of adequate dimensions and it seems probable that they used barns. In Stanihurst’s words, ‘in their coshering they sit on straw, they are served on straw, and lie upon mattresses and pallets of straw’.<sup>35</sup> This presents little contrast to the conditions described at the Christmas feast of the Great O’Neill in 1397 as noted above, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the great lords were increasingly living in castles, using tables and chairs, their walls adorned with murals or tapestries. We hear, for example, that the chief Rudhraighe MacMahon (d. 1446) possessed a set of a hundred wooden mazers or serving dishes.<sup>36</sup> This may have been one motive for the increasingly frequent practice in the later period of simply requiring the vassal chief to send food-stuffs sufficient for a feast directly to the overlord’s house, where they might be consumed in greater comfort. In 1597, MacCarthy Mór, Earl of Clancarty, was entitled to choose whether he would come to feast in his sub-chief’s house or have the materials of the banquet sent to him as ‘certayne proportions of flesh, aquavitae, ale, hony, flower [flour] or else in lieu thereof at the freeholder’s choyce, £4 8s. 8d’. Since the going price of a beef bullock in 1597 was a mark, or 13s 4d., it would seem the meat part of the Earl’s banquet might have extended to at least four or five beeves.<sup>37</sup> In the fifteenth century, Neachtain O’Donnell, chief of Tír Conaill (d. 1452), agreed with his vassal, MacSweeney of Fanad, that he would charge no more than six beeves every time he came with his retinue to feast at MacSweeney’s expense (and also that he would not make

**34** Kim R. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: Maynooth Monograph, 1990; repr. 2000), 78. **35** Liam Miller and Eileen Power (eds), *Holinshed’s Irish Chronicle 1577: the Historie of Irelande from the first habitation thereof, unto the yeare 1509. Collected*

*by Raphaell Holinshed, & continued till the yeare 1547 by Richarde Stanyhurst* (Dublin: Dolman, 1979), 113–14. **36** Katharine Simms, ‘Native sources for Gaelic settlement: the house poems’ in Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland: Land, Lordship*

*and Settlement c. 1250–c. 1650* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 246–67, 254. **37** William F.T. Butler, *Gleanings from Irish History* (London: New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1925), 20.

these oppressive visits more than three times a year).<sup>38</sup> The law-tract *Críth Gablach*, when counting the number of guests a lord can bring in his train to a coshering feast, numbers them by couples. Each man brought his wife with him, and at the end of the sixteenth century Fynes Moryson assures us many a lady at these banquets drank as much as the men, although the attendance of unescorted females was strongly discouraged.<sup>39</sup>

In spite of the numerous literary and legal allusions to feasting and its social functions, it is not easy to identify with confidence what exactly constituted the bill of fare. Clearly roast meat took a prominent place, and the allusion to the king's demand for a secondary snack (*frithairigid*) in *Aislinge MacConglinne* suggests the possibility of a dessert course of oaten and wheaten cakes and apples. An intriguing possibility of an *hors d'oeuvre* or opening appetiser comes in the tenth-century saga of the 'Battle of Mag Rath', when we are told:

The food was distributed to the host. Twelve hen's eggs were brought in upon a dish and placed at the corner of the couch. Whilst Domnall was standing up serving the eggs, Congal ate one of them. Domnall seated himself and the eggs were brought down. 'The woman who brought the eggs', said Domnall, 'told me that there were twelve. A curse on her to tell such a lie to my face', 'I ate one of them', said Congal. 'Then you may finish them', said Domnall, 'for I will not eat the remains of theft'.<sup>40</sup>

In this tale the guest's bad manners led to an escalating quarrel which culminated in an exceptionally violent battle, but ideally feasts were intended to be scenes of good fellowship and reconciliation. A number of eleventh- and twelfth-century tales feature the king's orator as a kind of master of ceremonies, calming any quarrels that might arise among the warriors at the feast and calling them to order with a wooden knocker or a stick hung with bells. In one of these narratives, 'The violent deaths of Goll and Garb', we are told:

The hosts arise. There was wrath hither and wrath thither in that place, storm and tempest. The thunderous wound-noise of the hosts was heard afar. Then Sencha rose up and shook the Branch of Peace over the hosts, so that they became peaceful like the

**38** Paul Walsh (ed.), *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (Dublin: Dollard, 1920), 59. **39** Eoin MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish law: the law of status or franchise', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 36 (1923) C, 265–316: 297–9; Morley, *Ireland under Elizabeth and James I*, 425–6; Simms, *Gaelic Ulster*, 449.

**40** Carl Marstrander, 'A new version of the Battle of Mag Rath', *Ériu* 5 (1911), 226–47, 235.

children of one father and one mother. Their shields were placed in order on their pegs, their swords on their cushions, and their spears on their racks. Everyone came into his drinking-place.<sup>41</sup>

This account sheds a new light on the traditional image of the stone banqueting hall hung about with spears and battle-axes. Rather than being displays of military might or trophies, the hooks in the wall facilitate the disarming of the guests to avoid serious harm should a drunken quarrel arise. In the early period the law-tract *Críth Gablach* pictured the person of the royal host protected by a body-guard of four men during the ale-feast, while the door is guarded by a further two champions. Throughout the medieval period the 'doorkeeper' and the 'strong man' continued to be essential to the control of any banquet.<sup>42</sup>

Medieval Gaelic society was almost entirely rural, people lived scattered across the countryside with little in the way of urban centres or even substantial villages. Consequently, occasions for foregathering, trading, match-making and exchanging news, whether fairs, saint's days or feasts, held a particular importance. The food-rents and reciprocal gift-giving at banquets forged an agreeable bond between overlord and subject nobility, sweetened not only by copious quantities of alcohol, but a floor-show that combined culture and comedy. The food, as long as it was fresh and plentiful, and distributed with due regard to social precedence, may regrettably have been of secondary importance.

<sup>41</sup> Whitley Stokes (ed.), 'The violent deaths of Goll and Garb', *Revue Celtique* 14 (1893), 427. See Hollo, 'Conchobar's "Sceptre"', 18–23. <sup>42</sup> Simms, *From Kings to Warlords*, 117.

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**08**

*Irish Diet in the Eleventh  
Century as Reflected in the Satire  
of 'Aislinge Meic Con Glinne'*

**William Sayers**

Textual and iconographical evidence for the medieval Irish conception of the king's banquet hall identifies the social status of nobles, royal functionaries, poets, craftsmen, musicians, and other entertainers not only by the relative height and location in the hall of their dining compartments and daises, but also by the cut of meat to which each was entitled.<sup>1</sup> This is doubtless an idealised vision, typical of the ruler and hero-centred epic tales of the kings' and Ulster cycles. Whatever sacral overtones or social prominence attended the fresh and salt beef and pork on which these sources focus, other foodstuffs were certainly raised and hunted, cultivated and gathered, imported and consumed.

Another more properly narrative text in which food plays a central role is *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (*The Vision of Mac Con Glinne*, hereafter *AMCG*). It complements the picture from the royal banquet hall and, for all its satirical and other exaggerations, may be thought to reflect everyday reality more accurately than the stylised description of the royal hall at Tara. Although viewed through a satirical lens, *AMCG* offers a 'snapshot' of the Irish diet and its associated vocabulary in the early twelfth century, albeit one taken with a definite ideological and literary purpose.<sup>2</sup>

The Mac Con Glinne of the *Vision* is an impecunious student or scholar, whose picaresque adventures take him from squalid guests' quarters in a monastery to a royal banquet hall. The fuller of two recensions, apparently adapting a base tale, has a number of satirical targets—the monks of Cork, lawyers, medical practitioners, and literary men. Mac Con Glinne's comments on the various groups he meets reinforce the author's mockery. The principal event, in what will prove to be a framing tale, is Mac Con Glinne's visit to the court of King Cathal of Munster, after being condemned to death for satirical remarks on the monastery's mean hospitality. The king is suffering from an eating disorder or tapeworm, personified (or reified) as a 'demon of gluttony' in his stomach. The scholar's stratagem is to entice the demon from the king's mouth by recounting

**1** See William Sayers, 'A Cut Above: Ration and Station in an Irish King's Hall', *Food and Foodways* 4 (1990), 89–110.

**2** Editions and translations include Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of MacConglinne* (London, 1892; repr. New York: Lemma, 1974); Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson (ed.), *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1990); and Lahney Preston-Matto (trans.), *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of Mac Conglinne* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010). The few general studies of the text to have been published

include Nora Chadwick, 'Geilt', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 5 (1942), 106–53; Gregory J. Darling, 'A Feast of Satire: Orality and the *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*', *Foilsíú* 5: 1 (2006), 129–40; Scott James Gwara, 'Gluttony, Lust and Penance in the B-Text of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*', *Celtica* 20 (1988), 53–72; Henry A. Jeffries, 'The Visions of Mac Conglinne and their Authors', *Studia Hibernica* 29 (1995–1997), 7–30; Catherine McKenna, 'Vision and Revision, Iteration and Reiteration, in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*' in Joseph Falaky Nagy and Leslie Jones (eds), *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic Tradition: A*

*Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 269–82; Vivien Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (London: Souvenir Press, 1991); Breandán Ó Buachalla, 'Aislinge Meic Conglinne', *Galvia* 7 (1960), 43–49; Ronan O'Flaherty, 'The Vision of Mac Conglinne: A Twelfth Century Shamanistic Flight?' in K. M. Davies, Una MacConville, and Gabriel Cooney (eds), *A Grand Gallimaufry: Essays Collected in Honour of Nick Maxwell* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2010), 248–51; Jan Erik Rekdal, 'Aislinge Meic Con Glinne: nuair a théann an gáire i bhfostú sa scornach', in Malachy O'Neill and Regina Uí Chollatáin (eds),

*An greann sa Ghaelige* (Dublin: Coiscéim i bpáirt le Éigse Cholm Cille, 2013), 42–52; Kurt Wais, 'Volkssprachliche Erzähler Alt-Irlands im Rahmen der europäischen Literaturgeschichte' in Heinz Lowe (ed.), *Die Iren and Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 639–85. See also William Sayers, 'Diet and Fantasy in Eleventh-Century Ireland: *The Vision of Mac Con Glinne*', *Food and Foodways* 6: 1 (1994), 1–17, from which portions of the present essay have been adapted.

a vision he had, after a good meal and night's sleep, of a voyage to a marvellous land, literally of milk and honey, where everything is made of foodstuffs, even the inhabitants, the Twelve Tribes of Food.

The vision, the story within the story, is arguably the earliest vernacular European deployment of this conceit of a land of plenty, here through the medium of the traditional Irish voyage to the Otherworld.<sup>3</sup> The *Land of Cockayne* of English and French tradition, and the German *Schlaraffenland* are successors, if not direct derivatives. The Otherworld across the sea was known in Irish as *Tír Tairngiri*, 'Land of Promise', *Tír na nÓg*, 'Land of the Young', but also *Tír na mBéo*, 'Land of the Living', i. e., 'Immortals'. Could the origins of the Irish fantasy lie in the pun *Tír na mBid*, 'Land of Food', *biad*, 'food' deriving from the same root as *béo* with the meaning 'life's sustenance'? In any case, the *Vision* radically secularises an important component of the early Irish conception of the supernatural, displacing it from the status of theme to that of comic setting. In a complementary movement in the other direction that confirms this importance, the large-scale adaptation of traditional Irish lore to Christian dogma and history generated works such as *The Voyage of St Brendan*, which enjoyed considerable vogue in continental Europe.

A first sample of the *Vision*, which describes the horse (of the porter of a figure that Meyer calls the Prognostic Physician) met by Mac Con Glinne in this alimentary Otherworld, gives the flavour of the scholar's account:

the bacon horse he sat on had legs of custard and hooves of coarse oat bread, ears of curds, and eyes of honey. Its breath plumed sour cream from each of its nostrils, and there was an occasional gush of bragget from its bum. The horse's tail was made of dulse, from which seven handfuls were pulled every twenty-four hours. It had a saddle of peerless corned beef on it, with a halter of heifer hide, a collar of old-wether spleen around its neck, and a little bell of soft cheese suspended from the collar with a narrow gut tongue.<sup>4</sup>

This is an exercise in incongruity so that no principle guides the assignment of foodstuff to a body part, only the author's desire to engage the imagination of the reader. Here the text pokes fun at one of the traditional topoi of early Irish

**3** The land of milk and honey of the Bible has numerous counterparts in later tradition and is doubtless a conception common to many cultures (see further below). Aron Gurevich discusses late antique and early medieval treatments, in particular the *Apocalypse of Paul*, as part of the larger theme of visions of paradise/

heaven and hell; 'The Divine Comedy before Dante', in Aron Gurevich (Janos M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth, trans.), *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 104–52. Of early voyage and *peregrinatio* literature, the

voyages of Bran, Maelduin, and St Brendan are the most important. Feasts and fine food are also part of the Irish Otherworld tradition. See Christa Maria Löffler, *The Voyage to the Otherworld Island in Early Irish Literature*, 2 vols, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 103 (Salzburg:

Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1983), and Manuel Aguirre, 'The Hero's Voyage in Immram Curaig Maelduin', *Études Celtiques* 27 (1990), 203–20. **4** AMCG, trans. Preston-Matto, 49.

The horse's tail was made of dulse, from which seven handfuls were pulled every twenty-four hours. It had a saddle of peerless corned beef on it, with a halter of heifer hide, a collar of old-wether spleen around its neck, and a little bell of soft cheese suspended from the collar with a narrow gut tongue

literature, the description of an approaching warrior, his war-cart and team of horses, as a subordinate reports them to a waiting party.

These and other mentions of foodstuff in the *Vision* naturally cannot give precise information on volume or frequency of consumption. Certain limitations of the text must be recognised at the outset. Much of the terminology is negatively or positively charged according to the story line, for example, the poor rations of the monastery or the rich foods of the Otherworld. Although everything in this gourmand's paradise is potentially edible, we find food only in its cooked state, so that neither raw meat nor many fresh vegetables are mentioned. Since many elements of the lexicon cannot be adequately differentiated and distinctions between kinds of food and specific dishes are unclear, the Irish terminology will serve as point of departure. Sorting by lexical category will illustrate the food types in the early Irish diet, but an idea of their relative volume, across social strata, is doubtless beyond our grasp.

### Mac Con Glinne's menu

Although not available to scholars before 1997, Fergus Kelly's *Early Irish Farming* (henceforth *EIF*), with its voluminous evidence from the early Irish law codes, proves an invaluable reality check on the extravagances of *AMCG*. Kelly, in turn, recognises the importance of *AMCG* for Irish food history.<sup>5</sup> Even though centuries separate this legal corpus and the later satire, much in the Irish diet may be assumed to have remained little changed. Nor would it change much under Anglo- and Cambrio-Norman influence until the arrival of the potato in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, 1997), 317. <sup>6</sup> A. T. Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland* (Kilkenny: Boethius Press, 1989); Vincent A. Dunn, *Cattle-raids and Courtships: Medieval Narrative Genres in Traditional Context* (New York: Garland, 1989); Nerys Thomas Patterson, *Cattle-lords and Clansmen: Kinship*

*and Rank in Early Ireland* (New York and London: Garland, 1991). The most extensive treatment of early Irish diet is found in A. T. Lucas, 'Irish Food before the Potato', *Gwerin* 3 (1960–62), 8–43. Briefer but more accessible surveys in Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings*, The Gill History of Ireland 1 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), 59–69; Donncha Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, Gill History of Ireland 2 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972), 48–66; Máire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland*, Ancient Peoples and Places 8 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), 88–96; Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: The Enduring Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1988), with scattered references

to economic matters. See also, Katharine Simms, 'Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 108 (1978), 67–100. Given the continuity of Irish tradition, also pertinent is E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London, Henley, and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 77ff.



Early Ireland was 'tribal, rural, hierarchical and familiar' (family-oriented) in D.A. Binchy's classic characterisation.<sup>7</sup> Cattle were the basis of the economy, cattle-owning was a source of prestige, cattle-rustling the means to enhance the warrior's reputation. Appropriately, the paramount epic in the old Irish tradition was *Táin bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle-raid of Cooley*). The picture that emerges from the *Vision*, however, will qualify assumptions about diet that might be made on the basis of the rhetoric menus that we meet in epic texts. Early Irish had a very extensive vocabulary for food, although little in the way of names for specific dishes. Much of this is reflected in *AMCG*, despite its emphasis on the fatty and salty end of the spectrum, and this will be further amplified with material from *EIF*. Milk and bread are basic, *tarsunn* the term for supplements, often called 'condiments' in English in a literalist translation.

Milk products are a major food category for this herding economy, amply reflected in the early literature (*EIF*, 323). The generic term *mlicht*, 'milk' is not met in *AMCG*, but other milk words are *as*, *ceó*, and *lemnacht* (this last as 'fresh milk'), cream (*croth*, also used of curds), butter (*imb*), buttermilk (*bláth-ach*). Some of the medieval Irish-based Norsemen acquired a taste for this last by-product and seem to have taken it to the Faroe Islands, where the Irish word evolved as *blak* (there were also cultural transfers in the other direction, from Norse to Celtic).

*Bánbiad* (whitemeats) was a generic term for semi-solid and solid milk products. Other terms for curds were *gruiten* (small curds or salt butter), *gruth*, *gruthach*, *senchrothi*, and *sengruth*, lit. 'old curds' may have been sour cream. *Milsén* is thought to have been sweetened curds. Whey was *medg*, *medguisce*, lit. 'whey water'; figuring in monastic and penitential diets were *draumce*, and possibly *tremanta* (whey made of buttermilk and sweet milk?).<sup>8</sup> Beestings (*colostrum*, *nús*) was prized by some, but not all. Milk was also incorporated in porridge (*lichtiu*) and in herbal broths (*brothchán*) to feed the sick.

Cream (*úachtar*) remains palatable for a longer time than fresh milk, if kept cool. Careful souring was practiced, as recorded in a law text on food rents due a lord. *Brechtán* appears to have been used of both butter (otherwise *imb*) and custard, *mescán*, of a lump of butter. Butter seems to have been viewed as a miraculous transformation (*EIF*, 326) and figures prominently in Irish folklore, generally as a food of the upper classes and consequently an item in food rents. Since butter stores well, supplies (*imenna*) were often laid up against hard times.

<sup>7</sup> D.A. Binchy, 'Secular Institutions,' in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish Society* (Dublin: Three Candles Press, 1954), 52–65, 54.

<sup>8</sup> *AMCG*, Jackson (ed).

Among the hardest and driest of cheeses (perhaps incorporating skim milk), and thus later qualifying as an export commodity, was *mulach* and *mulachán*. *Tanach* was also a very dry and aged cheese, hard enough to be used as a slung missile in the killing of Queen Medb of the Ulster Cycle of epics

Perishable milk was preserved through the use of bacterial cultures and in a variety of kinds of cheese. The term *cáise*, ‘cheese’ betrays foreign antecedents (Lat. *caseum*), and cheese-making might be thought to have its Irish origins in a monastic environment (cf. *sencháise*, ‘old cheese’, *tírmcháise*, ‘dry cheese’). On the other hand, the lexical loan may only have accompanied the introduction of new cheese-making techniques. Rennet (*binit*), unmentioned in *AMCG*, is known to have been used and has a distant offspring in *bonnyclabber* (< early modern Irish *bainne clabair*). *Mulchán* and *tanach* were hard and pressed cheese, respectively, *maethal*, a lump of soft cheese. *Milsen*, a soft cheese made of boiled fresh milk and butter, was also known. In all of this we should imagine the milk of sheep and goats being employed, along with cow’s milk. *Máethal* figures in *AMCG* as a term for another soft cheese (< *máeth*, ‘soft’). Salting, drying, and pressing were processes in cheese production, with such attendant terminology as *fáiscre grotha*, ‘pressed curds’ and *táth*, ‘binding together (of curds)’. Among the hardest and driest of cheeses (perhaps incorporating skim milk), and thus later qualifying as an export commodity, was *mulach* and *mulachán*. *Tanach* was also a very dry and aged cheese, hard enough to be used as a slung missile in the killing of Queen Medb of the Ulster Cycle of epics.<sup>9</sup> All said, curds remain the most frequently mentioned milk product. This extensive exploitation of milk, ubiquitous in early Irish life, finds literary expression in *AMCG* in a comic riff in which apparent exaggeration actually mirrors reality: ‘... very thick milk, milk that is not so thick, flowing and stiff milk, milk of medium thickness, yellow bubbling milk that you have to chew and swallow’.<sup>10</sup>

Cereals also had an extensive vocabulary. *Arbor* seems a generic term for grain. Basic crops in likely order of cultivated volume were oats (*corcae*; *serbán*, ‘wild oats’), barley (*eórnae*), wheat (*cruithnecht*), rye (*seaul*; *gemshecal*, ‘winter

<sup>9</sup> Vernam Hull, ‘Aided Meibhe: The Violent Death of Medb’, *Speculum* 13 (1938), 52–61. <sup>10</sup> *AMCG*, trans. Preston-Matto, 54.

rye), and buckwheat (*rúadán*). Oats was the only suitable cereal crop for high ground, damp conditions, and poor soil but had the disadvantage for baking purposes of lacking gluten. Wheat was naturally the most prestigious of the grains and wheaten flour the most prized.<sup>11</sup> *Fidbach* (var. *ibdach*) was another cereal and may have been two-row barley. The Irish term for oats was recorded in the now lost Norse speech of the Shetland Islands in the eighteenth century. The Atlantic Norse vocabulary for grain- and malt-drying kilns also displays Celtic origins, but these in turn can be traced to Latin (Icelandic *sofnhús*, Faroese *sodnur*, *sodnhús*, Shetlandic *sonn*, *soin* < Irish *forn*, *sorn* < Latin *furnus*). The *Vision* does not mention flour as such (*men*), but *tomaltus*, 'meal' is named; the by-products of milling are *garbán*, 'coarse meal or bran' and *cáith*, 'chaff, husks'. Cereal husks were also exploited in the preparation of drinks, English *sowens* (var. *sowans*).

The use of the built-up oven is thought to have begun with the monastic orders. *Arán* was a generic term for bread; *abland*, a small loaf; *bulbing* (a Norse loan), another kind of loaf. Specific loaf sizes are noted in the law texts which also state the expected yield in terms of number of loaves per bushel of grain. Recalling that milk and bread were the basic diet for most people, the latter was consumed in large quantities in early Ireland. One monastic rule states that a monk's daily loaf should weigh thirty ounces and could have been about twelve inches in diameter.<sup>12</sup> *Bairgen* was some kind of bread or cake. *Brothchán*, *buaidrén*, *craibechán*, *litte*, *findlitte* ('white'), *luaba* were all terms for porridge or gruel, but it is unsure whether grain was the sole or basic component of them all. Equally important products of cereal were *braichles* 'malt' or 'wort' (other texts use the term *mraich*), *cuirm* 'ale', *brocóit* 'bragget' (ale sweetened with honey). *Beóir*, 'beer', another Norse lexical import (Old Norse *bjórr*), was likely fruit-based, at least initially.<sup>13</sup> *Laith*, 'ale', is not given in *AMCG*. *Lind* was a more general term for alcoholic drinks. Also mentioned is *mid*, 'mead'.<sup>14</sup>

To turn to meat (*carnae*, *féoil*, 'flesh'), the tale exhibits a vocabulary almost as extensive as that for dairy products, but if the names of animals and fowl, domestic and wild, e.g., yearling calf (*gamain*), heifer (*samaisc*), ox and cow (*mart*), young pig (*lure*, *orcán*), doe and roedeer (*erb*), boar (*torc*), etc. are excluded, the remaining list of cuts and dishes is rather restricted. Meat from domesticated animals appears to have been more prized than game, except in such literary environment as the Fenian tales, in which life on the land is the ideal for the bellicose young warrior. Meat figured more prominently in the diet of the upper classes than in that of commoners (*EIF*, 336). Terms for cuts

11 Fergus Kelly, 'The Relative Importance of Cereals and Livestock in the Medieval Irish Economy: The Evidence of the Law-texts', in *L'Irlanda e gli irlandesi nell'alto medioevo* (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 2010), 93–108.  
12 Joseph O'Neill, 'The Rule

of Ailbe of Emily', *Ériu* 3 (1907), 92–115, 103(31a). 13 On the long-lived Gaelic tradition of a heather beer to which only the Norsemen had the secret, see Bo Almqvist, 'The Viking Ale and the Rhine Gold' in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne-Almqvist and Séamus Ó Catháin (eds), *Folklore*

*Contacts between the Northern and the Western Worlds* (Aberystwyth: Boethius, 1991), 65–81, which supersedes his earlier treatment of the topic. 14 See D. A. Binchy, 'Brewing in Eighth-Century Ireland' in B. G. Scott (ed.), *Studies in Early Ireland: Essays in Honour of M. V. Duignan* (Dublin:

Association of Young Irish Archaeologists, 1981), 3–6, and Gearóid Mac Eoin, 'The Early Irish Vocabulary of Mills and Milling', 13–19. On the fruit base of early Norse beer, see Christine Fell, 'Old English beer', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 8 (1975), 76–95.

of meat are of general kind: *staic*, 'steak, chop' (a surprising derivative of Old Norse *steik*), *cliathán*, 'loin, flitch', *sliss*, 'side', *iarshliss*, 'flank', *cliath*, 'rib', *lárac*, *lón*, 'haunch', the latter with a homonym meaning 'fat, food in general', *lurga*, 'shank'. The most frequently recurring terms, preferentially used in describing the composition of the edible Otherworld, are *bóshaill*, 'corned or salted beef', *saill*, *saillte*, 'salt meat', which is taken to be bacon, and *tinne*, 'flitch of bacon', a conveniently sized item in the payment of food rents.

Salting appears to have been the most common preservation technique, practiced more with pork than beef. The size of the animal slaughtered determines the amount of salt required, and that may have been a factor in the selection of cuts. Another technique is apparent in *tirmcharna*, 'dried meat'. Fermentation, as with lamb in the Faroes, was not known. The kidney (*ára*), spleen (*dressán*), and intestines (*caelán*, *inbe*) are mentioned, the last as tripe or sausages, but no further organs. Other words for sausage were *indrechtán* and *maróc*. From a list of food rents, we also have *cáelán*, apparently also a salted pork sausage. By-products of slaughtering and butchering were blood (*fuil*), bone and marrow (*cnáim*, *smir*), offal (*garr*), but pre-eminently lard, suet, and tallow (*blonac*, *ger*, *íth*, *úsca*), and, in prepared form, gravy (*beóchail* [*< beóil* 'fat. meat juice'], *inmar*, *olar*). Also noted is *scaiblin*, 'pot meat'. Cuts of meat were assigned in this ranked society and the most prized portions were reserved for the elite. Clearly, dishes prepared with offal (intestines, head, heart, liver, kidneys, tail), all of which might be done up as tripe or sausages, were the lot of commoners. And, as might be expected in a subsistence economy, every possible edible part of a carcass was used.

To judge from the archaeological evidence, the earliest procedure for cooking fresh meat was to boil it in open-air cooking pits (*fulacht*) in which water had been poured over heated rocks. Game roasted in the field on spits (*bir*) or griddles (*indéoin*) has also left traces of such pits. AMCG also describes roasting beef, mutton, and ham on revolving wooden or iron spits. This procedure has more inherent drama and visual effect than boiling and provides some of the hellish overtones that characterise portions of the work (see further below). In apron and cap, Mac Con Glinne rubs salt and honey into the meat and is careful not to lose meat juice in the fire. Fish was also cooked on spits or griddles. A cauldron (*coire*) was an essential component of a well-functioning household, as itemised in the legal tract *Críth Gablach* (*The Forked Purchase* in Binchy's rendering).<sup>15</sup> Social status determined permissible size. The juices of boiled meat

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 11 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1941).

The import of some luxury goods such as wine and spices may go back to the Roman period (although Ireland, unlike Britain, was never occupied). Norse loans reflect the tastes and possibly food-processing techniques of the invading and immigrant Norse population, concentrated in the trading ports they founded in the ninth century

were enhanced in broth (*enbruihte*), but such liquid food, with its carnal origins, was denied those, such as monks, who were on vegetarian diets.

Other modern food categories turn up less frequently in *AMCG*. Among vegetables and related plants, the *Vision* mentions *braisech*, ‘kale’ or ‘cabbage’ or dishes based on them, *cainnend*, ‘leeks’, *cerrbacán*, ‘carrots’, *briscen*, ‘tansy, wild carrot’, and *dulesc*, ‘dulse’, an edible seaweed. Also named in passing are eggs (*uga*), honey and honeycomb (*mil, criathar*, literally ‘sieve’),<sup>16</sup> berries (*caera*), the apple (*uball*), *áirne*, ‘sloe’ (thought to be the only cultivated fruits), acorns (*mess*), and nuts (*cnó; etne*, ‘kernel’), specifically hazelnuts (*coll*), which traditional pre-Christian lore associated with supernatural knowledge. Condiments (*torsann, annland*) include *luss* apparently ‘herbs’ in general or ‘greens’ (cf. *firfuss*, ‘rue *fuss*’; possibly ‘fresh *fuss*’, perhaps onion or garlic),<sup>17</sup> *anlann*, some kind of relish, salt and pepper (*salann, scibar*). The initial consonant cluster of the latter reveals its relatively early derivation from Latin *piper*, with a transitional form in *ch-*. Words for tidbits or delicacies that we cannot further identify are *airigid, blass, sercoll*. There is no mention of peas or beans in *AMCG*.<sup>18</sup> They might have been base components of the various gruels and porridges that cannot be more closely identified. Fish and shellfish are wholly absent in the *Vision*, save for the single mention of salmon (here called *friasc*, ‘true or fresh fish’), which is caught in the Otherworld but is, however, made of bacon.

The picture that emerges from the *Vision* does not differ from that which can be assembled from other early Irish literary texts, for example, heroic epics and saints’ lives, and archaeological, annalistic, and legal sources. Geared to an economy of aristocratic patrons and their clients, where financial obligations took the form of payment in livestock, food rent, or coshering (payment in kind by hosting extended visits), the legal texts are detailed, although difficult

<sup>16</sup> On honey and beeswax (for ecclesiastical candles), see Fergus Kelly, ‘Early Irish law on bee-keeping, with particular reference to *Bechbretha* “Bee-judgements”’, in David Wallace-Hare (ed.), *New Approaches to the Archaeology of Bee-keeping*

(Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing, 2022), 209–15.

<sup>17</sup> *AMCG*, trans. Jackson.

<sup>18</sup> see *EIF*, 248–49.

to interpret. Among the most thoroughly studied and instructive is the earlier noted tract *Críth Gablach*. It passes in review the rights, responsibilities, and appropriate standard of living of various grades of nobility and landowners. It complements the *Vision* and adds such terms as *murlúaith*, literally 'sea ash', seaweed burned to recover its salt content. Early Ireland recognised summer food and winter food (*sambiad*, *gambiad*) as two major categories, roughly fresh and preserved food, that we might epitomise in dairy products and salt pork, respectively. In describing the households, tools, and utensils of the various classes, the text provides valuable testimony on such food-related instruments as drying kilns (here called *aith*) and kneading troughs (*lossat*).

With some few exceptions, the medieval Irish vocabulary of food is derived from native Celtic roots, just as the foodstuffs themselves were almost exclusively of local production. Technical improvements may have accompanied transfers from the Latin of the Christian church (often via Wales). The import of some luxury goods such as wine and spices may go back to the Roman period (although Ireland, unlike Britain, was never occupied). Norse loans reflect the tastes and possibly food-processing techniques of the invading and immigrant Norse population, concentrated in the trading ports they founded in the ninth century.

In seeking to understand the herding and agrarian economy and dietary practices that underlie *AMCG*, climate must be seen as one factor at work; the complex interdependencies of social structure and selected economic values, e.g., cattle ownership as reflective of social station, are another. Nor can level of technological achievement be excluded as a determinant. On many counts Ireland may not have differed greatly from other parts of medieval northern Europe, although the relative scarcity of evidence as comprehensive as the Irish evidence makes it difficult to compare them on points of detail. Nonetheless, in several important respects, food production in early Ireland offers a number of surprises. Even after the introduction of a heavier plough type with coulter (but no wheel), only five percent of the country's arable land is judged to have been cultivated, exclusively for grain and perhaps flax.<sup>19</sup> Despite the prestige attached to cattle-owning (or perhaps because of it), beef was consumed on only a limited scale, butchered from surplus calves, old cows, or the victims of accident. Since grass was not cut for hay, the annals record that severe winters killed off stock; poor summers meant failed crops. As concerns meat consumption, feasts in the royal hall may have marked exceptions, but their frequency cannot be determined. Pork was the most common meat, but it may have primarily been

<sup>19</sup> Richter, *Medieval Ireland*

<sup>23</sup>; Lucas, *Irish Food Before the Potato*, 8.

cured for the winter. Kelly's *Early Irish Farming*, which concludes that the early Irish diet was balanced and nutritious, discusses numerous other topics of compelling interest: crops, hunting and gathering, as well as diet and cooking.<sup>20</sup> In the last-named section, he reviews the evidence of the legal texts for restricted diets (monastic fare, fasting, penitential foods, food for invalids, women, children, food taboos, feasting and famine). These all contribute to the background against which the satire of the *Vision* is to be appreciated.

Whatever the relative share of climatic, societal, and other factors in shaping pre-Norman Ireland's attitudes toward food production and consumption, the degree to which settlers from Britain in the twelfth and later centuries restructured the rural economy is striking. With the aid of the wheeled plough, the 'planters' took heavier land under cultivation for cereal production; uplands were more fully exploited in sheep-raising. New surpluses in production led to heightened exports. Ample evidence of the importance of trade in meat, fells (skins), leather, wool, and cloth is found in the state documents of Norman Ireland and even in the celebratory poem commissioned to mark the burgesses' contribution to the erection of new defensive walls around the Norman-founded town of New Ross in the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Before returning to the *Vision* as literature rather than a source for historical diet, we may summarise and qualify as follows: the author of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, in the portrayal of the Prognostic Physician's horse that introduced this chapter, and in the depiction of an Otherworld in general, has limited the choice of foodstuffs to rich, fatty foods as exemplified by butter, curds, and bacon, all processed foods. Possible reasons for this of selectivity, exclusion and emphasis, are explored below.

To return to the narrative of the *Vision* and bring the tale to its close, Mac Con Glinne draws on much of what we must recognise as an extensive alimentary lexicon while he roasts steaks on spits to provide additional, olfactory stimulus for the inscribed audience of the vision account, the demon of gluttony resident in the stomach of King Cathal. He eventually succeeds in luring the demon, imagined as a kind of lizard, to the king's mouth. He transfixes it on a spit and hurls it into the fire. Then the royal hall itself is fired, this too a conventional detail from heroic adventure and tales of kingly destinies. To end the story, King Cathal takes the expeditious Mac Con Glinne into his service.

<sup>20</sup> *EIF*, balanced and nutritious (317), crops (219–71), hunting and gathering (272–315), diet and cooking (316–59).

<sup>21</sup> Robin Frame, *Colonial Ireland, 1169–1369* (Dublin: Helicon, 1981), 89; William Sayers, 'AngloNorman Verse on New Ross and its Founders', *Irish Historical Studies* 28 (1992), 113–23, at 12lf.

### Food in a fictional world

While *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* may be scrutinised as a possible complement to more conventional historical sources, it is fundamentally a literary artifact. As such it relates to real life (and real-life fantasies) but also to other literary artifacts. Such intertextuality may be explicit, as in the parody of the descriptive topoi of the Irish epic or the larger compositional frames of the vision and oversea/Otherworld voyage. It may also be implicit. A second sample of the text, diet recommendations the Prognostic Physician gives Mac Con Glinne, will introduce a consideration of an important subtext to the vision and will lead to a discussion of *AMCG* in more narrowly literary terms, without removing our focus from diet.

Have that woman give you thrice nine helpings, Mac Conglinne, and every helping as big as the egg of a full-grown hen. You must ram the bites into your mouth with a hard shove, and roll your eyes around in your skull while you eat them. You must not spare the eight varieties of grain, Mac Conglinne, wherever you find them: rye, wild oats, coarse barley, buckwheat, wheat, barley, red wheat, and oats. Eat eight loaves from each grain and eight condiments for every loaf and eight relishes for every condiment, and every bite you throw into your mouth should be as big as a hen's egg.

Now, off you go to the little pots of fine sweet curds, Mc Conglinne! To fresh pork; to fatty feasts; to boiled mutton, cooked wethers; to the choice, oft-discussed bits for which the armies fight—corned beef brisket; delicacies of gentlefolk—mead; to the cure for chest colds—aged cured bacon; to gruel's need—sour curds; to the wish of fair unmarried women—fresh milk; to a queen's herbs—carrots; to disadvantaging a suitor—ale; to the prop of Lent—chicken; to a broken head—custard; the hand-to-hand—plain bread; to a bumpy hearth—pressed cheese; to a bubly belch—new ale; to a priest's favorite—fatty cabbage soup; to the halt of the hunger of a family—white porridge; to the double-hooped twins—sheep intestines; to the legal dues of a wall—flitches of bacon; to the bird of a cross—salt; to the entrance of an assembly—sweet-smelling apples; to the pearls of a household—hen's eggs; to a moment of nakedness—kernels.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *AMCG*, trans. Preston-Matto, 52–53.



From this perspective, the conceit of this existential Otherworld, *cibus ad nauseam*, is a good deal darker than perhaps first appreciated. What appears a glutton's paradise, based on equivalences, e.g., spleen as saddle, may not lie too far from the early visions of hell recorded in Ireland, where punishments were matched to crimes in the way later immortalised by Dante

In the creation of a counterfeit world where all is made of food, the creator, whether individual author or collective tradition, has exercised a Midas-like touch.

Few of the foodstuffs are in their natural raw state and all have passed through some form of cultural treatment, if only the separation of milk. Yet in this world where all is food, little food is actually eaten and the supply is never seriously depleted. In the narrative context of a tale told to lure the demon of gluttony from the king's stomach, this non-consummation and non-consumption quite properly leave the demon on tenterhooks with no vicarious sense of satisfaction through a description of food tasted and ingested. But on a different level this narrative strategy leaves a world of irreducible surplus, one that differs from the traditional Irish Otherworld in being without transcendence. The larger story of *AMCG* describes a trajectory through a number of quantitatively determined strata: from 1) outright self-denial of food (religious or legally coercive fasting), 2) ascetic monastic diet, and 3) the scant fare of mean hospitality, through 4) relative plenty to 5) self-indulgence, and finally 6) pathological surfeit, where food has invaded the composition of the characters and their surroundings. Instead of humans without food, the world of the O'Early-Eatings (Jackson) is populated by foods only secondarily human. In the affective, metaphorical pseudonyms of the Physician's recommendations (pseudonyms, since they are likely the author's creation rather than accepted by-names), foodstuffs take on human qualities, just as tribal society in the alimentary otherworld takes on those of food.

From a stylistic point of view such descriptions are fully consonant with the motif of an Otherworld where all is realised in a single, monolithic medium. The passage illustrates, in parodic fashion, the learned Irish taste for definition

and categorisation, lists and indices, but exceeds what would be contained in typical medieval *amplificatio*, so as to create a static, lexically hypertrophic text, marked by parataxis, suppression of verbs, accumulation and concatenation through alliteration and apposition, resulting in semantically overdetermined nominal phrases.<sup>23</sup> Other linguistic division, union, and word-play are evident in the Irish practice of etymological separation. In *Cormac's Glossary*, *cnú*, 'nut' is explained as *cainiu .i. millsí oldati na toraid aile*, 'fairer, i.e., sweeter than are the other fruits'.<sup>24</sup> The juxtaposition of *cnú* and *cain* is not so much a historical linguistic derivation as a recognition of the semantic affinity that was immanent in words with a phonological resemblance. This is an anachronistic defence of what must have been a witty exercise for the early Irish *literati*. One may also refer back to the description of the Physician's horse for an example of parataxis, the suppression of syntactic connectors.

Early Irish tradition gives ample evidence of the homological thinking that underlay much of preserved European myth, e.g., hair is to head as leaves to tree, or grass to pasture, with the analogy founded in the story of the sacrifice of the first being whose hair became foliage, bones became mountains, etc. (e.g., the giant Ymir in Norse, Purusa in Indic tradition). But here there is no mediation and homology has broken down. In this bizarre morphology there is no symbolic match between object and its constituent medium, save the qualities of solidity or liquidity. Living horse flesh is replaced by salt pork. Food is compared only to food, for example, loaves the size of a hen. From this perspective, the conceit of this existential Otherworld, *cibus ad nauseam*, is a good deal darker than perhaps first appreciated. What appears a glutton's paradise, based on equivalences, e.g., spleen as saddle, may not lie too far from the early visions of hell recorded in Ireland, where punishments were matched to crimes in the way later immortalised by Dante.

In the later, more evolved recension of *AMCG*, the basic metonym, the world as food—the 'meatonym'—forms the spatial context for the deployment of the story line and of various satirical excursions. A world under the sign of potential gluttony, of unrealised overindulgence, is the setting for attacks on other social ills. Jackson<sup>25</sup> usefully discusses the work's various satirical targets. One of the most thorough-going exercises, although lacking the sharp edge of satire, is the affectionate send-up of literary commonplaces. Food, initially narratively central, at last becomes thematically marginalised through the glut of images, and through images of glut.

<sup>23</sup> See McKenna on reiterative narrative effects on the macro level. <sup>24</sup> Whitley Stokes (ed.) and John O'Donovan (trans.), *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's Glossary* (Calcutta: The Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), 45. <sup>25</sup> *AMCG*, trans. Jackson, xxxi–xxxix.

With important qualifiers attending its singular constitution, Mac Con Glinne's Foodworld fits the general description of the Irish Otherworld that John Carey gives in his equation of Otherworld and imaginative narrative. Here he writes of the latter:

Within the confines of story, time and space can be telescoped at will; an age can pass in an instant, distant places can be juxtaposed, a moment can be seized and frozen in its flight. It is a realm where *resources are never exhausted or consumed*, peopled by beings whose vitality is unaffected by the passage of human time. Here all things are possible: *opposites can exist without conflict, essences and attributes can be isolated and transferred*. Like the Otherworld, narrative is a version of our own reality, *identical or antithetical* depending on our points of view, ubiquitous yet impalpable.<sup>26</sup> (emphasis added)

### The ecclesiastical perspective

When one concludes, as I think we must, that the repertory of foods rehearsed in the story coincides with that available in the Ireland of the time (no fountains of wine, no stuffed peacocks, no oranges, in short, no exotic foods), and that the food fantasy differs from everyday experience not in quality but only in quantity, one may seek in that same world important referential subtexts for *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, such as the dietary regulations prescribed in the various monastic rules that were elaborated in early Christian Ireland. One such text, sufficiently lengthy to encourage belief that most important issues are addressed in the extant version, is the vernacular account of the monastery of Tallaght, founded by Máelruain, and later led by his disciple, Máeldithriub, who may have been the author. The text dates from the mid-ninth century. Since the objective of the Rule is virtuous Christian living, the means to its realisation take the form of various kinds of abstinence as well as more positive devotion to prayers and vigils, this too accompanied by physical rigours. Often the text deals with the denial of food, as for example in the stipulation that meat (except for venison and wild swine) not be eaten by the monks but saved for guests. Game must here be viewed as natural food, of less value than domesticated food, and thus more appropriate to abstemious, luxury-denying monks. The rule displays the same reliance on hierarchy and attention to detail, even that of the least palatable food, that characterises the *Vision*. For example, one kind of penitential food

<sup>26</sup> John Carey, 'Otherworlds and Verbal Worlds in Middle Irish Narrative', in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium 9* (Cambridge: Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, 1989), 31–42, at 30f. Earlier relevant discussion in Patrick

Sims-Williams, 'Some Celtic Otherworld Terms' in A. T. E. Matonis and D. F. Melia (eds), *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric Hamp* (Van Nuys, Calif.: Ford and Bailie, 1990), 57–81; Carey, 'Time, Space, and the Otherworld', in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic*

*Colloquium 7* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), 1–27, and Carey's response to Sims-Williams in 'The Irish "Otherworld": Hiberno-Latin Perspectives', *Éigse 25* (1991), 154–59. Cf. Gurevich, 133ff. Recent reorientation of the discussion in William Sayers, 'Netherworld and Otherworld

in Early Irish Literature', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie 59* (2012), 201–30.

is prescribed as follows: ‘Those, however, who have committed great sins, and deserve seven years or more [of penance], as do bishops or priests who fall into mortal sin, do homicides and so forth, get gruel under water’.<sup>27</sup> The quality of the grain, the fineness of its milling, even the texture of the resulting gruel are matched to the gravity of the penitents’ sins.<sup>28</sup>

As an ecclesiastical student, Mac Con Glinne would have been conditioned by such an environment. Even without the incentive of saving his own skin by finding some expedient to purge King Cathal of his tapeworm, it might be thought natural that the scholar’s fantasies should go in the direction of abundant food. At a more fundamental level, however, one lying outside story and narrative line, his vision is of an anti-world that stands Christian values on their heads. Joseph Nagy has remarked on the Irish awareness of food’s strategic location in the tension-filled zone between religion and secular life.<sup>29</sup> Yet, while the vision borrows from other native traditions of a sinless Otherworld thought to have pre-Christian roots, it cannot be judged paganistic, irreligious, or even heretical, but rather grotesque. Mac Con Glinne’s vision is like the feast of fools, the carnival before *carne[m] levare*, where everything is reversed and a boy bishop rules over those previously revered as his superiors. It is perhaps in this spirit that the text excludes all reference to foods appropriate to fast days (crustaceans, fresh or salt fish) and even fails to mention, except in two comic names, the wine essential to Christian sacrament. Nonetheless, the text stays within the world of society and culture (and prepared food), in contrast to the diet of those on the social margin: the heroic sentinel’s ration (barnacle goose, salmon, cress, laver, dulse, cold sandy water) or the outlaw’s stolen feast (horseflesh gulped in the forest).<sup>30</sup>

Mac Con Glinne’s relentless vision of food is a fantasy but also a fraud. His dream seems the product of a rare rich meal and comfortable night’s sleep in the abbot’s bed. The contents of the vision make it unlikely that it is divinely inspired; unlike the conventional Irish entry into the Otherworld, the visit does not result in supernatural insights. According to medieval Christian causality, it must then be the work of demons. The deceptive vision, elaborated by Mac Con Glinne to help save his life by curing Cathal of his ravenous hunger, is made doubly deceitful in his artful retelling, appropriately turned back against a demon. Modern criticism might make much of the near homonymity (short and long vowel, respectively) of *Ion*, ‘demon’ and *lón*, ‘fat, food, feast; haunch, rump’, but it would be hazardous to affirm that such paronomasia was actively

**27** Edward J. Gwynn and Walter Purton (eds and trans.), ‘The Monastery of Tallaght’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29 (1911), 115–80, par. 74. The original text is in the vernacular, not in Latin. **28** On the connection between gluttony and lust, and appropriate penance, see

Gwara. **29** Joseph Falaky Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes and their Rites of Passage’, in Bo Almqvist and Séamus Ó Catháin (eds), *The Heroic Process: Form, Function and Fantasy in Folk Epic* (Dun Laoghaire: The Glendale Press, 1987), 161–82, citing Claude Lévi-Strauss. **30** The sentinel in question

is Cú Chulainn, and he offers his meagre fare to the visiting Fergus; Cecile O’Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin: DIAS, 1976), 157. The episode of the thieves eating horseflesh is predicted by a saint, the equivalent of a curse; Richard Sharpe (trans.), *Life of St*

*Columna: Adomnán of Iona* (London: Penguin, 2005), I, 21. Discussion in Lucas, *Irish Food before the Potato*, 30.

appreciated in *AMCG*, despite the frequent use of both words and documented early Irish taste for word-play. In the scholar's narrativisation of the vision, the Otherworld and narrative world of Carey's equation are even more tightly conjoined. The vision, nourishing neither the student nor the demon, is trapped in the framing tale like an undigested meal. In all of this, Mac Con Glinne's good faith and status as narrative subject, the master of discourse, remain ambiguous. The promise of the Otherworld, however, is ultimately fraudulent. In this larger frame of reference, the vision poses no threat to, and is contained by, orthodox Christian ideology.

Two speculations: game may have been less prized as food because the wilderness was judged antithetical to ordered Christian life and, more practically, wild animals carried less fat. Monastic diet, in some cases, may have shied away from grilled meat because the attributes of flame, flesh, and fork had associations with the Christian hell. Aristocratic laymen and women, such as those imagined to have dined at the great hall of Tara, would have had fewer scruples. It is then consonant, as with Dante's *contrapaso*, that the demon of gluttony is lured out to its doom with spit-mounted, roasted meats.

### The bountiful land and the kingship

Where does the alimentary vision of *AMCG* fit in traditional Irish belief? A central tenet in pre-Christian Ireland was that the fertility of man, stock, and land, as well as social stability, was dependent on the physical and moral qualities of the ruler, in particular the quality of royal justice, characterised as *fír*, or 'truth'. The local female divinities of territorial sovereignty, the embodiment of natural forces and the very land itself, conferred legitimacy on the king or withdrew it from him. In the form of a beautiful young woman, she offered the 'ale of sovereignty' and herself to the successful candidate for the kingship or she came to the door of the royal banquet hall as a hideous hag to predict the death of the deficient ruler. Irish conceptions of kingship required that the ruler be just, brave, and generous in order to retain her favour.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the king should be without physical defect. Thus, in narrative accounts some disfigurement of the king is the frequent prelude to loss of the kingdom. On the analogy 'head is to body' as 'king is to people', impairment to the head in the form of enforced tonsure or partial scalping, blindness, facial rictus, etc., is the external manifestation of the inadequacy of royal justice, what Georges

31 Fundamental and more recent studies on the theme of the goddess are Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Aspects of the Theme of the King and Goddess in Irish Literature, 1, 2, 3', *Études Celtiques* 7 (1955), 76–114, 356–413; 8 (1956) 59–65; Angela Partridge, 'Wild Men and Wailing Women', *Éigse* 18 (1980–81),

25–37; Nagy, 'Fenian Heroes'; Máire Herbert, 'Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland', in Louise D. Fredeburg (ed.), *Women and Sovereignty Cosmos* 7 (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1992), 264–75.

Dumézil would call a transgression or failure in his first social function of law and rulership. But rulers defective in, or deprived of, martial valour (the strong arm of his second function) illustrate his tripartite scheme equally well, as do others in the Irish tradition who are mean, extortionate, impotent, or otherwise fail their subjects in the third function of material prosperity, the fertility of stock and land. Although the text offers no causal antecedent in this parodic treatment, Cathal's royal impairment lies in Dumézil's third function, takes the form of a demon of gluttony, and appropriately affects the lower body. The abstemious, thigh-pierced Fisher King of Arthurian tradition is a direct descendant, and Cathal's ravenous hunger could be likened to an interior Wasteland.<sup>32</sup> The conception of the goddess of territorial sovereignty, as the sovereignty figure is titled in contemporary scholarship, and of the bountiful feminine land, along with the relatively conservative nature of Irish tradition, may go some way to explaining the particularly rich variety of alimentary motifs that is found in early Irish literature, food continuously linked with the fate of the hero or king.

### Origins of the Land of Cockaigne

AMCG represents a very full realisation of the Land of Cockaigne motif, although its relationship to the wider western European manifestations of the fantasy of a Land of Plenty—an elaboration of the Bible's land of milk and honey—has not been satisfactorily explained. Among the best-known parallels is the *Land of Cokaygne*, named in the Middle English poem from the 'Kildare collection', now ascribed to a Franciscan house in Waterford and dated to about 1330. Typical of scholarship in this area, the editor of the miscellany, Thorlac Turville-Petre, does not even mention AMCG in his introduction, despite Kildare's proximity to Cathal mac Finguine's kingdom in Munster.<sup>33</sup> Beyond Ireland, a rather untypical French romance, *Joufroi de Poitiers*, dated to the thirteenth century, mentions a lord of *Cocagne* (v. 1533) but the reference, doubtless familiar to the medieval public, remains unexplained.<sup>34</sup> Viewed against this evidence, the even earlier AMCG (c. 1175) will be shown to be at the fountainhead of the pan-European conception of a land where all is made of food.<sup>35</sup>

In one of Mac Con Glinne's visions, he meets the *fáithlaeg*, a prognostic-physician in Kuno Meyer's translation, a name in which the first element has echoes of pre-Christian druidic practices. Whether quack or 'witch-doctor' (Preston-Matto), the medical seer directs the poet to a place called *Síth Longthe* (l. 880).

**32** On the Celtic and Indo-European tradition of ruler inadequacy in this third function, see Jean-Michel Picard, 'The Strange Death of Guaire mac Aedain' in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone (eds), *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor*

*James Carney* Maynooth Monographs 2 (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 367–75.

**33** *The Land of Cokaygne* in Thorlac Turville-Petre (ed.), *Poems from BL MS Harley 913, 'the Kildare manuscript'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Wolfgang Biesterfeld and Marlis H. Haase, 'The Land

of Cokaygne: eine englische Version des Marchens von Schlaraffenland', *Fabula* 25 (1984), 76–83. **34** Percival B. Fay and John L. Grisby (eds), *Joufroi de Poitiers: Roman d'aventures du 13<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1972), v. 1533.

**35** See the discussion, with an emphasis on French and Dutch materials, in Herman

Pleij (trans. Diane Webb), *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life* (New York: Columbia, 2001), ch. 'The Name Cockaigne', 391–402. Pleij's proposed etymology is, however, the conventional one.

The standard form *síd* is commonly but misleadingly rendered ‘fairy-mound’ but more precisely designated hillside caverns. The Túatha Dé Danann (People of the Goddess Danu), early inhabitants of Ireland, lost a war with the invading Milesians and in the peace settlement (OIr. *síd*, both ‘peace’ and ‘settlement’) received the netherworld as compensation for the loss of the earth’s surface. The Túatha Dé Danann were dispossessed by an act of compulsory acquisition (US, eminent domain), when the Christian Church figuratively appropriated the underworld for the location of hell, although no text explicitly references this development.<sup>36</sup> In the last phase of this forced migration, the hidden Otherworld and its inhabitants moved from hillside caverns to lacustrine islands and then islands in the ocean, as is so richly portrayed in later literature (e.g., *The Voyage of St Brendan*, *The Voyage of Máeldúin*).

The second element of the novel toponym *Sith Longthe* for a land of inexhaustible food is derived from Old Irish *longud* (genitive singular *loingthe*), ‘eating; meal’, a reflex of *lón*, ‘food, sustenance; provision, ration’ (possibly related to the homonym *lón*, ‘haunch, rump’). The paraphrastic transition from *Sith Longthe*, ‘settlement-site of food’ to Irish *Tír Cucainn*, ‘land of kitchen, food rations’ is readily made. Irish *cucann* is adapted from Late Latin, here best seen as Church Latin, *coquina*, ‘kitchen; foodstuff’. In this context we may recall the idea of a punning toponym, *Tír na mBid*, ‘Land of Food,’ which would echo *Tír na mBéo*, the ‘Land of the Living’, and comparable names for Otherworlds in early Irish tradition. *Tír Cucainn* could have had a later English calque in the Kildare poem’s *Land of Cokagne*. In a goliardic poem from about 1160 we also meet a bibulous *abbas Cucaniensis*, who has a counterpart in the Kildare poem on Cokagne.<sup>37</sup>

The motif of a land of edible plenty could have reached the European continent along with the matter of Britain. In other Romance countries, loans or calques quickly appeared: Italian *Paese della Cuccagna*, Spanish *País de Cucaña*. Farther afield, we have echoes of Cockaigne when the ‘land of eats’ becomes the ‘land of ease’, as in Dutch *Luilekkerland*, German *Schlaraffenland*, and Swedish *Lubberland*. If this argument for the primacy of AMCG in launching the motif of a gastronomical Otherworld (not without some hellish aspects) obtains, Ireland will have made a major contribution to the European imaginary in the form of a fantasised alternative to the all-too-frequent Famine.

<sup>36</sup> See Sayers, ‘Netherworld’

<sup>37</sup> Edwin H. Zeydel (trans.), *Vagabond Verse: Secular Latin Poems of the Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 86–87.

### Conclusion

The monastic culture that promoted literacy and literature in medieval Ireland was also (ideally) under the sign of the dietary prescriptions that are the subjacent reference points from which the *Vision* launches its bulimic fantasy. Internal evidence makes a strong case for the motif of the Land of Cockayne, as deployed in later English, French, and German tradition, having Irish antecedents. In addition, the parodic tour-de-force that is *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* represents an insular gathering point for a number of traditional Irish story motifs and techniques—the Otherworld voyage and vision, either of paradisaical reward or hellish punishment, the story within a story, supernatural helpers, the encyclopaedic lists and overwrought, static descriptions—as well as having more topical satirical targets. But if the work stands alone in this respect, it took its present form at a time when other related Celtic matter was entering the mainstream of western European literature: the *Voyage of St Brendan*, Tnugdál's vision of St Patrick's Purgatory, the *Marvels of Ireland*, and the Island of Avalon, along with the more comprehensive stories of Arthur and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde.

This review of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* has not exhausted the early Irish lexicon of foods nor the 'menu' of known foodstuffs, although it has highlighted a dependency on grain, doubtless typical for early Europe, and on dairy products, this more specifically Irish. Social status was determining for diet, and the consumption of meat may have been infrequent for members of the lower classes. We should not believe that other medieval cultures had a less varied diet or more limited lexical resources to characterise it. Nor is there evidence, apart from some modest exports in dry cheese, that Irish food production and Irish diet had any significant influence on European food culture. But given the relative precocity of vernacular writing in Ireland, the product of an early conversion to Christianity, immunity from the disruptions of barbarian migration until the Viking raids, and perhaps the homogeneity and self-confidence of the insular culture, we have in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* and its various alimentary motifs much fuller, albeit still selective, dietary evidence, more entertainingly presented, than is available in the other vernacular languages and literatures of twelfth-century Europe. It is, in a foretaste of what would follow in the kingdom of letters, with the antecedents of the Land of Cockaigne that Ireland made its most significant medieval culinary contribution.

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Section 3

# Sources for food history in early modern Ireland



**Lancelot de Casteau (1604)****Ouverture de Cuisine****Vn gigot de mouton rosty à la mode d'Irlande**

Prennez vostre gigot, & le battez ben fort sans rompre la peau: puis mettez le tremper dans du vinaigre trois ou quatre heures: apres tirez le dehors, & faictes resuyer avec vn drap, & mettez des claussons dedans, & des petites pieces de canelle la longueur d'vn petit doigt, & le lardez avec vn peu de saige & mariolaine, & le mettez rostir en broche, & tousiours bien arrouser de beurre & vin d'Espagne: zestant bien cuit coupez deux citrons par petites tranches, & iettez sus avec la graisse qui est en la paille, & vn peu de vinaigre, & seruez ainsi.

**Leg of mutton roasted in the Irish way**

Take your leg [of mutton] and batten it well without breaking the skin, then marinate in vinegar for three or four hours: after taking it out and drying with a cloth, stud it with cloves of garlic and finger length pieces of cinnamon, sprinkle with sage and marjoram, and spit roast it, continuously basting with butter and Spanish wine: When well cooked, cut two lemons into little wedges and put into the pan juices with a little vinegar and serve.

OUVERTVRE  
DE CVISINE,

Par Maistre Lancelot de Casteau, Mon-  
tois, en son temps Maistre Cuisinier  
de trois Princes de Liege.

*Premierement à Monsieur Robert de Berghe,  
Conte de VValhain, Euesque de Liege.*

*Secondemēt à Mōsieur Gerard de Grousbееck,  
Cardinal & Euesque de Liege.*

*Tiercement à Noble & puissant Prince Er-  
nest, Duc de Bauiere, Archeuesque de Colo-  
gne, Electeur, & Euesque de Liege, &c.*

*Auec permission des Superieurs.*



A LIEGE,

Par Leonard Streeel Imprimeur iuré.

M. D. CIII.

*Auec priuilege.*

On les vend au Toison d'or, apres l'Eglise des  
Onze mil Vierges.

**09**

*The Humours of Whiskey:  
'Uisce beatha' in feudal Irish  
hospitality and medicine*

**Fionnán O'Connor**

The Irish delight in meat that is cooked rare, and not overdone, but they very rarely get sick because of the rawness or lack of cooking. As a medicine to cure all ills they use a kind of wine refined by fire, which is commonly called *aqua vitae*. The heat of this drink makes food easier to digest: so much so that if just a tiny flame is applied, the whole ignites at once, like gunpowder. They buy a great quantity of wine in the neighbouring towns, which they jokingly call 'the King of Spain's son'. With two kinds of intoxicating liquor and by downing flagons of wine, they overwhelm themselves.

—Richard Stanihurst, *De Rebus in Hibernia Gestis*, 1584<sup>1</sup>

Even the word is Irish. For centuries, 'whiskey' has been a central part of Irish food and beverage history and a complicated social aspect of lived experiences across both rural and urban Ireland. A tourist stepping into a modern Irish distillery or bar today will likely be regaled with stories of the water of life's 'dark age' monastic origins, its nineteenth-century global renown, and the aromatic nuances of its modern incarnations. Some of these stories are borne out by historical sources, while some—such as the notion of an early monastic origin—are modern inventions. Indeed, the word itself is actually rather modern. Seemingly unattested before the eighteenth century, whiskey (under various spellings) is an anglicisation of the older Irish *uisce beatha* (Scots Gaelic *uisge beatha*), itself a calque of the Latin *aqua vitae*, a phrase applied to distilled spirits generally across Europe from the thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The names for other European spirits such as French *eau de vie* and Scandinavian *akvavit* similarly stem from this initially medical and alchemical terminology. Before the Georgian era, the more common anglicisation of its Irish variant is 'usquebaugh', often mistakenly read as a synonym for whiskey but in reality a materially distinct beverage. Indeed, an awareness at the outset of this material plurality between similarly named beverages is invaluable to a more nuanced understanding of both the social history of alcohol in Ireland and the genesis of whiskey within the broader advent of Occidental spirits.

To understand that plurality, it is important first to situate Ireland's *uisce beatha* within the essential history of spirituous alcohol. Unlike fermented beverages such as ale and wine, spirits are the result of two processes: the anaerobic fermentation of sugars into ethanol and the distillation of that now mildly alcoholic liquid into a high-strength liquor. In principle, distillation describes the

<sup>1</sup> John Barry and Hiram Morgan (eds), *Great Deeds In Ireland: Richard Stanihurst's De Rebus in Hibernia Gestis* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), 119; Stanihurst's description of 'the King of Spain's son' is unusual, since the more frequently used idiom is 'the King of Spain's daughter'.

<sup>2</sup> David Wondrich, 'Aqua Vitae' in David Wondrich and Noah Rothbaum (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Spirits and Cocktails* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 33.

process of boiling a base liquid into vapour and then recondensing it back into a liquid. Due to their differing volatilities, compounds within the base liquid will evaporate and recondense at differing rates within this process, facilitating the at least partial separation of a specific component such as ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, (78.37°) from water (100°). Compared to fermented drinks, for which evidence is found from pre-history, the arrival of spirituous beverages to most global societies appears startlingly recent. Although distillation as a technology is at least Hellenistic (and possibly Mesopotamian), concrete evidence for the more specific distillation of beverage alcohol outside Oriental and Subcontinental Asian forerunner zones appears only from the Middle Ages, a chronological disconnect frequently attributed to the difficulty of fractionating low boiling ethanol without the aid of auxiliary cooling methodologies.<sup>3</sup> Although proposals have been put forward for the possible use of wine spirit in Dionysian cult or later Gnostic practices, these theories are drawn from suggestive rather than demonstrative literary accounts and remain ultimately speculative.<sup>4</sup>

In an early explicit account of wine distilling in *Kitab Kimiya' al-'Itr* (*The Book of Chemistry and Distillation*), the Islamic polymath Al-Kindi (c.803–873) observes, as if describing something novel, that ‘one can distil wine using a water-bath, and it comes out the same colour as rose-water’.<sup>5</sup> Curiously, Al-Kindi does not appear to be interested in any specific or discernibly ‘alcoholic’ properties in the resultant liquid. Aside from its psychoactive effects, significantly purified alcohol is distinguishable by its solvent, antiseptic, and preservative capabilities, as well as by the ability of its vapours to burn. Despite the frequent use of distillation as a process in the writings of Islamic intellectuals such as Jabir ibn Hayyan (Geber), Al-Razi (Rhazes), and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Kindi’s seemingly only passing interest in distilled wine is not unique. Coupled with the absence of a discernible terminology for ethanol as a substance unto itself, in the twentieth century this led chemistry historians Edmund Von Lipman, R.J. Forbes, and

**3** Lu Gwei-Djen, Joseph Needham, and Dorothy Needham, ‘The Coming of Ardent Water’, *Ambix* 19: 2 (1972), 69–75, 77–79, 87–88, 100–102; Explicitly potable distilled alcoholic spirits in the Gandhāra region in modern Pakistan have been shown to significantly predate developments in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Although clearly older than Medieval European spirits, the dating of early distilled beverages in China is disputed and is complicated by the earlier appearance of strong liquors via frigid congelation.

**4** Paul Keyser, ‘Alchemy in the Ancient World: From Science to Magic’, *Illinois Classical*

*Studies* 15: 2 (1990), 362–63; Wondrich, ‘distillation, history’, in *The Oxford Companion to Spirits*, 225. **5** Ahmad Y. al-Hassan and Donald R. Hill, *Islamic Technology: An illustrated history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 138. **6** Robert James Forbes, *Short History of the Art of Distillation from the Beginnings up to the Death of Cellier Blumenthal* (Leiden: Brill, 1948), 46–47, 87–89; Seth Rasmussen, ‘From *Aqua Vitae* to E85: The History of Ethanol as Fuel’, *Substantia* 3: 2 (2019), 46; Henry M. Leicester, *The Historical Background of Chemistry* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 76–77; Although the

word *alcohol* is itself Arabic, it initially referred to a wide range of distilled, pulverised, sublimated, or otherwise purified substances and only entered parlance as a specific term for ethanol (as *alcohol vini*) around the time of Paracelsus (d. 1541), who refers to it as such. When references to potable spirits do appear in the Arabic world during the thirteenth century, Forbes notes (46), ‘we find it mentioned, not as “alcohol”, but as “*aithale, sudor*” or “*al-raqa*” (that is the ‘sweat’) whence the name *arak*’. **7** Anthony R. Butler and Joseph Needham, ‘An Experimental Comparison of the East Asian, Hellenistic,

and Indian (Gandhāran) Stills in relation to the distillation of Ethanol and Acetic Acid’, *Ambix* 27: 2 (1980), 69–72, 75; al-Hassan and Hill, *Islamic Technology*, 138–41; Arguing that Von Lipmann and Forbes had not properly understood the Arabic terminology, al-Hassan and Hill argued for an Islamic understanding of the medical effects of wine spirit, if not a corresponding word for *aqua ardens* or *aqua vitae* as a substance. **8** Lola Ferre, ‘The Multi-Cultural Origins of the Salernitan Medical School: A Historiographical Debate’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 27: 1 (2018), 1–2, 11; Much of Salerno’s early

more recently Seth Rasmussen to conclude that alcohol was unknown among distillation's Early Medieval Arabic practitioners or their Hellenistic alchemical forebearers.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Forbes argued that their short and blunt-necked, earthenware and crude clay-coated glass distilling apparatuses allowed for insufficiently attenuated heating and cooling to successfully fractionate highly purified ethanol, although this has been contested.<sup>7</sup> Still the orthodox history of the birth of potable spirits in Europe and the Near East, the model put forward by Von Lipman and Forbes, attributed their development to the twelfth century research of the influential Italian medical school at Salerno, an institution that was itself fundamentally indebted to Graeco-Arabic learning.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on Latin translations of Islamic physicians such as Avicenna, and the twelfth century reintroduction into post-Roman Europe of the works of Classical authorities such as Galen and Hippocrates, Salerno and the later universities that followed in its Scholastic tradition developed a complex system of 'humoural' medicine, rooted in the belief that health and illness existed in relation to the four universal properties of 'hot', 'cold', 'wet', and 'dry', stemming ultimately from the four elements (fire, earth, water, air) and manifested within the human body by four 'humours': blood (hot and moist), yellow bile (hot and dry), black bile (cold and dry), and phlegm (cold and moist).<sup>9</sup> Imbalances between the humours were believed to provoke changes in mood as well as health and to be mitigatable through the use of 'correctors', or counteractive consumables possessed of opposite traits in a system known as *contraria contrariis sanantur*.<sup>10</sup> Nearly from the point of its arrival into this medieval Scholastic tradition, *aqua vitae* is as inseparable from humoural suppositions about its unusual properties or (at a later stage) related concepts such as the *quintae essentiae* as it is from the alchemical equipment inherited by those producing it.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically noting its ability to burn, a twelfth century receipt in the *Compendium Salernitanum* for the preparation of *aqua ardens* instructs that it

incorporation of Arabic and Greek learning has been attributed to the translations of Constantinus Africanus, a north African physician and possible Christian convert associated with Salerno and then with the abbey of Monte Cassino, to which the Salernitan Medical School was itself intimately connected (though as Ferre notes, not synonymous). Incorporating Muslim, Christian, Pagan, and more opaquely, Jewish authors without discrimination, Ferre notes that Constantine's translations (along with the incorporation of Byzantine texts translated by Monte Cassino's Bishop Alfannanus),

'came to form the basis of Christian medicine'.<sup>9</sup> Antonella Campanini, *Food Cultures in Medieval Europe*, trans. Leah M. Ashe (Brussels: Peter Lang S.A., 2019), 114–15; Winifred Wulff, *Rosa Anglica sev Rosa Medicinæ Johannis Anglici: An Early Modern Translation of a Section of the Mediaeval Medical Text-Book of John of Gaddesden* (Athens: Alpha Editions, 2020), XIV; Wulff notes a stark shift in the nature of European medicine following this c. 1150–1250 dual dissemination of Arabic learning and 'the version of Greek science that had dwelt in the Moslem (sic) world.... The first we may call the Dark Age, the second the Middle

or Scholastic, or better for our particular purpose, the Arabian Age'.<sup>10</sup> Campanini, *Food Cultures in Medieval Europe*, 116–17. <sup>11</sup> Michela Pereira, 'Heavens on Earth: From the Tabula Smaragdina to the Alchemical Fifth Essence', *Early Science and Medicine* 5: 2 (2000), 132–33, 135, 140–141, 143; Examining the intersection between the two traditions of Scholastic medicine and alchemy, Pereira notes that despite the alchemical interests of prominent Scholastics such as Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon, 'the scholastic curriculum never included alchemy' (132), also noting the still-evolving emergence

of the *quintae essentiae* (fifth element) as a concept and its peculiar association by the fourteenth century in the writings of Jean de Roquetaillade (a.k.a. John of Rupescissa) with *aqua vitae* as a material. She notes that certain alchemical concepts, 'though never accepted in the Scholastic movement, flowed like an undercurrent beneath it, carrying residues of the Platonic and Stoic traditions into the mainstream of the Hermetic conception of the All-as-One, whose full emergence was prevented by the strength of Aristotelian dualism'.



be distilled ‘in the manner of rosewater’ (as in Al-Kindi) from white or red wine with a pound of pulverised salt, four ounces of sulphur, and four ounces of tartar.<sup>12</sup> Like the later *aqua vitae*, the phrase *aqua ardens* would become a common designation for spirits across Europe and survives today in *aguardente* and *aguardiente*, the names applied both to spirits more broadly and to specific beverages in Portugal, Spain, and across Latin America.<sup>13</sup> The terms *aqua ardens* and *aqua vitae* significantly predate our modern understanding of the word *alcohol* and much of the fascination surrounding spirits in Medieval medical and alchemical literature stems ultimately from the properties of ethyl alcohol itself. Indeed, much of the debate around distilled spirits’ origins is concerned less with the possibility of wine distillation than with the ability and demonstrable intent to produce a spirit sufficiently purified for these aspects to become observable.<sup>14</sup> If Pre-Salernitan wine distilling did exist in Europe, it was sufficiently esoteric to remain practically invisible even in highly sophisticated medical literature and its results may not have been comparably high in strength. When it does appear in a few twelfth-century references and more abundantly in late thirteenth and fourteenth century treatises, it is certainly treated as a novel enough material possessed of remarkable sanitary aspects.

First recorded in a series of seven Bolognian medical treatises at the tail end of the c. 1280 *Consilia Medicinalia* of Taddeo Alderotti (a.k.a. Thaddeus Florentinus), the evocative phrase *aqua vitae* emerges alongside a growing fourteenth-century understanding of these attributes and a more widespread (albeit still largely medical, alchemical, and clerical) familiarity with the substance across Europe.<sup>15</sup> Forbes attributes this rapid and abrupt dissemination to the development of auxiliary cooling mechanisms like the *canale serpentinum* (worm coil), itself seemingly first described in the same Bolognian treatises.<sup>16</sup> Instead of the squat condensing arm of the older alchemical cucurbit, the Bolognian model called for a significantly longer winding coil submerged in regularly refreshed cooling water, allowing for a significantly slower condensation and a more exact fractionation of ethanol from water (Figure 1). Alongside ‘simple’ *aqua vitae* and *aqua composita* (distilled from herbally-compounded wine), Alderotti provides

**12** Salvatore de Renzi (ed.), *Collectio Salernitana: Ossia Documenti inediti, e trattati di medicina appartenenti alla Scuola Medica Salernitana* (Naples: Typographie Du Filiaire-Sebezio, 1859), 199, 214; *Compendium, Salernus Aequivocus*, MS 6976 ff. 14ra–20rb, Latin, Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; *Compendium, Salernus Aequivocus*, MS 6988 ff. 72vb–78vb, Latin, Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque Nationale de

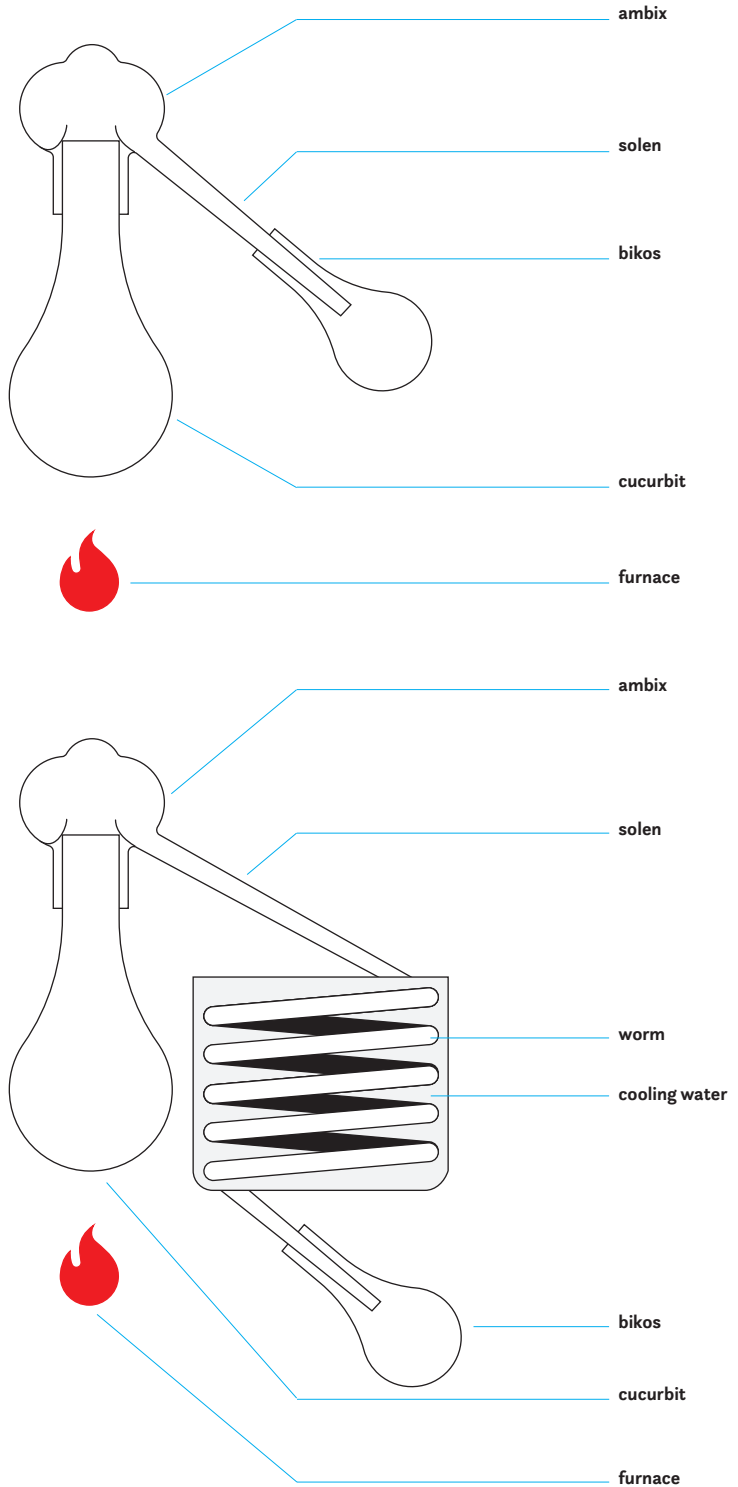
France, Paris; De Renzi’s seminal edition of the *Compendium Salernitanum* was prepared from several manuscripts now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the twelfth century ‘Breslau Codex’, lost during World War II and (outside print) surviving only in extant photographs of individual pages. The passage on *aqua ardens* instructs: ‘*Aqua ardens ad modum aquae rosatae sic fit: Vini (albi) vel rubei libra una in cucurbita ponatur, salis nigri pulverisati*

*aut etiam salis costi libra una, in olle rudi, sulphuris vivi quatuor unciae, tartari unciae quatuor in cucurbita ponantur cum vino praedicto et ventosa supponatur, et aqusitas descendens per nasum ventosae colligatur, a qua aqusitate pannus intinctus servabit flammam illesus.*

**13** Doug Frost, ‘aguardiente’, in *The Oxford Companion to Spirits*, 13–14; David Wondrich, ‘*aqua vitae*’, in *The Oxford Companion to Spirits*, 32.

**14** Rasmussen, *The Quest for Aqua Vitae*, 82–86; Seth

Rasmussen, ‘From Aqua Vitae to E85: The History of Ethanol as Fuel’, *Substantia* 3: 2 (2019), 46. **15** Taddeo Alderotti, *I Consilia*, ed. Giuseppe Michele Nardi (Torino: Edizioni Minerva Medica S.A., 1937), 235–242; Nancy G. Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and His Pupils: Two Generations of Italian Medical Learning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 300–301. **16** Forbes, *Short History of the Art of Distillation*, 83–86; Alderotti, *I Consilia*, 235–242;



**Figure 1** Illustration of Graeco-Arabic (above) vs. Canale Serpentinum (right) Alembic Models. Illustrated by Marcus Lynam.

instructions for multiple distillations of compounded wine in pursuit of *aqua vitae perfectissima*, seemingly pure alcohol itself. Aside from describing the process of fractionation, Alderotti's seven essays or *consilia* include a catalogue of *aqua vitae*'s supposed virtues, some of which are grounded in the demonstrable properties of ethanol and some of which are supposed from humoral theory and medical conjecture. 'The water of life', Alderotti notes in summary, 'is of inestimable glory, the mother and mistress of all medicine', a line later quoted in the fourteenth-century *Testamentum*, a key Medieval alchemical text once popularly misattributed to Ramon Lull.<sup>17</sup> Although the apparatuses are undescribed, *serpentis* distillation is similarly distinguished from *canonis* distillation in the writings of Alderotti's contemporary and University of Bologna colleague, Theodoric Borgognoni (a.k.a. Theodoric of Cervia).<sup>18</sup>

Although not the only means of attenuating the cooling process, the alembic and worm method would become the staple apparatus of numerous professional and folk distilling traditions and remains the essential model of homemade *poitín* stills in Ireland to this day. Curiously, such apparatuses are not described in the older Salernitan receipt, which simply refers to a cucurbit. Assuming the omission is not accidental, this may explain the need for salt in order to reduce the boiling point. The use of salt similarly appears in a twelfth century version of the *Mappae Clavicula*, a cryptic cypher-coded guide to highly specialised arts, the uncertain origins of which complicate the proposal of a straightforward twelfth-century Salernitan genesis for Occidental spirits.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Salernitan account of *aqua ardens*, the unnamed result is simply referred to in the *Mappae Clavicula* as 'a liquid, which when set on fire and while still flaming leaves the material [underneath] unburnt' and may stem from an independent awareness of the concept.<sup>20</sup>

However spirituous liquor was first distilled in Europe, in the decades following the c. 1280 Bolognian *Consilia* this previously near unattested material is suddenly visible across medical and alchemical accounts. Although indications of popular consumption before the fifteenth century are slim, already by 1288

**17** Jennifer Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300–1700* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 43–44, 52; [*Aqua Vitae*] est igitur eius gloria inextimabilis, omnium medicinarum mater et domina. **18** Nicholas Thomas, 'L'Alambic Dans La Cuisine' in Fabienne Ravoire and Anne Dietrich (eds), *La Cuisine Et la Table Dans la France de la Fin Du Moyen Age: Contenus Et Contenants Du XIVe Au XVIe Siecle* (Caen: Publications Du Crahm, 2009), 39. **19** Cyril Stanley Smith

and John G. Hawthorne, *Mappae Clavicula: A Little Key to the World of Medieval Techniques*, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 64: 4 (1974), 3–6; Although manuscript versions of the *Mappae Clavicula* were made in earlier centuries (and much of its content has been argued to be still older again), the inclusion of a recipe for flammable distilled spirit notably appears only from the twelfth century. **20** Smith and Hawthorne, *Mappae Clavicula*, 59; Coded in Caesar mono-alphabetic cypher,

the terse instructions in the *Mappae* note, 'from a mixture of pure and very strong xknk ['vini' - wine] with 3 qbsuf ['parte' - parts] tbnkt ['salis' - salt], cooked in the vessels used for this business, there comes a liquid, which when set on fire and while still flaming leaves the material [underneath] unburnt'. **21** Thomas, 'L'Alambic Dans La Cuisine', 39. **22** Michela Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull* (London: The Warburg Institute University of London, 1989), 1–3, 7, 12–15, 17–19, 27,

40, 76; Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, XV; Much of this fourteenth century alchemical literature has been misattributed to the Neoplatonist Ramon Lull, belonging more properly to the Pseudo-Lullian corpus, a body of some 143 esoteric texts by diverse later authors. The two major works underpinning Lull's false association with *aqua vitae* are the *Testamentum*, written by the 'Magister Testamentum' (an anonymous Catalonian possibly active at Montpellier) and the later *Liber de Secretis Naturae Seu*

the Dominicans in nearby Rimini are forbidden to produce it and expressly instructed to dismantle their alembics.<sup>21</sup> Outside Italy, much of this new fourteenth-century visibility clusters around the Franco-Catalonian Mediterranean, particularly in the writings of alchemists such as Jean de Roquetaillade and the Magister Testamentum and in the literature of physicians connected with key universities such as Montpellier, which had gradually eclipsed Salerno as Europe's pre-eminent medical school.<sup>22</sup> The legacy of Salerno as a beacon of medical learning nevertheless remained an important aspect of the European Scholastic imagination, including among doctors at Montpellier itself.

Already by c. 1310, the sanitary virtues of *aqua ardens* are catalogued along lines similar to Alderotti's in *De Conservanda Sanitate*, a medical treatise by Vital du Four, an Éauze cardinal connected with the papal court at Avignon.<sup>23</sup> As in the older Salernitan receipt, the cardinal's instructions call for sulphur and salt and describe the spirit as distilled in the manner of rose water.<sup>24</sup> Noticeably, Vital du Four differentiates between spirits compounded with botanical additives or distilled from pre-compounded wine and *aqua ardentis simplicis* or 'simple' (i.e. plain) spirit, a differentiation similarly made in Alderotti's *Consilia* and at greater length in the influential medical works historically attributed to Montpellier's Arnaldus de Villa Nova. Often credited with the development of the tincture in Occidental medicine, De Villa Nova's *Liber de Vinis* (1309–1312) and *Tractatus de Aquis Medicinalibus* describe the uses of wine, both as a straight material and as a distillable base compounded with botanical additives such as rosemary.<sup>25</sup>

Although its authorship has been recently interrogated, the De Villa Novan corpus was extraordinarily influential throughout late Medieval European medicine.<sup>26</sup> It appears directly in Ireland's own fifteenth and sixteenth-century distilling literature, both in general principles and in specific treatments such as the use of rosemary-compounded *uisce beatha* as a topical palliative for scabies and other ailments.<sup>27</sup> The De Villa Novan legacy is far from alone among Irish distilling's early textual debts to Mediterranean learning. The first extant text in Ireland detailing *aqua vitae*'s manufacture appears in the fourteenth-century *Red Book*

*de Quinta Essentia*, which Pereira shows to be textually related to the fourteenth-century *De Consideratione Quintae Essentiae Omnium Rerum* of Jean de Roquetaillade. Notably, where de Roquetaillade emphasises medicinal applications, the Pseudo-Lullian prioritises the possibilities for the 'quintessence of wine' in alchemical projects of material transmutation. **23** May Matta-Aliah, 'Armagnac', in *The Oxford Companion to Spirits*, 33. **24** Thomas, 'L'Alambic Dans La Cuisine', 25. **25** Liber Aque

Vite Editus Per Arnaldum de Villa Nova, MS Lat. 5377 fo. 87r., Vatican Apostolic Library. (hereafter VAL MS Lat. 5377 fo. 87r). **26** Chiara Crisciani and Michela Pereira, 'Black Death and Golden Remedies: Some Remarks on Alchemy and the Plague', in Agostino Paravicini Bagliani and Francesco Santi (eds), *The Regulation of Evil: Social and Cultural Attitudes to Epidemics in the Late Middle Ages* (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998), 18; Michela Pereira, 'Arnaldo da Vilanova e l'alchimia. Un'indagine preliminare', *Actes*

*de la I trobada internacional d'estudis sobre Arnau de Vilanova* 14 (1995), 95–174, 165–174; As with the writings of the Pseudo-Lull, Pereira has shown alchemical 'De Villa Novan' distilling texts such as *De aqua vitae simplici et composita* to be pseudepigraphic. **27** Six Medical Tracts, Fifteenth Century, MS G 11, Irish Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Ireland, Dublin; Micheál Ó Conchubhair, 'Uisce Beatha', *Studia Hibernica* 25 (1990), 49–75, 61–63, 66, 69–70; 'An

t-uisgi bethadh a mbia an luibh so do cur ar chainnser no ar sgaibies 7 foirigh 7 foirigh se linn fuar sailti gan gu fetar a fhoirithin roimhe 7 a mairfi do cnamarlach agus do bláth na luibhe cetna coimilte don bhall a mbia pairilis re teine 7 foirigh', *Irish Manuscripts Commission Catalogue 2020–2022*, accessed August 1, 2023.

of *Ossory* and can be situated within the decades and broad intellectual channels of the Bolognian *Consilia*'s dissemination, an internationalism not unusual in Late Medieval medicine.<sup>28</sup> The treatise in the *Red Book* was composed during the tenure of Bishop Richard Ledred in Kilkenny (1317–1360) and directly modelled on Alderotti's *Consilia*, to which its instructions for *canale serpentinum* distillation and catalogue of *aqua vitae*'s virtues bear an almost verbatim resemblance.<sup>29</sup> The 'simple *aqua vitae*' is to be distilled from year-old red wine 'rather of a red than a thick sort, strong and not sweet'.<sup>30</sup> As in its continental precedents, the *Ossory* manuscript is dually concerned with *aqua vitae*'s perceived virtues as a 'simple' material unto itself and as a compoundable vehicle for humoural tincturing.<sup>31</sup>

How influential Ledred's treatise was in the course of subsequent Irish distilling remains unknowable. There is no other known Irish reference to distillation during the remainder of the fourteenth century. Outside a small number of fantastical anecdotes told only in later centuries by Samuel Morewood and Edmund Campion (by whose time Irish spirits were already commonplace) there is similarly no substantive evidence for distilling in Ireland before the fourteenth century and there is no mention of distilled spirit in the entirety of the extensive Old and Middle Irish literary corpus, despite frequent references to other alcoholic beverages such as ale, wine, braggot, and mead.<sup>32</sup> Although there is a history of clerical involvement in European distilling, in which Bishop Ledred himself (like Cardinal du Four) might be defensibly situated, despite contemporary assumptions there is no compelling evidence for an Irish monastic distilling tradition either prior to the *Red Book*'s composition or in its wake. Indeed, as this paper should make clear, the story frequently put forward of an especially Early Medieval Celtic Monastic origin would necessitate an extraordinary back-dating not only of distilling in Ireland but also of Occidental and Near Eastern spirits themselves. Similarly, the oft-repeated notion of distilling's later importation through Irish monastic interface with Moorish Spain (itself politically contracted to the far south of Andalusia by the centuries in question) stands at odds not only with the attested history of *aqua vitae* but with the Irish sources themselves, which are overwhelmingly Scholastic Italian and Franco-Catalonian in origin.

**28** Campanini, *Food Cultures in Medieval Europe*, 115;

Discussing the dissemination of shared dietic under-standings in Medieval Europe, Campanini notes, 'Medical science, with all its discoveries and innovations, travels quickly throughout Europe: it is "international" by definition.'

**29** 'Irish Manuscripts

Commission Catalogue

2020–2022', accessed

August 1, 2023, [https://](https://www.irishmanuscripts.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/)

[www.irishmanuscripts.ie/](https://www.irishmanuscripts.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/)

[wp-content/uploads/2020/06/](https://www.irishmanuscripts.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/)

IMC-CATALOGUE-20-22.pdf;

Traditionally dated to 1324

in proxy to Bishop Ledred's

trial of Alice Kyteler, the *Liber*

*Ruber Diocesis Ossoriensis* is a

multifaceted text containing

hymns and proverbs not

necessarily written in tandem

with the treatise. It has been

suggested that an interest

in the copying of a medical

text on *aqua vitae* may have

been connected with the

arrival of the black plague to

Kilkenny in 1348, when Ledred

was still Bishop, especially

considering the substance's

perception in fourteenth-

century commentaries

(notably de Roquetaillade's

*De Consideratione Quintae*

*Essentiae*) as bubonic

medication. **30** J.F.M. Ffrench,

'On an Ancient Still-Worm

Discovered in the Co. Wicklow',

*The Journal of the Royal Society*

*of Antiquaries of Ireland* 1: 3

(1890), 243; The Translation is

from Rev. James Graves, 1890,

Secretary of the Royal Irish

Academy, 'Simple *aqua vitae*

is to be made in the following

manner: take choice one-year

old wine, and rather of a red

than a thick sort, strong and

not sweet, and place it in a

pot, closing the mouth with a

Clepsydra made of wood, and

having a linen cloth rolled

round it; out of which pot is

to issue a Cavalis leading to

another vessel having a worm

[serpente]. The latter vessel

is to be kept filled with cold

water, frequently renewed

when it grows warm, and

the water foams through the

Cavalis. The pot with the wine

In contrast to these repeated historical myths, there is a remarkable abundance of explicit and detailed references to distillation as a process and to *uisce beatha* as a therapeutic consumable in the extensive Irish language medical literature that accompanied the c. 1350–1500 Gaelic Resurgence. This persists as a running corpus through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, directly overlapping with Irish and Tudor anglophone accounts of *uisce beatha*'s by-then pronounced visibility in Normano-Gaelic hospitality. One of the oldest of these manuscripts is an early fifteenth-century Alderottian treatise containing a summary of his principles and a direct translation of his *Consilium CLXXX* into Irish, with additional material from *Consilia CLXXXI* and *CLXXXII* as well as other sources.<sup>33</sup> Written by the Fermoy scribe and physician Aodh Buidhe Ó Leighin (fl. 1425), the manuscript retains the Latin of Alderotti's opening words and much of his vocabulary, while translating other phrases such as *aqua vitae* into Irish. Thus, Ó Leighin's treatise begins, 'Hic incipiunt uirtutes aque uite ardentis .i. asann so sis tinnscaid buadha an uisci beathad noc lasas 7 Adeir Pilip Catelanus co fuilit adó deg 7 tri .xx. dabuadhaib air'. Notably employing the joint phrase 'aque vite ardentis' in the opening clause, Ó Leighin proceeds to directly relate it to its Irish equivalent and the manuscript may actually represent the oldest extant use of *uisce beatha* as a phrase.<sup>34</sup> Continental Latin terms such as *aqua composita* (*uisgi comsuigigte*) and *aqua perfectissima* (*uisgi lánfoirfe*) are similarly used interchangeably with their Irish equivalents.<sup>35</sup> Ó Leighin describes the distillation of wine along Bolognian lines in an 'innstruminteadh serpentina', comparing the virtues of year-old red wine (*fin derg bliadna*) against white wine (*fin finn*), concluding that the former is of purer material nature.<sup>36</sup>

Although both the Latin treatise in the *Red Book of Ossory* and the translated treatise and commentary in the Ó Leighin manuscript stem from an identical Alderottian source, it is unclear whether the latter owes any discernible debt to the former, especially given the chronological gap between them and Ó Leighin's peculiar allusion to a 'Pilip Catelanus', presumably Philip the Catalan. Furthermore, the translation in the Ó Leighin manuscript is not itself unique among Irish Alderottian treatises. A second, separately translated treatise on

having been placed previously on the fire, distil it with a slow fire until you have from it one-half the quantity of wine that you put in'. **31** G.B., 'On the Early Use of Aqua-Vitæ in Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 6 (1858), 285; Alderotti, I *Consilia*, 235–242; Nancy G. Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and His Pupils: Two Generations of Italian Medical Learning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 300–301. **32** Liam Downey and Ingelise Stuijts, 'Overview

of historical Irish food Products—A.T. Lucas (1960–62) revisited', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 22 (2013), 120. **33** Micheál Ó Conchubhair, 'Uisce Beatha', *Studia Hibernica* 25 (1990), 52–3; Medical Manuscript, Fifteenth Century, MS 1343, 107–110.20, Early Irish Manuscripts, Trinity College Dublin (hereafter TCD MS 1343). **34** Ó Leighin's *floruit* is 1425. Though now listed as *undated*, RIA MS (23 O 6), however, which contains an independently translated

but similarly Alderottian distilling treatise, was previously indexed as 'in good preservation, written about the year 1400'. Catalogued: <https://www.isos.dias.ie/master.html?https://www.isos.dias.ie/libraries/RIA/english/index.html?ref=https://www.google.com/> **35** TCD MS 1343; Ó Conchubhair, 'Uisce Beatha', 58, 71–2. **36** TCD MS 1343, 'Et ase so mathai 7 baintigerna na n-uili leigis 7 is lan inantach a gnimhartha 7 furtachtaiggid an aigid gach

*uili easlainti tic o fuaraidecht 7 Is mar so danter h-e da rer no n-innstruminteadh serpentina .i. gab cugad sein fin derg bliadna no ni as mo no ni as luga no fin finn ro-maith ged edh is fearr an fin derg oir is foirfe 7 is foirlíne 7 asortaighi uaislighi se an t-uisgi nan fin finn*'.

Utrucq. que uice ut utiq. parte que loco baym  
Lnatulr accepit .i. rrbcaq. j bzu mny. bta an po qna  
olab om pogan. amato nabaly. me. n. j. ca yle bñ oup  
rabaly. he an buntgo. o. naly. omha. e. ano. j. coimlo.  
.z. anpeol jantare ganmo. qad. omo. jly. ay. d. h. j.  
ji. bu. y. otu. j. r. d. o. ambrya. ay. d. yle. h. b. j. j. ay. d. an. l. s. may.  
naly. olu. amay. d. u. e. d. an. iat. j. b. r. y. d. re. nan. h. p. e. e. d. an. eb. t. h. i.  
he. s. r. e. m. i. l. l. j. e. u. h. j. m. l. o. d. o. n. a. c. h. j. c. o. e. b. y. o. re. t. e. m. e. l. j. c. l. o. j.  
o. s. e. d. o. n. a. y. r. t. j. a. e. u. r. p. r. t. u. j. c. o. r. p. e. m. o. l. o. j. l. h. j. h. o. re. n. a. c. h.  
j. s. e. l. a. y. s. a. n. t. i. m. a. p. o. r. i. m. l. u. e. t. q. a. m. b. i. p. r. t. u. j. e. a. n. y. j. a. t. a. b.  
j. t. m. p. o. r. i. s. d. o. n. l. u. e. t. q. a. m. b. i. a. e. p. i. l. j. p. o. r. i. i. a. t. j. c. a. y. l. e. t. s. h. t.  
j. e. e. o. j. e. j. d. i. t. b. j. a. t. j. s. j. a. n. t. o. t. l. h. j. j. n. a. n. i. t. j. d. o. e. y. a. r. o. j. e.  
a. o. a. j. d. o. m. a. t. d. o. b. o. p. t. a. e. h. j. m. m. i. s. j. d. o. j. r. r. b. a. d. n. d. h. e. j.  
c. o. m. l. o. d. a. y. s. a. n. o. j. e. t. e. a. c. h. j. l. e. m. j. c. o. e. b. y. s. l. i. p. j. p. r. u. l. e. n. a. h. a. y. d.  
q. j. e. t. o. j. s. i. o. h. i. j. b. r. o. l. y. e. d. . b. u. p. . j. . j. d. i. c. h. j. s. u. l. b. r. y. n. a. p. r. a. e. j.  
t. o. e. b. l. a. y. b. r. u. i. t. j. n. a. p. p. o. n. a. j. b. o. n. a. n. a. p. r. a. e. j. m. e. q. b. y. t. j. b. r. i. j. t.  
m. p. e. n. a. n. c. i. a. p. o. s. t. i. . j. . a. j. j. h. j. j. a. j. s. e. t. e. a. j. a. n. a. p. t. e. t. e. a. j. a. n. u. e. j. e.  
j. b. j. o. m. e. t. c. o. l. u. j. i. o. p. o. p. o. r. i. . d. n. i. t. h. i. o. p. . p. o. r. i. . c. o. l. i. j. n. e. a. y. d. a. j. s. o.  
j. d. h. j. i. p. e. n. e. m. j. t. e. l. e. d. j. r. e. a. i. t. b. a. y. d. n. a. e. t. j. c. o. m. p. u. r. t. o. e. d. a. j. s. e.  
d. o. l. y. e. d. n. a. l. i. b. r. a. p. u. y. a. i. t. q. n. a. m. n. a. y. b. p. l. e. s. m. a. t. i. e. a. t. o. m. i. e. j. i.  
d. o. g. i. b. e. y. e. y. j. e. t. u. o. j. . j. m. p. e. s. m. a. j. e. p. i. l. e. t. a. j. b. e. o. i. l. d. a. c. o. n. g. b. u. o.  
d. h. e. n. a. b. e. l. e. p. o. n. i. a. s. u. l. b. r. y. m. e. g. n. o. j. e. t. n. a. m. b. a. l. l. d. u. c. o. m. e. l. t.  
d. i. b. h. e. j. d. o. e. j. t. a. g. l. a. j. h. e. s. a. n. o. j. s. b. d. o. n. t. r. b. y. t. e. y. a. i. t. e. a. n. o. j.  
j. j. o. i. i. j. . j. j. r. l. i. m. i. o. e. n. a. y. n. t. u. j. p. o. i. j. s. o. u. t. o. o. n. i. p. e. j. n. a. o. n. a. j. i. t.  
o. l. a. j. o. j. a. p. e. a. c. h. h. l. e. m. i. p. l. u. c. h. j. i. p. i. n. j. u. j. j. a. c. o. r. m. i. e. q. n. a. d. o. j.  
t. a. o. o. j. n. o. c. o. s. o. e. l. l. d. b. a. c. h. j. a. t. u. m. a. a. n. o. j. l. a. j. j. m. l. o. n. e. t. a. n. j. i.  
m. t. u. j. j. d. o. j. p. i. m. a. t. d. o. n. p. i. t. a. i. t. j. d. o. j. p. i. l. a. d. d. b. p. i. a. n. b. u. n. o. j. d. o. j.  
p. i. n. o. m. j. d. p. . m. j. . j. d. o. j. . p. . d. a. y. e. j. d. o. b. b. t. a. n. p. j. a. q. m. n. y. c. o. i. t. e. j. j. b.  
a. n. d. e. n. a. c. h. i. o. d. e. j. d. u. e. l. e. d. d. e. c. o. p. a. h. e. d. o. b. m. b. t. . e. n. a. q. n. u. y. e. e.  
a. n. j. e. a. d. a. j. o. i. d. p. e. j. m. a. j. u. t. j. s. d. i. m. i. a. t. j. l. a. y. h. o. j. m. p. o. l. t. e. t. u. j.  
j. m. l. o. n. e. t. h. i. a. y. a. n. b. y. t. j. i. t. d. l. o. n. g. l. a. y. j. u. a. t. n. o. e. n. g. e. p. o. i. s. a. m. i. n. j. m. a.  
t. o. j. e. b. r. o. l. j. q. d. m. i. e. m. j. t. e. p. i. c. e. l. l. j. o. m. h. m. a. t. a. y. h. i. e. a.

the medical virtues of consumed *uisce beatha* (indexed by Ó Conchubhair as 'Téacs 2') similarly finds its first extant versions in the early fifteenth century, with recurring versions in Irish (and later Scottish) Gaelic medical manuscripts across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>37</sup> From the archaeological record, although the soldering and materials of the distilling vessels so far uncovered in Ireland do not suggest a date older than the 1400s, it is notable that these objects have been primarily identified by the structural uniqueness of the pot and serpentine coil apparatus as an object, a material indication of the same Bolognian Scholastic inheritance described in Irish manuscript instructions.<sup>38</sup>

None of this is out of character given the essentially Scholastic and Graeco-Arabic nature of Gaelic medicine itself.<sup>39</sup> Its practitioners, or medical *ollamháin*, were born into hereditary local kindreds and educated either in continental universities (including from the fourteenth century both Salerno and Montpellier) or in Irish schools whose teachings emulated continental practice.<sup>40</sup> As with Gaeldom's other castes of hereditary literati such as poets and brehons, these physicians occupied a place of prestige in the retinues of local chiefs and the more Gaelicised Norman lords and were often rewarded with familial lands.<sup>41</sup> As noted by medieval Irish medical scholar Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, 'such posts were limited in number, keenly contested, and richly rewarded'.<sup>42</sup> Comprising roughly a quarter of extant Late Medieval Irish language literature, their manuscripts are anomalous in their preference for Irish over Latin but were still adapted from the Latin writings of continental developments and from Latin translations of Greek and Arabic exemplars such as Avicenna and Hippocrates.<sup>43</sup> Examining the closely related legacy of the Scottish *Meic-Bethad* or *Beaton* kindred, John Bannerman notes of the corpus, 'Gaelic had thus joined Greek, Arabic, and Latin as one of only four languages in which this body of medical knowledge was formally and systematically studied and taught over the centuries from Hippocrates to Rivierius'.<sup>44</sup> Humoural medicine is deeply embedded in the corpus.<sup>45</sup> Indeed,

**37** Medical Treatises, Fifteenth Century, MS 464 (23 O 6) 36, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin; Medical Treatises, Fifteenth–Sixteenth Centuries, MS 445 (24 B 3), 94, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin; Miscellanea, Fifteenth–Sixteenth Centuries, MS 1337/3 (H.3.18), 417–418, Trinity College Dublin; NLS MS 72.1.2, f. 87v; Alderotti, *I Consilia*, 236–238. **38** Ffrench, 'On an Ancient Still-Worm Discovered in the Co. Wicklow', 244. **39** John Bannerman, *The Beatons: A Medical Kindred in the Classical Gaelic Tradition* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 1998), 89–90. **40** Máire Áine Sheehan, 'Law, Poetry, and Medicine: The Literate Professionals in Autonomous

Gaelic Ireland, c. 1250 – c. 1630' (PhD diss., University College Cork, 2016), 138–9; Pierce Grace, 'Medicine in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, c. 1350–1750', *Irish Historical Studies* 44: 166 (2020), 220. **41** Pierce Grace, 'Medicine in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, c. 1350–1750', *Irish Historical Studies* 44: 166 (2020), 220; Sheehan, 'Law, Poetry, and Medicine', 220. **42** Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha, 'Early Modern Irish Medical Writings', *Scéala Scoil an Léinn Cheiltigh: Newsletter of the School of Celtic Studies* 4, (1990), 35. **43** Many of these intellectual lineages are themselves inseparably intertwined. Fragments of

an Irish translation of Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, for example, have been shown by Pádraig Ó Macháin and Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha to stem from Gerard of Cremona's Latin version, with interpolations citing aphorisms of De Villa Nova and the *Pantegni* of Constantinus Africanus. Manuscript and details available via DIAS: [https://www.isos.dias.ie/PRIVATE/Avicenna\\_Fragment.html](https://www.isos.dias.ie/PRIVATE/Avicenna_Fragment.html) **44** John Bannerman, *The Beatons: A Medical Kindred in the Classical Gaelic Tradition* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 1998), 97. **45** Grace, 'Medicine in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland', 217.

**Figure 2** Irish Medical Treatise on Aqua Vitae's Virtues, Royal Irish Academy 24 B 3, p. 94



Ó Leighin's Alderottian distilling treatise (itself inherently humoural) shares its manuscript with a version of the influential *Materia Medica* or 'Herbal' of Tadhg Ó Cuinn, which catalogues the humoural properties of various consumables.<sup>46</sup> The herbily-compounded *aqua composita* described by Alderotti and Ó Leighin is similarly rooted in its very premise in humoural principles.

Indebted to a Late Medieval European practice in which *aqua vitae* was itself increasingly a feature, the Gaelic medical corpus' interest in *uisce beatha* is both chronologically and culturally in sync with the history of spirits elsewhere. While *aqua vitae*'s alchemical history is thus seemingly unmentioned, the interest shown by Gaelic authors in its therapeutic usages is a natural reflection of their connection to developments in medicine more broadly. The channels through which that knowledge spread were hybrid and diverse. Irish references to *uisce beatha* appear, for example, in both a c. 1460 Irish version of the *Rosa Anglica* of Oxford's John of Gaddesden and in a c. 1480 Irish translation of the 1303 *Lilium Medicinæ* of Montpellier's Bernard de Gordon, on whose text Gaddesden's *Rosa* was itself largely based.<sup>47</sup> To complicate matters, just as Gaddesden inherited the Montpellier tradition of de Gordon, Winifred Wulff notes of the 1460 Irish *Rosa Anglica* that, 'the Irish translator, not satisfied with the use already made of it, took pieces wholesale out of the *Lilium Medicinæ*, and inserted them in his translation of the *Rosa Anglica*'.<sup>48</sup> To complicate this textual legacy still further, while de Gordon himself alludes to *aqua vitae* in the *Lilium Medicinæ*, Micheál Ó Conchubhair has noted that despite John of Gaddesden's essential debt to that text his descriptions of *aqua vitae* are drawn from Alderotti.<sup>49</sup>

In illustration of these inextricable relations between Irish, French, English, and source Mediterranean medical texts, Wulff notes in the introduction to her seminal edition of the Irish *Rosa Anglica* that, 'all these [Irish] families of hereditary physicians appear to have kept in touch with medical learning in England and on the Continent—they all read the same books of the School of Salerno, the Arabian physicians; and Bernard of Gordon and John of Gaddesden were known to them'. Although the *Lilium* was clearly already an important text by the time of the 1460 Irish *Rosa Anglica*, the *ollamh* Cormac Mac Duinnshléibhe's c. 1480 translation (as *Lile na hEladhan Leighis*) became a core staple of the medieval Gaelic medical tradition, both in Ireland and in Scotland.<sup>50</sup> Curiously, unlike the receipts for *aqua vitae* in either Alderotti's *Consilia* or in the Ó Leighin manuscript, de Gordon and his translator Mac Duinnshléibhe describe its distillation from white rather than red wine.<sup>51</sup>

46 See 'The *Materia Medica* of Tadhg Ó Cuinn' (Manuscript-online) Available with listed manuscript sources at: UCC Corpus of Electronic Texts <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G600005.html> (Accessed March 1 2023). 47 Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, 264–65; Sheehan, 'Law, Poetry, and Medicine', 143.

48 Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, XV. 49 Ó Conchubhair, 'Uisce Beatha', 54. 50 Aoihbheann Nic Dhonnchadha, 'Medical Writing in Irish, 1400–1700', <https://www.dias.ie/celt/celt-staff-and-scholars/celt-dr-aoibheann-nic-dhonnchadha/medical-writing-in-irish-1400-1700/>; Copies of Mac

Duinnshléibhe's translation were made over at least the next two centuries, including an Isle of Skye Beaton *Lilium*, the sixteenth-century *Lilium* of Corc Óg Ó Cadhla, and Pádraic Ó Siadhail's late c. 1658 51 RIA MS 24 P 14 (433), at p.42a 9–14. Reference located on enquiry courtesy

Nic Dhonnchadha; *Lilium Medicinæ*, Book 1, Chapter 21, Rubric 7. Hathitrust Library: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/t?id=ucm.531654.5825&view=1up&seq=6&kin=2021> 'Foliorum ruthae, celidoniae, foliorum agrimoniae, ana. et ponantur integra in aqua vitae, hoc est in vino

there is a remarkable abundance of explicit and detailed references to distillation as a process and to *uisce beatha* as a therapeutic consumable in the extensive Irish language medical literature that accompanied the c. 1350–1500 Gaelic Resurgence

Diverse as these manuscripts' textual geneses are, their descriptions of *uisce beatha*'s curative utility can be situated within a relatively cohesive Scholastic and humoral High and Late Medieval intellectual context. As in other parts of Europe, for example, Ó Leighin describes *uisce beatha*'s use in the treatment of dysentery and diarrhoea, both ailments of moistness.<sup>52</sup> Essentially a 'hot' substance to counteract humoral 'cold' (and especially cold and moist) imbalances, *uisce beatha* is described in the Irish *Rosa Anglica* as both a potable and a topical corrector.<sup>53</sup> To cure paralysis of the tongue, for example, as this is 'a member in paralysis to which ointment cannot be rubbed on', it is recommended that the tongue be frequently washed with *uisce beatha* and a gargarism, while *uisce beatha* is also to be rubbed on the back of the head, all with the aim of restoring speech, 'as has been proved by many people'.<sup>54</sup> Curiously, the scribe adds this cure with the recommendation that *uisce beatha* may be consumed 'with honey, or wine, at times to reduce the disease and at times in the middle of a meal, mixed with soup or syrop, or an electuary', all of which finds precedents in continental sources such as the De Villa Novan corpus.<sup>55</sup> Still more curiously, in the section on moist dropsy, at least one extant copy (MS TCD E.3.3) notes that whether the dropsy be hot or cold, provided it be moist, a medicine can be prepared from the compounding into *uisce beatha* of a remedial preparation which includes fennel, anise, cinnamon, spikenard, and sugar, all subsequently hallmark additives of the later and increasingly convivial sixteenth and seventeenth-century Irish 'usquebaugh' commented upon by anglophone observers.<sup>56</sup>

This material similitude to Tudor era descriptions also appears in the Ó Leighin manuscript, which describes the compounding into *uisce beatha* of cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper, and cloves, along with more exotic additives such as bdellium, opopanax, and euphorbium. Interestingly, both of the manuscript's two receipts stipulate the addition of saffron (Ir. *cróch*), which along with anethole-based

*albo distillato per alambicum, et una gutta in fistula distilletur.* <sup>52</sup> TCD MS 1343; Ó Conchubhair, 'Uisce Beatha', 56. '... 7 fodnaig an aigid disinteria 7 fodnaig an aigid diarria frequentem ascellationem chum exoracionem sanguinis .i. fodnaig an aigid diarria noc

*tic co minic maille re scris na n-innedh 7 re fuil ...!* <sup>53</sup> Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, 264–65. '7 is edh adrerur and sin, an leighes do coimilt do cul an cind, 7 in tenga do coimilt, 7 do nighi co minic le huisgi beata 7 le gairarism: 7 in tuisgi beata do coimilt co minic do cul an cind, 7 don tengaidh, 7

*don ball pairilisech; 7 dobeir sin an urrlabra, mar do derbad ar moran do dainibh.'* <sup>54</sup> Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, 264–65. <sup>55</sup> Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, 264–65, '... is du becan don uisgi sin maille mil no maille fin uair and ag laigdhugad na heslainti 7 uair and a medhon na proindi maille henbruthi,

*no le siroip no le lictubairi.* <sup>56</sup> Wulff, *Rosa Anglica*, 300–301. Wulff in her introduction denotes her 'present text' as P and P1 (Royal Irish Academy), with additional material from five other manuscripts, one of which, marked E, finishes the same section (TCD E.3.3, 50a–52a) with, 'do beirid da

ingredients like fennel and anise would later be regarded in anglophone sources as perhaps the quintessential trait of recreational Irish ‘usquebaugh’.<sup>57</sup> Like wine itself, recurring additives such as saffron, fennel, anise, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg are all described as hot and dry in the Irish pharmacopeia as laid out in the Ó Cuinn herbal, a copy of which shares manuscript space with Ó Leighin’s distilling treatise.<sup>58</sup>

Although the Gaelic medical tradition continued to produce manuscripts (including versions of Ó Conchubhair’s *Téacs 2*) recounting *uisce beatha*’s virtues, from the sixteenth century we see parallel indications of its convivial consumption in scattered Irish and later anglophone sources. Indeed, their uncanny material resemblance offers a striking historical resonance between the drink as it existed in fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth-century Irish medical manuscripts and the overlapping record of sixteenth and seventeenth-century references to a feudal festive beverage. Despite its changed consumption contexts, that beverage nevertheless seemingly retained its therapeutic implications along with its ingredients. Saffron in particular became such a defining aspect (both as a flavouring and as a ‘muscadine’ colouring) that in a letter passed to the English Secretary of State in 1602, the yellowing of London ‘white *aqua vitae*’ into fraudulent ‘usquebaff’ is described as a counterfeit scheme.<sup>59</sup> Around the same time, receipts with similar ingredients for ‘Irish usquebaugh’ begin appearing in printed English apothecarial sources as well as in manuals for genteel women’s home cordial distillation, a class-calibrated sixteenth-century vogue overlapping with the chronology and varied historical processes through which spirits across Europe leaked from clerical and collegiate settings into domestic and professional manufacture.<sup>60</sup> As Megan Alvarez has observed of these parallel literatures, seventeenth-century usquebaugh receipts in England frequently include anethole-based anise, fennel, liquorice root, and caraway, along with ginger, cinnamon, and clove, all of which resonates with the concoctions seen in Irish medical sources, as well as with the humoural and practical histories of compounded spirits in other parts of Europe.<sup>61</sup>

Despite these two richly detailed printed literatures, spirits were not a comparatively popular beverage in Tudor England. Prior to 1601 distilling had been the legal reserve of a monopoly overseen by the Royal College of Physicians and although demand for spirits grew considerably by the century’s second half, from 1638 to 1690 distilling remained under the regulation of the Worshipful Company

*nuisgi betadh sa cuis so 7 is mor an seacran donid siad oir tiormaidh bunudas na mball ar son a tolltanaidhe. Finid. Amen’.*  
**57** Samuel Morewood, *A Philosophical And Statistical History Of The Inventions And Customs Of Ancient And Modern Nations In The Present Practice Of Distillation In All Its Varieties* (Dublin:

William Curry, 1838), 620.  
**58** See ‘The Materia Medica of Tadhg Ó Cuinn’ (Manuscript-online) Available with listed manuscript sources at: UCC Corpus of Electronic Texts <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G600005.html> (Accessed March 1 2023). The above are listed as *fin, croch, feinel, ainis, clobus, cainel*, and *nutamicc*.

**59** Robert Pentland Mahaffy (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Relating to Ireland 1601–1603, (with addenda, 1565–1654) and of the Hanmer papers Preserved In the Public Record Office: 1601–1603* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1912), 509–10. **60** George Urdang (ed.), *Pharmacopœia Londinensis of 1618* (Madison:

State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1944, North Carolina University Press, 2014), 109; Hugh Plat, *Delightes for Ladies, to Adorne Their Persons, Tables, Closets, and Distillatories: With Beauties, Banquets, Perfumes and Waters* (London: Peter Short, 1602).  
**61** Megan Alvarez, ‘Transforming the Irish

of Distillers.<sup>62</sup> As David Wondrich has remarked of its peculiar history with spirituous liquor, 'England has done more than perhaps any other country to shape the world of distilled spirits and the drinks mixed with them. This is ironic, since it came to distilling late and, for the most part, abandoned it early'.<sup>63</sup> This certainly gives context to the writings of sixteenth-century English commentators such as Andrew Boorde (1542) and Edmund Campion (1571), who appear to have regarded the Irishry's taste for spirits (and in Boorde's case the knowledge of how to make them) as something of an ethnic peculiarity in and of itself.<sup>64</sup> At first glance, English accounts of Ireland's barbarous thirst for an exotic form of alcohol stand in contrast to the acute consumption contexts outlined by Irish doctors. Although many of these (often condemnatory) observations are likely exaggerated, chieftains in particular are depicted as swilling gross quantities of usquebaugh with their retinues at feasts. In the 1603 opinions of the English military engineer Joseph Bodley, the Irish 'noble men— as Henry Oge MacMahon, MacHenry — and men and women of every rank— pour usquebaugh down their throats by day and by night; and that not for hilarity only, which would be praiseworthy, but for constant drunkenness which is detestable'.<sup>65</sup> In his 1571 *Historie of Ireland*, Edmund Campion similarly notes of such banquets that the Irish 'squeese out the blood of raw flesh and ask no more dressing thereto, the rest boyleth in their stomaches with *aqua vitae* which they swill in after such a surfeite by quarts and pottles'.<sup>66</sup>

Curiously, while condemning Irish drinking habits Campion also remarks on the use of *aqua vitae* by both natives and recently arrived colonists to treat rheumes and flux, an old term for dysentery. Blamed jointly on the island's boggy moist environs and on the native Irish diet, flux became so common among Tudor colonists that it was referred to as Ireland's 'country disease'. Queen Elizabeth's deputy Fynes Moryson similarly remarks in his *Description of Ireland* that, 'the inhabitants and strangers are troubled with looseness of body, the country disease. Yet for the rawness they have an excellent remedy by their *Aqua Vitae*, vulgarly called Usquebaugh, which binds the belly, and drieth up moisture more than our *Aqua Vitae*, yet inflameth not so much'.<sup>67</sup> Although Moryson's views on Irish drinking are largely condemnatory, he similarly describes their usquebaugh as 'the best in the world of that kind', attributing its virtues to 'the mingling of raisins, fennel-seed, and other things, mitigating the heat and making the taste pleasant, makes it less inflame, and yet refresh the weak stomach with moderate

Spirit: Colonialism Through the Commodification of "Drinkways" in Early Modern Ireland, c. 1540–1661' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2021), 78–80. **62** Phillips, *Alcohol: A History*, 115. **63** David Wondrich, 'England' in *The Oxford Companion to Spirits*, 251. **64** Frederick James Furnivall (ed.), *The*

*fyrst boke of the introduction of knowledge made by Andrew Borde, of physycke doctor: A compendyouus regyment; or, A dyetary of helth made in Mountpyllier* (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by N.T. Trübner & Co, 1870), 131. **65** *An Account of a journey of Captain Josias Bodley into*

*Lecale in Ulster, in the year 1602* (properly 1603). Reproduced in Alice Stopford Green, *The Old Irish World* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1912), 163–4. **66** Scott-Moncrieff, 'Aqua Vitae in Scotland', 262; Ó Conchubhair, 'Uisce Beatha', 56. **67** Fynes Moryson, *A Description of Ireland*,

trans. Charles Hughes (Cork: University College Cork, 2014), 226–221. Text available via UCC Corpus of Electronic Texts: <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100071.html>.

heat and a good relish'.<sup>68</sup> The use of anethole-based ingredients and muscadine colouring is similarly noted in 1620 by the judge Luke Gernon, whose more sympathetic views of the Irishry note that when 'coshering' (attending a *cóisir* or Gaelic feudal feast), 'you shall be presented with all the drinckes in the house, first the ordinary beere, then aquavita, then sacke, then olde-ale'.<sup>69</sup> In the same description, he notes the hospitable custom of 'dogh a dores' (from *deoch an dorais*, 'drink at the door'), advising the reader to, 'smacke them over, and lett us departe'. Curiously, a reciprocal practice is noted twenty years earlier by the traveller John Dymok, who describes the custom of '*teignie*', or the offer of drink upon arrival to an Irish house.<sup>70</sup> Though never divorced from the social role of alcohol as alcohol, a sense of spirits' therapeutic implications certainly pervades such gestures.

Even accounting for its appearances in Ireland's exotically particular hospitable vocabulary, usquebaugh's most visible social presence in Tudor Ireland is amid the notorious largeness of the Normano-Gaelic feudal feast, where Gernon notes its use as 'natural to digest the crudities of the Irish feeding'.<sup>71</sup> A revealing description of a feast of the MacSweynes in John Derricke's 1581 *Image of Ireland* includes both a description of the chieftain's 'surgion' at his lefthand side advising on the meal and the use of *vskebeaghe* as a kind of digestif to 'beautifith the feast' at the meal's close as 'cheare in bowles ... when their gutts be full'.<sup>72</sup> Although the MacSweyne chief likely regarded his high-occasion feast as anything but crude, the humoural logic of *contraria contrariis sanantur* was central to both the worldview of his 'surgion' and to a Medieval dietetics in which consumables were as inseparable from their humoural properties as they were from their tastes.<sup>73</sup> In such a schema, the use of *uisce beatha* as a digestif and a 'corrector' would have likely seemed self-evident, albeit blurred with the spirits' inevitable second function as an alcoholic aide to merriment.

This uneasy duality is also visible in Irish sources. An early reference to overconsumed *uisce beatha*, for example, also appears in the *Annála Connacht*, which notes the death of 'Risded Mag Ragnail' at Christmas in 1405 from an over-imbibement of *uisce beatha*, '*agus dob usci marbtha do Risded*'—and it was water of death to Ristead'.<sup>74</sup> Although the event is dated to 1405 (itself noticeably early), the *Annála Connacht* was written by three successive scribes (likely members of the Ó Duibhgeannáin scribal kindred) over the early to mid-sixteenth

**68** Henry Morley (ed.), *Ireland Under Elizabeth and James the First*, Described by Edmund Spenser, by Sir John Davies, and by Fynes Moryson (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1890), 423–424.

**69** Luke Gernon, *A Discourse of Ireland Anno 1620*, ed. C. Litton Falkiner (Cork: UCC Corpus of Electronic Texts,

2007), 359–361. The UCC edition notes that Dymok's *teignie* may stem from *teine*, in relation to the hearth. **70** Richard Butler (ed.), *A Treatise of Ireland*, by John Dymok. Now first published from a MS. preserved in the British Museum, with Notes, by the Rev. Richard Butler, A. B., M. R. I. A. in *Tracts Relating to*

*Ireland* (Dublin: University Press, Graisberry and Gill, 1843). (Manuscript-online) Available at: UCC Corpus of Electronic Texts **71** Gernon, *Discourse of Ireland*, 361. **72** John Small (ed.), *The Image of Ireland, with a Discoverie of Woodkarne*, By John Derricke, (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black) 1883. A reprint of the original

edition (in London) of 1581 <https://archive.org/details/imageofirelandewooderr/page/n9/mode/2up>, 55. **73** Campanini, *Food Cultures in Medieval Europe*, 116–17, 119. **74** *Annála Connacht*, Sixteenth Century, MS C iii 1 (Cat. No. 1219), Royal Irish Academy, Dublin. **75** Text available via UCC

century, with entries ranging up to 1544 and with a 1562 addendum.<sup>75</sup> The reference to Risded is written in the hand of the earliest scribe, 'Paitín', and the same reference appears in the related *Annála Loch Cé* and *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, the latter of which (given its somewhat misleading name by James Ware) is only available in a later 1660 manuscript of a 1627 English translation.<sup>76</sup> All of them are believed to descend from a shared mid-fifteenth-century manuscript by a scribe of the Ó Maoil Chonaire kindred. Whether a genuine fifteenth-century event or a fabrication by a later scribe, both Risded's death at a festive occasion such as Christmas and the scribe's sarcastic inversion of '*uisce beatha*' as a phrase certainly speak to the troubling hybridity of a therapeutic beverage that was nevertheless essentially strong alcohol.

Less starkly and with more material detail, *uisce beatha*'s association with hospitable occasions can also be seen in a c. 1532 poem attributed (and seemingly incorrectly) to the bard Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, describing a boy sent by the chieftain Ó Graidhaigh to fetch its ingredients in the lead up to the coshering of the Ó Cearnaigh of Cashel. Flustered, the boy stumbles along the road attempting to remember the necessary additives, '*piupar agus ainís*' (pepper and anise).<sup>77</sup> Both in materials and in consumption contexts, the comic poem resonates with anglophone descriptions in later decades. Unmentioned in the poem's ingredients and in this history so far are the fermented cereals so fundamental to the development of 'whiskey' as we know it today. While much of the medical literature simply describes the virtues of unqualified '*uisce beatha*', early sources such as *The Red Book of Ossory*, the Ó Leighin manuscript, and Cormac Mac Duinnshléibhe's *Lilium* all stipulate the distillation of wine in reflection of their Mediterranean sources. Likely driven at least primarily by access to raw materials, the gradual erosion in Ireland of this starting liquid into ale is far from unique among *aqua vitae*'s historical European drinkways and appears to have occurred in logical (and possibly inevitable) tandem with the sixteenth-century democratisation of its manufacture.

First visible in scattered local early sixteenth-century bans, *aqua vitae*'s 'consumption of grain' becomes an increasingly visible frustration in Tudor state papers by the time of the Desmond Rebellions.<sup>78</sup> Both as richly compounded usquebaugh and as a 'baser' plain *aqua vitae*, grain appears to have entered Irish *uisce beatha* somewhat silently, not least because its most remarked upon traits

Corpus of Electronic Texts: <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/Ga100011/index.html> Background on the compositional history and sources of the *Annála Connacht* available via the Royal Irish Academy: <https://www.ria.ie/library/special-collections/medieval-and-early-modern-manuscripts/annals-connacht>

**76** The Annals of Clonmacnoise, al. Mageoghegan's Book., 1660, MS A., Robinson Library, Armagh; Denis Murphy, *The Annals Of Clonmacnoise, Being Annals Of Ireland From The Earliest Period To A.D. 1408.* (Dublin: University Press for the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1896), 325; Nollaig Ó Muraile

(ed.), *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (Dublin: De Búrca Rare Books, 2022), 7–14, 24–25; *Annála Loch Cé*, Sixteenth Century, MS 1293, Trinity College Dublin. **77** Eleanor Knott (ed.), *A Bhfuil Aiguinn dár Chum Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (1550–1591): Idir Mholadh agus Marbhnadh Aoir agus Ábhacht Iomarbháigh agus Iomchasaoid*, Irish Texts

Society (22) (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1922), 164. **78** John Ainsworth, 'Corporation Book of the Irishtown of Kilkenny, 1537–1628', *Analecta Hibernica* 28 (1978), 45; Historical Manuscripts Commission (eds), *Archives of the Town of Galway in Report of The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts X*,

relate to its more gastronomically apparent additives rather than to the materiality of its distilled base. Seemingly, the two bases overlapped. Thus, while there are explicit complaints of Irish cereal distilling from at least the 1530s, as late as 1632 a state memorandum complaint explicitly notes the routine distillation near Waterford of imported wine into ‘usquebaugh or strong *aqua vitae*’ by ‘the rebellious part of the population’.<sup>79</sup> Both in *uisce beatha*’s plain and compounded incarnations, distilled cereals appear to have more or less replaced distilled wine by the first decades of the Excise and the dawn of what might be termed Irish distilling’s ‘commercial’ era.<sup>80</sup>

The Post-Restoration formation of the Excise in 1661–1662 was itself a reflection of a dramatically changed, increasingly commercial, and increasingly post-feudal seventeenth-century Ireland. Although its initial revenue appears to have been relatively meagre, its creation signalled the advent of an increasingly commercial Irish spirits history, essentially recreational and dominated in the long term by plain grain spirits, or *whiskey*, as they came to be known. Although the term usquebaugh survived well into the eighteenth century as a name for compounded cordials, by at least the Georgian era the phrase ‘*uisce beatha*’ in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic appears to have undergone its own semantic shift toward regular plain spirit, likely in reflection of its peasant class production. Today, in both European legislation and common understanding, ‘*uisce beatha*’ most certainly means plain grain ‘whiskey’. And yet the two histories cannot be cleanly parsed. Just as the histories of popular agrarian and nascently commercial distilling predate the Excise system that was brought in to regulate them, *uisce beatha*’s old medical understanding actually overlaps with both. In part due to the essentially apolitical utility of physicians in premise, for at least half a century after the Battle of Kinsale the Gaelic medical class continued to practice and to produce new manuscripts, albeit with eroded social status. Their connections with European universities such as Bologna persisted into at least the 1640s.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the comparative survival of so many Gaelic medical manuscripts may itself reflect their essentially apolitical value. Although Ireland’s *ollamhain* were gradually overtaken by a fundamentally altered system of medical professionalisation and an Ireland increasingly divided on sectarian religious lines, the class to whom nearly all of *uisce beatha*’s first references owe their origins depart from its history with a curious scribal comment (first noted by Nic Dhonnchadha) that both reflects the spirit’s altered relation to Irish

no. 4–5 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1885), 402.

**79** Robert Pentland Mahaffy (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Relating to Ireland Preserved in the Public Record Office: 1625–1670* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode., 1900–1910), 169.

**80** ‘Antiquarian Notes & Queries’, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 7 (1859) 260–61.

**81** Grace, ‘Medicine in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland’, 222.

society and re-roots it in the same Hiberno-Mediterranean corpus in which it first appeared.

A late great undertaking of the Irish medical tradition, the c. 1657–1658 *Leabhar Uí Shíadhail* ('Book of the O'Shiels', R.I.A MS 23 K 42) contains a compendium of treatises by Pádraic Gruamdha Ó Siadhail, incorporating translated tracts and extracts from Galen, Hippocrates, Avicenna, and the *Lilium Medicinae*. It was written less than five years before the formation of the Excise. Despite the strictly medical mention of spirits in either Cormac Mac Duinnshléibhe's older c. 1480 version or in Bernard de Gordon's 1303 original, where de Gordon defines 'drunkenness' as a disease of the brain and a softening of the sinews from the vapours released by wine, two centuries later Ó Siadhail discreetly adds, 'no on lionn 7 on uisge bhetha aguinne na hEireannaigh' ... 'or ale and uisce beatha among us Irish'.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Nic Dhonnchadha, 'Irish Medical Writings', 37.



**10**

*Franciscans and the  
Power of Fish in Seventeenth-  
Century Ireland*

**John McCafferty**

On 28 October 1628 the Irish Franciscans living in Louvain were granted permission by Infanta Isabella from her Viceregal court at Brussels to bring in salted fish from ships captained by 'those of their nation' without having to pay duty.<sup>1</sup> The Irish House of St Anthony of Padua (founded 1607) in the university city of Louvain was a place of study, scholarship and an exile repository for Gaelic culture in Flanders. It was also where young Franciscans trained to return to a native island in which religious practice in communion with Rome had been proscribed. By 1628 St Anthony's was twenty-one years old. A number of the older friars in the house, including the famous scribe Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, had been formed in the now extinct residence at Donegal town. By 1628 the county of Donegal had also been subjected to almost two decades of what its great proponent James VI & I would like to think of as British and Protestant plantation. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Ireland experienced a great rending of its population along religious lines into Catholics and Protestants. Sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland also experienced a corrosive and divisive revolution in land holding as multiple plantations from the 1550s onwards uprooted tens of thousands in order to plant tens of thousands of newcomers. Into these tightly braided stories of land and religion in Ireland, food, as a work of human hands and as a matter both of faith and soil, became a key part of the narrative.

Religious change in early modern Europe was intimately concerned with food. Fish, for example, as both an important source of protein but also a strong symbol of fasting, became caught up in the angst created by confessional choice. When should people fast? Regularly, or just in times of distress? Should they fast every Advent and Lent by rote, or just in response to the cyclical shocks of plague and natural disaster? Or to take another example, that of the commonplace products of bread and wine. First of all, the theologians, and then increasingly engaged congregations asked themselves whether the bread and wine were for substance the body and blood of the risen Christ? Or were grain and grape better understood as reverent memorials of that scriptural supper? Should the eating and drinking take place sitting around a table, sharing and breaking bread and common cup, or individually while kneeling? Was adoration of a host an act of profound piety or a brazen blasphemy? The Eucharistic feast found itself at the dead centre of Europe's religious explosion. Thinking about these ritual uses of food show that the Protestant and Catholic reformations were as much visceral as they were vocal.

<sup>1</sup> Brendan Jennings (ed.), *Louvain Papers, 1606–1827* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1968), 84.

Plantation policy in Ireland also concerned itself with food. In possibly the most reproduced of John Derricke's famous woodcuts, a Gaelic Lord and his entourage feast in a sylvan setting. The Franciscan Friar 'smell feaste' stands busily buzzing into the lord's ear in this colonial rendering of Irish food ways. This is a pointed graphic work.<sup>2</sup> The Gaelic people shown feasting *al fresco* in the woods were part of an argument about barbarity and civility and the right use of the land. Food consumption and production proved for the Elizabethan settlers and soldiers many of their confiscatory points. In Derricke's image the Irish eat from makeshift tables in the menacing woods. They seethe their meat, products of their pastoralist ways. They eschew the superior civilisation of tilled grain and orderly orchard. Meat and milk, handmade butter and cheese, human foodstuffs, were right at the core of expanding English (and later British claims) to be the people who would put the land of Ireland to its best possible use. Such disputes over the right ways to worship God and over the right ways to live on the land shook Ireland and made its inhabitants shudder and shove against each other for a very long time. Food played both a practical and symbolic part in that extended and often bloody quarrel.

The dominant writing technology in Ireland before the arrival of the printing press in the sixteenth century—ink on vellum—involved very many skins of livestock which had been kept predominantly for its food value. Written memory, in that sense, was connected to animal husbandry. The Irish Franciscans, such as Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, considered themselves critical collators and conservators of that manuscript heritage. By the time that they were importing duty free fish it was almost a century since Henry VIII's break with Rome, and they had started to reflect on their role in preserving Catholic ways (Figure 1). Those ways included of course both the Mass and the fasting which ritual actions brought with them and all their attendant understandings of the role of food in religious practice. Food, especially fish, turned out to be a means by which the members of this greatly influential religious grouping could begin to interpret their part in over a century of frenzied and fractious changes.

Around 1617, an Irish Franciscan Observant, Donatus Monaeus (Donagh Mooney or Donnchada Ó Maonaigh) (1577–1624) sat down in Louvain and wrote a history of the Irish friars, their houses and their fortunes since Henry VIII's break with Rome. It is also a history of power relations, written by the ostensible losers. Food, especially fish, runs right through Mooney's history. This paper

<sup>2</sup> For a recent overview of these woodcuts, see Thomas Herron, Denna Iammarino and Maryclare Moroney (eds), *John Derricke's The Image of Ireland: with a Discoverie of Woodkarne: essays on text and context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

En

Don Al. a permis et permet par ces lres. aux Freres de l'Ordre des  
 irlandois de la Ville de Louvain, qu'ils puissent sans mesprendre  
 faire venir de Saint Vliet, et leur Comitee aux d'ouvan, et dans le  
 terme d'un mois prochain, de la Communitee de poisson sale, dont  
 les Cap. de leur nation logez aux d'ouvan, leur ont fait auueoir,  
 Et donnant s'ay Al. a tous Jus fiers, officiers et subiects de sa  
 ma. qui lui appartiendra, de se lay et d'ily regler et rouduyre, sans  
 aucun difficulte, fait a Bruxelles sous le nom et charge  
 secret de s'ay Al. le Dingt huchisun d'octobre mil six  
 Dingt huit,  
 J. Mabil



Or ordonnance H. Roy Al. 1.  
 J. Mabil  
 Demiscent  
 Desen 26 nouenber 1628  
 Hous, 2 ans, Lint Schwoeten  
 Alrogh

Dele fonnig ystis 2 v  
 ydruing d'ing...  
 ordonnance Van Sade...  
 In door alle...  
 ydruing...  
 onder...  
 J. Mabil

Figure 1 Permission for the Irish Franciscans of Louvain to receive fish from Saint Vliet, 28 October 1628. UCD Archives, Courtesy of the UCD-OFM Partnership.

will explore the food story embedded in this 104 page Latin text which is usually known as *De Provincia Hiberniae*.<sup>3</sup>

The Observant Franciscans attempted to live a stricter version of the Rule of the Order.<sup>4</sup> This very successful movement which rapidly spread across Ireland from the second half of the fifteenth century was a movement fuelled by fish. Most of the new wealth and economic activity on the island in the fifteenth century was stimulated by changes in Atlantic shoaling patterns. A proverb of the time as recited in Bristol attests to this: ‘Heryng of Slegothe [Sligo] and salmon of Bame [the river Bann] heis made in Brystowe many a ryche man’.<sup>5</sup> This fishy wealth provided lay patrons whose ability to support large new friaries in rural settings would have great and lasting consequences in the fracturing world born out of sixteenth and seventeenth century religious change.<sup>6</sup> At the time of Mooney’s writing the survival of the Franciscan mendicants ninety years after Henry VIII’s early 1530s schism from Rome was, in a large part, due to the location of major friaries outside the reach of Crown control.<sup>7</sup> During his time as provincial leader of the Observant Irish Franciscans, Mooney re-established communities even in the hostile environment of urban areas such as Dublin. Rapidly growing numbers of friars meant a notable rise in questing for foodstuffs by these professed beggars. Franciscan mendicancy became so marked that it affronted both Dublin Castle and Catholic secular clergy alike.<sup>8</sup>

Food, however, was not just a pragmatic matter for the followers of the *Poverello* of Assisi. Eating and fasting were at the very core of the sacramental, theological and rule-bound lives of the friars. The *Regula Bullata* of 1223 not only enjoined fasting but also required Franciscans to eat whatever was set in front of them. That was all the Rule had to say about food but it did say a very great deal about poverty. Yet in pre-modern societies prone to regular subsistence crises, food was wealth. So, effectively, everything that pertained to the practice of poverty also pertained to food. Accordingly, then, this simultaneously providential and elastic understanding of the role of food in religious life was not primarily about nourishment but about the *raison d’être* of the Order—poverty. In both the Rule and in St Bonaventure’s *Legenda Major* (the official biography of Francis) food is always a means to the end of poverty. Food, both in its use and non-use, always points beyond itself: ‘they were refreshed more by the gift of

3 Brendan Jennings (ed.), ‘Brussels Ms. 3947: Donatus Moneyus, de Provincia Hiberniae S. Francisci’, *Analecta Hibernica* 6 (1934), 12–138. [Hereafter Brussels Ms. 3947]. A partial translation may be found in *Franciscan Tertiary*, 4 (Feb. 1894)–6 (Dec. 1896). For Mooney’s biography, see Judy Barry, ‘Mooney, Donatus (Donagh)’, James I. McGuire and James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of*

*Irish Biography*, vols 1–9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and freely accessible online at [www.dib.ie](http://www.dib.ie) <https://www.dib.ie/biography/mooney-donatus-donagh-35914> 4 In 1517 the Pope divided the Franciscan Order into Conventuals and Observants. The Capuchins, a further reforming branch of the Franciscans, did not come to Ireland until 1615. 5 Eleanora

Mary Carus-Wilson, ‘The Overseas Trade of Bristol’ in Eileen Power and Michael M. Postan (eds), *Studies in English Trade in the 15th Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006 [1933]), 183–246, 196; See also Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘The History of Seafood in Irish Cuisine and Culture’ in Richard Hosking (ed.), *Wild Foods: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery* 2005

(Devon, Prospect Books, 2006), 219–33. 6 Colman Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland 1400–1534* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002) gives a detailed assessment of Observant Franciscanism as well as examining their offshoot the Third Order Regular and the enduring Conventual Franciscan houses. 7 John McCafferty, ‘A mundo valde alieni: Irish Franciscan Responses to the Dissolution

divine generosity than by the food they had received for their bodies'.<sup>9</sup> Francis said: 'bread is clearly angelic which holy poverty gathers from door-to-door, which is sought out of God's love and is given out of His love by the blessed prompting of the angels'.<sup>10</sup> Begging is transfigured into theophany. Abandonment to poverty would lead not only to abundance but to 'superabundance' as both Mooney and Bonaventure put it.

For Mooney the fates of Franciscanism and of Ireland itself are so inter-related as to be one. A tautly reflective excursus in his chronology (between the entry for 1603 and that for 1606) details what we might call the six woes of Ireland. First, while sixteen years of warfare killed thousands of Protestant 'heretics', many of the antique nobility died in defence of 'faith and fatherland'. Second, Ireland was devastated, barren, burnt, wild beasts dominated the land and sky, fields were left uncultivated, hunger gave rise to rumours of cannibalism. Thirdly, the land was visited by a devastating plague after the peace. Fourth, there was a vicious persecution of the Catholic faith and its priests. Fifth, a general proscription of the nobles who defended that faith. Finally, and worst of all, came the King's decision that the ancient rights of those who were raised 'in papismo' were nothing, and that those who were 'addicti' [debt-slaves] of the king's religion would be 'carried over here and have the lands of others as divided by rope'.<sup>11</sup> The end of the nobles brings plague, famine, disaster and heresy, straight out of a medieval Irish advice text such as *Audacht Morainn*. But he is also writing out of a Franciscan tradition in which the daily necessity for sustenance intertwines with the daily sacrifice of poverty. Daily bread, most frequently evoked in the *Legenda Major* under its minor form of crumbs, is at the heart of St Francis' concerns—in the Host, in the Rule, in daily begging, in miraculous multiplications, in healings, in his very first sermon before the Pope. Mooney, steeped, as all Franciscan friars were, in the *Legenda* both in its full version, in its homiletic shortened version, as well as its related Divine Office, married this hagiography with his providential version of Irish Franciscan history.<sup>12</sup> Here is a double gaze which is at once transnational and deeply local.

Mooney's text is based on a visitation or tour he carried out in the mid-1610s. It has been mined by historians and others both as a gazetteer and source book as it offers a partial window back into the religious world before the dissolution

of the Monasteries, 1540–1640', *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 19 (2017), 50–63; Colm Lennon, 'The Dissolution to the Foundation of St. Anthony's College, Louvain, 1534–1607', in Edel Bhreathnach, Joseph MacMahon and John McCafferty (eds), *The Irish Franciscans 1534–1990* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 3–26; Brendan Scott, 'The Religious Houses of Tudor

Dublin: Their communities and resistance to Dissolution', in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin VII* (Dublin: Four Courts Press), 214–32; Brendan Bradshaw, *The Dissolution of the Religious Orders in Ireland under Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). For a comparative dimension, see John McCafferty, 'Nullus: The Ending of Conventual Religious Life in Denmark–

Norway, England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland', in James E. Kelly, Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan (eds), *Northern European Reformations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 213–31. **8** McCafferty, 'A mundo valde alieni', 59. **9** Regis J. Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short (eds), *Francis of Assisi, The Founder: Early Documents, Vol II* (New York: New City Press, 1999) for the text of

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio's *Legenda Major*, [Hereafter LM], 550. **10** LM, 582. **11** Brussels Ms. 3947, 116–18. **12** See also Brendan Jennings (ed.), 'Brevis Synopsis Provinciae Hiberniae FF. minorum', *Analecta Hibernica* 6 (1934), 139–86.

of Ireland's religious houses. On a pragmatic level this work is indeed a survey which was intended for use in recovery of friaries should (what Mooney calls) '*meliora tempora*' or 'better times' come long. Like many others of his contemporaries this Franciscan writer hoped that there might yet be a restoration of religious life in Ireland. But it is also a text which is, in its many lyrical layers, a hymn of praise to holy poverty as institutionalised in the Observant Franciscan movement. 'Superabundance' and 'excess of abundance' are the marks of a way of life whose engine is radical poverty. This sense of excess is at its most exuberant in Mooney's description of fish and fishing. In his three favourite, most austere houses—Donegal, Moyne and Sherkin—even St Francis, the founder's, angelic begging is eclipsed by the propensity of these remote places, now hallowed by Franciscan presence, to provide unceasing and unfailing supplies of food and seafood. On Sherkin Island, where the Observant friars arrived just after 1462, the friary is located overlooking the pier: friars may cast fishing lines even as they career around the cloister.<sup>13</sup> In Moyne the excess of discards from shellfish, the crumbs of the shells as it were, make up the very mortar of the buildings which are held together, as Mooney remarks, by Lady Poverty herself—costly stone churches were an abhorrence in the eyes of St Francis.<sup>14</sup> Such provision of food in deserted, uncultivated places was the first miracle granted to Francis and his companions on their way home to Assisi after being granted approval of their way of life by the Pope in Rome. Here with food, as all throughout his text, Mooney collapses both chronology and distance to bring the life of the founder and the vicissitudes of his seventeenth century Irish followers into close harmony.

*De Provincia Hiberniae* also contains two barely concealed narrative threads. The first was internal to the Franciscan *familia* itself—the rise of the Observant branch and its replacement of the Conventual friars. The second was the dissolution of the convents of the order and their distribution to what he calls *Anglo-haeretici* (English heretics) a deliberate conflation of ethnicity and confession by the provincial of a religious order in the throes of creating an argument for an identity based on birth in Ireland and adherence to Rome. Put plainly, to be Irish in this analysis was also to be a Catholic. Each of these narrative threads are in a large part picked out in food and fish. Mooney frequently praises the lands and waterways near friaries in Ireland for their fecundity and ability to offer an abundance for the cowed inhabitants. But when it came to fish, there was a crucial difference between Conventuals and Observants. The former group were not fully consecrated to poverty—they owned fish weirs and eel weirs but

<sup>13</sup> Brussels Ms. 3947, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Brussels Ms. 3947, 51.

In Moyne the excess of discards from shellfish, the crumbs of the shells as it were, make up the very mortar of the buildings which are held together, as Mooney remarks, by Lady Poverty herself—costly stone churches were an abhorrence in the eyes of St Francis

while these might be abundant, they were not superabundant.<sup>15</sup> They were fruits of commerce, often a little distant from a friary. The 'Observant' fish were right there at the friary, superabundant and just offering themselves up, the genuine fruits of poverty.

In Bonaventure's *Legenda* Francis chooses to pray in 'deserted and abandoned churches at night'.<sup>16</sup> There he is physically assaulted by, tussles with, and defeats demons and spirits who assault him physically. The Protestant possessors of former friaries such as Enniscorthy, New Ross and Drogheda are also pestered by nocturnal poltergeists but they are unable to defeat them, and are broken and bruised.<sup>17</sup> They are not St Francis nor are they his followers. If voluntary poverty leads to abundance, adverse possession of old friary sites leads to a scarifying involuntary poverty. Business ventures fail, heirs are not apparent. In Drogheda, the new lay owner attempts some kitchen gardening, but all the vegetables are distorted into the shapes of limbs and body parts, quickly becoming objects of disgust and purveyors of ruin for the speculator.<sup>18</sup> In Moyne, Cavan and Galway the new owners realise that it is prudent to leave some pairs of friars on site, otherwise their trade in food and other stuffs will fail.<sup>19</sup> For Donatus Mooney only poverty and its true practitioners can sustain these sites.

Water, the medium of fish, and also of hygiene, healing and transport soaks both *De Provincia* and *Legenda Major*. Francis creates many curative springs *ex nihilo*, good for both animal and human health. He also, on one of his many Christlike occasions, makes the sign of the cross over water, turning it into healing wine.<sup>20</sup> The Irish friars in Mooney's account, most especially the saintly figure of the loyal Donegal Franciscan Brian Mac Craith—who functions as the Catholic antithesis to the friar-apostate and Church of Ireland Archbishop Miler Mac Craith—cause many healing springs to gush up.<sup>21</sup> In a nicely inculturated drink miracle dated to 1595, Fr Maurice O'Hea of Timoleague friary turns

**15** Colmán Ó Clabaigh, *The Friars in Medieval Ireland 1224–1540* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2012), 125–33 gives an account of food consumption and production across all orders of friars in Ireland. The shockwaves of Henry VIII's reformation effectively ended the Conventual movement

in Ireland and all of the houses were, in jurisdictional terms, folded into the Observant family by Donatus Mooney's time of writing. **16** LM, 607–08 **17** Brussels Ms. 3947, 83–84, 81–82, 30–31. **18** Brussels Ms. 3947, 30. **19** Brussels Ms. 3947, 51, 49–50, 54–55. **20** LM, 567: 'At

once what had been brought as pure water became excellent wine; and what the poverty of a deserted place could not provide, the purity of the holy man provided'. **21** Brussels Ms. 3947, 41–47. For more detail on the miracle-working Frater Brian and on the role of fish

in the Donegal friary, see Terence O'Donnell OFM, 'Father Donagh Mooney OFM: the Franciscan Convent of Donegal' in *idem* (ed.), *Father John Colgan OFM 1592–1658: Essays in Commemoration of the Third Centenary of his death* (Dublin: Assisi Press, 1959), 130–54.



water into the sweetest milk and so brings a dying local back from the brink and back into a long life of witnessing Franciscan sanctity.<sup>22</sup> In both Umbria and Ireland, water blessed by Francis or blessed with his blessing, restores crops, ends droughts and heals the afflicted in an array of manners. In Kilkenny, for example, the house had both a healing spring, named after St Francis, and an elaborate plumbing system. The spring water continued to be used into modern times by the Smithwick's brewing company whose site still incorporates the ruin of the medieval friary. Bonaventure states that even the very water in which St Francis had washed his hands and feet was effective in curing sick livestock.<sup>23</sup> The Rule required friars to eat whatever their hosts placed before them. This is a major preoccupation in Bonaventure who explains: 'when he [Francis] went out among people, he conformed himself to his hosts in the food he ate because of the text of the Gospel (Luke 10, 7). But when he returned home, he kept strictly his sparse and rigid abstinence. Thus, he was austere towards himself but considerate toward his neighbour'.<sup>24</sup> Later on, Francis combines his presence at generous tables with begging quests on the very same evening, annoying even his ally the bishop of Ostia.<sup>25</sup> The table as site of commensality becomes a place of prophecy, of witness and of action in the life of the Poverello. The same dynamic is transferred to Ireland in Mooney whose holy hero Brian Mac Craith explains poverty to the Fitzgerald Earl of Kildare while seated in the banqueting place of honour beside the viceroy, and many friars' own deaths and the deaths of others far distant are frequently prophesied in refectories and at meals.<sup>26</sup>

Donatus Mooney's belief that the Franciscan Observants were especially 'unshaken' by the vicissitudes of religious shiftings under Ireland's Tudor rulers appeared to be borne out by the extent to which the friars helped conserve Catholicism until Rome began to reorganise the Irish church in earnest from the 1580s and 1590s onwards.<sup>27</sup> Their mendicancy was an asset in an island marked by decades of continuous war, dislocation and vast transfers of lands. Mooney's account plays this reality out in a sustained reflection on poverty. The very pith and core of this poverty could be understood through food. By transferring the food themes explored by St Francis' official biographer St Bonaventure to Ireland, Donatus Mooney vindicated his claim that his friars were the *organic* order for the island.

**22** Brussels Ms. 3947, 69. Mooney added that he personally investigated this alleged miracle in 1615, which was his first year of being provincial of Ireland. **23** LM, 634. **24** LM, 561 and also see 614–15. **25** LM, 582–83. **26** Brussels Ms. 3947, 46. What Mac Craith was doing

was using the table to invert power structures. For a recent compelling account of aristocratic food consumption in Ireland, see Charlie Taverner and Susan Flavin. 'Food and Power in Sixteenth-Century Ireland: Studying Household Accounts from Dublin Castle', *The Historical*

*Journal* 66: 1 (2023), 1–26. **27** John McCafferty, 'Becoming Irish Catholics: Ireland 1534–1690', in Robert E. Scully (ed.), *A Companion to Catholicism and Recusancy in Britain and Ireland: from Reformation to Emancipation* (Brill: Leiden, 2022), 228–75; Brian Mac

Cuarta, *Catholic revival in the north of Ireland, 1603–1641* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), 127–29 discusses the Franciscans in particular.

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**11**

*Food in Eighteenth-  
Century Ireland*

**Toby Barnard**

The variety of food in eighteenth-century Ireland has been laid out temptingly in recent accounts. What might have been served is known thanks to surviving recipes and menus.<sup>1</sup> Also, sketches illustrate foods on sale in Dublin streets and provincial markets.<sup>2</sup> A multiplicity of newspaper advertisements tells of a bewildering choice of ingredients. These developments, gathering pace throughout the eighteenth century, supplemented natural boons, notably the fertility of the land and the abundance of the sea. At the same time the vivid portrayals of the marketeers and street-sellers remind of disparities. Hardship may be etched in the faces of the vendors and implied by their squatting attitudes: hints of the toil behind the apparent plenty, but not of starvation. Yet in 1740–41, parts of Ireland endured a famine reckoned to have been as severe as the later one of 1845–48.<sup>3</sup> Before that, in 1729, a Church of Ireland clergyman reported from Co. Antrim, that many were starving and dying, and others contemplating emigration to America. ‘Many diseases are crept into the country by bad seasons, and bad food, and the want of necessities’. The cleric offered help, yet had no compunction about sending Italian fennel seed to a brother, a squire in Westmeath, adding that, when blanched, it ‘makes the most delightful, wholesome salad’. The correspondent, who when younger had travelled to Italy, regretted that he had not managed to obtain any New England peas, but recommended broccoli, as equal to cauliflower, and able to grow in any soil. He acknowledged, however, that melons were unlikely to thrive in the Irish climate.<sup>4</sup> For a fortunate minority, the available staples and novelties were there to be relished; the less fortunate subsisted on more monotonous fare.

Between the extremes of extravagance and bare subsistence lay the unremarkable daily diet of most. Guests, travellers and reformers commented on the notable, not the humdrum. If this is understandable, it is regrettable because there existed throughout much of the Irish population a less polarised and more varied situation. What follows seeks to balance the exotics which constituted conspicuous consumption against the mundane. Innovation, indulgence and extravagance command disproportionate attention in comparison with the daily portions of potatoes, buttermilk, oatmeal and bread. Nevertheless, accounts which focussed on the noteworthy help to identify what may have changed. It was a time of culinary innovation. Settlers arriving from Scotland and Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries introduced new tastes and the commodities and modes of cooking to satisfy them. More generally, exploration of

**1** Alison FitzGerald, ‘Taste in high life: dining in the Dublin townhouse’ in Christine Casey (ed.), *The eighteenth-century Dublin town house* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 120–7; Regina Sexton, ‘Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland’, in Elizabeth Fitzpatrick and James Kelly (eds), *Proceedings of the Royal*

*Irish Academy, Section C, Special Issue: Food and Drink in Ireland* 115 (2015), 257–306; Madeline Shanahan, ‘Dining on words: manuscript recipe books, culinary change and élite food culture in Ireland, 1660–1830’, *IADS* 15 (2012), 82–97; Madeline Shanahan, ‘“Whipt by a twig rod”: Irish manuscript recipe books as sources for the study

of culinary material culture, c. 1660 to 1830’ in Fitzpatrick and Kelly (eds), *Food and drink in Ireland*, 197–218. **2** William H. Crawford, ‘Provincial town life in the early nineteenth century: an artist’s impression’ in Brian P. Kennedy and Raymond Gillespie (eds), *Ireland: art into history* (Dublin and Niwot: Town House, 1994), 43–60;

William Laffan (ed.), *The Cries of Dublin drawn from the life by Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760* (Dublin: Irish Georgian Society, 2003). **3** David Dickson, *Arctic Ireland* (Belfast: White Row Press, 1997). **4** J. Smythe to W. Smythe, 21 Jan. 1728[9], 18 Feb. 1728[9], 28 March 1729, 15 July 1729, NLI, PC 449.

distant lands yielded strange flora and fauna, some of which—most frequently the potato and also the turkey—appeared on numerous Irish tables. Attempts were made to cultivate the novelties in Ireland, again with the potato as the most popular example but extending into the more rarefied like pineapples and melons.<sup>5</sup> Improved breeds of livestock and imported species of fruits and vegetables, when raised successfully on the island, brought dietary variation. In addition, conventions about what dishes appeared at meals and in what order and combinations brought further changes, as the savoury was separated from the sweet. Also, the hours at which the meals were served altered. These shifts in habits are more clearly detected in the prosperous upper reaches of society than among the generality of the population whose staple foods may have changed little with their consumption governed by the rhythms of the working day.

Those who urged that the island itself should live entirely on what it could produce, ignored the dependence on products such as sugar and (increasingly) tea, that no amount of industry and innovation would magic from Irish soil. Farming practices outside Ireland were noted and sometimes copied. New breeds of livestock were recommended because better suited to the terrain and climate, hardier, faster growing; in short, more profitable. Fisheries were thought capable of further exploitation, ‘like gold in the mine’, despite the uncertainties over their appearance in accessible waters.<sup>6</sup> Provisions, especially barrelled beef and gradually pork and bacon, were exported in growing quantities to colonies outside Europe. The profits to be made from such trade meant more of these commodities were reserved for sale overseas and less for home consumption. It smacked of complacency when an improving landowner from Co. Clare claimed in 1776 the ready availability of ‘bread and beer, butter and cheese, beef and bacon and potatoes’.<sup>7</sup>

Poorer consumers had to satisfy themselves and their families with cheaper foods, of which the potato was the chief. Already by 1760, the thoughtful speculated on what would happen if the crop failed: ‘the poorer sort would be starved before the inhabitants in general would be of ability to raise corn sufficient to their sustenance’.<sup>8</sup> Efforts were made to improve distribution at times of scarcity, to perfect more reliable varieties, and to simplify and quicken its cultivation.<sup>9</sup> Efforts to popularise other vegetables, such as the root mangel wurzel, and non-



**5** Toby Barnard, ‘Gardening, diet and “improvement” in late seventeenth century Ireland’, reprinted in *Irish Protestant ascents and descents, 1641–1770* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 223, 224, 226–7. **6** James Caldwell, *Two letters to the Dublin Society* (Dublin: S. Powell, 1767), 11. **7** Lucius H. O’Brien, *The substance of two speeches in the House of Commons*

*of Ireland...on the subject of fisheries* (Dublin: printed for William Watson, 1776), 8; Andrew Sneddon, ‘Legislating for economic development: Irish fisheries as a case study in the limitations of “improvement”’ in David W. Hayton, James Kelly and John Bergin (eds), *The eighteenth-century composite state: representative institutions in Ireland and Europe, 1689–*

*1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 136–59. **8** James Kelly (ed.), *The letters of Lord Chief Baron Edward Willes to the earl of Warwick, 1757–1762* (Aberystwyth: Boethius Press, 1990), 75; ‘A member of the Dublin Society’, *Cursory observations on Ireland* (Dublin: Printed by T. T. Faulkner, Parliament-Street, 1779), 57. **9** Samuel Hayes, *Essays in answer*

*to all the queries on the culture of potatoes* (Dublin: printed by W. Sleater, 1797); William Maunsell, *Letters to the...Dublin Society, on the culture of the potatoes from the shoots* (Dublin: printed by William Sleater, 1794); *Proceedings of the Dublin Society*, xxi (1784–5), 19, 49, 57, 78, 81, 109; xxii (1785–6), 67.

Innovation, indulgence  
and extravagance  
command disproportionate  
attention in comparison  
with the daily portions  
of potatoes, buttermilk,  
oatmeal and bread



**Figure 1** *New Milk sold in the Streets*, Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760. © Private collection

indigenous fruits never had the same success. Growing cereals was promoted through bounties, and mills for grinding corn multiplied.<sup>10</sup> Breweries and distilleries also sprang up to cater to changing tastes, so that older, locally popular beverages like cider were eclipsed although not wholly abandoned.<sup>11</sup>

## I

Let us begin with a few examples, widely separated in time and in the circumstances of those involved. Late in the seventeenth century, veteran soldiers were housed in the newly-built Royal Hospital at Kilmainham on the edge of Dublin. It was decreed that the inmates should be served roast beef on two days of the week, boiled beef on a third day, mutton or veal on Tuesdays, mutton or broth on another day, and on Fridays, depending on the season, either mutton broth or pork with peas. On Saturday, lamb, milk or fish was stipulated. The meagre ration of fish was explained because it was thought less suitable than meat for aged men. However, the overseers would defer to the doctors' opinion: already theories, often contradictory, cried up or cautioned against particular foods.<sup>12</sup> Soon a thoughtful landowner in Co. Cork would trace methodically the interconnectedness of diet, exercise and health.<sup>13</sup>

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the staples eaten by a Catholic gentry family—the Ryans of Inch in Co. Tipperary—were reckoned to cost £140 a year. These costs were considerably inflated when the additions thought necessary to maintain a hospitable and genteel table were tallied, mostly items such as fish and fowl not reared on the demesne, or imports like brandy, rum, wine, tea, coffee, oranges, and sugar.<sup>14</sup> The Ryans' outgoings were virtually matched by the annual expenses of £132 which it was calculated that a 'strong' farmer might be expected to incur around 1769.<sup>15</sup> The farmer's expenses included provision for indoor servants and also labourers on the land. In the latter calculation, there are surprises, notably the heavy spending on meat (£15 5s 6d). It was replicated in a group of affluent households as also in the privileged residents at Kilmainham, but not in more modest ones.<sup>16</sup> During the 1760s, at the one functioning ducal residence in Ireland, the Leinsters' Carton, upper servants received generous rations of meat—beef, mutton and veal—supplemented with plentiful

**10** Louis M. Cullen, 'Eighteenth-century flour-milling in Ireland', *Irish Economic and Social History* iv (1977), 5–25. **11** Coppinger of Barryscourt, Co. Cork, account, s.d. 25 Jan. 1763, 19 Jan. 1770, 16 May 1770, Cork Archives Institute, U 229; C. Hay to Lord Perceval, 9 Oct. 1744, BL, Add Ms 47,007, f. 152; F. Hodder to Dowager Lady Castlecomer, 2 July 1756, NLI, Ms. 35,561; Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand*

*Figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641–1770* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 219–20; Barnard, 'Gardening, diet and "improvement"', 214–15, 232; Marie-Louise Legg (ed.), *The diary of Nicholas Peacock, 1740–1751* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), *passim*. **12** C. Fox, papers relating to Kilmainham Hospital, Dorset CRO, D/FSI. **13** George Rye, 'Medicina statica Hibernica' in Joseph Rogers, *An essay on epidemic*

*diseases* (Dublin: S. Powell for W. Smith, 1734). For Rye see Toby Barnard, *Brought to Book: print in Ireland, 1680–1784* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 171–2. **14** Richard J. Fitzpatrick, 'The Ryans of Inch and their world: a Catholic gentry family from dispossession to integration, c. 1650–1831', unpublished Ph.D. NUI, Maynooth (2018), 150. <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/13793/1/RFitzpatrick%20>

PhDThesis.pdf **15** John W. Baker, *To his Excellency, the Right Honourable, Lord Visc. Townshend...the following Remonstrance* (Dublin: S. Powell, 1769), 89. **16** Leslie M. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and famine: a history of food and nutrition in Ireland 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33–5; Sexton, 'Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland', 287–8, note 73.



*Tripe Gentlemen of any kind*

Figure 2 *Tripe Gentlemen of any Kind* Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760. Private collection



'garden stuff' grown on the estate, potatoes, cabbage, roots, cheese and eggs. Even the lowlier servants were each allocated at a daily sitting one and a half pounds of meat.<sup>17</sup>

Largesse rather than culinary sophistication is further suggested around 1760, when a judge on circuit, fresh from England, was treated to what he presumed was a traditional Gaelic feast in Co. Mayo. It consisted of half a sheep roasted, the other half boiled, 'broiled' fish, potatoes in plenty, and salt. Copious draughts of brandy, brandy punch and 'some pretty good claret' accompanied the banquet. Lavish hospitality of this sort was not always to the taste of 'a connoisseur of good eating'.<sup>18</sup> More indicative of what was reckoned suitable for sociable meals were the seasonal menus proposed by a careful but prosperous householder in Leinster. Maybe they exuded optimism about what would be available locally, but it cannot have been just wishful thinking. 'A spring dinner' included boiled leg of lamb, goose, fillet of veal, sweetbreads, roasted chickens and ducks, cheese cakes, salad, spinach, asparagus, stewed apples and bogberry tart. Next came a midsummer dinner and then one for Michaelmas, focusing on ham with greens, boiled fowls accompanied by celery, goose, grouse, a turkey, again cheese cakes, 'a quaking pudding', a white fricassee, stewed apples, an apple pie, jellies and raspberry puffs. Finally, the Christmas dinner opened with boiled tongues, udder and marrow bones, proceeded with a sirloin of beef, brawn, wild fowl, collared pig, again a white fricassee, oyster loaves and lobsters, a dish of boiled puddings, jellies or whips, mince pies and an orange tart.<sup>19</sup>

Bills of fare such as these—and they abound in eighteenth-century Ireland—express aspiration rather than everyday actuality. Yet they do reveal the abundance and variety at least notionally on offer to those of comfortable means. Moreover, they speak not only of a rich choice, but of the skills and time that were deployed. Marketing as well as cooking required judgement and expertise. Cooking, because essentially ephemeral, tends to be overlooked as an activity in which pleasure and pride were taken, with those outstandingly proficient highly regarded. The gifted, typically women, usually remain anonymous. Characteristic of this effacement is the wife of the agent of the Wynnes of Hazelwood in Co. Sligo. Mrs Martin is mentioned only in her husband's letters to his employer. She was reported to be busy pickling salmon and oysters. In May 1764, for example, she had just pickled 600 oysters.<sup>20</sup>

Dorothea Herbert, the unmarried daughter of a Church of Ireland rector in Co. Tipperary during the 1780s and 1790s, remembered how female neighbours

<sup>17</sup> Terence Dooley (ed.), 'Copy of the marquis of Leinster's household book, 1758', *Archivium Hibernicum* 62 (2009), 195; Sexton, 'Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland', 290.  
<sup>18</sup> Kelly (ed.), *The letters of Lord Chief Baron Edward*

*Willes*, 90–1, 112. <sup>19</sup> 'Mrs Coote' recipe book, NLI, at page 7629.  
<sup>20</sup> E. Martin to O. Wynne, 20 Jan. 1758, 27 and 31 Jan. 1764, 3 Feb. 1764, 4 and 11 May 1764, 11 Feb. 1766, NLI, Ms. 22,252.

with enviable domestic skills were persuaded to assist in occasional feasts. One helper was celebrated for her confectionery; another for baking 'slim cakes'.<sup>21</sup> Not only were there amateur volunteers, in larger towns outside Dublin commercial confectioners were trading. Unexpectedly, perhaps, Cashel was famed for its chocolate.<sup>22</sup> More generally, Dorothea Herbert remembered that an exiled French woman not only taught the Herbert girls their French, but how to make mushroom soup and *soupes maigres*.<sup>23</sup> For the prosperous and leisured the indulgence in domestic and culinary tasks was a diversion which enlivened the routines of provincial life. It involved amicable cooperation and a willing acknowledgement of the expertise of others as well as rivalry. Observing and assisting in the kitchen, still-room or dairy, as in so many other spheres, was more enlightening than reading printed manuals. The skills picked up for amusement might later be applied when the novice acquired a family and household of her own, although Herbert never did.

If there is a danger that the satisfaction gained from accomplishment in the kitchen is overlooked, there is another: of idealising conditions. Economy and convenience recommended using what was readily to hand and affordable. So too did patriotism, which was very much in the air during the second part of the eighteenth century. The few with ample money, household staff and fertile lands around their houses were never self-sufficient. Leaving aside the spreading crazes for tea-, coffee- and chocolate-drinking, and the long-established penchant for wine, even those who reared their own livestock required experts to slaughter and butcher the meat. Two landed families, the Flowers of Castle Durrrow and the Annesleys from Castlewellan (Co. Down), for example, paid butchers for slaughtering beeves and sheep for them.<sup>24</sup> In the Vigors family in 1716, Mrs Vigors was allowed house-keeping of £25 for a quarter of the year. In addition, the wife was to have yearly eight bullocks or cows to be killed for the house together with six milking cows. Mrs Vigors was not expected to butcher the beasts herself.<sup>25</sup>

Rich crops of vegetables and fruit called for preserving against the leaner months of the year. A prudent house-keeper, noting medical as well as culinary recipes, knew how to preserve gooseberries, cherries, raspberries and whole quinces, dry green plums and make a marmalade of oranges.<sup>26</sup> Most of the spices and preservatives needed for these tasks had to be imported, and were then purchased from specialist retailers, notably grocers, whose number grew dramatically throughout the century. Provincials, when in Dublin, might have

**21** *Retrospections of Dorothea Herbert, 1770–1806* (Dublin: Town House, 1988), 91, 116, 122, 194, 197, 311–13, 357, 359. **22** *The Limerick directory* (Limerick: John Ferrar, 1769); Richard Lucas, *The Cork directory. For the year 1787*, 2nd edn,

2 vols (Cork: John Cronin, 1787–8); *Retrospections of Dorothea Herbert*, 198.

**23** *Retrospections of Dorothea Herbert*, 83–4. **24** PRONI, D 1854/8/17, s.d. 12 Jan. 1761.

**25** T. Vigors agreement, 1714, Vigors account book, 1711–20, NLI, microfilm, at page

7629 (original in Carlow County Library). **26** D. Twigge, recipe book, NAI, M. 6231.



Table 1 Lord Hartington account

<i>One month's spending</i>	£	s
<i>Butcher</i>	52	12
<i>Brewer</i>	21	8
<i>Poulterer</i>	9	18
<i>Grocer</i>	31	16
<i>Fruiterer</i>	12	2
<i>bacon and lard</i>	15	6
<i>Butter</i>	10	
<i>Greengrocer</i>	8	6
<i>Flour</i>	4	16
<i>milk and cream</i>	4	16

Figure 3 A Green Stall at the Root Market Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760. Private collection

A prudent house-keeper, noting medical  
as well as culinary recipes, knew how to  
preserve gooseberries, cherries, raspberries  
and whole quinces, dry green plums  
and make a marmalade of oranges

hampers of seasonal vegetables and fruit sent from their country gardens, but meat and fish were less easily despatched. The Kildares (future dukes of Leinster) were probably unique among Dublin residents in having cart-loads of their own produce trundled from nearby Carton twice every week. It was specified that each load should include a 'good fat sheep', together with its offal, and there was to be a weekly delivery of eighteen chickens, geese, a turkey and a few ducks. Garden stuff in abundance was to be sent three times each week. The fruit from Carton demanded extra care: it was to be carried by 'Joe' or another man on foot, also three times weekly.<sup>27</sup>

The standard for refined hospitality was expected to be set by the lord lieutenant when in residence at Dublin Castle. In the 1740s, an officer on guard duty there complained of the high cost: three guineas 'with a moderate and common dinner'.<sup>28</sup> Something of the attendant expense is known from a bill for one month's spending by Lord Hartington (later duke of Devonshire) while lord lieutenant in the autumn of 1755 (see Table 1).<sup>29</sup>

Specialist suppliers abounded in Dublin, either with a stall at one of the several markets or—increasingly—from fixed premises.<sup>30</sup> On a smaller scale, provincial towns offered similar facilities. The speed and degree to which shops supplemented or eventually supplanted street-traders, pedlars and hawkers cannot be measured with any precision. Markets, both open-air and covered, continued to flourish. Town corporations and patentees deriving an income from the tolls paid by the stall-holders strove to maintain their popularity. Tighter regulation sought to protect customers against malpractices. Weights and measures had to conform to the legal standards; goods should not be of obviously poor quality. The hours and locations of selling were controlled. In the port of Kinsale, it was stipulated that the licensed butchers of the town were to sell 'small ware cut into joints so that the poor may be furnished'. Ordinary shoppers were also to be allowed first pick of fruit, oysters, turnips, potatoes and

<sup>27</sup> Dooley (ed.), 'Copy of the marquis of Leinster's household book', 210, 213–14. <sup>28</sup> S. Bagshawe to W. Bagshawe, 2 June 1743, JRL, B 2/3/88.

<sup>29</sup> Lord Hartington account, 16 Sep 1755 to 14 Oct. 1755, Chatsworth House, letters,

260.418. (Note that again, butcher's meat and groceries were the heaviest costs. The account does not mention fish, confectionery or wine.)

<sup>30</sup> John Gough, *A tour in Ireland, in 1813 and 1814* (Dublin: Napper for Gough & Co., 1816), 158–65.

basket butter for two hours before the dealers, maybe with fixed shops, were permitted to buy. Thereby, it was hoped that the townspeople could provision their families 'at the best and cheapest rates'.<sup>31</sup> At Ennis, repeated efforts were made to outlaw the butchers' practice of 'blowing' or skewering meat. Carcasses were blown and then arranged to appear plumper and fresher than they were. The artificial enhancement in fact encouraged putrefaction.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in Ennis, 1735, butchers were prohibited from selling in the open street with the meat exposed to the weather and were brought under cover in a newly-built shambles. Similar worries led to a ban in Kinsale on the sale of meat other than in the market house.<sup>33</sup> With the prohibition on open-air trading having to be repeated, it is doubtful that it had succeeded.<sup>34</sup> Rudimentary hygiene lay behind a ban in Kinsale, formulated in 1723, that those selling meat should not smoke or handle dirty matter. Later, in the same town, controls were imposed on where beasts were to be slaughtered, primarily on health grounds.<sup>35</sup> Worries were also expressed that exposure to the elements spoiled much of the fish in the Dublin markets and about the filth of some of the capital's flesh markets.<sup>36</sup>

Anxiety over keeping meat led to the construction of a new market house at Clonmel in the mid-eighteenth century. It could be shut up 'so the meat is safely preserved as in a cellar'. A Dublin retailer assured buyers that potted fish would keep for six months if stored in a cool place.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, such spaces were not to be found in a smoky cabin or even a more substantial dwelling. Only grandees constructed ice-houses.<sup>38</sup> Nor did many crowded interiors boast wet and dry larders or an abundance of store cupboards.<sup>39</sup> The many lacking suitable facilities for storing foods, even dry groceries, had constantly to replenish their stocks. Depending on circumstances, shopping for food could be a chore, a skill or a diversion.

Among traders, the scope for petty frauds and bribery was wide.<sup>40</sup> To ensure that only 'wholesome & well-baked bread' should be sold in Kinsale, a guild of bakers was chartered.<sup>41</sup> Monopolies of this sort were hard to maintain, proved unpopular and may not always have achieved their objective. Indeed, a couple of decades after the bakers' guild was created, its master was fined for selling bad bread.<sup>42</sup> In Ennis, too, bakers were fined for selling 'unwholesome bread'. Indeed, in 1709, the Ennis authorities stated that 'the bread sold in this borough is generally worse than bread made elsewhere in this kingdom'.<sup>43</sup> Undoubtedly some regulations aimed to protect customers against inferior quality and over-priced goods and short measure. Pollution and possible infection were guarded

**31** 'Manuscripts of the old corporation of Kinsale', *Analecta Hibernica* xv (1944), 179, 181; Michael Mulcahy (ed.), *Calendar of Kinsale documents*, Vol. 2 (Kinsale: Kinsale Regional Museum, 1988–1998), 45, 58, 66, 71, 72, 79, 85. Cf. D. Townshend (ed.), 'Notes on the council book

of Clonakilty', *JCHAS*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series i (1895), 455. **32** Brian Ó Dálaigh (ed.), *Corporation book of Ennis* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1990), 88, 103, 105, 169, 175, 188.

**33** Mulcahy (ed.), *Calendar of Kinsale documents*, Vol. 2, 37, 43, 50, 57, 78, 83–4.

**34** Ó Dálaigh (ed.), *Corporation*

*book of Ennis*, 127, 152, 158.

**35** Mulcahy (ed.), *Calendar of Kinsale documents*, Vol. 3, 28; Vol. 6, 53. **36** Caldwell, *Two letters to the Dublin Society*, 13–14; Gough, *A tour in Ireland*, 158, 160.

**37** Charles Smith, account of Co. Tipperary, 1760, RIA, Ms. 24 G 9, at page 279; Saunders's

*News-Letter*, 26 Jan. 1782.

**38** E. Martin to O. Wynne, 15 Feb. 1763, 17 Jan. 1764, NLI, Ms. 22,252; James Howley, *The follies and garden buildings of Ireland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 205–6; Máiréad Johnston, *Ice and cold storage: a Dublin history* (Dublin:

against. Less formally, reputation determined the popularity and longevity of businesses. For some customers, it was more convenient and probably cheaper to buy from pedlars who appeared at the door or the casuals who set up in alleys and at corners. Evading the tolls payable for fixed standings, they could cut costs. Glimpses of the abundance on offer come from the young artist, Hugh Douglas Hamilton. In 1760, Hamilton sketched the street life of Dublin. Of more than sixty scenes and characters that he observed, nearly half were selling food. Especially frequent was fish—salmon, oysters, fresh and pickled herrings—milk, butter, eggs, whey, offal and black and white puddings. Here were also vendors of vegetables, herbs and cresses. The only fruit were apples, pears and oranges. As well as a baker, hot pies, unidentified ‘cake’, ginger-bread and Balrothery biscuits were on sale.<sup>44</sup> Absent are butcher’s meat, poultry, potatoes and dry groceries. Mostly they were cheap commodities and quick to spoil. Some—the oysters being opened, cake, cheese, biscuits, ginger-bread and apples—could be eaten in the street. Other items, such as the large fish and bakery, were being delivered. Hamilton’s unique visual record shows the wide choice of the fresh and seasonal available to the discerning shopper. It tells of the hubbub in the busy streets with stalls set up, sellers squatting on stools or on their haunches, bowed under the weight of baskets and bundles of roots. Rudimentary carts were transporting produce from its sources outside the city and others were delivering to retailers and private houses.

In order to take full advantage of the variety, time and experience were required. No doubt customers had favourites, based on convenience of location and quality of produce. Much was not available throughout the entire year, but seasonal. For the traders themselves it was a precarious livelihood, maybe adopted opportunistically when suddenly the chance to handle a cache, as of ‘spring herbs’, arose. A Dublin apothecary observed that dill, which grew on rocks by the sea at Dalkey, was hawked in the city’s streets. Also, charlock was sold as a substitute for kale, and the autumn bilberries were cried in the streets.<sup>45</sup> Further into the countryside, wild fruits were harvested. One August, a correspondent in the Midlands wrote of having ‘just bottled thirteen bottles of bog berries’.<sup>46</sup> Other Dublin sellers were more regular, familiar presences on a daily round, offering the refreshment of a can of ‘hot grey peas’ or a half-penny’s worth of cake and cheese.<sup>47</sup> For some buyers, the tasty snack supplemented the solid regular meals, but for others, it may have been the sole nourishment of the day.

Conclusions about the availability and sale of food drawn from Hamilton’s portrayals are mostly confirmed but varied by another pictorial record of some

Autozero, 1988); Rolf Loeber, ‘Irish Country Houses of the Late Caroline Period: An Unremembered Past Recaptured’, *Quarterly Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society* xvi (1973), 1–69, 48. <sup>39</sup> Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700–2000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cork:

Cork University Press, 2021), 241–79. <sup>40</sup> Mulcahy (ed.), *Calendar of Kinsale documents*, Vol. 5, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Mulcahy (ed.), *Calendar of Kinsale documents*, Vol. 5, 10.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Manuscripts of the old corporation of Kinsale’, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Ó Dálaigh (ed.), *Corporation book of Ennis*, 57, 88, 358, 361.

<sup>44</sup> For Balrothery biscuits: Dorothy Cashman, ‘Sugar bakers and confectioners in Georgian Ireland’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 41 (2018), 81. <sup>45</sup> John Rutty, *An essay towards a natural history of the county of Dublin*, 2 vols (Dublin: W. Sleater, 1772), i, 57–8, 75, 89–90.

<sup>46</sup> J. Cooley to R. Smythe, 30 Aug. 1758, NLI, Ms 41,598. <sup>47</sup> Laffan (ed.), *The Cries of Dublin*.

sixty years later. Traders in the market of the Co. Waterford port of Dungarvan are memorialised. Once more, the arduous labour of carting crops to a market is conveyed, with women balancing baskets of parsnips and carrots on their heads or sitting on the ground beside creels of bread, apples and roots. Again, fresh fish is alluringly displayed. A churn of milk trundled on a cart is bedded down among fresh greens and herbs.<sup>48</sup> Potatoes, grown in abundance around Dungarvan, also arrive on a cart. Present, too, are women with poultry for sale and another who sells small measures of either flour or salt.<sup>49</sup> About this time, Dungarvan is known to have had two grocers. There were also eleven described simply as ‘merchants’. However, it is unlikely that they dealt in the perishables which were being sold in the open air.<sup>50</sup> Before the end of the eighteenth century, open markets with their ribald badinage were giving way to but never altogether supplanted by fixed premises, of increasing pretension, in which deference and courtesies prevailed.<sup>51</sup>

## II

Improving systems of roads, the cutting of canals, traffic on rivers and around the coast all made home-produced and imported goods more readily available. Surviving orders and invoices show how householders in remote districts might receive seemingly rare foods. During the 1720s, a woman of substance in Connacht had a contact in Dublin, possibly a retailer, despatch to her a miscellany including pistachio nuts, raisins, mushrooms, anchovies and Spanish or Indian mangoes. Also ordered were red burgundy and half a dozen flasks of ‘right brisk champagne’. With the assorted goods came news and printed pamphlets.<sup>52</sup> Another woman, remote on the Kerry coast, was supplied by a trader in Cork city. Jane Crosbie’s order ranged from cloth, a garden spade to tea, sugar, capers, anchovies, raisins, currants, salad oil, figs and chestnuts.<sup>53</sup> Later, the Smythes, a gentry family of Westmeath, relied on a connection in Dublin to run errands. The willing woman enquired assiduously over the Smythes’ miscellaneous wants: servants, lodgings, clothes, shoes, utensils and food. Goods that she sent down to the country in one consignment during 1756 ranged from groceries (nutmeg, dried mushrooms, mace, truffles and anchovies) to fish, sweetbreads, a calf’s head (? for brawn) and four lemons. She had failed to find any scallops, fresh mushrooms or prawns. In 1766, she wrote of visiting all the flesh markets to compare the price of tongues. She also asked for salted salmon.<sup>54</sup> In contrast,

**48** Crawford, ‘Provincial town life’, 43–60; George Mott, ‘Eating and drinking in Ireland two hundred years ago’, *The Irish Ancestor* 5: 1 (1973), 10.

**49** Roch, sketchbook, nos 4, 25, 32, 34, Ulster Transport and Folk Museum. **50** James Pigot, *Commercial directory of Ireland, Scotland, and the four most northern counties of England,*

for 1821–22 & 23 (Manchester: J. Pigot & Co., 1820), 192.

**51** Sarah Foster, ‘“Ornament and splendour”: shops and shopping in Georgian Dublin’, *IADS* 15 (2012), 12–33.

**52** C. Lyons to M. Brabazon, 4 and 15 Feb. 1728[9], 18 March 1728[9], Brabazon Mss, private collection, London.

**53** F. Power to J. Crosbie, 25 Jan.

1713[14], BL, Ms. 20,715, f. 89.

**54** M. Ledwidge to R. Smythe, 2 Oct. 1756, 23 Nov. 1765, 22 Nov. 1766, NLI, Ms 41,598.

a shopper in Waterford, finding fish scarce, reserved one hundred herrings. Returning to collect them, since he had left no deposit with the vendor, 'she broke her word' by selling them to another.<sup>55</sup> Shopping on behalf of others, if it elicited gratitude, could be taxing. With unfamiliar commodities and articles multiplying, it could be hard to judge exactly what was wanted. On occasion, if the requested item was not to be had, then a substitute was tried: for example, biscuit rather than cake. In the 1720s, when tea was still a costly rarity, one woman commissioned to buy some, sent 'the best I could get', but confessed to 'not having great skill in green tea'. If the package did not please—at seventeen shillings for a pound—it would be changed.<sup>56</sup>

If friends and acquaintances could be commissioned to find goods, especially groceries, there remained remote localities with scanty supplies. In 1757, a revenue officer posted to the far south-west of Co. Cork was appalled. He judged the way of living unfit 'for any man that was bred or born a gentleman or ever used to anything better than a bowl of potatoes and a cabin'. Dwelling in damp and primitive accommodation, he commented, 'there is undoubtedly great plenty of fish, yet the people are so lazy they'd rather live on salt mackerel and potatoes than give themselves the trouble to take fresh fish'. Apparently, there were no vegetables, some very bad mutton and lamb, and no beef. The only bread was griddle bread, and very hard. Neither malt liquor nor wine was to be had other than in a few gentlemen's houses. Moving no more than thirty miles east from Crookhaven to Skibbereen cheered the revenue officer.<sup>57</sup>

### III

Access to the ever-expanding array of foods varied most obviously with income, locality, and the seasons. The time and skills which could be applied to preparation also differed. A further constraint was the equipment required. Among the polite or would-be polite the settings and service of meals were elaborated. At sociable rather than merely routine gatherings, a dessert might be served. Special sets of dishes and glasses were needed. Supper, taken late in the evening, sometimes after dancing, listening to music and playing cards, also called for distinctive utensils and dishes. Particular delicacies were thought best-suited to these occasions: fruit, local and seasonal, exotic and imported, preserved and candied, wet and dry sweetmeats, and confectionery. They became pretexts for competition and ostentation. Achievement in raising the delicate and delicious,

<sup>55</sup> S. White to J. Coneley, 15 Nov. 1735, NLI, Ms. 34,025.

<sup>56</sup> E. Cooke to Mrs Sweet, 15 Jan. 1729[30], NLI, p. 1560; T.R. to S. White, NLI, Ms. 34025; W. Conner to S. Bernard, 13 Nov. 1753, Castle Bernard Mss, Cork Archives Institute, U/137.

<sup>57</sup> G. Swift to Sir W. Fownes, 16 May 1757, 30 June 1757, 18 Aug. 1757, NLI, Ms. 3889.





notably grapes, wall-fruit and pineapples, was displayed; so too facility in spinning sugar, whisking whips and syllabubs, and setting jellies into 'shapes'. The crockery, glasses and cutlery played important roles. Further embellishment could be added with a *surtout*, a construction of either ceramic, silver or glass, or combinations of them, to dominate the middle of the board. The appeal to the eyes of the guests may sometimes have exceeded that to their palates.<sup>58</sup>

It is impossible to know with any exactness how far into the population these practices were spreading and how regularly or strictly the routines prescribed in conduct books were obeyed. Certainly, the lavishness and ostentation of some of the recorded occasions accentuate the contrast between the excesses of the few and the frugality of the many. These disparities connected with a standard measure of circumstances in eighteenth-century Ireland. Households were assessed for taxation if a chimney existed, rather than an open hearth where the makings of a meal could be boiled in a pot over the fire. A chance glimpse into the conditions of householders in the port of Dungarvan in Co. Waterford in 1758 shows attenuated material lives. Sometimes the sole pots had been turned to other uses, such as boiling tar for the chandlery.<sup>59</sup> From this difference arose

**Figure 4** *Black and White Puddings*, Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760. Private collection

<sup>58</sup> Toby Barnard, "Baubles for boudoirs" or "an article of such universal consumption": ceramics in the Irish home, 1730–1840' in Conor Lucey (ed.), *House and home in Georgian Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2022), 104–124; Anna Moran, "The eye as well as the appetite

must be car'd for": glass and dining in Ireland, about 1680–about 1830' in Christopher L. Maxwell (ed.), *In sparkling company: reflections on glass in the eighteenth-century British world* (New York: Corning Museum of Glass, 2020), 194–229. <sup>59</sup> Toby C. Barnard, "The common opinion of the

town": rumour and rancour in provincial Ireland, 1758' in Raymond Gillespie, James Kelly and Mary Ann Lyons (eds), *Politics and political culture in Ireland from Restoration to Union, 1660–1800* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2022), 202.

the varieties of bread which were noted. During the 1740s, in the Irishtown of Kilkenny bread was still baked in ‘unstopped [? open] ovens’, whereas in the neighbouring Englishtown it came from stopped ovens. Only the latter was sold publicly.<sup>60</sup> This was probably the difference which the West Cork revenue officer deplored, with loaves cooked over the fire on a griddle, in a portable oven (bastable) or pot.<sup>61</sup> The different sorts of bread underline the differentiation in diet owing primarily to money but also to cultural preferences. Those who lacked an enclosed oven in which to bake, either used another method of cooking (usually boiling) or, for a small charge, had a baker cook the prepared mixture, as also with meats, pies and cakes, or bought what the baker was selling.

Nor was it only the equipment for baking a loaf that was missing from humble and penurious households. As with so much else in the eighteenth century, so with the kitchen, specialised utensils multiplied as well as improved versions of common articles such as spits and jacks.<sup>62</sup> The establishment of a Cork landowner, returned after long service in India, was noted for its steam-powered spit. This innovation was compared with a traditional dog-spit used in the nearby inn.<sup>63</sup> Roughly constructed ovens were seen as causes of fires in buildings of timber and thatch. Then, too, where was fuel to be found? Many had the right to cut turf, but otherwise wood was notoriously scarce and coal only for the ‘quality’.

Open-handed hospitality needed a phalanx of servants or helpers, and extensive stocks of utensils such as the elaborate *batterie de cuisine* owned by the Inchiquin O’Briens.<sup>64</sup> Because many, who might entertain on the grand scale but rarely, even provincial squires and their families briefly in Dublin, lacked the necessary equipage, there developed a trade both in prepared dishes and the hire of furniture and accessories. Increasingly, specialist confectioners advertised their services. When the fictional Count O’Halloran recommended ‘that delicate sweetmeat, the Irish plum’ to his guests, he revealed that it was to be procured ‘only in his Majesty’s dominions from Mrs Godey’s confectioner’s shop in Dublin’.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV

Travellers required refreshment on their journeys. In 1787, for example, a new coach service between Granard and Dublin offered breakfast before departure in an inn and that dinner would be ready at Castletown Delvin.<sup>66</sup> Earlier, an army officer obliged to breakfast at an inn in Gort (Co. Galway) grumbled at

60 W. Colles to B. Colles, 26 Nov. 1743, 12 Dec. 1743, NAI, Prim Mss 87. 61 Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture and furnishings, 1700–2000*, 251, 407. 62 Sara Pennell, *The birth of the English kitchen, 1600–1850* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 59–111. 63 *Travels of Mirza abu Taleb Khan*, 2<sup>nd</sup>

edn, 3 vols (London: Watts, Broxbourne, Herts, for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1814), i, p. 121. Cf. 64 Shanahan, “Whipt by a twig rod”, 206–18.

65 Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 117; cf. Barnard, “Baubles for boudoirs”, 116–

117; Dorothy Cashman, “That delicate sweetmeat, the Irish plum”: the culinary world of Maria Edgeworth’, in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), *Tickling the palate: gastronomy in Irish literature and culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 15–34; Cashman, ‘Sugar bakers and

confectioners in Georgian Ireland’, 74–99. 66 *Dublin Evening Post*, 15 Sep. 1787.

the sparse refreshment: an egg, dry bread and tea that he suspected had been brewed from chopped hay.<sup>67</sup> (Blackthorn leaves were alleged to be used as a substitute for bohea tea.)<sup>68</sup> Coffee-houses and taverns provided solid as well as liquid sustenance. Especially for men on their own, obliged by business to be in either Dublin or the county town, dining at ‘the ordinary’, even ‘the fourpenny ordinary’, the set communal meal, was convenient. They might breakfast and sup alone. Another option was to join other solitary men in a temporary ‘club’.<sup>69</sup> One enterprising inn-keeper near Dublin Castle advertised in 1742, ‘the best of wines and nicest eating’, with two or three meat dishes available between two and three every afternoon. An apprenticed clerk, new to the city, was inducted by a colleague into a public-house where they ate beef steaks and quaffed ‘three and one’, a pint and a half of ale and a half-pint of porter.<sup>70</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, hotels and more eating-houses were opening. Those lodging temporarily or permanently in rented accommodation, notably in Dublin, although they might have the use of a kitchen or have meals brought to them by the landlady or landlord (or more likely a servant), also had recourse to what must be regarded as early take-aways and street-food.

It was natural enough for Squire Edgeworth, briefly in Dublin from Co. Longford, to send out for veal cutlets from a nearby tavern. Back in the capital ten years later in 1769, accompanied by a daughter, he paid his landlady’s maid for ‘dressing his victuals’ and cleaning his room.<sup>71</sup> Such arrangements were beyond the means of a nearby and permanent resident. Rose Lamotte, when she died in her Dublin lodgings, possessed pieces of wooden furniture, books and a good deal of threadbare clothing, but no utensils for preparing or eating food. Possibly those humble belongings had not been worth including in the auction of her effects.<sup>72</sup> However, it is more probable that others in the building—another lodger or a servant—brought her food and drink, which she may then have supplemented with the ready-made snacks available outside from the likes of Hugh Douglas Hamilton’s street-traders. Lodgers, especially spinsters and widows, straitened in circumstances, had to improvise arrangements for eating. Convention as well as cost may well have deterred solitary women from venturing into public eating places, other than when on a journey.

A Scot visiting Dublin during the summer of 1775 noted some of the meals that he ate, often in private houses but also at commercial premises. Some were judged indifferent and over-priced. However, at a festive gathering in the Ranelagh pleasure gardens, a dinner at two shillings and six pence each

**67** S. Bagshawe to C. Caldwell, 5 July 1751, JRL, B 3/1/3.

**68** Rutty, *An essay towards a natural history of Dublin*, i, 73–4. **69** R. Maxwell, bill, 1762, PRONI, D 1556/16/11/15; Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure*, 291. **70** *The adventures of Patrick O'Donnell*, in his

*travels through England and Ireland*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: J. Williams, 1763), 92–3.

**71** R. Edgeworth, accounts, s.d. 8 Dec. 1759, 10 May 1769, NLI, Mss. 1525, 1535. **72** Jason McElligott, ‘The ragged-gowned philanthropist: Miss Lamotte’s post-mortem

auction, 1769’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 36 (2021), 79–92.

consisted of boiled chicken, boiled neck of mutton, roast duck, a quarter of lamb, ham, salad, peas and asparagus. The claret and tea which accompanied it were presumably charged separately. At a Dublin tavern, if the claret—2s 2d the bottle—pleased, the cold supper of neck of lamb and chicken was thought too dear at ten pence half-penny per head. Shortly afterwards, breakfasting on the way to the races at The Curragh, the traveller again complained about the price of ten pence. At *The Eagle*, another Dublin hostelry, a dinner cost 10s 6d, but was reckoned not as good as it should have been. What these experiences, although very limited, confirm is a range of options for eating out and the sharp variations in quality and price. Indeed, on one day, some eggs and porter in ‘a beer house’ sufficed for the visitor.<sup>73</sup>

The craving for simplicity after being surfeited was expressed again by another stranger feted in Limerick during the 1790s. John Harden praised ‘the most complete Friday’s dinner I have ever seen’. Given by a Catholic living in Irishtown, it consisted entirely of fish, ‘but that of the most rare & delicate quality, salmon, hake, pike, soles, trout, plaice, lobster, eels, with variety of sauces’. Limerick, near the mouth of the Shannon, was noted for its fresh fish, as was Galway.<sup>74</sup> Yet, Harden appreciated a simpler meal offered in the nearby countryside. ‘The neat white cloth covered with nice potatoes, butter, milk and eggs’. Harden also recorded that evenings in Limerick were devoted to Bacchus, and added ruefully ‘these lads can drink’.<sup>75</sup>

Whether from necessity or choice, more took meals outside their own or their acquaintances’ houses. Supplying the wants was a chance of money-making to be seized. A corporation of cooks had existed in Dublin since the fifteenth century suggesting a long tradition of eating outside the home.<sup>76</sup> One professional caterer whose somewhat tortuous career in the capital can be traced is Peter Mequignon. Probably Swiss in origin, Mequignon was said to have been brought to Ireland by Lord Lieutenant Townshend in 1767.<sup>77</sup> Described variously as a cook and vintner, by 1784, he had started a business in central Dublin, at the Two Lions near Merrion Square, in providing food (‘made’ dishes) for private dinners, suppers and balls. The meals were cooked in the kitchen of his premises.<sup>78</sup> How then they were transported to the customer is not clear, or indeed how kept warm or, if necessary, reheated. The spectacle of covered tureens and steaming pots being carried through Dublin might have been expected to elicit contemporary comment. Mequignon did more than supply the eatables, he arranged the entire *mise-en-scène*. Such was his reputation that he organised

**73** J. Murray, journal, 27 May 1775; 1, 10, 13, 20, 25 June 1775, NLS, Ms. 43,018. **74** Kelly (ed.), *The letters of Lord Chief Baron Edward Willes*, 84. **75** Gough, *A tour in Ireland*, in 1813 and 1814, 213; Rev. James Hall, *Tour through Ireland*, 2 vols (London: R.P. Moore, 1813), i,

306; Kelly (ed.), *The letters of Lord Chief Baron Edward Willes*, 54–5; Sighle Ní Chinnéide (ed.), ‘A Frenchman’s impressions of Limerick, town and people in 1791’, *NMAJ* 5 (1946), 96–101, 98; Michael Quane (ed.) ‘Tour in Ireland by John Harden in 1797’, *JCHAS*

lviii (1953), 83, 86–7, 89–90.

**76** Mary Clark and Raymond Refaussé (eds), *Directory of historic Dublin guilds* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 18.

**77** Walter G. Strickland, *A dictionary of Irish artists*, 2 vols (Dublin and London: Maunsel & Co., Ltd.), i, 106. **78** *The*

*Treble Almanack for the year MDCCXCIV* (Dublin: sold by W.Wilson, 1794), 74; *Volunteer’s Journal*, 24 March 1784; *Freeman’s Journal*, 20 Feb. 1787.

an entertainment for Lord Cloncurry at Blackrock in 1793, a cold collation for a military corps on an officer's lawn in 1803, and provided the 'elegant supper' after the weekly balls in Percy's Dublin exhibition rooms.<sup>79</sup> Such was his fame that he was engaged by the Donegalls for a feast in 1805. In part it celebrated the recent naval victory at Trafalgar and there were patriotic displays as well as food. It was reported that Mequignon 'evinced great taste and fancy in the rich display'.<sup>80</sup>

Mequignon cashed in on a long-standing custom of al fresco dining or jaunts to the nearby sea- or river-side. In 1775, a Scottish visitor went with his Irish hosts to Chapelizod to eat strawberries: they had difficulty finding a place in the 'houses of entertainment'. Well-frequented were taverns overlooking Dublin Bay or down river from Limerick at Castle Connell. Water-borne frolics enlivened Cork harbour. Civic functionaries, candidates at elections and landowners' agents staged feasts indoors in a hostelry or outside, with spit-roasted joints of meat.<sup>81</sup> One at Kinsale in 1722 is notable not only for the lavish fare—lobsters, chickens and turkeys, almonds and currants for cheese-cakes—but for the numerous syllabub glasses broken. Since white wine and claret had been bought for the syllabubs, as well as sack for the jellies, the levity can be gauged.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, when a local grandee entertained the freemen of Carlingford in 1760, 1000 oysters were consumed and the other food cost £16 3s 6d. With ten gallons of brandy punch and another four of shrub, it was not so surprising that a linen table cloth, pewter dishes and plates together with knives and forks and glasses were purloined and that a punch bowl was broken.<sup>83</sup> A public dinner, planned by a Co. Down militia captain in 1746, had to be abandoned when the women who were to help in the preparations or serving demanded pay of sixpence. The organiser would offer only four pence each.<sup>84</sup> The impresario behind a civic feast in Youghal during the 1750s, engaged a cook from Cork to 'dress' the meal. He confessed, 'for my wife is not able to do it and scarcely see it done'.<sup>85</sup>

Mequignon's known enterprises suggests there was money to be made from preparing food. As well as the deliveries, he had two rooms in his property off Merrion Square in which meals were served.<sup>86</sup> He branched out by taking premises at Blackrock with views across Dublin Bay. Next, in 1794, he opened a tavern, *The Prince of Wales*, in central Dublin.<sup>87</sup> But, the following year he claimed to be fully occupied in overseeing the Sackville Street club house, only to open Mequignon's tavern soon after.<sup>88</sup> The frequent changes of address may tell of bids to revive drooping trade and warn of how quickly 'people of fashion' tired of briefly fashionable eating-places.

**79** *Freeman's Journal*, 26 Sep. 1793; *Saunders's News-Letter*, 4 Jan. 1803, 12 Oct. 1803.  
**80** *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 23 Nov. 1805; *Dublin Evening Post*, 26 Nov. 1805.  
**81** J. Hore to R. Power, 15 Sep. 1703, NLI, Ms. 13,243; J. Usher to Sir W. Abdy, 21 Nov. 1743, *ibid.*, Ms 7180; Barnard,

*Making the Grand Figure*, 371.  
**82** Michael Mulcahy, *Ceann Sáile: a short history of Kinsale* (Cork: Cork Historical Guides, 1966), 39. **83** G. Curphey, bill, 10 Jan. 1760, NLI, Ms. 10,726/3.  
**84** C. Brett to M. Ward, 4 Jan. 1745[6], PRONI, D 2092/1/7, 49.  
**85** W. Coughlan to W. Conner, 22 May 1755, Chatsworth,

Lismore Ms 36/138.  
**86** *Volunteer's Journal*, 16 March 1785. **87** *Dublin Evening Post*, 1 March 1794; *Saunders's News-Letter*, 4 March 1794, 2 June 1795.  
**88** *Saunders's News-Letter*, 4 April 1795, 27 March 1802.



Ginger Bread and Apples

Ginger Bread & Apples

Figure 5 *Ginger Bread & Apples*, Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760. Private collection

## V

Another described as a ‘French cook’ in later-eighteenth-century Dublin was John Merle. Yet Merle’s operation differed in character from Mequignon’s. With a shop in Great George Street, the establishment may have resembled what later was called a delicatessen. Merle purveyed a range of charcuterie, from black puddings, various sausages, and tongues to cooked and preserved meats. How far these were prepared by or under Merle’s supervision and to recipes of his invention was not specified. Also stocked were Cheshire and Gloucester cheeses, collared eels, red herrings and sprats, mustard, cornichons, capers and anchovies.<sup>89</sup>

Merle returns us to one of the most striking developments of the eighteenth century: the proliferation of those terming themselves as ‘grocers’. Those listed as ‘grocers’ in the Dublin of 1751 totalled ninety-four; twenty years later, they numbered 175. By 1791, the tally had risen to at least 370, with specialist dealers in tea or cheese named separately.<sup>90</sup> In 1768, a trader in Limerick, described simply as a ‘merchant’, solicited the custom of a local gentleman, promising good sugar, fine teas and ‘every thing in the grocery line’.<sup>91</sup> Larger towns such as Limerick or Cork also supported growing numbers of grocers: at least fifty-three in Limerick in 1769, and ninety-four in Cork by 1789.<sup>92</sup> Others styled simply as ‘merchants’ sold groceries. Earlier in the eighteenth century when tea was still a costly luxury, it was to be bought at a Dublin druggist.<sup>93</sup> As it increased in popularity and decreased in price, it was retailed by grocers as well as specialist dealers in tea.

As the advertisements of Merle—and of other shopkeepers—reveal, ‘groceries’ embraced an eclectic variety, some imported, others home-produced. Smoked fish was frequently stocked, with ‘pickled’ salmon apparently most common.<sup>94</sup> As has appeared already, given the abundance of both salmon and oysters, the skilled and provident preserved the fish in their own kitchens. But the plenty tempted the hopeful into schemes of larger-scale trade. There were intermittent but regular calls to do more to profit from the Irish fisheries. They were an under-developed source of employment, of exports and of cheap food especially suited to the Catholic majority.<sup>95</sup> More intensive exploitation required expensive tackle and was thwarted by the unpredictable habits of the fish. Faced with

**89** *The Treble Almanack for the year MDCCCLXXXVI* (Dublin: sold by W. Wilson, 1786), 74; *Volunteer’s Journal*, 14 March 1785. **90** *The Dublin directory, for the year 1751* (Dublin: printed for Peter Wilson, 1751); *Wilson’s Dublin directory for the year, 1771* (Dublin: printed for Peter and William Wilson, 1771); *The Treble almanack for the year MDCCXCI* (Dublin: sold by W. Wilson, 1791). It is to be hoped that in time an

Irish equivalent of Jon Stobart, *Sugar and spice: grocers and groceries in provincial England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) will be undertaken. For earlier shipments of groceries: Susan Flavin, *Consumption and culture in sixteenth-century Ireland: saffron, stockings and silk* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 148–55. **91** M. Rochford to J. Brown, 17 June 1779, Brown Mss,

box 1, Rathkeale Palatine Heritage Centre; *The Limerick directory*, 16.

**92** *The Limerick directory*; Lucas, *The Cork directory. For the year 1787*, i, passim.

**93** *Faulkner’s Dublin Journal*, 27–31 Dec. 1726, 18–21 Nov. 1727, 8–11 Feb. 1728[9].

**94** *Saunders’s News Letter*, 26 Jan. 1782. **95** *Some considerations on the British fisheries* (Dublin: printed for P. Wilson, 1750), 11.

**96** E. Caldwell, accounts, s.d. 5 Nov. 1762, JRL, B3/28/3; R. Edgeworth, accounts, s.d. 28 Jan. 1765, 5 March 1766, NLI, Mss 1528, 1531; R. French, accounts, s.d. 26 June 1749, NLI, Ms. 4919, f. 81; French, accounts, s.d. Aug. 1749, Sep. 1751, 10 Aug. 1753, *ibid.*, Ms. 4918, p. 245. **97** Caldwell, *Two letters to the Dublin Society*, 11–22. **98** J. Lee to Sir J. Caldwell, 25 Oct. 1781, JRL, B 3/20, 231; C. O’Neill to same, 10 Nov.

those obstacles, some landowners thought of profiting more from freshwater fish. Perch, trout and cray-fish were introduced into ponds, canals, streams and lakes on their own demesnes: whether simply for recreation or in the hope of sales is not always clear.<sup>96</sup> Sir James Caldwell in Fermanagh took a lead in adding to the stocks and seeking commercial markets, notably for eels in Dublin and English towns.<sup>97</sup> However, the response to his initiatives, an ‘infant manufacture of collared eel at Belleek’, was disappointing, and reminds both of the unpredictability of consumers and of the crucial factor of price. Neither in Bath nor Bristol were shopkeepers interested in ordering the Erne eels. In Dublin, the trout, pike and perch were snapped up, but not the eels, which at six pence a pound, were thought too expensive.<sup>98</sup> Caldwell in his zest to popularise freshwater fish even suggested that the Dublin Society open its own fish-shops: it did not happen.<sup>99</sup> If Caldwell’s extravagant hopes for marketing Fermanagh eels came to little, eels remained a food locally and seasonally available and popular. They added savour as the ‘kitchen’ in routine meals and interest to more elaborate ones.<sup>100</sup> They sufficed—with a mug of cider—to sustain the Co. Limerick farmer and land agent Nicholas Peacock. In Limerick city for the day, he supped on seven-penny worth of eels washed down with a glass of cider.<sup>101</sup> The snack serves as an example of an indigenous and hardly exotic food which was once routinely eaten but subsequently lost favour. Eels did not prove amenable to large-scale commercial promotion. Collared silver eel, relished by the discriminating, attracted fewer gasps of admiration than the pineapples grown by the host (or—more probably—his forgotten gardener).

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1781, *ibid.*, B 3/20, 318.

<sup>99</sup> Caldwell, *Two letters to the Dublin Society*, 13–14.

<sup>100</sup> Clarkson and Crawford, *Feast and famine*, 46, 69, 106; Sexton, ‘Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland’, 271.

<sup>101</sup> Legg (ed.), *The diary of Nicholas Peacock*, 150.



**12**

*Receipt Books from  
Birr Castle, County Offaly,  
1640–1920*

**Danielle Clarke**

This chapter explores the food culture and culinary activity of the Parsons family of Birr Castle, Co. Offaly, a property held in the same family since 1620. The materials held at Birr provide a unique example of changes in food production and consumption over three centuries, all the more interesting because of the relative stability of other key factors: place, status, and trading links. The recipe books provide not just evidence of food and how to prepare it (indeed, this latter was only one of many functions for these types of books), but granular detail about ingredients, utensils and provenance. Furthermore, each book illustrates the importance of the material practice of writing down, copying, and arranging recipes, and the ways in which these practices evolve in response to use and function. These very local examples suggest the complex connections of place to the global, in terms of ingredients, trends and fashions, and conventions governing the recording of recipe culture, many of which endure into the present day, and into new platforms and ways of representing recipes. Finally, this body of material demonstrates the centrality of food and food cultures to identity formation, as the Parsons sought to cement their enhanced position within the protestant ruling and land-owning class in Ireland after the wars of the Three Kingdoms (1639–1653), also known as the British Civil Wars. Like many other families whose fortunes rested on land grants over the course of the seventeenth-century, the Parsons family were highly mobile, moving frequently between their properties in Ireland and England. And like others of their type, the Parsons' recipe books aim to project and consolidate a familial identity focussed on a contested, and even imagined space.<sup>1</sup>

At Birr Castle in County Offaly there survives a unique collection of manuscript recipe or receipt books, spanning nearly four centuries.<sup>2</sup> These materials relate to food preparation, medical care, and household management, spanning the period from c. 1640–1920. This rare survival of what were often ephemeral 'household' materials is due to the continuous ownership of Birr Castle and related lands in the same family from 1620 to the present; to the habit of keeping documents and records that the Parsons family probably picked up from the documentary practices and habits of the Boyle family with whom they were closely associated from both families' residence in Youghal, Co. Cork at the end of the sixteenth century; and a continuing tradition of hospitality—again continued into the present day—at Birr.<sup>3</sup> This chapter argues that these materials provide important evidence of the ways in which aspiring planter families used food

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Earl and Countess of Rosse for their generosity in granting me access to their collection, and for their hospitality on my various visits to Birr Castle. All quotations and images are produced by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosse. My edition of the Birr Castle recipe books is

forthcoming from the Irish Manuscripts Commission; I am grateful for their permission. See Elizabeth Spiller, 'Printed Recipe Books in Medical, Political and Scientific Contexts,' in Laura L. Knoppers (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2012), 516–33.

<sup>2</sup> See BCA A4, BCA A17, BCA E 13/A and BCA M18. All are listed and described in Anthony Malcolmson (ed.), *The Calendar of the Rosse Papers* (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2007). <sup>3</sup> On the relationship of recipe books to humanist commonplacing and note-

taking practice, see Catherine Field, "'Many Hands Hands': Writing the Self in Early Modern Women's Recipe Books', in Michelle Dowd and Julie Eckerle (eds), *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 51 and Wendy Wall, *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and*

and writing to assert their evolving identities, even those identities as expressed via food cultures requiring the erasure or marginalisation of indigenous food production. As Bassnett and Nunn argue, ‘the labourers and enslaved people producing raw materials are routinely rendered invisible’.<sup>4</sup> This, of course, is not a new debate, and much recent work looks in detail at the ways in which the importation of English seeds, plants, foodstuffs, livestock (sheep and cattle in particular) effects a transformation of the agrarian environment of sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland. And of course, this process of agricultural change is not unique to the early modern period, as the work of Terrence Reeves-Smyth amongst many others shows.<sup>5</sup> Before discussing the recipe books themselves, I will give a couple of examples of these kinds of practices, drawn from the Birr Castle accounts, and also from the Egmont papers, which detail the estate management practices of the Percival and Southwell families over the course of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> As these instances suggest, food production and consumption at the communal table is only one dimension of food culture: so often in these types of books, local detail is oblique, or absent, and we can only glimpse these larger systems by engaging both historical context and imagination.<sup>7</sup>

Like many Protestant families, the Parsons, Southwells and Boyles arrived from England—many of them from the south-west—during Elizabeth’s reign, succeeding in getting their hands on considerable amounts of lands by often nefarious means (their obsession with title and legitimacy is a strange side effect of these processes). Once in possession of these lands—frequently referred to using the direct language of plantation (which has both a literal, practical meaning and an ideological one)—they mostly set about a process of planting, digging, ditching and draining, often turning uncultivated land into tillage and/or pasture. Accounts found in the Egmont papers, for example, demonstrate the ways in which the terms and conditions of tenancies obliged the tenants to undertake specified forms of agricultural improvement. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, for instance, William Bishop of Dromdowney is to pay £50 per year, and is enjoined ‘within 5 years to enlarge the Orchard that it may be a plantation Acre & by a supply make up 100 aple Trees’; he is also to dig a double ditch to plant hawthorn and five hundred saplings.<sup>8</sup> These activities are similar to the practices undertaken by Laurence Parsons (the grandfather of Dorothy Parsons, the compiler of one of the key Birr recipe books) in the late 1620s. He kept detailed records of the improvements he made, mostly using local labour

*Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ch. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Madeline Bassnett and Hillary Nunn, ‘Introduction: In the Kitchen’, in Madeline Bassnett and Hilary Nunn (eds), *In the Kitchen 1550–1800: English Cooking at Home*

and Abroad (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 11. <sup>5</sup> Terrence Reeves-Smyth, *Irish Gardens and Gardening before Cromwell* (Kinsale: Barryscourt Trust, 1999). <sup>6</sup> The Egmont papers (the archive of the Perceval family, subsequently, the Earls of Egmont) are held in the

British Library, see <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F18227> for a full description of their contents. <sup>7</sup> For examples of this kind of ideologically and culturally engaged practice in relation to food culture, see the podcasts produced by Nicola Twilley and Cynthia

Graber, at <https://gastropod.com/>; Susan Flavin’s ERC funded project FoodCult: Food Culture and Identity in Ireland ca. 1550–1650 demonstrates the importance of this multi-dimensional approach, <https://foodcult.eu/research/>. <sup>8</sup> British Library, Ms Add 47038, f. 11. <sup>9</sup> BCA Rosse A8, f.2. **10**

(Brian McHugh Coughlan, Patrick Condon—who continued in the family’s employment for some years—and Philip Trady amongst others):

I have hereby contracted with Patrick Condon for plowing, harrowing and making smooth and plan [i.e. flat] my whole orchard to be thrice plowed and thrice harrowed and the trees to be rooted up and cut into boardwood and ... laid in a heap in my bawn.<sup>9</sup>

Planting of trees, particularly fruit trees (the preservation of fruit is central to the recipe books under discussion), enclosure, and field clearance was central to the process and ideology of plantation, drawing on long established ideas about providence, and the appropriability of uncultivated land, the practice of seasonal pasturage and transhumance—and in the case of native Americans, seasonal planting.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the written records of the seventeenth century we find references to, and receipts for, apple, pear, cherry, damson, plum and apricot trees (Lord Barrymore’s gardens and orchards at Castlelyons were particularly fine).<sup>11</sup> Richard Boyle, Earl of Cork, for example, imported apple trees from Bristol for planting in Youghal (where many of these varieties survive to this day), and the growth of trees was used by him as a playful measure of time:

Given the lady fenton an angell in gold, for which she is to pay me £3: if she live till any two trees at Kilbree now planted do bear fruyt; which I hope in god she shall see and pay for (halfway between Midleton and Garryvoe).<sup>12</sup>

These processes of plantation, however, are not just about trees. Or cows. Or sheep. Laurence Parsons’ wife, Anne (née Malham) specifies in a document held at Birr that any cattle purchased are to be ‘of English breed’. This is entirely consistent with a process of displacement of longer established breeds of livestock, mostly smaller, and primarily bred for meat, by larger English stock that produced more meat and milk, and in the case of sheep, larger, more saleable fleeces (the export trade in wool in the seventeenth century was significant—Craig Muldrew estimates that in 1700 over 4 million pounds of Irish wool was imported into England).<sup>13</sup> It is in this context that the recording of Birr Castle’s food culture in the form of household, manuscript, recipe books for local use, needs, I suggest, to be understood.

Evidence relating to the plantation of Ulster provides evidence of the effectiveness of traditional agricultural practices, but also seeks to outlaw these; see George Hill, *An historical account of the plantation in Ulster at the commencement of the seventeenth century,*

1608–1620 (London: McCaw, Stevenson and Orr, 1877), viii for an account of Sir Thomas Phillips’ astonishment at the abundance of cattle and the production of barley and oats; this account testifies to the sustainability of the practice of creaghting [the practice of moving cattle seasonally, or

from pasture to pasture in conditions of scarcity—subtly distinct from ‘booleying’], as his surprise relates to the recovery in production after the devastation of war. Chichester, for example, argues for the outlawing of this practice on the grounds that it promotes idleness, see

69, 99 n.38 and 213. <sup>11</sup> Reeves-Smith, *Irish Gardens and Gardening*, 130. <sup>12</sup> Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), *Lismore Papers*, 1<sup>st</sup> series (London: Chiswick press, printed for private circulation), 6. <sup>13</sup> See Michael O’Connell, Fergus Kelly and James H. McAdam (eds), *Cattle in Ancient and Modern*

### Recipe Books at Birr: Overview

The recipe books at Birr comprise (1) a small number of loose leaf recipes from the 1640s and 1660s, bound into a letter-book (A4); (2) *Dorothy Parsons her Booke of Choyce Receipts, all written with her owne hand in 1666* (BCA A17); (3) the Recipe Book of Alice Lloyd, 2nd Countess of Rosse (BCA E 13/A), early nineteenth century; and (4) the Recipe Book of Edith A. Cramer, 1870 (BCA M18).<sup>14</sup> Each of these recipe books represents a distinct stage in the evolution of Irish culinary history, whilst demonstrating a high degree of continuity in both format and content. It is important to note from the outset the composite and collective nature of these manuscripts, in common with the large samples of such receipt books that survive in libraries and archives nationally and internationally.<sup>15</sup> All of the Birr manuscripts bear traces of continuous use, with additions and annotations that postdate their original compilation; each includes recipes from a range of sources (both print and manuscript), as well as a number of different hands. All combine culinary, medical and household preparations, but their organisation varies, from very systematic (Parsons) to loosely categorised (Lloyd and Cramer). Whilst all three combine print and manuscript sources, the later books, Cramer, most notably, cut and paste printed materials into the manuscript notebooks alongside hand-copied recipes. Despite a degree of continuity—all this material predates the large-scale industrialisation of food production, as well as the decline of the infrastructure of service in domestic settings over the course of the first half of the twentieth century—these books reveal the gradual commercialisation of food and the increasing separation of medicine from cuisine, despite the persistence even into the nineteenth century of a broadly humoral understanding of the body and its (mal)functions which bound food and medicine together. Each manuscript, in its unique way, embodies the specific history of Birr Castle, and of the Parsons family while also typifying larger patterns in culinary history.

The books register changes in type of ingredients, utensils, and methods of preservation, as well as changing relationships between the kitchen and the table. Parsons, for example, often provides guidance with regard to the presentation of food, ‘make them into Prity knots’ (f.1); ‘put into marmelate Glasses, and it will looke as Cleare as amber’ (f.5), ‘you may stick blanch almonds on the top cut in peeces’ (f.30), with the mode of address assuming that the reader (‘you’) is both cook and host. In Lloyd, by contrast, the use of ‘you’ as the form of address is significantly diminished, even as the recipe book as a whole suggests a more

*Ireland: Farming Practices, Environment and Economy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016); Craig Muldrew, “‘Th’ancient Distaff” and “Whirling Spindle”: measuring the contribution of spinning to household earnings and the

national economy in England, 1550–1770’, *Economic History Review* 65: 2 (2012), 514.

<sup>14</sup> For convenience, I will refer to A17 as ‘Parsons’, E 13/A as ‘Lloyd’ and M18 as ‘Cramer’.

<sup>15</sup> For example, there are numerous recipe books in the National Library of Ireland.

For a discussion and listing, see Madeline Shanahan, “‘Whipt with a twig rod’: Irish manuscript recipe books as sources for the study of culinary material culture, c. 1660 to 1830,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C* (2015), 197–218. For

examples of recipe books see the Wellcome Collection, and the Folger Library, [https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Recipe\\_books\\_at\\_the\\_Folger\\_Shakespeare\\_Library](https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Recipe_books_at_the_Folger_Shakespeare_Library)

direct and intimate relationship with Birr Castle and its hinterland (see, for example, the receipt for game, f.154). Frequently here, we can glimpse the relationship of kitchen to table, ‘NB fry 8 to 10 Oysters and throw them into the soup when ready to dish’ (f.47), or ‘let all lay in the stew a few minutes, & when quite hot send to table’ (f.105), but the separation between the two is clearly marked.<sup>16</sup> The question of precisely who undertakes culinary labour is often obscure, with the recipes cumulatively creating a particular image of the household with which they are connected, and thus scripting, through food preparation and presentation, the social position (or aspiration) of the compilers. With very few exceptions, (‘Rachel’ ‘Nan Tipper’) recipes are attributed to people of authority (‘Captain Blower’, ‘Dr Chambers’) or to those of a similar or higher social status. Many are neighbours or kin—the habit of attribution remains a strong feature of Alice Lloyd’s recipe book, but is noticeably diminished in Edith Cramer’s, although it is still present (e.g., Mrs Noble, J.L.), reflecting the quite different social positions of each compiler. Place is also important, with some recipes being tied to particular events (the cure of Dorothy’s son John in Salisbury in 1665, f.167). In the Cramer book, recipes are attributed to specific houses, Strancliffe, for example, or Barrow.<sup>17</sup> In the Lloyd book, the recipes thread together lines of connection between different Protestant families—not all as socially elevated as the Parsons—across rural Ireland, and this social permeability is a feature of these recipe books, where other dimensions of identity often rank higher in importance—religion and locality, for example. Edith Cramer’s receipt book represents another stage in the evolution of the relationship of kitchen to estate and to the table, as she was the Parsons’ housekeeper at Birr Castle 1873–1919. Taken together, these manuscripts provide fascinating evidence of how one family’s food culture developed and changed over the course of nearly four centuries and changing relationships to foodways, local supplies and ingredients, and developments in trade, science and food preparation.

<sup>16</sup> There is a wealth of literature on these topics. For a useful overview, see Sara Pennell, *The Birth of the English Kitchen, 1600–1850* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). On social and ideological formation in food culture, Wendy Wall,

*Recipes for Thought.*

<sup>17</sup> Strancliffe is near Cramer’s native Loughborough. Barrow could refer to any number of places in Ireland or in England, but most likely refers to the Hall at Barrow-upon-Soar, near Loughborough.

## The Manuscripts

### 1. A4 (1640s)

The small group of recipes in A4 (Figure 1) are all in the same mixed hand, all are medical, and are quite technical in nature, using the vocabulary common to medical preparations in the seventeenth century. There is no clear or obvious connection between these recipes and the later, more systematic collections, other than some shared attributions. One of these is to ‘my Lady Parsons’, possibly William Parsons’ mother (she died in 1644), or Dorothy’s future mother-in-law, Elizabeth, the ‘E.P.’ who is the source of many of the recipes copied into the *Booke of Choyce Receipts* (1666). Some of these receipts appear to have originated in London, where the Parsons family lived during the wars of the Three Kingdoms, with Dorothy’s elder brother, Lawrence, returning to Birr (then Parsonstown) in the 1650s.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that these were copied from loose sheets of paper which formed part of a ‘capsule’ of recipes that were later arranged and copied more systematically, the kind of textual practice that the Parsons family was likely engaged in.<sup>19</sup> Recipes are commonly found in early modern archives, often collected with family papers, interspersed with letters, accounts or other family documents—the practice of keeping such domestic archives was a developing habit over the course of the seventeenth century. A4 is one such document, described by Malcolmson as a ‘tattered vellum-bound volume’ which contains materials relating to plantations in Longford, the King’s County (Offaly), as well as in Birr, together with leases, rents and revenues, and details of births and baptisms.<sup>20</sup> Such remedies would have been a central part of the responsibility of a household, with the ‘cures’ being prepared at home.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, John Bergin, ‘Sir Lawrence Parsons’, <https://www.dib.ie/index.php/biography/parsons-sir-lawrence-a7214> <sup>19</sup> See Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science, and the Household in Early Modern England*

(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018). <sup>20</sup> See full calendar (NLI), at <https://birrcastle.com/archives/> <sup>21</sup> See inventory of Sir Hardress Waller, Castletown, Co. Limerick, which includes ‘gally potts, glasse bottles and such like necessary furniture

for a Clossett’, in Elaine Murphy, ‘Two inventories of goods belonging to Sir Hardress Waller in Ireland,’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 142/143 (2012–2013), 148.

**Figure 1** Opposite.  
Manuscript A4 from 1640s

Receipt for the stone in the  
Kidneyes from Mr. Worshy

61

Take to take of Sweet Almonds two ounce of white  
seed three quarters of an ounce of Conioun seed half an ounce  
pyllum seed flower stragly white Copoy seed two ounce  
Dianthon water half a pynck Caraway water 12 ounce  
Distill the Almond bark the Cowmber Conioun  
seed beat them with the rest into an Almond milke with  
the water, To which being made add of Gum Arabic  
one Dragma of this powder in the powder powder a simole  
or ten shillings weight in gold. Dissolve it with  
Syce of Marsh-mallows and drink it att 2 draughts  
every night in morning Note if this powder omission  
agrees with the stomacke I would have layd the quantity  
of the powder putt in any 20 shillings weight in gold

May 1652

Doctor Crocks Counsell for p[re]vention of the stone  
given me by Mr. Worshy the stone Cutter at Charing Crooke

Take flower ounce of Sesua of polipody picked sliced a smole  
of Camell Turbith sliced thyn as much of Epithimum one  
ounce and a halfe of sweet fennell seed, Brused a  
much of shirby grass of Holland a quarter of a p[er]che  
sliced or shred, Herse reddish roots three ounce when  
they be dried putt them in a bagg and putt the bagg  
into a Gallon of Oyle and after 4 dayes standing tooke  
itt a twice a day spring and fall, this he did

Sept 1645

An excellent receipt given me by Mr.

Reche to make the stone avoyd

Take the ragged bones that lyes in the head of a raddock, when they  
are continually two in each side of y<sup>e</sup> head one to be a good quantity  
of y<sup>e</sup> joints they be dry pound them small as may be, then take  
Alish wiffe if yo<sup>r</sup> have got it, if not white putt it into either of  
these wyces with a pretty quantity of Sallett Oyle, Distill of  
Lemonet Sugars Nutmeggs dimitte a good draug of y<sup>e</sup>  
and much att a time of the powder of the bones as use  
on a grate drink att y<sup>e</sup> this for a week by either of y<sup>e</sup>



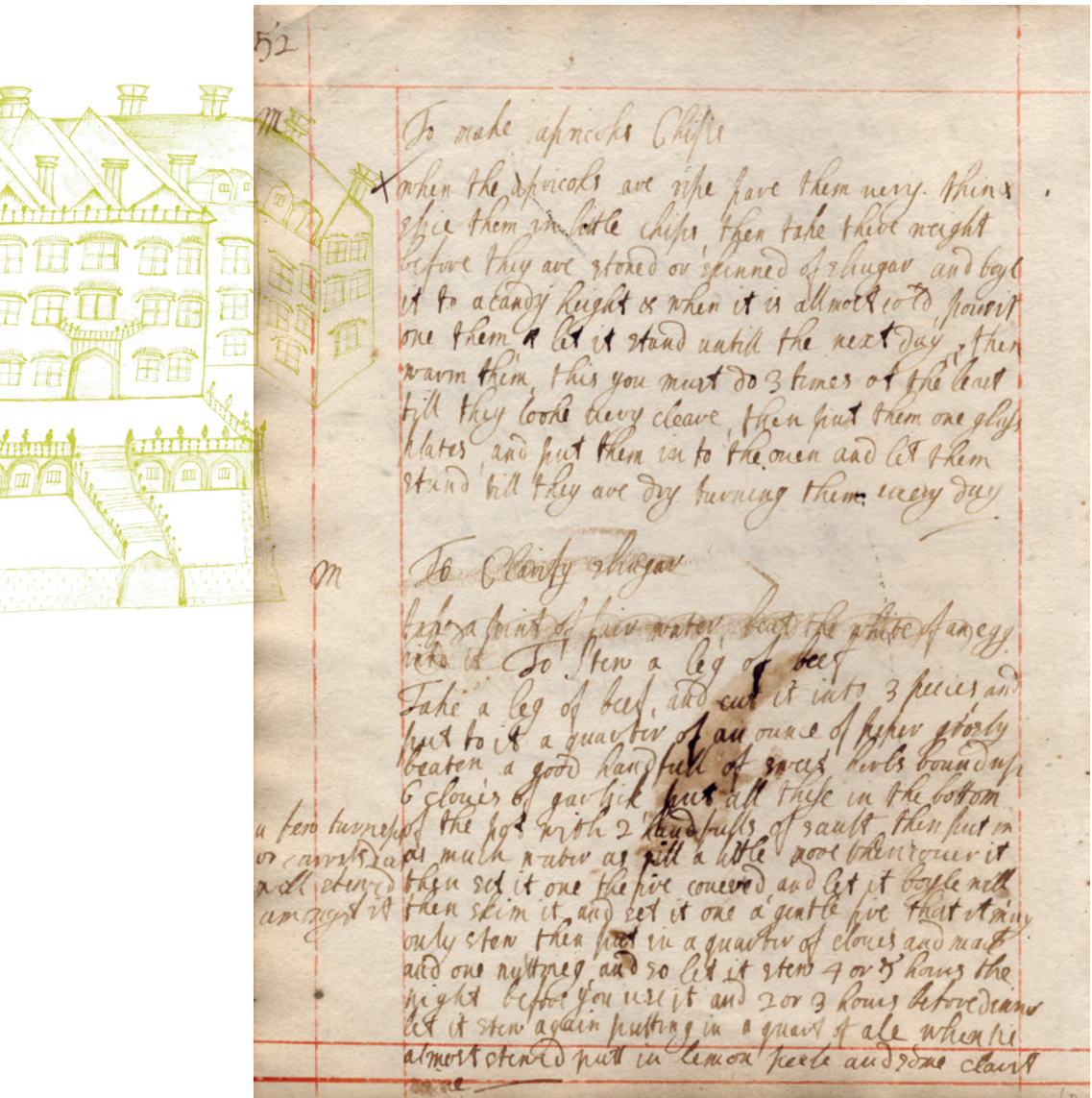


Figure 2 Sample page from  
 Parsons' Booke of Choyce  
 Receipts, written in 1666

## 2. A17 (1666) Parsons

This manuscript is a tightly organised collection of both medical and culinary recipes, copied in two main hands and bound in black Morocco leather. It was purchased at auction by the current Earl of Rosse for £750 in 1980, but its location between 1668 and 1980 is unclear.<sup>22</sup> The *Booke of Choyce Receipts*, written in 1666, is specifically attributed to Dorothy Parsons (b. 1640, at Birr, d. 1670, Langley Marish, England). The manuscript is ruled, and a note on the inside cover states that it was purchased in Aylesbury on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1665, and that it cost £1, 1s.<sup>23</sup> The recipes—unlike the other manuscripts—are carefully arranged into two groups, medical and culinary, with the book being reversed and inverted, each group of recipes occupying one part of the manuscript. Each section has its own index, and within both sections recipes are arranged alphabetically—if idiosyncratically so in some cases. The manuscript also has some corrections relating to position and order, as well as some marks (M, B, X etc.) that may be keyed to an earlier arrangement of loose-leaf materials (see Figure 2). Modes of classification vary—by ailment, remedy and ingredient, for example. Pages are numbered, and each recipe comes with a heading, and many with an attribution to a person, or, more rarely, a text. It is not possible to trace all of these, but some of them draw on common printed sources (for example, the Countess of Kent), and many share characteristics with recipes found in other manuscript collections.<sup>24</sup> For example, there is a recipe ‘to make very good perfumes’ on f. 59 which corresponds very closely to a recipe in a slightly later compilation by Anne Goodenough, now in the Folger Shakespeare Library (W.a.332).<sup>25</sup> Other recipes found in the volume can be replicated across the corpus of extant recipes, and the development of digital resources (Folger, Wellcome, EMROC, Recipes Collective etc.) has transformed our understanding of these materials, and their contexts.<sup>26</sup>

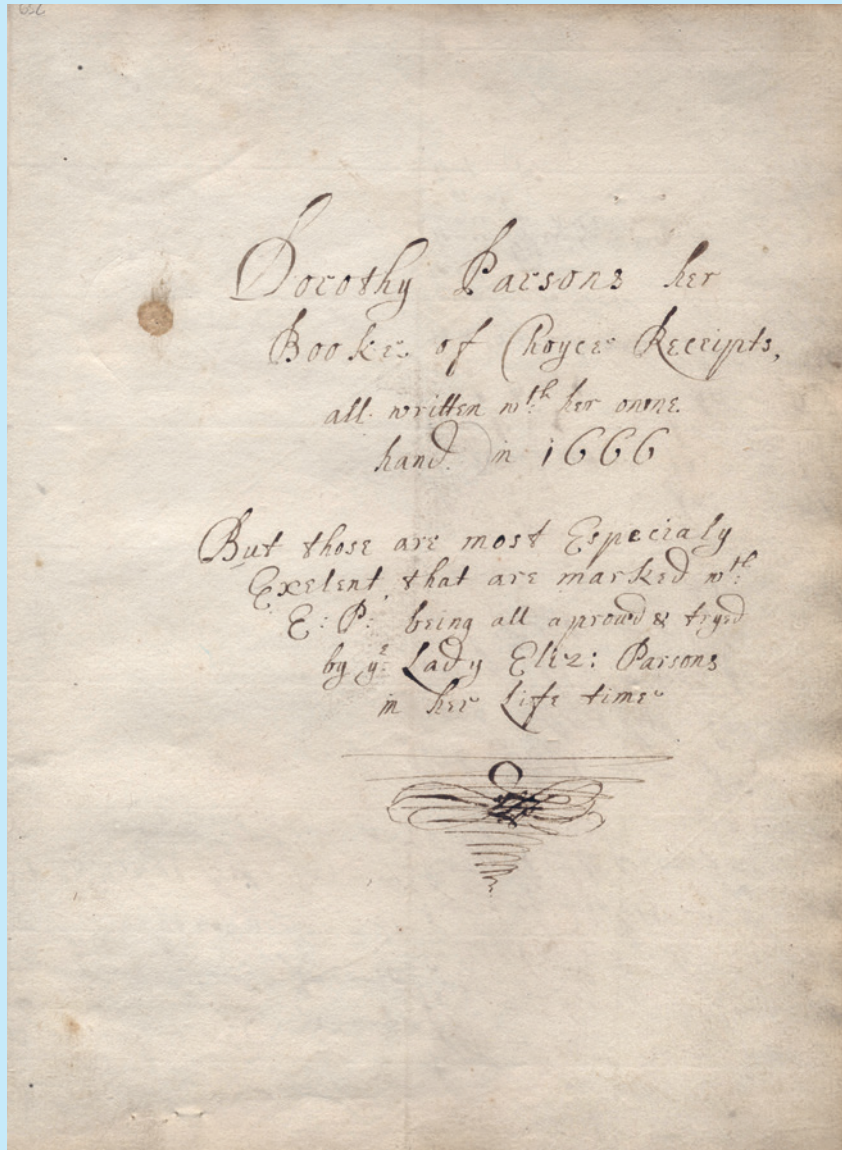
The title page of Dorothy Parsons’ recipe book (which is set out like a printed title page) notes that the recipes are written ‘with her owne hand’, although the book itself contains several hands, with two hands dominating (see Figure 3). One of these is definitely that of Dorothy herself (designated Hand A)—based on a comparison to her accounts, also in the Birr Castle Archive and the evidence of this title page. This is the hand that dominates the medical recipes. A second hand (designated B) follows sequentially in many of the sections in the medical recipes, and dominates in the culinary ones (see Figure 4). Users subsequent to Dorothy Parsons herself clearly understood the conventions structuring

<sup>22</sup> See BCA W/26, letter from Daniel McDowell to Lord Rosse, May 1980. <sup>23</sup> According to <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/> this would equate to around €130 in May 2021. <sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent, *A Choice Manual, or Rare and*

*Select Secrets in Physick and Chirurgery* (London: W.I. Gent., 1653), went through multiple editions and was widely copied into manuscript recipe books (see Parsons’ medical, f. 150). See for example, Michelle DiMeco and Rebecca Laroche, ‘On Elizabeth Isham’s “Oil of Swallows”: Animal Slaughter

and Early Modern Women’s Medical Recipes’, in Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche (eds), *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 87–104. <sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Cybi Nic Gearailt for this connection. <sup>26</sup> For recent work that engages with the colonial

implications of cookery see Bassnett and Nunn (eds), *In the Kitchen*, especially Section 4.



**Figure 3** Dorothy Parsons' own hand from *Booke of Choyce Receipts*, written in 1666

152 : 11 :

To make Roes  
Pills, very Good for a Gentle Purge

---

Take 4 ounces of y<sup>e</sup> best Blossoms in  
very fine powder & put it into a Galliey pott,  
then take about a 100 buds of Damask  
Roses & bruis out all y<sup>e</sup> Juice, putting it into the  
alovss & stir it well & so let it stand 6 or  
7 days (over) in a sunny window stirring it every  
day, if you find it grow to stiff putt in more  
Juice of Roses, & so stir it againe till it  
be fit to role into pills; keep it thus  
in your pott, & when you please you may  
take 2 or 3 at a time.

(Coz: Hill)

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an excellent water for a canker or any  
soare leggitch or sore mouth by M<sup>r</sup> Oakeley


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Take a pottle of smitneswater a handfull of sage 2  
handfulls of sage Elder Leaves boyle all these together  
till one halfe bee wasted then take halfe a pound or more  
allome & putt into it then let it boyle a little more then  
straine it from the herbs & keepe it for y<sup>e</sup> use

this is good for Childrens being made seeling not  
to so with a mee pat in the blakes,

Figure 4 Second hand from  
Booke of Choyce Receipts,  
written in 1666

Figure 5 Overleaf. Cover  
page of Pharmacopolium



**P**harmacopolium

**A**ltissimus creauit de Terra  
Medicinan, et Vir prudens  
non abhorrebit illam. Eccelus.  
Cap. 38. 4.

**T**he Lord hath created Medicines  
of the earth, and hee that is wise  
will not abhorre them. Eccelus.  
Cap. 38. 4.

**J**ohn  
**M**ary. } **K**edermister.

the book and followed them closely when supplementing the original set of recipes, even adding new entries to the indexes. Like many other such collections throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this is a multiply authored text, adapted over time to new circumstances and needs. The title page notes that 'But those are most Especialy Exelent, that are marked with E.P. being all aprovd and tryed by ye Lady Eliz: Parsons in her life time'—this is most likely to refer to Dorothy's mother-in-law, neé Kedermister.<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth's parents, John and Mary Kedermister, had commissioned an elaborate manuscript collection of medical cures, called the *Pharmacopolium* and still kept at the Kedermister Library, Langley Marish, now a suburb of Slough (see Figure 5).<sup>28</sup> This suggests that Dorothy inherited these recipes when her mother-in-law died in 1663, although whoever copied the bulk of the remainder also had access to these 'originals' as many recipes in Hand B are also marked with 'E.P.' (Figure 6). The recipe book itself was written between 1665 and 1666, with later additions, possibly with an eye towards the marriageability of the couple's two daughters, Alice and Elizabeth.

Dorothy's will (later the subject of a legal case brought by her children against the executor) made specific provision for the education of her daughters, to whom she also left her books.<sup>29</sup> Hand B, speculatively, might be that of Dorothy's elder daughter. At the end of this volume is a sketch, dated 1668, of a planned rebuilding of Parsonstown House, by 1666 occupied and overseen by Dorothy's elder brother Lawrence and his growing family (Figure 7).<sup>30</sup> It has a witty caption in the same hand as the recipe book title page (and the accounts), suggesting Dorothy's continuing connection with her natal family. She died in 1670, and what became of the recipe book remains obscure, although one of the later recipes suggests a Lincolnshire connection.

Dorothy herself was born in Birr in 1640; her father was Captain William Parsons (William Parsons, 1st Baronet of Bellamont, was his uncle), and her mother was Dorothy Phillips, the daughter of Thomas Phillips, the servitor and soldier who held lands in Limavady, and the possessor of the first license for the production of whiskey (and the ancestor of Bushmills).<sup>31</sup> Phillips' second marriage to Alice Ussher cemented his connections with established Protestant families in Ireland. Having held out against a siege at Parsonstown Castle in 1641, the family struggled in the face of a highly volatile political situation, and left Ireland for London. William died in 1653 and never returned. It is unclear what happened to William's wife (who is written out of his will), but it was Alice

<sup>27</sup> Lady Elizabeth Parsons, Dorothy Parsons' mother-in-law, d. 1663. <sup>28</sup> I am most grateful to Katie Flanagan, The Curator of the parish library at St Mary's, Langley Marish for facilitating my visit there.

<sup>29</sup> TNA PROM 11/332/192, 14 May 1668, proved 1670.

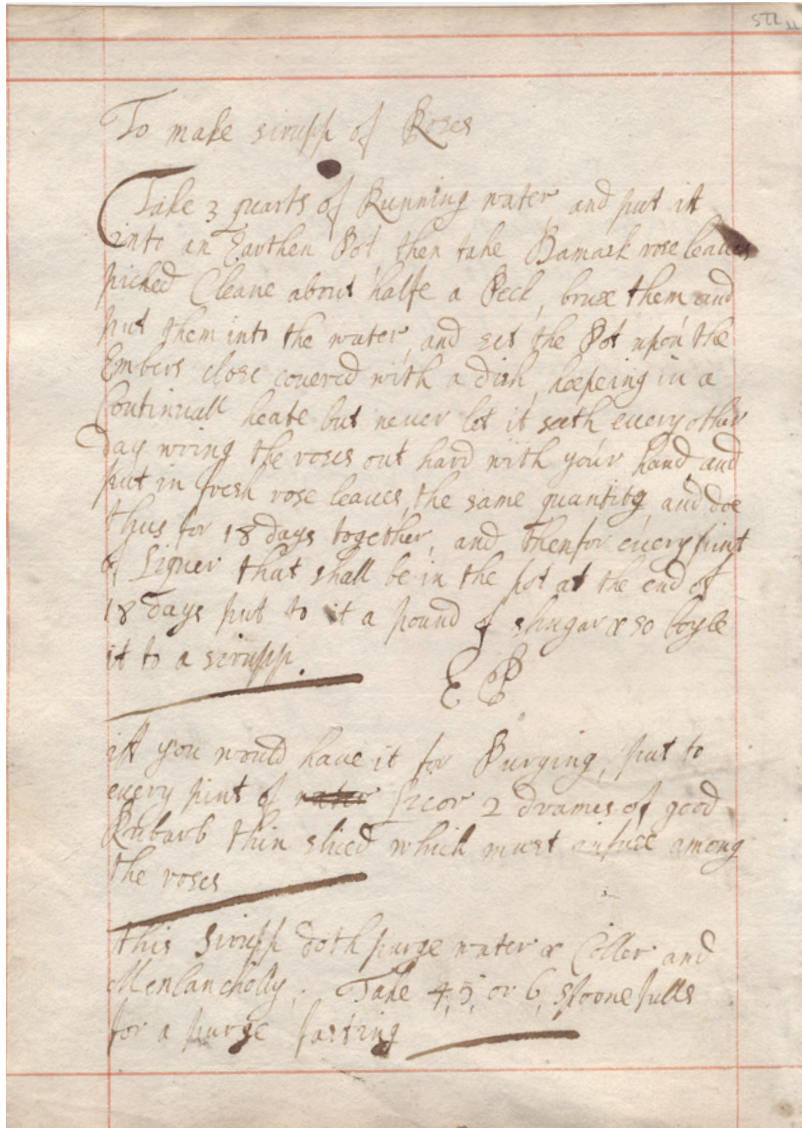
<sup>30</sup> In 1965, Mark Girouard

lamented the lack of 'any pictures or adequate plans' of Birr Castle before 1800, 'Birr Castle', *Country Life* (1965), 4. This image is discussed in Andrew Tierney, *Central Leinster: Kildare, Laois and Offaly* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

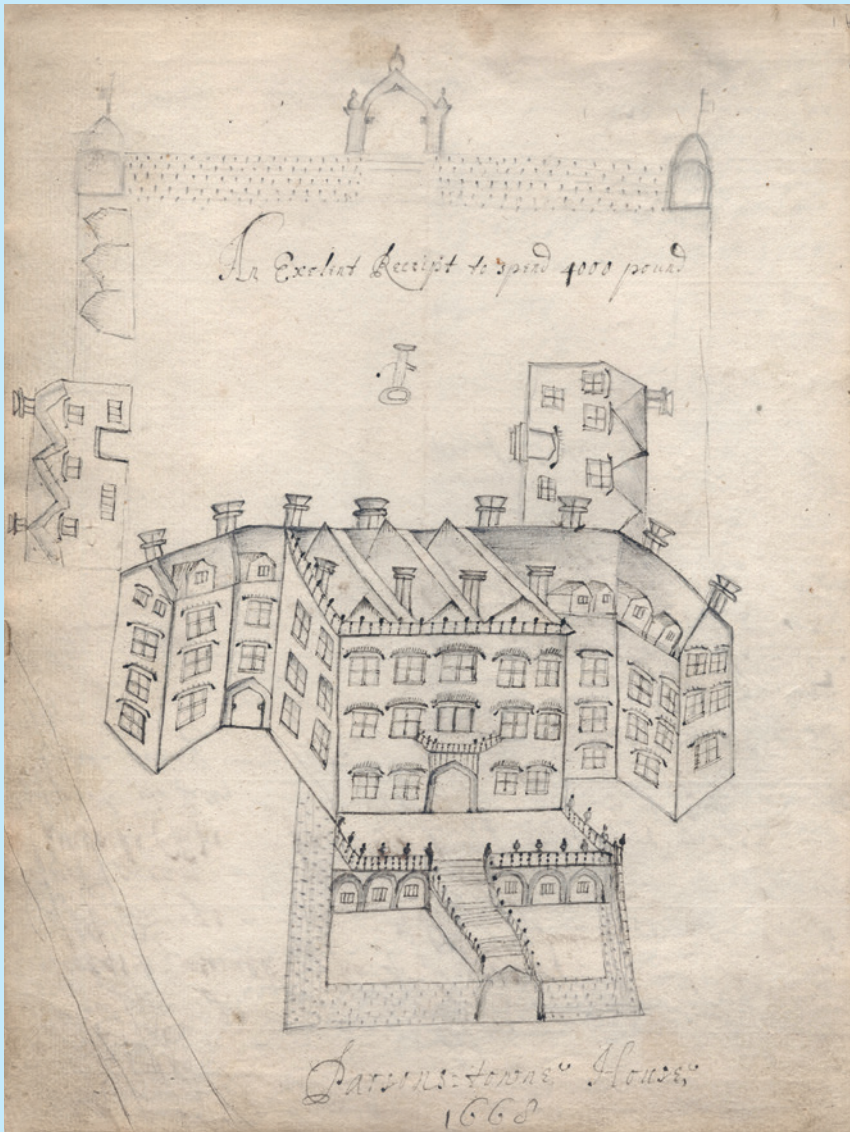
<sup>31</sup> See T.W. Moody, 'Sir

Thomas Phillips of Limavady, Servitor', *Irish Historical Studies* 1: 3 (1939), 251–72. For the license, see Hill, *Plantation in Ulster*, 393; For more information on Whiskey distilling, see Fionnán O'Connor, 'The Humours of Whiskey: *Uisce Beatha* in Feudal Irish Hospitality and

Medicine' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 9. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>



**Figure 6** Recipes from Hand B are also marked with 'E.P.'



**Figure 7** Sketch, dated 1668, of a planned rebuilding of Parsonstown House



Phillips (Dorothy's grandmother) who appears to have taken charge of the family, with the young Dorothy at her side. Dorothy kept a set of accounts at this time, detailing expenditures for her brothers' education, care for her younger siblings, servants' wages, and the cost of food and heating (Figure 8). Captain William's will made provision for Dorothy's marriage, noting that a larger portion was to be paid (£1500) 'in case shee shall happen to be married to that person whom I have nominated to her Mother and Grandmother and wish they will approve of'.<sup>32</sup> This was presumably her cousin, also William, the eldest son of another branch of the Parsons family then living at Langley Marish in Buckinghamshire (now in Berkshire), and this marriage duly took place in St Margaret's Church, Westminster, in May 1655, and the couple moved to Langley Marish—William's mother was still alive. Whilst there is little surviving evidence, the families in England and Ireland clearly maintained contact—Dorothy's husband William died in 1664, leaving a ring to 'my deare grandmother Lady Phillipps',<sup>33</sup> and the evidence of the recipe book itself testifies to a social and kinship network that traversed the Irish Sea.<sup>34</sup> Like other collections of this type, *The Booke of Choyce Receipts* represents the social world and familial connections of its users. In addition to Elizabeth Parsons, there are recipes here attributed to Lady Phillipps, to cousins, friends and neighbours. Many of the recipes have clearly been used and tested, as there are regular interpellations noting the efficacy (or otherwise) of a given recipe, or the particular circumstances in which it was offered or used, for example, 'this cured my Cozen Jane Parsons when her Breast was red as scarlett, and big as two breasts, and was given over by Doctors' (f.208).

The precise status of the recipes is harder to ascertain, namely the degree to which they are specifically linked to the women who collected them and copied them out. A couple of recipes appear to originate with servants, and some of them are sufficiently elaborate to suggest that these were not routine culinary productions. There is a heavy emphasis on preserving, using sugar, vinegar and salt, as a key role played by recipes was storing up food produced at times of plenty for consumption later in the year.<sup>35</sup> Given the book's largely English orientation, the lack of specific reference to local Irish ingredients is unsurprising, and little can be made, ultimately, of, for example, the potato recipe in terms of Irish culinary history.<sup>36</sup> Langley Marish was close to London, and to the market town of Aylesbury. The Parsons' recipe book, like many contemporary accounts, does not include recipes for bread or bread-making (unlike the Lloyd recipe book), and Dorothy's accounts from Orchard Street in London indicate

**32** TNA PROB 11/231/26

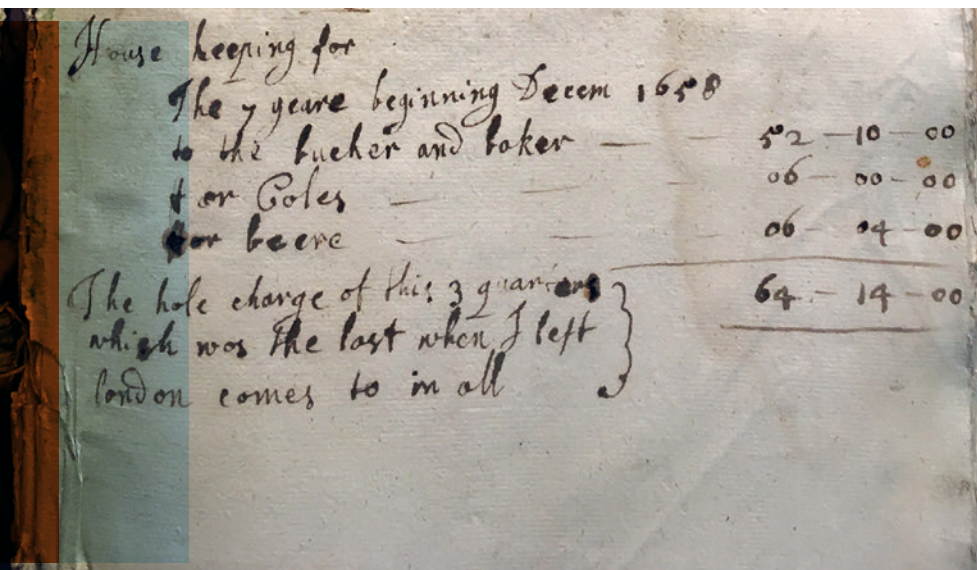
**33** TNA PROB 11/314/144

**34** See for a full account, Danielle Clarke, 'Dorothy Parsons of Birr: writing, networks, identity 1640–1670,' *The Seventeenth Century* 37: 1 (2022) 23–45 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0268117X.2021.1875262>

**35** See Madeline Bassnett, *Women, Food Exchange, and Governance in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016). **36** See Regina Sexton, 'Elite Women and their recipe books: the case of Dorothy Parsons and her *Booke of Choyce Receipts* all written down with her owne

hand in 1666', in Terence Dooley, Maeve O'Riordan and Christopher Ridgway (eds), *Women and the country house in Ireland and Britain* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 236–56. The recipe for potato pie was made in the first episode of the RTÉ television series, 'Lords and Ladles'

located in Birr Castle and based on the Parsons' recipe book; the episode is available at this link <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8511516/>



that bread was bought from a baker rather than baked at home. Bread is used as an ingredient for thickening sauces and soups, and for making poultices, and despite the Parsons' recipe book's careful demarcation between culinary and medical recipes, many ingredients and methods are shared across the categories.<sup>37</sup> The medical recipes, for example, can tell us a good deal about culinary ingredients, many of them drawing as much on locally available, quotidian, herbs and flowers as upon expensive and prized ingredients. Water—its freshness and origin—is frequently specified.<sup>38</sup>

The recipe book's date coincides with the beginning of the end of humoral medicine, where what was ingested was believed to have a direct relationship to illnesses caused by imbalances of the humours—in turn, these could be remedied by the appropriate type of food or drink—heat balancing cold, or dry countering moist, for example. There is thus a degree of cross-over between medical and culinary recipes with key processes (the use of yeasts and solvents, for example) and techniques (distilling, making pastes) being common to both. The recipe book relies on a range of methods for measuring goods—capacity/volume for wet and dry goods (quart, gallon, gill, peck), weight (pound, ounce)—but also more approximate measures (handful, spoonful, a penny loaf's worth) and technical alchemical measures (drachme, scruple). Preparation and cooking methods rely heavily on the vagaries of fire, with different intensities of boiling often specified.

<sup>37</sup> On the varied uses of bread and leaven, see Margaret Simon, 'Early Modern Leaven in Bread, Bodies and Spirit', in Bassnett and Nunn (eds), *In the Kitchen*, 91–108.

<sup>38</sup> See Hilary M. Nunn, 'Local Waters and Notions of Home in Early Modern Recipe Manuscripts', *The Journal*

**Figure 8** Accounts book 1658: cost of food (bucher, baker, beere) and heating (coles)

Varying levels of heat were achieved by the positioning of cooking utensils, the material of those utensils (copper being a more effective conductor of heat than earthenware, for example), and the stage of the fire. Moving dishes on and off the fire enabled the cook to control temperature, or taking it on and off the boil—a recipe for preserving barberries, for example, recommends ‘taking them of and on the fier’ (f.6). Doneness is rarely measured by cooking time (‘an hour or 2’, f.15, ‘about an hour’, f.64), but more often by texture or colour—and never by taste, although this is sometimes implied (‘when it tastes of the Peel’ f. 78; ‘season it with shugar to your tast’, f.36). ‘Inuff’ is the elusive direction found in many recipes, and whether such a state has been achieved or not presupposes a degree of skill and experience. Many recipes specify the use of an oven, not by any means a routine piece of kitchen equipment in the period, although common in larger households. Again, accurate use of an oven to achieve particular levels of heat was a complex skill. The primary purpose of such collections is not to instruct the novice, despite the use of the declarative and imperative moods.

The ingredients required for food preparation are wide-ranging and various, from staples (flour, butter, milk, eggs) through to the more exotic (liquorice, ambergreese). Many recipes create building blocks for other recipes (vinegars, for example) although the majority of recipes are free-standing. Dairy products are prevalent, with different types of butter (sweet, fresh), milk (new, ‘good morning milk’, ‘red Cows milke’, ‘unskimmed’) and cream (thick, thin, sweet, morning, good). A range of types of oil are used—olive oil (also called sallat or salad oil) most frequently. Meat and fish are represented, including high-end items like beef, carp or salmon, but with a strong dependence on chickens, mutton, pullets, pigeon, rabbits, oysters, shrimps and the less (to modern minds) palatable parts of animals (ox eyes and lips, sweetbreads, lamb stones, cockscombs). Most perishable items would have been sourced relatively locally—or least not much more than five days’ travel away. Vegetables include onions, shallots, garlic, artichokes, marrows, leeks, turnips, carrots, cucumbers, potatoes and spinach. Fruit is mostly preserved or made into jam: cherries, damsons, plums, apples (including pippins), quince, barberries, gooseberries, apricots, raspberries. Lemons, oranges and grapes also occur, primarily as ways of flavouring dishes—although they are also preserved. A wide range of imported dried fruits and nuts are used in both sweet and savoury dishes: raisins, currants, dates, figs, almonds. Many of the latter came into the English market in increasing quantities over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through



the exploitative practices of bodies like the East India Company. The nature of such extractive commerce was largely invisible to the domestic consumer, even as the rapid escalation in the quantity of recipe books in the seventeenth century plays a key part in the creation of a market for such goods. Like many similar compilations, Dorothy Parsons' recipe book uses sugar heavily—this focus may well speak to the fact that other culinary methods and techniques were well established and part of regular kitchen knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Sugar appears here in multiple forms: loaf, doubled refined, fine, white, Lisbon, sixpenny,

<sup>39</sup> See Kim F. Hall, 'Culinary spaces, colonial spaces: the gendering of sugar in the seventeenth century', in Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dymphna Callaghan (eds), *Feminist readings of early modern culture: Emerging subjects* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1996), 168–90.

**Figure 9** The recipe book of Alice Lloyd, Second Countess of Rosse E/13A

suggesting an increasingly differentiated market. Most sugar at this time came in solid cones (or loaves) which then needed to be ground or pounded to a specified consistency. Even if individual consumers did not have direct knowledge of the violent enslavement on which sugar production rested, nonetheless, they were participants in the trading networks and cultural practices that created and consolidated the demand for these commodities. Indeed, the absence and invisibility of these contexts is a key part of the positioning of such foreign and exotic commodities as domestic—the space of the kitchen is imagined to be self-sufficient, able to provide for the household's needs.

Both culinary and medicinal recipes use herbs and spices heavily—many of the former would have been gathered locally (borage, bugloss, rue, feverfew, cowslip, tansy, lovage, camomile). The recipe for 'a most precious Oyntment for all maner of Bruises, Gouts and Aches' (f.233) lists thirty-one herbs and flowers (daisy, peony, marigold, violets) that by implication are to be gathered rather than purchased, 'Because all these herbs be hard to gett at one time you must begin when the first coms up and as you gett them from time to time stamp them smale and putt them into your salet oyle', where the oil acts as a preservative to enable plants that grow at different seasons to be combined. Many of the spices and more specialised medical ingredients also originated in Africa and Asia, although some of them had been available in Northern Europe since the late medieval period. However, many of these commodities were also produced in severely exploitative conditions—the trading of nutmeg, for example, netted a profit of around 7500% for the Dutch traders who controlled the trade from the Banda Islands.<sup>40</sup> The attempt to establish a trading monopoly led to the enslavement of the native peoples of the island by the Dutch East Indies Company. Nutmeg was a relatively new (and expensive) commodity, and is a frequent flavouring in the Parsons' recipes, along with mace, ginger, pepper, cinnamon, and cloves.<sup>41</sup> As several critics and historians have argued, the household was a key institution in which women played a central role in 'the domesticating of this merchandise'.<sup>42</sup> Early modern families with property in Ireland were also part of these global trading networks, but with access to a different part of that network—as the work of Susan Flavin has shown, much of the Irish trade in spices and other global commodities came through Bristol, a key port in the slave trade.<sup>43</sup>

The kitchen equipment used in the Parsons' recipe book can be calibrated against numerous inventories from the seventeenth-century and whilst utensils and vessels fall into a few obvious types, it is clear from the recipes themselves,

<sup>40</sup> See 'The Spice Academy', (accessed 19 May 2021).  
<sup>41</sup> See Gitanjali Shahani, *Tasting Difference: Food, Race, and Cultural Encounters in Early Modern Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), and on the spice trade more broadly, Paul Freedman, *Out of the*

*East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), and on medical uses, Ben Breen, *The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).  
<sup>42</sup> Shahani, *Tasting Difference*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> See Susan Flavin, *Bristol's Trade with Ireland and the Continent 1503–1601: The Evidence of the Exchequer Accounts* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009).

that usage—based on size, capacity, type of material—was often highly specific. Vessels are made of wood, glass, earthenware or metal, and comprise both storage, cookery and the serving of food. Dorothy Parsons' will bequeaths various household items to her 'old servant' Anne 'all that lynnens and pewter that was used att Micham and now is att Darkin two silver spoones and my cawdle pott and Porringer' and the recipes require a far larger range of utensils than the will suggests.<sup>44</sup> Bottles and jars (made of stoneware or glass) are used for the storage of liquids and preserves; trenchers, plates and glasses are used for serving. The *baterie de cuisine* also included boxes, skillets of different sizes and metals, a kettle, a ladle, numerous gallipots, colanders, sieves, funnels. Different types of textile were commonly used for filtering liquids (e.g., a jelly bag), and paper was used to bake biscuits and cakes, as well as to store cooked food. The most frequently used utensils are spoons and the mortar, although the instruction to 'pare' or 'cut' is ubiquitous, suggesting regular use of knives. Other items are pressed into service, most often hands ('flat it with your hands', 'with your hands mingle it', 'scutch it betwne your hands')—a handful is also a very common measure used in the recipes. Other items repurposed to culinary use include feathers (used for icing or applying liquids), bundles of twigs or rods (used for whisking egg whites) and cloths of different fineness for straining liquids and preserves. The final piece of key equipment was a still—the ordinary or common still, and a glass still. These were used extensively in medicinal recipes for concentrating and combining key elements and ingredients. They are commonly found in inventories from seventeenth-century houses.

Like Alice Lloyd's recipe book, the carefully produced manuscript compiled by Dorothy Parsons (and speculatively, another family member) represents a particular stage of consolidation and future planning at Birr, with Dorothy's brother, Lawrence, returning to the estates to attempt to bring to fruition the programme of works and improvements started by his grandfather in the 1620s. The book's ideas of hospitality and care of the household take place in the imagined space of a restored and forward looking Birr Castle, as symbolised by the imagined sketch.

44 TNA PROB -11-332-195.

### 3. E 13/A (Lloyd)

The recipe book of Alice Lloyd, Second Countess of Rosse (born c. 1776), was created at Birr, and has remained there ever since—it is kept in the family’s private library (Figures 9 and 10). It is shorter than the Parsons’ recipe book, and comprises a sequential index (i.e., the recipes are listed at the front in the order in which they occur in the book) and a series of recipes mostly in the same hand. Recipes are not arranged in relation to any obvious schema, although recipes of the same type are found together (ices, for example) and combine culinary (the bulk of them), medicinal and domestic/cleaning preparations. It is thus in many ways more obviously and intimately tied to the specific domestic life of Birr Castle, to the point where this connection does not need to be overtly stated, by contrast with the inclusion of the sketch in Parsonstown House in the Parsons’ book (Figure 8) which advertises Dorothy’s ancestral link with the house and estate. As a result, this recipe book is more obviously private, focussed on the internal management of the house and estates. There are, for example, details of turf consumption at Birr Castle in winter (f. 115). Its meanings, therefore, derive directly from its physical location. However, like the Parsons’ book, Alice Lloyd’s recipe book represents a different phase in the development of Birr, the period of expansion and development immediately following the Act of Union—which was opposed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl, whose food preferences were very much focussed on Birr and Ireland, rather than on London.<sup>45</sup> The book also represents a consolidation of local political alliances—Alice Lloyd was the daughter of John Lloyd and Jane Le Hunt. The Lloyds held land around five miles away from Birr at Gloster; their ancestors came to Ireland in Charles I’s army and acquired the estate through marriage. In the early eighteenth century, the original house at Gloster was replaced with the current house, now a hotel. Like the Parsons family, John Lloyd (who was an MP) opposed the Act of Union. Many of the recipes in Alice Lloyd’s book reference Gloster, and her parents.<sup>46</sup>

It is mostly copied in the hand of Alice Lloyd herself, although there are a small number of recipes in another hand—possibly the cook or housekeeper (see Figure 11). This suggests the book’s status as a family document focussed specifically on the house in which it was written and used—contrasting in this way with Dorothy Parsons’ recipe book which conjures the *idea* of a place, as much as it deals in the concrete details of that place. The familial nature of the book is testified to by the recipe clearly copied in by Alice Lloyd’s son, Lawrence (later 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl) and the playful exchange between them—he writes ‘hurrah for

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication from the current Countess of Rosse. <sup>46</sup> See <https://niallbrn.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/lloyd-family-of-gloster-house-co-offaly/>

is very good in pickles,  
 N.B. the vinegar that you Strain  
 off your pickles leave bottled as  
 it is very good for kitchen use

Onions done like the above is  
 an excellent pickle, Dutch cabbage  
 shred fine & mixed with the onion is  
 also good & makes the onions pretty

Pickling Walnuts from Warburton  
 Let the Walnuts be green dry, pulled free from  
 spots, lay them in a Crock, take the strongest  
 Beer you can get, put into it a good handfull  
 of Salt, Boil it & pour it boiling hot on the walnuts  
 cover the crock close, at three days end change them  
 cover the crock close as before change them as before  
 the third time, when they have been three days  
 in the least small beer, take them out lay them  
 in a Crock well glazed with a good deal of Shalot

Shuggar', to which his mother responds, 'oh Lawrence how could you spell it that way' (f.126, see Figure 12).

Whilst the recipe book is far less formally constructed than the 1666 one, nonetheless it shares a good deal of common ground with it in terms of the use of measurements and ingredients. There is greater precision in measurements (teaspoons, tablespoons) although many of the key items of equipment (vessels, skilllets) are recognisable from two and a half centuries earlier. Types of pan are more clearly differentiated (preserving, tinned, iron, copper) and the tosspan

**Figure 10** The recipe book of Alice Lloyd, Second Countess of Rosse BCA E/13A



features frequently—a term first used in the late eighteenth century. New utensils are evident—spatula, spaddle—but for the most part, there is continuity. There is less emphasis on managing cooking fires and ovens—again, perhaps a reflection of the changed nature of the compiler’s involvement in food production in the house. Different types of serving dish and moulds are detailed, suggesting a greater focus on the presentation of food, and indeed, overall the recipes tend to show a bias towards preserves and pickles, puddings, pies and baked goods (Sally Lunn’s, so-called Trim cakes, Ratafias) and more luxurious items such as blancmanges, ices and fruit wines of various kinds. In terms of ingredients, the range is not substantially different to what was in use 250 years earlier, and in fact the focus on spices and sugar is rather less notable. Some new ingredients are in play: more specific types of some spices (capsicum, mustard seed, turmeric), treacle as well as sugar. Most fruits are also the same, with the addition of currants (red, white and black),<sup>47</sup> some use of rhubarb as a culinary rather than a medical item, and the introduction of strawberries (for which there are several recipes), cauliflowers, celery, asparagus, melon. Meat is more heavily beef focussed, but with some mutton and a range of pork products (hams and bacon in particular), but most of the recipes relate to the preservation rather than the consumption of meat. Fish also features, and includes, as in the seventeenth century, salmon, eels and oysters, as well as herring. ‘Macarony’ forms the basis of an entire dish—an ingredient first noted in English in the late seventeenth century—perhaps reflecting the family’s exposure to Italy through the Grand Tour.<sup>48</sup> Evident too is the increasing availability and use of proprietary ingredients, such as Goulards extract, and carbonate of soda used as a raising agent. Again, the more local orientation of the book is clear in the inclusion of recipes for potato barm and barm brack, together with the use of some hibernicisms, such as ‘delph’ and ‘naggin’. Notable too is the presence of local forms of alcohol—porter, whiskey and cider versus the Parsons’ book emphasis on imported drinks—brandy, sack, wine, port, sweet wine.<sup>49</sup> Several recipes in the book also relate to the production of various forms of fruit wine in considerable quantities. There are two recipes for lemon wine, including one from a Thomas Parsons, with a note on quantities—the alcohol deriving from whiskey; currant wines (made in the 1820s), and more than one recipe for elder wine, with the note, ‘this is the best Irish wine that is made and is extremely beneficial (mixed with water) to those who have delicate lungs’ (f.126), presumably to distinguish it

<sup>47</sup> These were grown in the seventeenth century, they just don’t appear in the Parsons’ recipes.

<sup>48</sup> Girouard, ‘Birr Castle,’ 7.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed account, see Tara McConnell, *“Honest Claret”: The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland’s Favourite Wine* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022).

Porter Cake  
Ingredients

1 # Flour  
 1/2 # Butter  
 3/4 # Almonds  
 3/4 # Raisins  
 1/4 # Citron  
 1 # Dark Brown Sugar  
 1 Lemon (Rind of)  
 2 Tea spoonsful Mace  
 Spice viz Cinnamon  
 clove nutmeg Ginger  
 more of first two  
 4 Eggs  
 1 Porter (small bottle)  
 1 tea spoon full carbonate soda

---

Dixing

Melt the Butter a little and the  
 eggs & sugar beat these well  
 whilst beating all the ingredients  
 may be added but soda & Porter  
Warm the Porter add to it soda  
 mix quickly bake in rather  
 slow oven 3 or 4 hours

stuck in  
 Alice Lloyd's  
 Cook Book

Figure 11 Recipe for Porter  
 Cake (stuck in Alice Lloyd's  
 Cook Book)

this is the best Irish ware that  
 is made and is extremely beneficial  
 (mixed with water) to those who  
 have delicate lungs —  
 Hurrah for Shuggar —  
 Oh Lawrence how could you  
 spell it that way.

Marking ink  
 one hundred grains of lunar caustic,  
<sup>25 grs</sup>  
 two drachms of gum Arabic,  
<sup>1/2 a dram</sup>  
 half a drachm of saffron  
<sup>7 grs</sup>  
 one ounce of rain water  
<sup>1/2 a dram</sup> — <sup>120 drops</sup>  
 Preparing liquor to wet the linen  
 one ounce of sal soda, a small piece of stone  
<sup>1/4 ounce</sup>  
 blue, two ounces of rain water.  
<sup>1/2 a dram</sup>

**Figure 12** Alice Lloyd's son,  
 Lawrence (later 3rd Earl)  
 writes 'hurrah for Shuggar',

from imported products. Wines in the earlier Parsons' manuscripts are made from sage, cowslips, raisins ('Grape') and by using elderflowers and raisins, a wine that imitates Frontignac (A17, f.75). These beverages were often kept for several months before bottling.

There is a recipe for preparing Salmon 'the Sligo way' which is of a piece with the recipe book's more Irish orientation.<sup>50</sup> Other recipes reproduced here track back to recipes circulating in Ireland in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries; for example, the recipe for what we would call ice cream, is the exact same as in Mrs Baker's manuscript and she attributes it to Lady Ann Fitzgerald, née Fitzmaurice.<sup>51</sup> Recipes for Shrewsbury cakes (f.106) and lemon cheese (attributed to Mrs Bligh, f.4) for example, also appear in a collection compiled by Abigail Jackson in the late eighteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Like many other recipe books across different periods, Alice Lloyd's mixes together a wide range of sources, printed, personal and social—many of the recipes are attributed to people likely to have been in her broad social network, including people of different social classes—Mrs William French, Lady North. Some of them derive from people local to Birr—Mrs Henry Mahon, for example, was the wife of the rector at Killegally, Co. Offaly. Mrs Christopher L'Estrange was also from a local family. Margaret Burke was most likely the wife of one of the Parsons' tenants, William Burke—his will is in the Rosse papers (BCA Q/12, 1821).

This recipe book, and the food culture it describes, is arguably linked to the changes and reforms at Birr in the early nineteenth century, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl (he inherited this title in 1807) attempted to regroup politically after the Act of Union, and chose—for a period—to focus his energies on improvements at Birr, and on the education of his children. The book then, is an important articulation of the idea of the house as forward-looking and progressive, but also as deeply rooted in its place and origins.

#### 4. M18 – Cramer (1870–1880)

The recipe book of Edith Cramer is, in many ways, the outlier with regard to the Birr receipt books, although it is every bit as much part of Birr's long culinary history as the other recipes discussed in this chapter. The book has its origins in Loughborough in England, where Cramer was from, and was started in 1870, shortly before she arrived at Birr in 1873—the latest dated recipe is from 1880. The range of recipes compiled here have, as might be expected given her role as housekeeper, a heavier emphasis on household matters than the other receipt books. It

<sup>50</sup> Dorothy Cashman has identified a series of recipes that reference preparation of salmon in 'the Sligo way', including Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, references that 'the dish of fish at the head of the table had been brought across the island

from Sligo'. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rosse was friends with Edgeworth (DIB). Mrs Baker's manuscript NLI MS 34,952 has a recipe by the same name.

<sup>51</sup> I owe this information to Dorothy Cashman, who kindly shared her work on Mrs Baker's manuscript,

NLI MS 34, 952. See Dorothy Cashman, 'An investigation of Irish culinary history, with particular reference to the gentry of County Kilkenny (1740–1830) vol. 1, *Doctoral thesis. Technological University Dublin* <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tourdoc/37/>  
<sup>52</sup> NLI Ms 42, 008.

has a rudimentary index, and some recipes are organised into groups (puddings for example), but overall its arrangement appears to be chronological and accretive, with the latter part of the book taken up with recipes and household tips cut and pasted from newspapers and periodicals, such as the *Ladies' Treasury*,<sup>53</sup> edited by Eliza Warren, published from 1857–95, and one of several magazines targeted at a growing readership of middle income women—Cramer's interest in such materials no doubt related as much to her own class position (her father was a musician, in the Queen's State Band) as to her role as housekeeper at Birr. Indeed, in parallel to Dorothy Parsons' recipes, it may have been part of an effort on Cramer's part to secure employment. A section of the book is copied directly from Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, reflecting the movement of household management into the marketplace of print, and the ways in which these mass-produced publications complemented and often supplanted culinary knowledge circulated through other means—through families, and through social networks. Nonetheless, many recipes here are attributed—although it is worth noting that periodicals like the *Ladies' Treasury* depended heavily on readers' contributions, which makes tracking provenance particularly difficult. Several recipes appear to be linked to Cramer's family—L.N. Cramer, MC, EC, but these are closer to personal notations than to the careful use of attribution to signal networks that is evident in both Parsons' and Lloyd's compilations. These attributions fade away as the receipt book progresses. There is little here that connects to the specifics of place, something that is evident too in the expansion of ingredients to include items like lobster, tomatoes, venison and broccoli. Types of recipe are less dependent on long cooking and include omelettes, fritters and Genoese pastry, alongside jams, pickles and preserves. Curries appear here too, alongside the use of commercial flavourings and preparations, often recommended or advertised in periodicals aimed at female readers—Nelson's gelatine, baking powder, and Burgess's anchovy sauce. Weights and measurements are very precise, using pounds and ounces, and fractions of pints. The recipe book is short, and most likely functional, tied to the role of its creator first and foremost.

Taken together, these four manuscripts provide, in microcosm, a way of seeing changes in food culture over an extended period. Early recipe exchanges focus on re-circulating specialist knowledge—usually medical, but over the course of the seventeenth century come to be supplemented by recipes focussed on the household, and on its unique symbolic role. For families developing estates, such as the Parsons family, this entailed a careful representation of the

<sup>53</sup> <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/ladies-treasury>

aspirations of those households, dealing often in prized luxury goods new to the market, alongside longstanding principles relating to providence, economy and bodily care. It is striking that the Parsons' book, whilst it must have drawn on local ingredients, does not present them as such, nor does it draw overtly on foods prepared locally. By contrast, Alice Lloyd's pre-Famine cookbook reveals the way in which the food culture of Birr Castle, by the early nineteenth century, becomes thoroughly embedded in its locality. By the late nineteenth century, we see a move towards more generic, more industrialised food preparation processes and methods, and a changed relationship between those responsible for producing cooked food and those who eat it. All these materials should be read with the caveat that what is included in a recipe book is only of limited use in relation to what people actually collected, cooked and ate—much as most of us have shelves full of glossy cookery books that we have never cooked from, yet such books represent something important about how we view and understand food and its social and historical role.

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**13**

*'Prodigious Fine Dinners':  
Drinking and dining with  
Jonathan Swift*

**Tara McConnell**

### Wine ... and food

As a food historian with a special interest in drinking studies, a decade ago I began researching the history of wine consumption in Ireland, focussing on exploring the social meaning of claret in the Georgian era. Early in the course of that research, it quickly became evident that wine—and in particular the red wine of Bordeaux—was very important to Jonathan Swift.<sup>1</sup> In this preference, Swift was not unusual. Period accounts of claret consumption in Ireland and a wealth of references to the elite predilection for this wine in contemporary Irish historiography underscore its social and gastronomic significance throughout the long eighteenth century.

Swift's reliance on wine as a therapeutic element in his diet is often noted in the wide range of literature devoted to examining his literary legacy and his status as one of eighteenth-century Ireland's foremost historical figures.<sup>2</sup> My research reveals, however, that Swift's appreciation of wine was more nuanced than a belief in its medicinal benefits alone implies.<sup>3</sup> His personal correspondence shows that the maladies that plagued him encouraged Swift to subscribe to a regime of dietary restrictions and to exert a degree of self-discipline at table that was rare for members of his peer group. Equally, however, his letters attest to both his appreciation of good food and wine and a concomitant deprecation of subpar gastronomic offerings. The letters he wrote in the first half of his life, especially those later compiled and published as *Journal to Stella* [hereafter, the *Journal*], highlight a more positive relationship with food than that suggested by his later correspondence, written when his medical woes were increasing.<sup>4</sup> I was therefore bewildered when I read the following assertion in a published version of Swift's personal account books: 'Swift was not greatly concerned about food'. More surprisingly still, the book's editors further qualified this statement by observing that in his letters Swift rarely makes 'more than a passing reference to his eating, no loving enumeration of dishes nor any indication of fussiness concerning his diet'.<sup>5</sup> While it is true that Swift's correspondence rarely sets out lengthy details about his meals, the topic of food and eating is certainly not ignored, and his dietary 'fussiness' is clearly evident.<sup>6</sup>

Swift's fastidious approach to eating and drinking developed alongside unpleasant and often debilitating physical symptoms that first began to trouble

**1** Tara McConnell, 'Ireland in the Georgian era: Was There Any Kingdom in Europe So Good a Customer at Bordeaux?', in Benjamin Keatinge and Mary Piere (eds), *France and Ireland in the Public Imagination* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 223–40; Tara McConnell, 'Honest Claret': *The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 188–94, 217, 222–23.

**2** The literary output on Swift since his death in 1745 is vast, and the dean and his works continue to inspire a range of publications to this day. For recent biographies, see John Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: The Reluctant Rebel* (London: Penguin Books, [2016] 2017) and Leo Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013). **3** McConnell, 'Honest Claret',

188–94. **4** George A. Aitken (ed.), *The Journal to Stella* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901). **5** Paul V. Thompson and Dorothy Jay Thompson's edited volume of Swift's accounts are based on nine extant volumes to which they had access. They estimated that Swift's full account records probably numbered about thirty volumes in total. Paul V. Thompson and Dorothy Jay Thompson (eds), *The*

*Account Books of Jonathan Swift* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Scolar Press, 1984), vii, lxxvii. **6** Swift's friend and fellow Anglican cleric, Thomas Sheridan, when writing to the Dean of St Patrick's in Dublin, frequently listed foods available at Quilca, his home in County Cavan, when attempting to entice the dean to visit.





him when he was about twenty years old. These symptoms—predominately vertigo, nausea, and deafness—have been ascribed to the likelihood that Swift suffered from Menière’s Disease, a disorder of the inner ear not yet identified in his day.<sup>7</sup> As a boy, Swift had ‘loved stuffing [himself]’, so it was, perhaps, with reluctance that he became the generally moderate diner and drinker that we meet both in his letters and in relevant comments by his friends and acquaintances. As an adult, Swift claimed that he hated ‘a prodigious fine dinner’, nor could he ‘endure [eating] above one dish’.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is clear from his personal correspondence that Swift was exacting about his diet, commenting frequently upon the quality of the food and drink he consumed.

**Figure 1** *Basket of Fruit*, Bartolomeo Cavarozzi, c. 1620, Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Errol M. Rudman, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: The Reluctant Rebel*, 9; John M.S. Pearce, ‘The Legacy and Maladies of Jonathan Swift’, *Hektoen International Journal, History Essays* (Fall 2019), <<https://hekint.org/2019/12/24/the-legacy-and-maladies-of-jonathan-swift/>>. <sup>8</sup> Swift, Letter LXI, 12 March 1712–13, *Journal*, 522. <sup>9</sup> Denis Johnston, ‘The Mysterious Origins of Dean Swift’, *Dublin Historical Record* 3: 4 (1941), 81–97, 82–85; Denis Johnston, *In Search of Swift* (Dublin: Hodges Figgis & Co., Ltd, 1959), 13–14, 57; Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 9; In the absence of contrary evidence, the accepted date

of Swift’s birth remains 30 November 1667 (Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 9–10); Swift is the founder of St Patrick’s Hospital, now known as St Patrick’s Mental Health Services, which continues its mission to this day as ‘Ireland’s leading not-for-profit mental health organization’, ‘History & Archives’, <https://www.stpatricks.ie/about-us/history-and-archives>. <sup>10</sup> Archibald Cameron Elias, Jr (ed.), *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington* (Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, [1748] 1997), 31–32; Irvin Ehrenpreis, *The Personality of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 11; Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: The Reluctant Rebel*, 58–60, 75. <sup>11</sup> See Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 69, 77. <sup>12</sup> Swift noted, however, that such school-day joys were counterbalanced by long hours in classrooms, beatings by masters and ‘bloody noses and broken shins’ courtesy of fellow students, Swift to Charles Ford, 11 November 1708, Harold Williams (ed.), *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, Vol. 1 [1690–1713] (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), 109. <sup>13</sup> Following the events of November

### Developing a taste for forbidding fruit

Details pertaining to Swift's childhood are scanty and not strictly reliable; even his birth date proves unverifiable. It has even been suggested that his biological father may not, in fact, have been the elder Jonathan Swift who died before the birth of the infant who would develop into a literary colossus, the pre-eminent satirist of his day, and the author of a remarkable philanthropic act in Georgian Ireland. The sources of Swift's fame as a writer and his reputation as a champion of social justice in Ireland require no explication. The philanthropic act for which he is best remembered is his testamentary bequest to 'build a house for fools and [the] mad', establishing in Dublin an institution devoted to the care of those suffering from mental health issues.<sup>9</sup> However highly Swift and the world esteemed his literary output in his own lifetime, insecurity about his origins and his orphan-like childhood most likely led to the inconsistent accounts he gave of his early life. Such self-mythologising on the dean's part may have served to gloss over personally troubling or potentially publicly embarrassing gaps in his narrative.<sup>10</sup>

Benevolent uncles ensured, nevertheless, that the young Jonathan did not experience a life of penury. He may have been starved of emotional comforts, but he did not go hungry.<sup>11</sup> One of the few happy childhood memories Swift recounted was of his schoolboy indulgence in 'charming Custards in a blind Alley'; the obscure nature of the site of consumption doubtless enhancing the thrill of enjoying a special treat.<sup>12</sup> Swift, at school in Kilkenny and, later, as an undergraduate in Dublin at Trinity College, probably subsisted on wholesome, plain fare, even if—from 1688 to 1689, when there was a general scarcity of provisions throughout the kingdom—the college refectory was able to provide only 'a single bare meal a day'.<sup>13</sup>

Escaping the rise in political and social turbulence in Ireland that immediately followed the 'Glorious Revolution', Swift sought both safety and his fortune in England, and by the spring or summer of 1689 he was working as secretary to Sir William Temple, a distinguished nobleman and essayist.<sup>14</sup> Temple had been a Restoration courtier and well-travelled diplomat. In the course of negotiating with the Dutch on behalf of Charles II, he had become friendly with the young William of Orange. Neither Temple nor the Dutch *stadtholder* could have imagined that, within four years of Charles II's death, William would replace Charles's brother—his own father-in-law, James II—on the English throne—ruling

and December 1688, when, respectively, William of Orange arrived in England to unseat James II and VII and James subsequently fled to France, Swift, fearing Catholic reprisals against Ireland's Protestants, opted to seek safety in England rather than stay in Dublin to obtain a master's degree,

Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 110–14.  
**14** For a discussion of the origin of the term 'The Glorious Revolution', as it describes the change in monarch in England in 1689, see James R. Hertzler, 'Who dubbed it "The Glorious Revolution"?' *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned*

*with British Studies* 19: 4 (1987), 579–85; In January of 1689, the English parliament acted to declare the throne vacant following James II's flight to France. It was then offered to William of Orange and his wife Mary Stuart. The couple ruled as the joint monarchs, William III and Mary II, in England, Scotland and Ireland until Mary's death in 1694, after which William reigned as sole monarch until his death in 1702. For a brief biography of Sir William Temple, see <https://www.dib.ie/biography/temple-sir-william-a8495>.

jointly as monarch with his wife Mary II. As the new king, William III offered Temple the position of secretary of state. Temple, however, declined the offer, choosing to forgo power. He observed in his memoirs that he ‘had learn’d by living long in Courts and publick Affairs, that [he] was fit to live no longer in either’. When Swift took up his position in Temple’s retreat, Moor Park, his employer was living as a country gentleman with his family, turning his thoughts ‘to wholly mend[ing] [him]self’—and writing.<sup>15</sup> Swift was engaged to assist Temple in the latter activity; however, his role would eventually encompass more than he initially anticipated, and the years that he would spend in the Temple household shaped many aspects of his future life, including his firm ideas about diet.<sup>16</sup>

Fashionable elites in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe were keen on garden design and fruit cultivation. Temple noted that throughout the reign of Charles II, gardening in England grew ‘into such a vogue, and [was] so mightily improved’.<sup>17</sup> In Ireland, these interests tended to be the preserve of the wealthier members of the power-wielding minority, one of whom included Sir William Temple’s brother, Sir John Temple.<sup>18</sup> In retirement, Sir William ‘devoted himself to a lettered leisure, amid books and apricots, pears and vines’.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, Temple’s gardens at Moor Park occupied much of his attention. The gardens were set out very much according to the ideal plan he describes in an essay titled *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus: Or, of Gardening, in the year 1685* (hereafter, *Upon the Gardens*). ‘[T]he best figure of a garden is either a square or an oblong’, Temple wrote, and the gardens at Moor Park conformed to the Dutch style that featured plots in these shapes, complemented by a decorative canal. Equally, at Moor Park, Temple aimed to recapture the ambiance of the gardens he had enjoyed during his honeymoon, spent at an estate in Hertfordshire—also named Moor Park—that had impressed him as ‘the perfectest [*sic*] figure of a garden’ he had ever seen.<sup>20</sup>

Temple and his wife Dorothy were keen fruit-lovers, and one can easily imagine a passion for fruit being instilled in Swift by their enthusiasm for cultivating the very best varieties and by *Upon the Gardens*. In that well-respected essay, Temple asserts that no other country can equal England ‘in the variety of fruits [... that] from the earliest cherry and strawberry, to the last apples and pears, may

**15** Sir William Temple, *The Works of Sir William Temple, Bart.*, 2 vols, I (London: J. Round, J. Tonson, J. Clarke, B. Motte, T. Wotton, S. Birt, and T. Osborne, 1731), 359; Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 39.

**16** Despite the resentment Swift eventually felt towards the Temple family, he admired much about the urbane Sir William. Certainly, Swift must have learned a great deal about conducting oneself in

elite society by living in the Temple household and coming into contact with members of Temple’s illustrious circle of acquaintance, Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 130–31. Equally importantly, it was at Moor Park that Swift met his ‘Stella’.<sup>17</sup> The following essays discuss gardening and gardens in the same period in Ireland and France, respectively: T.C. Barnard, ‘Gardening, diet

and “Improvement” in later seventeenth-century Ireland’, *Journal of Garden History* 10: 1 (1990), 71–85; Quellier observes that, in France in the [early] modern period, the enjoyment of a fruit-producing garden, whether situated within a city or surrounding countryside, was an important element of the lifestyle of urban elites, Florent Quellier, ‘Le Bourgeois Arboriste [XVIIe–XVIIIe

siècles]: Les élites urbaines et l’essor des cultures fruitières en Ile-de-France’, *Histoire Urbaine* 2: 6 [2002], 23–41, 29.

**18** Barnard, ‘Gardening, diet and “Improvement”’, 77, 80–81.

**19** Albert Forbes Sieveking, ‘Introduction’, in Sir William Temple, Abraham Cowley, Sir Thomas Browne, Andrew Marvell and John Evelyn, *Sir William Temple Upon the Gardens of Epicurus, with Other XVIIth-Century Garden Essays*:

furnish every day of the circling year'. Referring to the fruits of the garden under his own management (both at Moor Park and at Sheen, another family property) Temple boasts that French guests acknowledged both his grapes and his peaches to be 'as good as any they have eaten in France', while Italian visitors recognised his 'white figs to be as good as any of that sort in Italy'. Temple's delight in his fruits reaches new heights in the following description: 'My orange-trees are as large as any I saw when I was young in France, except those of Fontainebleau, or what I have since seen in the Low Countries, except some very old ones, of the Prince of Orange's'—leaving readers with no doubts about the nature of his competition.<sup>21</sup> Could it be any coincidence that Swift retained a fondness for oranges throughout his life? As late as 1739, the Earl of Orrery assures Swift that '[c]ertainly the best Oranges (I mean the preserv'd ones [...]) are the produce of your Table, such is your des[s]ert, and so thoroughly do I taste it'. The earl finds this Swiftian delicacy so appetising that he implores the dean to '[s]end me the receipt then to imitate You in eating [...] glorious Oranges [...] Lady Orrery joins her Entreaties to mine, that you would be so good to send us the receipt as soon as you can'.<sup>22</sup> Amongst the various fruits Swift mentions eating in his correspondence, oranges are the only type that he does not blame for producing ill effects. The fact that they had been cooked or preserved in some way, rather than eaten raw—they are often described as roasted or preserved—may explain why he appeared to tolerate them. In 1735, as 'a tribute' to an unidentified lady, Swift sent oranges that had been 'done' for him by someone with whom he had shared his 'receipt'. It is not quite clear what the 'doing' entailed, although it is reasonable to assume the receipt he refers to is the same one that was so eagerly sought by the Orrerlys. What is clear is that the unknown recipient of the 'done' oranges is to follow the dean's instructions and 'keep them in some warm place within the smell of a fire, till they grow dry'.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the fact that roasted oranges appear to have been a popular accompaniment to claret, and that his friend, Esther 'Stella' Johnson, was equally keen on the combination, somehow convinced Swift of their wholesomeness. This is pure supposition, but there is frequent reference to both his and Stella's enjoyment of oranges in Swift's correspondence in the *Journal*.<sup>24</sup> He mentions the fruit eight times in relation to himself and Stella specifically (as opposed to

*Introduction by Albert Forbes Sieveking* (London: Chatto and Windus, Publishers, 1908), xvi. **20** Edward Malins and Knight of Glin, 'Landscape Gardening by Jonathan Swift and His Friends in Ireland', *Garden History*, Autumn 2: 1 (1973), 69–93, 69; After acquiring an estate in Surrey, Temple rechristened it 'Moor Park' as an homage to another Moor Park, located in Hertfordshire, where he had honeymooned

after his marriage in 1654. Temple describes the gardens of the 'original' Moor Park in some detail in his essay, *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus*. Interestingly, James Butler, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Ormond, owned Moor Park (Hertfordshire) from 1663 to 1670, Sally Jeffery, 'The Formal Gardens at Moor Park in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', *Garden History*, Winter 42: 2 (2014), 157–77, 159–60, 165–66;

Temple, *Upon the Gardens*, 49–50. **21** See John Evelyn's diary for his impressions of the gardens of the royal Château de Fontainebleau in 1644, John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vol I (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1936), 59–60; Temple, *Upon the Gardens*, 37–38. **22** The dean granted the Orrerlys' excited request, and Lady Orrery afterwards sent her thanks for

the receipt in a letter directed to Swift's housekeeper, the Earl of Orrery to Swift, n.d. May 1739; Lady Orrery to Mrs Whiteway, 17 March 1739, *Correspondence*, v, 157, 180. **23** Swift to a Lady Unknown, 24 March 1735, *Correspondence*, iv, 311. **24** The letters Swift wrote from London between 1710 to 1713 to his dear Esther 'Stella' Johnson and, ostensibly, her companion, Rebecca Dingley, were later published

his more frequent references to 'MD', an abbreviation for Mrs Johnson and her companion, Rebecca Dingley, ostensibly the joint recipient of Swift's *Journal* letters). On four occasions, Swift tells Stella to head off to her pastime of playing cards, and to either roast or toast oranges, to be enjoyed along with claret. As for his own orange consumption, he has some with 'bad claret'; in February of 1711 he wishes MD could obtain in Dublin some of the Seville oranges he is able to buy in London so cheaply; and, in November of that same year, he reports that 'chestnuts and Seville oranges' are again newly available in town.<sup>25</sup> Orange-lover that he may have been, Swift nonetheless drew the line at accepting presents of oranges from strangers. When a person whose name he did not recognise attempted to deliver a parcel of oranges to his lodgings in January of 1713, Swift instructed his servant to send him away, observing to MD that the would-be donor might have been harmless, but it was equally possible that his intentions may have been villainous. Either way, Swift chose to err on the side of caution: 'Let them keep their poison for their rats', he told MD, 'I don't love it'.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, in Swift's published correspondence with Esther 'Vanessa' Van Homrigh (a young woman with whom he had an inscrutable friendship) an orange is mentioned only twice—and the fruit is spoken of strictly in the singular form. In both instances, Swift speaks—perhaps enigmatically—of having them with coffee, never wine.<sup>27</sup>

Swift had likely already eaten oranges in seventeenth-century Ireland, but it is probable that it was at Moor Park that he first had access to a wider variety of fruits in profusion.<sup>28</sup> Fruity produce from the gardens of Moor Park included a variety of grapes—Temple noted with pride that he had personally brought 'four different sorts into England' from France. In *Upon the Gardens* Temple names six varieties of peaches that he considers worthy of cultivation, adding that any others 'are not worth troubling a garden [with]'; as for apricots, the only type he recommends is 'the Brussels apricot'—a variety he claims to have introduced into England. In addition, Temple praises other favourite fruits he must have been especially proud of growing, such as white figs, Golden and Kentish pippins, cherries, and several different types of pears and plums.<sup>29</sup>

as *Journal to Stella*. Sometimes Mrs Johnson is addressed directly in the letters as 'Stella', and at other times both ladies are addressed as 'MD'. Despite the fact that 'it is clear the letters were written to Stella, even if they were often addressed to, and passed before the short-sighted eyes of, Rebecca Dingley', Aileen Douglas, 'Mrs Dingley's Spectacles: Swift, Print and Desire', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Tris an dá cultúr* 10 (1995), 69–77, 70. The convention of using 'MD' as

Swift does is followed here unless it is illogical to do so in the context of a given letter or citation. **25** Swift, Letters XI, XVI, XXXIV (18 December 1710, 10 February 1710–11, 5 November 1711), *Journal*, 98, 148, 332. **26** Far from being alarmist, Swift was wise to be cautious about his safety. His role as the Tory government's chief apologist was well known, and, in 1712, he might easily have been the victim of a grave or even fatal attack on his person by the Whig-leaning thugs known

as 'the Mohacks' (or Mohocks). Swift's servant, Patrick, heard convincing rumours that the Mohacks were targeting his employer, who had already been alerted to the real danger of an encounter with members of the gang by a young gentleman of his acquaintance. The result was that Swift became more cautious when travelling in London at night, or receiving unknown strangers or packages at his lodgings, Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 307–308; Swift, Letter XLIII, 9 March

1711–12, *Journal*, 419. **27** Swift to Vanessa, 18 December 1711 and 6 June 1713, A. Martin Freeman (ed.), *Vanessa and Her Correspondence with Jonathan Swift* (London: Selwyn & Blount, Ltd, 1921), 65, 80; There has been much speculation—both scholarly and gossipy—about whether or not 'coffee' in the Swift/Vanessa correspondence is code for sexual activity. For further discussion, see Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 423–24. **28** In 1662, consignments of imported oranges were 'eagerly snapped

It may seem that an undue amount of attention is paid here to the subject of fruit; however, fruit is mentioned fairly regularly in Swift's personal correspondence, and his agonies over its consumption—should he or shouldn't he?—regularly tortured him whenever longed-for fruits were in season or within his reach at the dining table. Why did eating fruit pose such a problem for Swift? Dorothy Temple firmly believed that surfeiting on fruit was seriously injurious to one's health. Her husband was equally convinced that poor-quality and unripe fruit was 'extremely unwholesome' and caused many 'untimely deaths' and illnesses.<sup>30</sup> The youthful Swift may have simply accepted his elders' specious 'wisdom' as true; however, its veracity appeared to be confirmed when he experienced his first episode of 'Giddyness [*sic*]' after indulging in over a hundred of the Temples' golden pippins 'at a time'.<sup>31</sup> Upon falling ill after allegedly consuming such an extraordinary quantity of fruit, the Temples' warnings doubtless rang in Swift's ears, and the unwavering belief that fruit could set off his 'disorders' became firmly rooted in his mind.

Despite his fears relating to fruit-eating, sometimes Swift simply couldn't resist it, and, invariably, if he experienced an attack of vertigo soon afterwards, he attributed it, either partially or entirely, to his fruit consumption. In July of 1711, Swift told MD that he had recently eaten some cherries and 'repent[ed] it already', finding 'his head a little disordered'. Nevertheless, the following month he 'venture[d] to eat [one] fig', an indulgence that, once again, he almost immediately regretted.<sup>32</sup> The lifelong turmoil surrounding fruit-eating and his virtual obsession with fruits is encapsulated in the following lament, in which he tells MD that he hates late summer in London:

[I]t is autumn this good while in St James's Park; the limes have been losing their leaves, and those remaining on the trees are all parched: I hate this season where everything grows worse and worse. The only good thing of it is the fruit, and that I dare not eat.<sup>33</sup>

Sixteen summers later, the dean is still tortured by his desire for self-forbidden fruit, telling his friend Thomas Sheridan that 'in the midst of Peaches, Figs, Nectarines, and Mulberries, I touch not a bit'.<sup>34</sup> One cannot help feeling pity for Swift, so cruelly (and misguidedly) thwarted in his fruit-scoffing.

up' at Christmas time in Ireland, Barnard, 'Gardening, diet and "Improvement"', 75; For essays discussing historical evidence of fruit growing in Ireland see the following: Terence Reeves-Smith, *Irish Gardens and Gardening Before Cromwell, Barryscourt Lectures IV* (Kinsale: The Barryscourt Trust in association with Cork County Council and Gandon Editions, 1999), 106–11, 114–18,

22, 125–28, 130; Susan Lyons, 'Food plants, fruits and foreign foodstuffs: the archaeological evidence from urban medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, Vol. 115C, *Food and Drink in Ireland* (2015), 111–66, 150–56. **29** Temple, *Upon the Gardens*, 44–48 **30** The Temples were not unique in their era in attributing certain

risks to fruit consumption. As late as 1777, the death of a duchess was attributed to 'a surfeit of cherries', Norman Pearson, *Society Sketches in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1911), 141; Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 147; Temple, *Upon the Gardens*, 63. **31** Swift often used the terms 'giddy' and 'giddyness' to describe the episodes of vertigo from

which he suffered; Swift to Mrs Howard, 19 August 1727, *Correspondence*, iii, 32.

**32** Swift, Letter XXVI, 6 July 1711 and Letter XXVIII, 23 August 1711, *Journal*, 275. **33** Swift, Letter XXIX, 27 August 1711, *Journal*, 282.

**34** Swift to the Rev. Thomas Sheridan, 12 August, 1727, *Correspondence*, iii, 229.

Swift appreciated the status attached to cultivating fruit as well as presenting it as a gift in the period; therefore, the potentially unpleasant effects fruit might visit upon him did not deter him from planting successful apple orchards at his own town and country gardens in Ireland.<sup>35</sup> Swift's country orchard, featuring pippins and cherries, was established at his property at Laracor, in Co. Meath. He was appointed vicar of the hamlet's parish in September of 1700, and Laracor became a cherished rural retreat. After becoming Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in 1713, Swift expended much money and energy on the creation of his town garden, 'Naboth's Vineyard'.<sup>36</sup> The condition of the fruit at both properties preoccupied him. While in England in May of 1712, Swift commiserated with a nobleman he was visiting, who showed him 'his cherries all blasted' due to poor weather. Swift reasoned that his orchard at Laracor must be suffering similarly, and that, consequently, he 'would have no apples this year neither'.<sup>37</sup> The dean's friends were well aware of his financial and emotional investment in Naboth's Vineyard. In 1728, Swift bemoaned the recent 'Havock' that flooding had caused in the garden—a garden that perhaps brought him greater disappointment than satisfaction, at least in relation to fruit harvests.<sup>38</sup> In the spring of 1731, Dean Swift advised his friend and fellow garden enthusiast Alexander Pope that 'a long run of Northeast winds' had 'almost ruined my fruit [...] in my famous Garden of Naboth's Vineyard, that you have heard me boast of'.<sup>39</sup> Writing to Swift in September of 1734, Mary Pendarves expressed the hope that 'Naboth's Vineyard flourishes: it always has my good wishes, though I am not near enough to partake of its fruits'.<sup>40</sup>

At Moor Park, Swift may have significantly increased his knowledge of the dining etiquette expected at elite tables, if a third-hand account of his manners upon arrival there can be credited. The novelist Samuel Richardson claimed that a friend-to-a-nephew of Sir William told *him* that 'because of [Swift's] ill qualities', his employer did not permit him to dine with him.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that Swift, still relatively unsophisticated when he joined Moor Park's household, may have displayed certain gaucheries in the eyes of the Temples. But even if there is any truth in Richardson's rather mean tittle-tattle, it would be odd if Swift had not been awed by Temple's roster of lofty acquaintance (including, as it did, no less a figure than William III), by the dynamics of a noble household, and by his own somewhat uncomfortable status as a servant—although he would

**35** For further on gifting fruit in the period, see McConnell, 'Honest Claret', 113–14.

**36** Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 94–95, 299; Swift's garden situated on the south side of the deanery of St Patrick's took its name from the Bible (1 Kings 21). **37** Swift, Letter XLVIII, 31 May 1712, *Journal*, 442. **38** By the 1720s, it seems that Naboth's Vineyard acted

as refuge from society, like the deanery itself, when Swift's symptoms made it impossible for him to socialise. Amongst other examples, see Swift to the Earl of Oxford, 27 November 1724 and Swift to Charles Ford, 31 December 1724, *Correspondence*, iii, 40, 46. **39** Swift to Rev. Thomas Sheridan, 18 September 1728, *Correspondence*, iii, 298; Swift

to Alexander Pope, 20 April 1731, *Correspondence*, iii, 458; Pope's love of his garden at Twickenham is often mentioned in the Swift/Pope correspondence. The extent of Pope's ambitions for his garden can be gauged from Swift's praise for '[Pope's] great achievements in building and planting and especially of your subterranean Passage to your

Garden whereby you turned a blunder into beauty which is a Piece of Ars Poetica', Swift to Alexander Pope, 29 September 1725, *Correspondence*, iii, 103. **40** Mary Pendarves is better known to posterity by the surname of Delany which she acquired following her second marriage, in 1743, to Dean Swift's friend and fellow Anglican dean, Patrick

not remain awed for long. Swift's own circle of acquaintance would later match, if not outshine, the lustre of Temple's. Nevertheless, Temple's stated approach to life and diet as encapsulated in his memoirs, and his household's *mode de vie*, must have deeply impressed his (initially) admiring secretary, as Swift's future comportment suggests.<sup>42</sup> He appears to have adopted the following precepts, as stated by Sir William in his memoirs, in which he pledged to pursue 'the old and excellent counsel of Pythagorus [...] to avoid Diseases in the Body, Perturbations in the Mind, Luxury in Diet, Factions in the House, and Seditions in the State'.<sup>43</sup> Swift, like Temple, also prized 'old wine to drink, old friends to converse with, and old books to read' over shallow pursuits.<sup>44</sup>

Towards the end of his residency at Moor Park, Swift told a friend that he was living there 'in great state'. His employers were temporarily absent, and, somewhat wryly, he informed his friend that 'the cook comes in to know what I please to have for dinner: I ask very gravely what is in the house, and accordingly give order for a dish of pigeons, or & c.'. <sup>45</sup> One can almost hear Swift imitating his noble employer, and taking no small pleasure in doing so. Swift, at this point, was thirty-one years old, a dependent in another man's household, and a relatively insignificant member of the clergy with seemingly poor prospects of church advancement. It is not surprising, therefore, that the pleasure he takes in briefly 'acting the lord' is almost tangible, and his interest in selecting his menu appears unfeigned. Moreover, he is evidently confident in the proxy role of master of a fine household, and any rough edges he may have displayed upon first arriving at Moor Park appear to have been thoroughly smoothed out.

### The *Journal* years: dining at the 'great tables' (and sometimes taverns)

In 1710, Swift attempted to make headway with Queen Anne's ministry in the matter of a petition by the Church of Ireland to have certain dues (the 'First Fruits and Twentieth Parts'), payable by its clergy to the monarch remitted.<sup>46</sup> To this end, he was obliged to interact with the most important ministers in the queen's Tory government. As a literary maverick with a growing reputation, Swift was lionised by figures in the highest echelons of English court and literary society.<sup>47</sup> Dinner invitations abounded, and the *Journal* provides almost a daily record of his dining activities over a period of almost three years.<sup>48</sup> Swift himself presciently observed that the letters would make an excellent memoir—if he dared

Delany; Mrs Pendarves to Swift, 9 September 1734, *Correspondence*, iv, 252.

<sup>41</sup> Anna Laetitia Barbauld (ed.), *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 6 vols (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), vi, 173; Swift told MD that his 'fingers itched' when he was in a booksellers examining the contents of 'a fine old library', Swift, Letter

XXVI, 9 July 1711, *Journal*, 251.

<sup>42</sup> In the *Journal*, Swift speaks wonderingly of 'the veneration we used to have for Sir William Temple', Swift, Letter IX, 11 November 1710, *Journal*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> Temple, *The Works of Sir William Temple*, 'Memoirs', 359. <sup>44</sup> Temple, *The Works of Sir William Temple*, 'Memoirs', Temple citing Alphonsus the Wise, King of Aragon, 'An Essay

Upon the Ancient and Modern Learning', 169. <sup>45</sup> Swift to ?, n.d. 1698, *Correspondence*, i, 24.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed explanation of Swift's role in petitioning Queen Anne's government to remit the First Fruits of Ireland's Anglican clergy, see Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age*, 3 vols (Routledge: Abingdon, [1962–83] 2021),

ii, 131–33, 225–29, 394–99.

<sup>47</sup> Swift had gained fame, and, in some quarters, notoriety, through his authorship of *A Tale of a Tub*, published in 1704. A brief perusal of the index of the *Journal* provides a list of the luminaries with whom he was on intimate terms in the period.



write all that he knew and if the letters could bypass the hands of government censors. The journal reads as an epistolary diary, with Swift recounting both great and small events as he experiences them, day to day.<sup>49</sup> From conversations with his friend Robert Harley, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Oxford, Lord High Treasurer, to complaints about his unreliable servant, Patrick, the *Journal* teems with details about late Stuart London and Swift's life there.<sup>50</sup>

Early in the *Journal*, Swift calls attention to the fact that he had formed the habit of telling Johnson and Dingley where, with whom, and on what he dines:

I will tell you something that's plaguy silly: I had forgot to say on the 23d in my last, where I dined; and because I had done it constantly, I thought it was a great omission, and was going to interline it; but at last the silliness of it made me cry, Pshah, and I let it alone.<sup>51</sup>

Swift did not bother to retroactively insert the missing dining information between the lines of his letter of 23 November; however, he continued to regularly update the Dublin ladies about his eating, drinking, and dining engagements throughout the remainder of the *Journal*, so he evidently considered the information sufficiently interesting to avoid any further such omissions in subsequent correspondence. Swift's circle of acquaintance was both wide and democratic. On any given day, his dining companions could range from courtiers to 'friend merchants', clerical contacts, fellow writers, and impoverished cousins.<sup>52</sup> The location of his meals varied accordingly; sometimes Swift enjoyed hobnobbing at the courtly tables of 'the Green Cloth'; sometimes he slumped it at 'a blind chop-house'.<sup>53</sup>

In the summertime, or during holidays when Swift's aristocratic friends left town, he could find himself—discontentedly—'at a loss for a dinner'.<sup>54</sup> Rarely did he have to buy his own meals in a tavern or chop-house; however, when he chose to do so with friends, he often complained because it 'cost [him] money, faith'.<sup>55</sup> Whether dining in company or, more rarely, alone, outside of noting with whom he dined, where, and at what hour, Swift's descriptions regarding his consumption tend to be matter-of-fact: he provides more precise details only when the food and drink are particularly good or bad. So, what do Swift's letters reveal about his interest in food and drink, his approach to diet, and his likes and dislikes? Those topics are highlighted in the pages that follow.

**48** Swift did not exaggerate when he told the two Dublin ladies that invitations to dinner were 'ten times more plentiful with [him in London] than ever, or than in Dublin', Swift, Letter VIII, 6 November 1710, *Journal*, 59. **49** Swift, Letter LXI, 14 March 1712–13, *Journal*, 523. **50** Robert Harley (1661–1724), Chancellor of the

Exchequer from June of 1710, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Oxford from May of 1711 and sworn in as Lord High Treasurer the following month. Harley first 'received [Swift] with the greatest respect and kindness imaginable' on 4 October 1710. The friendship between the two men endured up until Harley's death, Swift, Letter V, 4 October 1710, *Journal*,

26–27; Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift: Reluctant Rebel*, 469; Swift conceded that Patrick generally had the upper hand in their relationship and was 'drunk about three times a week', Swift, Letter IV, 23 September 1710, *Journal*, 16; Ehrenpreis, *Swift*, ii, 554. **51** Swift, Letter X, 25 November 1710, *Journal*, 76. **52** Swift,

Letter III, 13 September 1710; Letter VII, 26 October 1710 and Letter IX, 17 November 1710, *Journal*, 9, 51, 71. **53** The Board of the Green Cloth was a committee whose members, known as Clerks of the Green Cloth, were responsible for the management of the royal household. Swift dined 'at the Green Cloth' a number



of times between 1710 and 1713, indicating that he was invited to dine at court at the expense of the queen's household. See 'The Household below stairs: Clerks of the Green Cloth 1660–1782', BHO/British History Online, available at <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/office-holders/vol11/pp403-407>. For

Swift's explanation of the Green Cloth, see Letter XXVII, 6 August 1711, *Journal*, 266; A 'blind' chop-house suggests a dining establishment of a particularly obscure nature, Swift, Letter V, 7 October 1710, *Journal*, 31. **54** Swift, Letter XXIX, 26 August 1711, *Journal*, 281. **55** Swift, Letter X, 5 December 1710, *Journal*, 84.

**Figure 2** Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. Pierre Fourdrinier, engraver, fl. 1722–1758 after Charles Jervas, c. 1675–1739 National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

### Oysters and other 'good bits'

Putting aside Swift's love/hate relationship with fruit, what other foods or meals did he seem to enjoy? Very few items of food appear more than once in the entries in the extant records of his personal accounts. Bread, butter, chocolate, gingerbread, mutton, and venison are the food items that occur most frequently, and ale, coffee, and wine are the beverages most regularly noted. Swift's gardens supplied him with fruits, vegetables, and herbs, so it is not surprising that these items are rarely noted in the accounts he kept when he was in Ireland, where he also regularly received gifts of food and wine.<sup>56</sup> The following examples are representative: One friend promises him 'a Pot of Woodcocks'; Swift informs the niece of another that before he ever met her uncle in person, he 'was loading me every season with salmons, that surfeited myself and all my visitors'; and Swift's friend Thomas Sheridan often sent him gifts of food from the country, such as 'a quarter of [Sheridan's] own small mutton and about six quarts of nuts'.<sup>57</sup> Swift—tongue firmly in cheek—upbraided one of his prebends for sending him 'a Barrell of ale' when he had, in fact, 'begged some mutton' of him. 'These disappointments', the dean observed, 'we must endure'.<sup>58</sup>

Swift's accounts record only seven specific entries for the purchase of chicken (including pullets), a fowl that Swift seemed to dine on almost exclusively in his later years, when he took his meals alone at the deanery. As the dean got older, he often told his friends that a 'Chicken with the Appendixes'—or sometimes just half of one—and a pint of wine at dinner were sufficient to his needs.<sup>59</sup> A non-exhaustive list of some of the foods mentioned in his letters includes a range of poultry in addition to wild fowl and game, such as pigeon, teal, pheasant, woodcock, rabbit, and venison. As Dean of St Patrick's, when making visits to the homes of lower-level clergyman, Swift invariably carried with him 'a Joynt of meat and [a] bottle of wine, and Town bread'.<sup>60</sup> This measure had the benefit not only of ensuring the quality of his own meal, but also of sparing 'some rural parson' the cost of the dean's entertainment. Swift doesn't specify the joint that furnished his dinners on such sorties, but mutton seems to have been a preferred meat. Beef, veal, and bacon are the other meats mentioned in Swift's correspondence. Vegetables, whether cooked or raw, rarely merit specific mention. Nevertheless, asparagus is worth noting owing to an anecdote involving William III that Swift's cousin, Deane Swift, includes in an essay: Dean Swift 'often heard from the Doctor's own mouth' that the king, in the course of one

**56** See 'Food' for a general discussion of account entries for Swift's expenditure on food (and drink) in Thompson and Thompson (eds), *The Account Books*, lxxxii–lxxxv. **57** Lord Castle-Durrow to Swift, 4 December 1736, *Correspondence*, iv, 549; Swift to Miss Katharine Richardson, 28 January 1738, *Correspondence*, v, 87;

The Rev. Thomas Sheridan to Swift, 15 September 1736, *Correspondence*, iv, 531.

**58** Swift to the Rev. John Blachford, 16 April 1731, *Correspondence*, iii, 452.

**59** Thompson and Thompson (eds), *The Account Books*, 78, 248, 257, 258; Swift to Gay and the Duchess of Queensberry, 10 July 1732,

*Correspondence*, iv, 39; Swift to John Arbuthnot, n.d. November 1734, *Correspondence*, iv, 268

**60** Swift to Lord Oxford, 2 September 1735,

*Correspondence*, iv, 379; Swift was ever-conscious of potential drains on not only his own personal finances but also on those of others of his acquaintance. He did not

like to see anyone pressured into spending beyond their means. As he observed to MD, 'I find all rich fellows have that humour of using all people without any consideration of their fortunes', Swift, Letter VI, 13 October 1710, *Journal*, 37.



**Figure 3** *Still life with fruit, oysters & a porcelain bowl.* Abraham Mignon, 1660–79, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

of his visits to the gardens of his friend Sir William Temple, took the opportunity to instruct the latter's secretary, the young Swift, in the method of cutting asparagus 'in the Dutch manner'.<sup>61</sup>

Fish and shellfish generally pleased Swift: he told MD that he'd 'grown a mighty lover of herrings' in London.<sup>62</sup> He must have enjoyed them in Dublin too, where he noted that they were larger than those he feasted on in the English capital. Oysters, as prepared in the home of Lord Masham—husband to Queen Anne's favourite, Lady Abigail Masham—proved to be a particular palate-pleaser for Swift. After Lord Masham 'made [him] go home with him to eat boiled oysters', Swift sent the recipe for the dish back to his 'dears' in Dublin:

Take oysters, wash them clean; that is, wash their shells clean; then put your oysters into an earthen pot, with their hollow sides down; then put this pot into a great kettle of water, and so let them boil. Your oysters are boiled in their own liquor, and not mixed with water.<sup>63</sup>

The precision in this recipe is impressive. The fact that Swift emphasises that the oysters must seethe in their own juice shows that he knew that the cooking method intensifies the flavour of the shellfish rather than dilutes it. Equally important, Swift went to the trouble of securing the recipe and sharing it with his friends, highlighting the degree of pleasure this particular dish gave him.

Swift seems to have enjoyed discussing diet and exchanging recipes with intimates, as evidenced by a flurry of letters between him and some friends in England in September and October of 1726. In this particular exchange of correspondence, talk of recipes begins with a letter in September, written by the hand of John Gay—although it seems that a number of friends contributed to the text. Alexander Pope appears to have been chief amongst these, and the following poem, which has been attributed to him, provides 'a receipt for Stewing Veal':

<sup>61</sup> Deane Swift, *An Essay upon the Life, Writings, and Character of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London: Charles Bathurst, 1755), 108. <sup>62</sup> Swift, Letter XXXII, 12 October 1711, *Journal*, 313. <sup>63</sup> Swift, Letter XLII, 6 March 1711–12, *Journal*, 417.

Take a knuckle of Veal,  
 You may buy it, or steal,  
 In a few pieces cut it,  
 Salt, pepper and mace  
 Must season this knuckle,  
 Then what's join'd to a place  
 With other Herbs muckle;  
 That which killed King Will,  
 And what never stands still,  
 Some sprigs of that bed  
 Where Children are bred,  
 Which much you will mend, if  
 Both Spinnage and Endive,  
 And Lettuce and Beet,  
 With Marygold meet;  
 Put no water at all,  
 For it maketh things small:  
 Which, lest it should happen,  
 A close cover clap on;  
 Put this pot of Wood's mettle  
 In a hot boiling kettle,  
 And there let it be,  
 (Mark the doctrine I teach)  
 About—let me see—  
 Thrice as long as you preach  
 So skimming the fat off,  
 Say Grace with your hat off,  
 O then, with what rapture  
 Will it fill Dean & Chapter!<sup>64</sup>

**64** John Gay to Swift,  
 September 1726,  
*Correspondence*, iii, 168–69.  
 See Harold William's note  
 on the original manuscript  
 carrying these verses  
 and other contemporary  
 transcriptions that 'assign  
 authorship to Pope'.

Acknowledging receipt of this recipe in a letter addressed to Gay and Pope the following month, it is clear that the dean had discussed it carefully with ‘the Lad[ies] here’—adverting to Johnson and Dingley—who find fault with the instructions regarding the recommended cooking vessels, ‘Swear[ing] that a Sauce Pan cannot get into a Kettle, and therefore they resolve to change it into a deep Earthen Pot’. With this adjustment, Swift assures his friends that he is ‘going to try your Receipt of the Knuckle of Veal, and [he wishes] the measure of Ingredients may prove better than [that] of the Verses’.<sup>65</sup> He adds that he would like them to also send him another friend’s recipe for ‘a Chicken in a wooden Bo[w]l’, adding, rather pathetically, that carving out time to reply to Gay and Pope meant that he had time that day to only ‘dine upon Eggs alone’.<sup>66</sup> Further discussion of the veal recipe continues, and within a week Gay informs Swift that its source is a certain Monsieur Davoux, the French cook of their mutual friend William Pulteney, and it has already met with approval at ‘one of our Twickenham entertainments’; in other words, a get-together at Pope’s home. Gay clarifies the nature of the cooking vessel that should be used—‘a Stew-pan’, not a saucepan. He concedes, however, that an ‘Earthen Vessel’, well-sealed, is a suitable alternative.<sup>67</sup> One suspects that Swift and his culinary advisors in Dublin enjoyed the dish as it was prepared in the cooking vessel of *their* choice.

Swift was especially proud of ‘his’ puddings. He did not, of course, prepare them—that was the task of his housekeepers. He appears to have secured the original recipe for a plum pudding—‘su[e]t and Plumbs are three fourths of the Ingredients’—from Sir William Temple’s sister, Lady Giffard. The dean boasted of this dessert to his friend Castle-Durrow, explaining to him that ‘[a]s to puddings, my Lord, I am not only the best, but the sole perfect maker of them in this Kingdom: they are universally known and esteemed under the name of Deanry Puddings’.<sup>68</sup> Castle-Durrow confirms the excellence of Swift’s puddings, observing in 1737 that he had ‘been acquainted with [them] these 40 years, they [were] the best sweet thing [he] ever [ate]’ (fine competition, then, for the preserved oranges that sent Lord Orrery and his lady into ecstasies).<sup>69</sup>

In the early 1710s, dining on a number of occasions in London with a man whom he described as ‘a true epicure’, Swift proved that he was not as unappreciative of ‘prodigious fine dinners’ as he claimed to be. Qualifying his gastronomic guide, Charles Darteneuf, as a lover of ‘good bits and good sups’, Swift could barely disguise his delight at being introduced to a few of his friend’s select dining spots.<sup>70</sup> At the ‘little snug house’ of one of the clerks of the kitchen to the Queen,

65 Swift to Alexander Pope and John Gay, 15 October 1726, iii, *Correspondence*, 173.

66 Swift to Alexander Pope and John Gay, 15 October 1726, iii, *Correspondence*, 173.

67 John Gay to Swift, 22 October 1726, *Correspondence*, iii, 174; William Pulteney (1684–1764) was, in 1726, a

political ally of Swift’s friend Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke (after 1712) and part of the dean’s circle of friends who gravitated around Alexander Pope at his home in Twickenham.

68 Swift to Lord Castle-Durrow, 24 December 1736, *Correspondence*, iv, 556.

69 Lord Castle-Durrow to Swift, 11 January 1736–37, *Correspondence*, v, 1. 70 Charles Darteneuf (n.d., 1664–1737), see ‘Dartiquenave, Charles’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/search?q=charles=dartiquenave&searchBrtn=Search&isQuickSearch=>

true; Swift, Letter XLIII, 21 March 1711–12, *Journal*, 429.

Swift was favourably impressed that there, in Darteneuf's company, he enjoyed 'the Queen's wine', while demurring—unconvincingly—that he was served 'such very fine victuals' that he could not eat them. Nevertheless, his (possibly feigned) delicacy did not prevent Swift from joining Darteneuf at the table of another clerk of the Queen's Kitchen the following year. It seems that on that occasion, Swift—by now a seasoned diner at what he called 'great tables'—didn't find the bits and sups offered to him too fine to digest.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, it does appear that Swift, like his admirer Voltaire, generally favoured plainly prepared dishes and he was not an enthusiast of the eighteenth-century's '*nouvelle cuisine*'.<sup>72</sup> Voltaire could have been speaking for Swift when the former wrote that his digestive system couldn't suffer heavily sauced foods and that he disliked dishes prepared in such a way that the original ingredients could not be easily distinguished or were disguised, such as 'a mince composed of turkey, hare, and rabbit, that I'm supposed to take for a single variety of meat'.<sup>73</sup> Voltaire's gastronomic practices also mirrored Swift's in that he paid close attention to what he drank, consuming wine strictly in moderation (in the context of the period). Voltaire seems to have drunk about the same amount of wine daily as Swift—a half-litre to Swift's pint—and the French writer was equally particular about the drink's quality, insisting that it had to be excellent.<sup>74</sup>

Swift hinted that his aversion to sauces may have been linked to the challenge they presented to a diner attempting to lift sauced morsels successfully from plate to mouth. A discussion of the use of forks arose in Swift's correspondence sometime after he had dined at his friend Pope's home, on an occasion when John Gay and his patroness, the Duchess of Queensberry, were fellow diners. Swift opted to use a knife to propel food into his mouth, in lieu of the two-pronged fork supplied at Pope's table. The duchess was apparently discomfited by the dean's employment of this retrograde dining practice.<sup>75</sup> In a letter written in February of 1727–28, Gay first passed on a request from the duchess that Swift adopt the habit of using a fork rather than a knife to put food into his mouth, telling his friend that he 'hope[d] (for her sake) you will take care to put your fork to all its proper uses', and, in future, keep knives clear of his mouth.<sup>76</sup> A third

71 Swift, Letter XVII, 27 February 1710–11, *Journal*, 159; Letter XXVII, 29 July 1711, *Journal*, 262. 72 John Lyon cited in Ehrenpreis, *Swift*, iii, 330. There is an extensive range of literature on the subject of the evolution of '*nouvelle cuisine*' in this period. See, for example, the following: Beatrice Fink, 'Introduction', in Beatrice Fink (ed.), *Les Liaisons Savoureuses: Réflexions et Pratiques Culinaires au XVIIIe Siècle* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 1995), 7–20; Stephen

Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, [1985] 1996), 71–83; Dorothy Cashman, 'French Boobys and Good English Cooks: The Relationship with French Culinary Influences in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland', in Ben Keatinge and Mary Pierce (eds), *Reimagining Ireland: Proceedings from the AFIS Conference 2012*, Vol. 55 *Reimagining Ireland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 207–222.

73 'Je ne puis pas manger [...] d'un hachis composé de dinde, de lièvre, et de lapin, qu'on veut me faire prendre pour une seule viande', Voltaire to M. le Comte d'Argental, 4 September 1765, '*Correspondence générale*', in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Vol. XLVII (Paris: Armand Aubrée, 1830), 429. 74 'Je bois du vin modérément, et je trouve forte étranges les gens [...] qui ne savent pas même ce qu'ils mangent', Voltaire to M. le Comte d'Argental, 4 September 1765; Voltaire drank about a half-litre of wine a day, but

of the best [quality] ('environ un demi-litre de vin par jour, mais du meilleur'), Christiane Mervaud, 'Du nectar pour Voltaire', *Dix-huitième Siècle*, No. 29 (1997), 137–45, 137.

75 For a discussion of the historical development of the use of the fork at table, see Norbert Elias, trans. Edmund Jephcott, *The Civilizing Process: The Development of Manners* (New York: Urizen Books, [1939] 1978), 68–70, 95–96, 126–29, 151. 76 John Gay to Swift, 15 February 1727–28, *Correspondence*, iii, 266.



party was introduced into the conversation in March 1728–29, when Swift, in a letter to a mutual friend, Charles Ford, asked him to ‘Let Mr Gay likewise tell the Dutchess, that I promise never to take up my Meat on a knife’.<sup>77</sup> This reassurance, if communicated to Gay, did not suffice. Gay reinforced the duchess’s appeal on 9 November 1729, pleading with Swift to ‘Never more despise a Fork with three prongs. I wish too you would not eat from the point of your knife’.<sup>78</sup> Swift replied on 20 November, asking Gay to assuage the offended sensibilities of the duchess with the following explanation: ‘Pray tell her Grace that the fault was in Mr. Pope’s Poetical forks, and not in my want of manners; and that I will rob Neptune of his Trident rather than commit such Solecism in good breeding again’.<sup>79</sup> Sending his respects to the duchess in a letter to Gay the following March, Swift waggishly adds that he can ‘never dine without thinking of her, although it be with some difficulty that I can obey her, when I happen to dine with Forks that have but two prongs and the Sa[u]ce is not very consistent’.<sup>80</sup> On 8 November 1730, while Gay was staying with the Queensberrys, he wrote asking Swift to call by there, if he should come to England soon, jokingly—or perhaps anxiously—telling Swift that, at the ducal seat, he would ‘be welcome to a three-prong’d fork’.<sup>81</sup> Either way, Gay appears to be firmly hinting that should Swift dine at the Queensberrys’ he had better use a fork at table. Swift responds immediately—and with a surprising degree of equanimity—continuing to parse the inefficiency of the two-pronged fork that, in his view, forced him to instead use a knife:

I desire you will tell her Grace, that the ill management of forks is not to be helpt [*sic*] when they are only bidental [*sic*], which happens in all poor houses, especially those of Poets, upon which account, a knife was absolutely necessary at Mr. Pope’s, where it was morally impossible with a bidental knife to convey a morsel of beef with the incumbrance of mustard and turnips into your mouth at once.<sup>82</sup>

Swift finally accedes to his friends’ cutlery recommendations after receiving both Gay’s and the duchess’s repeated expressions of concern—for the safety of the dean’s sharply-honed tongue as much as for his table manners, perhaps. In a final effort to appease the playwright and the affronted duchess, Swift tells Gay that he can inform her that he has spent ‘30 pounds to provide tridents [three-pronged forks] for fear of offending her [further]’.<sup>83</sup> Swift has often been

<sup>77</sup> Swift to Charles Ford, 18 March 1728–9, *Correspondence*, iii, 321. <sup>78</sup> John Gay to Swift, 9 November 1729, *Correspondence*, iii, 357. <sup>79</sup> Swift to John Gay, 20 November 1729, *Correspondence*, iii, 362. <sup>80</sup> Swift to John Gay, 19 March 1729–30, *Correspondence*, iii, 380. <sup>81</sup> John Gay to Swift, 8 November 1730, *Correspondence*, iii, 415. <sup>82</sup> Swift to John Gay, 10 November 1730, *Correspondence*, iii, 417. <sup>83</sup> Swift to John Gay, 10 November 1730, *Correspondence*, iii, 417.

depicted as a prickly, even difficult friend by his critics and biographers.<sup>84</sup> In this instance, one can only admire his forbearance when faced with an epistolary onslaught of well-intentioned-but-unsolicited advice from friends—the sort that is frequently most difficult to digest.

### Not fit for a dog

Swift appreciated the calibre of the fine fare served at the tables of his illustrious friends in England, even if it amused him to pretend otherwise (and even if he didn't always eat it). The following witticism of Swift's upon receiving a dinner invitation from his friend Henry St John made the rounds of court in late August of 1711: 'He showed me his bill of fare to tempt me to dine with him. "Poh", said I, "I value not your bill of fare; give me your bill of company"'. Swift delightedly reported to MD that the Lord Treasurer (Oxford), 'told it [to] everybody as a notable thing'.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, no matter how accustomed Swift became to the *haute cuisine* served at 'great tables', he never disdained simple dishes. He could sup one evening, as he did in January of 1713, at Oxford's table, and a couple of days later share a bite with a friend at a 'hedge ale-house' where, the humble location notwithstanding, Swift claimed they ate 'like emperors'.<sup>86</sup> Two decades later, he informed Oxford that when he was without company at the deanery, he 'dine[d] often like a King [...] My Chicken and Pint of French wine is my dinner'.<sup>87</sup> He disliked dining at any public establishments where the food or company—or both—was likely to be 'insignificant, low, and scurvy'.<sup>88</sup> Even at Queen Anne's court, some tables proved more desirable than others, and Swift went out of his way to avoid 'the worst provided table' there—the one allocated to the chaplains.<sup>89</sup>

Evidently, not all hostelries, or even noble tables, served food and wine that met Swift's exacting standards. When he ate mutton, he often noted in the *Journal* the specific cut he dined on, such as chops, breast, leg, loin, and shoulder. On the sole occasion that he specified a style of preparation of the meat, it came with a harsh critique. Swift grumbled that, in a tavern, he had been served '[a] neck of mutton dressed à la Maintenon that the dog could not eat'.<sup>90</sup> Since it was not uncommon in the period to throw food on the floor for scavenging cats and dogs, a dog may very well have turned its nose up at the offending plate. Some 'ugly, nasty, filthy' wine was served with the aforementioned mutton dish, a combination that kept Swift awake an entire night with a

**84** Edward Young described Swift as 'piqued by many [men], and peevish at more', Young, *Conjectures*, 881. **85** Swift, Letter XXIX, 2 September 1711, *Journal*, 286. **86** Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* defines 'hedge', when employed as an adjective, as indicating 'something mean, vile, of the lowest class' (*Samuel Johnson's Dictionary*

[online] available at <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>; Swift, Letter LVIII, 10 and 12 January 1712–13, *Journal*, 490–92. **87** Swift to Lord Oxford, 2 September 1735, *Correspondence*, iv, 379. **88** Swift, Letter XXI, 25 April 1711, *Journal*, 200. **89** Swift, Letter XXXI, 6 October 1711, *Journal*, 309. **90** Swift, Letter V, 8 October 1710, *Journal*,

32; The fact that a dish 'à la Maintenon' was on a tavern menu indicates the degree to which French culinary influence had seeped into England's gastronomic register in the period. This was equally the case in Ireland where, up until the Act of Union, 'the standards of French *haute cuisine* prevailed' amongst prosperous members of

Anglo-Irish society, Cashman, 'French Boobys', 217. See also Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman, 'Irish culinary manuscripts and printed cookbooks: A discussion', *Petits Propos Culinaires* 94 (2011), 81–101.

sour stomach.<sup>91</sup> Dyspepsia was also provoked after his friend, William Congreve, the dramatist, gave him ‘nasty white wine’ to drink, and, after dining on sturgeon one day, he found that it inconveniently resisted digestion.<sup>92</sup> An exceptional evening, during which the health-conscious Swift drank ‘nasty white wine till eleven’ with an acquaintance, left him feeling ‘sick, and ashamed of it’.<sup>93</sup> Swift witheringly dismisses the meat and drink provided at a bishop’s table as ‘very so-so’; he complains that an ale-house dished up ‘a scurvy dinner’, and he damns the overpriced, poor-quality wine served at a tavern.<sup>94</sup> An earl, playing host to Swift and some other guests, is labelled ‘a puppy’ for offering them nothing but a broiled turkey leg and fish. Swift’s dissatisfaction focussed on the piscine platter because, to his disgust, ‘the carps were raw’. Worse still, the miserable meal was accompanied by ‘poison[ous]’ wine.<sup>95</sup>



**Figure 4** Detail, *Still life in a stable*. Hendrik Potuyl, 1639–49 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

<sup>91</sup> Swift, Letter V, 9 October 1710, *Journal*, 32–33. <sup>92</sup> Swift, Letter XVI, 16 February 1710–1711, *Journal*, 151; Swift, Letter XXIX, 5 September 1711, *Journal*, 287. <sup>93</sup> Swift, Letter XI, 20 December 1710, *Journal*, 100. <sup>94</sup> Swift, Letter LV, 18 November 1712, *Journal*, 471; Swift, Letter XIII, 9 January 1710–1711, *Journal*, 123.

<sup>95</sup> The peer referred to, the 2nd Earl of Abingdon, must have been known for his poor table since Swift noted that

‘everybody laughed at me for dining with him’, Swift, Letter LX, 18 February 1712–1713, *Journal*, 510. <sup>96</sup> Swift to John Arbuthnot, n.d. November 1734, *Correspondence*, iv, 268; Swift was not unique in viewing wine as an important element in the domestic-medicine arsenal. See McConnell, ‘Honest Claret’, 214–19; McConnell, ‘Ireland in the Georgian Era’, 212; Tara McConnell, ‘The Social Meaning of Claret in

### Sober gallons and hospitality

Swift, ever-conscious of the importance of drinking moderately, nonetheless believed firmly that wine played a significant role in managing and staving off the onset of his physical disorders. He drank wine therapeutically, certainly, telling his friend John Arbuthnot that drinking ‘a bottle of French wine myself every day [...] is the only thing that keeps me out of pain’.<sup>96</sup> It is equally true, however, that for most of his life he enjoyed drinking wine on a gustatory level, as evidenced by numerous references in his correspondence to the beverage. Swift’s friend Sheridan drew attention to the dean’s appreciation of fine wine in a rhyme he composed to tease him about the elevated company—and very fine wines—he was enjoying during a visit to England in 1726: ‘[W]hen with those lords you dine, They treat you with the best of wine, Burgundy, Cyprus and Tokay; Why so can we as well as they’.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, claret, or a close approximation of it, was the wine that Swift preferred drinking over the course of his life.<sup>98</sup> Acknowledging his own and his compatriots’ penchant for it, he occasionally referred to claret as ‘Irish wine’ in the *Journal*, especially when he drank it with friends from Ireland.<sup>99</sup>

Swift enjoyed joshing Stella about her fondness for claret in the *Journal*. He would usually do so at the close of a missive when he would likewise reference her enthusiasm for card-playing and orange-eating. In October of 1710, Stella is directed thus: ‘And so get you gone to your cards, and your claret and orange’.<sup>100</sup> ‘Drink up your claret’, Swift advises her a few months later, ‘and do not lose your money’.<sup>101</sup> In September of 1711, listing the lovely fruits in season, Swift teasingly wonders if Stella eats any, then playfully concludes that she does not and that her chief pleasures are ‘nothing but claret and [the card game] ombre!’.<sup>102</sup> On another occasion, he tells her that in London that day he had been drinking ‘as good wine as you do [in Dublin]’, hinting at both the general superiority of the claret available in Ireland’s capital (in comparison to England’s) and Stella’s wine connoisseurship.<sup>103</sup> That Stella enjoyed her wine—regularly—is emphasised by Swift’s pre-emptive reply to a query about how she was passing her time ‘in this ugly weather? Gaming and drinking, I suppose’.<sup>104</sup> In April of 1721, Stella apparently asked Swift to provide her with a bottle of the luxury wine, Château

Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, in Charles C. Ludington (ed.), *The Irish in Eighteenth-Century Bordeaux: Contexts, Relations, and Commodities* (London: Routledge, 2024), 209–30, 218. **97** Thomas Sheridan, ‘A Letter to the Dean when in England, 1726’, in Walter Scott (ed.), *The Works of Jonathan Swift, D. D., Dean of St. Patrick’s, Dublin: Containing Additional Letters, Tracts, and Poems Not Hitherto Published with Notes and A Life of the Author*, Vol. XV

(Edinburgh: A. Constable and Co.; London: White, Cochran and Co., Gale, Curtis and Fenner; Dublin: J. Cumming, 1814), 112. **98** McConnell, ‘Honest Claret’, 188–94. **99** For more on wine connoisseurship in Georgian Ireland, see McConnell, ‘Honest Claret’, 155–162; Swift, Letters VI and VII, 17 and 20 October 1710; Letter XXXVIII, 29 December 1711, *Journal*, 43, 45, 371. **100** Swift, Letter V, 6 October 1710, *Journal*, 29. **101** Stella,

rather than Rebecca Dingley, was the claret enthusiast in the ‘MD’ pairing, just as she was the frequent loser at cards, so this admonishment is pointedly directed at her, Swift, Letter XIII, 15 January 1710–11, *Journal*, 127; For a wider discussion of female wine consumption in eighteenth-century Ireland, see McConnell, ‘Honest Claret’, 208–14. **102** Swift, Letter XXIX, 1 September 1711, *Journal*, 285. **103** Swift, Letter V, 7 October

1710, *Journal*, 30; For an in-depth discussion of the quality of claret in Georgian Ireland in comparison to that of England in the same period, see McConnell, ‘Honest Claret’, 155–63. **104** Swift, Letter XVI, 10 February 1710–1711, *Journal*, 148.

Margaux, but the manner in which she asked for it annoyed him, and he riposted ‘You may be sure, if there be a good bottle you shall have it. I am sure I never refused you, and therefore that reflection might have been spared’. Piqued by Stella’s suggestion that he was ever less than generous with her, it seems that Swift decided to emphasise his annoyance by correcting her spelling of the desired wine, cattily informing her that it is ‘*Margoose*, and not *Mergoose*, it is spelt with an *a*, Simpleton’.<sup>105</sup>

Swift stinted neither himself nor his friends on wine. He willingly supplied first-growth claret to the demanding Stella, and he was reputed to be a generous host. Extending an invitation in 1727 to his friends John Gay and Alexander Pope to stay with him, Swift tried to tempt them to accept by telling them that, in Dublin, ‘All things to eat and drink except very few, [are] better than in London’, assuring them, additionally, of ‘[a] very good Apartment [and] good French wine’.<sup>106</sup> The dean was ‘thrifty in everything but wine’, and deanery guests were almost invariably treated to ‘Honest Claret’.<sup>107</sup> Doubtless, Swift’s friends appreciated his expenditure on high quality wine: his friend Castle-Durrow affirmed that he was highly regarded as a host, saying ‘I am told your Wine is excellent’.<sup>108</sup> Swift replied that he paid ‘a reasonable price’ for his wine, but that if his old friend came to visit, he would see if his cellar could yet furnish ‘an odd bottle of a particular choice wine’—one so special that it was ‘like Court secrets kept in the Dark’.<sup>109</sup>

In London in the early 1710s, to ensure the high calibre of the wine he drank when he was obliged to pay for it himself, Swift spent at least five to six shillings a bottle.<sup>110</sup> Dining with wealthy merchants in London at the fashionable Pontack’s, Swift amusedly observed that ‘[the owner] told us, although his wine was so good [...] he [charged] but seven shillings a flask. Are not these pretty rates?’.<sup>111</sup> Swift’s wealthy friends treated him to the very best wines. From the merchant friend who introduced him to Tokay, which Swift found ‘admirable, but not to the degree [he] expected’, to being served the wine that ‘the Duke of Tuscany used to send to Sir William Temple’ by his friend Henry St John (‘Mr Secretary’), and which he liked ‘mightily’, Swift’s enjoyment of fine wine is palpable.<sup>112</sup> St John sent him a ‘chest of Florence [wine]’ since he expressed such enthusiasm for it, and Swift wished that Stella, too, could share in the pleasure of drinking it, telling her ‘I would give two guineas you [could have] it’.<sup>113</sup> Pleasures shared are pleasures doubled, and Swift’s wish that Stella could experience the same delight that he takes in St John’s Florence wine indicates the depth of his affection for her.

**105** Swift to Stella, 30 April 1721, *Correspondence*, ii, 385; Anglophones tended to misspell *Margaux* rather fancifully in the period.  
**106** Swift to John Gay and Alexander Pope, 21 November 1727, *Correspondence*, iii.  
**107** Swift to John Arbuthnot,

n.d. November 1734, *Correspondence*, iv, 268; Swift to Charles Wogan, n.d. 1735–36, *Correspondence*, iv, 470.  
**108** Lord Castle-Durrow to Swift, 4 December 1736, *Correspondence*, iv, 548.  
**109** Swift to Lord Castle-Durrow, 14 December 1736,

*Correspondence*, iv, 556.  
**110** The following are examples of British currency values of 1710 as they compare to those of 2017. They show that Swift did not scrim on his expenditure on wine: 5 shillings = £26.26; 6 shillings = £31.48; 7 shillings = £36.72,

The National Archives [UK] Currency Converter: 1270–2017 [online], available at <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>>.  
**111** Swift, Letter XXXVIII 16 August 1711, *Journal*, 271.  
**112** Swift, Letter III, 14

In her biography of Swift, Victoria Glendinning states that Swift ‘learned to drink in London, and was often hungover’.<sup>114</sup> This makes Swift sound surprisingly *louche*. He may have suffered an occasional hangover, but he deliberately chose not to drink to excess as a rule, always bearing in mind his position as a clergyman.<sup>115</sup> The *Journal* suggests that, on the contrary, in London he learned how to *avoid* drinking, and, in fact, encouraged some friends—especially the hard-drinking Henry St John—to follow his example. To Swift’s dismay, it was not unusual for informal meetings and dinners with his ministerial friends to degenerate into tedious drinking sessions, commending to MD ‘an old saying and a true, “after much drinking, little thinking”’.<sup>116</sup> On an evening when Swift and St John intended to discuss ‘some business of importance’ with Harley, to Swift’s irritation the plan collapsed when unexpected company showed up and countless bottles made the rounds. Swift tried to convince St John to leave the bacchanalia with him, ‘but he was in for’t’, so Swift resigned himself to abandoning the bibulous ‘toad’ to his drinking.<sup>117</sup> Referring to a dinner at which a renowned general was to be entertained by St John and a passel of foreign ministers, Swift predicted ‘They will all be drunk, I am sure’.<sup>118</sup> Swift said that he ‘chid [St John] severely’ about his drinking, believing that downing burgundy and champagne while ‘sitting up all night at business’ caused his friend to be ‘very ill’ in early April of 1711. At a subsequent dinner with St John, Swift ‘would not let him drink one drop of champagne or burgundy without water’. To encourage his friend in this abstemious and, for St John, exceptional measure, Swift drank diluted wine alongside him.<sup>119</sup> Swift himself was not a keen champagne drinker. He had to be ‘teased’ into drinking three or four glasses of it on one occasion; on another he blamed the wine for giving him a pain in his back; and he ‘stole away’ from a post-prandial booze-up at which countless toasts were made in champagne, seeking refuge in the company of tea-drinking ladies.<sup>120</sup>

Like his friend Orrery, Swift did not enjoy the over-consumption at table that was common at dinners with their social peers; he therefore perfected strategies for avoiding socially enforced surfeiting. ‘Stealing away’ from revels, whenever it was possible to do so discreetly, appears to have been one of his favourite tactics. For example, he reported to MD with satisfaction that he ‘stole away at five’ from a well-attended (and doubtless bibulous) dinner to ‘[get] home like a good boy’.<sup>121</sup> At another lavish but noisy dinner, Swift ‘stole away before the second course came in’.<sup>122</sup> In spite of such measures, Swift was sometimes obliged to eat and drink more than he found comfortable. Attendance at a ducal repast at the home

September 1710, *Journal*, 10; Letter XXI, 15 April 1711, *Journal*, 194. **113** Letter XXI, 16 April 1711, *Journal*, 195. **114** Victoria Glendinning, *Jonathan Swift* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), 122. **115** Swift, for instance, was too scrupulous to ‘enter into the

Church merely for [financial] support’, and waited to do so until the genuineness of his motivation could not be questioned. Swift cited in Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift*, 72. **116** Swift, Letter XLII, 26 February 1711–12, *Journal*, 411. **117** Swift, Letter XIV, 18

January 1710–11, *Journal*, 130–131. **118** Swift, Letter XXXVII, 16 December 1711, *Journal*, 362. **119** Swift, Letter XX, 7 and 9 April 1711, *Journal*, 188, 189. **120** Swift, Letter LX, 20 February 1712–1713, *Journal*, 511. **121** Swift, Letter VIII, 8 November 1710, *Journal*, 60.

**122** Swift, Letter IX, 15 November 1710, *Journal*, 70.



*The Most Noble Prince James Duke of Ormonde*  
sculpsit J. Smith del. G. Kneller pinxit in h. a. 1711

*The Most Noble Prince James Duke of Ormonde*

of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Ormonde caused Swift to fret that, as prevailing standards of etiquette demanded, he had probably eaten and drunk too much.<sup>123</sup>

Swift distinguished himself from his heavy-drinking acquaintances by (voluntarily) discussing his wine consumption with physicians, one of whom assured him that drinking a little undiluted wine would not be harmful.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, he usually chose to dilute his wine with water—partly to avoid inebriation, and partly because he believed doing so best suited his personal health regime. Swift synthesised his strategy for avoiding drinking too much thus: ‘I drink little, miss my glass often, put water in my wine, and go away before the rest, which I take to be a good receipt for sobriety’. He was so satisfied with these manoeuvres that he decided to ‘make a proverb of [them]’ and set it in rhyme:

Drink little at a time;  
Put water in your wine;  
Miss your glass when you can;  
And go off the first man.<sup>125</sup>

After a boozy dinner in 1710, he primly reported to MD that his fellow diners ‘were half-fuddled, but not I: for I mixed water with my wine’. In her memoirs, Laetitia Pilkington confirmed that, at the time she knew the dean, in the late 1720s and early 1730s, he ‘never drank above half a Pint of wine, in every Glass of which he mixed water and sugar’.<sup>126</sup> In an era when, according to Lord Orrery, ‘a right jolly glorious memory Hibernian never roll[ed] into Bed without having taken a sober Gallon of Claret to his own Share’, Swift’s moderation is noteworthy.<sup>127</sup>

### ‘A Little and perfectly good’

Within the strict parameters he imposed on his personal consumption of food and wine—necessary, as he believed, for the management of his physical disorders—Swift appears to have relished his food and drink when his health permitted. The dean’s friend Sheridan was surely not taunting him (but, rather, trying to tempt him to visit) when he listed the bounty—so ‘that all things [would] be to [Swift’s] heart’s desire’—his guest could expect to meet with at his home: ‘such venison, such mutton, such small beer, such chickens, such butter, such trouts, such pouts, such ducks, such beef, such fish, such eels, such turkeys [...],

**123** Swift Letter LIX, 4 February 1712–1713, *Journal*, 503. **124** Swift, Letter XLVIII, 17 June 1712, *Journal*, 443. **125** Swift, Letter XXI, 21 April 1711, *Journal*, 197–198. **126** Laetitia Pilkington, *Memoirs of Mrs Pilkington, Wife to the Rev. Mr Matthew Pilkington, Written by Herself. Wherein Are Occasionally*

*Interspersed, All Her Poems; with Anecdotes of Several Eminent Persons, Living and Dead* (Dublin: [n.d.]; London: R. Griffiths, 1748), 185. **127** E. C. Boyle (ed.), *The Orrery Papers*, 2 vols (London: Duckworth and Company, 1903), i, 157.

**Figure 5** James Butler, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Ormonde (1665–1745) John Simon, engraver, 1675–1755, after Michael Dahl, 1659–1743, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



such potatoes, such raspberries [and] such bilberries'.<sup>128</sup> If this list truly details Swift's tastes—and there are sufficient examples of discussions pertaining to food and wine between Sheridan and the dean in the latter's correspondence to indicate that it does—then the dietary self-discipline he exercised was truly admirable, especially in the context of the gastronomic habitudes of his social class and the age in which he lived. Besides regularly denying himself longed-for luscious fruits in season, he restricted himself to the plainest fare whenever he suspected an onset of the symptoms that tormented him. Irvin Ehrenpreis observed of Swift that 'when he felt dizzy, he avoided heavy dining', and there were many occasions throughout his life when he acted as he did on 21 April 1711. Describing himself as 'something of a totterer' that day, when he had arranged to dine with friends, Swift drank only a little watered-down wine and refrained from feasting on 'ham and pigeons, pease-soup, stewed beef [and] cold salmon', fearing that such dishes might upset his stomach and further disturb his equilibrium. Instead, he chose to eat only 'gentle', easily-digestible food.<sup>129</sup>

Running counter-current to period dictates on hospitality in Ireland, the excessive nature of which provoked much commentary at home and abroad, Swift's style of entertaining mirrored his own preference for the moderate consumption of high quality food and drink. Commenting on the dinners that guests were served at the deanery, Lord Castle-Durrow assured Swift that 'the Oeconomy of your table is delicious, a Little and perfectly good is the greatest Treat'.<sup>130</sup> Swift exercised a considerable degree of restraint at the table. Yet this chapter runs counter to the assertion that he 'was not greatly concerned about food'. On the contrary, his personal correspondence reveals that 'the sharpest tongue of the age [...] accommodated a discriminating palate', and Swift appears to have been a gourmet—albeit a thwarted one.<sup>131</sup>

**128** The Rev. Thomas Sheridan to Swift, 16 July 1735, *Correspondence*, iv, 366. **129** Ehrenpreis, *Swift*, ii, 557; Swift, Letter XXI, 21 April 1711, *Journal*, 198. **130** Lord Castle-Durrow to Swift, 11 January 1736–37, *Correspondence*, v, 1; See Ehrenpreis for a description of deanery dinners (Ehrenpreis, *Swift*,

iii, 330). **131** Thompson and Thompson (eds), *The Account Books*, lxxii; McConnell, 'Honest Claret', 188.

**Figure 6** Mrs Laetitia Pilkington née Van Lewen. (c. 1712–c. 1750) Richard Purcell, engraver, c. 1736–c. 1766, after Nathaniel Hone the Elder, 1718–84. National Gallery of Ireland



*Walthamstow Pinax!*

*R. Parcell fecit*

*M<sup>rs</sup> Letitia Pilkington*

*Walthamstow Pinax!*

*R. Parcell fecit*

*M<sup>rs</sup> Letitia Pilkington*



**Figure 7**  
Jonathan Swift  
(1667–1745),  
Dean of St Patrick's  
Cathedral, Dublin,  
and satirist. Andrew  
Miller, engraver,  
fl. 1737–63, after  
Francis Bindon,  
c. 1690–1765  
National Gallery  
of Ireland

Dr Tara McConnell has been described as ‘the leading scholar of eighteenth-century Irish wine drinking’. As a food historian with a particular interest in drinking studies and material culture, she has written and lectured extensively on these topics. Her monograph, *‘Honest Claret’: The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland’s Favourite Wine*, describes the lively role that claret, the red wine of Bordeaux, played in eighteenth-century Ireland, making it an important addition to the historiography of Irish gastronomy. Tara completed an MSc in 2009, and was awarded a doctorate in 2021 by TU Dublin for her research on the history of claret. She is a founding member of the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium (2012–present). Currently working as an Independent Scholar, Tara enjoys contributing essays, book chapters, and articles to scholarly journals and blogs.



Section 4

# Developments in food supply, technology, and trade









## Cill Liadáin

Antaine Raiftearaí (1784–1835)

Cill Liadáin an baile a bhfásann gach ní ann,  
tá sméara, sú craobh ann is meas ar gach sort;  
is dá mbeinnse i mo sheasamh ann i gceartlár mo dhaoine,  
d'imeodh an aois díom is bheinn arís óg.

Tá cruithneacht is coirce, fás eorna agus lín ann,  
seagal breá aoibhinn, arán plúir agus feoil;  
lucht déanta uisce beatha gan licence ag díol ann,  
Móruaisle na tíre ann ag imirt is ag ól.

Tá cur agus treabhadh ann, is leasú gan aoileach,  
Is iomdha sin ní ann nár labhair mé air fós:  
áitheanna is muilte ag obair gan scíth ann,  
Ní íoctar pín chíosá ann ná dadaidh dá shórt.

Tá an t-uisce sa loch, is an abhainn ag triall ann,  
na coracha déanta, is na líonta i gcóir;  
tá an liús is an breac is an eascann ina luí ann,  
an portán, and faochán, and ronnach, is an rón.

Tá an bradáin is an ballach ag preabadh gach oíche ann,  
is an liúbhán ag triall ann ón bhfarraige mhór;  
an tortoise is an gliomach is an turbard riabhach,  
cnúdáin is iasc ann chomh fairsing le móin.

## **Killedan**

Antaine Raiftearaí (1784–1835)

Killedan is the town where everything grows,  
Blackberries, raspberries, and mast of all sorts,  
If I found myself standing in the midst of my people,  
The years would fall from me and I would no longer be old.

There is wheat and oats, the growing of barley and flax there,  
pleasant fine rye, flour bread and meat;  
moonshiners of poitín without licence for sale there,  
the great and the good there, at drink and at play.

There is planting and ploughing, and fertilising without lime,  
And many a thing I have yet to report;  
Kilns and mills working without rest there,  
Not a penny's rent paid there, or nought of that sort.

There is water in the lake and the river approaching,  
the weirs readymade there, and the nets in fine shape;  
the pike, and the trout, and the eel there all resting,  
The crab, the periwinkle, the mackerel and the seal.

The salmon and wrasse are leaping each evening,  
And the basking shark returning from far oceans' surf;  
The tortoise, and the lobster, and the speckled turbot,  
Gurnard and fish there as plentiful as turf.

*English translation by Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire*

**14**

*Food, Feast and Famine  
in the Correspondence of  
Daniel O'Connell*

**Grace Neville**

Even after two centuries, fascination with the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell (1775–1847), for the widest of audiences far beyond the usual academic ones, shows no signs of waning. It explains the appeal of the O'Connell Summer School held every year in the Liberator's native Iveragh Peninsula (*Uíbh Ráthach*) in south-west Kerry. It explains the invitation issued by one of London's oldest clubs and icon of liberal and progressive politics, the Reform Club, to President Mary Robinson to address it on O'Connell on 15 May 1997, the 150th anniversary of his death. It explains the warm welcome given in 2022 to a two-part RTÉ documentary on O'Connell made by leading journalist and broadcaster, Olivia O'Leary.<sup>1</sup> It even explains the migration of O'Connell's story into contemporary genres such as graphic novels.<sup>2</sup> These publications, events and programmes have arguably focused mainly on O'Connell the public man: on his groundbreaking career as politician and lawyer and on his worldwide fame and enduring legacy. This is not surprising. However, a close reading of the eight volumes of his edited correspondence provides a more rounded picture of the man in the fascinating account it offers of his everyday life and of the material culture in which it was embedded.<sup>3</sup> From his correspondence, he emerges not just as a towering political figure on the national and international stage, but as a man who relished good food and good wine. In January 1841, he received the following invitation: 'A number of the Belfast tee-totalers are anxious that you should honour them with your company at a public soirée'. A somewhat cryptic footnote by O'Connell's editor and kinsman, historian Maurice R. O'Connell (1922–2005), says it all: O'Connell 'does not appear to have attended this *soirée*' (2794).<sup>4</sup>

In the French context, the theme of food and drink in writers from Rabelais and Montaigne to modern ones like Proust and Marguerite Duras, has long been used by scholars and other commentators as a useful entry point into the writings in question. In the political sphere, at least in modern times, French politicians frequently use food and drink to enhance or even invent a vote-gathering *persona*. Thus, Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France from 2007 to 2012, harnessed his Coke-drinking teetotaler image to present himself as a free spirit keen to break with the past, while his immediate predecessor as President of France from 1995 to 2007, Jacques Chirac, let it be known that his preferred dish was *tête de veau*, a peasant dish that Chirac, graduate of two of France's elite *grandes écoles*, husband of an aristocrat and owner of a château in Corrèze, privately disliked but that nonetheless served him well in burnishing his credentials as a self-proclaimed 'man of the people'. In the Irish context, studies of the relationship that leading

<sup>1</sup> Olivia O'Leary, *Daniel O'Connell: Forgotten King of Ireland*, RTÉ1, 22 & 29 August 2019. <sup>2</sup> See Jody Moylan, *Daniel O'Connell: A Graphic Life* (Cork: Collins Press, 2016). <sup>3</sup> Maurice R. O'Connell (ed.), *The Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell* (Dublin: Irish

University Press for the Irish Manuscripts Commission: 1972–77), 8 volumes. Digitised and available on Irish Manuscripts Commission <https://www.irishmanuscripts.ie/product-category/imc-digital-editions/> <https://www.irishmanuscripts.ie/product-category/>

[imc-digital-editions/page/2/](https://www.irishmanuscripts.ie/product-category/imc-digital-editions/page/2/)  
<sup>4</sup> Quotations from O'Connell's correspondence hereafter will indicate the letter from which they come.

figures had with food and drink have, to date, been rare. This chapter will thus focus on depictions of food and drink in Daniel O'Connell's vast correspondence and will attempt to establish if it casts new light on the man often hailed—to quote Olivia O'Leary—as 'our greatest politician ever'.<sup>5</sup>

At one level, O'Connell's attitude to food mirrors his attitude to life in general. Consider the enormity of his political ambitions and the enormity of his intellectual range. Where food was concerned, the very best was the minimum that he would accept. Writing in 1807 to his wife Mary (in Dublin at the time) from Cork he remarks that despite not sending her money to Kerry due to his financial commitments he has 'bought here another hogshead of claret<sup>6</sup> and two quarter casks of white wine together with a hogshead of cider of *the finest kind*' (emphasis added, 183). For him, high standards were guaranteed especially by knowledge of where his food was sourced: 'We get in turkies [sic], beef, butter and bread in quantities from Glencullen. Fitz-Simon killed a beef there and I have not seen a finer piece of roast beef than it afforded us yesterday' (2145).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one of the very few short-tempered letters in his vast correspondence was prompted by his disappointment at the poor quality of wines delivered:

I am much disappointed in many things. The wines I got from Cork are by no means satisfactory. Can you tell the quantity and nature of the wine you ordered? [...] I have got a wooden box containing three dozen bottles sent by Sir D. Roose. I have got besides, 6 hampers of port containing altogether about 24 dozen, 6 hampers of sherry containing 24 dozen or thereabouts. There are then 4 hampers of Sauterne containing about 12 dozen altogether. The port is fair wine enough. Some of the sherry is very bad. The Sauterne appears also very indifferent. There is also a hamper marked to contain six dozen Madeira (3428 to John Primrose, Jr).<sup>8</sup>

Food gives us a glimpse of his personality: as in his political ambitions, moderation was never his forte. Writing to his wife during the Lenten period in March 1823 he promises her that '[i]t would do your heart good to see me dine, even yesterday, although I eat 3 eggs for breakfast I was able to call for beef 3 times and mutton twice and to eat apple pie besides' (1002). He veers from one extreme to the other. For instance, his periods of fasting during Lent are juxtaposed with periods of binge eating:

<sup>5</sup> On Daniel O'Connell beyond the parameters of this paper see Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist: Daniel O'Connell, 1830–47* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); Maurice O'Connell, *Daniel O'Connell: The Man and His Politics* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990); Patrick M. Geoghegan,

*King Dan: The Rise of Daniel O'Connell, 1775–1828* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2008); Patrick M. Geoghegan, *Liberator: The Life and Death of Daniel O'Connell, 1830–1847* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2010). <sup>6</sup> On the history and importance of claret in Ireland, see especially Tara

McConnell, 'Honest Claret': *The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022). <sup>7</sup> Glencullen House was the home of the FitzSimon family. Ellen O'Connell, daughter of Daniel and Mary O'Connell married Christopher FitzSimon in 1825. <https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/60250027/glencullen-house-barrack-road-glencullen-glencullen-dun-laoghaire-rathdown>

<sup>8</sup> John Primrose, Jr, O'Connell's Land Agent and at times political facilitator. Primrose was married to

The Lent is now over and here I am as hale and hearty as man can be, somewhat thinner, I admit, but not one bit the worse for that. You would have smiled if you saw me eat my breakfast last Sunday, a goose egg, then a turkey egg and then a hen egg. I shall grow too fat when Lent is over (1007).

His private life is momentarily illuminated when writing to his wife (and distant cousin) Mary,<sup>9</sup> both well advanced into their middle years at that stage, hailing her letters to him as a 'drink of honey' (1217) (Figure 1). His hands-on attitude to his food and his meticulous management—even micro-management—skills are clearly shared by his wife as is obvious from her post-scripted request to him in Iveragh from Clontarf in Dublin in October 1810: 'I beg you will have sent me by Whelan half a hundred of the common salt salmon, not the smoked kind, and if you could get for love or money a small crock of corned butter about twelve pounds, it would be a great treat to me. It must be made particularly for myself and put in a crock, no cask after the vile butter I got last year' (305).

At one level, these references to food and drink lift the veil on the lavish lifestyle enjoyed by families like the O'Connells at the time. However, layers of additional messages, veiled or otherwise, are often embedded in such comments. Consider this, for instance, in a letter dated 7 June 1817, to Mary about a recent visit to London:

I was that day splendidly entertained by Blake<sup>10</sup> at his house with a large party of English Catholics of the first rank. And the next day Lord Fingall and I were entertained in a similar party at the Thatched House Tavern in St. James Street—with that name it is one of the finest taverns in the world. Our feast was turtle—turbot, champagne, etc. (700).

Here, food is more than food: it is a parallel language, a powerful social signifier used by O'Connell to impress upon his wife that he has now arrived at the very pinnacle of English society and was even invited into the private home of a leading establishment figure, Anthony Blake; he was entertained not just by a large party of English Catholics but by a large party of English Catholics 'of the first rank'; his fellow guest was none other than a Lord; the tavern chosen by his hosts was 'one of the finest taverns in the world', located on St James's Street in the heart of Westminster, between St James's Palace and Pall Mall; the

a cousin of O'Connell.  
 9 <https://www.dib.ie/biography/oconnell-mary-a6567> 10 Per editor's note, *The Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, Vol. II, 148 'Anthony Richard Blake (1786–1849), youngest son of Martin Blake, Hollypark, Co. Galway. Though a Catholic

he was a member of the administration of Marquis Wellesley who appointed him chief Remembrancer, 1823; described by a contemporary as 'the backstairs Viceroy of Ireland'; author of *Thoughts upon the Catholic Question* (1828).

event he was invited to was not a meal but a 'feast'. Similarly, here he is in 1822 conjuring up for Mary a recent event that he and their son, Maurice, had attended in Dublin Castle: 'there was a quantity of wine and cakes demolished in high style [...] Maurice made his first appearance at the Castle and drank a couple of glasses of *royal* wine' (983). O'Connell is implying that his family's future in the uppermost échelons is now secure: the next generation of O'Connells, in the person of his son, Maurice, has made not *an* appearance but his *first* appearance in Dublin Castle and drunk not just any kind of wine but *royal* wine, as emphasised in his letter.

However, for O'Connell, food brings more than pleasure and status: it can restore health. O'Connell's brother-in-law, James, regained his health when he abandoned the milk diet he had followed for three weeks in favour of 'a syrup composed of snails<sup>11</sup> and sugar-a-candy', supplemented by fresh meat and 'a glass of sherry every day for a fortnight', along with three or four glasses of wine at dinner (106, 110). Food can blot out bad experiences. Here he is in September 1815, regaling Mary about a particularly difficult and dramatic sea-crossing from Holyhead to Dublin:

the night came to blow tremendously and the packet was crowded to excess. Not a berth could be had for love or money. I lay on the cabin floor as sick as a dog, with three gentlemen's legs on my breast and stomach, and the sea water dripping in on my knees and feet. I was never so completely punished, and of all the wretched nights that we ever spent it really was the most miserable. We, however, got in rather early yesterday. I tumbled into bed as soon as I breakfasted, and am as well this day as I ever was in the whole course of my life (590).

Food can also lift the spirits. In March that same year, when Mary herself was over seven months pregnant and beset by family worries (including the death of her sister and the illness of her brother), she writes this: 'my illness was but an affection in my stomach attended with a weakness and a very great depression of spirits, but I am this moment after taking a bowl of broth and toast and I feel quite stout' (538).

Food brings comfort too, as we see in O'Connell's enquiry to his wife: 'Have you made any inquiries about the servant woman you sent to the fever hospital? If you could get her any extra comfort of wine etc., surely it ought to be done' (728).

<sup>11</sup> Snails have long been included as an ingredient in medical recipes. See The Recipes Project, <https://recipes.hypotheses.org/17507>

<sup>12</sup> See Grace Neville, "I hate France with a mortal hatred": Daniel O'Connell and France' in Eamon Maher

and Grace Neville (eds), *France-Ireland: Anatomy of a Relationship* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004) 241–57.



**Figure 1** Mary O'Connell and her son, Daniel by John Gubbins (fl 1820s). Oil on canvas, c. 1817. Reproduced with kind permission from Derrynane House—OPW.



In this context, O'Connell's references to eating food from Kerry are interesting: 'I dined on a brace of wild ducks that I got from Kerry' (983); 'we make our dinner tomorrow of woodcock, teal and snipe from Kerry' (991). This reads not just like concern for quality but rather as a form of comfort eating to compensate for the absence of Mary and six of their children who were living in France at the time.<sup>12</sup> Kerry food is the food of comfort, of childhood, of home and of everything that was familiar to him in the absence of seven of the people he loved most.

Food involves sociability. For a man as convivial as O'Connell, food and feasting are communal activities that afford opportunities for useful networking (Figure 2). Dining alone strikes him as sad and unusual, a cause for pity, even self-pity. Sociability often slides into celebration. And where there is celebration, there is food and wine. There is much talk within O'Connell's immediate family of celebrating occasions such as birthdays. In March 1815, his daughter Kate writes: 'Saturday will be my birthday. I am so sorry you will not be here to drink my health. I shall not forget to drink your's [sic] on Patrick's Day' (530). On the eve of her fortieth birthday, Mary writes: 'Tomorrow I shall be forty years of age. Will you and my boys drink my health?' (751). On O'Connell's own forty-first birthday, Mary again writes: 'This is your birthday, my heart. I shall drink your health and may *we* and *our* little ones live to see many, many happy returns of this day' (643). Similarly, in the public sphere too, there are constant references to triumphal dinners and to his health being drunk when for instance Mary writes: 'are you not very proud of having your health drunk, at Glasgow? I know I am' (569).

For O'Connell, celebration is often synonymous with performance, even with theatre, where form is as important as content. In his description of a dinner at the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park with its attendant pomp, ceremony, music and footmen, he is literally dazzled by the dinner service: 'Of course the whole dinner service was plate. The [? gilt[sic]] service, except plates, which were china, was in gold. The knives were gold with agate handles' (988).

Given what is known about O'Connell's finances, particularly about his ability to make significant amounts of money through his work as a lawyer and to spend it with alarming speed,<sup>13</sup> it is perhaps unsurprising that food and money are often intertwined: 'I dined this day with Rick.<sup>14</sup> He had excellent fish for Maurice and me especially scallops; only think, large scallops costing only 1s. 8d., or two tenpennies the dozen' (1004).

At another level, one should not forget the key role played by alcohol in the O'Connell family finances, specifically by the smuggling of French alcohol

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice R. O'Connell, 'Daniel O'Connell: income, expenditure and despair', *Irish Historical Studies* 17: 66 (September 1970): 200–20.

<sup>14</sup> Rick was his brother-in-law.



**Figure 2** Daniel O'Connell by John Gubbins. Oil on canvas, c. 1817–18. Reproduced with kind permission from Derrynane House—OPW.



which filled the coffers of O'Connell's uncle, Maurice 'Hunting Cap' O'Connell, owner of Derrynane House on the Iveragh coast.<sup>15</sup> It was 'Hunting Cap' who paid for O'Connell's education in France, eventually bequeathing him Derrynane House (Figure 3). It is hardly surprising therefore to find the young O'Connell repaying his uncle in March 1805 by offering him confidential legal advice about the best course of action to be pursued, following a story circulating in Dublin about a huge haul of brandy that had washed up on his uncle's land after a recent shipwreck (141).

Food features frequently in the wider context of O'Connell's legal work, with references to taxes on malt, flour and tea, and to Corn Law legislation. As a politician, he was frequently lobbied by vintners. For instance, Joseph Boyce, alderman and retired wine and general merchant, writes to lobby O'Connell in 1846 to ensure that impending legislation would align duty on whiskey with that levied on 'brandy, gincoia and rum', thereby putting Irish merchants 'on the same footing with the French, Dutch and West India man' (3257). The same year a letter from J.J. Forrester, a merchant and wine shipper of Oporto, states that 'by the *Mary Sweet*' he is taking the liberty of sending O'Connell '2 cases of wine, as per bill of [landing] enclosed of which I pray your acceptance, not for the value of wine as wine but as a specimen of the kind of port which I wish to introduce among the consumers at home' (3269). This reads suspiciously like a backhander.

While stories of scallops and champagne may proliferate in his letters, this is by no means the full story. O'Connell's lifestyle and consequent poor eating habits often lead Mary to berate him:

**Figure 3** Derrynane House. Reproduced with kind permission from Derrynane House—OPW.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/oconnell-maurice-hunting-cap-a6568>

I wish to God you could contrive to get out of court for a quarter of an hour during the middle of the day to take a bowl of soup or a snack of some kind. Surely, though you may not be able to spare time to go to a tavern, could not James [his servant] get anything you wished for from the Bar mess at your lodgings, which is merely a step from the Court-house? Do, my love, really try to accomplish this for really, I am quite unhappy to have you fasting from an early hour in the morning until nine or ten o'clock at night. I wish I was with you to make you take care of yourself. I am quite sure there is not another barrister on your circuit would go through half the fatigue you do without taking necessary nourishment. If you dislike taking soup or cold meat, can't you take jelly? Do, darling, take something for my sake (693).

He refuses to listen:

Darling, in spite of all my labours I never was in better health or spirits. Do not be uneasy about my not eating in the middle of the day. The fact is I am grown too fat and should be quite a monster if I were to sit about devouring midday meals as you suggest to me, darling (695).

In fact, excessive eating and the problems it causes are quite frequent topics in O'Connell's letters:

Almost all the diseases of persons in the upper classes do at middle age arise from repletion or overmuch food in the stomach, and there can be no cure for that so complete as a Lent regularly kept (1002). It is quite idle for healthy people to say that they cannot fast or live upon a single meal. How many thousands, I may say millions, have not one good meal to live on and yet do all manners of work on one bad meal in the 24 hours (1006).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, body image and issues around weight often surface in these letters. With Mary's health a constant source of worry, O'Connell goes so far as to pressure her into gaining weight: 'if you love me you will let me find you stout and fat on my return' (364). In everyone else, however, fatness is reprehensible, even sinister. Of his daughter-in-law O'Connell remarks: 'Is

it certain that his [Maurice's] wife is with child at all for I have my doubts? She fell into such *fatness* which is a symptom of ceasing to breed' (2147). Excessive weight can even be the mark of the political traitor: of a certain John Howard Payne,<sup>16</sup> he comments: 'He looks fat and bloated and employs himself, I am told, constantly abusing Ireland' (721).

As for O'Connell himself, he constantly worries about gaining weight: to Mary he confesses in 1814 that although he was 'never in better health' he is 'scandalously corpulent in spite of all my efforts to keep myself down' (503). Despite his delight in spending time in his beloved Iveragh, especially during hunting season in the Autumn ('it is with bitter regret I tear myself from these mountains' 2980), he despairs of the weight that he inevitably piles on there: 'It is surprising how I doat of the wild life I had here [in Iveragh] for a month or six weeks but I am growing so abominably fat that I hate and detest myself' (750). There is even a sense of defeat and vulnerability here which he would reveal to no one but Mary:

I do not take any wine or punch and yet I am growing daily more and more corpulent. I do not know, darling, what to do with myself to keep this propensity in order. I rise early, keep on my legs and walk very fast through the streets. Yet I get fat. I ought not, I believe, to eat so much (1096).

However, none of this finally matters because this time Mary is on side:

As you are well, darling, I care little for your increasing size, the more particularly as you always exaggerate your size. It can't at all events be unwholesome. It does not proceed from inactive or sedentary habits. You are neither an epicure nor a hard drinker [...] You have the best of constitutions and may God continue it to you is my constant prayer (1642).

At the other end of the spectrum, a separate study would be needed to do justice to the theme of fasting, especially religious or Lenten fasts, threaded through his letters from his time as an adolescent at school in St Omer (where he was clearly surprised that students had to eat meat during Lent). Again, and again, Mary voices her worry about what for her is his excessive fasting:

<sup>16</sup> John Howard Payne was an American dramatist, actor and author of *Home! Sweet Home!* In London in 1813–32, he did travel to Ireland during that time.

I am most anxious indeed to hear how your fasting journey agreed with you ... I fear you are observing this Lent too strictly. At all events, while on circuit, I think you ought to relax in some degree. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday would be quite sufficient for you to fast from breakfast. To be from nine o'clock in the morning to perhaps ten at night without eating a morsel in a cold court-house is more than any constitution (however good) will be able to bear. I am sure you are too good a Christian to persevere in anything that would be injurious to your constitution, and I therefore hope you will promise me to give up fasting should you in the slightest degree find it disagrees with you (613).

Ever pragmatic, she is clearly anxious not just for O'Connell himself but for her fate and that of their large family were their breadwinner to fall ill: 'Let me know particularly how you are. I cannot divest myself of a dread that fasting will injure you. Consider, darling, how dear in every sense of the word is your health to me and your little family' (615). It was a concern that was echoed by his confessor, Rev. William J. Whelan, who, when writing from Clarendon Street in Dublin in 1837, cautioned that 'I hope you are taking care of your health and that you do not attempt to fast or even abstain' (2389).

Again, and again, the ever-optimistic O'Connell assures Mary that her worries are groundless, that fasting 'agrees perfectly well with me in every respect' (621). Even at a lavish banquet in the Phoenix Park, where he had remarked on the knives of gold with agate handles, he had observed Lent. In other words, he transforms Lent, like so much else in his life, into some kind of competition at which he had to excel.

Mary, in her own way, buys in to this: 'Most truly, darling, do I congratulate you on the conclusion of Lent. Very few, I believe, have observed the fast and abstinence so strictly' (633). On close examination, however, it transpires that fasting for O'Connell in no way implies hunger: 'I eat on abstinence days an enormous dinner of fish' (617). Nor does it preclude him from drinking alcohol: at the banquet he attended in the Phoenix Park where he had 'a fine turbot. The dessert itself was excellent and abundance of ices. The champagne was good as any I ever drank and in great quantities' (983). His strategy was to simply refrain from eating meat.

In the public sphere quite literally outside O'Connell's body, food shortages and even famine feature regularly in his correspondence from 1817 onwards.

In 1815, the Irish economy experienced a massive though short-lived slump. In that same year, the largest volcanic eruption on record, the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, led to the following year, 1816, being dubbed 'The Year without a Summer'. Ash cloud led to failing crops and livestock throughout the Northern hemisphere and to widespread famine and disease. Extensive potato crop failure triggered food riots in Dublin and Galway in 1816–17. Heavy rain and cold temperatures ruined grain and potato crops in 1817. Famine and typhus continued until 1819, with an estimated 67,000 people succumbing to typhus alone. Mary comments: 'never was Dublin so high as at this moment as to bread and potatoes. I don't know when they mean to stop raising their price. Meat and butter are uncommonly high. It requires a good fortune to live *now* in Dublin' (691). Given her concern around the price of food, she is delighted to find bargains while shopping in Bristol where she had gone to take the waters:

the best meat is sold at Bristol for sixpence English a pound. Irish butter so very good. Ducks three shillings a couple. Chickens half crown. Vegetables much cheaper than in Dublin. Bread exceedingly good and cheaper than when I left home. Potatoes are not so cheap as in Dublin but they are very good and the best milk for three pence a quart (701). It is here the same price as in Dublin, every other article, fowl excepted, cheaper than in Dublin. I certainly think we will cost you more in Dublin than we will here for the time we shall remain, as nearly as I can calculate. Paying lodging money, horses, and everything else (3 months to Miss Gaghan included), grocer's and wine bill up beginning of this month, I have laid out £162.2.0. I keep a regular account of every penny (even for parsley) that I lay out (717).

In the same summer of 1817, with Mary still in Bristol, O'Connell writes to her about the evolving food situation at home:

I have said nothing of our Dublin riots because they were the silliest things imaginable. Women and boys plundering the bakers and few butchers. In fact the distress and poverty is excessive but the people are as quiet as lambs and there will not be a reoccurrence even of those wretched squabbles (705).

It is surely out of character for O'Connell to dismiss food riots as silly and wretched, the work not of men but of mere women and boys: perhaps he had deliberately not told Mary about the riots in order to protect her, but when she found out about them anyhow, he again tries to minimise the danger of the situation to avoid worrying her. He reinforces his upbeat message: 'the rioters are all at peace, provisions very dear but no alarm, every effort making to procure more food and the prospect of the harvest very good. Indeed, nothing can be better' (703).

From 1822 onwards however, famine stalks the land. O'Connell's brother, James, warns that their tenants in Iveragh have no money: 'to add to this, potatoes are now 6/8 a peck and not near enough of them in Iveragh so that I regret to add there will be almost a famine in the country' (937). The situation worsens, as O'Connell reports to Mary just three months later:

All are actually starving in the County of Clare and nearly so in the County of Kerry. It is horrible to think of the state of the poor people (962). The famine is nearly complete in that county [Kerry] and as yet but little has been done to alleviate it. They however talk of doing great things. In the meantime the people are starving (958).

Ten years later, cholera strikes. O'Connell moves into action and orders his estate manager to 'cleanse and purify' the main town in Iveragh, Cahersiveen, by white-washing it and arranging for some of his money to be given to the poor if cholera reaches the town: 'Nourishment and cleanliness are the two great protectors under God from this malady' (1892). He tries to prevent a cholera outbreak from a distance—he was in London when he wrote this to his land agent:

Take immediate precautions for the Derrynane district. Get a cow or two killed, one after the other, and distributed in broth and beef among the poorest classes of my tenants. It is the best precaution. Totally stop the sale of whiskey. [...] Send two or three gallons of pure brandy to Derrynane [for medicinal purposes] (2047). As far as I am concerned, spare no expense that can possibly alleviate the sufferings of the people [...] Everybody should live as full as possible, eating meat twice a day. Get meat for the poor as much as possible. [...]



Before all things, be prodigal of relief out of my means—beef, bread, mutton, medicines, physician, everything you can think of (2048).

In December of the same year, his rising panic infuses his instructions to Mary who was in Derrynane at the time:

are you aware that my uncle was in the habit of killing a cow at Christmas and distributing the meat among the poor? I am sure I need not suggest to you to do at least as much. You cannot, sweetest, do too much for our poor people' (2166).

Some years later, in March 1839, with famine again raging along the west coast of Ireland, he instructed his land agent as follows:

I enclose a bill of landing for 64 tons and a quarter of potatoes which are on their [way] or, I hope, arrived at Derrynane. See to their landing at once and to their security. Use them discreetly and they will serve to keep down the markets. Give of course as much as needful in charity and, for the rest, get from those who can pay, a moderate price. Especially take care to give the people seed (2595).

His mounting anxiety is palpable the following year when he wrote, in June, from London: 'I am deeply grieved to see the prospects of the harvest becoming unfavourable. We have HEAT with a north wind for many days. What do you hear in Ireland as to the coming harvest, especially the potato harvest?' (2726).

When the Great Famine hits in 1846, O'Connell again tries to manage the situation from a distance: to his query, 'What quantity of corn or meal is in store in the government stores at Cahersiveen?' (3337), his son Maurice replies: 'We have got 23 bags of wheat meal landed and in store here. The balance, 27, making 70 in all of yours, which came with Sullivan's consignment, will, please god, be stored early tomorrow' (3339).

O'Connell talks about arranging for Indian corn to be shipped from Kilrush in Co. Clare to Cahersiveen (3353). There is even a reference to 'ten tons of meal for the Knight of Kerry in Valentia by a Royal Navy ship' (3356). His generosity and concern are both consistent and unsurprising as we see in his order to his

son, Maurice: 'I wish you to be as abundant to the people as you possibly can, recollecting however that we have dreadful times before us' (3353).

Never afraid to express his emotions in the public or the private sphere, he replies to Maurice: 'I am delighted to get your letter today for you had frightened me. You have got the Indian corn of course before now' (3362). However, this euphoria is dashed by bad news which arrives in a letter from Dublin Castle in December 1846:

I am sorry to acquaint you that a large concourse of people amounting to about 1,000 assembled round the commissariat depot in Caherciveen, breaking partly through one of the windows but were finally induced to desist from further violence at the instance of the committee by whom a distribution of biscuit and meal was made to them (3363).

A footnote to this letter added by O'Connell's editor implies that his wish to buy the whole government food depot in Cahersiveen was refused by Charles Edward Trevelyan.<sup>17</sup>

O'Connell died in Genoa just five months later on 15 May 1847. Famine in Ireland was the subject of his last, impassioned speech at the House of Commons on 8 February 1847. Summoning up all of his dying strength, and with his voice almost inaudible, he begged the packed chamber for urgent relief for his starving countrymen and women. It is surely not fanciful to suggest that the stress of the situation outlined above must have exacerbated whatever underlying condition eventually killed him.

### Conclusion

Among the thousands of Irish volunteers in Simon Bolivar's army in Venezuela in the early nineteenth century was O'Connell's fifteen-year old son, Morgan (1804–1885),<sup>18</sup> whom O'Connell had gone so far as to offer to Bolivar in an earlier letter he had sent to him. Writing from Margarita Island in the Caribbean off the coast of Venezuela in June 1820, Morgan describes a recent dinner he had attended with leading army personnel:

I never in my life saw a such a dinner before. We began by turtle soup, then came all sorts of fowl, fish, yams, bananas, game,

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/trevelyan-sir-charles-edward-a8647>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/oconnell-morgan-a6571>

etc., and the largest turkey I ever beheld, I am sure it was as large as a sirloin of beef. There were all sorts of spiced and forced meats, with bottled porter, etc. After dinner a most sumptuous desert was introduced, such a one I might challenge all Europe to produce—pineapples, melons, both water and musk, bananas—I can't remember half of their names [...] it may be enough to say that all the fruits you ever read of are here in abundance (843).

Ironically, there are, of course, echoes here of O'Connell's earlier lavish descriptions of ceremonial dinners in Dublin Castle, the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park, London and elsewhere. But O'Connell's young son is surely—deliberately or not—using food images here to impress upon his illustrious father that despite everything that the older man had achieved in his lifetime and despite his worldwide fame, he had nevertheless never once experienced what the fifteen-year old has just experienced, never tasted these foods, never even cast eyes on them. O'Connell may have read about them, but his young son has gone further and touched and tasted them for himself. Psychologists sometimes contend that a young man must kill his father in order to become his own man. Consciously or not, through this mesmerising account of food and feasting in faraway Venezuela, the next generation of this remarkable family, in the person of young Morgan (who carried his grandfather's name), is deposing/ killing the old man and thereby ensuring nothing less than the immortality of O'Connell's lineage.

*Dom' chara dhil, Cathal Ó Corcora, Ciarraíoch eile: omós, amitiés.*

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**15**

*Eating Abroad,  
Remembering Home:  
Food parcels, 1845–1960*

**John D. Mulcahy**

The transmission of food between family and friends in different locations via intermediaries is a long-standing tradition, and quite possibly is as old as time. There have always been echelons of society with the resources (such as money, time, and surplus food) to send or receive packages of provisions for any number of reasons, and there were systems able to provide the required service to make that possible.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter the focus is not on the Establishment, nor the elites, sending provisions to each other, which is usually well recorded. Instead, the focus is on the enigmatic use of food parcels and their contents by what could be viewed as 'ordinary' Irish people, mainly by exchanging them at scale with friends and family who had emigrated to North America and Britain, while also sending them to each other at home in Ireland,<sup>2</sup> often without a written record of what was sent and why. Fortunately, what is recorded in the newspapers of the time is how the Post Office, and others, dealt with those parcels and their contents, and what role they played in Ireland in times of conflict, particularly from the late 1800s to just after the Second World War. Examining these sources allows us to witness what foods were of emotional and cultural value to both senders and recipients.

As we will see, the surge of development in communications technology and transport infrastructure that occurred in the United Kingdom (UK)<sup>3</sup> during the mid-nineteenth century facilitated the use of food parcels by removing many of the economic, geographic, and temporal barriers to sending food on a personal level. Essentially, the Irish both at home and abroad were employing the culturally semiotic qualities and connotations of food. In doing so, they were purposefully maintaining and strengthening socio-cultural bonds in the face of both enduring colonisation and emigration, which were 'embedded in Irish society' over centuries and 'one of the defining features of Irish life'.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the anglophone literature on the specific subject of food parcels itself seems quite limited internationally and almost silent in an Irish context, although this is changing somewhat.<sup>5</sup> This silence is surprising given

**1** Daniel O'Connell valued getting food (specifically wild fowl) sent to him from Kerry to compensate for the absence of his family and his nostalgia for home, see Grace Neville, 'Food, Feast and Famine in the Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUI+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 14. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>

**2** In this work 'Ireland' refers to the State, the Republic of Ireland, and 'Northern Ireland' refers to the part of the island

of Ireland that is part of the United Kingdom. It is worth pointing out that, from 1922, the State was known as the Irish Free State, then most commonly Éire during the Second World War, and then Ireland after that. Following the declaration of a republic in 1948, it was known informally as the Republic of Ireland or 'the Republic'. See Ronan McGreevy, 'Namecheck: Ireland, Éire or the Republic?', *Irish Times*, 31 December 2022, State Papers, 9.

**3** The UK included all of the island of Ireland until 1922 when the Irish Free State was established under the

Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. For the purposes of this chapter, and following convention, the United Kingdom (UK) comprises England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (pre-1922). Since 1922, the UK comprises England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Great Britain (or simply Britain) is comprised of England, Scotland, and Wales.

**4** Bernadette Whelan, 'Women on the Move: a review of the historiography of Irish emigration to the USA, 1750–1900', *Women's History Review* 24: 6 (2015), 900, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1013305>.

**5** John D. Mulcahy, 'Eating Abroad, Remembering Home: Violent Disruption, the Irish Diaspora, and their Food Parcels, 1845–1960' (Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, Dublin, Technological University Dublin, May 26th 2020); 'How the Irish became food delivery pioneers in the 19th century', RTÉ Brainstorm, updated 3 July, 2020, accessed 19 July, 2023, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0618/1148255-ireland-food-delivery-1880s-history-post-office/> Diana Mata-Codesal and Maria Abranches (eds), *Food Parcels in International Migration. Intimate*

the contemporary prevalence and importance of small-scale food-sending practices worldwide,<sup>6</sup> not to mention historic practices. That is not to say that food parcels are absent from the Irish literature. Instead, food parcels are a small but rich part of the extensive discourses taking place in the fields of Irish studies, anthropology, ethnography, women's studies, and sociology, particularly where the focus is on migration, emigration, and the Irish diaspora, utilising the collection of oral histories or first-hand accounts as primary data.<sup>7</sup>

### New railways plus faster ships equals more parcels

The Victorian era, roughly coinciding with the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) was witness to what Roy Church termed the 'Great Victorian Boom'—a burgeoning British Empire, with considerable military and financial resources, resulted in rapid and unprecedented technological advances.<sup>8</sup>

By 1860 all major European cities were connected by electric telegraph, and this ability to communicate was augmented in 1866 when the transatlantic cable between the south-west coast of Ireland, at Valentia Island, and Newfoundland was connected. Improved communications were further facilitated by the rapid growth of the railways network, revolutionising the transport of goods, in particular.<sup>9</sup> According to Andrew Odlyzko,<sup>10</sup> there were three periods of railway investment 'mania' (1830s, 1840s, and 1860s) in the UK which led to a financial crash in 1866 and the suspension of the gold standard by the UK government; the railway lines, however, still operated thanks to the rapidly expanding economy.<sup>11</sup> As late as 1909, Adam Findlater (1855–1911), of the Dublin grocer family, attests to the enduring financial instability of the railway companies when writing about the loss-making Dublin and South Eastern Railway company. He noted that the directors had failed to reveal that they had 'largely increased those [revenues] from parcels, a traffic which has become of a most remunerative character'.<sup>12</sup> He was very well placed to comment, given the deep insight that his chain of upmarket grocery shops around Dublin would have provided to him.<sup>13</sup>

*Connections* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

**6** See Diana Mata-Codesal and Maria Abranches, 'Sending, Bringing, Consuming and Researching Food Parcels', in Mata-Codesal and Abranches (eds), *Food Parcels in International Migration*. 4. Examples highlighted include food parcels from Ecuador to the USA; Spain to the UK; Macedonia to Italy; the sending of balikbayan boxes to the Philippines; West Africa to Europe; the Cabo Verde migrants to Portugal and elsewhere; Mexico to the USA.

**7** For example, Moya Kneafsey

and Rosie Cox, 'Food, gender and Irishness—How Irish women in Coventry make home', *Irish Geography* 35: 1 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00750770209555789>; Brendan McGowan, 'The Irish in Leeds, 1931–81: aspects of emigration' (Heritage Studies Master of Arts Thesis, Atlantic Technological University, Galway–Mayo, 2004), <https://research.thea.ie/handle/20.500.12065/522>; Louise Ryan, 'Family matters: (e)migration, familial networks and Irish women in Britain', *The Sociological Review* 52: 3 (2004), [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00484.x](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00484.x);

Tony Murray, 'Edna O'Brien and narrative diaspora space', *Irish Studies Review* 21: 1 (2013), 85–98. [https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2012.758951](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2012.758951); Whelan, 'Women on the Move'; Siobhán Browne and Cliona O'Carroll, 'Communicative Memory and Diaspora Space: "...Offering My Prayers for all the Exiled Members of My Family"', in Chiara Giuliani and Kate Hodgson (eds), *Memory, Mobility, and Material Culture* (New York, London: Routledge,

2023), 112–32. **8** Roy A.

Church, *The Great Victorian Boom 1850–1873, Studies in Economic and Social History* (London: Palgrave, 1975).

**9** D. J. Hickey and J. E. Doherty, *A Dictionary of Irish History from 1800* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1980), 485; Andrew Odlyzko, 'The Railway Mania of the 1860s and Financial Innovation', SSRN (Social Science Research Network) (January 14 2022), 1–61, 10, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn>

**10** A professor of mathematics at the University of Minnesota who researches technology and financial

In 1860, the UK railway network comprised c. 10,000 miles of track, and by 1870 that had been extended to about 15,000 miles. By around 1914, the network had reached its peak extent of about 20,000 miles.<sup>14</sup> This dramatic increase of the network across the UK required an enormous level of investment, estimated at 15% to 20% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at the time.<sup>15</sup> On the island of Ireland, development had started comparatively early—the first line authorised by the UK Parliament in 1826 was between Limerick and Waterford, while the first to be opened was between Dublin and Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire, six miles south of Dublin city) in 1834. Dublin to Drogheda followed in 1844.<sup>16</sup> The Dublin to Cork line was completed in 1849, and lines were completed from Dublin to Galway and Belfast, and Limerick to Waterford, in 1851–1852.<sup>17</sup> As each line was opened, the impact was significant—a 1900 newspaper report comments that the ‘iron horse’ had entered into the ‘keeping of Xmas’ as much of the ‘luxuries now partaken of at this festive season were unknown in the provinces in the days anterior to the advent of the iron steed’.<sup>18</sup> The report goes on to note that 1,400 ‘Xmas’ parcels were dispatched by rail from Nenagh railway station, while 1,100 were received.<sup>19</sup>

Although a single integrated Post Office system was established in 1657 for England, Scotland, and Ireland,<sup>20</sup> further development of the system did not occur until the late nineteenth century. Recognising that demand for postal services was stimulated by the improved speed and capacity of substantial railway development, the Regulation of Railways Act (1873) went one step further by obliging railways ‘to accept mail for carriage without prior notice or delay’, and the Post Office (Parcels) Act (1882), extended that remit specifically to parcels.<sup>21</sup> According to the very informative *An Post*<sup>22</sup> Museum blog, the carriage of parcels during the nineteenth century was by ‘road carters’ and then operated as a commercial business by the railways. The Post Office itself entered this market on foot of the 1882 Act. ‘Letter carriers’ became ‘postmen’, and the parcel post became part of the Post Office’s wider services.<sup>23</sup> The Tramways and Public Companies Act (1883) provided for the establishment of light railways which would act as

manias. **11** Odlyzko, ‘The Railway Mania of the 1860s’.  
**12** Alex Findlater, *Findlaters: The Story of a Dublin Merchant Family (1774–2001)* (Dublin: A. & A. Farmar, 2001), 219. <http://www.findlaters.com/index.html>. **13** For more on the Findlater family, see Bryce Evans, ‘Food in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History*, chapter 24, <https://doi.org/10.21427/SWHY-oK87>  
**14** Odlyzko, ‘The Railway Mania of the 1860s’, 5.  
**15** Odlyzko, ‘The Railway

Mania of the 1860s’, 2.  
**16** Hickey and Doherty, *A Dictionary of Irish History from 1800*, 498. **17** Patrick C. Power and Sean Duffy, *The Timechart History of Ireland: an Illustrated Chronological Chart of the History of Ireland from 6000 BC to Present Times* (London: Worth Press Limited, 2001), 31.  
**18** For further information of Irish food traditions around Christmas, see Stephanie Byrne and Kathleen Farrell, ‘An investigation into the food related traditions associated with the Christmas

period in Rural Ireland’, *Folk Life* 59: 2 (2021), 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957427>  
**19** ‘Echoes of the Xmas Past: At the Railway Station, At the Post Office’, *Nenagh Guardian*, 29 December 1900, 2. **20** Stephen Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland: An Illustrated History* (Newbridge, Co Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2016), 5.  
**21** Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 169. **22** ‘An Post’ is the Post Office in Ireland.  
**23** ‘Parcel Post—Christmas Card’, Stephen Ferguson (ed.),

An Post Museum @ the GPO Dublin, An Post, 14 February, 2014, <https://anpostmuseum.wordpress.com/2014/12/02/parcel-post-christmas-card/>



feeder lines to the major railways.<sup>24</sup> A commemorative stamp (Figure 1) shows an electric tram in Cork with an advertising hording for ‘Sweetest, Best Made Cash Bakery Bread’ in Cork city.<sup>25</sup> One of these lines, the Cork and Muskerry Light Railway, opened in 1887, travelling westwards to Blarney and Coachford from the Western Road railway station, ten minutes’ walk from Cork city centre. Passengers’ purchases, made earlier in the day, were delivered by messenger boys to the city terminus in the afternoon, where, to attract the attention of their employer’s customers, the boys would shout out the names of the shops where the purchases had been made: ‘Lipton’, ‘Home and Colonial’, ‘London and Newcastle’, ‘Cash’s’, ‘Sutton’s’, and ‘Woodford Bourne’s’. The line was closed in 1934.<sup>26</sup> A commemorative stamp (Figure 2) shows the electric tram alongside the Steam Engine from the Cork and Muskerry Railway.<sup>27</sup>

Two years after entering the parcels market, an information notice was posted in national and regional newspapers by the Post Office advising customers on how to carefully pack a parcel:

All articles intended for transmission by parcels post should be carefully packed by the senders, so as to avoid injury during transit, especially fragile articles or liquids, the nature of which should invariably be indicated outside the parcel. The parcels must always be addressed ‘*Per Parcels Post*’, and must not be posted in the letterbox, but must be taken into a post office and handed over the counter.<sup>28</sup>

The notice gave specific and detailed instructions on how parcels were to be packed for each of six different items: eggs, liquids (particularly in bottles, but advising that bladders containing liquid were prohibited), perishable articles (which included fish, game, meats, butter, and cream), hat boxes, umbrellas, and fruit. It seems reasonable to assume that the Post Office had been experiencing some operational problems with respect to these items being sent in the post. Shortly afterwards, the 32nd Report of the Postmaster General<sup>29</sup> gave some indications as to what people thought it was possible to post in a parcel, even if contrary to regulations: ‘2 hens, 8 mice, & 2 hedgehogs’, helpfully observing that although one hen died (its destination was a London vet), the other animals were returned to their owners. Some live creatures appeared to be acceptable, so it is no surprise to see an advertisement placed in *The Mayo News* (Figure 3) some eight years later by a James Lynchehan from Achill, Co. Mayo, declaring that:

**24** Seán Beecher, *Cork 365: A Day-by-Day Miscellany of Cork History* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2005), 4 February.

**25** An Post, ‘Cork Electric Tram’. Digital Repository of Ireland. <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.57130x34k>.

**26** Beecher, *Cork 365: A Day-by-Day Miscellany of Cork*

*History*, 4 February. **27** An

Post, ‘Cork and Muskerry Railway’, Digital Repository of Ireland. <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.7079jz47n>.

**28** ‘Post Office Notice’, *Belfast*

*News Letter*, 27 May 1884, 7.

**29** 1886, quoted in Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 236.



**Figure 1** Top left. An Post Commemorative Stamp from 1987 for the Cork Electric Tram with advertisement for Cash Bakery Bread, 3 April 1987. Illustration by Charles Rycraft. Courtesy of An Post Museum & Archive.



**Figure 2** Bottom left. An Post Commemorative Stamp from 1995 for Cork and Muskerry Railway, 28 Feb. 1995. Illustration by Charles Rycraft. Courtesy of An Post Museum & Archive.



**LOBSTERS.**

LIVE LOBSTERS supplied per Parcel Post in half-dozen Packages. Orders by Post punctually attended to. Please carefully specify. To supply an order for any particular day 24 hours notice is required, and postal arrangements are backward. PLEASE MONROE'S—MARKET PLACE.

JAMES LYNCH HAN,  
THE VALLEY, ACHILL.

Telegrams "By Post."

**Figure 3** Bottom right. Advertisement for Live Lobsters in the *Mayo News* 28<sup>th</sup> October 1893. Courtesy of Irish Newspaper Archives.

**Figure 4** Top right. An Post Commemorative Stamp from 1995 of 1938 Cork – New York Steamship, 5 Dec. 1988. Illustration by Charles Rycraft. Courtesy of An Post Museum & Archive.

Lobsters. Live lobsters supplied for Parcel Post in half dozen Packages. Orders by post punctually attended to. Pots continually fishing. To supply an order for any particular day 24 hours' notice is required, as postal arrangements are backward.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, from early on users had high expectations of what a parcels post service could do. For example, the public had the tendency to illegally hide a pound of sausages or rashers in newspapers sent in the post to relatives in Britain.<sup>31</sup> On a more inspiring note, Florence Irwin, writing in 1949, appends a note at the end of her recipe for 'To Steam a Plum Cake' with the following helpful advice:

... if sending this cake abroad, when it is cold, return it to the tin and post it tin and all. It carries best this way. For parcelling, a square tin is best in which to bake it. I have known this cake to go to the Antipodes [Australia and New Zealand] and be delicious for six months.<sup>32</sup>

Irwin includes a recipe from Hannah Glass (1708–70) for 'Yorkshire Xmas Pie' in her collection, which echoes the imperatives underlying successful passage of these somewhat delicate consumables. Where Irwin advises a square tin, Glass notes that 'these pies are often sent to London in a box as presents: therefore the walls (of paste) must be well built'.<sup>33</sup> Evidently, it would seem that similar practical measures were required for parcels in both the 18th and the 20th centuries.

By the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of sending fresh food by parcel post was commonplace. Public demand created large volumes of parcel post, such that the Post Office of the new State decided that all inward and outward English and provincial mails should be handled in Amiens Street, and that all incoming parcels for Dublin city and district were handled in the Central Model Schools, Marlborough Street in Dublin where, in 1928, 'a miniature mountain of parcels' of about one million were being dealt with.<sup>34</sup> Later, the growing volume of all inward foreign mails (foreign being anywhere but English and provincial mails) were dealt with in Parnell Square, Dublin.<sup>35</sup>

Sadly, parcel contents were not always pleasant, or appropriate. In 1923 an inquest report describes how the body of a six-day old infant was discovered in a parcel by a Customs Officer on duty in Bandon, Co. Cork. While the Customs declaration indicated that the parcel contained tea, it 'gave off an offensive smell' and further examination revealed that 'the outer cover of the box at one of the

**30** Advertisement, 'Lobsters', *Mayo News*, 28 October 1893, 1.  
**31** Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 368. **32** Florence Irwin, *The Cookin' Woman: Irish Country Recipes and Others* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1949), 140. **33** Hannah Glass, *The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy* (London: Printed

for the author, 1747), 17; First Irish edition (Dublin: E. & J. Exshaw, 1748). **34** 'Where Christmas is no holiday. Work in Post Office. About a million packets handled already', *Irish Independent*, 19 December 1928, 9. This report notes that all incoming parcels for Dublin

city and district were handled in the Central Model Schools, Marlboro Street in Dublin.

**35** 'Post Workers Fight Clock in Mails rush', *Irish Press*, 23 December 1946, 7.

corners was broken, and through the aperture he noticed the foot of a child'. The baby had been placed in a chocolate box and sent to an address in Skibbereen from London.<sup>36</sup>

The development of communications and transport on land was mirrored by similar development on the seas. Steamships speeded up sea transport and made it more reliable, especially between Ireland, Britain, and North America. While sailing ships took four to six weeks to cross the Atlantic, the first steamship from Cork to New York only took eighteen days in 1838.<sup>37</sup> A commemorative stamp issued in 1988 (Figure 4)<sup>38</sup> illustrates this technological development. By the turn of the twentieth century, the fastest voyage from Cobh, Co. Cork, to New York was under six days. The consequent level of traffic was such that in 1905, the US Post Office established an American parcel office in Queenstown (now Cobh), Co. Cork.<sup>39</sup> The efficiency of the UK railways network was such that US mail to and from Britain was routed by rail to Holyhead (Wales), then by mailboat to Kingstown (Dublin), and then by rail to Cobh.<sup>40</sup> Canadian mail used a similar route, but via Moville, on the Inishowen Peninsula of Co. Donegal, twenty miles north of Derry.

By 1913 the *Skibbereen Eagle* was reporting on the volume of mail being carried from Liverpool to North America via Queenstown on the Cunard Royal Mail Steamship, RMS Lusitania. The liner had 5,928 bags of mail and parcel post taken on board at Liverpool. In Queenstown she loaded another 1,626 sacks, 'which arrived [by rail] from London at the Deep Water Quay 25 minutes late'. The mail was then loaded on two mail tenders 'to convey the mails to the liner, which was at anchor outside the harbour'.<sup>41</sup> Luckily, the December weather was quite mild. The same day, a large inward mail of 1,696 bags from the liner *Columbia* also passed through Queenstown, en route by rail and mailboat via Dublin to London. According to the newspaper report, this mail should have been landed at Moville, Co. Donegal as the *Columbia* was one of the ships engaged in the regular transatlantic service between Glasgow, Moville, and New York, and vice versa. However, the postal authorities decided that the mail on this voyage,

being a large one, should be landed at Queenstown and dispatched to London by special through boat and train service, in order to secure rapid delivery, and thereby relieve the pressure already being felt in connection with the Christmas Postal Service.<sup>42</sup>

**36** 'Cork Inquest. Infant's Mysterious Death', *Cork Examiner*, 14 September 1923, 6. **37** Hickey and Doherty, *A Dictionary of Irish History from 1800*, 538. **38** 'An Post, Cork–New York 1838.' Digital Repository of Ireland. <https://repository.dri.ie/catalog/jqo8k88om>

**39** 'Mails Via Queenstown. Visit of American Postal Officials. Proposed Establishment of American Parcel Post', *Irish Examiner* (Cork), 10 February 1905, 1. **40** 'The Post Office. Net Deficit of £548,738', *Irish Times*, 27 May 1926, 5; Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 189.

**41** 'Huge American Mail. Lusitania sails with 7,548 bags. Columbia lands 1,696 sacks at Queenstown. Special train and boat service to London', *Skibbereen Eagle*, 20 December 1913, 15. **42** 'Huge American Mail. Lusitania sails with 7,548 bags'.

By 1924, Cobh was serviced by six shipping companies handling 40,000 sacks of mail.<sup>43</sup>

Christmas mail from America was still considered 'heavy' in 1936, with one liner, the *SS Washington*, arriving into Cobh from New York with '353 parcel bags and nearly 3,500 registered letters and insured parcels' ensuring that '11 special Customs Officers have been kept going at full pressure in examining parcels', work which appears to have taken two days before delivery could take place.<sup>44</sup> For the more affluent, or impatient, air parcel post to USA commenced in July 1949, dispatched daily on the 5:15 pm train to catch a flight from Shannon to New York and entry to the US postal system the following day.<sup>45</sup>

This era of newness, of innovative communication technologies and increased mobility, also coincided with the increased availability, at scale but at a price, of mass produced and readily accessible goods, particularly food products, both fresh and preserved. Distance was plainly no longer a challenge. For instance, a 1906 Irish newspaper report on the growing production and export of fresh blackberries, bilberries,<sup>46</sup> and crab apples, noted that forwarding the delicate fruit to Britain (principally West Yorkshire, for jam production) took 2½ days by goods train, but only 12–18 hours by passenger train. Those involved were quick to adapt their packaging so that the quicker route<sup>47</sup> could be utilised.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, on a pragmatic level, the sustained use and popularity of food parcels, as we will see later, between the UK, America, and Ireland during the 19th and 20th centuries can be directly linked to the economic growth fuelled by the expansion of the British empire. Ireland's long-term experiences of colonisation and emigration, and the unfamiliar experience of the emergence of the new Irish State in the 1920s, suggests a unique complexity which embraced and reinforced key features of Irish culture and social practices. Food was a foil for community building and socialising, a means of expressing Irishness and personal identities, and adding to the quality of life of distant relatives and friends.<sup>49</sup> The food parcel, therefore, came not only with food for tomorrow, but also as nostalgic gastronomy,<sup>50</sup> fused with hope, renewal, and a sense of solidarity.

### The parcel traffic in Ireland

Initially, newspapers were commenting on the societal changes taking place as a result of the development of the railway network discussed earlier. In 1900, the *Nenagh Guardian* commented that 'since the introduction of the parcel post

**43** 'The Post Office. Net Deficit of £548,738', *Irish Times*, 27 May 1926, 5; Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 189.

**44** 'American Parcels. 3,500 Registered Letters Received', *Evening Echo*, 22 December 1936, 9. **45** Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 423.

**46** For more information on the bilberry also known as bog

berries, see Michael J. Conry, *Picking Bilberries, Fraocháns and Whorts in Ireland—The Human Story* (Carlow: Michael J. Conry, 2011); bog berries are also mentioned in Toby Barnard, 'Food in Eighteenth Century Ireland' in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter

11, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>.

**47** As a result of the Regulation of Railways Act (1873), and the Post Office (Parcels) Act (1882) which obliged railways to accept mail for carriage without prior notice or delay (referred to earlier).

**48** 'Fruit Culture in Ireland.

Increased Production and Consumption. Blackberries, Bilberries and Crab Apples', *Anglo Celt*, (Cavan), 25 August 1906, 5. **49** John D. Mulcahy, 'Transforming Ireland through gastronomic nationalism promoted and practiced by government, business, and civil society', in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon

and the “Christmas card craze” the national postal system, like the railways, also enters largely into the keeping of Christmas’. The report notes how busy the post office is, crowded with people anxious ‘to forward all kinds of poultry and game or boxes of bon-bons, chocolates, cigars, cigarettes, and the 101 knick-knacks sold by drapers’.<sup>51</sup> By 1913, however, the novelty seems to have become problematic when a newspaper revealed that a Post Office ‘returns department’ was very busy after Christmas, largely due to poor packing of parcels. It describes how the building had a cold storage department for all the lost perishable goods. These included ‘turkeys, pheasants, geese, fowls, hares, rabbits, pigeons, snipe, fish of various kinds, eggs, butter, cream, and a host of other perishable goods’.<sup>52</sup>

Newspapers focused primarily on the substantial outgoing mail between Ireland and Britain, and the large incoming mail from America, particularly in the twentieth century, both of which will be discussed later. There doesn’t appear to be a lot of evidence for large volumes of food parcels traffic from the UK in the early years of the new Irish State.<sup>53</sup> One of the reasons for this is probably best illustrated by this letter to a newspaper editor in 1925, entitled ‘Parcel Post Tax’:

On 14th December I got a Xmas present from a relative in England, containing 1 lb of raisins, 2 lb lump sugar, a small handbag (ladies), 10 cigars, a little spice, one pennyworth of lemon peel and a few pennyworths of sweets. Total cost, 14s. What do you think I was charged as duty by the postal authorities? No less a sum than 10s. 6d. (75 per cent).<sup>54</sup>

The letter goes on to complain bitterly about this situation, but it does serve, perhaps, to illustrate why this traffic was not regularly commented on in the newspapers.

Unfortunately, newspaper commentary on food parcels within Ireland is sparse, perhaps because sending food by post, whether for sale or as a gift, was so commonplace as not to be deserving of commentary. The *An Post* blog confirms that it was very common to send food through the post within the new State,<sup>55</sup> noting that turkeys and geese were sent at Christmas as well as game, rabbits and eggs. Echoing the Post Office Notice published in 1844, mentioned earlier, there were strict regulations on how the eggs should be packed—a rigid box with partitions for each egg, and the spaces around the eggs were to be filled up with

Maher (eds), *Tickling the Palate: Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (Bern/New York/Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 159–174, 161.  
 50 Rachel Slocum, ‘Race in the study of food’, *Progress in Human Geography* 35: 3 (2011), 308, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1177/0309132510378335>  
 51 ‘Echoes of the Xmas Past:

At the Railway Station, At the Post Office’, *Nenagh Guardian*, 29 December 1900, 2.  
 52 ‘Puzzles for the Post Office’, *Evening Herald*, 29 December 1913, 6. 53 Some of the reasons for this include the ‘Economic War’ and the ‘Emergency’, see Evans, ‘Food in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s’. 54 ‘Letter to the Editor: Parcel Post Tax’,

*Irish Examiner*, 29 January 1925, 4. 55 This is because rural women’s income was largely financed by the income from poultry, eggs, butter, goosewing dusters, feathers, etc., which were largely sold at markets, but also sent by post to intermediaries and agents. For example, specialist egg dealers, known

as ‘egglers’, traded directly with the housewives from smaller farms, well into the 20th C. See Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 426–29; Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Andrea Cully, ‘The History of Eggs in Irish Cuisine and Culture’, in

'newspaper or cotton waste'. The parcel also had to be clearly marked as eggs, and a special pink label (Figure 5) was provided to do so.<sup>56</sup>

The lack of newspaper commentary belies the affection ordinary people had for food parcels when the focus was on friends and family, and this becomes clear where oral histories are recorded. The books of the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA) are a rich source of these accounts in living memory. One describes how an ICA member's granny always made several puddings at Christmas, and how they were sent by post from Dublin to relatives in Britain (Bedfordshire and Birmingham), as well as friends in Counties Wicklow and Offaly. In return, the friends sent an oven-ready goose back on the train from Offaly to Dublin.<sup>57</sup>

Contemporary media can also provide accounts from living memory. In a recent TV programme on Channel 4, the comedian and TV presenter Dara Ó Briain, living in Co. Wicklow and born in 1972, described his memory of a food parcel:

An entire turkey in the post. My mother's cousins live in County Mayo, they had a farm, and every Christmas they would send us the turkey we ate at Christmas. This was full turkey, head squeezed in, boxed wrapped around it, misshapen. You'd pop it open, whatever. Big, proper, pre-butcher turkey in the post. We had to collect it from the post depot every year round about mid-December.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, in a podcast interview, Sally Barnes, an artisan food producer from Skibbereen in Co. Cork, tells the story of how her postman told her that he delivered, by bicycle, fresh salmon from Claregalway, Co. Galway (260 km away), to the previous owner of her house in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, in an oral history taken in Dublin, a postman described deliveries of food parcels in the late 1930s on a large tricycle with a big basket at the front. He describes parcels of fresh eggs, packed in a cardboard box, being sent to 'ordinary individuals' from relatives in the country. He also describes delivering fowl at Christmas with 'feathers on them and a label around the neck and around the leg', and 'a lot of fish, salmon wrapped in rushes and reeds'.<sup>60</sup>

Richard Hosking (ed.), *Eggs in Cookery: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium of Food and Cookery 2006* (Devon: Prospect Books, 2007), 137–49. **56** 'Parcel Post—Eggs Label', Stephen Ferguson (ed.), *An Post Museum*, GPO Dublin, An Post, 1 March 2013, <https://anpostmuseum.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/parcel-post-eggs-label/>. **57** Aoife Carrihy (ed.), *The Irish Countrywomen's*

*Association Book of Christmas* (Ireland: Gill Books, 2015), 3. **58** 'Long-Legged Lobster', in Andy Devonshire (ed.), *Taskmaster* (Series 14, Episode 6, United Kingdom: Channel 4, 1st July 2023), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwTOmwWqoZM>. **59** Mei Chin, Blanca Valencia, and Dee Laffan, 'Season Finale! Smoking Sally: A conversation with fish smoker Sally Barnes', podcast audio,

Spice Bags, at 31:23 minutes of 67 minutes, accessed 23 January 2023, 2022, <https://www.spicebags.ie/episodes/episode/503432ac/s3-ep11-season-finale-smoking-sally-a-conversation-with-fish-smoker-sally-barnes> **60** Kevin C. Kearns, *In Our Day: An Oral History of Dublin's Bygone Days* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2022), 114.

The notice gave specific and detailed instructions on how parcels were to be packed for each of six different items: eggs, liquids (particularly in bottles, but advising that bladders containing liquid were prohibited), perishable articles (which included fish, game, meats, butter, and cream), hat boxes, umbrellas, and fruit



**Figure 5a** Parcel Post Eggs label, Courtesy of An Post Museum & Archive.  
**Figure 5b** Raylite Egg Box, Ulster Folk Museum.  
**Figure 5c** Detail, Raylite Egg Box, Ulster Folk Museum.



### The parcel traffic to and from Britain

As noted earlier, the focus of newspaper reports is primarily on the substantial outgoing mail between Ireland and Britain, especially after the First World War (1914–18). A typical example is the report that outward post in Galway was heavy in December 1931, with about 6,000 parcels being posted on the four days before Christmas, of which 1,200 were to addresses in England, comprised mainly of fowl.<sup>61</sup>

During the Second World War waste was unthinkable. Clarissa Dickson Wright<sup>62</sup> describes how an Irish food parcel arrived in her house in England during the war with a chicken in it. Although infested with maggots, rather than ‘chuck it out’, her mother boiled the chicken until the maggots floated to the surface and skimmed them off.<sup>63</sup> In an account with more pleasant outcomes, Sally Barnes, the Skibbereen artisan, relates how a local family moved to London during the Second World War. A relative would kill a chicken on a Friday morning and:

pluck it, gut it, wrap it in brown paper and string, and post it to London. The parcel would be picked up by the mail train in Skibbereen that afternoon, taken straight to Cork, it would be put straight on the ferry and there wasn’t a Sunday during the war that they didn’t eat a fresh chicken from West Cork in London.<sup>64</sup>

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, newspapers reported that the volume of outward parcels from Ireland was very much heavier ‘than in the emergency seasons, accounted for principally by the mailing of parcels of beef, mutton, veal, and lamb to Irish residents in England and Scotland. The records show that over 3,000 sacks of such parcels were dispatched at Christmas’,<sup>65</sup> and that, during Christmas, ‘a special feature was the big increase in gift parcels of food for absent friends across the channel’.<sup>66</sup> They also noted that large volumes of parcels arrived in Kerry for Christmas with one newspaper noting that ‘not inconsiderable supplies of fruit also arrived from Great Britain’.<sup>67</sup>

A recent oral history study confirms that it was common to send food between Ireland and London in the 1940s and ‘50s – one participant remembered that Christmas was when the turkey arrived from an aunt in Co. Limerick because ‘you couldn’t get meat’, and that it would arrive, ‘with all the guts in it’.<sup>68</sup> Understandably, there was some concern about the advisability of sending fresh

**61** ‘At The Post Office. Very Heavy Christmas Mail. About £55,000 in Money for Galway’, *Connacht Sentinel* (Galway), 29 December 1931, 3. **62** One of the ‘Two Fat Ladies’ in the BBC2 cooking series, 1996–1999. **63** Clarissa Dickson Wright, *A History of English*

*Food* (London: Random House UK, 2011), 418. **64** Chin *et al.*, ‘Season Finale. Smoking Sally.’ **65** ‘A Busy Time. Splendid work by all staffs’, *Evening Echo* (Cork), 29 December 1945, 2. **66** ‘Heavy Traffic in Limerick. Busy in GPO.

*American Mails*, *Limerick Leader*, 29 December 1945, 5. **67** ‘Christmas Gifts. Many American and British Parcels for South Kerry’, *Evening Echo*, 1 January 1946, 1. **68** Browne and O’Carroll, ‘Communicative Memory and Diaspora Space’, 117.

meat in the post. A letter to a newspaper editor queried why it was forbidden to cook the meat first before sending it, having repeatedly sent fresh meat by post only to find it arrived ‘uneatable’.<sup>69</sup> Stories like these, and those that follow, demonstrate how, at one level, practical knowledge and culinary expertise were very ably applied, and on another level how emblematic food parcels were of the compassion and consideration which family and friends had for each other in difficult times.

The lack of meat suggests that, after the Second World War, rationing was to blame. In part, it was, but it was also due to very unusual weather patterns in the mid-1940s. Following a poor harvest in the summer of 1946 amidst the worst fuel crisis in its history,<sup>70</sup> Ireland came close to a famine in the winter of 1946–47 when the country experienced two months of temperatures as low as -14 degrees Celsius, along with 60–70 mph cold easterly winds and five blizzards resulting in 20–50 foot high snowdrifts, followed by meltwater floods and heavy rains.<sup>71</sup> This had implications for planting the next harvest, and food was in very short supply. According to Alex Findlater, ‘meat prices, for example, had shot up, so that the family joint now cost 50% more than a year before; as one newspaper put it, there were more steaks than customers in Dublin butchers’ shops’. He references a Scottish paper, the *Sunday Post*, as reporting that c. 55,000 parcels of meat were being sent weekly from Irish to English and Scottish recipients.<sup>72</sup> Clearly, despite the hardship of the weather and shortages in Ireland, the wider Irish community were looking after each other. To combat the shortage, the government intervened, deciding ‘to withdraw temporarily the concession whereby parcels of beef and mutton were accepted for export by post unaccompanied by a licence’.<sup>73</sup>

Notwithstanding the government’s intervention, the number of food parcels grew exponentially from here on. During Christmas 1949, a newspaper report indicates that the parcel traffic to England was so heavy that:

Loaders began to put postal bags aboard the mail boat as soon as she arrived in the morning and had to work all day to clear the outward load before the steamer sailed at 8:30 pm. It was estimated yesterday that 14,000 to 16,000 mail bags, mostly parcel post, went aboard.

The report also stated that ‘in the last fortnight’ 800,000 parcels in 90,000 post bags were sent out from Ireland to Great Britain. This was double the volume

**69** Lamorna Purcell-Fitzgerald, ‘Food Parcels’, Letters to the Editor, *Irish Times*, 18 March 1946, 5.  
**70** The turf harvest had become sodden with water and had never dried out due to persistent rain. **71** Kevin C. Kearns, *Ireland’s*

*Arctic Siege* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2012). **72** Findlater, *Findlaters—The Story of a Dublin Merchant Family (1774–2001)*, 457. **73** ‘Export Ban on Meat Parcels’, *Irish Independent*, 10 May 1947, 7.

of the previous year and, of the total, about 65,000 of the parcels contained gift turkeys going out under licence.<sup>74</sup>

This is borne out by oral accounts. An ICA member describes how her mother sent a turkey at Christmas to London, and a chicken to Liverpool, by post from Co. Wicklow every year. The poultry, plucked but not drawn (i.e., cleaned out) and with heads and feet intact, were wrapped up in layers of greaseproof paper, newspaper, strong brown paper, and, finally, robust string. In the mid-1950s the cousin from Liverpool wrote to say that she noticed chickens had become more plentiful to buy, and although they certainly wouldn't taste anything like the Irish chicken, she felt it wasn't necessary for any more chickens to be posted to her. The turkey was still dispatched to London until, in one New Years' letter, they wrote to say the turkey had arrived safely but had 'gone off' slightly. The cause was put down to a combination of a mild December and the introduction of heating in the sorting area of the Post Office. In spite of this, they had managed to salvage enough of the bird which, having been roasted extra well, provided a hearty dinner without any ill effects.<sup>75</sup>

Some aspects of food parcels were set to change and become much more complicated for families looking after each other. With effect from January 1<sup>st</sup> 1950, Britain, concerned about 'illegal traffic in high-priced food stuffs' and 'fraudulent gift parcels from Éire', prohibited parcels from Ireland which contained canned fruit, dried fruit, table jellies, and chocolate and sugar confectionary.<sup>76</sup> Worried about the effect that the ban might have on their trade, the representative association for grocery shops (RGDATA) published a list of what was permitted in food parcels to Britain, and alerts us to what was considered appropriate for a parcel, and of value, at that time. The *R.G.D.A. T.A. Review*<sup>77</sup> highlighted that other foods were still on the 'permitted' list. These included cakes, cake mixtures, puddings for human consumption, coffee berries, cornflour, custard powder, almonds, farmers' butter, oranges, lemons, grapefruit, apples, currants, gooseberries, grapes, plums, raspberries, strawberries (excluding tinned fruit), honey, jams and marmalades, candied peels, pickles, spices, sauces and condiments, sardines, anchovies and chinchards [horse mackerel], gelatine, starch, and starch preparations. The magazine noted that there was a 20 lb limit on gift parcels (containing food only) which could be imported into the UK. In addition, it also noted that the Department of Industry and Commerce issued permits to applicants

**74** 'Shopping Rush Reaches Climax, Four Days Left', *Irish Independent*, 21 December 1949, 7. **75** Carrigy, *The Irish Countrywomen's Association Book of Christmas*, 30.

**76** 'Food Parcels Ban Causes Discontent', *Irish Independent* (Dublin), 1 December 1949, London Letter, 4.

**77** A trade magazine published in Ireland by the

Retail Grocery, Dairy, and Allied Trades Association.

**78** Erinox is Ireland's version of the 'Oxo' cube or 'Bovril' intended to enrich soups and gravies. They were made at Clover Meats in Waterford, who introduced Erinox Cubes in 1937. They were very popular during 'The Emergency' and were used as a substitute for tea.

See Bernard Share, *Naming Names: Who, What, Where in Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 2001), 132.

**79** Dolan lists a creamery as a 'factory making butter and cheese with milk supplied by a number of local producers, once a familiar sight, with donkey and cart, churns on board, in rural areas'. See Terence Patrick

Dolan (ed.), *The Dictionary of Hiberno-English*, 3rd edn (Dublin: Gill Books, 2020), 70. The difference between homemade butter and creamery butter arose from the former being made with sour cream and the later from sweet cream. See Caoimhín Ó Danachair and Timothy P. O'Neill, 'Life and Tradition in Rural Ireland', review of *Life*

who wanted to send to relatives abroad any of the following goods, subject to a 2 lb limit on any one commodity to be exported at any one time: sago, tapioca, Bovril, Oxo, Erinnox,<sup>78</sup> tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, chocolates, margarines, fats (other than butter or lard). The magazine also pointed out that the Department of Agriculture issued permits, 'on medical certificates, for sending to relatives abroad' parcels containing Creamery butter,<sup>79</sup> bacon, milk, cheese, lard, cream, poultry, eggs, cereals, flour, tinned meat, ham, pork, salmon, sausages, and black and white puddings.<sup>80</sup>

By 1957, fewer turkeys were being dispatched through the postal system, the *Cork Examiner* noting that the public were availing 'more extensively of air service for this purpose'.<sup>81</sup> In 1963, the volume was still significant, although there is no mention of contents in Post Office newspaper reports anymore:

By Christmas Eve it is expected that a total of 28 million letters and packets will have been handled in Dublin. District deliveries will amount to 13 million. In the parcel sorting office at Amiens St, Dublin, 700,000 parcels have been handled, 500,000 of which were dispatched from Dublin and 200,000 were delivered in the city.<sup>82</sup>

It appears that the contents of outbound food parcels had changed, reflecting nostalgia for Irish products not available abroad. A Co. Mayo contributor to the online 'Wild Geese Irish Social Network' mentioned that,

In the 1960s, after the emigration of the '50s there was a large trade in tins of Kimberley, Mikado and Coconut Creams,<sup>83</sup> which were posted to relatives in the United Kingdom or America. These varieties of biscuits were not then available in the UK and had a nostalgic value for relatives abroad.<sup>84</sup>

Another oral account of the 1960s details how fruitcake, custard powder, biscuits and sweets would be sent to relatives in Co. Limerick from the UK at Christmas, trying 'to make up the difference between what was available [in the shops] between the two countries'.<sup>85</sup>

and *Tradition in Rural Ireland*, Timothy P. O'Neill, *Béaloidéas* 45/47 (1977), 274, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20521405>  
**80** 'What May Still be Sent. Gift Parcels For Britain', *Westmeath Independent*, 14 January 1950, 2. **81** 'One Million Air Mail Items Passed Through Limerick G.P.O.', *Cork Examiner* (Cork), 28 December 1957, 3.

**82** 'Christmas post record', *Irish Press*, 21 December 1963, 6. **83** Three types of biscuits with marshmallow made by Jacob's, a prominent Irish manufacturer in the twentieth century. See Cathal Cowan and Regina Sexton, *Ireland's Traditional Foods: An Exploration of Irish Local and Typical Foods and Drinks* (Dublin: Teagasc, 1997), 137–39.

**84** 'Christmas shopping in my father's time', *Christmas Time in Ireland*, GAR Media LLC, updated 13 December, 2015, accessed 14 February, 2023, <https://thewildgeese.irish/profiles/blogs/christmastime-in-ireland>  
**85** Browne and O'Carroll, 'Communicative Memory and Diaspora Space', 118.

### The parcel traffic to and from America

The arrival of what was known as the ‘American parcel’ from family members who had emigrated to North America, largely from the north, west, and south-west of Ireland was highly anticipated. It usually contained food as well as ‘knitted gifts, photographs, rings, watches and clothes’. More importantly, these parcels also contained postal orders (money) to support the family, or travel tickets so that family could join the sender.<sup>86</sup> The volume and economic importance of the American parcels ensured that they were a popular newspaper item. One report, in 1928, comments that ‘one feature of the mails is [sic] the enormous amounts that is addressed to Co. Kerry. In one of the bags which the customs officials examined they found a bottle of “whiskey” consigned from Boston’,<sup>87</sup> while another noted the increase in the number of parcels and letters addressed in the Irish language.<sup>88</sup>

Unsurprisingly, far more parcels were received in Ireland (an average of 170,000) than sent to the USA (16,000) annually in the 1920s and Ireland imposed a surtax on parcels received from the USA.<sup>89</sup> Some businesses appear to have tried to capitalise on the imbalance. Thompson’s Plum Puddings in Cork were advertising their puddings, declaring ‘For your friend abroad, specially made in hermetically sealed tins for export via the American Parcel Mails’ on the front page of a newspaper.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the effects of the tax, and of the Wall Street Crash in 1929, the volume of American parcels to Ireland’s north-western, western, and south-western counties was sustained. In 1937, despite the depression following the Wall Street Crash, the *Irish Press* reported that 7,000 parcels in 650 bags arrived in Dublin from Irish people in America for their relatives at home. The report continues: ‘American mail so far compared favourably with previous years ... the bulk of the first big consignment was for the West and Northwest, Donegal, Galway and Mayo, while there was a good proportion for county Cavan’.<sup>91</sup>

There is evidence that, towards the end of the Second World War, the traffic in food parcels altered somewhat, reflecting economic growth and the easing of rationing, initially in the USA at least. The end of the war saw a revival of American parcels, along with the excitement they produced, as described in two reports, worth quoting in full:

Whatever the position may be in other parts of the country,  
Connemara’s Christmas cakes are already secure. Last week’s American

<sup>86</sup> Ferguson, *The Post Office in Ireland*, 237; Whelan, ‘Women on the Move’, 909.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Where Christmas is no holiday. Work in Post Office. About a million packets handled already’, *Irish Independent*, 19 December 1928, 9.<sup>88</sup> ‘At The Post Office.

Very Heavy Christmas Mail. About £55,000 in Money for Galway’, *Connacht Sentinel*, 29 December 1931, 3.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Irish to Tax Parcel Post’, *New York Times* (New York), 17 April 1924, 18.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Advertisement’, *Irish Examiner*, 28 November 1930, 1.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Big Mail from U.S.’, *Irish Press*, 17 December 1937, 9.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Connemara. No Shortage This Christmas’, *Connacht Tribune*, 23 December 1944, 7.

<sup>93</sup> A variation on traditional Soda Bread, which adds in an egg along with dried fruit like sultanas, raisins, or

currants. The fruit, of course, are the spots referred to in the name. Considered a ‘sweet cake’, it is also known as curnie cake, railway cake, or currant bread, and was a special treat at harvest time and Sundays, Myrtle Allen, *The Ballymaloe Cookbook*,

mail brought loads of sultanas to almost every postal district in Connemara. The war has brought a revival of the ‘American Parcels’ and never were they more numerous or more chuck-full of luxuries than this Christmas. Only a half pound of tea is permitted in each parcel from the USA [by Irish Customs], but this has been circumvented by sending a parcel to each member of the same family. Black marketeers in tea would do very little business in Connemara at the moment.<sup>92</sup>

The enthusiasm that year was also evident in a newspaper report from Limerick:

American Mails—Several large consignments of tea and dried fruit parcels were received from the USA this Christmas. This is the first year in which such commodities have been received from friends in America, and as the official jocosely put it, the spotted dog<sup>93</sup> will this year bark with an American accent.<sup>94</sup>

Clearly, tea and dried fruit were considered by the diaspora to be the commodities that might be most valued at home, or perhaps they were the items requested most frequently. One newspaper provided a more obvious reason while not overtly linking the volume of parcels and the proliferation of parcels containing tea: ‘the inward parcel mails were extremely heavy, the outstanding feature being the clearing through the customs of over 40,000 parcels from the USA. A cross section of the contents show them to be mostly controlled commodities in short supply in this country, such as tea, soap, tin fruits, etc.’<sup>95</sup> Other regional newspapers also highlighted American parcel contents, with one reporting that ‘their contents as shown on the declaration form affixed to the parcels were invariably tea and dried fruit’.<sup>96</sup> Another reported that large volumes of parcels arrived in Kerry for Christmas and ‘[t]he American parcels usually consisted, apart from wearing apparel, of such luxuries as dried fruit, oranges, tea, and rice’,<sup>97</sup> while a report from Sligo commented that ‘in all, it is estimated that 22,000 parcels were handled at the Sligo [post] office. A large number of parcels from America contained tea’.<sup>98</sup> Tea appears to explain the growth in American Parcel volumes in the years after the war until rationing ended in 1951.

The volume of parcels was replicated in Dublin where it was reported that ‘approximately 5,000 mail-bags comprising roughly 36,000 parcels have been received from the United States during the past eight or ten days’.<sup>99</sup> One

3rd edn (Gill & MacMillan, 1977; repr., 1988), 144.

**94** ‘Busy in GPO. The Christmas Rush’, *Limerick Leader*, 30 December 1944, 5.

**95** ‘A Busy Time. Splendid work by all staffs’, *Evening Echo*, 29 December 1945, 2.

**96** ‘Heavy Traffic in Limerick.

Busy in GPO. American Mails’, *Limerick Leader*, 29 December 1945, 5.

**97** ‘Christmas Gifts. Many American and British Parcels for South Kerry’, *Evening Echo*, 1 January 1946, 1.

**98** ‘Sligo Post Office Rush. Xmas Traffic Heavier than

Ever’, *Sligo Champion*, 29 December 1945, 3.

**99** ‘Post Workers Fight Clock in Mails rush’, *Irish Press*, 23 December 1946, 7.

**100** ‘Exiles’ Gifts to Those At Home’, *Irish Independent* (Dublin), 22 December 1950, 8.

8 *Irish Independent*, Friday, December 22, 1950.

## Exiles' Gifts To Those At Home



Some of the 6,300 sacks of American mail, containing more than 35,000 parcels, which were unloaded at Cobh from the U.S. vessel *America* and *American Manufacturer*. The parcels have now been transported to Dublin, and, according to a Post Office official, they will be delivered to their destinations before Christmas.

newspaper carried a picture (Figure 6) of two men dwarfed by the pile of 6,300 sacks of American mail, containing more than 35,000 parcels.<sup>100</sup> These volumes continued to grow so that, in 1954, a newspaper reported that:

The first consignment of Christmas greetings and gifts, in a big way, from America, is due to reach Dublin on Friday in the United States vessel *American Farmer*, which is bringing 10,000 bags of mail. The agents say they understand that this will be the biggest mail cargo ever to reach an Irish port.<sup>101</sup>

Evidently, shipping capacity had increased, and mail cargo was now arriving in Dublin rather than Cork or Derry. While the importance of the American parcel diminished somewhat as the Irish economy improved, regional newspapers in the west of Ireland still took note of whether they arrived or not. One report from 1966 notes that ‘Last year there was no parcel mail from the USA because of the dock strike but this year a record consignment of US parcels reached Tuam’.<sup>102</sup>

**Figure 6** Picture of 6,300 sacks of American Mail – *Irish Independent* 22 December 1950. Courtesy of Irish Newspaper Archives.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Christmas Cargoes. Big Consignment of U.S. mails on way to Dublin’, *Irish Independent*, 8 December 1954, 12. <sup>102</sup> ‘P.O. Handled Half-Million Packets’, *Tuam Herald*, 1 January 1966, 1.

<sup>103</sup> From an Irish perspective, where Irish members of the British army were involved, apart from the First and

Second World Wars, the most notable conflicts include: The Crimean War (1854–56), The Indian Rebellion (1857–1859), The Ashanti Wars (1870s–1900s), Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–80), Anglo-Zulu War (1879), Anglo-Boer Wars (1880–1; 1899–1902), Occupation of Egypt (1882), Matabele Wars

(1893–7), and the Amritsar massacre (1919). Niamh Gallagher, *Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>104</sup> Kevin Kenny, ‘The Irish in the Empire’, in Kevin Kenny (ed.) *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). At

### Food parcels and conflict

In the period covered by this chapter, conflict was a constant.<sup>103</sup> Imperial expansion required resources, primarily personnel, and so Ireland's participation and role in the imperial project is extensive. Historian Kevin Kenny has shown that, between 1855–63, nearly a quarter of Indian Civil Service recruits came from Irish universities, while in 1830, 42% of British Army recruits were Irish born, drawn in the main from the working classes, although this had declined considerably by the turn of the century.<sup>104</sup>

The consequences of this for Irish families become apparent in contemporaneous newspaper reports, which reveal that food parcels were an overt way of maintaining contact and demonstrating practical support from home even if they may not have supported the imperial expansion. A typical example is a report in a Tipperary newspaper in 1900 which published letters from four soldiers (three of them brothers) serving with the British forces in the South African Boer War (1899–1902) to their mothers in Nenagh. The report notes that, 'of the four, only one is just out of his teens'. One letter, from Bert and Edgar Hennessy, comments that:

I have received none of your parcels. They may have been delayed enroute, but nevertheless thank you from my heart. I want you in future to send me no more parcels, as they are sure to get lost or stolen on the road. All I want is cigarettes, and Gus [his brother] will send me those. I got one parcel from him already and I enjoyed them very much.<sup>105</sup>

This difficulty of attempting to select the appropriate contents and then sending parcels is indicative of the struggle with reality in families where their sons were fighting distant wars, where what was considered normal in Ireland was alien on the battlefield.

It was during the First World War that food parcels began to be exploited by governments. It became less about what the families *could* send, and more about what the authorities thought *should* be sent, and by whom. Early in the war, the War Office announced that food parcels were to be administered centrally in future, rather than through a multiplicity of charitable and community organisations. The most pressing reason for this was that so many parcels were

the end of the Second World War, there were still large numbers of Irish in the British Army, which impacted parcel post – a Christmas news report in 1946 noted the arrival in Dublin of 1,000 mailbags made up of parcels sent from 'Irish soldiers serving in the British Army of Occupation in Germany,

from Australia, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Egypt, Switzerland, Belgium, France, Holland, Yugoslavia, Greece – in fact almost every European country', See 'Post Workers Fight Clock in Mails rush', *Irish Press*, 23 December 1946, 7. **105** 'Letters From the War', *Nenagh Guardian*, 12 May 1900, 5.



sent, some recipients sold the excess. Also, some parcels were packed so badly that they fell apart with sugar, rice, and oatmeal leaking out. Censorship by both the British and the Germans also caused damage to food parcel contents, when cakes and bread, even tinned food, were cut and pierced. The War Office saw this as depleting the UK food supplies in favour of the enemy and centralised the administration and distribution of food parcels to troops and prisoners of war.<sup>106</sup>

The contents of the food parcels varied weekly. The Dublin and Kildare POW Committees had two versions: 'The first contains 1lb bacon, 1 tin beef and vegetable rations, 1 tin liquid soup, 1 tin milk,  $\frac{3}{4}$ lb sugar, 1lb dates,  $\frac{1}{2}$ lb tea,  $\frac{1}{2}$ lb biscuits, 1 tin salmon, 1 slab Mexican chocolate. The second contained Collared Head,<sup>107</sup> dripping, herrings, milk, biscuits, 2lbs bacon. To the latter there is always added one extra item of solid food'.<sup>108</sup> Another report explained that 'every food parcel comprises 1lb of biscuits, some kind of cereal, and condensed milk. Tea is given in three parcels out of four, and cocoa in the fourth. The remainder of the food consists of tinned meats, corned beef, sausages, tripe and onions, meat and potato puddings, tinned salmon, herrings, sardines, and potted meat'.<sup>109</sup>

The overall volume was significant. By 1918, the British army postal service had forwarded 114 million parcels (food, clothing, and cigarettes) from Britain to conflict zones over the entire course of the First World War, which, of course, included significant numbers of troops from Ireland.<sup>110</sup> In a House of Commons debate, the Postmaster General reported that the weekly mail to the army in France averaged 350,000 parcels, and parcel post to prisoners of war and those interned in neutral countries had increased from 85,000 to 126,000 weekly.<sup>111</sup> This level of activity was not without its problems, with the War Office complaining about the high level of wastage of food sent in parcels to 'the various fronts, more especially the distant forces'. A forwarding officer is quoted at a port: 'these parcels are constantly found to contain articles such as eggs, butter, sausages, oranges, and so on, the whole being in a varying state of putrefaction'. Similarly, another officer commented that his military forwarding base in Greece had experienced a large consignment of parcels arriving containing puddings and cakes which had become unfit for consumption.<sup>112</sup>

Closer to home, a new military conflict erupted within the UK and on the island of Ireland. The 1916 Easter Rising, primarily in Dublin, had resulted in executions and in the internment and imprisonment of Irish political prisoners both in England and Ireland. On the British side, the withdrawal of food parcels 'privileges' quickly became a means of demonstrating power and a means of

**106** 'Relief for British Prisoners of War. New Scheme to Prevent Abuses', *Irish Times*, 21 October 1916, 7; 'Care of British Prisoners of War', *Cork Examiner*, 28 May 1918, 3.  
**107** A tasty economical terrine made from the

meat of a boiled pig's head, also known as 'brawn'.

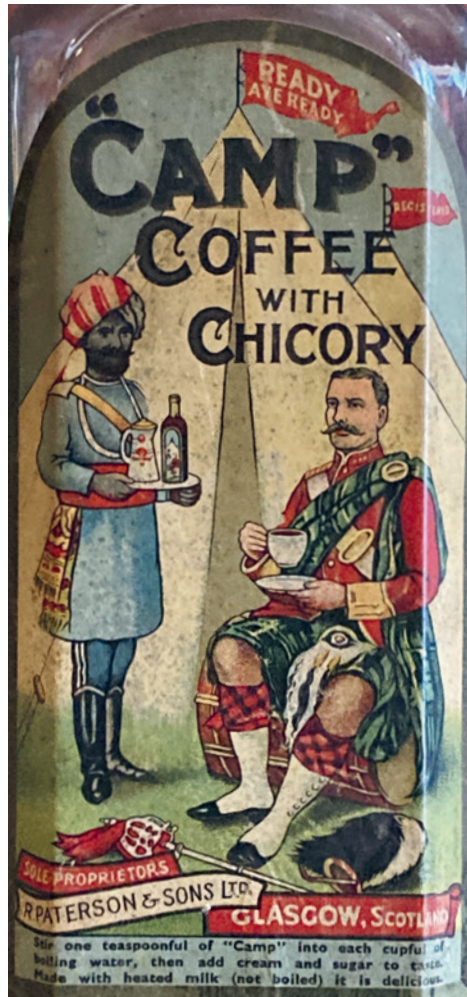
**108** 'Food for Prisoners of War', *Freeman's Journal*, 9 March 1917, 3.  
**109** 'Care of British Prisoners of War', *Cork Examiner*, 28 May 1918, 3.

**110** '10 ways Christmas was celebrated during

the First World War', *BBC History Magazine* and *BBC History Revealed*, updated 24 December 2019, 2019, accessed 14 February, 2023, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/first-world-war/how-christmas-celebrated-during-ww1-wartime/>.

**111** 'Work of the Post Office', *Cork Examiner*, 13 June 1918, 6.

**112** 'Parcels for Troops', *Irish Times*, 18 August 1917, 5.



**Figure 7** Bottle of Camp Coffee, photographed by the author in Ulster Folk Museum and reproduced with kind permission.

isolating prisoners,<sup>113</sup> while on the Irish side, parcels were a means of galvanising and demonstrating support for the 1916 rebels, as well as subterfuge.

One of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, Éamon de Valera,<sup>114</sup> along with others, was arrested by the British in 1918 and sent to prison in England.<sup>115</sup> Shortly afterwards, the Cumann na mBan<sup>116</sup> Prisoners' Sub-Committee published a letter encouraging the 'relatives of the deportees to continue to send food parcels until we can procure a complete list of prisoners and ascertain their whereabouts'. As rationing was in place in England, they believed that 'sugar, butter, cheese, bacon, and meat of all kinds' should not be sent in a food parcel. Instead, they suggested, the following was suitable to supplement the prison diet:

bread, made with milk; sweet cakes, made with butter and eggs, and, if possible, fruits, such as dates, etc.; sweetened condensed full milk, sweets, chocolate, toffee (home-made preferable), golden syrup in tins, jam, marmalade, and honey, tea, Camp coffee,<sup>117</sup> [Figure 7] and cocoa, hard-boiled eggs, fish cakes, and tinned fish (including sardines).<sup>118</sup>

But six days later newspapers reported that de Valera wrote from prison to the sub-committee saying: 'We have decided here that, on principle, food parcels should not be sent us from Ireland. It is for the English government to feed us properly. Inform those concerned'. Subsequently, newspapers reported that, as a consequence of de Valera's request, the Sub Committee asked subscribers not to send any more food parcels.<sup>119</sup> Clearly, de Valera was using food parcels, and the connotations that had grown up around them, to create a useful narrative both to gain support at home, and to strengthen his position in his conflict with the British. More prosaically, he also used food parcels to escape from prison in England. Eager to get back to Ireland and the volatile politics of the new emerging state, he had identified a door in the jail through which he could escape. By sending out cartoons of the critical door key on Christmas cards and receiving three different fruit cakes to smuggle in a key that would work, he escaped in February 1919.<sup>120</sup>

**113** 'Irish Rebellion Prisoners', *Southern Star*, 23 November 1916, 2.  
**114** Later Taoiseach (Prime Minister), and President of Ireland. **115** Hickey and Doherty, *A Dictionary of Irish History from 1800*, 121.  
**116** The name, in Irish, for the 'League of Women', which was

formed in 1914 as an auxiliary corps, to complement the Irish Volunteer Force. They supported the Easter Rising in 1916. Hickey and Doherty, *A Dictionary of Irish History from 1800*, 106. **117** A popular brand of Chicory and Coffee Essence  
**118** 'Food Parcels for Prisoners. To the Editor

"Irish Independent", *Irish Independent*, 7 June 1918, 3.

**119** 'The Irish Deportees. Mr De Valera and Food Supplies', *Irish Independent*, 13 June 1918, 2. **120** Liam McMahon, Statement by Witness, Document No. W.S. 0274, 8–10 (Dublin, Irish Defence Forces, 1949).

### Final thoughts

Food and beverages have progressively become an indispensable lens through which we can plot changes in historical values and social and economic trends. Indeed, several academic disciplines view the production and consumption of food as ways of understanding cultural adaptation and social grouping. What has emerged in this discussion is a deeper appreciation and realisation of a multi-faceted environment, or, in Bourdieu's terms, the cultural habitus<sup>121</sup> surrounding food parcels and their contents. At a fundamental level, food parcels were vehicles to convey meaning, to establish, maintain and reinforce cultural identity, and to demonstrate community. This reflects Roland Barthes' idea that 'food is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used. It has a twofold value, being nutrition as well as protocol, and its value as protocol becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic needs are satisfied'.<sup>122</sup>

Although it is never explicit, the Irish food parcel culture has consistently signified kinship, obligation and reciprocity, characteristic of life on the island and central to many familial networks, and essential to migratory networks among the diaspora in Britain and America.<sup>123</sup> Given the scale of Irish emigration over two centuries, a 'long term, multi-generational symbiotic relationship between those who were at home and those who were abroad was a feature of this diaspora space'.<sup>124</sup> In a wider context, this was recognised in 1955 by Ireland's Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems when it reported that:

Tradition and example have also been very powerful influences. Emigration of some members of the family has almost become part of the established custom of the people in certain areas—a part of the generally accepted pattern of life. For very many emigrants there was a traditional path 'from the known to the known', that is to say, from areas where they lived to places where their friends and relations awaited them. This path they followed as a matter of course without even looking for suitable employment in this country.<sup>125</sup>

Dense with meaning, the Irish diaspora formed a distinct national identity, comprised of those who 'stayed put' versus those who 'went away', or those in the 'home society' versus those in the 'host society', yet they remain a part of both, but not fully.<sup>126</sup> Essentially, food parcels and their specific contents constituted

**121** A concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu which refers to a habitual, unremarked, individual practice that reflects group consensus about 'how things are done', David Swartz, *Culture & Power: the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

**122** Roland Barthes, 'Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds), *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 21–27, 26.

**123** Browne and O'Carroll, 'Communicative Memory

and Diaspora Space', 128.

**124** Browne and O'Carroll, 'Communicative Memory and Diaspora Space', 129.

**125** Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems, *Reports of the Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems*

1948–1954, 137 (Dublin: Government Publications Office, 1955).

**126** Browne and O'Carroll, 'Communicative Memory and Diaspora Space'.

a trade off in commensality—the people ‘abroad’ were sending remittances (for a hay barn, a radio, and a washing machine), and the people ‘at home’ were sending food (fresh meat, in particular).<sup>127</sup> Unfortunately, in the wider context of the migration experience, families do not usually leave a written record of the circumstances, context, memories, or the consequences of the decisions made and the actions taken over a lifetime.<sup>128</sup> Hopefully, this chapter goes some way to revealing several primary and secondary sources which provide an insight, particularly in relation to food parcels and their contents.

**127** For figures on this over a century, see McGowan, ‘The Irish in Leeds, 1931-81: aspects of emigration’.

**128** Browne and O’Carroll, ‘Communicative Memory and Diaspora Space’, 113.

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*'Joined in Butter':  
The material culture of Irish  
home butter-makers, using  
the dash churn, up to the late  
nineteenth century*

**Claudia Kinmonth**

This research explores the objects associated with making butter on Ireland's smallest farms. It centres on butter that was churned from 'ripened cream' or whole milk, using upright wooden dash churns, up to the late nineteenth century. It also examines how women sometimes collaborated to profit from their butter making, and how others sent it to local markets. It attempts a categorisation of the variously named and sometimes overlapping range of hand implements used in conjunction with the dash churn. Comparisons are made with implements manufactured in alternative, modern materials, which retailers offered to compete within a busy market. The descriptions of butter making objects follow the chronology of butter making: from milking cows by hand, to the straining then setting of milk to ripen cream, its skimming then churning, lifting off before 'working' (washing, blending and salting), and finishing off by 'making up' before home use or sale. The chapter explores how small dairy buildings were situated and furnished, and how frugality and communality affected the various objects involved in the exacting, laborious, and challenging making of butter by the unmodernised, traditional system. This approach is grounded in design and art history. It draws from the recorded folklore relating to butter making, but focuses principally on material culture.

### Introduction

Butter was made on Irish farms until the establishment of creameries, from the 1880s onwards.<sup>1</sup> Before the creamery system changed production methods, the range of tools used to make butter developed, expanded and evolved with industrialisation inventing new potentials to save labour, and pushing the sale of novel products. However, the portable hand-held, traditional tools and the techniques involved in the dairies of Ireland's so called 'big houses' and large farms, were often echoed in the smaller farm houses of the rural working poor. Accounts from the larger establishments can help inform this study of the most simple, functional and often multi-purpose objects used in butter production associated with the dash churn, up to about the 1880s. This includes a period when butter was often still sold directly by its maker, on the streets in open markets, or in some cases sent to highly regulated city butter markets such as The Cork Butter Exchange.

Plenty of objects used for making butter survive in Irish museums, but information about how items were named, used, where or by whom, is sometimes lacking. Object analysis, combined with art historical analysis, augments the

<sup>1</sup> P.F. Fox and Proinsias Breathnach, 'Proprietary Creameries in Ireland', in Peter Foynes, Colin Rynne, Chris Synnott (eds) *Butter in Ireland from Earliest Times to the 21st Century* (Cork: Cork Butter Museum, 2014), 61–70.



vast reservoir drawn on here from the Irish Folklore Commission manuscripts: especially The Schools' Collection (IFCS).<sup>2</sup> These accounts are often highly detailed and sometimes include sketches. They are cross-referred here with surviving objects and various published texts.

Some didactic poetry for schoolchildren, from 1829, is a reminder of how rooted butter making then was in small farmhouses and 'cabins':

Great A he discompared  
 To a cabin's gable end, sir:  
 And B it stood for butter,  
 That we to market send, sir:  
 C for half a griddle,  
 H, the great big haggard gate, sir,  
 I, a pitchfork stuck in the ground,  
 And K it stands for Kate, sir.<sup>3</sup>

A brief, evocative account from a prosperous Co. Limerick farmhouse encapsulates some of the basics of mid-nineteenth-century butter making. Mary Carbery recalls in *The Farm by Lough Gur* (1937) that the house used two dairies, each chosen according to season. So:

the lower one ... reached from the upper by stone steps, was cooler and used in summer. On the stone shelves were rows of flat earthen and glass pans: all spotlessly clean and fragrant ... Here entered in a long file, the head dairywoman and her maids, carrying milk pails on their heads; lowering them carefully, they poured the milk through strainers into huge lead cisterns<sup>4</sup> where the cream for butter-making was to rise, the remainder being strained into flat pans on the shelves. A lovely homely sight: rich, ivory milk, golden cream—all to be hand skimmed—firm one-pound pats of perfectly made butter ready to be sent off to special customers in Dublin and London; other great pats for home consumption ... and the bulk of the butter in firkins [small oak casks bound with wooden hoops, of varying capacity], each containing seventy pounds, set aside for the butter buyer to take to market.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Irish Folklore Commission Schools' Collection (1937–39) is referred to throughout this paper in footnotes as the IFCS.  
<sup>3</sup> Thomas Crofton Croker and R. Adolphus Lynch, *Legends of the lakes, or, Sayings and doings at Killarney*, Vol.2

(London: John Ebers, 1829), 147. <sup>4</sup> Peter Brears, *The Dairy Catalogue* (York: Castle Museum, 1979), Figure 50, 9.  
<sup>5</sup> Mary Carbery, *The Farm by Lough Gur, the story of Mary Fogarty (Sissy O'Brien)* (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1986 [1937]), 22. See also

Claudia Kinmonth, 'Noggins the nicest work of all' in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies XVIII* (2015), 79, Fig.4.; Margaret Willes, *Household Management* (London: The National Trust), 28–33.



### Milking

Each cow was milked by hand, often simply out in a field, perhaps with her back legs hobbled or secured with a spangle to keep her still. Otherwise milking was done in the byre. Having the calf nearby encouraged the cow to 'let down' her milk (Figure 1). Customarily a woman or girl was the milkmaid: perhaps carrying a stool along for her task. It took about ten minutes to milk each one (morning and evening), and the cows were familiar, with names such as Bluebell, Dairymaid or Bright Eye.<sup>6</sup> Often there would be a song. Asked about singing as she milked, Ellie, the 'young and lively maid' from Lough Gur retorted:

Sing, is it? And why wouldn't I sing? ... Sorra a drop would the cows let down and we cheating them of their song! What's more they milk aisy for the *Wearin' of the Green* and *She's far from the land*, but if ye try them with *The Shan Van Voght* ye'll repent it ... most of them would be that excited they'd have the milk sweep' out of the pail with their tails on the first note.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> IFCS 866:110 Co. Kilkenny <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4742026/4729335>.  
<sup>7</sup> Carbery, *The Farm by Lough Gur*, 23. Kinmonth, 'Noggins', 79, Fig.4.

**Figure 1** A byre dwelling housed people and animals beneath one roof, usually divided by a drain. The cow is being milked into a tin can or 'gallon' with her calf nearby on a bed of heather, with the unlined thatched roof overhead. Basil Bradley

(1842–1904) *Interior of a cabin, Connemara, 1880*, oil on canvas, 36.8 cm x 57.2 cm, Courtesy Gorry Gallery.



### Carrying the can / the piggin

Milking was done directly into a wooden staved pail, variously called a piggin or can (or on the Aran Islands *canna*). Very similar forms of these open-topped, conical, staved vessels were recorded from archaeological excavations in medieval Dublin.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, some were resorting to lighter, metal cans, sometimes with a carrying handle (Figure 1). The piggin usually had one longer, projecting stave for a handle (Figure 2). Then the milkmaid carried the can (Figure 3) home balanced skilfully on her head, using a head ring of straw, or roll of cloth that might be tied under her chin like a bonnet.<sup>9</sup> Carrying the can was a responsible job, especially for those who sold rather than drank the milk; oat milk, called 'bull's milk' was an alternative home-made milk for personal consumption.<sup>10</sup> Irish women carried all sorts of things in this way, well into the twentieth century. It is sketched in 1760 by Hugh Douglas Hamilton in *The Cries of Dublin*. Huge vessels of milk and of 'sweet whey' were sold by milk maids on Dublin's streets, one of whom carries a huge staved vessel on her head.<sup>11</sup> The way they wore heeled shoes enhanced their striking caryatid-like stance, and caught peoples' attention.

The cooper made all staved vessels slightly tapered, so binding hoops tightened up as he tapped them over the staves: hoops were often made of ash. The milking piggin or *pigin bainne* was usually narrowed at the top, to prevent milk

**Figure 2** Oak staved 'piggin', with raised lug handle, bound with metal hoops, for milking into (or for carrying water, milk or butter on the dairymaid's head). Photo courtesy Sheppards. H.27 cm x W.25 cm.

**Figure 3** A woman carrying a can or piggin on her head, with a head ring for comfort, strides barefoot across a stream, while driving her cows (in County Cork). Attributed to Daniel Maclise (1806–70), from Thomas Crofton Croker and R. Adolphus Lynch, *Legends of the Lakes, or Sayings and Doings at Killarney*, Vol.2 (London: Ebers, 1929), 120.

**8** Martin G. Corney, *Coopers and Coopering in Viking Age Dublin, Medieval Dublin Excavations 1962–81*, Ser. B, Vol. 10 (Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 2010), 26–27, 30–33, 49, 67, 70–71, Fig.57a, 207, 221, 216. More research is needed into parallels between archaeological evidence and recent discoveries in design history, the figure just cited is a specific technical detail

that this author revealed using Xradia technology in the binding of a noggin, illustrated in Claudia Kinmonth 'Noggins' Figures 8–11, 139–45. **9** IFCS 448:220 Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4706359/4706130>. **10** IFCS 212:101 Co. Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4649695/4648049>; For a chapter on Bulls Milk, see Florence Irwin's *Irish*

spilling out during the walk. The statuesque confidence of a Cork milkmaid, striding barefoot through a stream near Kanturk, was sketched by celebrated Cork artist Daniel Maclise (1806–1870), in 1827 (Figure 3). Her ‘peasant’ costume caught his eye: a green gown, red petticoat and blue cloak and ‘her head was enveloped in its formally plaited hood. With a kippen or switch in her left hand she urged the cattle forward, singing a wild melody, while her right hand, placed akimbo, served to balance the milk pail which she carried on her head’.<sup>12</sup> A watercolour c. 1850, attributed to Erskine Nicol (1825–1904), shows another barefoot milkmaid carrying a larger, more elaborate iron-bound piggin on her head, equipped with cups on hooks, and a tap at the front. She could reach up to fill and sell cups of milk to passing customers and replace them, without taking the heavy vessel down from her head. Her head ring is clearly visible, helping balance her impressive load.<sup>13</sup>

Each piggin for milking and carrying home milk probably varied in capacity. As previously noted, it usually had one stave longer than the others as a handle; this elongated stave was either long and widened at the top (like most noggins) or short and perforated for grip (like that of a keeler). Such designs would vary according to each cooper and region.<sup>14</sup> The short stave handle used less timber, weighed less and is visible in Maclise’s sketch (Figure 3).<sup>15</sup> These handles helped the air drying of vessels propped upside-down out of doors.

### The Dairy

According to the foremost expert on treen,<sup>16</sup> Edward Pinto, the ‘prime essentials of the dairy, cleanliness and coolness, are unchanging; both have been stressed in all books of instruction from early times’.<sup>17</sup> Those smallholders with the fewest cows were most likely to churn milk or cream with the comparatively inexpensive, easily cleaned dash churn (Figures 4, 5). Often, they lacked the luxury of separate dairies, so instead made butter in their barns, byres or in ‘the room’ (which doubled as a parlour and bedroom)<sup>18</sup> or simply in the kitchen<sup>19</sup> (Figures 6, 7).



**Figure 4** Convex Dash churn with flared top, hooped in metal and like many others, painted green. The dasher handle protrudes through the recessed lid and the rectangular ‘churn board’ that rests on the lid reduced splashing (a variant of a turned ‘joggler’). Easier to clean and less expensive than mechanised churns, these were still used well into the mid-20th century. Made by Stephen Daly at Daly’s cooperage, Ennis, County Clare, F1967.108. H. 75 cm x D. 46 cm. Photograph courtesy National Museum of Ireland.

*Country Recipes* (Belfast: The Northern Whig, 1937), 93.

**11** William Laffan (ed.), *The Cries of Dublin, Drawn from the Life by Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760* (Dublin: Irish Georgian Society, 2003), plate 11, 76–7, plate 32, 119, plate 19, 93. Anne O’Dowd, *Straw, Hay & Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press/National Museum of Ireland, 2015), 367–71. **12** Croker and Lynch, *Legends of the lakes*, 120–1.

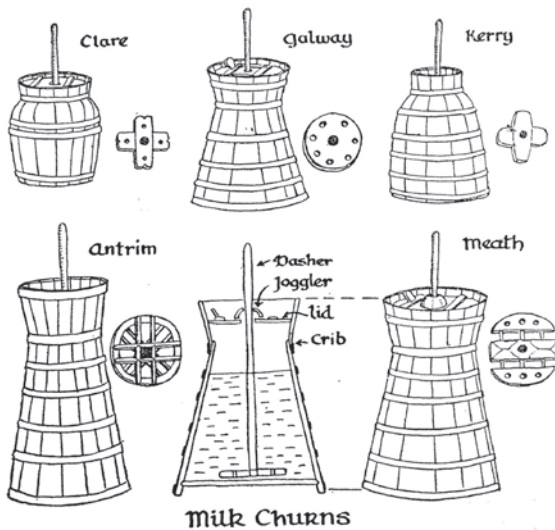
**13** Kinmonth, ‘Noggins’ 131–3, Figure 2–3, 10.

**14** Megan McManus, *Crafted in Ireland* (Belfast: Ulster

Folk and Transport Museum exhibition catalogue, 1986), 40–42. **15** Claudia Kinmonth,

*Irish country furniture and furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), Figure 441, 447. **16** Treen is a term for small domestic wooden objects. **17** Edward H. Pinto, *Treen and other wooden bygones: an encyclopaedia and social history* (London: Bell & Sons, 1969), 97. **18** Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, 264–72, 305–6, 337–41.

**19** IFCS 957:184 Co. Monaghan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4742056/4731416>.



**Figure 5** The shapes of dash churns and dashers varied regionally: Evans' fieldwork was primarily in Northern counties where people churned from milk, explaining his title: 'Milk Churns'. His Meath cross section shows the curved joggler (dabber or butter cup) sitting on the lid: to reduce splattering of cream as the staff was agitated. In frugal households, the joggler also served to lift butter off the churn, wash buttermilk out of it, and incorporate salt. From E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Heritage*,

*the landscape, the people, and their work* (Dundalk, 1942), Figure 67, p.122. Courtesy Dundalgan Press.

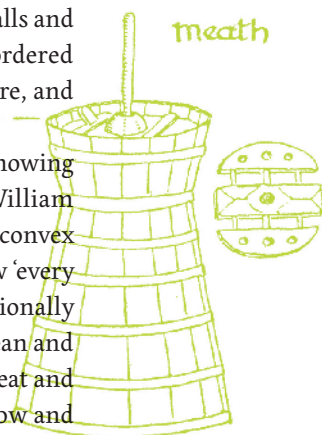
**Figure 6** 'Churning the milk in Ireland' illustrates the common practise of churning in a kitchen. Her huge churn is typical of northern counties, where instead of ripened cream, many butter-makers churned whole milk. This resulted in comparatively large churns, as reflected in museum collections. Postcard of a painting c. 1900, author's collection.



Some architectural details of one Irish dairy survive from Co. Wicklow. Mrs Miley's dairy at Marlfields, Monamuck, was recorded by folklorists on 10 June, 1939 during the Poulaphuca Reservoir Survey: 'The Miley's have 54 acres of land and keep about 30 head of cattle in winter'.<sup>20</sup> Rudimentary sketches, with photographs of a long, low row of farm buildings, reveal the 'Dairy' had a corrugated iron roof, three stone steps leading up to its only door, and a single window. Sandwiched between the 'Room' of Miley's three-bay thatched farmhouse (to the left), and the 'Stable' (with one door) to its right, the dairy had no internal connecting doors. The neatly whitewashed buildings, adorned with climbing roses, faced a gated yard with an 'Out-office' and 'Lean-to' at one end. Photographs suggest the dairy door had a key, and an array of butter making equipment was photographed outside, including a huge piece of butter on a wooden trencher, a small butter dish and a crudely carved butter 'printer'. The kitchen walls and ceiling were wallpapered, presenting an impressively neat, bright, ordered arrangement complete with a dresser adorned with ample matching ware, and a row of eggs, opposite a floor-level open hearth.<sup>21</sup>

Some detailed drawings by celebrated food historian Peter Brears, showing English dairies, create a touchstone.<sup>22</sup> However, a watercolour by William Magrath (1838–1918) shows a plausible dairy arrangement, centred on a convex dash churn typical of Co. Cork (Figure 8).<sup>23</sup> A 1930s account related how 'every farmer who owned cows had a dairy. It was oftentimes a room but occasionally there was a separate house for the purpose. It was kept scrupulously clean and was whitewashed',<sup>24</sup> ideally thatched (to insulate against extremes of heat and cold) and possibly isolated from other farm buildings,<sup>25</sup> 'with the window and door facing north'.<sup>26</sup> A Co. Cavan dairy was lined with shelves holding crocks of new milk 'left there to ripe or thicken for churning' and for making butter (Figure 9).<sup>27</sup>

Dairies were recalled in the late 1930s, with 'whitewashed walls and nicely sanded floor[s]. Around by the walls inside were "stillings" or stands, whereon the wooden "keelers" were placed'.<sup>28</sup> An American engraving shows how Irish dairies may have been arranged, internally (Figures 10, 11).



**20** Christiaan Corlett (ed.), *Beneath the Poulaphuca Reservoir, The 1939 Poulaphuca Survey of the lands flooded by the Liffey Reservoir Scheme* (Dublin: Government of Ireland, 2008), 209; Christiaan Corlett, *Wicklow's traditional farmhouses: rediscovering some of Wicklow's hidden treasures and a way of life that went with them* (Wicklow County Council, 2014), Figure 37, 39; includes a 2012 photograph of a two-storey farmhouse at Askeagh, Ballinglen, where 'at one end

of the kitchen [furthest from the hearth] is the former dairy and pantry' Corlett's plan locates it on the ground floor, beneath a bedroom. **21** Corlett, *Beneath the Poulaphuca Reservoir*, 219–25. The inaccurate sketches by Seán Ó Súilleabháin (Figure 28) omit some of the window openings when juxtaposed with the photographs, which suggest the 'dairy' had a window to the left of its single door. **22** Peter Brears, 'The Dairy' in Mark Dawson, Laura Mason, Janet Pickering (eds),

*The Domestic Dairy aspects of British Dairying History* (Leeds Symposium on Food History and Traditions, Vol. 15 of 'Food and Society' series, King's Lynn, 2018), 102–07. **23** Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), Figures 120–21, pp. 119–21. **24** IFCS 185:24 Co. Sligo <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4701754/4699511>. **25** IFCS 324:134 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/encbes/4921693/4890521>.

**26** IFCS 243:252 Co. Roscommon <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4798690/4790550>. **27** IFCS 967:390 Co. Cavan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5083770/5039691>. **28** IFCS 324:134 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890521> also IFCS 350:193 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921730/4894228>; Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, Figure 436, 442.



**Figure 7** This kitchen scene shows cream being set in a crock (far right), and a spoon on the wall for skimming once it ripens. The small dash churn, with the mother's hand on the staff, has a lucky rowan hoop encircling it, and is typical of Galway, where this artist had a studio. Howard Helmick (1840–1907), *'Her First Love'*, 1878, oil on canvas, 50.8 cm x 40.6 cm, courtesy Gorry Gallery.

**Figure 8** This view of a dairy centres on the convex dash churn typical of Cork with a high metal top to contain splashing cream. Ripening cream gleams in setting pans (right), an oak keeler (left) is ready in which to 'work' (wash and salt) butter from the churn. Her butter print soaks in a basin of water by her feet, for decorating her butter. William Magrath (1838–1918), *'In the Dairy'*, 1876, watercolour, 46 cm x 36cm.



Whitewashing of flour bags to line the underside of thatch reduced dust, enhanced light levels greatly and helped keep everything clean for other activities such as lace making, spinning, knitting, weaving, and cooking



**Figure 9** Low earthenware, trailed slip crock or setting pan for ripening cream (and multipurpose). Tall black manganese-glazed crock for storing buttermilk, cream, butter, water, preserved eggs etc. Note the hand prints in glaze, and flat top for the wooden or stone lid. Typically made in Coalisland, County Tyrone, both have turned over 'lips' for hand grip. Author's photo, courtesy National Museum of Ireland; F1968:114, H.15 cm x W. 33 cm, and F1969:17, H. 26.5 cm x D. 36 -37.2 cm.



'Stillions' or 'stillings' were wooden frames, shelves, or stone recesses in Irish farm-houses. They were intended for vessels of water from the spring, to raise casks off the floor. In dairies they supported crocks.<sup>29</sup> Thatch was often mentioned as an ideal roofing material for the dairy, even when associated farm buildings were slated, to buffer the space from frost in winter and heat in summer. Dirt rained down from dark, unlined thatched roofs, but from Cork we learn how 'The dairy was lined with white-washed bags. There were two or more windows in each dairy according to size. The dairies should be kept spotlessly clean ... [with] two timber stands [where] cream pans were placed'.<sup>30</sup> Whitewashing of flour bags to line the underside of thatch reduced dust, enhanced light levels greatly and helped keep everything clean for other activities such as lace making, spinning, knitting, weaving, and cooking. Closely woven flour bags were frugally reserved and even chosen according to how easily the print could be washed off. Some were 'bleached on the grass until white as snow', then used to wrap butter (and probably to help strain it) to sell to the local shops, rather than purchasing muslin.<sup>31</sup> The strict routines involved with keeping the dairy fastidiously clean were crucial to the success of making the best butter.

### Sieves, strainers and milk ladders

As soon as it reached the dairy, the fresh 'sweet milk' had to be strained to remove hairs, grit, cow dander or detritus (Figure 11). Evans mentions a seventeenth century 'milk strainer made of birch bark folded into a cone and filled with straw'.<sup>32</sup> He describes hoops of ash or bog fir, made to hold sheep or goat skin taut, and some had perforations for sieving buttermilk. In 1951, A. T. Lucas described how 'before the introduction of the modern type of sieve or riddle laced with wire' specialist craftsmen made circular hooped 'riddles' and finer 'sieves', which skilfully incorporated woven strips of split ash. Primarily for cleaning grain they were 'put to a wide variety of uses'.<sup>33</sup> Frugal people habitually used one object for numerous purposes. For milk straining, some 'put a muslin cloth instead placed on a sieve'.<sup>34</sup> Resourceful people strained milk through a wad of fresh clean grass, or through various natural materials including straw pads, wisps of hay, fern and woven rushes.<sup>35</sup> Straining was sometimes done through a (horse-)hair sieve<sup>36</sup> which also served to collect stray granules of butter out of the churn.<sup>37</sup>

Brears' research reveals how a turner made a 'sile' (or sieve) by turning a wooden bowl, with a wide hole in its 'footed' base. A clean muslin cloth was tied

**29** Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, 56, 257–61, 470, Figure 274. **30** IFCS 360: 33 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921772/4905579>. **31** Kinmonth, *Irish country furniture*, Figure 445, pp.455–58. **32** Emyr Estyn Evans, *Irish Heritage: the landscape, the people and their work* (Dundalk: Dundalgan

Press, 1945), 124. **33** A. T. Lucas, 'Making Wooden Sieves', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 81: 2 (1951), 146–155. **34** IFCS 487:69 Co. Limerick <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921957/4913205>. **35** O'Dowd, *Straw, Hay & Rushes*, 434–35. **36** IFCS 355:296, Co. Cork [\[www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921751/4903491\]\(https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921751/4903491\); NFCS 1030:56 Co. Donegal <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4428261/4389765>. \*\*37\*\* IFCS 1118:461 Co. Donegal <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4493787/4420367>; IFCS 901:314 Co. Wexford <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009339/5008531>; So](https://</a></p>
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the sieve's diameter needed to be smaller than the aperture of a dash churn.

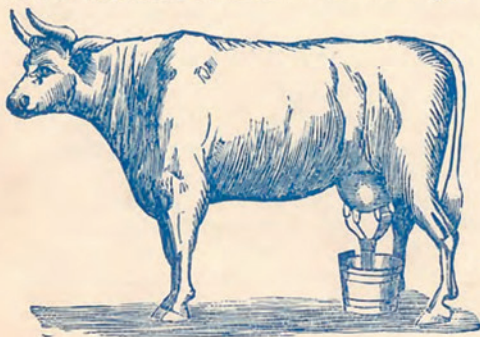


**Figure 10** 'Straining and Skimming'. An American dairy interior showing a piggín of fresh milk being poured through a hooped strainer into a low crock, to set (right). On the left, ripened cream is skimmed off using a spoon, into a

tall crock, for stirring, before churning. Crocks line the shelves (called 'stillions' in Ireland). From *The Progress of the Dairy: Descriptive of the Making of Butter and Cheese for the Information of Youth* (New York: Samuel Wood, 1819).

**NEW MILKING MACHINE.****INVALUABLE FOR NEWLY-CALVED COWS.**

Tested by practical agriculturists, dairymen, etc., and pronounced one of the most invaluable machines yet invented.



Amongst its many advantages are:—

- 1st. *Self-Acting*, and can be used by any person.
- 2nd. Will milk any cow in *four minutes* effectually, and its use is more agreeable to the cow than hand-milking.
- 3rd. It is a great boon in the case of sore or corded teats.

Price 7/6. Post free.

Silver Milking Tubes for Sore Udders, 2/- each.



**Figure 11** Arrangement for straining fresh milk; it was poured through the bowl-shaped strainer (muslin would have been tied across its base hole), supported on a 'milk straining ladder'. Milk collects in the oak keeler beneath, alternatively a shallow crock or various setting pans (of tin, enamel or porcelain) served the same purpose. This strainer was lathe-turned, others were of hooped wood or metal. Milk Strainer and ladder from Kilbride, County Wicklow: F.1933.37.1-2, butter keeler: Dungummin, County Cavan: F.1949.14. Courtesy National Museum of Ireland.

**MILKING PAILS.**

OAK.

10 qts., 3/-

12 qts., 3/6

14 qts., 4/-

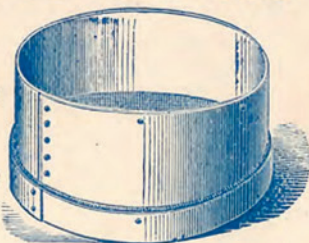
**SIEVES FOR MILK AND BUTTER.****FOR MILK.**

Size 8 10 inch

2/6 3/6

Size 12 14 inch

4/9 5/6

**FOR BUTTER.**

Size 8 10 inch

1/4 2/-

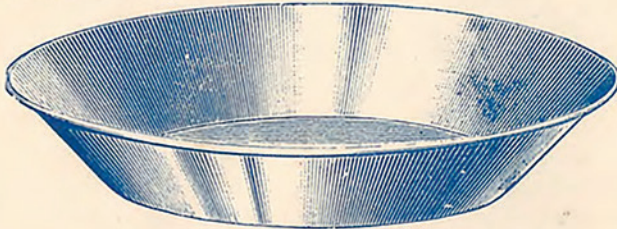
Size 12 14 inch

2/6 3/6

Salt Sieves—7in., 1/- ; 9in., 1/6 ; 11in., 2/-.

**MILK SETTING PANS.**

Machine made, stamped in one piece and wire edged, silver tinned, and wheeled to facilitate the quick rising of the cream.



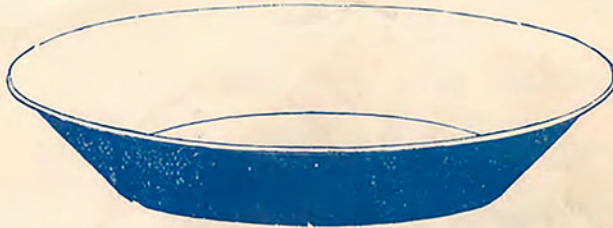
✱  
With  
Wired Bottoms.



PRICES :				
16	18	20	22	24 inches.
1s. 6d.	2s.	2s. 3d.	2s. 6d.	3s. 3d. each.
5	6	10	12	16 quarts.

**ENAMELLED  
MILK SETTING  
PANS - -**

(Wrought Steel).



PRICES :			
18	20	22	24 inches.
3s.	3s. 9d.	4s. 6d.	5s. each.
10	12	16	18 quarts



**BELLEEK WARE  
MILK - -  
SETTING PANS**

(very handsome  
Porcelain).

PRICES :			
16	18	20	22 inches.
3s. 6d.	4s. 6d.	5s. 6d.	7s. 6d. each.

**MILK STRAINING LADDER**

(Best Ash ; no nails used).

18 inch,	1s. each.	22 inch,	1s. 9d. each.
20 "	1s. 6d. "	24 "	2s. "



Figure 12 DECI Catalogue pages 14-15 Milking pails (piggins), Sieves for Milk and Butter, etc.

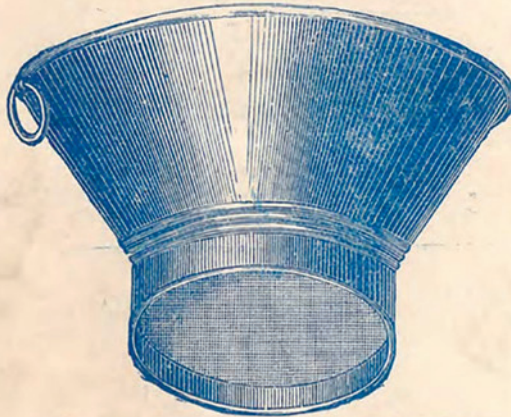


**MILK STRAINERS.**

The great advantage of our Milk Sieves is that the bottoms can be removed; in consequence they can be thoroughly and easily cleaned, and when worn out replaced at a trilling cost.

8 $\frac{1}{2}$	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	11	12 inches
1s. 9d.	2s. 3d.	2s. 6d.	2s. 9d. each
Extra sieve, 6d., 7d., 8d., 9d. each.			

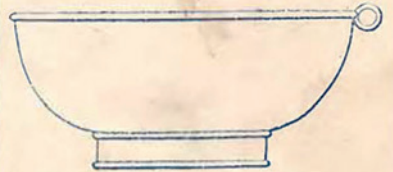
**SPECIAL MILK STRAINER.**



9 $\frac{1}{2}$	10 $\frac{1}{2}$	11	12 inches
1s. 3d.	1s. 6d.	1s. 9d.	2s. each

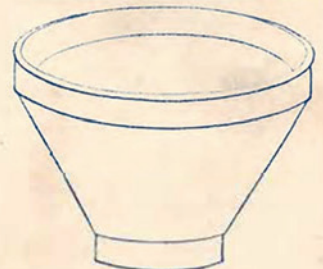
**No. 33 STRAINER.**

Seamless, with Brass Wire Gauze and Loose Foot for New Strainer.



8	10	12	14 inches
2s. 6d.	3s. 6d.	4s. 6d.	6s. each

**MILK STRAINER.**



Extra strong, Brass Wire Gauze Bottom.

8	10	12 inches
2s. 6d.	3s.	3s. 9d. each

**CREAM SKIMMERS.**

Planned Tin, strong.

5	6	7	8 inches
7d.	8d.	10d.	1s. each



Belleek Ware, 1s. 3d. each, perforated.

Figure 13 DECI Catalogue page 16 Milk Strainers, Cream skimmers, etc.

around the hole, through which milk was sieved.<sup>38</sup> Robust and easily cleaned, without metal, it imparted no taint to the liquid (15a).

The Dairy Engineering Company of Ireland (DECI) had premises on 21 and 22 Bachelor's Walk, Dublin, until at least the 1970s. Cork Butter Museum owns a rare surviving (incomplete) copy of their illustrated catalogue (henceforth referred to as DECI) dating from about 1910.<sup>39</sup> It is a valuable contextual touchstone here, for understanding, naming and comparing numerous implements used in Irish dairies. Pages 14 and 15 of the catalogue show a hooped sieve and various types of setting pans (Figure 12, pp.14–15), while page 16 illustrates a choice of four types of metal funnel-shaped 'milk strainers' (each 'extra sieve ... 9d') (Figure 13, p.16).<sup>40</sup> Old designs were often mimicked in new materials, and their 'No. 33 strainer' is shaped like the original turned D-shaped sycamore bowls as depicted in the catalogue (Figure 11).<sup>41</sup>

A similar wooden straining bowl survives in the National Museum of Ireland as well as various milk straining ladders (Figure 11). Each ladder or frame had curved inner edges to fit the convex curves of the bowl. This allowed straining of milk from a piggin without an assistant (as shown in Figure 10). Milk ladders had long 'legs' (to straddle various pan widths) projecting like the shape of an open-centred St Brigid's cross or a ladder-like capital H configuration, known in England as a 'brig' (Figure 12, p.15).<sup>42</sup>

### Milk keelers and setting pans

The sieved milk was left in a cool place for 30 hours or so, to 'ripen' (without souring); the milk sank with gravity and the cream rose to the top.<sup>43</sup> These wide, shallow containers came in a range of competing materials: the most ancient, robust and repairable, was the wooden keeler (Figs.11, 14, p.23) alternatively there was earthenware (Figure 9), as well as glass and subsequently tin or enamel. All DECI's setting pans in enamel, tin, and even 'very handsome porcelain' from Belleek, undercut their staved 'best oak keelers' in price, but enamel and porcelain were fragile, and tin plating quickly wore off exposing the iron (Figure 12, p.15).<sup>44</sup>

The Lough Gur dairy had expensive equipment such as rectangular cisterns<sup>45</sup> and setting pans of glass (presumably easily cleaned and allowing sight of the

**38** The author thanks Peter Brears for discussions: personal comment 26 April 2022, also see long-handled skimmers in Peter Brears, *The Old Devon Farmhouse* (Devon: Devon Books, 1998), 89, 136. Also illustrated in Peter Brears, *Farming in Cumbria The Tullie House collection* (Carlisle: Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust, 2020), 27–28, Figure 128. Modern metal sieves

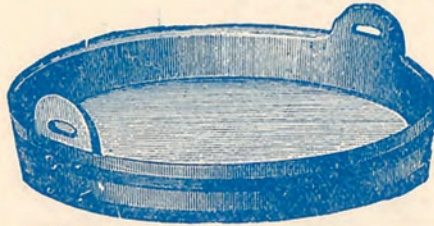
also sometimes had muslin tied around the base, following in the earlier tradition. **39** The author is grateful to Dr Mary Ann Bolger, for dating the DECI catalogue based on its graphic design. **40** *The Dairy Engineering Company of Ireland, catalogue of the latest & most improved implements for farm, garden, dairy and general use/DECI* (Dublin: c.1910), 16. **41** DECI, 16.

IFCS 1048:107 Co. Donegal <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4428332/4396052>.

**42** DECI, p.15, illustrates a milk straining ladder with 'no nails used' reflecting concerns that metal tainted food. Corlett, *Beneath the Poulaphuca Reservoir*, Pl. 211, Figure 30, 223. Brears, *The Dairy Catalogue*, 16, Figure 288, brigs of oak, also of ash and sycamore. **43** IFCS 324:135 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas>.

[ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890522](https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890522). **44** DECI, 15, 23. Several white Belleek setting pans, each with a pouring lip, survive in the collections of Ulster Folk Museum and Cork Butter Museum. **45** Peter Brears, *The Dairy Catalogue* (York and London: Westminster Press/Castle Museum 1979), Figure 50, 9. The Irish Agricultural Museum has a rectangular cistern.

## DAIRY WOODWARE.



### Butter Keeler with Galvanized Hoops.

For Making and Washing Butter.  
OF BEST OAK.

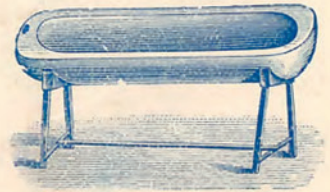
	s.	d.
18 inch wide	5	0
20 "	6	0
22 "	7	0
24 "	8	0

### Linden Butter Troughs.

To hold butter after being lifted from churn.

	s.	d.	s.	d.
22 inch	3	0	30 inch	6 6
25 "	4	6	35 "	10 6

Stands Extra.



### Making-up Wood Dishes.

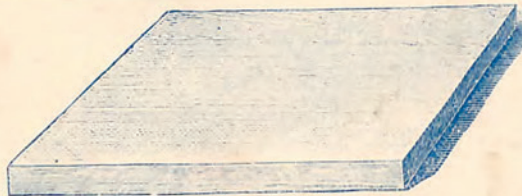


	s.	d.
6 inch	1	0 each.
8 "	1	3 "
10 "	1	6 "

### Hand Butter Worker.



	s.	d.
6 inch	0	9 each.
7 "	0	10 "
8 "	1	0 "
9 "	1	3 "



### Making-up or Chopping Boards.

Best Hardwood. Plain.	
Sizes ...	12 x 9 15 x 12 18 x 15 21 x 18 in
Prices,	13 16 2- 3-
Lighter, cheaper quality.	
14 x 12	14 x 16 16 x 18
13	16 2/-

### Best Wood Bowls.

Sizes ...	13	15	17	19	21 in.
Prices ...	1/-	1/6	2/3	3/-	3/9



Figure 14 DECI  
Catalogue pages 23-24  
Dairy Woodware, butter  
keeler, butter worker,  
dishes and bowls, scoop,  
beater, knife, scotch  
hands, prints. A similar  
butter trough, on a stand,  
is in the collection of  
the Irish Agricultural  
Museum.

**DAIRY WOOD WARE.**SCOTCH HANDS, BEATERS,  
SLICERS, SCOOPS, PRINTS.

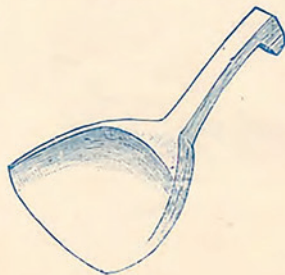
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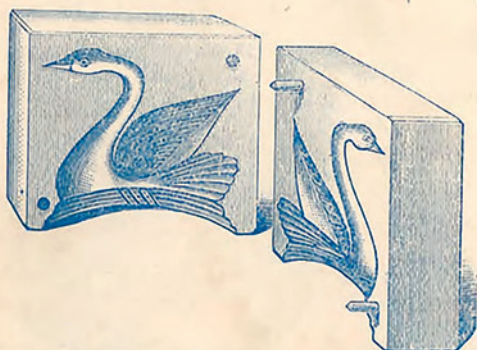
5

1. Butter Knife, best Boxwood	s. d.	4. Butter Scoop, for taking	s. d.
2. Butter Hands, large, per pair	1 9	Butter off Churn	1 0
Do. medium "	2 6	5. Boxwood Butter Lifter,	
Do. small "	1 6	7½ in., 1/3 ; 9 in.	1 9
3. Beechwood ... per pair	0 4	6. Best Boxwood Beaters, each	1 9

6

**BUTTER PRINTS.**

½ lb. size, with case, oblong ...	s. d.	In Cases for 1 lb., round ...	s. d.
1 " " " " " " " " " " " " " "	2 0	Without Cases ...	1 6
	3 9	2 oz., 6d ; 4 oz., 8d. ; 8 oz., 1/-	

**BUTTER MOULDS.**

Designs of all kinds cut.

Crests and Monograms  
supplied.

Small	...	s. d.	1 6
Medium	...	2 0	
Large	...	3 0	

Wood Carrying Yoke for  
shoulder, 2/6 each.



progress of cream as it ripened).<sup>46</sup> The wide shallow crocks (Figure 9) were designed to hold the milk, and once the cream rose, it formed a separate layer that could be removed usually by ‘skimming’ off the surface. In May or June after calving, these wide setting pans were filled about three times a week, but in winter, with lower milk flow, about once a week.

Oak or bog oak keelers or coolers<sup>47</sup> were wide, shallow, flat-bottomed, staved vessels, made by the cooper, who could make far larger containers than the turner (Figure 15). A keeler was the shallowest of many multi-purpose staved tubs or butts used on the farm ‘for making and washing Butter’ and transporting it.<sup>48</sup> Heavier and more robust than pans of other materials, it required more laborious cleaning; along with other wooden equipment one had to ‘Rinse with cold water, Scald with boiling water, Rub thoroughly with salt, Rinse with cold water’ until everything was scoured to whiteness. Salt from various sources was needed to preserve butter, and for cleaning the dairy vessels.<sup>49</sup>

Some used a home-made scrubbing brush made of a species of heather called ‘sop-na-picka’, and afterwards ‘scalded’ vessels with boiling water. Various artisans enabled the dairy and its equipment to be cleaned, and fine sand, sold door to door, was used for scouring.<sup>50</sup> In Monaghan the ‘McMahons made brooms out of heather ... They also made articles called “scrubs” which were used for cleaning out churns ... also from heather ... [to sell in] Clones on fair and market days’.<sup>51</sup> Frugality enhanced farmers’ profit, so when eventually ‘the beesum was worn down it became shorter and was called a “scrub” ... used to scrub ... churns, milk pails, tables, stools and such’.<sup>52</sup> Wooden vessels were routinely dried outside in the wind and feature in early photographs of vernacular houses. The oak keeler could be repaired by a cooper if it was damaged; an important economic consideration in resourceful households already used to replace the legs of hedge chairs or the feet of dressers, to minimise waste.<sup>53</sup> But glazed earthenware crocks may have been preferable with their lower latent temperature.

### Earthenware half-glazed crocks

Shiny half-glazed earthenware crocks, made low or tall, known as ‘black pans’, were produced in Ireland since at least the early eighteenth century (Figure 9).

**46** A glass ‘milk pan of pale green hue’ from Lancashire is illustrated in Peter Brears & S. Harrison, *The Dairy Catalogue* (York and London: Westminster Press Ltd, 1979), Figure 57, 10. There is at least one glass example in The National Museum of Ireland (engraved ‘Mrs Miller 1864’). **47** IFCS 358:1 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921763/4904488>; Corlett, *Beneath the Poulaphuca Reservoir*, A sketch shows a

staved “Cooler”, for conveying butter to market’, with other dairy plenishings from Mrs Miley’s dairy: Figures 28, 30, Pl. 207–08, 211–15, 223–25. **48** DECI 23. **49** Salt-making, Ch.6 in Dara Downey, Liam Downey and Derry O’Donovan, *Historical Irish Dairy Products* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2021), 61–74. DECI, ‘A few simple rules for butter making’, 12, ‘the importance of pure salt’, 13. **50** Kinmonth ‘Noggins’, 144–6. IFCS 324:135 Co. Cork

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890522>; Keelers were scrubbed with a type of heather called ‘sop-na-picka’ especially suitable for making scrubs. O’Dowd, *Straw, Hay & Rushes*, 455–58. **51** IFCS 945:280 Co. Monaghan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5162164/5160505>; IFCS 229:235 Co. Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658464/4658194>; IFCS 204:215: travelling woman made heather besoms and

‘scrubbs’ in exchange for a bed for the night, Co. Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4605937/4603924>. **52** IFCS 978:222 Co. Cavan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044839/5043148>; A beesum is probably another spelling for a besom: a floor sweeping brush made of a bundle of heather bound tightly around a long handle, later reused when worn short (removed from its handle), as a hand scrubbing brush.



Their distinctive black shards have been unearthed in Coalisland, Co. Tyrone, along with red and yellow trailed slip versions with looped decoration, and spotted edges. Similar designs were also imported from potteries in north Devon (England) and Buckley (Wales), where they had finer clay.<sup>54</sup> They were easier to clean than keelers and had multifarious uses such as storage for milk, water, buttermilk and indeed butter (the tallest ones). When people saved eggs for winter, when hens naturally laid less, the eggs could be rubbed in butter or preserved using Isinglass, a substance extracted from fish. Many tall crocks still bear a hard-white residue of isinglass inside, bearing witness to this use. Each crock had a lid of stone or wood to protect the contents from dirt and vermin. In Co. Cavan they ‘were placed on benches in that part of the barn kept so clean, and the crocks were covered with [circular] wooden lids which were made by the cooper’.<sup>55</sup>

**53** Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, Figs 50–51, 71, Figure 53, 72, Figure 54, 74, Figure 113, 119, Fig. 227, 212–16, Figure 229.

**54** Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 437–41. Claudia Kinmonth, ‘Rags, Riches and Recycling: material and visual culture of the Dublin Society 1731–1781’, *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies XXI* (2018), 80–84. Personal communication from Peter Brears states

Buckley potteries exported earthenware via Connah’s Quay (Dee estuary) across to Ireland. **55** Kathleen Sheehan (1894–1985), ‘Life in Glangevlin’ in Mary Ryan, Séan Browne & Keven Gilmour (eds), *No Shoes in Summer Days to Remember* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995), 91. Crock lids resemble those for dash churns, but with no central hole.

**Figure 15** Joseph Hughes turns a sycamore butter dish or bowl on his pole lathe at Banbrook, Armagh, c.1936. Depressing a foot treadle pulls a cord wrapped around the piece of wood being ‘turned’, while his chisel cuts. The springy rod fixed to the ceiling pulls it back up again. He has turned a sieve with a hole in its base (top right A, set up for use in Figure 11), various sizes of butter bowls

(B), skimmers, trenchers, butter workers, a dash head (C), jogglers and cops (or small bowls) all from unseasoned ‘green’ timber. Photo courtesy Armagh County Museum.

### Cream skimmers

A cream or milk skimmer (or 'fleeting dish' in England) looks like a shallow wooden saucer, which is usually 180–255mm (7–10 inches) in diameter.<sup>56</sup> It is distinguished from a ceramic saucer by its finely tapered outmost feather edges, designed for slipping under the layer of ripe cream, lifting it and removing it to a container, while discarding any milk from beneath, back into the crock (Figure 16). The shallow, round-edged setting pan was perfectly designed to accommodate the horizontal slicing movement of the feather edged, curved skimmer. It was the frugal butter-maker's ultimate 'go-to' hand tool for all tasks; it took cream off milk, lifted butter from the churn, washed out buttermilk, worked in salt, and 'made up' butter with decorative marks before sale, in lieu of a print.

Sometimes a spoon was used for skimming instead, made of wood, silver or cow horn: the latter materials were easily cleaned (Figures 7, 10).<sup>57</sup> A spoon was also useful to check if butter had 'broken' towards the end of the churning process.<sup>58</sup>

Implements used with food (such as skimmers) were ideally turned from sycamore. Its pale, close grain is free of knots, and wide enough to make large vessels. Crucially it imparted no taint. After scrubbing, scalding and drying, its surface remains smooth. Skimmers are difficult to date, as they darken with use, but they betray age by eventually wearing away at the sides. This deceptively simple looking yet highly functional object may not have changed its shape since Viking times in Ireland. The same can be said of the plunger of an excavated dash churn.<sup>59</sup> Objects clearly linked to dairying were identified when the National Museum of Ireland carried out its Wood Quay (Dublin) excavations in 1974–1981.<sup>60</sup>

DECI did not stock timber skimmers; instead it offered inexpensive 'Planished Tin, strong' cream skimmers with multiple perforations (allowing milk to drain out as the cream or butter was lifted) each with a raised loop handle (Figure 13, p.16).<sup>61</sup> Wealthier clients could buy 'Belleek Ware' porcelain, but as one rare surviving example indicates, it was far more fragile if handled carelessly by a butter-fingered dairymaid (Figure 16). A basic and presumably ancient alternative was to skim with one's fingers,<sup>62</sup> or to improvise with a ceramic saucer.<sup>63</sup> Using a skimmer, the ripened cream was put into a tall crock (Figure 9). More

**56** Pinto, *Treen*, 1969, plate 96 G, H, 104. Brears, *The Dairy Catalogue*, 10, 18, Figures 61, 63.  
**57** IFCS 553:393 Co. Tipperary <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922210/4861047>, IFCS 999:53 Co. Cavan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5070785/5063223>; Claudia Kinmonth, 'Irish horn spoons: their design history and social significance', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 118C (2018), 231–69.

**58** IFCS 948:310 Co. Monaghan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4723860/4719952>.

**59** Personal comment from Patrick F. Wallace that skimmers survived from Dublin's Viking Wood Quay Excavations, which await stratification for dating.

**60** For example, a wooden churn dash of circular plan see Patrick F. Wallace, *Viking Dublin, the Wood Quay*

*Excavations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016), 220 Fig.6.8. NMI Reg E190:1738 is closely similar to one sketched by Simon Coleman at Gortahook, Co. Donegal (1949). IFC ref: B129.29.00001 *cuinneoige croc bainne lonaidh clar cuinneoige* S. Coleman also similar to E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 96, Figure 30. (Figure 5)

(Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, Figure 30, 96). Many of the Viking age objects were, like the skimmers, made using pole lathes or were staved (Patrick F. Wallace, 2016, Figure 6.8, pp.220, 250–1.)  
**61** DECI, 16. IFCS 397:128 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921926/4900772>.  
**62** IFCS 588:80 Co. Clare <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5177610/5173071>.  
**63** IFCS 397:128 Co. Cork



cream was periodically added and stirred, until there was enough for churning. Seamus Heaney's poem 'Churning Day'<sup>64</sup> illuminates routines from his Northern childhood, opening with a layer of cream ripening with a thick crust formed on top of four crocks in the small pantry:

After the hot brewery of gland, cud and udder  
 cool porous earthenware fermented the buttermilk  
 for churning day, when the hooped churn was scoured  
 with plumping kettles and the busy scrubber  
 echoed daintily on the seasoned wood.

Traditionally wood was widely favoured by coopers and turners (or those who combined both skills), who up to the nineteenth century were the main makers supplying and repairing equipment used by butter-makers (Figure 15). Much woodenware was also home-made, by resourceful householders accustomed to making and repairing their own furniture. An account from Dysart, Co. Cork recalls that:

In olden times the milk was 'set' in shallow wooden coolers ['keelers']. In more recent times earthenware pans were substituted, and later on still these were replaced by vessels of tin ... The milk was allowed to stand for some days. Then the cream was removed by a 'skimmer' made of wood, or a common saucer ... [and] placed in a deep jar to allow to ripen.<sup>65</sup>

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921926/4900772>.

<sup>64</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Selected Poems 1965–1975* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber), 16, © Estate of Seamus Heaney. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Limited. All rights reserved.

<sup>65</sup> IFCS 397:128 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921926/4900772>; George Chambers and Ian McDougall (eds), *The Origins of the Dairy Industry in Ulster* (Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, 2017), 57. The

**Figure 16** (left to right) Contrasting cream skimmers, all with convex bases and concave tops (left to right): The most archaic were turned on pole lathes from green sycamore, so are distinctly oval in plan, with thinly feathered edges; serving many purposes such as lifting butter off the churn, working out buttermilk, washing and mixing in salt or colour, shaping, marking and decorating. H. 2.5 cm x D. 20.2 cm. Planished

tin, was cheap, lightweight with a hoop handle and perforations allowing buttermilk to drain off. But it was fragile and probably tainted the cream once the plating wore off. H. 5.5 cm x D. 7.5 cm. White porcelain, with perforations and pouring lips to release buttermilk, easily cleaned, comparatively expensive, but inherently fragile (hence cracks). H. 4.5 cm x D. 19.5 cm. Author's photo, all objects courtesy Cork Butter Museum.

Competing manufacturers offered inexpensive tin, aluminium, enamel, and ceramic versions of wooden implements. From Co. Leitrim an account laments how '[n]early all the wooden vessels that people used long ago and which were nearly all homemade are now falling into disuse and the people now buy nearly all the vessels ... in the shops and they therefore spend more money'.<sup>66</sup> This competition forced woodworkers and travelling tinsmiths out of business.

### The dash churn

Dash churns were made by coopers who also made the huge range of staved vessels such as barrels, piggins, noggins, tubs, butts and casks for holding dry and wet goods. The churn was an upright staved vessel that held cream when it was being made into butter, and sometimes, like a cask, was curvaceous. Broad based for stability, it became narrow towards the top, with a 'waist' (or 'chim') where a top section sometimes called a 'keel' was attached, helping reducing splashing (Figures 4–8).<sup>67</sup> Evans' map of dash churns sketches seven designs of churns and their dashers.<sup>68</sup> He contends the most ancient type was the convex or barrel-shaped variety 'with a narrow vertical mouth' favoured in the south-west<sup>69</sup> which is similar to English and Welsh ones, and to examples unearthed by archaeologists in Ireland.<sup>70</sup> His earlier work (Figure 5) from the 1930s and 40s (illustrating cross sections and elusive details juxtaposing lid, joggler and dasher), observes such churns 'still in use'.<sup>71</sup>

The same cooper who made churns customarily travelled around his locale to farms to custom make or repair his wares. Occasionally a folklore account provides detail of a cooper's activities in relation to dairy ware, so we read how 'Nioclhas [*sic*] Buttler of Bishop Street, Tuam' made each churn in the early twentieth century, whereas 'the lovine (churn-dash) was bought in a shop'.<sup>72</sup> Oak was best for the churn body, or in Co. Leitrim, 'red ash' or bog deal. Any unsound or leaking areas the cooper repaired with rushes, small patches of oak or beeswax, and one householder resorted to an external plaster of curds and lime.<sup>73</sup> Staved vessels stay watertight when used, but fall apart if allowed to dry out. Some were externally painted (most often in green), as was vernacular furniture, and paint may also have helped keep cooperage watertight. In the late 1930s an account from Mrs Mc Tiernan in Co. Leitrim described how her churn 'is scoured white

author is grateful to James Moore for drawing her attention to this book.

**66** IFCS 212:101 Co. Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4649695/4648049>.

**67** IFCS 1038:356 Co. Donegal <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4428300/4392813>; IFCS 169:128 Co. Sligo <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4701699/4693676>; 'the top which is called the Keel and the other part or

body of churn is called the Peck'. It is worth noting that terminology varies hugely across Ireland for parts of churns as well as associated dairying implements, so it awaits further research. It is beyond the scope of this study to address or interpret terms in the Irish language.

**68** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 95–6, Figure 30. **69** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 95. Occasionally a dash churn seems to have

been made by adding a flared top section to a cask.

**70** Gertrude Jekyll & Sydney R. Jones, *Old English Household Life* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1939), 56; Comey, *Coopers and Coopering in Viking Age Dublin*, 34–35, 203, 209.

**71** Evans, *Irish Heritage*, 121–2, Figures 67–69.

**72** IFCS 18:273 Co. Galway <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4613682/4608151>.

**73** IFCS 229:235 Co. Leitrim

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658464/4658194>.

**74** IFCS 199:155 (31.1.1938) Gortnaskeagh, Co. Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4602759/4601823>.

**75** IFCS 185:24. Co. Sligo <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4701754/4699511>. Of those painted dash churns surviving in museum collections, the colour green undoubtedly predominates, a considerable percentage

and painted green outside'.<sup>74</sup> A typical dairy in Sligo contained a churn that had 'several hoops painted black while the churn was usually painted green'.<sup>75</sup> Green paint is visible on surviving examples from Munster, and an account from Co. Donegal recalls their blue painted dash churn.<sup>76</sup>

Rather than being standardised by volume, churns were made according to how many cows there were on the farm. Mrs Mc Tiernan relates how hers had 'six hoops all round [*sic*] the churn to keep it together'. Evans' map reveals that churn dashes had differently configured bases.<sup>77</sup> Some had a circular base perforated with round holes, other had cross-shaped bases or were assembled of several composite ladder-like pieces of wood.

Once filled with ripened cream, or in northern counties 'whole milk' (Figure 6), the dasher was lifted up and down swiftly or 'brashed' rhythmically for about an hour or more until the butter began to 'break', 'form' or 'come'.<sup>78</sup> Then the dashing would be slowed down. It was twisted at various stages, and the base of the churn was usually propped up to tilt it, towards the end of the process. The holes in the dasher allowed the liquid to be forced through swiftly, until eventually granules of butter formed, and soon after, lumps of it.

Pinto commented that butter never seems to have been made; it either came in response to the verse:

Come butter, come,  
Come butter, come,  
Peter stands at the gate,  
Waiting for a buttered cake,  
Come butter, come

Or it did not come. It often refused to come, particularly in thundery weather, and the process must have been especially tricky when temperatures of cream had to be 'tested by the fingers' and when delay in 'coming' resulted in fatigue of the churn operator and lack of rhythm.<sup>79</sup>

survive unpainted, too. **76** IFCS 1086:26. **77** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 96. **78** Peter Brears' correspondence (1 Sept. 2022); 'Churning the whole milk, rather than cream...appears to have been restricted to the northern counties of Ireland, south western Scotland, and Lancashire...practised only where little space and a lack of dairy utensils prevailed, and where the demand

for buttermilk was greater than that for skimmed milk (especially for feeding pigs). The main advantages were a greater extraction of butter (until separators were introduced), no need of cream setting equipment, or of benches on which to mount it. After milking, the milk was put directly into a large coopered butt or churn and left for a few days to sour ... [the] process [was] hastened

by stirring in either a little buttermilk or ripened whole milk. The churns used to make whole-milk butter were characterised by their greater size [and] usual external coating of green paint. Best churned at 60 degrees F, it usually took three to five hours of extremely hard labour before the butter came, but when it did it was of very good quality'. See description by John Dubourdieu,

*Statistical Survey of the County of Antrim*, i (Dublin: Graisberry and Campbell, 1812), 329, 331–2; See also Chambers and McDougall (eds), *The Origins of the Dairy Industry*, 92. **79** Pinto, *Treen*, 98.

### The juggler, churn cup, churn runner, or butter cup

Each dash churn had a flat lid, which was recessed a few centimetres down inside the top of the churn. The lid had a central hole just large enough to accommodate the tall staff of the churn dash. The ‘joggler’ or *séalán* (in English seal) or *claibín* (little lid) covered and surrounded the hole in the lid, reducing splashes during the messy process of churning (Figure 5). Typically like a bowl with a central hole (Figure 17), its slight oval shape results from being turned from one block of green wood using a pole lathe (Figure 15).<sup>80</sup> In Leitrim, the term ‘joggling’ also meant the specific uneven rocking movement of the dash churn towards the final stages of butter forming within.<sup>81</sup> The juggler was also called the ‘churn cup’, the ‘churn runner’ in Wicklow,<sup>82</sup> the ‘dabblers’<sup>83</sup> or in many places, the ‘butter cup’.<sup>84</sup> Instead of a turned juggler, some used a rectangular wooden block, with a hole drilled in the centre for the churn staff (Figure 4). Called a ‘churn board’, it served the same purpose (it may also have served other purposes, like almost every implement described here). Multi-purpose objects, like the skimmer, reduced outlay and labour; and the ‘butter cup’ is also mentioned repeatedly as useful for lifting butter from the churn, the hole in its base allowing buttermilk to run out, as well as being used to ‘work’ or knead any buttermilk out and mix salt in.<sup>85</sup> Some jugglers had a projecting rim around the top, helping a butter-fingered dairymaid grip it when using it as a mixer.

Only rarely is the juggler or churn board visible in images of dash churns (Figure 4). Documentary artist Simon Coleman RHA (1916–95)<sup>86</sup> was employed by the Irish Folklore Commission to sketch things associated with rural traditional material culture, in 1949 and 1959. His juxtaposition of a juggler and churn staff are characteristically meticulous. From Co. Leitrim there is a written description of the juggler resting on the churn lid (like a hat): with its widest rim down.<sup>87</sup>

Frugal, resourceful households improvised: ‘The “joggler” prevents the milk from splashing out over the lid. In some places a sally [willow] rod is used for a “joggler”. It is twisted into a round shape and is used twice. This juggler is called the “sally gad”’.<sup>88</sup> Others also managed differently, so: ‘a spotlessly clean cloth would be wrapped round the edge of the churn to keep it from splashing’.<sup>89</sup> This small component is often absent or misunderstood once a dash churn reaches a museum, and its form could easily be confused with the slightly larger turned wooden strainer (with its wider central hole).

**80** IFCS 608:94. Co. Clare  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922342/4871942>.

**81** IFCS 221:546. Co. Leitrim  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658432/4654983>.

**82** Corlett, *Beneath the Poulaphuca Reservoir*, Figure 19, 154, Pl. 102, 138.

**83** IFCS 221:543 Co. Leitrim  
<https://www.duchas.ie/>

[en/cbes/4658432/4654980](https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658432/4654980), 222:180 Co. Leitrim  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658435/4655307>.

**84** IFCS 813:455 Co. Offaly  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044626/5027124>;  
IFCS 58:1 ‘a butter cup was put on the lid not to let the cream spatter’ Co. Cork  
<https://www.duchas.ie/>

[en/cbes/4921763/4904488](https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921763/4904488);  
IFCS 440:555 Co. Kerry  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4706330/4703271>; IFCS 273:237 Co. Roscommon  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921574/4880950>.  
**85** IFCS 672:6 Co. Louth  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5008859/4961416>;  
IFCS 813:455 Co. Offaly

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044626/5027124>.

**86** <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbeg/49475>. **87** IFCS 229.235 Co. Leitrim  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658464/4658194>.

**88** IFCS 223:270 Co. Leitrim  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658443/4656042>.

**89** IFCS 566:34. Bell and



### Butter scoops and lifters

If the churning was slow or tricky, and the butter wouldn't form into granules or 'was long in comin, you'd put a drop of hot water in the churn, scaldin it, but you daren't put in too much. Too much hot water would ruin it. You can tell when the butter's come because it'll all join into one lump'.<sup>90</sup> Then the butter could be 'lifted off', buttermilk had to be washed out, and salt was incorporated. Increasingly there were separate implements to help with these stages, but originally, a skimmer, or a joggler, or perhaps a butter worker, might have coped with them all (and reduced any waste and time spent washing).

By about 1915, the DECI catalogue devotes half a page to a range of 'wood ware' including a commonly surviving shape of 'Butter scoop, for taking Butter off churn'. Other versions have perforations to help drain away buttermilk as butter was removed into another container, in pieces (Figures 14, 18 two on far left). The handles are usually compact and curved and the backs of those without holes served perfectly for the vigorous 'butter working': some are significantly worn from scraping butter off the inside of the churn and clapping it against the keeler to wash out buttermilk. Selling for a shilling, a scoop with a hook behind the end of the handle, gave the dairymaid's wet hand grip, and allowed suspension for air drying. Others improvised to 'lift' butter from the churn; some 'with a butter strainer and butter spades',<sup>91</sup> others with wood or tin skimmers (Figure 13, p.16), another, from Co. Galway 'with two butter pats'.<sup>92</sup> A 'well scalded wooden spoon' did the job in Co. Cavan<sup>93</sup> where people would 'stop brashing and with the wooden lifter, take off the butter and put it into a wooden tub'.<sup>94</sup> DECI's 'lifter' was boxwood, a dense grained wood, procured in small dimensions, but sufficiently durable to scrape butter off oak, explaining its T-shaped handle and high price (Figure 14, p.24, no.5). People lacking specialist implements traditionally used their hands, which instruction booklets repeatedly railed against.

Watson, *Irish Farming Life*, plate 24, 39. <sup>90</sup> Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1982), 531.

<sup>91</sup> IFCS 223:271 Co. Leitrim. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658443/4656043>.

<sup>92</sup> IFCS 29:412 Co. Galway. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4574072/4565051>.

<sup>93</sup> IFCS 999:53 Co. Cavan. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5070785/5063223>.

<sup>94</sup> IFCS 967:392 Co. Cavan

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5083770/5039693>.

**Figure 17** Butter-makers' tools turned green on a pole lathe, all uneven from seasoning after making: left to right; Joggler (or churn cup, churn runner) fits onto the dash churn's lid, reducing splashing, also sometimes used for 'working butter'. F1969.3.2 Barney, County Longford. H. 5.1 cm x W. 13.1 cm x L. 14 cm, D. of hole 4.2–4.4 cm. Trencher used while 'working' then 'making up' butter. Its slanted flat rim, flat base and incised line on the

outside is also characteristic of butter dishes. F1933.39 4.5 cm x L. 31.4 cm x W. 30.4 cm. Tiny print depicting a swan; expertly made by turning from a single block of sycamore, then chip carving the detail. When wet, it was pressed into cold butter, then put into cold water to release the butter with its domed swan image (see Figure 8). 1933.45 from Kilbride, County Wicklow. H. 7 cm x W. 5.5–5.9 cm. Author's photo courtesy National Museum of Ireland.





**Butter spade or beater, butter worker,  
wooden knife, and Scotch hands**

Churning was a skilled process, but subsequently ‘working butter’ was considered to be ‘even more important than the actual churning’.<sup>95</sup> Having ‘lifted off’ butter in lumps and pieces from the churn, every trace of buttermilk had to be washed out of it (by beating or ‘clapping’). Salt was then incorporated and it was made into a solid mass, or the butter would not keep. Some poor households improvised, using their wooden skimmer for ‘working’ the butter. But the heavier ‘butter spade’, ‘clapper’, or ‘butter beater’ was purpose-made with its long, round-section ergonomic handle providing grip for this vigorous work (Figure 14, p.24 no.6 and Figure 18 centre). Some examples have slightly rounded ends. Such a tool needed to withstand robust use, so dense timbers were chosen; DECI promoted one made of ‘best boxwood’,<sup>96</sup> while another in the National Museum of Ireland is made from bog oak.<sup>97</sup> Clapped against the sides of a bowl or keeler, its flat blade was often grooved, helping liquid flow away (Figure 14, p.24 no.6). Folklorist Henry Glassie illustrates one, and relates how in Fermanagh; ‘when the grooves “close” from use, you “open” them with a nail ... It measures 8 ½ inches’. Once the butter had come:

**Figure 18** Archetypal butter tools (left to right); Two types of butter scoop, one perforated allowing buttermilk to drain away as butter is scooped out of the churn (with worn tips from scraping out butter). For grip, handles are usually curved, often with a hooked end. L. 25.5 cm x W. 11 cm.

Butter beater; typically, sturdy with a rounded but straight handle to work out buttermilk: wash and salt it. Also made in bog oak, boxwood etc. L. 25 cm x W. 12 cm. Pair of ‘Scotch hands’ or pats, for delicate shaping while ‘making up’ butter for the table, or sale. Usually mass produced: each has

a grooved non-slip surface on one side. IAM 1978.232 (Taghmon, Co. Wexford). L. 27.5 cm x W. 7 cm. Photo courtesy Irish Agricultural Museum. (Also compare all to DECI p.24: Nos 2, 4 & 6).

**95** Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the bonds Mid-Atlantic farm women, 1750–1850* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1986), 108.

**96** DECI, ‘Best boxwood beaters, each 1s.9d.’, 24.

**97** NMI Butter spade Reg: 1949:78 from Quinn, Co. Clare, of riven bog oak, L.26.2 x W. 10 x D. 1.5 cm.

At that point, you wash your hands carefully, placing them into a bowl filled with cold spring water. There the lump is patted and patted, rejoined, and washed by emptying its water out and pouring on new until, after four or so times, no [butter]milk comes with the water. Then mix in salt at two teaspoons per pound. It must be mixed thoroughly. 'If you just threw a lock of salt in, it wouldn't save, but if it's properly salted, it will last for weeks. That's in the mix in'.<sup>98</sup>

The same task of working the butter was alternatively done with a 'butter worker' (or 'butter packer'): shaped like a wide-capped mushroom with an integral handle on the inner curve (Figure 19). Long handled versions survive in Cork Butter Museum made of two pieces of wood (perfected for packing butter into a firkin and excluding air): but the sturdy short-handled type turned from one block required less timber. This working or washing was variously done in a staved keeler, or a butter bowl held in the crook of the arm (Figures 8, 11, 15, 17).

Early butter bowls or dishes, of many sizes, are perceptively oval and crooked: typical of any wood turned unseasoned on a pole lathe (Figures 14, 15B). Many surviving examples have split, then been frugally repaired with metal wire.

Removing stray hairs from butter was crucial; and although some resorted to using a hairpin, others avoided metal imparting 'taint' to the butter by slicing it through with a wooden knife (Figure 14, p.24 no.1).<sup>99</sup>



<sup>98</sup> Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, Figure Butter Spade, 531.  
<sup>99</sup> A wooden knife has yet to be identified in collections.

**Figure 19** The butter worker was made for 'working' pressing and washing all residual buttermilk from the butter, fresh from the churn. Its convex base 'worked' or incorporated salt and/or colour, and also served to 'pack' butter firmly into firkins, excluding any air pockets. Turned from one

block of unseasoned wood with an integral handle (larger 'packers' had long handles screwed in with wooden threads). D. 16.3 cm x H. 2.5cm handle H. 2 cm x W. 5.3 cm. NMI F1948:232, from Donard, County Wicklow. Author's photo courtesy National Museum of Ireland.

### The trencher

‘The trencher or wooden plate’ was wide and shallow, with thick curved outer edges, desirable in the final stages of washing and ‘making up’ butter (Figure 17).<sup>100</sup> After removing stray hairs from the butter, the dairymaid ‘claps it to take out any water’. In Leitrim she did this by ‘holding the lump of butter on the side of the juggler and then clapping it firmly down on the trencher which she holds in the other hand. She then makes it up in bars or prints’.<sup>101</sup> Many households lacked tables, so in lieu of a wooden worktop, a trencher facilitated ‘making up’ butter on a clean, washable surface.<sup>102</sup>

A photograph from the 1939 Poulaphuca Reservoir survey, shows surveyors holding up butter making implements; a juggler, a print, a trencher and a butter worker: implements used for ‘working’ and ‘making up’ butter. The inclusion of the juggler suggests that a dash churn was in use, whereas other associated documentation suggests they used a mechanised, horse-powered churn.<sup>103</sup> A Co. Monaghan account describes butter being taken from the bowl after salting and ‘put on a plate called a trencher’ (Figure 20).<sup>104</sup>

After salting the butter, if it wasn’t packed into firkins, it could be arranged into various vaguely named shapes, pats or rolls. The wooden skimmer was perfect to skim ripe cream from pans, but also served as a multi-purpose tool for ‘mixing salt through the butter’<sup>105</sup> and for decorating or finishing butter before selling or serving it, using its feather edge to strike lines and patterns.<sup>106</sup>

More verses from Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘Churning Day’ appropriately recall the toil of the churning, and his mother setting the rhythm in the laborious work often resulting in aching and blistered hands before the magic of ‘gold flecks’ dancing as the butter came, and the lifting of the resulting butter, done not using scoops or lifters but with a perforated strainer:

**100** Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 369–70.

**101** IFCS 221:547 Co. Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658432/4654984>; IFCS 222:180 Co. Leitrim. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658435/4655307>.

**102** Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 369–74.

**103** Corlett, *Beneath the Poulaphuca Reservoir*, Pl. 102, 138. Some households used mechanised churns during summer when there was the

most milk, but resorted to the more easily cleaned dash churn during less productive winter months. **104** IFCS 948:314 Co. Monaghan <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4723860/4719956>.

**105** IFCS 408:176 Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4644827/4613037>.

**106** IFCS 557:386 Co. Tipperary <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922224/4862288>.

**Figure 20** ‘Butter making [up] in a County Antrim farm kitchen’: butter is shaped in a wooden bowl, using pats or ‘Scotch hands’. To the right a hooped sieve (see DECI, p. 14, 24), contains one of two prints that was dipped in water before marking the butter. Finished butter was put on a trencher (left foreground). Similar processes were used on smaller farms using

dash churns. Photo attr. to William Alfred Green (c. 1880–1940), courtesy of National Museums of Northern Ireland.



Their short stroke quickened, suddenly  
a yellow curd was weighting the churned up white,  
heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight  
that they fished, dripping, in a wide tin strainer,  
heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl.<sup>107</sup>

107 Heaney, *Selected Poems*, 16–17

### 'Scotch hands'

Scotch hands were lightweight, paired paddles (confusingly also called pats), for working and shaping butter into rolls or rounded pats (Figure 14, p.24 Nos. 2–3, Figure 18 far right, Figure 20). Textbooks advocating hygiene warned against dairymaids touching the butter with their hands, instead recommending the use of Scotch hands (so called as they had 'scotched' or ridged surfaces).<sup>108</sup> Most often uniformly flat along their entire length, they were usually mass produced, commonly surviving in beech. Food historian Laura Mason suggests they were not added to the butter-maker's repertoire until the nineteenth century.<sup>109</sup>

Not to be confused with a butter spade; the Scotch hands are comparatively lighter, narrower, with handles being flat on both sides, whereas the heavier butter spade usually has a round-section handle.

### Butter prints

The 'making up' of butter to finish it off distinctively was also women's work and highly regarded. Carved wooden butter 'prints' were used to decorate portions of butter for the table, or to distinguish individual makers' butter products on sale: an early form of branding frequently described in the Schools' manuscripts (Figure 21).<sup>110</sup> Irish examples await research, but Mason's detailed article on British prints defines three categories; flat (Figure 21), ejector or plunger, and roller (the latter absent in DECI) (Figures 17, 20). She also describes two-part butter moulds, for sculpting butter into freestanding, upmarket table decorations, and indeed DECI invited orders with 'Crests and Monograms supplied' (Figure 14, p.24 and Figure 20).<sup>111</sup> Figure 20 shows butter being made in a Co. Antrim farm kitchen using scotch hands.

A 1930s account from Tipperary recollects a cooper who seems likely to have supplied prints sold by DECI:

[n]amed James Loftus ... who was a 'turner' by trade ... With a Pole Lathe which he made himself, Mr Loftus made all types of dairy utensil—small churns, dishes, strainers, skimmers, cups, jogglers and butter prints, on which he carved designs ... Sycamore was the wood usually used ... [he] sold his wares at fairs and he also had a contract with firms in Dublin, Cork and Galway.<sup>112</sup>



**Figure 21** Flat type of print with pierced side handle (typical of Connaught) carved with a traditional, geometric, apotropaic daisy wheel symbol. Butter-makers pressed such carved prints into butter: branding it for sale. Made by Michil Rooney

and collected by Ciaran Báiréad of the Irish Folklore Commission. L. 22 cm x W. 12 cm. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland F1962.70.

**108** Brears, *Farming in Cumbria* History and traditions, Vol. 15 *The Tullie House collection* of 'Food and Society' series, Figures 23–4, 32. Laura Mason, King's Lynn, 2018), 102–107.  
**109** Mason, 'Cows and thistles', Figs.4.2–3, 53–7.  
**110** IFCS 169:132–3 Co. Sligo <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4701699/4693680>.  
**111** DECI, 24; Mason, 'Cows and thistles', 53–63. **112** IFCS

So, coopers profited from supplying large companies whose other products were mass produced. The horners made horn spoons since time immemorial but could not compete when mass-produced plastic versions flooded the market: the traditional woodworkers' decline is comparable.<sup>113</sup>

### Joining in butter to fill a firkin

Until the late nineteenth century, butter was produced on the farms and often transported in comparatively small staved casks called firkins.<sup>114</sup> Typically made with oak staves, bound together with split willow rods, each held roughly 56–70lbs or more of butter (Figure 23).<sup>115</sup> Gathering sufficient butter to fill each firkin and sending it in a clean state for sale and ultimately export, was a highly rewarding challenge for the smaller farmers.<sup>116</sup> Exact comparative prices per pound are scarce, but in Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim, people exported 'well packed' butter in cases (56lbs), butts (from 40–60 lbs), or firkins (about 90lbs) to Glasgow. Most 'small farmers... cannot afford to wait to fill butts or firkins' so they sell it 'in lumps or rolls, which as soon as bought by the exporter, are wrapped in muslin and packed in 56-pound cases ... it realises for the producer 6½d. per pound ... Butter in butts fetches at least 1d. a pound more than lump butter as it keeps longer' ... 'its average value is 8d. a pound'. Whereas after inspection 'the price was 9d. for "firsts" ... the quotation on the same date being a fraction lower for Cork and for Dublin about 1d. a pound higher'.<sup>117</sup>

Because there was potentially a greater return per pound from selling a full firkin, than from selling butter in lesser quantities, small producers who couldn't make enough butter to fill an entire firkin alone, collaborated or 'joined in butter' with their neighbours, to 'fill a firkin'. This was then collected by 'the butter buyer'. He would take this 'salt-firkin butter' and witness its inspection, its grading and potential for sale at places such as the Cork Butter Exchange which was 'the largest in the world throughout much of the 1800s'.<sup>118</sup> Those on smaller farms who could afford to, salted their butter highly enough to keep it until autumn when prices rose. Or as one interviewee from Dunlavin, Co. Wicklow told the folklore collector: 'Many salt butter heavily in summertime and pack it in crocks and store it in a cool place, for use in winter months when

532:198. **113** Kinmonth, 'Irish horn spoons', 231–269.

**114** Kinmonth, 'Rags, riches, and recycling', 78–9.

**115** References to capacity are elusive but 56lbs is repeatedly and most often alluded to in the Schools' manuscripts. Chambers and McDougall (eds), *The Origins of the Dairy Industry*, 37, 43, 91; explains varied capacity of firkins and their use to contain Irish butter for export since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, or

in 'barrels' as early as 1587.

**116** Prior to export in firkins (c. 1865), tall cylindrical coarse redware, black-glazed 'butter-pots' (made in Staffordshire) contained Irish butter for export. Butter was kept cooler and sweeter, but their use was discontinued due partly to fragility, see: Llewellynn Jewitt, *The Wedgwoods: Being a life of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Virtue Brothers, 1865), 27–31 also Eliza Meteyard, *The Life*

*of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1865), Vol. 1, 125–7. 'Mug-butter, sold in earthenware mugs' may be an alternative term for 'pot butter' see Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), Vol. 4, 193. <https://archive.org/details/englishdialectdio4wriguoft/page/192/mode/2up> The author thanks Nicholas Mosse and Peter Brears for these references.

**117** James Morrissey (ed.), *On the Verge of Want, a unique insight into living conditions along Ireland's Western Seaboard in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century* (Dublin: Crannóg Books, 2001), 79–80.

**118** Liam Downey in Peter Foyne, Colin Rynne and Chris Synnot (eds), *Butter in Ireland from earliest times to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cork: Cork Butter Museum, 2014), 31, 39, 41.



butter is very scarce'.<sup>119</sup> According to Bell and Watson, because of this kind of practice, 'it was alleged that butter was often inedible by the time it reached urban markets'.<sup>120</sup> Those milking only one or two cows, who could not afford to hold it back (or indeed consume any themselves), could wrap it in muslin and carry it in baskets to small local markets. More sold their butter to local families or to visiting butter buyers who profited by selling it on (Figure 22). An account from Hugh Nolan in Co. Fermanagh recalls the surplus being shared with neighbours, or 'every Tuesday you would carry your butt of butter to Enniskillen. And there would be butter buyers there, do you see, in Enniskillen that would buy it by the pound. "If you couldn't fill your butt, your butter would be sold in the shops for a very low figure"'.<sup>121</sup>

Neighbouring women conferred, collaborated and pooled their resources of butter, by careful prearrangement, known as 'butter joining'.<sup>122</sup> One of several descriptions of such gatherings, in Co. Clare, relates how 'The kitchen milk vessels were thoroughly washed and spotlessly clean. The aim was to get all the butter into a firkin while it was fresh and sweet. Each woman would bring her own quota of butter from 14 to 28 lbs or more according to the time of year [and] the quantity—in wooden basins [bowls] or cans or tubs'. On arrival at the designated farmhouse:

[t]he women had a pleasant time chatting and laughing, mixing the butter, washing it and putting pickle in it [lukewarm salt solution to temper the butter]. The butter was thoroughly washed two or three

**Figure 22** 'Roadside butter market', hand coloured postcard, 1890s. Women with insufficient butter to fill a firkin, brought 'rolls' of butter covered in cabbage leaves or wrapped cleanly in cloth to street markets

or shops. On the left male butter buyers suspend weighing scales from cart shafts: large cloth-lined baskets hold what they purchase, for selling on. Author's photo, private collection.

<sup>119</sup> IFCS 914:197 Dunlavin, Co. Wicklow <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044712/5033633>.

<sup>120</sup> Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson, *Irish Farming Life, History and Heritage* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 40.

<sup>121</sup> Glassie, *Passing the Time*

in Ballymenone, 529–30.

<sup>122</sup> IFCS 444:254 Scart, Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4706345/4704497>.

<sup>123</sup> IFCS 408:176 Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4644827/4613037>, also IFCS 541:39 Co. Tipperary

times ... in cold spring water. Then they coloured salt (6 per 4 or 4 ½ stone of butter) with saffron juices which was drawn like tea.<sup>123</sup>

A Co. Cork account of the collaborative efforts reveals how '[t]he kitchen now presented an animated scene. With jackets off and sleeves rolled up to the armpits, the women knelt on the floor around the "keelers" "working in" the salt, and as much water as they could, and good honest sweat pouring down their cheeks'.<sup>124</sup>

Substances varied to add colour to butter or unify its various colours when joining to fill a firkin (Figure 23), a separate account mentions that 'a chemical liquid known locally as "saffron" was added to the water in which the butter was worked. This produced a rich even yellow colour'.<sup>125</sup>

This was thrown on the salt in basin[s], mixed up evenly in basin or dish. This was worked into the butter with buttercups<sup>126</sup> [and] lukewarm pickle to temper the butter ... [then] it was put in a firkin ... lined with paper. The quality of butter was first class. Sleeves were rolled up to the shoulder almost and of course thoroughly washed in hot water before any work was done. White aprons were worn by the women. A hearty meal was eaten after filling [a] firkin.<sup>127</sup>

There is a further description of how the skimmer (Figure 16) was used not only to mix salt through the butter but also to polish off the butter on the top of the firkin.<sup>128</sup> The Co. Cork account mentions a:

[l]eaf or two of green cabbage thoroughly washed was placed on top and the lid fastened on ... the receipt for the firkin, after inspection at Cork Butter Market was known as: the 'return' of her firkin, which came through the post in the form of a blue slip of paper in an open envelope. It was divided into three parts, weight, quality, and price ... All these 'butter notes' were carefully preserved in the locked drawer of the cupboard till the end of the year, when the man and woman of the house took them to Cork to 'settle with the merchant'. Pigs' heads, crubeens, and a firkin of sprats, and maybe a firkin of white flour were brought home as rarities for Christmas. Many humorous tales abound ... about the adventures of these simple farmers in the big city of Cork.<sup>129</sup>

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922164/4857540>.  
**124** IFCS 324: 140–1 Co. Cork.  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890527>.  
**125** IFCS 541:39 Co. Tipperary.  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922164/4857540>.

**126** Pinto, 99 shows these Butter Cups in England as sturdy turned wooden cup shaped measures, although it seems likely this Irish account refers to jogglers or churn cups (also known as Butter cups), which may have a

similar cup shape but are dual purpose and always have a central hole for the churn staff.  
**127** IFSC 0022:471 Co. Galway.  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4562127/4561922>  
**128** IFCS 408:177 Co. Kerry.

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4644827/4613038>.  
**129** IFCS 324: 143–4 Co. Cork.  
<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890531>.



The term ‘first class’ was specific, as confirmed by a similar account from Liscarroll, Co. Cork; ‘at that time there was a market for butter in every big town. The butter was sold according to the number of pounds in every firkin and the butter’s quality after inspection. There were [up to 6] grades, 1st 2nd and 3rd. The 1st quality butter got the highest price’.<sup>130</sup> Inspectors dismantled firkins and sampled butter with metal piercing rods, to check for any bad butter.<sup>131</sup> A Kerry woman marvelled at how they calculated varied contributions, apparently without weighing scales: but instead ‘with pottles<sup>132</sup> and gallons and basins [it] was a mystery, and they would never have a falling out over it’.<sup>133</sup> Another remembered how ‘they had a tub in the middle of the floor for washing the butter and every one of them had a wooden mug for measuring it’.<sup>134</sup> A similar ‘Butter Party’ described in detail from Co. Limerick avoided disputes because:

[a] book was kept in which the number of pounds of butter was entered. Each farmer’s wife kept her own book ... This arrangement worked very satisfactorily ... about 56 lbs was put into the firkin. The lid was put on the firkins. A clean white muslin between the butter and the lid preserved the butter from the smell of the timber.<sup>135</sup>

One female narrator remarked that:

It was a great sign of friendship to be ‘joined in butter’. You’d often see the women coming across the fields to each other’s houses with a bucket of butter in one hand and a timber gallon or bucket balanced on her head. She’d make a roll of cloth and place it on her head and put the bucket of butter on top of that and never put a hand to it while she’d be walking along (Figure 3).<sup>136</sup>

She continued to describe how ‘[t]hey used to have a great tea party when the firkin was filled. A nice hot cream cake used to be made, and plenty butter put on it while it was hot, then they had eggs and some nice “young” cream for the tea’. The people this narrator described ‘would only have five or six cows [so they] would join together, two or three of them, and fill a firkin between them’.<sup>137</sup> In Co. Wicklow, it was noted that:



**Figure 23** Oak staved butter firkin, bound or ‘twigged’ with split wooden hoops: it would typically be lined with cloth, holding 56 lbs of butter. A firkin full of butter fetched more per pound than smaller quantities sold locally, hence the incentive for ‘joining in butter’. F1999.265 (Kilrush, County Clare) H. 45 cm x D. c. 35.5 cm. Photo courtesy National Museum of Ireland.

**130** IFCS 367:26. Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921794/4907669>; Also, Liam Downey in Peter Foynes, Colin Rynne and Chris Synnott (eds), *Butter in Ireland* (Cork: Cork Butter Museum, 2014), 39–42.

**131** Inspectors’ metal Piercing rods survive in Cork Butter Museum and in the NMI collection e.g. Reg: F1975: 163.

**132** ‘A “pottle”—a vessel

made out of a solid piece of wood and containing two quarts’ IFCS 324:139 Co. Cork <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921693/4890526>.

**133** IFCS 448:218. Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4706359/4706128>.

**134** IFCS 444:254. Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4706345/4704497>.

**135** IFCS 480:362 Co. Limerick. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/>

<https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921935/4911345>.

**136** Kinmonth, ‘Noggins’, Figure 2. **137** IFCS 448:218. Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4706359/4706128>.

**138** IFCS 914:197 Dunavin, Co. Wicklow <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044712/5033632>; IFCS 408:177 Co. Kerry <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4644827/4613038>.

**139** Myrtle Hill and Vivienne Pollock, *Women of Ireland*:

On firkin day, there was usually cream cakes made, a pot of potatoes was also boiled and eaten with butter. Butter was not seen on the table again until the next 'Firkin Day.' Some buried Firkins of butter in the bogs to preserve it for the winter when they secured a better price. Those, who could afford it kept their butter from 15 August until the 1st October and then sold it to make the half year's rent.<sup>138</sup>

### Gender and the making of butter

Milking cows and especially 'making up butter' (after the churning) was still considered 'women's work' up to the late nineteenth century, although men were involved in some households with the laborious part: the churning. The gender balance changed with the introduction of the creamery system from the 1880s. As men increasingly took charge of modern co-operative creameries, the women no longer profited directly from selling the butter they had previously made at home.<sup>139</sup> The nature of the resulting butter also changed. According to Rynne 'the manufacture of salted sweet-cream butter by creameries [contrasted with] ... salted ripened-cream butter' which women used to make in their farms or dairies.<sup>140</sup>

The innumerable superstitions linked with the potential success of making butter is beyond the scope of this study. Some rituals unwittingly helped produce a good product, in a process prone to failure if unclean, or the wrong temperature, or interrupted mid-stream, by people who lacked thermometers, refrigeration, piped water or hygienic spaces in which to work.<sup>141</sup> Pieces of rowan trees were tied to cows' tails, the red berries decorated their horns, or the dash churn was encircled by a rowan hoop, which probably explains the extra hoop hanging around Helmick's churn (Figure 7).<sup>142</sup> Others attached pieces of rowan to the churn staff on May Eve (a day which for butter-makers was the focus of superstitions).<sup>143</sup> One commonly held wish was that 'If any person comes in when churning is going on that person takes a few strokes in order not to take the butter with him or her ...'<sup>144</sup> It is tempting to ponder such superstition while considering that it was surely a relief to take a break from the hard work of churning, which succeeded best when uninterrupted, by encouraging a visitor to take a turn on arrival.

*Image and experience, c. 1880–1920* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999), 52; Patrick Doyle, *Civilising Rural Ireland: The co-operative movement and the nation-state, 1889–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 49–53. **140** Colin Rynne, 'Butter-making over the centuries', Ch.4 in Dara Downey, Liam Downey and Derry O'Donovan (eds), *Historical*

*Irish Dairy Products* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2021), 45. **141** Colin Rynne in Downey, Downey and O'Donovan, *Historical Irish Dairy Products*, 49. **142** Claudia Kinmonth, 'Howard Eaton Helmick Revisited: Matrimony and Material Culture through Irish Art' in Vera Krielkamp (ed.), *Rural Ireland the Inside Story* (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, 2012), 89–101.

IFCS 975:264 Co. Cavan. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5044827/5042226>. **143** IFCS 221:549 Leitrim <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4658432/4654986>; IFCS 1026:28 Co. Donegal <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4428247/4388244>; IFCS 721:121 Co. Westmeath, includes a sketch <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009029/4979047>;

Roberta Reeners (ed.), *A Wexford Farmstead: the conservation of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century farmstead at Mayglass* (Kilkenny: Heritage Council, 2003), 115. **144** IFCS 169:129 Co. Sligo <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4701699/4693677>.

## Conclusion

The house would stink long after churning day,  
acrid as a sulphur mine ... <sup>145</sup>

Some butter-makers' wooden implements probably had ancient origins; the dash churn and its distinctive dasher, the skimmer, and possibly the juggler. In many households the latter two were the multi-purpose tools; such highly functional objects presumably had wider appeal than the complex range on sale by the close of the nineteenth century, while saving labour and fuel for washing. The staved objects such as the piggin and keeler, also resemble objects unearthed in Dublin's Viking excavations. Wooden implements made by turners and coopers (often the same tradesperson), dominate the range, and they also repaired all the woodwork; these craftsmen were the equivalent of the twentieth century car mechanic, keeping it all going. Such implements were robust and reliable, and were cleaned with a routine involving water, salt, heather scrubs, sand, wind and sunlight.

The 'joining in butter' between relatively small farms, indicates meticulously organised female collaboration. Economic success depended on careful hygiene, measurement of their perishable product (without weighing scales) and exclusion from the club of 'slovenly' producers, whose contaminated butter might damage the 'class A' reputation of others. Cold spring water collected at dawn predated refrigeration and plumbing, when the distance walked from the spring was a measure of the value of a farmhouse. The 'joining' depended on trust, was socially cohesive, yet for others must have been unhappily divisive. Salting and colouring butter to preserve it until market prices rose, was profitable (salt was bought, as was saffron), but strategically unattainable for those with fewer cows, whose butter had to be sold sooner, for less, closer to home. This study spotlights working women's economic success before the creamery system which, with its fundamentally male-dominated hierarchies, changed how Irish butter was produced.

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**Claudia Kinmonth's** curiosity about butter-making began with childhood journeys by horse and cart to a local creamery, and subsequently her involvement with Cork's Butter Museum. As an art and design historian specialising in Irish vernacular furniture, she is Research Curator (Domestic Life), for the Ulster Folk Museum, a Board Member of The National Museum of Ireland and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. Before moving to County Cork in Ireland she worked at London's Victoria and Albert Museum and the Sir John Soane's Museum. Her books with Yale University Press, *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (1993), then *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (2006) instigated exhibitions in Cork then Dublin's National Gallery of Ireland and Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art. Her furniture books won awards, most recently *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork University Press, 2020). She publishes, lectures and broadcasts widely and her work can be seen on [www.claudiakinmonth.ie](http://www.claudiakinmonth.ie)

**17**

*A Dairy Democracy:  
The co-operative movement  
and the improvement of  
pre-Independence Irish dairying  
1889–1922*

**Patrick Doyle**

In an address delivered to an audience at the Royal College of Science in Dublin on 9 January 1919, T. W. Russell assessed the previous two decades of agricultural development in Ireland. Russell had served as the Vice-President of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland (DATI) (essentially the Irish Minister for Agriculture) from 1907, before retiring at the end of 1918. The speech marked the final public act of Russell's time in office as well as an occasion to mark twenty years since the establishment of the said Department.<sup>1</sup> Taking place in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, the speech took stock of the achievements thus far, and sketched out some preliminary thoughts about the issues facing those involved in driving agrarian progress in Ireland. Russell viewed discussions around 'reconstruction' in the wake of the war as less applicable to Irish agriculture. He believed the template for agrarian development was already in place with the existence of the DATI, although he felt that the funding available was inadequate. Among the many accomplishments were those related to increased wartime food production, whereby the DATI played a crucial role directing farmers towards better stewardship of the soil to ensure critical food supplies were maintained. Russell concluded that the real achievement of the Department lay in the fact that its establishment, twenty years previously, marked the moment when 'the work of the reconstruction of agriculture really commenced, a work which happily obviates necessity for much of what might properly be called reconstruction now'.<sup>2</sup>

While Russell set out his views on Irish rural development, his speech might be considered more notable for what it did not include. The talk was near silent on the prominent role played by the co-operative movement in driving the model of agricultural development in the previous three decades. In a terse comment, Russell mentioned that the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS), the leading body of the co-operative movement, had been one such development agency that shaped Irish agriculture, but due to the need to 'prepare this necessarily brief review ... would have to be omitted'.<sup>3</sup> When discussing dairy farming—'a great factor in Irish agriculture'—Russell never mentioned the network of co-operative creameries that represented the backbone of the sector.<sup>4</sup> These societies proved to be crucial institutions through which Irish farmers produced and transmitted vital foodstuffs to Britain during the war. Even more striking to those who listened to the speech must have been the omission of mention of Russell's predecessor as the first Vice-President and the architect of the Department, as well as leader of the co-operative movement, Horace Plunkett.

**1** For the definitive history of the DATI see Mary E. Daly, *The First Department: A History of the Department of Agriculture* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2002). For more on the career of T. W. Russell see James Loughlin, 'Russell, Sir Thomas

Wallace', in *Dictionary of Irish Biography: From Earliest Times to the Year 2002*, Volume 8, ed. by James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 665–66. Loughlin, 'T. W. Russell, the Tenant Farmer Interest

and Progressive Unionism in Ulster, 1886–1900', *Eire-Ireland*, 25: 1 (1990), 44–63; Alvin Jackson, 'Irish Unionism and the Russellite Threat, 1894–1906', *Irish Historical Studies* 25: 100 (1987), 376–404. **2** Thomas Wallace Russell, 'Twenty Years of Agricultural

Development in Ireland, 1899–1919', *DATI Journal* 19: 2 (1919), 160–74, 173. **3** Russell, 'Twenty Years of Agricultural Development', 174. **4** Russell, 'Twenty Years of Agricultural Development', 166.

Founded in 1894 and led by the social reformer Plunkett, the IAOS existed to shape the development of the co-operative movement across the Irish countryside. While the type of co-operative businesses included agricultural supply societies and credit societies that provided farmers with loans to invest in their industry, the strength of the Irish co-operative movement resided in the creamery societies. In 1894, the IAOS presided over thirty-three creameries, which grew into 153 by 1900. Through its network of organisers, engineers, and instructors, the IAOS helped organise new co-operative societies around Ireland and subsequently offered administrative and technical support to ensure co-operative businesses adapted to change. Between 1894 and 1922, which was the year in which the Irish Free State was established, the IAOS played a critical role in developing the Irish dairy industry. This essay will trace the ways in which the Irish co-operative movement reformed food production, especially dairying. The improvement of food quality and the reputation of Irish farming was a chief objective of co-operative reformers, and this was closely aligned to a wider project of moral reform. Efforts to improve the quality of Irish butter, the pursuit of a unified national marketing strategy for co-operatives, and the shaping of Irish character, all combined under the aegis of co-operative reform, with varying results. Plunkett summarised the aims of this project as 'better farming, better business, better living'. By this, Plunkett later wrote, he meant that 'agriculture must be regarded as an industry, as a business, and as a life'. The most important of these maxims was the latter. The improvement of agriculture through modern farming and business methods mattered because it provided a 'means to better living'. Co-operative activists promoted a rural community where 'every member ... can be satisfied that remaining on the land does not imply being in the backwater of modern progress'.<sup>5</sup>

What emerged in the years under review was a revolution in the countryside, which saw the co-operative movement become a key force in Irish politics and economic development. The IAOS helped integrate the latest dairy machinery into the agrarian economy, while also regulating and marketing Irish food. The focus is upon the IAOS's efforts to improve food production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and examines how a rural modernisation project conceived along a co-operative paradigm took shape. Through its interventions, the IAOS engineered a new countryside, one defined by technological adoption and democratic ownership.

<sup>5</sup> Horace Plunkett, 'Rural Regeneration', *North American Review* 214: 791 (1921), 470–76, 474. <sup>6</sup> Robert A. Anderson, 'Co-operative Dairying: Why Farmers should Support it', in *Irish Agricultural Organisation Society [IAOS], Annual Report, 1895* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers and Walker, 1895), 19–20, 19 [hereafter

IAOS, *Annual Report*].

<sup>7</sup> Kevin H. O'Rourke, 'Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Denmark in an Irish Mirror: land tenure, homogeneity and the roots of Danish success' in John L. Campbell, John A. Hall and Ove Kaj Pedersen (eds), *The State of Denmark: Small States, Corporatism and the Varieties of Capitalism* (Montreal:

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 159–96.

### The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Secretary of the IAOS, Robert Anderson, outlined the position of the Irish dairying industry:

Ireland was once the greatest butter-producing country in the world. Irish butter was considered superior to any other, and everywhere it obtained the highest price. This was only a few short years ago, yet in that short period it has had to give place to butter from Denmark, from Sweden, from France, from Canada, and even from far-away Australia and New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

The swift displacement of Ireland as a self-perceived great butter producer spurred Anderson's call to farmers for a change in the structure of the dairying industry. A shift away from home dairying towards a more efficient butter product offered by the creamery, perceived as higher quality, was an important part of the needed reform aimed at by the IAOS.

Anderson understood that Irish dairy farmers had ceded ground to international rivals, with the most prominent of these being the Danes. Between 1860 and 1910, the Irish share of the British butter market declined from 46.6 percent to 11.9 percent.<sup>7</sup> Key to the success of Danish agriculture had been the adoption of the co-operative model of dairying, which saw its share of the British butter market increase from 0.6 percent to 35.2 percent. A change to the composition of Irish agriculture had also taken place that saw a shift from dairying to the livestock trade.<sup>8</sup> Irish agricultural produce declined in value during the agrarian depression of the 1870s, and this placed financial pressure on farmers. Agricultural output for 1886 received 64 per cent of the valuation for 1876, while at the same time international competition grew fiercer.<sup>9</sup> Successive economic historians have compared the experience of Irish dairying during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries unfavourably with the Danish counterparts. The reasons for this are various. The Danes enjoyed several comparative advantages over the Irish, such as an earlier adoption of cream separation technology, higher cow density, different cultural and legal contexts, and the earlier organisation of a farmers' co-operative movement.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, the relative decline in Irish dairying was a source of great anxiety for agriculturalists. The emergence of co-operative dairying, promoted by the IAOS in the late-nineteenth century,

**8** Ingrid Henriksen, Eoin McLaughlin, and Paul Sharp, 'Contracts and Co-operation: the relative failure of the Irish dairy industry in the late nineteenth century reconsidered,' *European Review of Economic History*, 19 (2015), 412–31, 412–13.

**9** Barbara Lewis Solow, *The Land Question and the*

*Irish Economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 171–73.

**10** Henriksen *et al.* 'Contracts and Co-operation'; O'Rourke, 'Late 19th century Denmark in an Irish mirror'; Kevin H. O'Rourke, 'Culture, conflict and cooperation: Irish dairying before the Great War', *Economic Journal* 117 (2007),

1357–79; Ingrid Henriksen, Markus Lampe, and Paul Sharp, 'The role of technology and institutions for growth: Danish creameries in the late nineteenth century', *European Review of Economic History* 15 (2011), 475–93.



was in part a recognition of the falling stature in Irish butter's reputation as it came to be cast in a less flattering light than that of their continental competitors. Nevertheless, the IAOS's interventions did herald a change in tack and led to a rapid transformation in production processes for Irish butter, cream, and cheese.

Co-operative dairying formed part of a wider transformation taking place in post-Famine rural Ireland, but one that made its effects felt in manifold ways. The efforts to modernise and industrialise food production proved to be a priority of social reformers in the period that continued into the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> A dramatic shift in Irish dietary habits occurred after the Great Famine. An increased dietary diversity from reliance upon the potato as the major source of nutrition occurred with meat consumption gradually increasing for the poor, an increase in white bread consumption, as well as the increased use of tea and sugar. As Ian Miller has argued, social reformers viewed some of these developments with concern, as they felt that the Irish diet, indeed the Irish nation, had embarked on a process of physical and moral degradation.<sup>12</sup> Therefore economic performance and the physical condition of the Irish population were closely entwined concerns that co-operators sought to address.

But another aspect of the co-operative model also mattered—ownership. 'The co-operative creamery is your own—remember that', Anderson told his readers.<sup>13</sup> This reminder was not an addendum to the speech, it was central. The fact of ownership over the creamery society amounted to the farmers' shared and democratic control of the dairy industry. Dairy farmers who subscribed to join a local co-operative creamery were entitled to inspect, observe, and criticise the workings of their industry at any time, and because the committee running that association was drawn from the local membership it meant that any farmer-member could complain or impress their views on a management that was accessible and accountable. The appearance of this form of economic ownership over the means of dairy production in the 1890s mattered. The ongoing transfer of land ownership from landlords to tenantry taking place from the 1880s onwards formed a crucial part of the context into which co-operative societies were promoted. This shift in land ownership represented an ongoing social revolution that took place across rural Ireland over the subsequent decades.<sup>14</sup> What preoccupied the thinking of figures like Plunkett and Anderson, was the use to which the Irish rural population would put the land. The spread of agricultural co-operative societies would drive social and economic progress along lines of mutualism rather than of selfish interests. Therefore, the introduction

<sup>11</sup> Juliana Adelman, 'Food in Ireland since 1740', in Eugenio Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 233–43. <sup>12</sup> Ian Miller, *Reforming Food in post-Famine Ireland: Medicine, Science and Improvement, 1845–1922*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, 'Co-operative Dairying', 20. <sup>14</sup> Terence Dooley, *Burning the Big House: the Story of the Irish Country House in War and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 9. See also Dooley, 'The Land for the

People': *the Land Question in Independent Ireland, 1923–73* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2004).

of co-operative principles represented a crucial aspect of the work required to complete this social revolution. For Plunkett, co-operation was critical to prevent farmers from becoming ‘a body of isolated units, having all the drawbacks of individualism and none of its virtues, unorganised and singularly ill-equipped for that great international struggle of our time, which we know as agricultural competition’.<sup>15</sup>

The IAOS worked hard to persuade farmers to create their own co-operative businesses, but they also strived to overcome opposition to their establishment in the first place. The phenomenon of co-operative farmers in control of their means of butter production drew fierce criticism from a range of economic and political opponents. The movement’s growth in the 1890s saw a form of class conflict take place in the countryside between co-operators and those with occupations threatened by new co-operative businesses. The *Skibbereen Eagle* launched one such attack on the movement as it described co-operation as a ‘scheme for the introduction of continental socialism’, and warned farmers away from the IAOS because it represented ‘a mockery, a delusion, a snare’ that aimed ‘to abolish shopkeepers, pig-buyers, cattle-dealers and the like’.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, leading nationalists in the Irish Parliamentary Party opposed the expansion of the IAOS, viewing it as increasing the prestige of opponents to Home Rule whose number included Plunkett. Although Plunkett created a coalition of political views that cut across nationalism and unionism among the ranks of the IAOS, his past career as a Unionist MP prejudiced him in the eyes of political nationalists. This attitude intensified after 1900, when his occupancy of the Vice-Presidency of the DATI granted him policymaking powers. John Dillon MP, led a campaign to have Plunkett removed from the DATI and argued that under Plunkett’s tenure, ‘the work of the Department has been very far indeed from a success. And that its comparative failure has been due in large measure to Sir Horace Plunkett’s personality as well as to the constitution which he imposed upon it’.<sup>17</sup> Plunkett’s leadership saw the IAOS and DATI work closely to co-ordinate their work of rural development as a joint effort. With Plunkett’s replacement by T. W. Russell the DATI embarked upon a new direction in which the relationship between the IAOS and the DATI deteriorated until the priorities of the wartime economy after 1914 saw the two development agencies forced to collaborate.<sup>18</sup>

**15** Horace Plunkett, *Ireland in the New Century: with an Epilogue in Answer to Some Critics* (London: John Murray, 1905), 44.

**16** ‘Mr Horace Plunkett’s Disorganization Society Limited’, *Skibbereen Eagle*, 12 October 1895, 2.

**17** Speech Notes: ‘Horace

Plunkett and the Department of Agriculture, ca. 1907’, P6856/19, John Dillon Papers, Trinity College Dublin Archive.

**18** Not always without friction.

For more on this relationship, see Patrick Doyle, *Civilising Rural Ireland: The co-operative movement, development and the nation-state*,

1889–1939 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), chapters 3 and 4.

### Reversing decline

The desire to create high quality dairy produce in Ireland was an overarching objective of the IAOS. Central to this was placing the latest tools of production within reach of Irish dairy farmers. Technological advances to the industry since the 1870s encouraged agrarian reformers associated with the IAOS to seek out new ways for farmers to conduct their business. In particular, the invention of the centrifugal cream separator in 1878 by Swedish engineer Carl de Laval revolutionised dairying. These separators needed a large supply of milk in order to work, with the earliest models equipped with the capacity of working 300 pounds of milk an hour.<sup>19</sup> The mechanisation of dairying meant that the separation process happened quicker, while a higher proportion of cream was extracted from the milk than if conducted by hand. In Denmark, the swift diffusion of cream separators through co-operative purchase granted the Danish farmer a distinct competitive advantage, which by the 1880s proved to be an important factor in Irish butter losing market share in Britain.<sup>20</sup> This remained the case until the First World War restricted Danish access to the British marketplace. As such, Denmark provided a template for those interested in improving Irish food production. Thomas O'Donnell, M.P. for West Kerry, conducted a trip through Denmark in 1908 to highlight lessons that Irish farmers should adopt. While both countries had some nominal similarities in that they were small countries with a large agrarian sector, O'Donnell noted that they differed in important ways, with the value of Irish goods in the British marketplace declining whilst Denmark's continued to rise. The lesson was clear, Ireland was experiencing 'wholesale decay', while at risk of becoming 'a pauper among the nations, left hopelessly behind in the race of progress'.<sup>21</sup> In particular, O'Donnell lamented that the Irish failed to produce butter over the winter period, while the 'Danish farmer seems to excel most in being able to supply the markets with butter all the year round'.<sup>22</sup> The problem of maintaining a supply of butter all through the year remained a problem as Irish farmers failed to adopt winter dairying, despite both the IAOS and DATI promoting methods to stimulate all-year butter production through early calving. With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, J.R. Campbell, a DATI official, highlighted that 'in addition to being exporters of butter, we actually become importers of this article in winter'.<sup>23</sup>

The mass uptake of the latest separator technology within the Danish dairy sector meant that a similar co-operative system was pursued by the IAOS staff through the diffusion of co-operative societies in Ireland from the 1890s. Inherent

**19** Everett E. Edwards, 'Europe's Contribution to the American Dairy Industry', *Journal of Economic History* 9 (1949), 72–84, 78–79. **20** Kevin O'Rourke, 'Property Rights, Politics and Innovation: Creamery Diffusion in pre-1914 Ireland', *European Review of Economic History*

11 (2007), 395–417.

**21** Thomas O'Donnell, *A Trip to Denmark* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1908), 44–45.

**22** O'Donnell, *A Trip to Denmark*, 15. **23** John R. Campbell, 'The War and Irish Agriculture', *DATI Journal* 15: 1 (Oct., 1914), 10–19, 15.

in this work of disseminating co-operative principles and democratic ownership of new dairying technology, was a project of enhanced quality of Irish agricultural products for sale on the market, as well as one that promoted self-reliance and socioeconomic improvement among the rural population. By promoting co-operative creameries, the IAOS placed the cream separator within financial reach of Irish farmers who could combine their modest financial resources to group purchase the necessary machinery. Moreover, the introduction of the cream separator cemented the rise of the co-operative movement as the dominant force within the liquid milk industry.<sup>24</sup> By 1899, 40,000 farmers had enrolled as members of a co-operative society affiliated to the IAOS, with the majority sending their milk daily to the creamery.<sup>25</sup>

Co-operation contributed to national prosperity. With the creamery under co-operative ownership farmers possessed crucial technology, but also created an economy of scale through the act of combination that provided direct access to markets to sell their goods. The act of co-operative association also brought other tools and inputs within reach of these communities of farmers. Through the agricultural co-operative society, farmers could bulk buy manures, seeds, tools, and machinery—all part of a process to drive innovations across Irish farms. For example, the ability of members to rent tools and machinery through their co-operatives, which could then be shared across the community, was highlighted in the official newspaper of the movement, the *Irish Homestead*. The anonymous author argued that many small farmers previously unable to access ‘modern agricultural technology’ are ‘through the aid of the [co-operative] association, now in a position to do so’. The author continued:

some of our critics attack these methods. They seem unable to grasp the fact that decreasing the expense of raising agricultural products means increased wealth to an agricultural community such as ours. They deplore our National poverty, yet object to our methods towards increased National Prosperity.<sup>26</sup>

The adoption of the co-operative model of creamery ownership held other important social consequences and shaped gender dynamics around the nature of work. The efforts to modernise and industrialise food production practices tended to push women out of the occupations of egg and butter production.<sup>27</sup> Irish butter production traditionally occurred within the home and was carried

**24** Patricia Lysaght, ‘Women, Milk and Magic at the Boundary Festival of May’, in Patricia Lysaght (ed.), *Milk and Milk Products from Mediaeval to Modern Times: Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Ethnological Food Research, Ireland. 1992* (Edinburgh: Canongate

Press, 1994), 208–29, 210–11.

**25** IAOS, *Annual Report, 1899*, 7.

**26** ‘Association and Agricultural Machinery’, *Irish Homestead*, 22 June 1895, 250. **27** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Andrea Cully, ‘The History of Eggs in Irish Cuisine and Culture’ in Richard Hoskings (ed.),

*Eggs in Cookery: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2006* (Devon, Prospect Books, 2007), 137–49; Adelman, ‘Food in Ireland since 1740’, 238.

out by women who worked the product by hand.<sup>28</sup> For much of the nineteenth century this homemade product would be sold to merchants who supplied the Irish market or who exported butter to Britain where it formed a staple of the industrial working-class diet.<sup>29</sup> By shifting to creamery production it became mechanised and moved away from a home-centred production process. The diffusion of the co-operative creamery meant that female employment in that area started to decline as butter production moved into the public sphere and accrued a masculine character. For example, in the summer of 1900, criticism appeared in the *Cork Herald* when a writer, under the pseudonym ‘Special Commissioner’, attacked the co-operative system for promoting unemployment among women who formerly worked as dairymaids. In response, the editor of the *Irish Homestead* conceded that the creamery did impact detrimentally on female employment in butter production, but responded:

there are few Irish farmhouses where more attention could not, with advantage, be paid to cookery, and all the little domestic arts which come to make a comfortable home, while there are still many industries—notably the poultry industry—in which the farmers’ wives and daughters could find profitable employment, instead of wasting their time over dairy work, which can be more economically carried out by a creamery.<sup>30</sup>

Although homemade butter retained popularity as a food article in Ireland, the introduction of the creamery system signalled its drawn-out decline and eventual replacement by the creamery produced version.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside an imperative to remain competitive on the international marketplace, ongoing processes of food, land, and political reform tended to result in a prominent moralising aspect to the work of co-operative activists in fin-de-siècle Ireland. Post-Famine reformers saw the Irish diet as representative of a lack of economic resilience and inability to compete with international rivals, both symptoms of a broader national decline. This drive to use the area of food production to improve the quality of Irish life and character was part of a broader anxiety common among social reformers in this period. As Miller has shown, public health and agronomic experts sought to reverse a widely perceived state of national decline—in its economic, moral, and public health registers—with a pre-occupation around the waning of food production and consumption standards.<sup>32</sup>

**28** For further detail on home butter production by women, see Claudia Kinmonth, “Joined in Butter”: the material culture of Irish home butter-makers, using the dash churn, up to the late nineteenth century’ in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish*

*Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUt+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 16, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>. **29** Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change and Housework in Ireland, 1890–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1993), 85. **30** ‘The Creamery System and its Critics’, *Irish Homestead*, 7 July 1900, 433.

**31** Muiris O’Sullivan and Liam Downey, ‘Butter Making’, *Archaeology Ireland* 32: 3 (2018), 48–51. **32** Miller, *Reforming Food in post-Famine Ireland*.

However, as Michael Turner pointed out in his study of post-Famine agriculture, the IAOS emerged as an important, yet often overlooked, source of expertise and a driver in the push to reform and modernise the use of the Irish land.<sup>33</sup>

Horace Plunkett's role in promoting economic co-operation and the IAOS as a solution to the problem of rural life fit into this mould. According to an early circular issued by the IAOS, 'the moral and social benefits arising from this movement are not less important than the economic'. From the outset, the IAOS sought to instil farmers with the principle of self-help, which was 'enhanced in efficacy by mutual help. Our object is to teach the farmer that by his own intelligence, energy and will, and by entering into combination with his fellows, he can do for himself what neither Government nor any outside power can do for him'.<sup>34</sup> This preoccupation remained for Plunkett, who wrote, 'the conclusion was long ago forced upon me that whatever may have been true of the past, the chief responsibility for the remoulding of our national life rests now with ourselves, and in the last analysis the problem of Irish ineffectiveness at home is in the main a problem of character—and of Irish character'.<sup>35</sup>

The creamery became a site through which Irish farmers would learn new disciplines that enhanced their capacity as producers, but which would deliver a cleaner, healthier type of milk from which butter would be made. Co-operative members who supplied the creamery were provided with instructions to ensure their milk contained no dirt from the farm, and 'in the event of any outbreak of contagious or infectious disease in the household of the supplier, notice must be given at once to the creamery, and the supplying of milk discontinued until all danger of spreading disease through the milk is certified by a medical man to have passed'.<sup>36</sup> Co-operative experts were, then, concerned about issues around food purity, adulteration, and the health of the wider population. The late nineteenth century saw increased state regulation to prevent problems around food adulteration across the United Kingdom. From the 1870s onwards legislation was implemented to prevent adulteration of bread, milk, seeds, butter and many other foodstuffs. This had a pecuniary, public health, and moral aspect to it. With special relevance to Ireland was the rollout of the 1887 Margarine Act and the 1907 Butter and Margarine Act. Both acts tried to differentiate between butter and margarine sold to consumers, although the legislation struggled to curtail products sold as salted butter, or with trade names for margarine such as 'Marvo', and milk-blended butter.<sup>37</sup>

**33** Michael Turner, *After the Famine: Irish Agriculture, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.

**34** 'Circular Letter from the President to all interested in Irish Agriculture, issued 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1895', in IAOS, *Annual Report, 1896*, 31–32, 31.

**35** Plunkett, *Ireland in the*

*New Century*, 32. **36** 'Creamery Management: Rules for Milk Suppliers', Appendix G in IAOS, *Annual Report, 1899*, 64–65. **37** Leslie A. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 265–66; David

M. Higgins and Mads Mordhorst, 'Reputation and export performance: Danish butter exports and the British market, c.1880–c.1914', *Business History* 50: 2 (2008), 185–204, 193.

The establishment of the DATI in 1900, with Plunkett as its first leader, saw a greater emphasis placed on raising the quality and standards of Irish butter.<sup>38</sup> While Plunkett once emphasised his vision of self-help in which co-operators acted without interference from outside agencies or government, he enthusiastically intertwined the project of co-operative-led development with the functions of the DATI. The IAOS had already worked to bring improvements to quality and quantity of Irish produce, but with new state capacity extant in Ireland, resources were available to accelerate this process. Frequent inspections of creameries by co-operative organisers provided the IAOS headquarters in Dublin with a detailed snapshot of the condition of co-operative agriculture in practice. Within a few years, the IAOS proclaimed the ‘progressive character’ of their dairying societies, which became centres of a scientific and rational approach to agricultural production. One Annual Report noted that ‘lectures given to Dairy Societies are crowded, the ordinary general meetings are well attended, experimental work is carefully watched, and its teaching intelligently applied’.<sup>39</sup> The DATI built on top of this work as it introduced a series of measures designed to encourage a higher fat content in milk sent to creameries and which ensured that the product that left the creamery for market met with a certain minimum standard. In 1902, the Sale of Butter (Ireland) Regulations established that where a sample of butter contains a proportion of water exceeding 16%, the sample is not genuine butter.<sup>40</sup> Surprise butter competitions followed, whereby random samples taken from individual creameries were judged by a panel which included representatives of the principal buyers of Irish butter in Great Britain, as well as Cork, Limerick, Belfast, and Dublin. In 1903, seven such competitions took place examining 774 different butter samples. Prizes were awarded to the best samples, with the overall cohort judged as ‘good average quality, while a considerable number attained to a high standard of excellence’. Despite this, the judges cited areas for improvement such as the inferior quality of the packaging and wooden boxes in which the butter was transported, and called for all creamery managers to maintain high standards around milk pasteurisation and the use of ice and refrigeration to ensure cream was churned at an appropriate temperature for a higher quality product.<sup>41</sup> The issue of poor packaging proved to be a liability for Irish farmers as a report from 1907 showed that in the packages supplied by Irish creameries ‘one to four pounds of butter has frequently to be scraped off the surface of the butter by the purchaser, and put on one side as

**38** On Plunkett’s role in establishing and leading the IAOS see Carla King, ‘The Recess Committee, 1895–6’, *Studia Hibernica* 30 (1998/1999), 21–46; Doyle, *Civilising Rural Ireland*, chapter 2. **39** IAOS, *Annual Report, 1901*, 16.

**40** Garda Síochána, *The Sale of Food and Drugs Acts, 1875 to 1936, and Regulations and*

*Instructions with Notes and Cases* (Dublin: A. Thom and Co., 1939), 14. **41** ‘Surprise Butter Competitions, 1903’, *DATI Journal* 4: 3 (Mar. 1904), 552–56, 54.

unsaleable'.<sup>42</sup> Despite this coordinated effort between the co-operative movement and the state, the variability in butter quality remained a perennial problem. To remedy such defects, reformers looked to establish a reputation that associated Irish butter with quality and trust. For the IAOS the creation of a national co-operative marketing strategy remained an objective throughout the early twentieth century. In 1893, the Irish Co-operative Agency Society (ICAS) was established in Limerick with the objective of promoting the co-operative movement in Ireland by the 'selling on commission of Irish Creamery and other Butter'.<sup>43</sup> It was hoped that co-operative societies would subscribe as members to ICAS and benefit from the concentrated market power of a co-operative selling agent. The results were disappointing. An investigation carried out by the IAOS sought to examine reasons why there had been a limited take-up of ICAS's services. Factors included the lack of capital on hand, which reflected the low number of subscriptions from co-operative societies, and an inconvenient location in Limerick for the headquarters, which made it less accessible for non-Munster co-operatives.<sup>44</sup>

In 1897, the Irish Agricultural Wholesale Society (IAWS) was founded in Dublin as a trading federation that replaced ICAS and carried out retail and wholesale work for co-operative societies (see Figure 1). As well as acting as a selling agent, the IAWS bulk bought goods that could be sold onto co-operators at a cost price. Individual societies could subscribe to the IAWS to provide the trade body with substantial capital that allowed the larger body to pass on significant savings to members through the mass purchase of seeds, fertilisers, and machinery. Importantly, as a separate organisation, the IAWS could help agricultural co-operative societies develop a limited retail business for members.<sup>45</sup> Co-operative societies that federated to the IAWS could expand their businesses during the war. The number of co-operatives that affiliated to the IAWS increased from twenty-eight in 1900 to 379 by the end of 1918.<sup>46</sup> A major aim of the IAWS was to co-ordinate as much co-operatively produced food through its channels as possible, and help to establish a platform through which Irish co-operative produce would be marketed. However, the failure to attain support from *all* co-operatives meant that too much co-operatively produced food remained outside the purview of the IAWS. As L.P. Byrne noted at the end of the First World War, 'individual creameries ... still prefer to market their own produce in their own way. The best [produce] ... they market in this way, the inferior is sent to the Wholesale'.<sup>47</sup> As late as 1936, disappointment at the lack of progress

<sup>42</sup> 'Report of Experiments in Butter Packages', *DATI, Journal*, 4: 3 (1907), 477-88, 88.

<sup>43</sup> 'The Irish Co-operative Agency Society, Limited' in IAOS, *Annual Report, 1898*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> 'Report of Agency Investigation Committee, 10 May 1898', in IAOS, *Annual Report, 1898*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> Lionel Smith-Gordon and

Laurence C. Staples, *Rural Reconstruction in Ireland: A Record of Co-operative Organisation* (London: P.S. King and Co., 1917), 141-47.

<sup>46</sup> Laurence Patrick Byrne, *Twenty-One Years of the IAWS, 1897-1918* (Dublin: IAWS, 1919), 48, 78-80.

<sup>47</sup> Byrne, *Twenty-One Years*, 84.



in co-operative marketing was reflected in comments made by then president of the IAOS, Robert Anderson, who stated 'a vast field lies untilled before us. We have done little or nothing to solve the question of co-operative marketing, which is usually, elsewhere, the first problem to be grappled with, and what we have attempted has not met with success'.<sup>48</sup>

While the state played a more interventionist role in Irish agriculture with the establishment of the DATI, the IAOS retained key responsibility in promoting its own model of agricultural development. The co-operative creamery proved itself to be a major site of food, business, and public health improvement. Since the 1890s the co-operative creamery evolved through the support of IAOS organisers as it became equipped with the latest plant machinery, which increased the productiveness of dairy farmers. Moreover, IAOS employees visited, observed, and provided advice to co-operative societies about new dairying techniques and advised on how to increase milk quantity and quality. The IAOS also encouraged methods of scientific and accurate record keeping among co-operators and produced a guide to creamery accounting aimed at co-operative committees and managers. Written by Thomas Scott, a public auditor, the book contained a series of tables to work out how to calculate the price to pay for various grades of milk based on its fat content delivered by members to the creamery. In the preface, Robert Anderson emphasised the connection between accurate record-keeping and food quality. Anderson reminded all managers and committees about the 'necessity for the payment for milk according to its quality ... the price of milk must, like that of every other commodity, be regulated by its quality, and that any departure from the system laid down must inevitably do an injustice to the suppliers, and ultimately destroyed their confidence in the Creamery system'.<sup>49</sup> As the *Irish Homestead's* editor, Æ, noted, 'the value of account-keeping cannot be overestimated: it teaches precision, punctuality, tidiness; and the illumination it gives leads to improvement, and progress'.<sup>50</sup> With the creation of the DATI in 1900, technical instructors employed by the state took on the task of educating farmers in the adoption of new farming practices, the use of new fertilisers, and the keeping of accurate farm accounts.

The scientific approach to improving butter manufacturing also related to the very structure of the creamery buildings. In 1899, the IAOS employed James Fant, an engineer and manager of Ballyclough Creamery in County Cork to take on the role of Creamery Inspector. Fant emerged as a crucial figure who linked the Dublin-based IAOS leaders to their rural membership, and his new position

**48** IAOS, *Annual Report*, 1936, 20.

**49** Robert A. Anderson, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in Thomas Scott, *Creamery and General Book-Keeping with Tables Showing the Gross Value of Milk per Gallon, According to its Quality and the Current Price of Butter*

(Limerick: Guy and Co., 1895), viii. **50** Æ, 'The Value of Account Keeping', *Irish Homestead*, 30 September 1905, reprinted in G.W. William Russell, Æ, *Selections from the Contributions to the Irish Homestead, Volume 1* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe, 1978), 59–60. Æ is

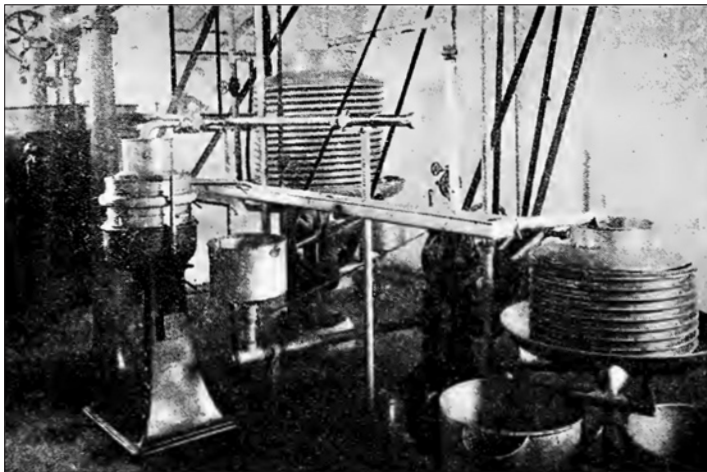
the pseudonym of George William Russell (1867–1935).

was conceived as a supplement to the work carried out by government inspectors. He visited all IAOS creameries and made a thorough inspection of the buildings, machinery, drainage and sanitation facilities, as well as the book and account keeping practiced by the management. His visits also included observations of the working methods of the creamery staff and ‘in some cases it was found necessary for him to remain several days at the Dairies he visited, during which time he instructed the dairy staff verbally and by practical demonstration in the technical part of their business, and in every case a marked improvement has been the result’.<sup>51</sup> As the sole engineer employed by the IAOS, James Fant proved to be a crucial individual in helping co-operative societies maintain up-to-date plant machinery, and arguably he contributed more to the infrastructural transformation that took place in early-twentieth century Ireland than any other individual.<sup>52</sup> His expertise as an engineer, architect, and creamery manager meant he viewed the development of individual local societies from a unique perspective, and he helped societies acquire necessities such as separators, refrigeration devices, and pasteurising equipment. In James Fant, the IAOS possessed



<sup>51</sup> IAOS, *Annual Report*, 1899, 12. <sup>52</sup> [https://www.dia.ie/architects/view/1827/FANT-JAMES#tab\\_biography](https://www.dia.ie/architects/view/1827/FANT-JAMES#tab_biography)

**Figure 1** IAWS headquarters, Thomas Street, Dublin. Source L.P. Byrne, *Twenty-One Years of the IAWS* (1919)



**Figure 2** Top. View of an Irish Creamery. Source: IAOS, *Why you should buy Irish Produce* (1909).

**Figure 3** Below. Creamery Machinery. Pasturising, Separating, and Cooling Plant. Source: IAOS, *Why you should buy Irish Produce* (1909)

a 'special creamery organiser with expert qualifications ... [whose] services are always in demand, and ... the IAOS could profitably employ at least four such organisers if it had the funds wherewith to do so'.<sup>53</sup>

All such interventions delivered a positive impact, which the IAOS drew attention towards as it aimed to ensure Irish food received a positive presentation to potential consumers. In a 1909 book that accompanied a display of Irish breakfast table commodities at the Grocery Provision, Oil & Italian Warehouse & Allied Trades International Exhibition held at the Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington, the IAOS emphasised the significance of the co-operative model in enhancing the quality of Irish produce for British consumers. The author began the paean to Irish food by playing on a stereotypical view of Ireland as refracted through the metropolitan British lens:

All that the average Briton knows of Ireland is that it is a decidedly unpleasant country to govern. We wish to modify this impression by pointing out that it produces very good things to eat, and to give some cogent arguments why the English consumer should buy Irish produce and make himself as Irish as he can in this way.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside descriptions testifying to the excellent quality of Irish bacon, eggs, butter, and other articles produced by co-operative societies, the book included photographs of the modern interiors and exteriors of co-operative creameries. Through the presentation of images that showed clean, co-operatively-owned buildings fitted out with up-to-date pasteurising and cream separating technology, the IAOS exhibited the modernity of the enterprises which had produced the goods on display (see Figures 2 and 3). More importantly, the book emphasised several changes to the Irish economy brought about by the co-operative movement. First, the introduction of co-operative creameries showed how the Irish were not afraid of competition and 'are not now afraid of showing our butter alongside the best Continental butters'.<sup>55</sup> Second, Ireland's proximity to Britain was a guarantee of freshness of produce. Third, the exhibition provided a testament to the business acumen of Irish farmers who, since the arrival of co-operative business methods, transformed into modern businessmen. Prior to the co-operative creamery, butter was produced in a way that lacked uniformity. The modernising impulse inherent to the co-operative way of business resulted from the fact of member ownership as the 'farmers who exhibit here own their

<sup>53</sup> IAOS, *Annual Report*, 1909, 10. <sup>54</sup> *Why you should buy Irish produce* (Dublin: IAOS, 1909), 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Why you should buy*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Why you should buy*, 6.

own creameries, their own egg and poultry societies, their own beehives, their own tobacco fields, their own bacon factories, and they run them with the energy of self-interest'.<sup>56</sup> The co-operative creamery provided a virtue to the consumer as it guaranteed 'the most stringent conditions of cleanliness which begin to operate in the farm and end only when the butter is packed and sent out of Ireland'. In this way the creamery represented an important institution in the promotion of public health and hygienic food, a place where 'the slaughter of the microbes' occurred.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Great War, the Great Test**

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 tested the resilience and capacity of the co-operative movement, as Irish farmers were expected to respond to the demands of a wartime economy. As well as this, the IAOS contended with hostile agricultural policymakers. Lionel Smith-Gordon, an IAOS employee and author, categorised the 25-year period leading up to the outbreak of the war as being made up of four periods of agricultural development starting with Plunkett's first efforts to establish co-operative societies in 1889. First were the early years of co-operative promotion under the auspices of Plunkett and the IAOS. Second, from 1900 and with the creation of the DATI, agricultural development experienced seven years of close collaboration between the co-operative movement and the state. The third period commenced in 1907 with T. W. Russell's tenure at the DATI and his decision to defund the co-operative movement, placing the two agencies of development at odds. The fourth stage occurred when the Liberal government in Westminster established the Development Commission to provide funding to the IAOS, despite the protestations of T. W. Russell.<sup>58</sup> The outbreak of war represented a new phase and raised questions about the capacity of Irish agriculture to produce the necessary foodstuffs to support the war effort. According to Smith-Gordon, the IAOS's role as a leading agency of agricultural development was being purposefully ignored by the Department. The co-operative movement pushed for a policy to increase tillage through continuous cropping, which would require 'the use of labour-saving up-to-date machinery, which will enable the existing supply of labour to accomplish a vastly increased production'. The IAOS would organise 'co-operative societies which are able through collective purchase to obtain the required implements and hire them out at small cost to their individual members'. The DATI's attitude in the initial phase

<sup>57</sup> *Why you should buy*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Lionel Smith-Gordon, *Food Shortage and its Remedy: The Case Against the Department* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1915), 7–8. For more on the rift between the IAOS and the DATI and the Development Commission's role in providing funds to the

IAOS see, Doyle, *Civilising Rural Ireland*, chapter 3.

of the War, according to Smith-Gordon's analysis, was one which reflected 'fear of the powerful interests which feel themselves damaged in pocket or principle by any co-operative trading, [and which] refuses to countenance the poisonous plant'.<sup>59</sup>

The state played an increasingly interventionist role in organising wartime food supplies across Britain and Ireland. In Ireland, at an official level, the views of co-operators were not sought, and when offered were marginalised. A Departmental Committee to investigate and report on how to stimulate Irish food production was established, and its members included Horace Plunkett. The government's Food Controller saw a focus on engineering the equitable distribution of food, commandeering supplies when required and, eventually, introducing compulsory rationing. The DATI led the way in the rollout of a new phase in food production, which included fixing prices for staple foods such as wheat, oats, and potatoes, promoting tillage, and fixing wages for labourers.<sup>60</sup> While Plunkett engaged in the process to redesign official policy around food production, he played the part of heretic. Plunkett wanted official recognition for, and use of, the co-operative movement to stimulate intensive food production, but his views only appeared as a Minority Report.<sup>61</sup>

In an official capacity the IAOS was cut adrift from the DATI, but at a granular level, co-operative societies played an active role in guiding farmers through the war. Co-operative societies, with their ability to reach their large membership, proved to be an effective network through which knowledge exchange and resources could be organised. The work of IAOS employees like Fant and Anderson helped individual co-operatives adapt and build a new infrastructure that ensured farmers produced and supplied the necessary food. The work carried out over the past twenty-five years had placed co-operative farmers in a strong position with their societies providing the platform for success. An IAOS organiser called John O'Leary provided an assessment of Abbeydorney Co-operative Society in Co. Kerry in January 1915 and reported to Anderson on a well-managed business. The society operated a central creamery and an auxiliary creamery which received a supply of milk from 150 members. All sewage and waste water was disposed of in a satisfactory manner; the grounds, building and machinery were maintained in good order; the quality of the milk supplied by members was 'clean and sweet', with all sour milk rejected; the creamery supplied loans to members on the condition that they continued to supply milk; and

<sup>59</sup> Smith-Gordon, *Food Shortage*, 9. <sup>60</sup> 'The Organisation and Working of the Food Production Scheme, 1917', *DATI Journal*, 17: 3 (April 1917), 499–510. <sup>61</sup> Doyle, *Civilising Rural Ireland*, 102–03.

<sup>62</sup> John O'Leary, IAOS Creamery Organiser's Report for Abbeydorney,

7 January 1915, National Archives of Ireland (NAI) 1088/2/3. <sup>63</sup> T. O'Donovan, Abbeydorney to Robert A. Anderson, Dublin, 22 January 1915, NAI 1088/2/3.

‘the books were examined, compared, and found in order’.<sup>62</sup> Later that month, Abbeydorney’s manager wrote to Anderson to inform him that the members established flour mills in order to engage in bread production.<sup>63</sup>

Co-operatives diversified their activities during the war years. The creation of flour mills provided one example. The movement into cheese production proved to be of longer-term significance. Prior to the war, cheese-making proved to be a negligible area of food production in Ireland. In 1911, the DATI’s official journal highlighted the lack of Irish cheese,<sup>64</sup> lamenting the fact it ‘does not receive the attention that it deserves as a remunerative method of disposing of whole milk’. The author noted that the reasons for this were that cheese as a food was not valued as highly as it should be, explaining the lack of local demand. As a result, very few individuals were skilled in cheese making. Moreover, ‘the time required for the ripening of the cheese has involved the locking up of so much capital the owners of creameries, etc. have been slow to embark on the industry’.<sup>65</sup> Creameries shifted towards cheese production during the war to meet demand for protein required in British diets. Irish cheese production expanded from 10,000 tons produced for export in 1914, to 286,000 tons by 1919.<sup>66</sup> Cheese-making paid more than butter-making as a result of Food Controls, which saw a higher guaranteed price for the former. Alexander Poole Wilson calculated that under price controls, a farmer received 14.33 pence per gallon of milk used for Caerphilly cheese production, compared to 8.6 pence per gallon used for butter.<sup>67</sup> The demand for Irish cheese during the war was such that the state purchased any grade of produce for a guaranteed minimum price. This led to situations whereby the production of cheese of variable quality was a persistent feature of Irish cheese production. When the war ended, the IAOS appealed to co-operative committees to ‘examine their consciences’ when it came to quality control of their cheeses.<sup>68</sup> By the 1920s creameries once again focused on the production of butter. The foray into Irish cheese manufacturing proved temporary, albeit essential to the war effort, and it would not be taken up on a commercial scale until later in the twentieth century.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

When the Great War concluded in November 1918, so too did T.W. Russell’s tenure at the head of the DATI, and a hoped-for new relationship between the co-operative movement and the state beckoned. However, it was not to be a return to business as normal, as the country slipped into another crisis which

**64** For an earlier history of Irish cheesemaking, see Mícheál Ó Sé, ‘Old Irish Chesses and other milk products’, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 53: 178 (1948), 82–87; For Linguistic and Literary evidence of Old Irish Cheese

see William Sayers, ‘Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’ in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy,

2024), chapter 8, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>; and J. P. Mallory, ‘Food in Irish Prehistory: Archaeological, Linguistic, and early Literary Evidence, with a Note of Caution’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*,

chapter 1, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>.

**65** ‘Caerphilly Cheese-Making in Ireland’, *DATI Journal* 11: 4 (Jul 1911), 669–75, 669.

**66** Daly, *The First Department*, 58–60.

**67** Alexander Poole Wilson, ‘The Extension of

saw the outbreak of violence between 1919 and 1921 as Irish nationalists engaged in violent confrontations with Crown forces during the War of Independence. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 between representatives of the British government and Dáil Éireann led to the establishment of two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland: Northern Ireland, made up of six counties in the north-east, which remained a part of the United Kingdom (UK); and the Irish Free State made up of twenty-six counties and which gained political independence.

The IAOS worked closely with the new Free State government to shape and build on the achievements of the first decades of the co-operative movement. The point that T.W. Russell made in January 1919 about there being no need for post-war reconstruction of Irish agriculture was largely true. There was some recalibration in the relationship between co-operators and the state after independence, and the IAOS found itself working with a willing partner in the Department of Agriculture. The IAOS's mission to improve Irish food production had seen the organisation pilot a shift from a demoralised countryside following the Great Famine, into a modern and technologically advanced dairying industry. Through its network of creameries and agricultural societies, the IAOS had threaded a democratic project throughout the rural landscape.

That is not to say that it successfully achieved all it aimed at. For example, limited success in establishing a national brand and marketing strategy bedevilled Irish food manufacturing for decades. It would not be until 1962 with the establishment of the Kerrygold brand which was developed under the leadership of Tony O'Reilly that Irish butter attained a strong branded presence in the UK market. Between 1960 and 1972, Irish butter exports to Britain increased tenfold.<sup>70</sup> This was followed up in 1964 with the establishment of the semi-state body, the National Dairy Council, which promoted the reputation of Irish dairying abroad.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the practice of winter dairying proved difficult to instil among Irish farmers, and according to Paul Rouse, 'the pre-war trend of export through the summer and import during the winter proved exceptionally difficult to alter'.<sup>72</sup> The improvement of food quality remained a preoccupation of the co-operative movement and the state, with the Irish Agricultural Advisory Services providing crucial assistance in this work after independence.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, the IAOS helped steer Irish farmers through war and revolution, while ensuring that they proved able to compete with international agriculturalists. In the process of taking control of the soil, the IAOS introduced farmers to the latest

Cheese-Making in Ireland', *DATI Journal* 17: 3 (April 1917), 467–85, 70. **68** IAOS, *Annual Report, 1919*, 9. **69** Tim Cogan and Liam Downey, 'Historical Perspectives on Cheese Production', *Archaeology Ireland* 34: 2 (2020), 19–22. **70** Patricia Lysaght "'Taste

Kerrygold, Experience Ireland" An Ethnological Perspective on Food Marketing', *Béaloideas* 72 (2004), 61–90. **71** National Dairy Council, <https://ndc.ie/about-the-ndc/> (accessed 10 August 2023). **72** Paul Rouse, *Ireland's Own Soil: Government*

*and Agriculture in Ireland, 1945–65* (Dublin: Irish Farmers' Journal, 2000), 46. **73** Micheál Ó Fathartaigh, *Developing Rural Ireland: A History of the Irish Agricultural Advisory Services* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2022).



technology and business methods required to achieve their potential. Perhaps its most important success was in embedding a modernisation program that shaped Irish agriculture, and setting a template for a close state-co-op movement relationship that remained in place until the entry of Ireland as a member of the European Economic Community in 1973. The achievements of the IAOS proved significant and its legacy can be viewed in both the size and the importance of the Irish dairying sector to the Irish economy today.<sup>74</sup> The economic and social programme piloted by the IAOS did not always achieve the results that leaders like Plunkett desired. However, the experiment essentially remained a democratic one, and one which raises important issues around the way in which an experiment can become a sustainable template for development.

**74** The dairy industry, according to IBEC in 2023, is a key component of the economy on the island of Ireland, providing €16 billion of economic value and around 85,000 jobs. <https://www.ibec.ie/dairyindustryireland/our-dairy-story/economics-and-social>

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Section 5

# Food, folklore, foclóirí, and digital humanities





## **Colcannon [The Little Skillet Pot]**

Shaun O’Nolan (1872–1945)

Well did you ever make colcannon, made with lovely pickled cream  
with the greens and scallions mingled like a picture in a dream?  
Did you ever make a hole on top to hold the melting flake  
of the creamy flavoured butter that our mothers used to make?

Oh, you did, so you did, so did he and so did I  
And the more I think about it, sure the nearer I’m to cry  
Oh, weren’t them the happy days when troubles we knew not  
and our mother made colcannon in the little skillet pot?

Well, did you ever take potato cake and boxty to the school  
tucked underneath your oxtar with your books, your slate and rule?  
And when teacher wasn’t looking, ‘sure a great big bite you’d take  
Of the creamy flavoured soft and meltin’ sweet potato cake.

Oh, you did, so you did, so did he and so did I,  
And the more I think about it, sure the nearer I’m to cry  
Oh, weren’t them the happy days when troubles we knew not  
and our mother made colcannon in the little skillet pot?

Well did you ever go a courtin’ boys, when the evenin’ sun went down  
And the moon began a peepin’ from behind the Hill O’ Down  
And you wandered down the boreen where the clúrachán was seen  
And you whispered lovin’ praises to your own dear sweet cailín.

Oh, you did, so you did, so did he and so did I  
And the more I think about it, sure the nearer I’m to cry  
And weren’t those the happy days when we did have our fling,  
Back in dear old Ireland where love is lord and king.

*‘Níl aon tinteán mar  
do thinteán féin’:  
Hearth furniture from  
the Famine to rural  
electrification*

**Clodagh Doyle**

The old Irish proverb ‘*níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin*’,<sup>1</sup> meaning there is no place like home, literally states that there is no fireplace like your own fireplace (Figure 1). In order to discuss open hearth cooking and the cookware used up until c. seventy-five years ago, it is necessary to firstly introduce the fireplace itself. The hearth, in traditional Irish houses, was situated either at the gable wall, especially in the West and North of the country, or (generally) in the centre of the home in the east and south (Figure 2); however, there were always exceptions.<sup>2</sup> Smoke holes were the original architectural feature to release the smoke. The hob wall would have been built up around the back (or sides) of the fire so that the fire would be set more out from the wall and heat the room better—it was often flat and wide enough to rest a pot on (See Figures 3 and 4).<sup>3</sup>

In the hip-roofed houses of the midlands and the east, whether the fire was raised from the floor depended on the type of fuel employed. When burning wood, coal, or anthracite, a raised firebox was needed so that a draft could be created to aid the combustion of the fuel. Raised fires were popular where the fuel was abundant, such as wooded areas in the east and south. Hand-bellows were sometimes used but built-in fire fan blowers were more common.<sup>4</sup> A handle-turned wheel operated fan blades that forced air through a channel to a gap under the fire: when turned, the fire was fanned by somebody seated nearby (See Figure 5). When turf was burned, the fire was directly at floor level (Figures 3 and 4), as any breeze would cause the turf to burn too fast. The sods of turf were arranged in a pyramid shape creating a slow burning, consistent fire unlike the stronger blazes created by wood and coal. Throughout the country, bogwoods, logs, sticks and branches, cowdung, seaweed, heather and furze were all relied on as supplementary fuels.<sup>5</sup> The hearth and accoutrements in the Co. Kerry home of Pats Ó Conaill (Figure 1) was drawn by Åke Campbell in 1934 as part of the Swedish Folk Cultural Mission to Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Much of the detailed information in this chapter stems from folklore sources, particularly the National Folklore Collection.

It was traditional to keep the area around the hearth whitewashed, and heather besoms, or wings and feathers combined with shovels, were used to keep the area clean. Pokers were not needed for stoking the fires, but a tongs (*an tlu / maide briste*) was almost always used (Figure 6). The *maide briste* (literally broken stick) features in much of the folklore concerning cooking techniques,

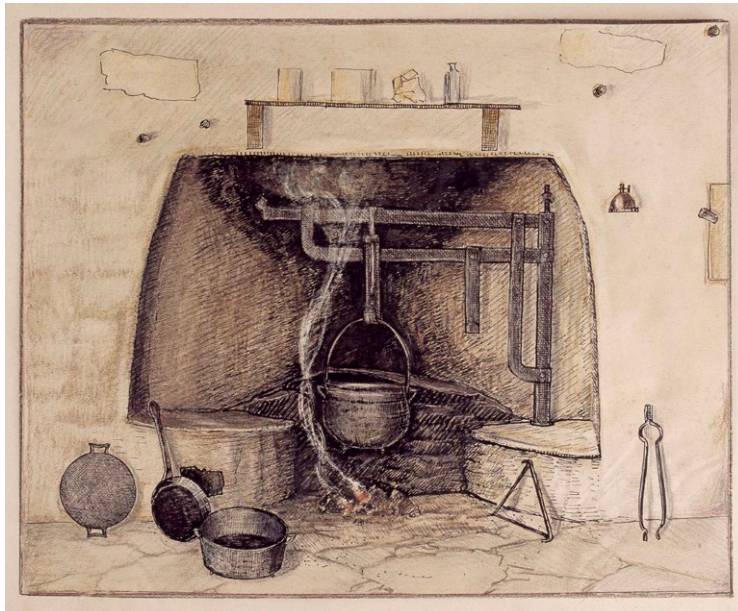
**1** *Sean-fhocla agus an bhri atá leo*: Rooskey, Co. Mayo. National Folklore Collection (henceforth NFC), The Schools' Collection, Volume 0108, Page 144.

**2** Also in archaeological evidence from Ireland, central hearths with smokeholes were usual from all settlement evidence up from the Mesolithic period until medieval times.

**3** 'The 17th of March is Patrick's Day, and the wall behind the fire is the hob'. Old Saying, Banteer, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0361, Page 556. **4** Ballyhaise, Co. Cavan. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0974, Page 104. **5** Film and imagery of creating turf from mud slurry at Ballinacarriga Bog, Dunmayway, Co. Cork. June,

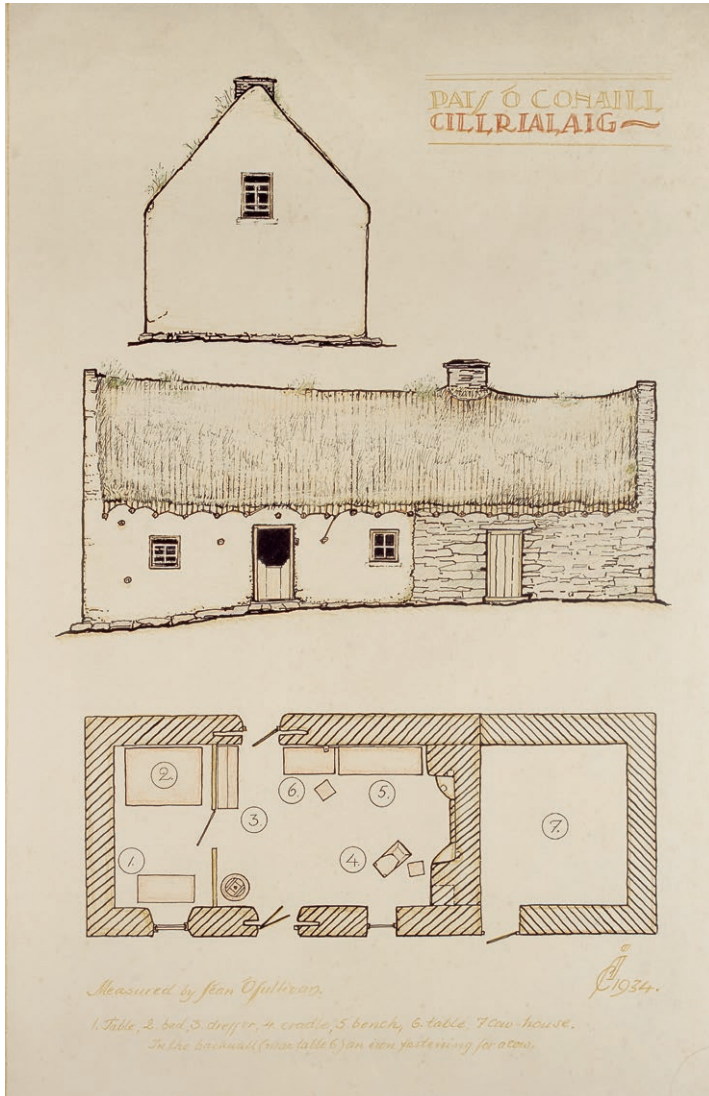
IFD. File F37.1957. **6** Patricia Lysaght, 'Swedish Ethnological Surveys in Ireland 1934–35 and their Aftermath', in Hugh Cheape (ed.), *Tools and Traditions. Studies in European Ethnology Presented to Alexander Fenton* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 1993), 22–31.

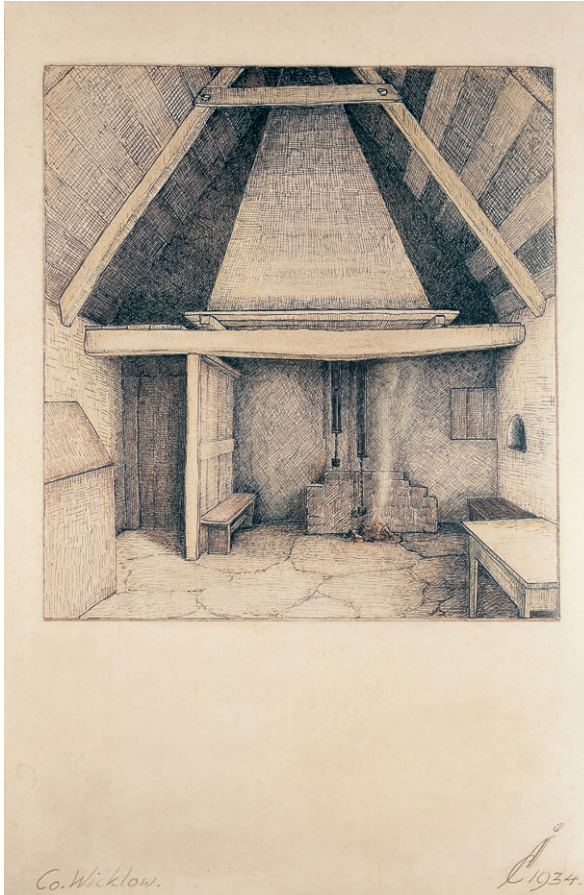




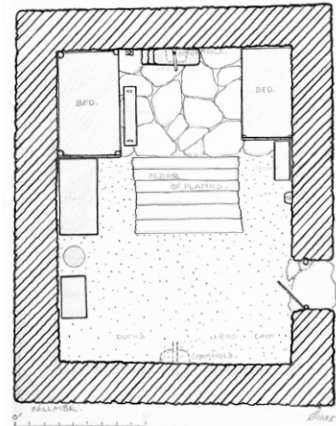
**Figure 1** Above. This architectural drawing shows the detail of the hearth and accoutrements in the home of Pats Ó Conaill, Cill Rialaig, Co. Kerry. The drawing by Åke Campbell in 1934 was part of the Swedish Folk Cultural Mission to Ireland. National Museum of Ireland (henceforth NMI) Collection.

**Figure 2** Opposite. Architectural survey Pats Ó Conaill, Cill Rialaig, Co. Kerry. Plan features: 1.Table, 2.bed, 3.dresser, 4.cradle, 5.bench, 6.table, 7.cowhouse. In the back, wall (near Table 6) an iron fastening for a cow. NMI Collection.





**Figure 3** Lobby-entry house with a central hearth with a wicker canopy. There is a central entrance door and a wooden jamb wall creates a porch area which leads into the kitchen or the room behind the hearth, the bedroom. See also the hob wall, the crook sticks, built-in wall press and keeping hole. Luggala, Co. Wicklow. Åke Campbell, 1934. NMI Collection.



**Figure 4** It had a peg forced into the gable wall above the hearth and instead of a chimney had a smoke-hole. The much worn area around the hearth has flagstones and planks and the hob-wall is stepped. There are spaces for animals opposite. Below each smokehole is a stick coming from the gable wall to suspend a crook or chain. An Fál Mór, Co. Mayo. Åke Campbell, 1935. NMI Collection.



TONGS

P. 1966:348

CD: DERRYCAHILL  
 PAR: LYSBARTY  
 BAR: ATHLONE  
 CO. ROSCOMMON.

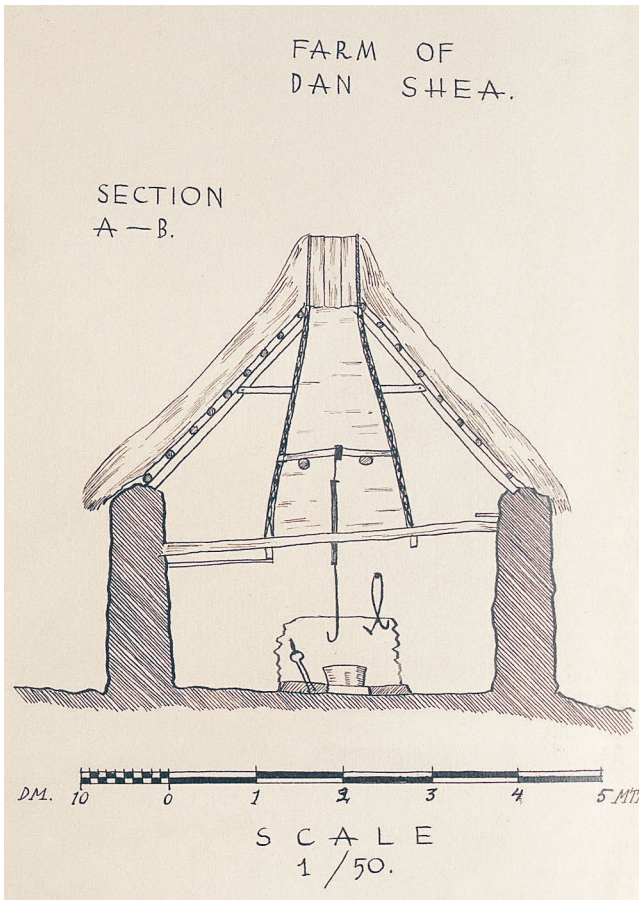
O.S. 47, 50



**Tongs;** Smith made of wrought iron. Its total length is 58 cm. One member is the full length, its upper end being prolonged and terminating in a knob. About 2.5 cm. below the knob this member is slotted, and in the slot the upper end of the second member is hinged with a rivet. Below the hinge the members are semi-circularly bowed to keep the legs apart and to afford a hard grip. The bow is 8.5 cm. across. The metal here and in the legs is round in section of diameter 1 cm. The legs terminate in opposing flat oval expansions, 2.5 cm. wide x 1.8 cm. high x .2 - 3 cm. thick.

**Figure 5** Chalk drawing of the hearth in Murty Cullety's house in Kishkeam, Co. Cork, by Seán Keating in 1946. The fire fan bellows is partly submerged in the ground and the wheel to move the fan can be turned by a person sitting on the settle bed. NMI Collection. F1948.352.

**Figure 6** Index card in the Irish Folklife Division, NMI for a tongs from Derrycahill, Co. Roscommon.

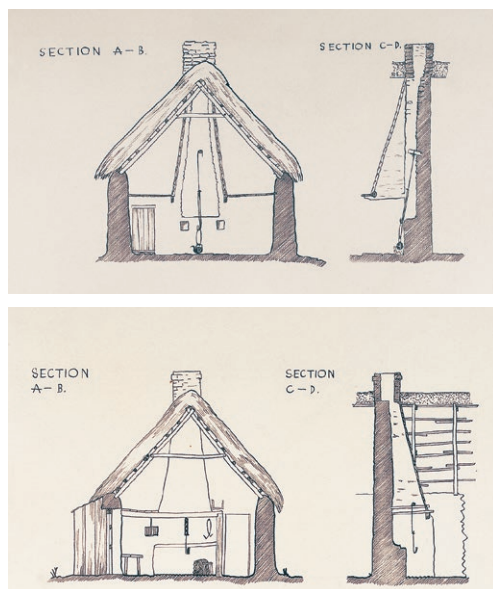


**Figure 7a** Architectural survey drawing by Albert Nilsinn, 1935, of the farm of Dan Shea, Cnoc an Chuilinn, Co. Cork. Section A-B features open fire, wicker canopy, within which, a wooden beam supported by two beams jutting out of the gable wall (from this the metal crook stick hangs). NMI Collection.

**Figure 7b** Soot-covered Crook stick, Feenaghmore, Co. Roscommon. NMI Collection. F1966.295.  
**Figure 8** Opposite top. Architectural survey drawing by Albert Nilsinn, 1935, of the farm of Dómhnall Ó Súilleabháin. Charraig, Dingle, Co. Kerry. Section C-D illustrates the one wooden peg inserted into the chimney (from this the metal crook stick hangs to support the kettle). NMI Collection.

**Figure 9** Opposite below. Architectural survey drawing by Albert Nilsinn, 1935, Mrs Jane Smyth's house, Carbury, Co. Kildare. Section C-D illustrates the two beams from the wall to the wicker canopy support beam on which a beam straddles to support the single metal crook. NMI Collection.

Each unit on the scale above represents 10 cm



superstition,<sup>7</sup> pedagogical use,<sup>8</sup> and riddles in the National Folklore Collection Schools' Collection.<sup>9</sup>

In some houses, there were purpose-built chimneys and built-in fireplaces. Many of these homes had a mantle-piece, often with an oilcloth covering. Others had wicker canopies extending out from the gable wall—these would have become fire-resistant over time (See Figures 7a, 8 and 9) and in poorer homes the smoke escaped via a smoke-hole broken through the roof thatch (See Figure 4).<sup>10</sup>

In order to hang vessels over the fire from a metal crook, stick, or chain, it was necessary to put a support mechanism in to the gable wall. This would allow the metal crook to be suspended a distance away from the wall, as illustrated in Figures 7a, 8, and 9—all of which show the internal arrangements for hanging vessels over the open fire. The peg or wooden crook-stick support illustrated in Figure 7b was found in many traditional houses in the 1930s whether there was a smokehole, a canopy or even a chimney. This crook-stick support was also known in Ireland as a 'chimney pole', or 'riddy pole'<sup>11</sup> and the wood used was said to have been holly.<sup>12</sup>

**7** 'the "maide briste" that is a tongs made of a (broken bent) sally...' Allenwood, Co. Kildare. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0775, Page 088. Belief in the power of iron for protection was strong and the tongs was especially believed to offer protection to babies and young children from being stolen by the fairies. See Caherlustraun, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools'

Collection, Volume 0022, Page 0536. **8** To learn to write the Alphabet "V"= Maide Briste', Srath Laoill, Co. Donegal. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 1043, Page 41. **9** Riddle. 'Long legs, crooked thighs, a small head and no eyes. (A tongs)'. Gortskehy, Co. Mayo. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0105, Page 185; For more on food within the National

Folklore Collection, see Jonny Dillon and Ailbe van der Heide, "Lashings and Leavings": Foodways as represented in the Archives of the Irish National Folklore Collections' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUt+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 21. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>

**10** Caherlistrane, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0022, Page 0259 **11** Olive Sharkey, *Old Days, Old Ways. An Illustrated Folk History of Ireland* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1985), 30. **12** E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 68.

### Open Hearth Cooking

For most of human history, the principal way to cook a meal was over an open fire. Throughout the world many of the same methods of cooking have survived since antiquity—roasting, boiling, grilling, frying, and baking are still how we currently cook in the main<sup>13</sup>—today, in Ireland, the only time we cook over flames is over a campfire, cooking over a gas flame, or over barbeque coals. In Irish traditional homes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, open hearth cooking was normal, until replaced by the range and the electric or gas cooker. From the end of the eighteenth century, hearth furniture such as pots, pans, and kettles were purchased, and these vessels—known as black cast-iron hollow ware—cast in foundries in England, were plentiful across Ireland. Much of the other hearth furniture was of twisted wrought iron and was made by the local blacksmith. People acquired the essential vessels and adapted them for many uses. Your level of wealth dictated the array of objects around the hearth.

Most of the food was boiled and this included meat. This involved the use of large three-legged pots for cooking potatoes, and smaller ones for boiling meat, vegetables, eggs, and porridge. Kettles were boiled hanging over the open fire and then kept warm on a trivet near the fire. For roasting, there is a history of using spits for open hearth roasting. It appears that the larger horizontal ones tended to be mainly used in the houses attached to large and prosperous farms, whereas smaller, dangle spits were cheaply made locally and used in dwellings further down the social scale. Gridirons were used for roasting directly over the fire, whereas toasting forks were used in front of the fire. Both of these were employed to roast or grill small pieces of meat. Pot ovens were used to cook pot roasts and to bake soda bread in. Frying pans were utilised for dishes such as bacon and boxty. In general, there was no custom of domestic oven baking in Ireland and baking was done on the hearthstone<sup>14</sup> in front of the fire, on the griddle, on harnen toasting stands or later, with the introduction of bread soda, in the pot oven (known as a ‘Bastable’).<sup>15</sup>

The embers (*gríosach*) of the fire were used for many aspects of cooking, usually to cover the lids of pots to ensure an even heat throughout the vessel. These were arranged on the lid with the tongs. They were also used for cooking food directly in.<sup>16</sup> ‘*Teallachán*’ is the name in Irish for a batch of potatoes which have been roasted in the embers of the fire,<sup>17</sup> (*‘Dórnán prátaí le róstadh sa ghríosach’*)<sup>18</sup>

**13** Although fire was involved in most methods, it was not always directly used for cooking. Fire was used for heating stones and using these to cook with, heating fuel for earth and stone ovens, creating ashes for cooking within the embers.

**14** A sample of folklore reminiscences of hearthstone cooking are found in reports

from Cashes, Co. Mayo. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0122, Page 107:

Ballagh, Co. Roscommon. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0258, Page 137: And Moynalty, Co. Meath. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0689, Page 281

**15** Bantry, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0281, Page 201. **16** Cogaula,

Co. Mayo. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0088, Page 485. See also Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dónall Ó Braonáin, ‘Seventy-two Words for Potato: Exploring Irish language resources for Food History’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 19.

**17** Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir*

*Gaeilge–Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1977). Doire Sheanaigh, Co. Donegal. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 1054, Page 103.

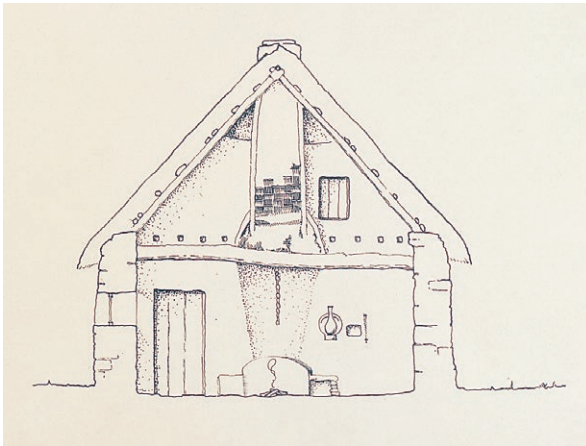
**18** smouldering embers = *gríosach dhearg*, <https://www.foclóir.ie/en/dictionary/ei/smoulder>

**19** Kevin Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago* (Cork: Mercier

and 'older people believed that they tasted best like that'.<sup>19</sup> There are also many references to bread and even porridge cooked directly on hot coals or on top of a cabbage leaf<sup>20</sup> in the embers.<sup>21</sup> Mushrooms were cooked by placing them 'on red-hot sods of turf beside the fire'<sup>22</sup> and in later times by placing them directly on top of the cooking range. There are also accounts of roasting clay-covered birds and fowl directly in the fire<sup>23</sup> and then breaking away the encrusted clay before eating.<sup>24</sup> The embers were often moved away from the main fire to form satellite fires on the hearth on which smaller pots or teapots were placed directly and other pots rested on trivets above.

### Chains, Cranes, Crooks and Pot Hangers

To cook over the open hearth, suspension devices were required. In Ireland, the chain (See Figure 10) was still in use in some houses until the 1950s with a larger loop at the top in the chimney to encircle the wooden stick in the chimney (See Figure 7b)—most chains were replaced with a long 'crook',<sup>25</sup> a vertical and always adjustable iron rack from which a pot could also be hung (See Figure 9 and 6 and 7a). The in-chimney crook stick, a simple horizontal bar, started to be made in iron.<sup>26</sup> The use of this iron bar across the chimney, perhaps illustrates the transition in some houses from the use of the crook stick to its successor, the iron crane.



Press, [1962]1969), 19.

**20** *Famine Times—Cooking of Indian meal cakes on and covered by cabbage leaves*. Ballymoe, Co. Galway. NFC, The Main Manuscript Collection, Volume 0463, Page 0142 **21** Caoimhín O Danachair, 'Bread', *Ulster Folklife* 4 (1958), 29–32, 30; Pollremon, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection,

Volume 0014, Page 335; See also Ballyglass South, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0016, Page 290. **22** Alice Taylor, *To School through the Fields* (Dingle: Brandon, 1988), 45. **23** 'Wild fowl were roasted in clay' Kilkenny, Co. Kilkenny. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0855, Page 337. **24** Danaher, *In Ireland*

*Long Ago*, 18–20. **25** <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/crochadh> **26** Seán Ó Cróinín agus Donncha Ó Cróinín, *Seanchas Amhlaoibh í Lúinse* (Baile Átha Cliath: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1980), 57.

**Figure 10** Menlough Village Survey, Co. Galway. Survey of cottage number 3, Baile Thios. Cross section showing crane for suspending pot over fire. 1945. Drawn by Patrick Tuite, UCD, July, 1945. NMI Collection.



The crane consisted of an upright revolving axle, which supported a projecting horizontal arm from which pots could be hung. The Irish for crane is '*crann tógála*',<sup>27</sup> 'lifting tree', and this evolved from the earliest examples being made of wood (See Figure 11). Bog oak was often used for these wooden cranes. Like the wooden crook stick, in time these became soot covered and fire resistant. These wooden cranes survived longest in use in rural Co. Kerry where some were still functioning in the 1930s, although the majority of cranes in use were smith-made of iron, as noted by a folklore contribution from Co. Galway.<sup>28</sup> The advantage of the crane over the crook stick was that it could hold several pot crooks, the adjustable vertical hanging racks for pots, at the same time. The crane suited larger households for this reason. The crook stick, which only supported the one-pot crook or suspension chain, and thus one pot or kettle at a time, was retained in single and double-occupancy households. By the end of the nineteenth century, the crane was in general use.

The other main advantage of the crane was that its upright swung on a pivot.<sup>29</sup> This allowed for the horizontal arm of the crane to swing outward, away from the fire, for the safe lifting on and off of pots. The crane was generally secured to one side of the hearth. When positioned in the left-hand side of the fire it was comfortably used by a right-handed person and when fixed to the right hand side, it was convenient for a left-handed person (See Figure 12). Iron cranes were made by the blacksmith based on the measurements of the hearth area in a house. Like much of the forged hearth furniture, each crane was unique and perfectly suited to the requirements of the household. All consisted of right-angled pieces of iron, but it was the measurements across and the support brace which usually differed, mostly dictated by the width of the fireplace (the axle for a pair of cart wheels often formed a standard upright and a long length of metal for the bands of the cartwheel, the horizontal). Sometimes the cranes incorporated elaborate pot-raising devices with hand levers or even cog-wheels. Although the cranes were purely functional objects, made to take heavy weights, they often had ornamentation, sometimes of the Crane bird that features in Irish mythological tales (see Figures 13 a & b).

The 'crook' was an adjustable pot-hanging device. The earliest versions of large crooks were barb-edged and changed little between the medieval period and the nineteenth century. Later versions also consisted of two pieces of iron. One piece was a thin rod with a large hook at one end and at the other, a smaller projection. This end projection fitted into one of a series of holes on the flat

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.foclóir.ie/en/dictionary/ei/crane>

<sup>28</sup> 'there is hardly a fine crane or a grate in any house in my village that was not made by him'. Windfield, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0046, Page 0028.

<sup>29</sup> 'What goes in and out, and

never goes out the door. ans = (A crane): A little Kerry

cow lying by the wall she eats all she gets and drinks none at all. ans = ('The fire)'. Riddles. Abbey, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0052, Page 0166.



**Figure 11** Wooden Crane.  
NMI Collection.

**Figure 12** Right-hand side crane in Vallymount, Co. Wicklow. T. H. Mason, SF518 © National Museum of Ireland.

metal bar, which made up the other part of the crook (See Figure 14). The hook of the first part was designed to hang around either the crook stick or the upper bar of the crane.

The second bar of the pot hanger/crook terminated in a hook from which the kettle or pot hung. These parts were sometimes known as the 'hook' and the 'rack'. These were smaller versions of the in-chimney hanging long metal crook (that allowed one vessel to hang over the fire) but with a narrow-hooked end, that fitted around the thin, top bar of the crane. These were variously called '*slat phota*',<sup>30</sup> pot crooks,<sup>31</sup> crane crooks, crook racks, ratchet hooks, pot racks, or pot hangers.<sup>32</sup> Many of these smaller adjustable pot hangers could be used at the same time to suspend vessels from the crane. The local blacksmith installed the crane and made the crooks with their different steps, holes, clutches, etc.<sup>33</sup> When these were not used, simple elongated 's'-shaped hooks were hung from the crane. Smaller versions of these were required when the chain was the method of suspension.

Pots and vessels for use over the open hearth, with the exception of the kettle, came with two small handles called 'ears', or 'lugs', on either side. These could accommodate a bail handle, which was the shape of an inverted 'u' and hooked into the ears of the pot. These handles were often purchased when buying a pot. A more popular alternative was a pair of pothooks, which were locally made by the blacksmith.<sup>34</sup> These consisted of two curved pieces of iron with hooks at one end, which attached on to the pot. At the other end, they were 'open eye' or ring shaped and fitted into each other. These were used to hang vessels either from the singular crook or from the smaller pot racks on the crane.

Pot-tilters and lifters were intriguing gadgets, which were designed and made by the blacksmith. They usually consisted of a handgrip and a stem with a hook or ring at the end. The ring or hook was slipped around the leg of a suspended vessel and pulled, thus tilting the pot. They were useful for straining potatoes, without removing the pot from over the fire.<sup>35</sup>

The chains, crooks, cranes, and pot racks were the suspension mechanisms from which the hooked cooking vessels hung and all were blacksmith-made of wrought iron.<sup>36</sup>

**30** *Slat croiche* = transverse bar of pot-rack. <https://www.teaglann.ie/en/fgb/slat>

**31** Riddle, 'Q. What is it that is full of holes and holds up water? A. A crook'. Glencar, Co. Leitrim. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0193, Page 213.

**32** *Pisreoga*, 'The pot hanger that is hung up over the fire, they do not like to see children meddling with

it, as they say the fairies would be after them'. Caherlustraun, Co. Galway.

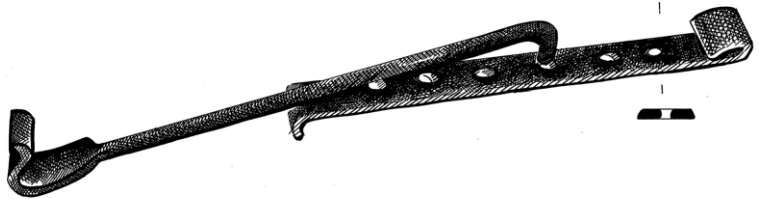
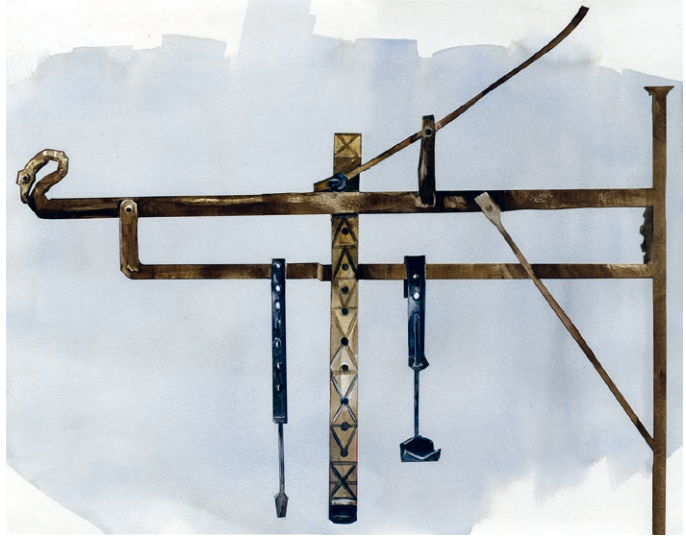
**33** Cortober, Co. Roscommon. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0022, Page 0536.

**34** Cortober, Co. Roscommon. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0237, Page 067.

**35** 'There was a smith long-ago living on the Island... He also made pot hangers, thongs, cranes and many other articles'. Rerrin, Bere

Island, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0277, Page 166. **36** Hooked ones could be used to remove hot pot lids or sometimes used in pairs, to lift vessels off the fire. They were made with varying length stems and exceptionally long ones were made in Ulster. These range from c. 35cm to a metre in length and were known as 'cleeks'.

**36** Sometimes these pieces of domestic equipment were decorated. They were usually custom-made to suit the measurements of the individual hearths and were built to last several lifetimes.



**Figures 13a & b**

Watercolour of crane with ornamentation and detail showing decorated bird head terminal. Kilmalley, Co. Clare. NMI Collection.

**Figure 14** Adjustable pot hook/crook/hanger for use on crane or chain. NMI Collection. F1995.220.

### Cooking Pots

Skillets were equivalent to the flat-sided modern saucepan but with three legs. Sheet brass or bell metal, an alloy of copper and tin, was used to make these and later, cast iron. For boiling smaller quantities, skillets and small round-bellied posnets were used for many centuries. When foundries started to make the common three-legged pots with round bellies, the smallest of these were known in Ireland as ‘skillets’ although they had more in common with the posnets.<sup>37</sup>

The cast-iron three-legged pots used here were all made in Britain (See Figure 15). They came in a number of sizes ranging in capacity from half a gallon to sixty gallons in 1880, and by 1930, a third of a gallon to eighty gallons. Irish consumers purchased pots which ranged in capacity from half a gallon to twenty-two gallons. These pots were usually called ‘Common Three Legged Pots’ in many of the hardware catalogues, and in Ireland only pots with short legs were used (c. 4cm in length).<sup>38</sup> The pots are generally encircled by raised ribs in relief, usually four, and often also bear the inscription of their capacity, also in relief e.g., ‘6 GALL’. The pots were usually purchased with plain lids and without the bail handles.<sup>39</sup> They had small handles near the rim to allow for suspension and these were commonly referred to as ears, ‘*cluas nó cuincín an phota*’,<sup>40</sup> ‘ear or little corner of the pot’, or lugs.<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 15** Above. Three-legged pot. NMI Collection. F1970.274.

**Figure 16** Overleaf. Drawing of a three-legged pot with a skib of potatoes on top. NMI Collection.

**37** In Britain, the foundry-made skillet pans were more like their predecessors, earlier medieval skillets.

Sheet metal cauldrons and cookware were made until the mid-eighteenth century.

**38** Also known as ‘Negro Pots’ in some catalogues. There seems to be no surviving examples of the ‘Long Legged Pot’ or ‘Kafir Pot’ (with legs c. 10cm in length).

**39** Manufactured hanging handles, such as bail handles, were usually not purchased as pairs of pot hangers

and could be purchased locally from the blacksmith.

Decorated cast-iron lids were not common. **40** Tomás Ó Máille, *An Béal Beo* (Baile Átha Cliath: Comhlucht Oideachais na hÉireann, 1936), 15.

**41** ‘Lug’, noun, Scottish and N. English or informal, a person’s ear. A projection on an object by which it may be carried or fixed in place. *New Oxford English Dictionary of English*; ‘What has two ears and cannot hear? Answer: A pot’. Ballyroe, Co. Galway, NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0014,

Page 032. **42** ‘*Tóin dubh ag an tulán ar an bpota*’, An Sáilín, Co. Mayo. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0134, Page 015. *Súid é shios sa gclúidé agus dhá chéad súil air. Freagra: Pota anbhruithe*. Fearann an Choirce, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0001, Page 147. **43** Maolmhaadhóg Ó Ruairc, *Díolaim d’Abairtí Dúchasacha* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 1996), 13. **44** Potshot, noun, origin mid 19<sup>th</sup> c: originally a shot at an animal intended for a pot. *New Oxford English*

The black cooking pots are referred to in the expressions, ‘*Casadh an chorcaín leis an chiteal*’<sup>42</sup> meaning ‘the pot calling the kettle black’.<sup>43</sup> The expression ‘pot-luck’ is used to describe a person’s luck as to what may be in the pot cooking for the meal, and ‘pot-shot’ describes a shot taken at game merely for the purpose of filling the pot for a meal.<sup>44</sup> The fire is often said to be the heart of the home and interestingly, other parts of the human body are associated with the description of the cookware. Most of the utensils have legs, feet, arms, ears and in the case of the cooking pots, a round belly, from which the expression, ‘pot-bellied’ is derived.<sup>45</sup>

This human connection continues in popular beliefs such as, for example, when a pot was broken, it was believed that ‘you broke its spirit’, and it was remarked during Famine years that victims ‘clung to the pot when all else was gone’.<sup>46</sup> When there was thunder and lightning, people believed that the chimney might be hit and hung an iron pot of water over the fire for protection.<sup>47</sup>

Mashed potato was often called ‘poundy’. The potatoes were pounded<sup>48</sup> in the pot with a wooden beetle—often family members or sometimes just the children took turns. Pounding potatoes in a round-bottomed pot on a clay floor<sup>49</sup> would create crater-like depressions, possibly the original ‘pot-holes’ in the kitchen floor.<sup>50</sup> The largest of the three-legged pots was most often used for boiling left-overs for pig food.<sup>51</sup> Other large pots were used for washing clothes. A medium sized, three-legged pot was always used for boiling potatoes. A small three-legged pot, known as a skillet, was used to cook vegetables and porridge<sup>52</sup> overnight in the gentle heat of the fire’.<sup>53</sup>

In Castleplunket, Co. Roscommon, the skillet pot was principally used for boiling eggs and cooking porridge.<sup>54</sup> The skillet had other uses: in Co. Kerry, often used in place of a kettle<sup>55</sup> and in Co. Meath, in the process of making candles.<sup>56</sup> In Blacklion, Co. Cavan, the ‘Big pot was called “a pot”, whereas the small round metal pot was called ‘a skillet’. In the hardware trade, a salesman stated that ‘Skillet’ was the name used for three-legged pots, which ranged in capacity from ½ a gallon to 8 gallons, larger than this were officially called boilers, but were generally just known as ‘pots’.<sup>57</sup>

*Dictionary of English*, in French it is ‘*Courir la fortune du pot*’.

**45** ‘*Tomhaiseanna. Fear beag dubh agus bolg mór, trí cosa an-airde is a bhéal ar ár.*

*Freagra: Pota*. Fearann an Choirce, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0001, Page 147. **46** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 72–73.

**47** ‘It was said that the pot of water would save the house’, Ó Cróinín agus Ó Cróinín, *Seanchas Amhlaoihbh í Lúinse*, 60. **48** For Poundies, see. Urbalreagh, Co. Donegal. NFC, The Schools’ Collection,

Volume 1124, Page 215. For Colcannon, see. Carrigallen, Co. Leitrim. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0228, Page 047a. **49** Predominance of clay kitchen floors, e.g., Lisduff, Co. Mayo. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0119, Page 330. **50** Regina Sexton, *A Little History of Irish Food* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 76–77. **51** Olive Sharkey noted that her grandmother had three cooking pots, ‘a large one in which the pigs’ grub was boiled every night, a

smaller one used exclusively for boiling the potatoes, and a small one, called a skillet, which she used for boiling the porridge and sometimes for the cabbage or other vegetables’, Sharkey, *Old Days, Old Ways*, 58. **52** Personal Communication: 29/8/99. Mrs. Katty Hanlon of Ballymitty, Co. Wexford, recalled that the ‘big pot’ was used to cook potatoes and animal food, and the skillet was used to boil meat and vegetables and to cook the porridge overnight. **53** Alice Taylor

confirmed the same, recalling the porridge in the skillet cooking overnight in the gentle heat by the fire’, Alice Taylor, *Quench The Lamp* (New York; Dingle: St. Martin’s Press; Brandon, 1990), 61–2.

**54** Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, NMI, for object F1951:80. **55** Tuosist, Co. Kerry. NFC, The Main Manuscript Collection, Volume 30, Page 2. **56** Moynalty, Co. Meath. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0706, Page 237. **57** Personal Communication: Charlie Harris, ex J.C.

The three-legged pot is most often associated with cooking potatoes.<sup>58</sup> Although often called ‘the big pot’, it was in fact the medium-sized pot according to trade catalogues, and used for boiling potatoes for eating plain or incorporated into recipes.<sup>59</sup> The popular song verse celebrating colcannon describes it as being cooked in the skillet pot, which does not appear to have been usual:

Did you ever eat colcannon  
When it was made with yellow cream...  
Ah God be the happy days  
When troubles we had not  
And our mothers made colcannon  
In the little skillet pot<sup>60</sup>

There are some references to the use of cooking pots as furniture (See Figure 16). Referring to poor ‘cabins’ between Blarney and Millstreet, Co. Cork, Rev. James Hall wrote in 1813 that the large pot which was used for boiling potatoes ‘is not infrequently turned mouth downward, and used as a seat about the fire’.<sup>61</sup> The potato pot being used as a support for a table board and the potato skib being put on the pot to form a table, were described as familiar aspects of life in Ireland.<sup>62</sup> Kevin Danaher described the use of tables in cabins and smaller households in Ireland as relatively recent in origin, that many houses lacked one and ‘at mealtimes sat around the fire and ate from a basket set on top of a three legged iron pot’.<sup>63</sup>



**Figure 17** Opposite top right. ‘Diamond Club’ trade mark of Matthew Swain & Co., Railway Foundry, Manchester.

**Figure 18** Above. Cast Iron flat-bottomed pot with bale handle. NMI Collection.

Parkes of the Coombe (Hardware Agent), Dublin.

**58** Bríd Mahon describes the first crop of new potatoes as a cause for celebration and when a basket of these was dug the ‘three-legged pot was filled and the potatoes boiled on the open fire’, Bríd Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey—The*

*Story of Traditional Irish Food and Drink* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press [1991], 1998), 138.

**59** Such as Champ which was also known as Thump, Poundies and Bruisy due to the pounding or thumping involved in mashing the potatoes. **60** ‘Colcannon’. Traditional arrangement by

the Black family, from the original by Shaun O’Nolan (1872–1945). **61** Rev. James Hall, *A Tour through Ireland*, Vol. 1 (London: printed for R.P. Moore, 1913), 199–200. **62** Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork, Cork University Press,

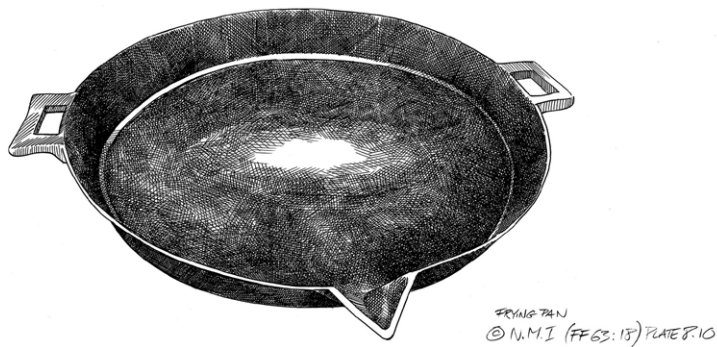
The use of the three-legged pot prevailed in Ireland, and was still used in some homes up until the 1960s. By then they were no longer made by foundries and could not be obtained by Irish suppliers. The last manufacturer to supply Ireland was Matthew Swain & Co. Manchester who had a distinctive diamond and clubs mark (See Figure 17).



Cast-iron saucepans and lidded flat-based pots were used in Ireland from the 1920s onwards. They first complemented the existing three-legged pots and later replaced them (See Figure 18). From the 1940s onwards, aluminium pots and pans<sup>64</sup> became very popular and are still in use today. In the 1960s and 1970s sets of these saucepans with red or black Bakelite handles were a much sought-after wedding gift. There is a continuance of using cast-iron pots today with the popularity of the enameled, cast iron Le Creuset brand, with many other cheaper versions available in supermarkets.

### Frying Pans

In the past two hundred years, frying pans have changed very little. Short-handled frying pans with either shallow or deep, flaring sides began to be cast in iron by the foundries from the early nineteenth century,<sup>65</sup> either round or oval in shape, although round was the most popular in Ireland, and usually had a pouring lip (See Figure 19). There were some with a single cast-iron handle designed for use on top of a range or on a trivet over an open fire. Those which were intended to be suspended above the fire, had either a bow handle with a swivel hoop riveted to the base, or two handles, one on each side, to take a pair of pothooks.



**Figure 19** Frying pan repaired by blacksmith (removal of broken long handle and the addition of two handles). Dingle, Co. Kerry. NMI Collection. F1968.237.

2020), 369–374. **63** Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, 31–2. **64** Castle Brand was the trade name of the Irish Aluminium Company, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, which operated from 1934–1984. **65** Peter Brears, *The Dairy Catalogue* (York: Castle Museum, 1979), 7.



The frying pan was designed to withstand heat which was far in excess of that required to boil water. Cast iron can stand this usage better than other metals due to 'its capacity to withstand violent distortion when subjected to heat'.<sup>66</sup> The interiors of cast-iron frying pans were tinned or enamelled from the 1920s onwards, to protect food from contamination. Frying was a simple and economical method of cooking which was suitable for poorer households, as it required little fuel and could also be used when the fire was too low for either boiling or roasting.<sup>67</sup>

The Irish for frying pan is '*friochtán*'<sup>68</sup> and it was sometimes known as a 'panny'.<sup>69</sup> A common expression, still used today, to describe when circumstances go from bad to worse, is to 'jump from the frying pan into the fire'.<sup>70</sup> Part of the song sung by the Wren boys as they did their rounds on St Stephen's Day, includes mention of the frying pan, 'So up with the kettle and down with the pan'.<sup>71</sup> The frying pan was used for cooking meat but it was also used for cooking potato pancakes and potato bread, 'boxty', and features in popular sayings about the dish:

Two rounds of boxty baked on the pan,  
Each one came in got a farl in her han',  
Butter on one side, gravy on the other,  
Sure them that made boxty were better than my mother.<sup>72</sup>

The griddle pan was popular for baking bread, instead of the griddle<sup>73</sup> and it was a design of frying pan known as a 'baking pan'. It had two suspension 'ears'<sup>74</sup> or handles, and was used in Ireland before the frying pans with single handles. Except for the lack of suspension handles, frying pans today are similar in shape to those produced in foundries from 1900 onwards. Non-stick pans, griddle pans and cast-iron pans are still very popular today.<sup>75</sup>

### Kettles and Teapots

In many rural homes in Ireland, kettles were not common until the late nineteenth century. Around the time of the Famine there were few kettles in use and a skillet was often used in place of a kettle: '*Chuir sé síos scilléad chun té a dhéanamh*'.<sup>76</sup> An agricultural labourer from Co. Cork recalled that in the late

**66** A. J. Ketley (ed.), *Textbook of Ironmongery and Hardware* (Birmingham: National Institute of Hardware, 1949), 71.  
**67** David Eveleigh, *Old Cooking Utensils*, Shire Album No.177 (Aylesbury: Shire Publications, 1986), 20.  
**68** Ó Máille, *An Béal Beo*, 158. **69** Sharkey, *Old Days, Old Ways*, 28–30.  
**70** Meenbane, Co. Donegal.

NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 1096, Page 418.  
**71** Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland—Irish Calendar Customs* (Cork; Dublin: Mercier Press, 1972), 246.  
**72** <https://oakden.co.uk/boxty-on-the-griddle/>. **73** Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'Bread in Ireland' in Alexander Fenton and Trefor M. Owen (eds), *Food in perspective: Proceedings of the Third International*

*Conference on Ethnological Food Research*, Cardiff, Wales 1977 (Edinburgh: J. Donald Publishers, 1981), 57–67, 63.  
**74** Templenacarriga South, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0387, Page 165. **75** With the current popularity of induction hobs working on magnetism, cast-iron pans work perfectly.  
**76** Tousist, Co. Kerry. NFC, The Main Manuscript

Collection, Volume 0030, Page 2. **77** Kilworth, Co. Cork. NFC, The Main Manuscript Collection, Volume 0107, Page 448. **78** Pádraig Ó Tuathail, 'Folk tales from Carlow and West Wicklow', *Béaloides* 7: 1 (1937), 46–94, 65–66. Also, Kilkerrin, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0080, Page 225.  
**79** Taylor, *Quench the Lamp*, 61.  
**80** Retired blacksmith Willie

1880s, 'there were only three kettles in the town of Araglen'.<sup>77</sup> The kettles that were used in Irish homes were of cast iron, usually with a domed lid with a knob on top, an S-curved spout and a hoop-shaped handle (See Figure 20).

Again, referring to the Wren Boys song, 'So up with the kettle and down with the pan', the mention of the kettle clearly illustrates its use, hanging above the fire for boiling water. At the end of telling a folktale sometimes the narrator used a saying, 'So put down the kettle and make tay, And if they don't live happy, that I may'.<sup>78</sup> Kettles were often inconvenient to use, as they were large and very heavy, even without water in them. They were usually covered in soot and are remembered as always being on the boil, sometimes creating a whistling sound.<sup>79</sup> The black kettles often got a build-up of lime scale in the base and the spout, and a Mayo informant remembered seeing many large kettles pouring only a dribble of water.<sup>80</sup>

Copper kettles became popular when ranges started to be used but were not as popular as the black kettle.<sup>81</sup> Aluminium kettles replaced the cast iron versions (prior to electric kettles being embraced), but these needed more polishing than the black kettle and were very slow to boil.<sup>82</sup> Along with clothes irons, electric kettles were popular as wedding presents with couples often being gifted two or three of each.<sup>83</sup>



Roche's wife Anna Maria used to boil bread soda (bicarbonate of soda) in her kettle as a remedy for this.

**81** Once Anna Maria had a copper kettle for the range but only used it a few times, as the tea tasted dreadful. She remembered people always said that 'there was nicer tea out of a black kettle'. She recalled that the black kettle did not require as much

polishing as her present stainless steel one (Personal Communication with author).

**82** Early electric kettles were inefficient and took twenty minutes to boil. Juliana Adelman, 'The History of the Kettle', 10 Aug. 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/the-history-of-the-kettle-1.3578351> **83** Clones, Co. Monaghan, February 2017. National Museum of

Ireland website—Kitchen Power online -Memories of Rural Electrification; Also Latnamard, Co. Monaghan. NCF, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0948, Page 351

**Figure 20** Above left. Cast-iron kettle. NMI Collection.

**Figure 21** Above right. Blue enamel teapot. NMI Collection.

Teapots were first made of pewter<sup>84</sup> and other expensive metals and were only found in larger farmhouses. Lidded tin canisters made by travelling tinsmiths<sup>85</sup> were most commonly used for brewing tea up to the 1920s. After this, foundry made, black cast-iron teapots and ones made of enamel (See Figure 21) became popular. Aluminium tea pots (Castle Brand) were used after 1940 and stayed in use through to the 1990s. It was said that the can or teapot was seldom out of the *griosach* or ashes, and tea might be brewed up to ten times a day.<sup>86</sup> 'It wasn't considered worth drinking unless it was so strong you could dance a mouse on it'.<sup>87</sup>

### Trivets, Brands and Fire Bar Extensions

The expression, 'as right as a trivet' was used when someone was thoroughly and perfectly right, with reference to the trivet always standing firm on its three feet.<sup>88</sup> Trivets are three-legged stands or supports, which can tolerate intense heat and are usually used for placing cooking vessels on. They were locally-made by blacksmiths (See Figure 22) and were usually triangular or 'y' shaped. They were made from three bars welded together at their ends and turned down to form three legs. These legs often turned out at the ends to form feet. Iron bars or twisted iron wire were used for these feet. In some counties within the Northern half of Ireland, a trivet was often called a 'crow'<sup>89</sup> and in other places, it was called a 'tripod' although this more normally is the word for a three-legged vessel, such as a pot or pot-oven.



**84** Rathdowney, Co. Laois. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0828, Page 102.

**85** 'About 60 years or so ago, John Ahearne, the Knight of the Teapot, visited this place regularly, about once a year'. Meelick, Co. Clare. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0598, Page 116.

**86** 'The tea used to be drawn in a saucepan near the fire and then poured into the teapot'. Moyny Lower, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0303, Page 052.

**87** Department of Irish Folklore, UCD, Questionnaire (Drinks). **88** *New Oxford English Dictionary of English*.

**89** F1960:159, 'Crow', Mullaghfad, Co. Fermanagh, NMI Collection; F1960:158, 'Crow', Lannat, Co. Monaghan, NMI Collection. **90** The griddle stand is called a brand iron. Levally, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0018, Page 267; Cloughjordan, Co.

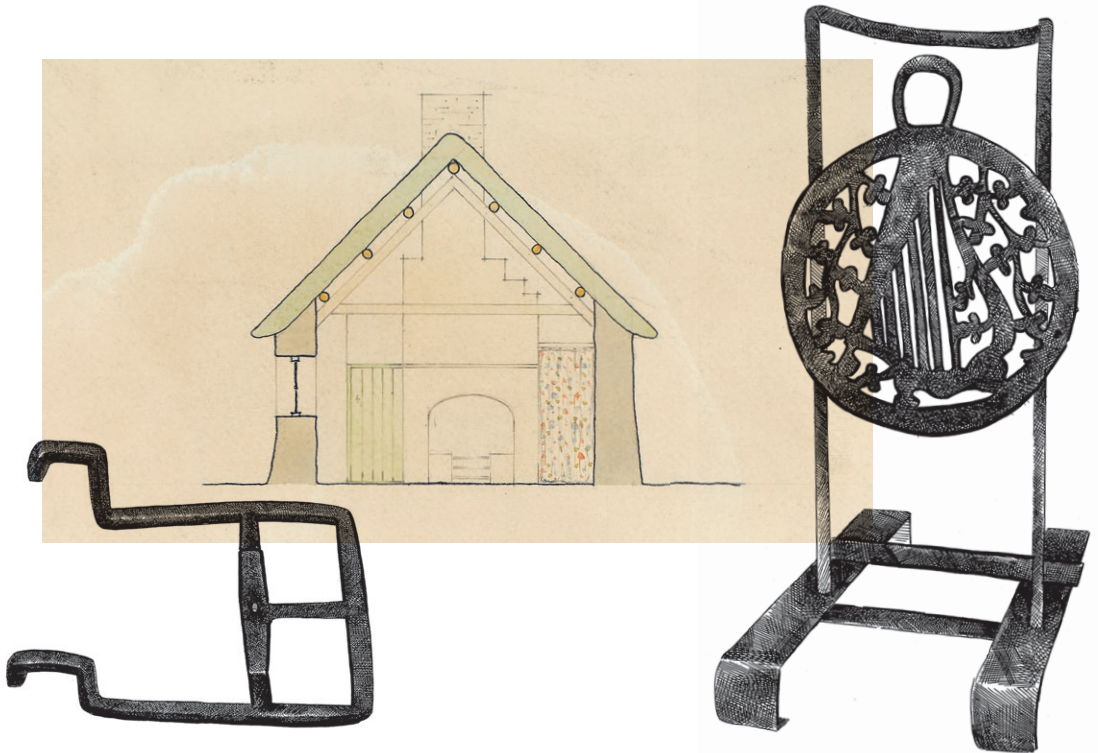
**Figure 22** Above left. Blacksmith-made support for a griddle. NMI Collection.

**Figure 23** Centre. Brand, Coolteige, Co. Roscommon. NMI Collection.

**Figure 24** Right. Horseshoe shaped trivet for a skillet or teapot. NMI Collection.

Heavier trivets, which were circular, are usually known as ‘brands’ or ‘brand irons’ and were designed specifically to support pot ovens and griddles (See Figure 23).<sup>90</sup> Blacksmiths occasionally used horseshoes to make the top of trivets using either one or three shoes (See Figure 24). These triangular and circular trivets were used to support cooking vessels used in a floor level hearth. They supported griddles for bread and cakes,<sup>91</sup> frying pans for boxty, teapots and skillets.

For the raised hearth (See Figure 25), fire bar extensions were used. These consisted of a small shelf to support a pot or kettle with projecting hooks, which allowed it to attach on to one of the fire bars. These were usually smith-made and often had decorative features (See Figures 26 and 27). Foundry-made fire bar extensions were also produced for use on kitchen ranges. In the 1950s, trivets and brands were still being used in many parts of Ireland and later were donated to the Irish Folklife Collection.



Tipperary. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0533, Page 140. <sup>91</sup> 'These cakes were baked in a grid-iron placed on a tripod about nine inches over the fire'. Clashmore, Co. Waterford. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0640, Page 404.

**Figure 25** Raised fire with fire bars. NMI Collection. F2006.208.

**Figure 26** Fire bar Extension. NMI Collection.

**Figure 27** Fire bar Extension. NMI Collection.

### Spits and Dangle Spits

A spit is a slender, sharp-pointed rod of metal used for thrusting through meat, which is to be roasted at an open hearth. Wooden spits (of rowan) are mentioned in the twelfth century Irish text, '*Duanaire Finn*'.<sup>92</sup> The Wren Boys' rhyme previously referred to included mention of the use of spits: 'On Christmas Day I turned the spit; I burned my finger, I feel it yet'.<sup>93</sup>

The spits were long and flat like a narrow sword and usually had a spearhead shaped tip. The handle was often cranked to the spit by a semi-circular shaped band and the area distinguishing the handle from the body of the spit was circular in section for ease of movement (See Figure 28). The later spits were made of wrought iron and some of those surviving have decorated handles. Large joints of meat were often secured to the spit using skewers, similar to those available today (See Figure 29). The cooking of large pieces of meat on spits was unusual and they were seldom in use, but often stored on a spit dresser (See Figure 30). The upper part of this type of dresser had slots on either side and these held one or two spits horizontally. The spits in turn secured the large meat platters in a standing position on a shelf behind them. Spits were a status symbol and like the large meat platters in willow pattern, they were on display to invite attention.

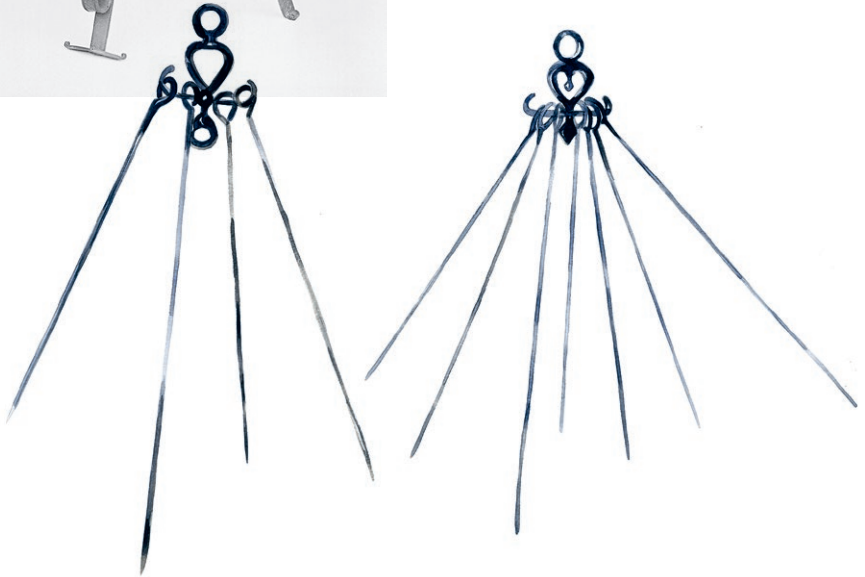
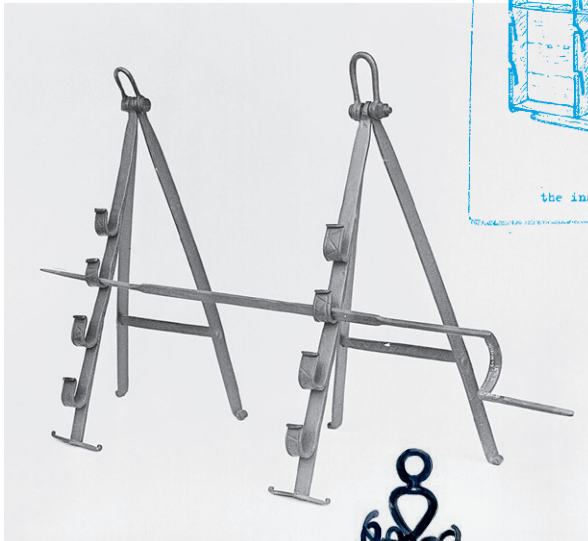
When firedogs were no longer needed due to the adoption of coal, pairs of spit holding stands were made to support the spits in front of the fire for open-hearth roasting (See Figures 31 a and b). These were used from the sixteenth century and perhaps earlier. They were made of wrought iron and often included ornamentation. The stands consisted of two legs, which could be opened for use and closed when stored hanging from a hook at the joining hinge. The leg that faced away from the fire was the one that tended to be decorated, and the one facing the fire had a series of hooks at different heights. These hooks supported the spit and allowed for varying the distance between the meat and the fire during the roasting procedure. Open-fire roasting initially seared the meat and then moved it to hooks farther away for continued gradual cooking without burning. These spit holders, sometimes known as spit dogs, declined in use in the early part of the nineteenth century. Some pairs of spit holders in the Museum collection were extensions that connected on to the fire bar of a raised grate (See Figure 32). In some counties in the North, their function appears to have been replaced by decorative bread irons. Many of the oatcake toasters from Co. Longford have spit stands on their back support leg.

<sup>92</sup> Eoin Mac Neill, *Duanaire Finn: The book of the Lays of Fionn*. Part I (London: published for the Irish Texts Society, 1908), 129. <sup>93</sup> Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, 246.

**Figure 28** Opposite middle. Roasting spit. Dunlavin, Co. Wicklow. NMI Collection. LF1931.23.

**Figure 29** Opposite, bottom. Skewers. NMI Collection.

**Figure 30** Opposite top. Index card for Spit Dresser. Ardnamoher, Co. Limerick. NMI Collection. F1955.66.



Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm

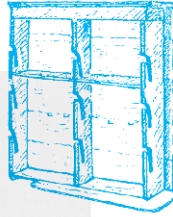
**Spit Dresser**

Reg.No.F1955:66

Id :	Ardnamoher
Par :	Galbally
Bar :	Coshlea
Co :	Liseric
U.S.:	49,50

**Spit Dresser:** A small shallow dresser for hanging on wall or standing on some other article of furniture. It is rather patched. It consists of three upright boards which support a top and 2 shelves. The height is 110 cm., the width 120 cm. and 11 cm. deep from front to back. The shelves are 37 cm. apart. The lowest shelf is 124 cm. long and 18 cm. wide. The front edge of each of the vertical boards is provided with three sloping slots which held spits arranged horizontally across the front of the dresser. Three spits could be thus accommodated. Each slot is 13 cm. long and 3.2 cm. wide. The back of the dresser is formed of boards nailed horizontally in place. The outside and the shelves are painted brown and the back of the inside cream or white.

P.T.O.





**Figures 31a and b**  
Examples of blacksmith-  
made spit holders. NMI  
Collection.

Sometimes a pan was placed on the floor under the spit, to collect the juices, which fell from the meat. These were called dripping pans and were specially made for this purpose (See Figure 33). These would have been expensive items to purchase and consequentially the few that survive are from larger farmhouses. An example from Abbeyleix, Co. Laois, was made from tin and had a receptacle in the centre, which was perforated with holes so that no pieces of meat or ashes would get into the grease collected.

Spits almost disappeared from use throughout the nineteenth century and although older people in the 1930s remembered their use,<sup>94</sup> it is generally only the spit dressers which served as physical reminders of roasting in this way. In 1955, Mr. Michael Moore of Morette, Co. Laois was interviewed by the National Museum. He remembered a wooden spit rack on the wall above the fireplace of his family home and described it as having slanting slots in which the spit rested.<sup>95</sup> By the 1960s, there were very few people who could remember the spit in use.<sup>96</sup>

Clockwork bottle jacks (see Figure 34), also known as 'hasteners',<sup>97</sup> replaced the spit in larger farmhouses. Like the spits and holders, these were mainly found in the east of Ireland in households with large farms.<sup>98</sup> The meat was hooked onto the end of this device and was suspended above the fire. Winding a key in the clockwork bottle jack caused a weight inside to revolve part of the jack and this in turn revolved the meat.

Roasting large joints of meat was not common in rural households where the meat was more often boiled. Smaller pieces of meat were commonly roasted by means of toasting forks and gridirons. A simple form of vertical spit, the dangle spit (See Figure 35), was also used for broiling small pieces of meat and fish. These were locally made and consisted of barbed hooks or prongs extending from a stem with a suspension ring at the top, which could either be hooked on to a pot hanger or hung by heavy cord from the mantle shelf above the fire. Some of these had adjustable settings to allow the meat to be raised or lowered. In many places, they were mainly used for roasting herrings. When meat was not boiled in a pot or broiled on a gridiron or toasting fork, the pot oven was the common means of pot-roasting, in almost all rural houses, up to the decline of the open hearth.

<sup>94</sup> Co. Meath. NFC., Main Manuscript Collection, Volume 815, Page 190.

<sup>95</sup> F1958:15, Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland.

<sup>96</sup> Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, 18–20. <sup>97</sup> Traditionally, a hastener was a stand or reflector used for confining the heat of the fire to meat while roasting before it, thus hastening the cooking process. <sup>98</sup> Eveleigh, *Old Cooking Utensils*, 24.



Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
5 cm

**Figure 32** Top. Spit holder for raised fires to attach in a pair to the fire bars. NMI Collection.

**Figure 33** Middle. Tin dripping tray. Abbyleix, Co. Laois. NMI Collection.

**Figure 34** Bottom. Clockwork bottle jack. NMI Collection.



### Toasting Forks

Large hand-held forks were the simplest way of open-fire roasting and toasting. They were used for small pieces of meat, fish, and bread. They were called either 'flesh forks', 'meat forks' or 'toasting forks'. As 'flesh forks', they are mentioned in a ninth century tale '*Scéla Mucce meic Dathó*'.<sup>99</sup> Smith-made, usually of wrought iron, and later steel, they were most often triple pronged. These were popular in various forms throughout Europe and were certainly in use in all counties of Ireland during the nineteenth century. Latterly they were used for taking meat and cabbage out of cooking pots.<sup>100</sup>

The average length of the forks is 60cm, the middle of the three prongs often bifurcating into two parts which curve to form a heart shape (See Figure 36). The handles tend to expand in an elongated lozenge shape and this area is often decorated. The end of the handle always has a suspension mechanism, frequently a perforated hole, in the shape of a heart or a loop or hook. There is evidence of their use in every county in Ireland.<sup>101</sup>

Decoration seen on Irish forks involves the use of heart motifs, twisted bar ornamentation and irregular shaping of the metal. Punch or file-incised lines and shallow grooved nicks frequently appear etched onto the handle, sometimes forming a lattice design. Strips of copper wire and strips of brass were used to embellish the handle of a toasting fork from Ashbourne, Co. Meath (See Figure 37).<sup>102</sup> The forks fell into disuse when the open-hearth fire was no longer used for cooking and their lack of purpose caused them to be abandoned.



**Figure 35** Adjustable dangle spit. NMI Collection.

**99** Rudolf Thurneysen, *Scéla Mucce meic Dathó* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1935), 2.

**100** F1961:52, Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland.

**101** F1961:5, Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland.

**102** F1944:280, Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland.



**Figure 36** Three decorated toasting forks. NMI Collection.



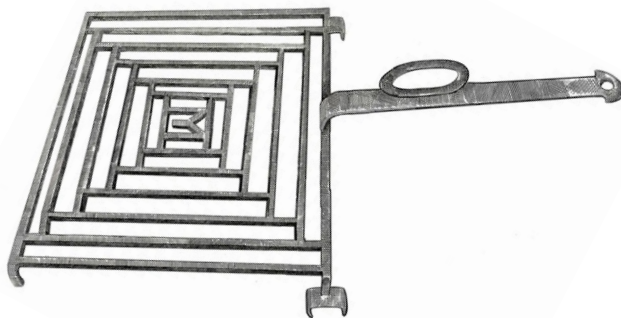
**Figure 37** Three decorated toasting forks. NMI Collection.

### Gridirons

A gridiron was a framework of ten to fourteen parallel metal bars, which was used for broiling meat or fish over the fire. It was similar to modern day grilling and very popular in Ireland.

In the Irish folktale about Túain maic Cairill, Túan recalls his transmigration through the ages. He was changed into a salmon and was caught by the ‘fisherman of Cairill, the king of that land’, who took him to the king’s wife, who liked fish. Túan remembered that ‘the man put me on a gridiron and roasted me. And the queen desired me and ate me by herself’.<sup>103</sup> In Dublin in 1322–3 permission was sought from the Mayor, to levy customs of a farthing on ‘every dozen of gridirons’ towards the paving of the city.<sup>104</sup>

In contrast to toasting forks, which used the radiant heat from the front of the fire, the gridirons were held directly over the fire. The type most used has its origins in medieval times.<sup>105</sup> These consisted of a square or rectangular framework of parallel bars (c. 35cm square) with short legs at each corner and a single handle, long enough to be held in place over the fire. The handles had a suspension mechanism, usually a pierced hole, for hanging the gridiron on a wall when not in use (See Figure 38). The handles often start at a height horizontal with the grid but then crank upwards to almost double that height as it tapers outward. This ensures that when in use at floor level, it was a high enough distance from the floor, for comfort of use, and some came with a supplementary looped lifting handle.



**103** Kuno Meyer and Alfred Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran, son of Febal to the land of the living: the happy otherworld*, Vol. II, Appendix A (London: David Nutt, 1895), 300. **104** John T. Gilbert, *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin*, vols I–XV, Vol.1 (Dublin: Dollard, 1889–1911), 13. **105** Peter Brears, *The Kitchen Catalogue* (York: Castle Museum, 1979), 7.

**Figure 38** Gridiron with ‘M’ initial. NMI Collection.

The use of raised grates in many areas meant that gridirons were designed with the back legs splayed into a 'v' shape so that they could potentially rest or hook on to the top fire bar (See Figure 39). It was important that the gridiron was kept slanting outwards so that as little fat as possible fell into the fire. Later ones were modified with grooved bars to channel the juices of the meat into a long reservoir, to which a collecting receptacle could be attached (See Figure 40a).

The gridirons were made by local blacksmiths and sometimes had decorative designs on the handle or had heart motifs or letters incorporated into the grid. Rotary gridirons (Figure 40b) were not as common as square ones but many examples are found in Ireland. These again were smith-made and consisted of a circular grid mounted on a long handle by a rivet, which allowed the grid to be spun around over the fire.

The popularity of smith-made gridirons prompted the foundries to produce their own models, including saucer-shaped circular gridirons with pouring spout and grease receptacles. The most popular cast gridiron produced was that made at the Kendrick foundry, in West Bromwich. Around 1850 they started the production of cast-iron enamelled gridirons with fan-shaped concave grid bars and a holder for collecting fat and juices. The forge-made gridirons would have been locally made and cheaper to purchase for most households.

Gridirons were used for roasting small pieces of meat but are mainly associated in Ireland with the cooking of fish, especially herrings. Their use for this purpose is outlined in Mr and Mrs Hall's journey through Galway in 1843:



**Figure 39** Gridiron with 'v' shaped back legs to rest on fire bars. NMI Collection.

**Figure 40a** Smith-made gridiron with channel for grease collection. NMI Collection.



**Figure 40b** Selection of Cooking equipment. NMI Collection. Upper left: rotary gridiron, F1931.96. Upper right: wire gridiron, F1932.141. Spit, F1948.174. Bottom: Dangle spit. Co. Wicklow, F1944.321.

‘There was also a primitive gridiron to “broil the red herrings”, made of a piece of twisted iron’ (See Figure 41).<sup>106</sup> This was the cheapest type of gridiron, which could be easily made at home, as described in Charles Kickham’s book, *Knocknagow* about life in South Tipperary in the nineteenth century:

Nelly Donovan was engaged in cooking a salt herring on a small gridiron, which was constructed by simply bending a piece of thin rod iron, zig-zag, into something like the outline of a hand with the fingers extended, traced with a burnt stick upon the wall, and bringing the ends of the iron together and twisting them into a handle, which might represent a very attenuated arm to the hand aforesaid.<sup>107</sup>



One expression in Irish, ‘*Tá achainí an scadáin ort*’, means, ‘You have the petition of the herring on you’. This relates to a story that before dying, the herring pleaded to be roasted on the fire and similar expressions are said of old people who crave the heat of the fire.<sup>108</sup>

### Hearthstone Baking and the Griddle

Oats and barley were the staple bread grains for most rural families in Ireland. Wheat was a more expensive crop and was formerly less used in the baking of bread. In Ireland, bread was baked either on a flat stone put near the hearth or on the flagstone in front of the fire, which was set into the ground. Traditionally, floors were made of clay and the area around the fire was paved with flat stones. This method appears to have been popular in the seventeenth century and earlier, before the countrywide adoption of the iron bake stone, ‘the griddle’. In Co. Kerry, flagstone griddles were possibly still in use in the nineteenth century.<sup>109</sup> Baking was achieved by moving a small portion of the main hearth fire onto the washed flagstone and leaving it to heat an area of it. The fire was then moved to another part of the stone and the area, which was first heated, was then cleaned for the bread to be placed upon it. The fire continued to be moved around the stone and the bread succeeded it until fully baked. The same method was used in many places but an account from Ballybay, Co. Monaghan has a flat piece of tin put on top of the bread and embers placed on it,<sup>110</sup> or cabbage leaves placed over the boxty bread and topped with embers.<sup>111</sup>

In Yorkshire, England, manufactured ‘bakestones’ were cut from mudstone at Delph, near Saddleworth. They were flat stones, which could be used for baking,

**106** Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall, *Ireland: its scenery, character etc.* 3 vols. (London: How and Parsons, 1841–3) *Skizzen aus Irland*, Vol. III (Berlin: Herk, 1850) 297. **107** Charles J. Kickham, *Knocknagow* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1879) <https://www.exclassics.com/>

[knockngw/knock.pdf](https://www.exclassics.com/knockngw/knock.pdf), 119.

**108** Enrí Ó Muirgheasa, *Seanfhocail Uladh* (Baile Átha Cliath: Conradh na Gaeilge, 1907), 97.

**109** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 78.

**110** Ballybay, Co. Monaghan. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0938, Page 250.

**111** Castlesaunderson Demesne, Co. Cavan. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 1025, Page 023.

**Figure 41** Twisted wire gridiron. NMI Collection.

similar to the hearth slab, or could be suspended above the fire from the crane.<sup>112</sup> Kevin Danaher wrote in 1977, '[b]reads baked on the flagstone were in all ways similar to the "griddle bread", still made in parts of Ireland'.<sup>113</sup> Griddles (known as 'girdles' in Scotland),<sup>114</sup> were circular pieces of iron (See Figs. 42a & b), which were either suspended above the open fire or rested on a trivet or 'brand'<sup>115</sup> in the fire area. They were used for baking bread (*arán gridille*),<sup>116</sup> griddle cakes (*cacai greidill*),<sup>117</sup> and pancakes.<sup>118</sup> In a 1644 account of travelling in Ireland the griddle was described as a small 'table': 'The poor grind barley and peas between two stones and make it in to bread, which they cook upon a small iron table heated on a tripod...'<sup>119</sup> Prior to this, there are mentions of griddles in the Brehon Laws.<sup>120</sup> Thin, dry, breads made from oats and barley, were first associated with the griddle. A German traveller described the baking of oatcakes in Monasterboice, Co. Louth in 1842: 'The meal is formed into a thick paste with water, and spread upon a warm circular of iron (called a griddle), which is found in every Irish cabin and is heated by a few handfuls of lighted straw. The paste is spread out on this like a thin pancake, and in a few moments is fit to eat, and dry like a biscuit'.<sup>121</sup> Initially, unleavened breads were made on the griddle and then, after baking



Each unit  
on this scale  
represents  
10 cm



**Figure 42** This page.

One handed griddle. NMI Collection F1948.275

**Figure 43** Opposite. Drawing of Griddle and griddle bread. Cill Riallaig, Co. Kerry.

**112** Peter Brears, *Traditional Food in Yorkshire* (Devon; Prospect Books, 2014), 62

**113** Caomhín Ó Danachair, 'Bread in Ireland', 62; 'Oaten bread was always eaten. Sometimes it was baked on a griddle. Sometimes it was placed on an upright position on the hearthstone supported by two sods, in front of the fire. Thus it was baked'. Ballynacargy, Co. Westmeath.

NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0740, Page 398.

**114** <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/girdle>. **115** Newcastle, Co. Tipperary. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0571, Page 375.

**116** <https://www.focloir.ie/en/dictionary/ei/griddle+cake>.

**117** Beagh, Co. Galway. NFC, Main Manuscript Collection, Volume 434, Page 397.

**118** Dundrum, Co. Tipperary.

NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0582, Page 186.

**119** Thomas Crofton, *The Tour of the French Traveller M. de la Boullaye le Gouz in Ireland in A.D. 1644* (London: T & W Boone, 1837), 39–40

**120** References in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century texts to laws related to the interference with griddles. See Sexton, *A Little History of Irish Food*, 84. **121** Johann Georg Kohl,

soda was embraced throughout the countryside, from the 1840s onwards, thin soda farls were also baked on the griddle. It was said that, 'spongy griddle cakes with cold bacon were brought out to the workers in the field with pitchers of buttermilk at harvest time'.<sup>122</sup> The griddle itself was called 'The Mother Dubh (the black mother)'.<sup>123</sup>

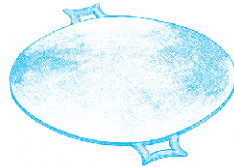
A cross was cut deeply into the circular bread before baking, dividing it into four pieces which were called 'farls',<sup>124</sup> soda farl (*farla sóidel*)<sup>125</sup> in some places, from an old word for a 'quarter', and when cut into eights they were known as 'pointers'<sup>126</sup> in other places because of their shape. In Stradbally, Co. Waterford, an account details that the soda bread made in the pot oven was cut with a cross into fours and that the griddle bread was always cut into eight parts and this may have related to 'the mariners compass'.<sup>127</sup> The bread was usually eaten hot from the griddle with butter melting on top (See Figure 43).<sup>128</sup>

The griddle was not just used as a baking utensil, but also as a form of pan. Potatoes were also cooked on the griddle in the form of 'boxty' or 'stampy',<sup>129</sup> and potato cakes.<sup>130</sup> Boxty was made from watery potato pulp, which was dried out in a cloth, then formed into cakes, and baked on a hot griddle or pan. One popular saying about boxty recited, 'Boxty on the griddle, boxty on the pan; If you don't eat boxty, You'll never get your man'.<sup>131</sup> Variations included, 'If you can't make boxty, You'll never get a man',<sup>132</sup> or 'If you don't eat boxty, you will never be a man'.<sup>133</sup>

Similarly, a popular (anonymous) poem found in the folklore archives goes as follows

Boxty bread it went ahead,  
It travelled around the nation,  
Till it came to the turnpike style,  
It is there it took its station.

The only plan is to grease the pan,  
To make it turn easy,  
I go bail without much male (meal),  
I'll make a cake that will please you.<sup>134</sup>



*Travels in Ireland* (London: Bruce and Wyld, 1844), 315. **122** Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey*, 75. **123** Anglesborough, Co. Limerick. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0514, Page 135. **124** References to 'farl' in the NFC, The Schools' Collection. **125** [https://www.focloir.ie/en/dictionary/ei/soda#soda\\_\\_3](https://www.focloir.ie/en/dictionary/ei/soda#soda__3) **126** References to 'pointer' in the NFC, The Schools'

Collection. **127** Stradbally, Co. Waterford. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0649, Page 92. **128** Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, 44. **129** Rahanagh, Co. Limerick. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0491, Page 278. **130** Sign of the cross made on the bread. Camderrynabinnia, Co. Mayo. NCF, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0119C, Page 03\_019.

**131** Burren, Co. Mayo. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0089, Page 071. **132** For more on Boxty, See Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Pádraic Óg Gallagher, 'The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture' *Journal of Culinary Science & Technology* 7: 2–3, 152–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15428050903313457>; 'you can't get a man'. Leitrim

Beg Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0054, Page 0084. **133** 'Never be a man'. Kilskeer, Co. Meath. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0704, Page 309 and Fohanagh, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0043, Page 0074. **134** Cloran, Co. Westmeath. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0725, Page 0329 and Killulagh, Co. Westmeath.



Earlier griddles<sup>135</sup> were made of wrought iron and later ones were cast in foundries in Britain. Smith-made ones, made from hammered wrought iron, are few in number in the National Museum's collection and are never quite circular.<sup>136</sup> Cast-iron griddles were always regular in size. Griddles had either one or two handles, generally called 'ears',<sup>137</sup> and usually were roughly rectangular with concave edges. One-handled griddles were known as 'Cassada Plates' or 'Bake Plates' (the latter being slightly thicker at  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch) in foundry catalogues and these ranged in diameter between 8–20 inches.<sup>138</sup> 'Griddles' came with two handles and had the option of fixed or swivel bow handles for suspension.<sup>139</sup> Flat areas of land are often called after the griddle (such as Griddle townland in the southern part of the parish of Easkey, Co. Sligo).<sup>140</sup> Other places were associated with the metal griddle, such as the story of the Griddle Road: 'Near Mayglass on the border of Piercestown there is a road which is called "The Griddle Road". The reason it is called by that name is—the people of long ago had only one griddle between them in the whole village'.<sup>141</sup> Another tale of a magical griddle is found in Walterstown, Co. Meath.<sup>142</sup>

Although the griddle was found in all counties in Ireland, the National Museum's collection appears to suggest that it was latterly most popular in Leinster and Munster. In Connaught and Ulster, decorative hardening toasters had a wide distribution for baking oatcakes, which perhaps explains the smaller number of griddles from this area.<sup>143</sup>

Most often, the griddle was used on a tripod over the embers of a satellite fire. If it hung over the fire, an ordinary pair of pothooks, or a pair which were specially made to enclose the handles, could be used for the two 'eared' griddle.<sup>144</sup> For the one 'eared' griddle, a special set of hooks, called 'griddle bools' could be used for hanging it above the fire. These consisted of three slightly curved bars attached by hooks at their upper end, to three hooks on a circular iron suspension ring. The ends of the bars are thickened and turned in to form grips, for supporting under the griddle.<sup>145</sup>

The disappearance of the griddle can be linked to the popularity of wheaten bread, which was only adopted slowly due to its expense. Oaten bread gradually became unfashionable and associated with poverty. The increased use of frying pans also led to the griddle's decline. However, it was still in general usage around

NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0726, Page 296.

**135** 'Griddle bread was also made and there was a griddle in every house'. Kilure Beg, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0028, Page 0097. **136** For example, a griddle from Tuosist, Co. Kerry (F1935.10) measures 40.5cm in diameter in one direction and 41cm in diameter the other.

**137** Glanworth, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0373, Page 167. **138** Falkirk Foundry Catalogue, 1930. NMI (GF 685). **139** <https://oakden.co.uk/product/large-traditional-griddle/> currently manufacturing and selling steel griddles with bow handles. **140** NFC, The Schools' Collection,

Volume 0165, Page 279. Griddle townland = An Grideall. **141** Piercestown, Co. Wexford. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0879, Page 402. **142** Walterstown, Co. Meath. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0686, Page 093. **143** Although, in the NFC, Schools' Collection (1937–1939), there are 2441 references to

the 'griddle' from all of the 26 counties. **144** Riddle. 'A black sheep and a white fleece? A cake on a griddle'. Terryglass, Co. Tipperary. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0531, Page 053. **145** F1931:79 Set of Griddle Bools, Killinchy, Co. Down.



**Figure 44** Bread sticks.  
Arched type, Co. Clare,  
tripod type, Co. Galway.  
NMI Collection.

1920 in most of Munster.<sup>146</sup> By 1949, it had almost entirely disappeared. Some broken griddles were recorded as being used as fire backs in Co. Tipperary<sup>147</sup> and Co. Kerry. These fragments were regarded as curiosities since only the older people remembered the griddle in use.<sup>148</sup> The solid-fuel range cookers that were popular in the 1950s and '60s all featured circular hot plates that were removable and the same general size as the griddle.<sup>149</sup>

### Bread Irons

Oaten bread was thin (about a quarter of an inch), unleavened bread, which was baked by drying out the dough in front of the fire. Barley bread was also cooked the same way against a wooden stand.<sup>150</sup> Three-legged stands were used to hold the bread on edge and at an angle in front of the fire. The earliest types were made of wood (thus the name bread stick)<sup>151</sup> and surviving examples come from western counties (See Figure 44). A triple-forked branch was a suitable support and others were carved out of wood with a wooden leg at the back to angle the front support.<sup>152</sup> These were sometimes known as 'tripods',<sup>153</sup> the '*crágachán*', which means the 'large hand or paw', or '*maide an bhocaire*', the 'cake stick'.<sup>154</sup> A



**Figure 45** An ornate horseshoe-shaped example incorporating pairs of decorative spirals. There is a thin wavy band of iron at the base of the frame. The stand at the back has a forked foot and two hooks on it allowing (if paired with another oatcake toaster), it to be used to support a meat spit. This oatcake toaster is an elaborate

one, illustrating great craftsmanship. It has no shelf to support the oatcake but would have rested at an angle near the fire to allow the oaten bread to dry. Carrickacroman, Larah, Co. Cavan. NMI Collection. F1960.77.

**Figure 46** Bread iron with forked back leg and suspension ring. NMI Collection. F1957.88.

**146** Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, 44. **147** Dundrum, Co. Tipperary. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0582, Page 191.

**148** F1949:206, Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland.

**149** H & F Enterprises, Ltd. Website for diagram of features of early range cookers – Stanley No. 8.

**150** Coole, Co. Westmeath.

NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0719, Page 460.

**151** Creggs, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0015, Page 198.

**152** Leitir, Co. Cavan. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 1010, Page 418.

**153** Mullagh, Co. Limerick. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0482, Page 426.

**154** Leitir, Co. Cavan. NFC, The Schools' Collection,

humorous story from Donegal mentions the use of ‘the leg of a stool and a sod of turf’,<sup>155</sup> to support the oaten bread in front of the fire. John Dunton travelled through Ireland in 1699 and described the making of an oatcake in a peasant house near Galway: ‘When she had ground her oates [sic] upon the querns or hand mill stones, with a little water she made a triangular cake which she reared up before the fire against a little wooden stool made like a tripod’.<sup>156</sup> Wrought iron versions of these stands were known as oatcake toasters, bread sticks, bread irons, ‘harnen’ stands or ‘hardening toasters’. They are always decorative pieces displaying the craftsmanship and skill of the blacksmith. The ornamentation usually consists of scrolls, spirals, twisted bars, wavy lines or heart designs (See Figure 45). The majority are horseshoe-shaped and approximately 35cm in height. There are odd examples of rectangular and circular bread irons. A back leg or stay is generally hinged to the top of the stand, sometimes with a two-pronged forked terminal to stabilise it into the ground (See Figure 46). This back leg allows it to close the bread-iron to a vertical position to hang on the wall near the hearth.

Many of the stands have a series of hooks, at different levels on the back support leg. These were spit holders and a pair would be needed to support a spit. Most of the Museum examples of this type are from Co. Longford and its surrounding counties, and perhaps two of the examples were kept in houses to be used for either baking or together for roasting. There was often a ring at the top of the stand so that when not in use, it could hang on the wall around the fireplace. James Milton of Bohy, Co. Longford, said that when on the wall the hooked leg would be to the front so that the hooks could be used to hang objects.<sup>157</sup> There is usually a shelf near the base on which the bread would have rested, although this shelf is often the most fragile part of the bread iron and is sometimes missing on older examples.

Elizabeth David (1913–1992), the British author famous for her cookery books, went to Donegal in the 1950s and ’60s and saw oatcakes being dried out on bread irons in front of the fire. She noticed that these decorative stands had fallen into disuse and that the Irish people seldom made oatcakes anymore. Gracie Mc Dermott (cook to Derek Hill in Glebe House<sup>158</sup>) shared her recipe and showed David the method she used. This and other Irish recipes were published in the book, *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*. As a child, Gracie Mc Dermott recalled

Volume 1010, Page 419.  
**155** Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey*, 68. **156** Dunton’s Letters, No. 6, in Edward Mac Lysaght *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century: After Cromwell* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1939), 337. **157** F1958: Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland. **158** Albert Hill, ‘A Place Like No Other: tales of the unexpected at Derek

Hill’s house in Donegal’, <https://inigo.com/almanac/a-place-like-no-other-glebe-house-derek-hill>. Glebe House was gifted to the state and is maintained by the OPW <https://irishmuseums.org/membership-directory/glebe-house-and-gallery-opw>





**Figure 49a** Above.  
Hardening Fenders F1931:78  
Killinchy, Co. Down and  
Ireland. NMI Collection.

**Figure 49b** Below.  
Firebar hanging oatcake  
toaster—the rack to  
hold the farl can revolve  
and be moved nearer or  
farther from the fire. NMI  
Collection. F1995.216.

that oatcake was known as the ‘Moon and Stars’, the round oatcake toasted before the peat fire on the iron being the moon and the ‘sheetful of crumbs’, the stars.<sup>159</sup> Twisted-wire oatcake toasters were very common in Donegal where the Irish name was ‘*iarann aráin*’ and they were horseshoe-shaped like those of wrought iron (See Figure 47). They illustrate similar decoration but in a different medium and were made by travelling tinsmiths. Iron wire made up the body and leg of the stand and a sheet of tin-plate, the shelf.<sup>160</sup>

Stone examples are unusual in Ireland and there are just a few in existence, from the Northern counties of Fermanagh and Armagh<sup>161</sup> (See Figure 48). These oatcake toasters are similar to the previously discussed bakestones. In Scotland, oatcake ‘bannocks’ were also baked on toasting stones set upright in front of the fire, which were sometimes attractively carved with designs in relief.<sup>162</sup> The few stone examples in Irish museum collections perhaps reflect this tradition from Scotland or Northern England.

Examples of hardening fenders also appear only to be found in the North of Ireland (See Figures 49a and b). They are decorative fire surrounds with holders to toast several oatcakes or ‘furls’ (quarters), concurrently. Many consist of two halves, which could be opened out to partially enclose the fire. Other examples consist of horizontal shelves with perforated holes through which heat could filter to the oatcake furls. These smith-made objects were usually decorated and the top bar of one is etched with a border of arcs and a central row of flowers.<sup>163</sup>

Hanging toasters of wrought iron were used in Northern, coal burning areas. They consist of a frame, which hangs on the grate bars on which slides an adjustable rack for holding the bread to be toasted. These racks, most often could hold only one oatcake furl at a time but could be adjusted to move closer or nearer to the fire. Sometimes the rack swivelled on its axis so that both sides of the bread could be toasted without removing it to turn it.

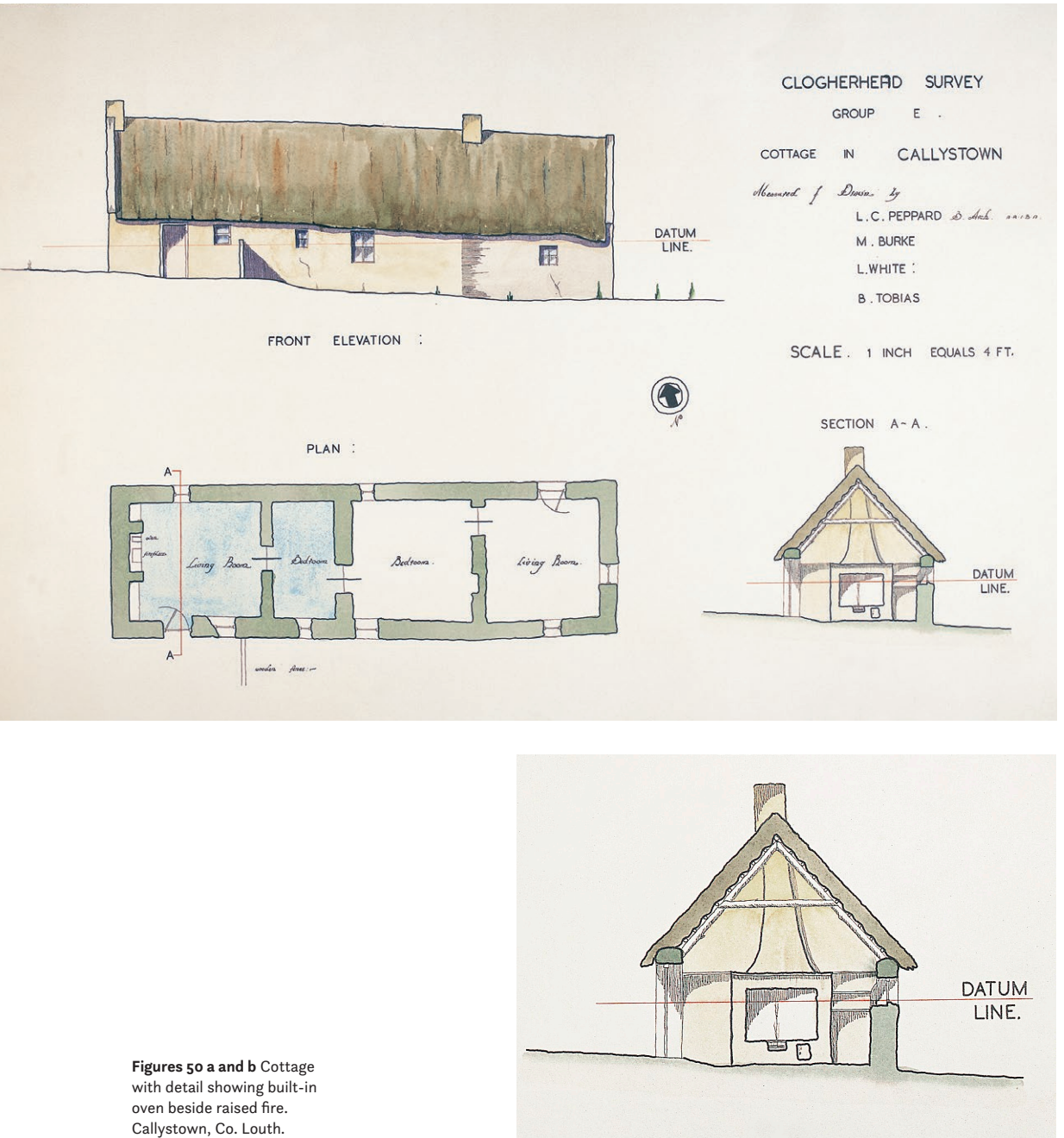
Oatcake toasters appear to have been mainly used in the Northern half of the country and survived longest in use in Ulster. Their lack of distribution in the southern half of Ireland can be explained by the popularity of the griddle for baking oaten bread and then later the adoption of wheat as the main grain crop. The land was more fertile in the South and East, and in the North and West people were slower to change from the traditional crop of oats.

**159** Elizabeth David, *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* (Allen Lane; Biscuit Books: London; Massachusetts, 1977, 1995), 532–33; Gracie Mc Dermott’s description tallies with a riddle collected in Gorey, Co. Donegal. NFC, The Schools’ Collection, Volume 1124, Page 49.  
**160** See also drawing by

Simon Coleman of *arán iarann*, Na Cruacha, Co. Donegal. NFC, The Photographic Collection, B120.29.00001.  
**161** One in Fermanagh County Museum and one from Armagh in NMI.  
**162** Hugh Cheape and Gavin Sprott, *Angus Country Life. A companion to the Angus Folk Museum* (Edinburgh:

The National Trust for Scotland, 1980), 26.

**163** NMI Collection F1931:78 Hardening Fender, Killinchy, Co. Down.



Figures 50 a and b Cottage with detail showing built-in oven beside raised fire. Callystown, Co. Louth. Clogherhead architectural survey. Drawn by L.C. Peppard. NMI Collection. F:2006.142.



### Ovens and Pot Ovens

Built-in ovens were rare in traditional houses in Ireland but existed in monastic orders, bakeries<sup>164</sup> and in larger farmhouses and upper-class homes. While ovens may not have been a common feature of the average house they were certainly common in the tower houses, castles and fortified houses, farm houses and other dwellings of the wealthier classes. They were certainly not confined to The Pale and east Leinster / south Munster as implied by the folklorist vernacular tradition.<sup>165</sup>

In the south eastern counties, mainly those in and bordering the baronies of Forth and Bargy in Co. Wexford, traditional houses were often constructed with a wall oven beside the hearth. These were brick-lined cavities with an iron door and some had a separate flue to the outside of the house. They were generally used for baking bread.<sup>166</sup> See Figures 50 a and b, for a similar type in Callystown, Co. Louth. They were heated by lighting a small fire inside them (often from burning furze or kindling) and then sweeping the embers out when the oven was considered sufficiently hot and then placing the bread inside. By 1950 most of the Wexford wall ovens were gone and those which remained in traditional houses were generally adapted as cupboards.

The pot oven or 'bastable' was a flat-bottomed cooking pot, with three legs, two 'ears' for suspension and a tight-fitting lid (See Figure 51). It could be either suspended over the fire, by pothooks or placed in the hearth area during cooking. At the start of the eighteenth century, foundries in Britain started to produce these 'baking pots', also known as 'camp ovens'. A popular term, used mainly in



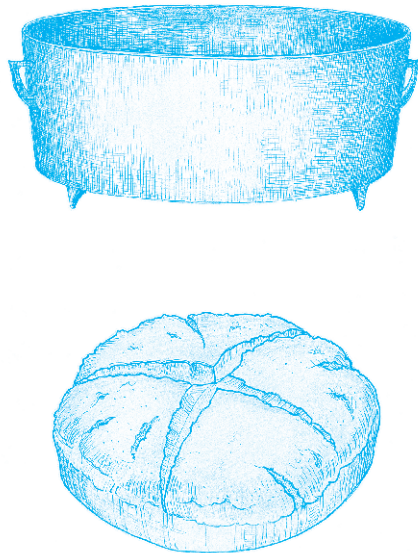
**Figure 51** Pot-oven made by the Albatross Foundry England. NMI Collection.

**164** The earliest commercial bakeries operated in Ireland in the first half of the 1800s. Johnston, Mooney and O'Brien <http://www.jmob.ie/history/> is most referenced as the oldest bakery in Ireland, opening in 1835 and also credited with introducing the sliced loaf in 1930.

**165** Richard Tobin, 'Nineteenth-Century Bread Ovens of the Blackwater Valley in County Waterford', *European Journal of Food Drink and Society* 2: 1, Article 4 (2022), 12. <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ejfds/vol2/iss1/4/> **166** 'Bread is now baked in an oven-pot with

fire over and under or in an oven built into the wall called a "Farmers Oven" Coolnahorna, Co. Waterford. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0654, Page 471.

North America, was 'Dutch oven', deriving from the process of casting in sand. After visiting Holland, Abraham Darby copied this Dutch technique and used it to make his iron cookware in Coalbrookdale, England from 1707. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, these cast-iron pots were in common use in Ireland and the most popular size was '11 inches' in diameter, which was often cast in relief on the sides and lids of the pots. There appears to be some confusion over the spelling and origin of the 'Bastable' or as Estyn Evans wrote, 'its other name (was) the bastible, from the fact that it was first made in Barnstaple in Devon'.<sup>167</sup> Bríd Mahon concurs with this view but calls it, a 'bastable'.<sup>168</sup> Barnstaple was a shipping port, which had long-standing trading connections with Ireland, especially in the seventeenth century when earthenware pots were imported from there into Ireland to be used as containers in which Irish butter was exported to France.<sup>169</sup> There were no foundries around that part of Devon making pots and pans. Pots made in other parts of Britain were exported to Ireland from Barnstaple, or alternatively perhaps the word 'bastable' could be connected with 'basting' meat, as the pot-oven replaced the spit for roasting meat.



**Figure 52** Drawing of a pot oven with soda bread, Cill Riallaig, Co. Kerry. NMI Collection.

**167** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 76–77. **168** Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey*, 73.

**169** Alison Grant, *North Devon Pottery: The Seventeenth Century* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983), 105.

The pot oven was essentially designed for baking but could also be used for pot-roasting. Unlike oaten bread, soda bread was quickly prepared and became very fashionable. As a result of this, the pot oven replaced many of the oatcake toasters. In several places, it also took the place of the griddle, although some households continued to use both utensils. The general absence of wall ovens ensured the demand for this versatile substitute.

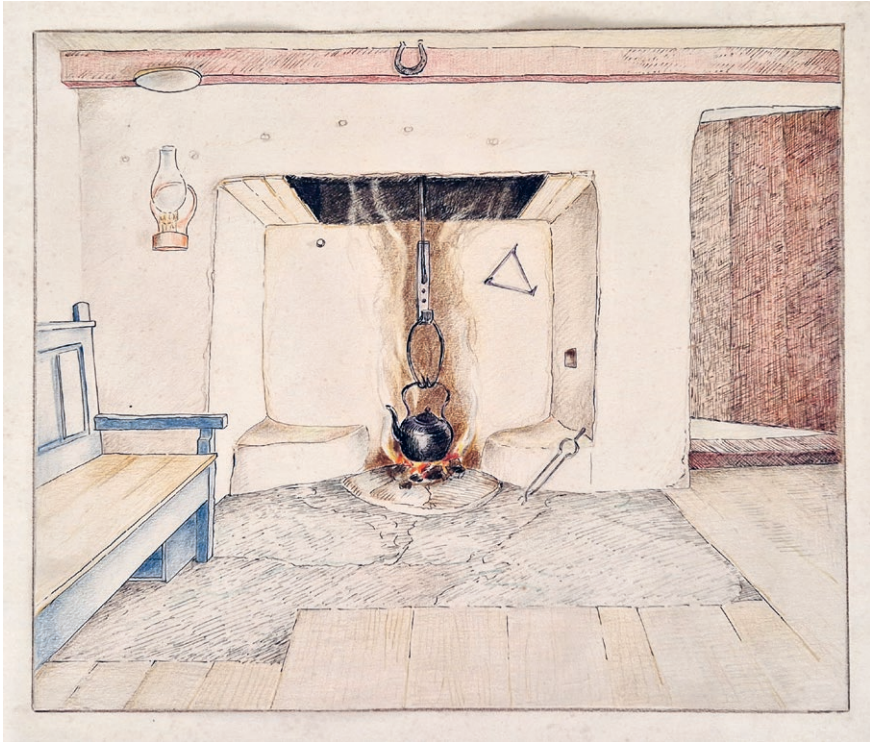
It was traditional to cut a cross into the dough to assist with raising the bread and for good luck.<sup>170</sup> The soda cake contained a mixture of flour, bread soda and fermented sour milk and was baked in a bastable. After the dough was kneaded and before being placed in the bastable two insertions were made with a knife in the shape of a cross so that the heat would go through the cuttings. Except where there were large families, the bread was usually baked three times a week.<sup>171</sup> During bread or cake baking, the pot oven was either greased or floured and the lid protected the enclosed cake from smoke,<sup>172</sup> 'ashes and hot turf dust'.<sup>173</sup> It was customary to place burning turf or coal embers on top of the oven lid, which was either flat or raised in shape. This ensured even heating and gave better baking results.<sup>174</sup> It was said that, 'no bread ever tasted sweeter or nuttier than that baked in a pot oven among the ashes of a turf fire'.<sup>175</sup> The 'hearth, the bastible and the skilful turn of the woman's hand' combined to create fine quality Irish soda bread (See Figure 52).<sup>176</sup> The pot oven was still very much in use in the late 1940s. In Dingle, Co. Kerry, it was called 'oigheann' in Irish and in 1949, was 'the universal means of baking, the griddle having entirely disappeared'.<sup>177</sup> In Belcarra in Co. Mayo, it was still used for baking soda bread each day in 1999. The husband of the home-baker was the retired blacksmith, and had removed the three legs of the pot, so that it slid conveniently into her gas cooker.<sup>178</sup>

The pot oven was also used for pot roasts and is believed to have 'replaced spit roasted meat'.<sup>179</sup> Meats roasted in the pot oven included pork steak<sup>180</sup> and the cooking of this in the 1940s was recounted by Ina Buckley to Regina Sexton in 1994,<sup>181</sup> while the Christmas goose, as remembered by Alice Taylor, was, slowly roasting in the bastable, 'filling the kitchen with a mouth-watering aroma'<sup>182</sup> on the family's return from Mass.

**170** Eyrecourt, Co. Galway. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0056, Page 0179.  
**171** Bruree, Co. Limerick. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0498, Page 131.  
**172** Sharkey, *Old Days, Old Ways*, 52. **173** Taylor, *Quench the Lamp*, 62.  
**174** Riddle. 'It's under the fire and over the fire but it never

touches the fire. A cake in a bastable'. Rerrin, Co. Cork. NFC, The Schools' Collection, Volume 0277, Page 208.  
**175** Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey*, 74. **176** Sexton, *A Little History of Irish Food*, 85.  
**177** F1949:206, Index Card, Irish Folklife Division, National Museum of Ireland.  
**178** Anna Maria Roche, wife

of retired blacksmith in Belcarra, Co. Mayo. Personal Communication: August 1999  
**179** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 7  
**180** Taylor, *To School through the Fields*, 120. **181** Sexton, *A Little History of Irish Food*, 47.



**Figure 53** This architectural drawing shows the detail of the hearth in the home of Michael Ó Connor, Cill Rialaig, Co. Kerry. Áke Campbell, 1935, NMI Collection.

### Decline of the Open Hearth and its Associated Objects

There was no particular reason for the decline in the use of the traditional open hearth for cooking (Figure 53). There were many significant changes in Ireland that affected the lives of those living in the countryside. Rural society has never been static. It has always undergone change from external and internal influences. Objects only survive in a community for as long as they fulfil their function and as long as they are respected.<sup>183</sup> Objects retain their usefulness until they are replaced with a better alternative.<sup>184</sup> Many of the cooking objects, such as the spits, forks, griddles and oatcake toasters became defunct as new products replaced them. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the rate of change affecting rural society was dramatic: '[t]here was a new craving for things that were chic, cosmopolitan, knowing, and had "style", an urge to get away from what were viewed as the backwardness and homespun simplicities of Irish life'.<sup>185</sup>

This new outlook coincided with rural electrification and as previously noted, the electric kettle was most often the first appliance purchased.<sup>186</sup> Although the Electricity Supply Board was established in 1925, it was not until the Rural Electrification Scheme (1946) and the *Electricity Supply Amendment Act* (1955) were passed that the electricity network started to reach the most rural and isolated communities in the country—this totally changed everything.<sup>187</sup>

Many other gradual developments influenced the decline of the open hearth. One was the changes in house building materials and styles, along with the provision of social housing and the movement of families by the Land Commission<sup>188</sup> to new modern houses. Many of these new dwellings were built with modern conveniences and luxuries, such as fireplaces in bedrooms and boilers for hot water, and by the 1960s tenants were given the choice between solid fuel or electric cookers. The popularity of the range and the availability of new cookware products were especially significant.

The spread of bakeries and the demand for white bread,<sup>189</sup> industrialisation, the gradual disappearance of craftsmen and rural depopulation cannot be overlooked. Although ranges appeared in the late nineteenth century in Ireland, it was not until the 1930s that they became a popular alternative to the traditional hearth in rural areas.<sup>190</sup> The hearth opening was usually blocked up and the

**182** Taylor, *To School through the Fields*, 150.

**183** Ray Cashman, 'Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland', *The Journal of American Folklore* 119: 472 (2006), 137–60.

**184** Heather M. Van Wormer, 'The Ties That Bind: Ideology, Material Culture, and the Utopian Ideal', *Historical Archaeology* 40: 1 (2006), 37–56.

**185** Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence—Irish Culture 1930–1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 260–61.

**186** Ann Gabbett interviewed by Eleanor Calnan about her memories of buying appliances in Mitchelstown, County Cork, April 2018 on Museum.ie; Nora interviewed by Alison Mac Cormaic about her family's reaction to getting their first electric kettle in Gort, County Galway, November 2017 Museum.ie.

**187** John Joe Mc Ginley, 'And then there was light: Electrification in Rural Ireland', *The Irish Story*.

**188** The Land Commission

Migrations Of Western Seaboard People To County Kildare (58-minute radio documentary by Paul Wright).

**189** Patricia Lysaght, 'When I makes tea, I makes tea', *Ulster Folklife* 33 (1987), 45.

**190** Allied Ironfounders supplied the earliest ranges, specified for County Council housing and they had an Irish base in Waterford City. The 'Liffey' and the 'Dover' (turf-burning) ranges were the most common models purchased by the Local Authorities. The

'Aga', 'Rayburn', 'Trueburn', and the 'Stanley' were the most popular designs. The post-war era was the most successful year for sales by Waterford Stanley, a subsidiary of Allied Ironfounders.

range fitted in its place. Like the open hearth, the kitchen range served a variety of purposes but more tasks could be accomplished at the same time. It heated the kitchen and dried clothes but the cooking hobs, oven, and the water boiler were the real advantages over the open hearth. Often viewed as an investment, it was also more economical with fuel.<sup>191</sup>

Cast hollow-ware, specifically for use on electric cookers, began to be made in the foundries.<sup>192</sup> In Ireland, in the 1930s, demand remained for cooking equipment for the open hearth, but there was now more choice of cookware. The different materials and local Irish manufacturers have previously been mentioned. Changes also occurred in food consumption patterns. Tea and white bread were perceived as luxuries—only the very affluent could afford initially to buy bread from the bakers but it slowly started to filter down through the social classes. Home baking declined. The setting up of commercial bakeries in smaller towns around the turn of the century fostered this trend towards white yeast bread. Not only did they deliver to the farmhouse, they also ‘catered for country tastes by providing an extraordinary variety of cakes and farls as well as standard loaves’.<sup>193</sup> In rural areas yeast bread started to be purchased for special occasions and fashion dictated that it was far superior to ‘ordinary’ home baked flat oaten bread and brown soda bread.<sup>194</sup> In parts of Co. Tipperary, it was known as ‘priests’ bread’,<sup>195</sup> as it was only purchased in households when the local priest was visiting for the Stations, a local mass held in the house, or at a wake.<sup>196</sup> Without daily bread baking, there was a decline in the use of the bakeware.

Industrialisation affected Ireland after the Second World War.<sup>197</sup> The tractor and the car were the most influential changes in Irish society, both of which affected the craft of blacksmithing.<sup>198</sup> The influx of mass-produced products into rural society expedited the decline in the demand for the services of local craftsmen, and hearth furniture was no longer smith-made. There were large department stores in the cities (Clery’s, Arnott’s, Roches Stores, Brown Thomas) catering for the domestic market and it became fashionable to take an annual trip to the city to buy domestic furnishings.

Rural population was also undergoing changes from the turn of the century. Migration to Britain and America and then more so to Irish urban centres,

**191** People missed the comfort and warmth of looking at the traditional open hearth. The doors of these ranges could be left open to view the fire inside. They were designed to be very economical with fuel, but ‘people were satisfied to use three times the fuel in order to obtain the cheerful appearance of an open fire’. Industrial Research Council, *Turf as Domestic Fuel*, Dept. of Industry and Commerce (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1941), 9. **192** An advertisement

in the Fletcher Hardware Catalogue of 1930 advertised the special machine-made cast-iron hollow-ware with ‘dead flat’ bases and also for sale was the ‘accident proof electric kettle’ with a twelve minute boil time. Fletcher Hardware, Birmingham, England: Catalogue No.109, 1930, p.67. **193** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 78. **194** The domestic fuel crisis of the 1940s meant that it was more expensive to produce home-baked bread daily than it

was to buy bakery bread that used imported coal for the ovens. John Swift, *The History of the Dublin Bakers and Others* (Dublin: Irish Bakers, Confectionery and Allied Workers Union, 1948), 351. **195** I.F.C., Co. Tipperary, Ms. 407, p.136. **196** See Patricia Lysaght, ‘The Wake for the Dead and Traditional Hospitality in Ireland in the Twentieth Century: Continuity and Change’ in Mac Con Iomairé and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*,

chapter 20, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>.

**197** Hillary Tovey, ‘Rural Sociology in Ireland: A Review’, *Rural Journal of Sociology* 2 (1992), 108. **198** Today, the Irish Artists Blacksmiths Association offer courses <https://www.irishblacksmiths.ie/listings/courses/> and there is a Blacksmithing Centre of Excellence in Limerick <https://collegeoffet.ie/blacksmithing/>

became a part of life. Good wages could be obtained in cities and Irish rural society was becoming more money conscious. People aimed for a richer material lifestyle and the convenience that accompanied it.<sup>199</sup> From the 1930s to 1950s, consumption of mass-produced objects increased. To use modern alternatives instead of locally produced goods signified modernity. There was diminished respect for home-made objects and these were literally ‘dumped’. This change most strongly affected agriculture but also the kitchen.<sup>200</sup>

Culture became progressively standardised. Ireland moved forward and there was no place for the traditional open hearth and its cumbersome accoutrements. Despite this, the traditional hearth and its furniture have become an emblem for Irish identity. While other cultures gather around the table, the Irish traditionally preferred to gather around the fire.<sup>201</sup> The association of the hearth with comfort, friendship, music, and welcoming hospitality has been adopted as a characteristic for Irishness, however we cannot overlook that the open hearth cooking ended due to adversity.<sup>202</sup> In a country famous for putting on the kettle to make tea,<sup>203</sup> (Figure 53) this staple of the fireside and kitchen is disappearing in favour of the tap that gives instant boiled water.<sup>204</sup> Although we can still buy the finest Le Crueset cast-iron cookware, and aspire to purchasing a Stanley range<sup>205</sup> or Aga cooker as a symbol of wealth and status, strangely, these most closely connect us with the cookware and hearth of our grandparents and great-grandparents, but without the hardship.

**199** Fintan O’Toole, *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1994), 36–7. **200** Kitchen Power. NMI Exhibition online. **201** Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, 15–16. **202** Fallon, *An Age of Innocence—Irish Culture 1930–1960*, 269–270. **203** Tricia Cusack, “This Pernicious Tea Drinking

Habit’: Women, Tea, and Respectability in Nineteenth-Century Ireland”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 41 (2018), 178–209. **204** Denise O’Connor, ‘In praise of the boiling water tap ... and other great appliances’ *Irish Times* (13 February 2020) <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/homes-and-property/>

interiors/in-praise-of-the-boiling-water-tap-and-other-great-appliances-1.4160423 **205** In 2023, the latest colour in the Aga range is raspberry and it can range in price between €5,500 and €8,000. <https://waterfordstanley.com/news/introducing-new-aga-colour-raspberry>

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**19**

*Seventy-two Words for  
Potato: Irish language sources  
for food history*

**Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and  
Dónall Ó Braonáin**

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)<sup>1</sup> noted that the limits of one's language meant the limits of one's world. In 1993, some three-quarters of a century after Wittgenstein's philosophical tract was published, Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) famously stated that '[n]ot to learn Irish is to miss the opportunity of understanding what life in this country has meant and could mean in a better future'.<sup>2</sup> Languages are a window into different cosmologies, a way of looking at the world differently. The Irish public, partly due to our maritime island culture, has a long history of being preoccupied by and fascinated with the weather, as instanced in the fact that in 2019, An Post, the provider of postal services in Ireland, issued a stamp celebrating the many words, in both English and Irish, we regularly use for rain; for example, 'a soft day' (a mist), 'spitting' (a few drops of rain) and 'lashing' (diagonal hard rain), and in Irish 'ceobhrán' (drizzle), 'brádán' (misty rain), 'croabhmhúr' (slight shower), 'bús báistí', 'ragáille' or 'clagairt' (pelting) and 'forlacht' (deluge) (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

There has been a growing interest and awareness in Ireland in recent years of our own linguistic cultural heritage, and the richness of our native language. Seamus Mac an Iomaire (1891–1967), in his iconic book *Cladaí Chonamara*, gave Irish names and descriptions for forty-three different types of seaweed from his native west Galway.<sup>4</sup> Extending this descriptive profusion, *rabharta* means a spring tide (which provides an abundance of cast-up seaweed), and the word *garbhshion* or *scairbhín na gCuach* (rough weather of the Cuckoos) refers to a particular time between late April and early May when rough or harsh weather throws up seaweed on the coastline, which is also gathered for fertilising potato beds.<sup>5</sup> Inherited wisdom and knowledge of nature's cycle has been preserved by multiple generations of our ancestors within specific words, sayings, proverbs, and triads. Folklore collected in Killorglin, Co. Kerry noted that '*an scairbhín*' was the name given to the period from the middle of April to the middle of May,<sup>6</sup> and *laethanta na bó riabhaí* (the days of the brindled cow) is the name given to the few particularly cold days at the end of March into early April.<sup>7</sup> The triad '*Turscar, Prátaí, Páistí*' (cast-up seaweed, potatoes, children) reinforces the historical interconnectedness between the weather, cast-up seaweed / wrack, potatoes, and population growth in coastal parts on this island. The adoption of the potato as a staple food directly influenced the dramatic population growth in Ireland

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922). <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.218527/page/n151/mode/2up> 2 The full quote, from a poster issued by *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaeilcolaitochta*, continues 'It is to cut oneself off from ways of being at home. If we regard self-understanding,

mutual understanding, imaginative enhancement, cultural diversity and a tolerant political atmosphere as desirable attainments, we should remember that a knowledge of the Irish Language is an essential element in their realisation'. <https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000771918> 3 [\[Day%E2%80%99-Stamp-for-Ireland\]\(https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/garbshh%C3%ADon\) 4 Seamus Mac an Iomaire, \*Cladaí Chonamara\* \(Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 1985 \[1938\]\). 5 <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/garbshh%C3%ADon> 6 <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4687714/4686487> 7 Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'The Riabhach days: folklore, footwear and engaging with landscape' \*Irish Times\*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-riabhach-days-folklore-footwear-and-engaging-with-landscape-1.4838226> 8 <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/turscar>](https://www.anpost.com/Media-Centre/News/A-%E2%80%98Rainy-</a></p>
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from 1 million in 1590 (roughly coinciding with the introduction of the potato) to 8.4 million in the 1840s.<sup>9</sup>

The Irish word for generous is *flaithiúil*, which stems from the word ‘*flaith*’ or prince, so in Irish to be generous is to be princely. The Irish for the Department of Justice is *An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt*—literally, the department of the law and what is right: the Irish language separates the law from what is right or just. The Irish saying ‘*Fáilte Uí Cheallaigh*’—the welcome of the O’Kellys—carries memories of an exceptional hospitality event that happened seven centuries ago in east Galway/south Roscommon but is still preserved in today’s speech.<sup>10</sup> This chapter seeks to discuss the wealth of Irish language sources for the study of Irish food history. It explores how engagement with these sources can provide a more rounded perspective on the story of food in Ireland. Having first explored several Irish language sources and variations of terminology for dairy and oats, using the potato as a case study, the chapter will uncover the diversity within the Irish language for all aspects—from cultivation to consumption—of this relatively recent staple of the Irish diet.

Various legal tracts, annals, and indeed even reports from foreign visitors have all highlighted the central tradition of hospitality within Irish culture, the importance of being *flaithiúil*. William Sayers’ chapter in this volume on *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* emphasises the power of satire, with the young scholar, Aniér, writing quatrains against Manchín, the Abbot of Cork, for the lack of hospitality shown to him on his arrival.<sup>11</sup> One of the most powerful tools of protest in Ancient Ireland was ‘fasting to distract’, where an individual would go on hunger strike outside the home of their transgressor to draw attention to an injustice.<sup>12</sup> The practice of ‘guesting and feasting’ enshrined in the Brehon Laws included the right of a king to ‘coshering’ (Ir. *cóisir*, ‘a party’) and the billeting of his retinue among his vassals.<sup>13</sup> The Anglo-Normans, often referred to as the ‘Old English’ in Ireland, adopted the Irish language, customs, and manners. This included the traditions of hospitality of the Irish, many of which survived the plantations of the Elizabethan era. The ‘extraordinary hospitality’ of the Irish gentry and ‘the conviviality of their manners’ was frequently the first thing to

**9** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Pádraic Ó Gallagher, ‘The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture’, *Journal of Culinary Science & Technology* 7: 2/3 (2009), 152–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15428050903313457> **10** The Ó Ceallaigh mentioned is William Buí Ó Ceallaigh, Taoiseach of Uí Mhaine, who issued an invitation to the poets, writers, and artists of Ireland to a great feast at his home, Gailey Castle (built in 1348 on the western shores of Lough Ree, Knockcroghery,

Co. Roscommon) at Christmas 1351. See Micheál Ó Conghaile, *Colourful Irish Phrases* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2018); For other famous hosts and memorable banquets, see Katharine Simms, ‘Banqueting and the medieval Gaelic chiefs’ in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 7, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **11** William Sayers, ‘Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century

as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 8, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **12** See Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 12. **13** Simms, ‘Banqueting and the medieval Gaelic chiefs’.

**Figure 1** An Post, A Stamp for Ireland, 2019, Design: The Stone Twins. The full list of English and Irish expressions for rain featured on the stamp are listed opposite.



### English

A downpour  
 A squib  
 Bucketing  
 Cloudburst  
 Driving rain  
 Drizzle  
 Hammering  
 Heavens opened  
 Lashing rain  
 Mist  
 Pelting  
 Pouring rain  
 Raining stair-rods  
 Rotten  
 Sheets of rain  
 Soft day  
 Soft rain  
 Spitting  
 Sun shower  
 A thunder shower  
 Torrential  
 Trying to rain  
 Wetting rain

### Irish

Aimsir cheathach  
 Batharnach  
 Breachháisteach  
 Brádán  
 Báisteach  
 Bús báistí  
 Ceathanna  
 Ceobhrán  
 Clagairt  
 Clagarnach  
 Craobhmhúr  
 Dallcairt  
 Fearthainne  
 Forlacht  
 Gleidearnach  
 Múrtha  
 Péatar  
 Ragáille  
 Scrabhanna báistí  
 Seadbhraonta  
 Seabháisteach  
 Spréachbhraon fearthainne  
 Stealladh  
 Tuile

strike an English traveller in eighteenth century Ireland,<sup>14</sup> yet, Ireland is depicted in history more for its famines and food shortages. Darra Goldstein noted that this focus on deprivation presented ‘an obstacle to the exploration of Irish food. All too often the story begins and ends with potatoes or famine’.<sup>15</sup> Although this chapter discusses potatoes, it does so in a more expansive and celebratory fashion, moving well beyond monoculture and the infamous ‘Lumper’ variety associated with famine.

A pernicious fallacy that continues to be peddled is that Ireland does not have a rich food tradition, or varied food culture, often based on historiography that has neglected to engage with any sources in the Irish language.<sup>16</sup> Ken Albala points out that the first thing a cultural historian should do is learn the language of the culture being studied.<sup>17</sup> Vincent Morley notes how the failure of so many historians to use Irish language sources had a remarkable effect on our official history.<sup>18</sup> In a review of Morley’s book, Declan Kiberd noted that ‘it would be hard to imagine French people paying much heed to a history of their country, written by someone with no working knowledge of its language; but they do (or did) things differently in Ireland’.<sup>19</sup>

Another fallacy is that the Irish, their language and their culture, was insular,<sup>20</sup> perhaps linked with de Valera’s autarkic policies in the 1930s. Taking a longer view of history tells a different story. Take for instance, the trilingual ninth-century Irish scholar Johannes Scotus Eriugena,<sup>21</sup> working in the court of Emperor Charles the Bald in the year 858, translated the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite from Greek into Latin. Michael Cronin outlines what was a long tradition of Irish scholars transcribing various texts relating to the heroic wars of Graeco-Roman antiquity into Irish between the eleventh and the thirteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Stories and knowledge were transmitted in both directions, and this multi-directional and bi-lingual transmission was not exceptional. William Sayers’ chapter in this volume outlines how the vision (a story within the story) of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* was arguably the earliest vernacular European deployment of this conceit of a land of plenty, derivatives of which are found in the later *Land of Cockayne* of English and French tradition, and the German

**14** Constantia Maxwell, *Country and Town in Ireland under the Georges* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1949); Toby Barnard, ‘Public and private uses of wealth in Ireland, c. 1660–1760’, in Jacqueline Hill and Colm Lennon (eds), *Luxury & Austerity* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1999), 66–83. **15** Darra Goldstein, ‘Foreword’, in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), ‘Tickling the Palate’: *Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014),

xi–xvii, xii. **16** For example, Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish & Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 84–85; Maria Fonte, ‘Knowledge, Food and Place. A Way of Producing, a Way of Knowing’, *Sociologia Ruralis* 48: 3 (2008), 200–222, 204. **17** Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch, *Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), Chapter 5 ‘A Conversation with Ken Albala’, 91–92. **18** Vincent

Morley, *The Popular Mind in Eighteenth-century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 2. **19** Declan Kiberd, ‘The Popular Mind in Eighteenth-century Ireland review: An elegant and luminous study’, *Irish Times*, 15 April 2017. **20** Susan Flavin, ‘Food and Social Politics in Early Modern Ireland: Representing the Peasant in The Parliament of Clan Tomas’, *Food & History* 20: 1 (2022), 9–40, 9. <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/99550> **21** <https://www.dib.ie/>

biography/john-scottus-eriugena-a4287 **22** Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland. Translations, Languages, Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 8–46. **23** Sayers, ‘Irish Diet in the Eleventh Century as Reflected in the Satire of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’. **24** Thanks to Michael Cronin for his insight into the quadriviral paradigm. For scholarship taking a maritime reading of Irish culture, see Nicholas Allen, *Ireland, Literature and the Coast:*



*Schlaraffenland*.<sup>23</sup> Much of the peripheral view of Irish life and culture stems from the Graeco-Roman terrestrial paradigm, which viewed the Irish as living at the ends of the earth, *fnis terrae*. There is a growing movement towards a wholly different paradigm of the Gaelic world. In this 'quadri-axial' paradigm, which shifts from a terrestrial to a maritime reading of culture, the Gaelic world is seen as lying at the crossroads of a north / south axis from Scandinavia to the Iberian Peninsula and beyond, and an east / west axis between Europe and America.<sup>24</sup> If Irish culture was insular, how do we explain, for example, the pine-resin hair gel found on Clonycavan Man<sup>25</sup>—a bog body discovered in 2002 and radiocarbon dated to between 392 BCE and 201 BCE—which can be traced to northern Spain or southern France? This chapter, using a food lens, will highlight how Irish culture and the Irish language was very much in tune with the outside world and how trade in spices, wines, and the dissemination of technological and medicinal knowledge from the Middle East and the Mediterranean are preserved in Irish language sources, and that knowledge and trade flowed both ways.<sup>26</sup> Flavin's recent study on the seventeenth-century Irish satirical text *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*, a text discussed further below, points out that Ireland was connected to continental developments and using a gastro-political analysis demonstrates 'the highly sophisticated conceptual integration of European ideas and symbols in Irish culture'.<sup>27</sup> Irish language folklore sources collected in the early twentieth century in Connemara tell of regular and historic illicit trading in cloth, brandy, and other provisions with Guernsey, revealing the importance of a maritime

*Seatangled* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Bob Quinn, *The Atlantean Irish: Ireland's Oriental and Maritime Heritage* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2005); David Brett, *A Book Around the Irish Sea: History without Nations* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2009). **25** Eamonn P. Kelly, 'An archaeological interpretation of Irish Iron Age bodies' in Sarah Ralph (ed.), *The Archaeology of Violence. Interdisciplinary Approaches* (New York: SUNY, 2013), 232–40, 234–35. **26** For Irish

language translations of medical tracts from Salerno and distilling knowledge from the Arab world, see Fionnán O'Connor, 'The Humours of Whiskey: *Uisce Beatha* in Feudal Irish Hospitality and Medicine' in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 9, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **27** Flavin, 'Food and Social Politics in Early Modern Ireland Representing the Peasant in The Parliament of Clan Tomas', 9; See also

Charlie Taverner and Susan Flavin, 'Food and Power in Sixteenth-Century Ireland: Studying Household Accounts from Dublin Castle', *The Historical Journal* (2022), 1–26. doi:10.1017/S0018246X2200019X

**Figure 2** Sign showing the Placename west of Dingle for Wine Strand *Trá an Fhíona*.

reading of culture.<sup>28</sup> Spanish and Gascon wine feature frequently in Irish songs, stories, placenames (Figure 2), and old recipes, highlighting the direct seafaring economy between Western ports such as Dingle, Galway, Sligo, and Derry with the Iberian peninsula and France.<sup>29</sup>

The decline in use of the Irish language is usually linked to the Great Irish Famine (1845–1851) but actually predates it, and goes back to the British colonial project, particularly events following the Battle of Kinsale (1601) and the Flight of the Earls (1607). Fynes Morryson<sup>30</sup> declared that post Kinsale ‘Ireland was left as a payre of cleane tables, where the state might write lawes at pleasure’. Part of the colonial project was the erasure of the Irish language, which was later assisted by the Catholic church with the rolling out of the English-speaking National Schools’ system in the 1830s.<sup>31</sup> Up until the eve of the Great Famine, Ireland had as many as four million Irish speakers—a substantial proportion of the total population—who could be found in every county of the island and in all social classes and religious persuasions. This included an important middling class that had money and were committed to the language’s wellbeing, however, their numbers dramatically contracted post-Famine.<sup>32</sup>

There has been a growing interest in Ireland in recent years in the Irish language and how this ancient tongue allows us a closer insight into the natural world and the cosmology of our ancestors. The Irish language is exceptionally well-served by a number of authoritative and rich lexicographical resources. Digitisation of language resources such as projects by the folklore commission ([www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)), the placenames database of Ireland ([www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)), and various historic dictionaries ([www.dil.ie/](http://www.dil.ie/); [www.corpas.ie/ga](http://www.corpas.ie/ga); <https://celt.ucc.ie//Dinneen1.pdf>; <https://teanglann.ie>) have democratised much of this knowledge, and made it more accessible for scholars of Irish food history, culture, and heritage.<sup>33</sup> Manchán Magan’s *Thirty-Two Words for Field: Lost Words in the Irish Landscape* became an Irish bestseller in 2020. Magan instances how the Irish word ‘*cuibhreann*’<sup>34</sup> meaning commensality or to share food at table, can also mean to be married, and that a further meaning is applied to a tilled field which is worked in partnership with neighbours.<sup>35</sup> *Cuibhreann prátaí* means a field of potatoes, tilled by a *meitheal*. The Irish word ‘*meitheal*’<sup>36</sup> (working group,

**28** Seán Mac Giollarnáth (compiler), Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (translators), *Conamara Chronicles: Tales from Iorras Aithneach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 133–40. **29** Examples of songs include Róisín Dubh; placenames include Spanish Arch, Wine Strand, or Claret Rock; for old recipes see Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘The Influence of French Travellers on Irish Gastronomy’ in Frank

Healy and Brigitte Bastiat (eds), *Voyages between France and Ireland: Culture, Tourism and Sport* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), 155–77. **30** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/moryson-fynes-a6002> **31** The educational and legal systems, the church, immigration and the economy were all working against the language even prior to the Great Famine, see Michael Cronin, *An Ghaeilge agus an Eiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology* (Baile Átha

Cliath: Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, 2019), 59; Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *I mBéal an Bháis: The Great Famine and Language Shift in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Hamden, CT: Quinpiac University Press). **32** Nicholas M. Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island: State, Religion, Community, and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770–1870* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014). **33** Caitríona Nic Philibín and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Surfing the Irish Folklore

Commission’s Schools’ Collection: New Beginnings in the Democratisation of Learning through Digital Archives’, in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), *New Beginnings: Perspectives from France and Ireland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2023), 219–40. **34** <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/cuibhreann> **35** Manchán Magan, *Thirty-Two Words for Field: Lost Words of the Irish Landscape* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2020) 4–5. **36** <https://www>.

gang) is at the heart of most positive community development in Ireland to this day, from organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) to the volunteer transcribers of the [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) Schools' folklore project which will be discussed later. Other food-related field names include *buaile* (cattle milking), *geamhar* (corn grass), *tuar* (night field for cattle), not to mention *garraí*, which is associated principally with growing potatoes.<sup>37</sup> This resonates with Michael Cronin's observation regarding the absurdity of the Irish government's policy on the environment which not once mentioned the Irish language, a language in which the inherited wisdom of multiple generations of Irish people reside.<sup>38</sup>

Two further recent publications have explored the public's renewed fascination with Irish placenames, decoding their original meaning from the Irish language.<sup>39</sup> Over ninety percent of Irish placenames have their origin in the Irish language, with the majority of them dating to before the seventeenth century, and many a thousand years older. Brian Friel in his play *Translations*, set in Donegal in 1833, pointed out how the anglicisation of placenames and other Irish words have rendered these placenames meaningless.<sup>40</sup> Friel's characters, Hugh and Jimmy Jack, are similar to Johannes Scotus Eriugena in being trilingual in Gaelic, Latin and Greek.

Many words we use in Hiberno-English are in fact rooted in the Irish language. For example, the word 'shebeen' which is found in most anglophone countries, throughout the Americas and in Africa, meaning 'a shop or house where excisable liquors are sold without a licence'<sup>41</sup> is of Irish origin, stemming from the word *séibe*, meaning a mugful of ale or whiskey.<sup>42</sup> The Folklorist Brid Mahon, in *Land of Milk and Honey*, while discussing one of St Brigid's miracles with food, uses the word 'strone'<sup>43</sup> which does not appear in any English dictionary. Closer investigation revealed that the word is an anglicisation of 'sruán', or 'srubhán',<sup>44</sup> a term for griddle-cake, 'sruán coirce' giving oat-cake. An entry in the Schools' Collection from Laragh, Co. Monaghan, titled *Focail Ghaeilge ata in Úsáid sa Bhéarla* (Irish words in common use in English) lists *sruán* among other Irish words such as *amadán* (idiot), *clábar* (wet clay), *gríosach* (red hot ashes), and *bonnóg* (a bunnock of bread), explaining it as 'a srooan or bread: a piece'.<sup>45</sup> Irish food and foodways are gradually being appreciated as part of our intangible

teaglann.ie/en/fgb/Meitheal  
**37** Magan, *Thirty-Two Words for Field*, 4–5. **38** Cronin, *An Ghaeilge agus an Eiceolaíocht*.  
**39** Seoirse Ó Dochartaigh, *Know Your Place: An Exploration of the Place Names of Ireland* (Dublin: Red Stripe Press, 2021); John Creedon, *That Place We Call Home: A Journey through the Place Names of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2020). **40** Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981). An example of meaningless transliteration

is Muckanaghederdauhulia (Irish: *Muiceanach idir Dhá Sháile*, meaning 'pig-marsh between two sea inlets') in Co. Galway, or Terenure (*Tír an Iúir*, meaning 'land of the yew trees'), a suburb of Dublin. **41** [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/shebeen\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use&tl=true#23236617](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/shebeen_n?tab=meaning_and_use&tl=true#23236617)  
**42** 'Shebeen' is from Irish *séibe* via its diminutive *séibín* ('mugful' or 'little mugful'). Originally referring to rotgut alcohol, most

typically bad ale but also spirits, often under the Anglification *sheepey*. With the expansion of licensing and the late-seventeenth-century outlawing of private spirits, *séibín* (and its Anglification *shebeen*) evolved to refer to the often remote or impromptu unlicensed premises in which the drinks were sold. For more on the history of whiskey see O'Connor 'The Humours of Whiskey: *Uisce Beatha* in Feudal Irish Hospitality and

Medicine'. **43** Brid Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1991), 124. Mahon describes a tradition of leaving a 'strone of oaten bread in the shape of a cross and a sheaf of straw on the windowsill for the saint and her pet cow'. **44** Note that this can also be spelled 'srubhán', for example in *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*. Thanks to Nicholas Williams for this insight. **45** The Schools' Collection, Volume 0939, Page 143; <https://www.duchas.ie/>



cultural heritage.<sup>46</sup> Utilising different electronic sources (the Schools' Collection of folklore, placename database, and various dictionaries), and the three terms 'milk', 'oats', and 'potato' as examples, this chapter will highlight the diversity of uses and variations of food words within the Irish language, uncovering over seventy-two words for potato.

### Irish language sources

Irish has been the language used on this island for over 3,000 years. The ancient tales, genealogies, histories, and *dinnseanchas*—placename lore—were transmitted orally and passed on by a stratum of learned men (*ollamh*—professors, scholars, poets, bards etc.) until, with the spread of literacy following the introduction of Christianity, they were written down by scribes in the fifth century. From the eleventh to the seventeenth century, various bardic schools were active where the laws, ancient histories—*seanchas*—poetry, songs, medicine, and music were taught, transcribed and preserved. As outlined in this volume by Nikolah Gilligan, Ireland holds one of the richest collections in Europe of early medieval vernacular literature; documentary sources which include law tracts and legal glosses, ecclesiastical legislation and penitential codes, as well as annals, wisdom-texts, sagas and poetry that are invaluable for reconstructing food practices as they provide a great deal of information about farming, livestock management and layout of buildings.<sup>47</sup> One of the most important projects to preserve this ancient Gaelic heritage was carried out by Micheál Ó Cléirigh (c. 1590–1643), OFM, and his fellow Franciscan historians and scribes in the compilation of the *Annals of the Four Masters*. This work chronicles Irish history from 2242 BCE until the death of Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, in 1616 CE,<sup>48</sup> during which century the secular bardic schools were disbanded.<sup>49</sup> The subsequent change in social status of poets is evident in Aogán Ó Rathaille's (1670?–1728/9) poem 'Is Fada Liom Oíche Fhrfhliuch',<sup>50</sup> in which he laments the loss of his former Jacobite patrons, the Mac Carthys and Brownes (Lords Kenmare), whose lands were partly or wholly dispossessed following the battles of the Boyne (1690) and Aughrim (1691).<sup>51</sup> Ó Rathaille notes, in the context of this change, that he never

en/cbes/5162159/5160093

**46** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Recognizing food as part of Ireland's intangible cultural heritage', *Folk Life* 56: 2 (2018), 93–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2018.1502402>; Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Cairíona Nic Philibín, 'Exploring the Food-Related Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bealtaine (May Day) within the Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Collection Digital Archive', *Études Irlandaises* 47: 1 (2022), 15–32. <https://doi.org/10.4000/>

etudesirlandaises.12548

**47** Nikolah Gilligan, 'Dishing up the Past: A review of plant foods, food products and agriculture in Early Medieval Ireland', in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 4, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK8748> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/o-cleirigh-micheal-oclerly-michael-a6307>; <https://www.ria.ie/library/catalogues/special-collections/medieval-and-early-modern-manuscripts/>

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**49** Katharine Simms, 'Gaelic Culture and Society' in Brendan Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland Volume 1 (600–1550)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 415–440. **50** <https://alloetry.com/Is-Fada-Liom-Oche-Fhrfhliuch> **51** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/o-rathaille-aogan-a6427> **52** See for example Douglas Hyde, *Love Songs of Connacht* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1969). **53** The diaries of

Alma Cardell Curtin, wife of Jeremiah Curtin (1835–1906) the American ethnographer, folklorist and translator, offer rich descriptions of food eaten in different regions of Ireland during their five visits to Ireland between 1871 and 1893. See Angela Bourke, 'The Myth Business: Jeremiah and Alma Curtin in Ireland, 1887–1893', *Éire-Ireland* 44: 3&4 (2009), 140–70. **54** <https://www.duchas.ie/download/cill-rialaigh.pdf> **55** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'The Food Trope in Literature, Poetry and

had to resort to eating dogfish or river cockles in his childhood. Some of the vernacular stories, songs, and folklore remained principally an oral tradition until the late nineteenth century when many were written down by Gaelic revivalists such as Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory.<sup>52</sup> More were preserved following the arrival of American<sup>53</sup> and Scandinavian folklore collectors<sup>54</sup> in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and with the establishment of the Irish Folklore Society in 1926. An exploratory study of the food trope within Irish literature in the English language has been published<sup>55</sup> disproving certain claims that 'Irish writers of memoir, poems, stories, political tracts, or songs rarely included the details of food in describing daily life'.<sup>56</sup> Further evidence of food within Irish poetry, short stories and novels has been provided in Anke Klitzing's recent doctoral thesis defining gastrocriticism as a critical paradigm modelled on an example of Irish literature and food writing.<sup>57</sup> However, further research on the food trope within specific time periods, genres, and specific regions of Ireland is long overdue.<sup>58</sup> Another development in Irish food history following the dinnseanchas tradition was a study mining the digitised placenames database [www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie) for food-related placenames, coined gastro-topography, both of which will be discussed below.<sup>59</sup>

### The digitised Folklore Collection ([www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie))

Food traditions, customs, and practices are abundantly preserved in the resources of the National Folklore Collection (NFC), in University College Dublin (UCD).<sup>60</sup> Many scholars have published articles and monographs based on the Main Collection of the NFC, but few are food-related.<sup>61</sup> The Schools' Folklore Collection (SFC) has also proved a rich resource for folklore scholars, however, to date, with the exceptions of Bríd Mahon and Patricia Lysaght, little food-specific research has emerged from these collections.<sup>62</sup> The Schools' Collection 1937–38 was an oral history project that collected handwritten essays from sixth-class pupils in national schools around Ireland (outside the larger cities). The Collection emerged from an innovative agreement between the Folklore Commission, the Department of Education, and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, which

Songs from the Irish Tradition' in Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 364–78.

**56** Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish & Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, 84–5.

**57** Anke Klitzing, 'Defining Gastrocriticism as a Critical Paradigm on the Example of Irish Literature and Food Writing: A *Vade Mecum*' (Unpublished PhD: Technological University

Dublin, 2023). Klitzing's exclusion of Irish language sources from her thesis is noted as a limitation of her study. **58** Some rare exceptions include Mairéad Ní Chinnéide agus Clíodna Cussen, *Bainne na Bó: Bainne agus Bánbhianna in Éirinn ó thús Aimsire* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 1986); Cormac Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaoil: Béaloideas agus Amhráin* (Baile Átha Cliath: Coiscéim, 1994); Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (eag.), *An Práta* (An Daingean: An Sagart,

1996); Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*. 3rd Edition (Dundalk: The Dundalgan Press, 2008).

**59** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Gastro-Topography: Exploring Food-Related Place Names in Ireland', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 38: 1/2 (2014), 126–57. **60** For the latest overall survey of food within the Irish folklore collection, see Jonny Dillon and Ailbe van der Heide, 'Lashings and Leavings': Foodways as represented in the National Folklore

Collection' in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 21, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87> **61** Food related publications include Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey*; Patricia Lysaght, 'Bealtaine: Irish Maytime Customs and the Reaffirmation of Boundaries', in Hilda Ellis Davidson (ed.), *Boundaries and Thresholds* (Stroud, Glos.: The Tumble Press, 1993), 28–43. **62** Patricia Lysaght, 'Bealtaine: Women, Milk, and Magic at the

led to the schoolchildren of what was then the Irish Free State (26 counties) becoming folklore collectors in nearly every parish of the country. A similar project conducted in Northern Ireland a decade later was called the Schools' Scheme, which is currently being analysed from a food lens.<sup>63</sup>

In 2012, the *Dúchas* project was initiated in partnership with the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin, the National Folklore Foundation and the UCD Digital Library. Further project partners included *Gaois*, *Fiontar* and *Scoil na Gaeilge*, Dublin City University (DCU), and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. The DCU-based research group, *Gaois*, which develops innovative resources to support the Irish language and its heritage, as well as other projects within the digital humanities, are also responsible for the digitisation of the placenames register card file system into a database, which will be further discussed later in this chapter. This digitisation process has immeasurably contributed to the democratisation of knowledge.<sup>64</sup> Similar to other forms of scholarship, engagement with the Irish language sources within the Main and Schools' Collections leads to providing a more complete picture of our overall food heritage. Around half of the Main Collection is in the Irish language as the Commission set out initially to 'collect the fragments', principally in Gaeltacht regions of the western seaboard.<sup>65</sup> The Schools' Collection covered a wider and more diverse geographical spread, yet nearly a quarter (23%) of the pages transcribed by the volunteer '*meitheal dúchas.ie*' are in the Irish language.<sup>66</sup> Food-related research was carried out on the digitised Schools' Collection of Folklore ([www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)) during the Covid-19 pandemic when regular archives were closed.<sup>67</sup> Whereas Nic Philibín and Mac Con Iomaire drew their samples from entries in both languages, Byrne and Farrell focused solely on English language sources within the Schools' Collection, thus missing out on possible revelations from the neglected Irish entries.

For illustrative purposes, we will provide just a few of the insights that exploring the Irish language entries in the Schools' Collection reveal around the topics of milk, oats and potatoes. The Collection is indexed and can be searched by theme or by keyword. Within the product themes, there are 3,601 entries for food products, and 2,063 on bread. Within the economic activity topic, there are 3,280 entries on butter and churns, and 2,701 on potatoes. A word search for 'oat' gives 1,449 results, whereas '*coirce*' shows 1,226 results. One of these entries

Boundary Festival of May', in Patricia Lysaght (ed.), *Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 208–29; Patricia Lysaght, 'Hospitality at wakes and funerals in Ireland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century: Some evidence from the written record', *Folklore* 114: 3 (2003), 403–26.  
**63** Caitríona Nic Philibín,

'Exploring Ireland's food traditions North and South: A Comparative Analysis of the Schools' Collection 1937–8 and the Schools' Scheme 1955–56'. IRC GOI Postgraduate Fellowship (PhD Project TU Dublin 2022–26).  
**64** Nic Philibín and Mac Con Iomaire, 'Surfing the Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Collection: New Beginnings in the Democratisation of

Learning through Digital Archives'. **65** Patricia Lysaght, 'From "Collect the Fragments . . ." to "Memory of the World"—Collecting the Folklore of Ireland 1927–70: Aims, Achievement, Legacy', *Folklore* 130: 1 (2019), 1–30.  
**66** <https://duchas.ie/ga/meitheal> **67** Caitríona Nic Philibín, 'Exploring Food Traditions within the four Quarter Days of the Irish

Calendar year' (M.A. Thesis: Technological University Dublin, 2021). DOI: 10.21427/TZ8N-NC0g; Caitríona Nic Philibín and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire 'An exploratory study of food traditions associated with Imbolg (St Brigid's Day)', *Folk Life* 59: 2 (2021), 141–60 <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957428>; Stephanie Byrne and Kathleen Farrell, 'An investigation into the food

go minic mar bíod sé aca leif na parat  
 freisin. bsinne leaninac azur bsinne geor  
 le as an zuseog nó an an mboard a d'icidif  
 an béile. Crocraod siad an board leif an  
 bpalla nuair a bíod béile sírice aca. bíod  
 m' buidel azur roinnic plúr aca azur do  
 bíodif az deanam anáin doob síh. do bíod  
 m' coirce aca freitín azur d'icidif é  
 mar béile. do meastad siad an m' m' m'  
 coirce agus na parat bruite le d'icidif  
 i deanam siad é, na na parat as  
 s' g'obad le s' z'apúr" agus é f'asjed  
 go marí agus é bruit anner. agus  
 nuair a bíod sé bruite, é ve mar  
 aran. Ní bíod an piot nó minic  
 aca, aca miar a m'antijead siad  
 beidif nó caoiria, is feor in a bíod  
 aca. Nuair a bíod na m'ca nó, m'antij-  
 ead siad ceann aca agus s'ulleid siad ead  
 agus bíod siad dá ve gurt. d'icidif  
 an piot gan beir bruite ion an bí-  
 com is dá m'ead sí bruite.

Figure 3 Entry from Inis  
 Meáin: The Schools'  
 Collection, Volume  
 0002C, Page 03\_025

titled *bia na seanaimsire* (food from olden times) from Inis Meáin, Co. Galway describes oat meal eaten as a meal but also mixed with grated potatoes to make a form of oat and potato bread (Figure 3).<sup>68</sup> This source also mentions new milk and sour buttermilk: '*bainne leamhnacht agus bainne géar*'. Another interesting entry from Eoghanacht, Inis Mór, Co. Galway, titled *An Talamh, Cur na bhFataí srl.* (The Land, Planting of Potatoes, etc.), gives a detailed outline of preparing the ground for planting potatoes, focusing in on the fact that most fields in Aran have been made from generations of hauling seaweed, sand, clay, and manure. It mentions the use of different varieties of seaweed at various time of the year to fertilise the soil.<sup>69</sup> This ingenious process of making potato fields was captured by Robert J. Flaherty in his 1934 fictional documentary *Man of Aran*.<sup>70</sup>

Apart from the usual porridge or oat cakes, a particularly interesting dish is *Cáithbhruith*, stemming from *cáith* (chaff) and *bhruith* (to boil), where the chaff of the oats was soaked for a number of days and let ferment before being boiled to create a form of sour porridge or blancmange. An entry from Baile na Bó, Co. Donegal, collected from a 67-year-old man outlines the daily regimen of meals, and notes that the *cáithbhruith* was reputedly a cure for a cold. The entry also notes that *cáithbhruith*, potato bread, and boxty were special occasion meals.<sup>71</sup> *Cáithbhruith*, known as 'sowens' or 'sowans' in English, could produce a form of fermented oat milk which is noted in Medieval times in Nikolah Gilligan's chapter in this volume.<sup>72</sup> It is interesting to observe that the mentions in the Schools' Collection, sometimes spelled '*cáfraidh*' or '*cáfraith*', generally align with the oat growing regions of the north-west counties, particularly Donegal.<sup>73</sup> Another regionally located term from Donegal is 'poundies', a mashed potato dish which stems from the Irish '*brúitín*' from the verb '*brúigh*', to push or mash. Regional variations are evident for boxty, which is known as '*steampí*' in Munster.<sup>74</sup> The Baile na Bó (townland of the cow) Donegal origin of the *cáithbhruigh* entry in [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) provides a nice segue into exploring food-related placenames a little closer using [www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie).

### Placenames Database of Ireland (Logainm.ie)

As previously noted, the vast majority of Irish placenames originate in the Irish language with many dating from earlier than the seventh century. A relatively

related traditions associated with the Christmas period in Rural Ireland', *Folk Life* 59: 2 (2021), 123–40 <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957427>. **68** The Schools' Collection, Volume 002C, Page 03\_025; <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5235142/5221961?HighlightText=coirce&Route=stories&SearchLanguage=ga> **69** The Schools' Collection, Volume 0002, Page 047; <https://www.duchas.ie/en/>

[cbes/4602670/4594113?HighlightText=coirce&Route=stories&SearchLanguage=ga](https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4602670/4594113?HighlightText=coirce&Route=stories&SearchLanguage=ga) **70** Robert J. Flaherty, *Man of Aran* (London: Gaumont British Distributors, 1934), YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cwmc05qWoxc>, 14.50–24.30mins. **71** The Schools' Collection, Volume 1073, Page 288; <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4493628/4405251> **72** Gilligan, 'Dishing up

the Past: Plants foods, food products and agriculture in early medieval Ireland'. **73** Nic Philibín and Mac Con Iomaire, 'An exploratory study of food traditions associated with Imbolg (St Brigid's Day)', 145. **74** William Wilde notes that boxty was also known as 'scotchty', 'buck-bread', or 'stampy' in the south of the country and was very popular with children, William Wilde,

'The food of the Irish', *The Dublin University Magazine* 43: 214 (1854), 127–46.

**75** The Irish of Ireland's Eye is *Inis Mac Neasáin*—the island of the son of Neasán <https://www.logainm.ie/en/s?txt=Ireland%27s+Eye&str=on> **76** Ní Chinnéide agus Cussen, *Bainne na Bó*, 10–11. **77** Mac Con Iomaire, 'Gastro-Topography', 127.

small number of placenames are of Scandinavian origin, such as Leixlip in Co. Kildare, from the Norse *lax hlaup*—*Léim an Bhradáin*—The Leap of the Salmon (Figure 4), or Smerwick Harbour in Co. Kerry—Butter Bay from *smjor uik*. Other placenames with Norse influence, are Fingal—*Fine Gall*—kindred > territory of foreigners (Norwegian Vikings); or Baldoyle—*Baile Dúill* < *Baile Dubhghaill*—town of the dark foreigners (Danish Vikings). Further Norse influence is found in placenames such as Ireland’s Eye (an island off north Dublin), which stems from the Norse ‘*ey*’ meaning island.<sup>75</sup> Folklore found in both Ireland and Iceland tells of how Irish slaves saved an Icelandic Viking crew when their ship was caught in a storm by teaching them to mix butter and water for food.<sup>76</sup>

Some towns were renamed after Elizabethan planters or settlers. Manorhamilton in Co. Leitrim is one such example whose Irish version *Cluainín*, an abbreviation of *Cluainín Uí Ruairc*—the small meadow of the O’Rourke’s—refers to the Gaelic chieftains who ruled the north Leitrim part of the Kingdom of *Breifne* (Breffny) for centuries. Londonderry is named after the charter given to the Worshipful Companies of London when the city was granted a Royal Charter in 1613 by King James I, supplanting the original Irish name *Doire Cholmcille*—the oakwood of St Colmcille. Naturally, due to the late arrival of the potato in Irish history, very few Irish placenames refer to the potato, but they do give an insight into the variety of foodstuffs consumed in Irish culture prior to the potato’s arrival. An analysis of Irish placenames, coined gastro-topography, unearthed evidence of a diet which ‘included wild garlic, honey, grouse, game, white meats or *bánbhia* (milk, buttermilk, curds etc.), eels, wrasse, oats, rye, gruel, pottage, watercress, apples, hazelnuts, bilberries, sorrel, tansy, and edible seaweed’,<sup>77</sup> all prior to the arrival of the humble potato (Table 1). We will particularly focus here on the abundance of placenames related to dairy and oats, before highlighting the dearth of those related to the potato.



**Figure 4** Signpost for *Léim an Bhradáin*—Leixlip in Co. Kildare

**Table 1** Selection of food related placenames

Foodstuff	Irish	Placename Irish	Placename English & county
<b>Bovine:</b> Cows, Bulls, Calf	Bó, Tarbh, Lao	<i>Cluain Tarbh</i> <i>Droim an Lao</i> <i>Ath na mBó</i>	Clontarf (Dublin) Drumalee (Dublin) Annamoe (Wicklow, Offaly)
<b>Ovine: Sheep</b> Goats, Kids	Caora, Gabhar, Meannán	<i>Gleann na gCaorach</i> <i>Baile na nGabhar</i> <i>Baile Uí Mheannáin</i>	Glenageary (Dublin) Goatstown (Dublin) Ballyminaun (Wexford)
<b>Porcine:</b> Pigs, Boars	Muc, Torc, Collach	<i>Béal Átha na Muice</i> <i>Ceann Toirc</i> <i>Gleann na Muc</i> <i>Log na gCollach</i>	Swinford (Mayo) Kanturk (Cork) Glenamuck (Wicklow) Lugnagullagh (Westmeath)
<b>Poultry and Feathered Game</b> (Hen, Grouse, Goose, Woodcock)	Cearc, Cearc fhraoigh, Gé, Creabhar	<i>Na Cearca</i> <i>Cluain na gCearc</i> <i>Gort an Ghé</i> <i>Muine Creabhair</i>	Carks (Kerry) Cloonagark (Galway) Gortagea (Tipperary) Bunacrower (Mayo)
<b>Furred Game</b> (Deer, Rabbits, Hare)	Fia, Coinín, Giorria	<i>Dún na bhFiach</i> <i>Droim Coinín</i> <i>Gort na nGiorriacha</i>	Dernaveagh (Antrim) Drumcunnion (Monaghan) Harefield (Mayo)
<b>Fish</b>	lasc	<i>Léim an Bhradáin</i>	Leixlip (Kildare)
<b>Oats</b>	Coirce	<i>Fearann an Choirce</i>	Oatlands (Dublin, Limerick, Inis Mór)
<b>Barley</b>	Eorna	<i>Garrán na hEorna</i>	Barley Grove (Wexford, Cork)
<b>Wheat</b>	Cruithneacht	<i>Carraig na Cruithneachta</i>	Wheat Rock (Galway)
<b>Rye</b>	Seagal	<i>Ceapaigh an tSeagail</i>	Cappataggle (Galway)
<b>Milk</b>	Bainne	<i>Cnoc an Bhainne</i>	Knockavanny (Galway)
<b>Buttermilk</b>	Bláthach	<i>Port na Bláiche</i>	Portnablahy (Donegal)

<b>Foodstuff</b>	<b>Irish</b>	<b>Placename Irish</b>	<b>Placename English &amp; county</b>
<b>Butter</b>	Im	<i>Coill Dhíoma</i>	Killimy (Laois)
<b>Wild Garlic</b>	Creamh	<i>Cluain Creamha</i>	Cloncraft (Offaly)
<b>Honey</b>	Mil	<i>Cluain Meala</i>	Clonmel (Tipperary)
<b>Watercress</b>	Biolar	<i>Dumha Bhiolra</i>	Doovlra (Mayo)
<b>Corn</b>	Arbhar	<i>Margadh an Arbhair</i>	Corn Market (Dublin)
<b>Apples / Orchard</b>	Úill / Úllord	<i>Baile an Úlloird</i> <i>Baile an Abhalloirt</i>	Orchardstown (Dublin) Ballynahoulort (Kerry)
<b>Potatoes</b>	Fataí	<i>Oileáin Fhataí</i>	Potato Islands (Galway)
<b>Wild Tansy</b>	Brioscán	<i>Béal Átha na mBrioscán</i>	Bellanabriscaun (Mayo)
<b>Berries</b>	Caor	<i>Coill na gCaor</i>	Kilnageer (Monaghan, Mayo)



## Cattle

The previously discussed abundant vocabulary for rain and our fascination with the weather indirectly influences our rich dairying heritage. Ireland is a lush country where grass grows nearly all year round, and is ideal for rearing cattle. Cattle were a sign of wealth in ancient Ireland and cattle raids feature in many mythological tales, such as the famous *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley).<sup>78</sup> Cattle were valued principally for their milk, which could be preserved by fermentation, butter, and cheesemaking.<sup>79</sup> The Irish obsession with cattle is evident in Irish placenames. *Bó* and *tarbh* are the words in the Irish language for cow and bull respectively. The English for *Bóthar* is road, defined in width by the length and breadth of a cow; the English for *buachaill* is boy, but can also mean herd boy or herdsman, literally cow herder (*bua*-cattle *chail*-herder), with the word for girl (*cailín*) literally meaning little herder.<sup>80</sup> *Bóthar* can also appear as ‘batter’, as in Stoneybatter, or in a direct Anglicisation such as Bohernabreena, both locations in Dublin. Irish placenames of bovine origin include Drumbo (Cavan), Lough Bo (Sligo), Annamoe (Wicklow & Offaly), Inishbofin (Donegal, Galway, Westmeath), and also the river Boyne (from *Bóinn*, Boann, or Bovinda—the goddess of the white cow). Some placenames featuring the Anglicised term ‘bawn’, such as Old Bawn in Wexford, derive from *Bábhún*—cow fort or walled enclosure, and not from ‘*bán*’ the Irish for white.<sup>81</sup> In Dublin you have Red Cow Lane, Bull Wall, Bull Alley, and Drumalee (*Droim an Lao*)—hill of the young calf: ‘*Lao*’ and ‘*Gamhain*’ both mean calf. There is an *Eanach Lao* (Annaghlee) in Cavan; a *Lios na Lao* (Lisnalea) in both Armagh and Monaghan; and *Móta Lao* (Motalee) in Derry. *Loch Gamhna* (Lough Gowna) in Cavan and *Gort na nGamhna* (Gortnagowna) in Tipperary mean the lake and the field of the calves respectively. *Gamhnach* is the Irish for a stripper cow, which has been defined as ‘a cow which has been in milk more than eight months’.<sup>82</sup> Magowna (Clare) and Moygawnagh (Mayo), therefore, are the plain of the milch cows. Lullymore (*Loilíoch Mór*) in Kildare gets its name from a milch cow.

‘*Cró*’, which means enclosure, fold or pen for animals, is of common occurrence in placenames. In Donegal it can also mean a glen. *Craoi*, the genitive singular of *cró*, is also preserved in placenames such as *Cnocán an Chraoi* (Knockanacree) in Tipperary. *Mín an Daimh* (Meenadiff) in Donegal is the mountain pasture of the ox (*damh*). The site of the Battle of Clontarf (1014) in Dublin derives its name from *Cluain Tarbh* (pasture of the bulls). The name of the victorious Irish king in said battle, Brian Ború, means Brian of the cattle tribute.

**78** Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin: Translated from the Epic Irish Tain Bó Cuailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). **79** For concept of ante-mortem and post-mortem value of cattle, see Seamas Caulfield, ‘A Landscape Fossilized’: Céide Fields, Dairy farming

and food production in the Irish Neolithic’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 3, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87> **80** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Pádraic Óg Gallagher, ‘Irish Corned Beef: A Culinary History’, *Journal of Culinary*

*Science & Technology* 9: 1 (2011), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15428052.2011.558464> **81** Deirdre Flanagan and Laurence Flanagan, *Irish Place Names* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994); <https://www.teanglann.ie/ga/fgb/bábhún> **82** F.L. Kent, ‘Fresh versus Stripper Cow

Butter’, *Oregon Agriculture Experimental Station Bulletin* 54 (May, 1898), 20–1, 20.

### Milk and Buttermilk

Milk and milk-based products played an important role in the Irish diet. John Stevens, describing Co. Limerick in 1690, observed: ‘The people generally being the greatest lovers of milk I ever saw which they eat and drink about twenty several sorts of ways and what is strangest love it best when sourest’.<sup>83</sup> *Bainne* is the Irish for milk, and *bláthach* is the Irish for buttermilk, which could be sweet or sour. Placenames include *Log an Bhainne* (Luggawannia)—hollow of the milk—and *Cnoc an Bhainne* (Knocknavanny) in Galway; Castlebanny in Kilkenny; Kishawanny in Kildare; and *Bealach Bainne* (Ballyboni) in Louth. For buttermilk, there are *Cathair na Bláiche* (Cahernablahy) in Mayo; *Port na Bláiche* (Portnablahy) in Donegal; and *Bóithrín na Bláthaí* (Buttermilk Lane) in Galway. *Leamhnacht*, the Irish for ‘new milk’, is preserved in the placename *Inis Leamhachta* (Inishlounaght) in Tipperary by the banks of the River Suir, once the location of a Cistercian Abbey. *Nús*, the Irish for beestings, the first milk of a newly calved cow, is reflected in the Armagh placename *Doire Nús* (Derrynoose). Maugha in Cork stems from the Irish ‘*macha*’, which can mean a cattle field, or also a herd.<sup>84</sup> It also means a milking field. *Buaile* or Booley means cattle fold or summer pasture. Indeed, *buailteachas* means summer grazing or transhumance, where the *buachaillí* (herd boys) brought the cattle to the hills for grazing. Brid Mahon notes that girls as young as thirteen also spent the summer months booleying and would bring spinning wheels and knitting needles with them to keep busy when not milking their cattle or making butter.<sup>85</sup> Many Irish place-names such as Boolahallagh and Boolabeha in Tipperary, Ballynaboola in both Waterford and Wexford, and Shanabooly in Limerick, reflect this origin. *Bligh* is the Irish verb to milk, and *Bliotóg* (Blittoge) in Monaghan means a milking place.

### Butter and Cheese

Where there were cows one also found milk, cream, butter, and cheese. In the transhumance tradition, the milk was often preserved as butter, a practice evident in a number of placenames. Butter is made from churning either whole milk or the cream from the top of the milk.<sup>86</sup> Irish words for churn include *cuinneog* and *meadar*, both evident in placenames; *Lios na gCuinneog* (lisnagonoge) in Tipperary and *Carraig na Meidre* (Medery Rock) in Galway.

The Irish word for butter is *im*; *Carraig an Ime* (Carriganimmy) in Cork means rock of the butter, whereas Gort an Ime in both Dublin and Limerick is literally ‘Butterfield’. Both Knockanima and Carrickanima in Galway may be named after

<sup>83</sup> Rev. Robert H. Murray (ed.), *The journal of John Stevens, containing a brief account of the war in Ireland, 1689–1691* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1912), 139. <sup>84</sup> Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 1977). <sup>85</sup> Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey*. See also Eugene

Costello, *Transhumance and the making of Ireland’s uplands, 1550–1900* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> For details of home butter making and later industrial cooperative creameries, see Claudia Kinmonth, “‘Joined in Butter’: the material culture of Irish home

butter-makers, using the dash churn, up to the late nineteenth century’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 16 <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>; Patrick Doyle, ‘A Dairy Democracy: The co-operative movement

and the improvement of pre-Independence Irish Dairying (1899–1922)’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 17 <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>

places where butter was either made or stored. Butter was preserved in the bogs of Ireland and other northern European countries. This practice is captured in the place name *Móin na dTobán* (Monadubbaun) in Kilkenny—meaning bog of the tubs.<sup>87</sup> Many varieties of cheese were produced and savoured in Ireland. Some placenames may refer directly to cheese production or may use the term for soft cheese as a simile for soft land. Examples of this are *Maothail* (Mohill) in Leitrim, and *Muine Maothail* (Money Mohill) in Limerick, meaning thicket of the cheese and stemming from the word ‘*maoth*’ (soft) and ‘*maothal*’ (beestings). There seems to be a differentiation between the *gruth núis* (first beestings) and the *gruth maothail* (second beestings) which is also called *gruth buí* (yellow curds) as it has a thick consistency and yellow colour similar to custard. *Meidhg* is the Irish word for whey, so the placenames *Seanadh Mheidhg* (Shanaveag) in Galway and *Muileann an Mheidhg* (Mullinaveige) in Wicklow both suggest dairying or cheese making took place there. *Corr na Fastra* (Cornafostra) in Leitrim is said to mean the round hill of the cheese. This possibly derives from the Irish word ‘*fáiscire*’ or squeezer, referring to the process of squeezing the curds to make cheese, or it may be linked with the Irish word ‘*maistreadh*’ for butter making.

### Cereals (Oats, Rye, Barley, Wheat)

Anthony T. Lucas observed that ‘from pre-history to the close of the seventeenth century, corn and milk were the mainstay of the national food’.<sup>88</sup> The word ‘corn’ is used in this context as a catch-all for a variety of cereals and not to be mistaken for maize or Indian corn which is a New World food. Archaeobotanical evidence shows that in the early medieval period barley, wheat, oats, and rye were the primary cereals found in assemblages.<sup>89</sup> Many cereal crops feature in placenames. *Coirce* is the Irish for oats and there are several variations, ranging from *Gort an Choirce* (Gortahork) and Tullyhorky in Donegal; *Cuar an Choirce* (Cooracurkia) in Galway; and *Inis an Choirce* (Inchincurka) in Cork.

*Seagal* is the Irish for rye and placenames range from *Ceapaigh an tSeagail* (Cappagaggle) in Galway; *Lios an tSeagail* (Listoghil) in Sligo; Gortaggle in Leitrim; to Knockataggle in Kerry and Knockataggal in Fermanagh—both meaning hill of the rye.

Barley or *Eorna* is found in quite a few placenames from right around the country, including *Baile Eorna* (Ballyorney) in Wicklow; *Buaile na hEorna* (Ballinahorna) in Wexford; *Goirtín Eorna* (Gorteenorna) in Longford; *Carraig na hEorna* (Carricknahorna) in Donegal; *Lios na hEorna* (Lisnahorna) and *Gort na hEorna* (Barleyfield), both in Cork, and Barley Rock in Galway.

<sup>87</sup> See Maeve Sikora and Isabella Mulhall, ‘A History of Bog Butter in Ireland’ in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUt+ Academic Press, 2023), chapter 5,

<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/eutpressbooks/6/>. <sup>88</sup> Anthony T. Lucas, ‘Irish Food Before The Potato’ *Gwerin* 3: 2 (1960), 8–43.

<sup>89</sup> Gilligan, ‘Dishing up the Past: A review of plant foods, food products and agriculture in Early Medieval Ireland’.

*Cruithneacht*, the Irish for wheat, appears in a few placenames: Mullycrunnet in Tyrone and Articrunaght in Derry, which means height of the house of wheat, or a house on a hill that was used as a wheat granary. There is also *Carraig na Cruithneachta* (Wheat Rock) in Galway and *Cruithneachtán* (Crinnaghtane) in Cork, not to mention Wheatfield in Dublin.

*Arbhar*, the Irish for corn, appears in placenames such as *Gort an Arbhair* (Cornfield) in Clare. All these cereals would be stored in a Granary, which translates as a *gráinseach* or *iothlainn* in Irish. Patrick W. Joyce noted that there were over two hundred grange-related placenames in Ireland which are Medieval, such as Coolnagranshy in Roscommon or Drumnagranshy in Sligo, *Lios na Gráinsí* (Lisnagranshy) in Galway, and *Carraig na hIothlann* (Carrignahihilan) near Kenmare in Kerry, noted in 1841 as ‘rock of the haggard’—which derives from the old Norse *Heygarthr*, from *hey* (hay) and *garthr* (yard).<sup>90</sup> There is a Grange listed in over twenty-two counties on the Logainm database.<sup>91</sup> Grange / *Gráinseach* can also mean a farm or, more specifically, an outlying monastic farm.<sup>92</sup>

### Potatoes in the Irish language

To trace every food-related placename in Ireland is outside the scope of this chapter. It is worth reminding ourselves that few placenames refer to the potato or maize, as they mainly predate the arrival of the tuber to Ireland from the New World about the late sixteenth century. There is *Oileán Fhataí* (Potato Islands) on Lough Corrib in Galway—from ‘*fata*’ or ‘*práta*’. Another possible contender is *Béal Átha Póirín* (Ballyporeen) in Tipperary (where former US president Ronald Reagan’s ancestors came from)—possibly meaning the ford-entrance of the little potato, however ‘*póirín*’ may equally relate to either a hole for dying cloth indigo or an enclosure for lambs being weaned,<sup>93</sup> each of which have a longer history in Ireland than the humble potato. Despite its absence in placenames, apart from cattle and dairy, the potato has arguably influenced the Irish diet and history more than any other foodstuff.<sup>94</sup> As we will see from this final section on dictionaries, the Irish language did embrace the potato upon its arrival and the wealth of words that will be discussed below show the range of terms and the variety of customs associated with all aspects of the potato, from preparing the land, sowing the seed potatoes, harvesting and storage to the multiple practices of preparation and consumption. We will start with an overview of the lexicographical sources available to historians of Irish food.

90 Patrick W. Joyce, *The origin and history of Irish names of places* (3 vols) (Dublin: McGlashan and Gill, 1869–70); See also <https://www.dib.ie/biography/joyce-patrick-weston-a4364>  
91 <https://www.logainm.ie/>

en/s?txt=Grange&str=on  
92 Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Gastro-Topography’, 144; further details of grinding corn on quern stones, porridge and gruel within placenames available in original article.  
93 Patrick S. Dinneen,

*Foclóir Gaedhige Agus Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath: Irish Text Society, 1927).  
94 Mac Con Iomaire and Gallagher, ‘The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture’.

### Primary lexicographical sources and electronic corpora

As a result of far-sighted investment in linguistic corpus-planning, Irish is exceptionally well-served by a number of authoritative and rich lexicographical resources. Liam Mac Amhlaigh provides an insightful analysis of the development of dictionaries since the seventeenth century, from Micheál Ó Cléirigh's *Foclóir na Sanasan nua* (1643) to Niall Ó Dónaill's *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1977).<sup>95</sup>

#### eDIL—<https://dil.ie/>

The first fascicle of the Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of the Irish Language* appeared in 1913 and progress continued throughout the twentieth century until the full suite of twenty-three fascicles were finally completed in 1976. A compact edition of all fascicles was subsequently published in 1983, and reprinted in 1998 and 2007.<sup>96</sup> Containing approximately 35,000 entries, the *Dictionary* provides deep and detailed insights into the development of the Irish language between c. 700–1650. Covering Early Irish (c. 600–900), Middle Irish (c. 900–1200) and Early Modern Irish (c. 1200–1600), this dictionary has since been developed as a powerful electronic resource – eDIL.<sup>97</sup> In 1981, Tomás de Bhaldraithe provided a very useful Modern Irish index for readers of DIL which facilitates access for non-specialist readers unfamiliar with historical orthography.<sup>98</sup>

#### *Corpas Fhoclóir na Nua-Ghaeilge*—<https://corpas.ria.ie>

Departure from the well-established early modern linguistic norms occurred throughout the seventeenth century and a valuable resource for the historical study of literary Modern Irish (1600–1926) is to be found in *Corpas Fhoclóir na Nua-Ghaeilge*. Based on a comprehensive text archive, this searchable corpus functions as the basis for a Historical Dictionary of Modern Irish which is being compiled under the aegis of the Royal Irish Academy and funded by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

#### Dinneen's Irish-English Dictionary—<https://celt.ucc.ie//Dinneen1.pdf>

This dictionary was first published in 1904 and was 'revised and greatly enlarged' for a subsequent edition in 1927. The lexicon itself occupies a rather unique place in Irish studies in the twentieth century as it was the primary reference source for readers of contemporary Irish until the publication of Niall Ó Dónaill's *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*.<sup>99</sup> Liam S. Gógán (1891–1979) had assisted Fr Pádraig Ó

<sup>95</sup> Liam Mac Amhlaigh, *the eDIL project*, *Literary & Linguistic Computing* 21: 1 (2006), 83–90. <sup>98</sup> Tomás de Bhaldraithe, *Innéacs Nua-Ghaeilge don Dictionary of the Irish Language. Deascán Foclóireachta 1* (Baile Átha Cliath: Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann, 1981). <sup>99</sup> See Noel O'Connell, *Father Dinneen: his dictionary and*

*the Gaelic Revival* (London: Irish Texts Society, 1984); Alf Mac Lochlainn, 'Father Dinneen and his dictionary' in *Studies* 91 (2002), 68–77; Pádraigín Riggs, *Dinneen and the Dictionary: 1904–2004* (London: Irish Texts Society, 2005); Mac Amhlaigh, *Foclóirí agus foclóiríthe na Gaeilge*. <sup>100</sup> <https://www.w>

[www.w](https://www.w) <sup>101</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/dinneen-patrick-stephen-a2627> <sup>102</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/de-bhaldraithe-tomas-a2453> <sup>103</sup> Aidan Doyle and Edmund Gussmann, *A reverse dictionary of modern Irish*. LSCL 2 (Lublín: Folium, 1996 [second edition: 2004]).

Duinnín (1860–1934)<sup>100</sup> in preparing the revised and enlarged edition of 1927 and a supplement of 40,000 words was prepared by Gógán at the request of the Irish Texts Society in 1950 but was never published.

### Standardised Reference Works—<https://teaglann.ie>

The production of modern authoritative dictionaries was recognised as vital for language acquisition and formed a key element of the work of the Publications Branch of the Department of Education, An Gúm. Tomás de Bhaldraithe (1916–96)<sup>101</sup> was editor of the seminal *English-Irish Dictionary* (1959) and this 864-page publication had immense influence in codifying and normalising a range of neologisms and modern terminology for discursive purposes. While the standardisation of modern Irish was led by *Rannóg an Aistriúcháin* in Leinster House, the role of dictionaries in validating new orthographical conventions and reformed spelling was critical. The publication of *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (1977), edited by Niall Ó Dónaill<sup>102</sup> with Tomás de Bhaldraithe acting as consultative editor, marked a watershed. It provided much needed direction for writers, educators, and professional language users while recognising regional variations throughout its 1309 pages. Both dictionaries have been repurposed for use as searchable electronic resources on a single site by Foras na Gaeilge.

### Contemporary Lexicography—<https://www.foclóir.ie/ga/>

From an initial electronic database of 7000 headwords in 2013, the print edition of the New English-Irish Dictionary, *Concise English-Irish Dictionary*, was published in 2020 by Foras na Gaeilge. The printed dictionary contains 30,000 entries and 85,000 word senses across 1776 pages. The website [foclóir.ie](https://www.foclóir.ie) contains many more headwords than the printed edition and extended usage examples. Work is now being carried out on an Irish-Irish dictionary. Other recent publications of note include a reverse dictionary of modern Irish<sup>103</sup> and various thesauruses.<sup>104</sup>

### Lexical variation, distribution and change

From the inception of the Irish language revival movement in the late nineteenth century, particular attention has been devoted to the study of regional variation and dialects in Irish. All of the main extant dialects of Irish have been described extensively and systemic descriptions also pay close attention to regionalised vocabularies.<sup>105</sup> A programme to describe Irish dialects was initiated following

**104** Breandán Ó Doibhlin, *Gaith an fhocail: foclóir analógach* (Baile Átha Cliath: *arna fhoilsiú i gcomhar ag Sáirséal Ó Marcaigh agus Coiscéim*, 1998); Garry Bannister, *Teasáras Gaeilge-Béarla—Irish-English thesaurus* (Dublin: New Island, 2023); Nicholas Williams (Compiler) and

Michael Everson (ed.), *Stórchiste—Teasáras Aibítreach na Gaeilge—An Alphabetic Thesaurus of Irish* (Dundee: Everttype, 2023).

**105** Thomas F. O'Rahilly and Brian Ó Cuív, *Irish dialects past and present, with chapters on Scottish and Manx* (revised edition) (Dublin: Dublin Institute

for Advanced Studies, 1972); Mícheál Ó Siadhail, *Modern Irish: grammatical structure and dialectal variation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Raymond Hickey, *The dialects of Irish: study of a changing landscape*. TISM 230 (Berlin; Boston, MA: de Gruyter, 2011).

the establishment of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies in 1940 and a series of localised phonetic, phonemic and morphological studies followed.<sup>106</sup> The Swiss linguist Heinrich Wagner (1923–1988)<sup>107</sup> was the initial promoter of a national linguistic survey which would attempt to visualise linguistic variation and distribution on a national basis in an atlas.<sup>108</sup> The four volumes of the *Linguistic Atlas and Survey of Irish Dialects* or LASID appeared between 1958–69 and contain a wealth of phonological and morphological data which can be analysed closely for regional change.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, and as a complementary area of enquiry to survey work, individual scholars compiled localised glossaries or word-lists as part of the DIAS publishing programme or for the lexicographical series of the Royal Irish Academy, *Deascán Foclóireachta*.<sup>110</sup> Regional variation and dialect have been a constant preoccupation of scholars since the beginning of the Irish language revival in the late nineteenth century. Localised studies of vocabulary and idiom were conceived as aids to philology and language acquisition. As Alessandro Duranti has noted, ‘lists of names for plants, animals, tools and places have always formed an important part of a fieldworker’s notebooks, reflecting the western view that the first step in knowing something is the ability to write down its name, hence the identification of individual words is crucial’.<sup>111</sup> The peripheral distribution of Irish-speaking districts, *Gaeltachtaí*, in discrete areas along the western seaboard, provided a diversity of language forms for linguistic study. These Gaeltacht areas are predominantly rural communities in which small agricultural holdings were the primary economic mainstay. A selected glossary of potato-related lexical items, sources and meaning is shown in Table 2.

Irish food history is often divided into ‘before the potato’<sup>112</sup> and ‘with the potato’.<sup>113</sup> Prior to the potato’s arrival, our ancestors survived on a rich and varied dietary regime principally based on corn (wheat, barley, oats etc.) and white meats (milk, curds, butter, whey, cheese etc.) supplemented by various meats, fruit, vegetables, nuts, and fish where available. Emyr Estyn Evans has noted

**106** Tomás de Bhaldraithe, *The Irish of Cois Fhairrge, Co. Galway. A phonetic study* (Dublin: D.I.A.S., [1944] rev. ed. 1966); de Bhaldraithe, *Gaeilge Chois Fhairrge. an Deilbhíocht* (B.Á.C.: I.Á.B., 1953); Heinrich Wagner, *Gaeilge Theilinn. Foghraidheacht, Gramadach, Téacsanna* (Baile Átha Cliath: I.Á.B., 1959); Eamon Mhac an Fhailigh, *The Irish of Erris, Co. Mayo: a phonemic study* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968).  
**107** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/wagner-heinrich-hans-a8837> **108** Heinrich Wagner, ‘An Irish linguistic atlas’, *Éigse* 6: 1(1948/52),

23–33. **109** Heinrich Wagner, *Linguistic atlas and survey of Irish dialects* (Dublin: D.I.A.S., 1958–69) Vol. 1. *Introduction & maps*; Vol. 2. *The dialects of Munster*; Vol. 3. *The dialects of Connaught*; Vol. 4. *The dialects of Ulster and the Isle of Man. Specimens of Scottish Gaelic dialects. Phonetic texts of east Ulster Irish* (With Colm Ó Baoill) **110** For a non-exhaustive but representative list, see Tomás Ó Máille and Ruairí Ó hUiginn (eds), *An Beal Beo* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm [Based on second edition 1937], 2002); Michael Sheehan, *Sean-chaint na nDéise: the idiom of living*

*Irish* (Baile Átha Cliath: DIAS, 1944); Brian Ó Cuív (ed.), *Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne i gCunndae Chorcaí. Mícheál Ó Briain (1866–1942) a bhailig* (B.Á.C.: I.Á.B., 1947); Stiofán Ó hAnnracháin, *Caint an Bhaile Dhuibh. Leabhair Thairghde* 10. (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1964); Seán Ó hEochaidh, *Sean-chaint Theilinn* (Baile Átha Cliath: I.Á.B., [1955] 1995); Leslie Lúcas, *Cnuasach Focal as Ros Goill. Deascán Foclóireachta 5* (Baile Átha Cliath: Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann, 1986); Caoilfhionn Nic Phóidín, *Cnuasach Focal ó Uíbh Ráthach. Deascán*

*Foclóireachta 6* (Baile Átha Cliath: Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann, 1987); Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Gaeilge Chléire: An Teanga Bheo* (Baile Átha Cliath: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, 2003). **111** Alessandra Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 129. **112** Lucas, ‘Irish Food Before the Potato’.  
**113** Kenneth Hugh Connell, ‘The Potato in Ireland’, *Past and Present* 23 (1962), 57–71.

**Table 2** Select glossary of potato words with their sources and meaning

Lexical Item	Source	Meaning
bachlógaí	LASID 1 (1958: 186, pts 69-86, 27-36)	potato sprouts—Donegal, Mayo, North East Galway, Roscommon
baslógaí	LASID I (1958: 186, pts 39-50)	potato sprouts—South Connemara, Aran Islands
péacáin	LASID I (1958: 186, pts 17-21)	potato sprouts—Kilgarvan, Waterville, Killorglin, Dún Chaoin
priacha	LASID I (1958: 186, pts 12,14,15,17)	potato sprouts—West Cork, Durseay Sound, Cúil Aodha
beannáin	LASID I (1958: 186, pts 8-11)	potato sprouts—Clonakilty, Glandore, Skibbereen, Oileán Cléire
cnap	Caint an Bhaile Dhuibh (1964: 48)	Large potato
criochán	Caint an Bhaile Dhuibh (1964: 51)	Very small potato
clabhrán	Sean-chaint na nDéise (Sheehan, 1944: 61)	small potato
liathóg	Caint an Bhaile Dhuibh (1964: 68)	Semicircle of potatoes being roasted on fire embers
steaimpí	Caint an Bhaile Dhuibh (1964: 86)	potato-cake made with raw potatoes
scoltógaí	LASID I (1958: 182, pts 31, 33, 34, 62)	potato slits—North East Galway, Roscommon, South Mayo
sciolláin	LASID I (1958: 182, pt 23-52)	potato slits—Galway, Aran Islands, North Clare
plútún	Caint an Bhaile Dhuibh (1964: 76)	Lump of mashed material, used when describing over-cooked potatoes
prauit	Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne (Ó Cuív 1947: 180)	tá na prátaí ina bprauit—the potatoes are over-cooked and look quite unappetising
builín breac	Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne (Ó Cuív 1947: 43)	Skinned previously boiled potato roasted in embers
brothóg	Gaeilge Chléire (Ó Buachalla 2003: 100)	brothóg prátaí—a large number of potatoes
iomarachaí	LASID III (1966: 135, pt 40)	Lochán Beag—potato beds
leapacha iomairí	LASID II (1964: 230, pt 20)	Dún Chaoin—potato beds
na hiomaracha	LASID IV (1969:74, pt 74)	Gort an Choice—potato beds



that 'before the coming of the potato the oats (corn) crop was all-important, and the routine of its cultivation set the pattern of the farming year and was closely integrated into pastoral needs'.<sup>114</sup> Louis Cullen points out that prior to the arrival of the potato, the *per capita* consumption of butter in Ireland was the highest in the world, meat consumption *per capita* was also relatively high and the range of meats eaten was uniquely wide, making the Irish diet and cooking, although relatively simple compared to the French, 'one of the most interesting culinary traditions in Europe'.<sup>115</sup> The richest single source of what was eaten in Ireland prior to the potato is the aforementioned eleventh-century satire *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (The Vision of Mac Conglinne). However, there are many other Irish language sources that enable the scholar of Irish food history to have a deeper and better understanding of our ancestors' foodways, such as those mined by Fergus Kelly in his magisterial *Early Irish Farming*.<sup>116</sup>

The story of how the potato first appeared in Ireland is highly disputed, full of myths and legends, many of which have been proven false.<sup>117</sup> We can roughly date the acceptance of the potato among the general populace from one Irish language literary source *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás* (PCT), a satire which was written in two parts. It seems from the first part (PCT I) written c. 1618 in Co. Kerry that the Irish diet was mostly oat-cake (*sruhán*). In the second half (PCT II), written c. 1662, the potato (*putataoi*) is apparently becoming the staple food.<sup>118</sup> Two centuries of genetic evolution resulted in potato yields growing from two tons per acre in 1670 to ten tons per acre in 1800. Four phases of acceptance of the potato into the general Irish diet are outlined by Austin Bourke.<sup>119</sup> Stage one (1590–1675) sees the potato used as a supplementary food and standby against famine; Stage two (1675–1750) the potato is viewed as a valuable winter food for the poorer classes; Stage three (1750–1810) the poorer classes become dangerously reliant on potato as staple for most of the year; Stage four (1810–1845) sees mounting distress as localised famines and potato failures become commonplace.

Ireland, agriculturally, could be separated into the more fertile wheat and barley-growing east and south and the poorer oat-growing and pastoral north and west. The commercialisation of agriculture intensified from the mid-seventeenth century with Irish butter becoming a global commodity, and much of the east and south of the country becoming the 'breadbasket' for the growing British industrial cities and towns. Interestingly, F.S.L. Lyons<sup>120</sup> notes that the potato was useful for cleaning, restoring and reclaiming the soil, and also for fattening pigs, a point elaborated by Louis Cullen,<sup>121</sup> who suggests that increased

**114** Emyr Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 140.

**115** Louis Michael Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland 1600–1900* (London, Batsford Academic, 1981), 141.

**116** Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin:

Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, 1997).

**117** Tomás O' Riordan, 'The Introduction of the Potato into Ireland', *History Ireland* 9: 1 (2001), online.

**118** Nicholas J. Williams (personnel communication 26 March 2021). **119** Austin

Bourke, *The Visitation of God? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993). **120** F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London: Fontana, 1982), 35.

**121** Louis Michael Cullen, 'Comparative aspects of Irish diet, 1550–1850' in

Hans J. Teuteberg (ed.), *European Food History: A Research Review* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 45–55, 47.

**122** Julianna Adelman, '“Practically only an English grazing farm”: the Irish landscape and English beef', in

potato consumption may simply and paradoxically reflect the fact that cereal cultivation intensified in the 1750s and 1760s. This resulted in a growing reliance on the potato as a cleaning, restoring root crop. The potato provided cheap sustenance for the growing labour force needed for the move from pasture to tillage that occurred at this time, but resulted in high levels of unemployment following the Battle of Waterloo (1815) when the demand for exports fell. This situation was further exacerbated with the arrival of *Phytophthora infestans* and the resulting Great Famine. Following the reversal from tillage to pasture, Ireland during the second half of the nineteenth century was described as ‘practically only an English grazing farm’, providing beef which had by then become a regular component of the diet of the English working classes.<sup>122</sup>

In its early history in Ireland, the potato was often referred to in the Irish language as *An Spáinneach*, or *An Spáinneach Geal* (the white, or kind-hearted Spaniard), suggesting a point of origin in Spain itself, or that a Spaniard was responsible for its introduction. Rebecca Earle notes that the very names we give potatoes around the world root them to the local landscape, be it King Edwards or Jersey Royals in the UK, Idaho potatoes in the US, or Darjeeling Red Round potatoes in India.<sup>123</sup> Another important Irish language source for food history is *Cín Lae Amhlaoibh*, a diary written by a Catholic middle-class teacher and draper, Humphrey O’Sullivan (1780–1837), in Callan, Co. Kilkenny between 1827 and 1835.<sup>124</sup> His diary illustrates how dramatically the acceptance of, and overdependence on the potato among the populace reduced the variety of their diet in the years before the Great Famine: ‘I remember the time, about thirty-five years ago, when every capable farmer had peas and beans; but the potato put them out of date. Few people sow them now except the gentry’.<sup>125</sup> Translators have differing translations of the text. In his diary entry for Thursday 21st February 1828 he mentions a potato dish ‘*coimhbhleidhe*’ which does not feature in Dinneen’s dictionary or later sources but appears from the eDIL<sup>126</sup> to be a shared bowl. Tomás de Bhaldraithe translates ‘*coimhbhleidhe*’ as ‘cobbledy’, differing from Michael McGrath’s translation used by Sexton (see below). Equally the ‘*bocairighe bána*’ may stem from the word *bocaid*<sup>127</sup> for the act of softening or making soft, as opposed to *bocaire*,<sup>128</sup> which means a small cake:

I have *coimhbhleidhe* (*comhbleide*) for dinner today. It is not correct to call it calecannon, for there is neither kale nor cabbage nor white cabbage in it, but white potatoes / ‘lumpers’? (*bocairighe bána*), full

Mark McWilliams (ed.), *Food and Landscape: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery* (London: Prospect Books, 2018), 57–66.  
**123** Rebecca Earle, *Feeding the People: The Politics of the Potato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

2020). See also Redcliffe Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949).  
**124** For more on O’Sullivan’s diary as a source of evidence for the food of the rural ‘middling’ class, see Regina

Sexton, ‘Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Food and Drink in Ireland* (2015), 257–306, 299–304.  
**125** Tomás de Bhaldraithe, *Cín Lae Amhlaoibh* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar

Tta, 1976 [1970]), 37. Diary entry was for the 27<sup>th</sup> May 1828. ‘*chuireadar as dáta iad!*’  
**126** <https://dil.ie/search?q=bleidhe> It can also mean a drinking cup or goblet.  
**127** <https://dil.ie/search?q=bocaid>  
**128** <https://www.teaglann.ie/en/fgb/bocaire>

white new milk, good salted butter, salt on top of that, pepper to heat it for me, onions if I were to mention them and myself and my beloved wife eating it to our hearts' content without shortage or superfluidity.<sup>129</sup>

As we can see from Table 2 there is an assortment of Irish words that capture all stages of their cultivation, harvest, storage, preparation, and consumption, often differing regionally based on both local dialects and traditions, and in keeping with the title of the chapter there are more than seventy-two words for potato. The process starts with seed potatoes, or *prátaí póir* or *scealláin*. Folklore suggests planting around St Patrick's Day and before the end of March, with it being auspicious to plant potatoes on Good Friday and definitely by Lady Day, or the Feast of the Annunciation on 25 March.<sup>130</sup> Various names for seed potatoes include, *falcaire* (old seed-potato; dried-up, spent, potato), *langán* (discarded portion of seed-potato), *scealbóir* (discarded portion of cut seed-potato), and *cailleach phráta* (shrivelled potato; old seed-potato). Potatoes are usually stored in dark cool places in either a potato pit (*poll prátaí*) or in a root cellar, whereas to produce seed-potatoes, you want the potato to develop some sprouts out of their eyes, which as Table 2 shows were known in different dialects or regions as either *bachlógaí*, *baslógaí*, *péacáin*, *priacha* or *beannáin*. The word *áirí* applies to ground manured in the previous year or, similar to *athphrátaí*, land in which potatoes had grown the previous year. In coastal regions, seaweed harvested or washed up after winter and spring storms<sup>131</sup> was essential for fertilising the ground, as was manure from animals. *Trinseáil* is the word for the lazy-bed method of planting potatoes, *iomaire* is the actual potato ridge, while *crúbán* is a short potato ridge at an angle to the main ridge. Estyn Evans treats extensively of lazy-beds and the community norms and beliefs associated with potato cultivation.<sup>132</sup> Holes were made at regular intervals where manure and a seed potato would be placed, and then sometimes a *habhaistín* (pounder) was used to close the holes in the potato drills. The lateral sod on a potato ridge was called a *taobhfhód*. The earthing up of the ridges as the potatoes began to grow was known as *teilgeann*, *lánú*, *taosca*, *athchré*, or *athshluaistrigh*. Levelling the potato ridge is called *ag múchadh bord*. When the potatoes would begin to grow, the first buds are known as *millíní*, and when white flowers appear, it was known as *bláth bán ar na prátaí*, and a *báinseog phrátaí* was a patch of potatoes in bloom. If you fail to earth up the potatoes, and they are exposed to sunlight, they are called *prátaí gréine*, *prátaí gorm gréine*, or

**129** English translation taken from Sexton, 'Food and culinary cultures in pre-Famine Ireland', 300; One author (Máirín) recalls a near identical dish being made by his father in the early 1980s for the family when his mother was away, only his father called it *Ceaille* or *Kala*.

**130** NFC The Schools' Collection, Volume 0322, Page 283; <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921686/4889892>

**131** *Rabharta Lá Féile Bhríde* referred to the spring tide, flood or torrent that landed large quantities of seaweed on land in late January early February.

<https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/rabharta> **132** Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, 140–50.

*prátaí odhar*, whereas *prátaí seaca* are potatoes that have been frost-bitten, and *prátaí slámáis* are potatoes with overgrown stalks. Naturally there are also a few Irish words for potato blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) which caused the Great Famine. They include an *aicíd dubh*, *bleaist*, and *dubh*.

In Ireland we particularly like floury potatoes, *prátaí gáiriteacha*, *prátaí plúracha*, as opposed to waxy potatoes. We do not like watery potatoes, *prátaí fliucha*, *uisciúla*, *bogáin phrátaí*. When potatoes are harvested, jacket potatoes are known as *prátaí ina gcraicne*; *prátaí gáiriteacha*; or *prátaí spréite*. Irish words for a large potato include *adhbhairne*, *fadhbhán*, *gilín*, *práta garbh*, *práta reamhar*, *cnaist phráta*, *cnap práta*, *corránaidhe préata*, *meallamán*, *peil*, and *caldair phrátaí*. Along with the earlier mentioned *póirín*, there are a number of words for small potatoes including *broc phráta*, *creachán*, *criochán*, *clabhrán*, and *sceidíní* with *steodaire*, *sliomach*, *luspairt phrátaí*, *scailliún*, *screamhachóirí prátaí*, and *dradairníní* meaning small worthless potatoes. *Teallachán*, *prochán*, *praistéal*, *luathóg*, *gáttaire*, *circín*, *builín* and *bruithneog* are all Irish language words describing potatoes roasted in the ashes or embers of a fire; further collective words such as *gríosach phrátaí* and *ceaist phrátaí* also exist for batches of ember-roasted potatoes, with *liathóg* referencing a semicircle of potatoes roasted on embers. A boiled potato that has been peeled and then roasted in the embers is called *builín breac*. As previously noted from the folklore section, there were different Irish words found for different cooked potato dishes around Ireland including *ceaile*, *colcaineann*, *brúitín*, *bacstaí*, and *steaimpí*. Many of these dishes are celebratory dishes that were associated with particular festivals or quarter days.<sup>133</sup> Plain boiled potatoes were commonly emptied into a large *ciseog* (wicker basket or kish) which was placed over the pot to act as a table, the potatoes then eaten quite plainly along with some form of *anlann*, *tarsann*, or *sercol*, which can be loosely translated as 'kitchen', a tasty accompaniment or dip (e.g., salt, butter, buttermilk, meat, fish), or the *scadán caoch* (blind herring), salted milk or water used as potato-dip. From 'putataoi', to 'prátaí' or 'fataí', the Irish language both embraced this new foodstuff from South America, and developed a rich vocabulary over time to describe its every nuance. It is important to note that the abundance of nouns in Dinneen's enlarged lexicon (1927) relating to the potato would not be replicated in vocabulary inventories today, some 100 years later. There is a wealth of literature on the history of the potato in Ireland, and the range of different varieties from pre-Famine to post-Famine times.<sup>134</sup> Detailed studies such as undertaken by Emyr Estyn Evans<sup>135</sup> in the 1950s would be markedly different today with

<sup>133</sup> Nic Philibín, 'Exploring Food Traditions within the four Quarter Days'. <sup>134</sup> See for example, Mac Con Iomaire and Gallagher, 'The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture'; Bourke, *The Visitation of God*; Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*.

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/evans-emyr-estyn-a2960>

much of rural Ireland having acquired peri-urban characteristics. However, the potato as a cultural artefact remains a rich discursive topic within studies of Irish language folklore.<sup>136</sup> One of the authors<sup>137</sup> recalls working in a greengrocer's shop in South County Dublin in the early 1980s and selling a variety of potatoes (Queens, Kerr's Pinks, Records, Pentland Dells, Golden Wonders) and new potatoes from France and Cyprus to a discerning customer base. The rise of the supermarket put most of these greengrocers out of business in the 1990s and changes were also afoot within potato breeding in Ireland. The Rooster variety was developed in Oak Park, Co. Carlow in 1991, and makes up over 50% of the area under potato cultivation in Ireland.<sup>138</sup>

Around the 1980s, families that had been self-sufficient in potatoes for generations stopped planting and began purchasing them from supermarkets or local shops. With this change in potato sourcing, came a loss of traditional knowledge but also of terminology and associated language, both in Irish and English. A recent study of Connemara Irish has delineated phonological and morphological markers of attrition and has introduced a 'post-traditional' categorisation of Irish speakers born after 1970 or so.<sup>139</sup> Vanishing vocabulary is but one of the markers of language obsolescence.<sup>140</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter set out to highlight the importance of food scholars engaging with Irish language sources to gain a broader perspective on Ireland's history. The digitisation of databases, folklore collections and dictionaries have democratised scholarship, making these resources available to a global public. The growing interest in our linguistic heritage has been noted, and solid examples have been given of the variety of words in Irish for not only rain, seaweed, dairy, and oats, but focussing particularly on dictionaries, this chapter has identified over seventy-two Irish words for potato. Information has been gathered from a number of data sources for phenomena such as spring storms or exceptionally high tides (*rabhartá*) casting-up seaweed (*turscar*), which was collected and utilised to fertilise land for potatoes. Evidence from the Aran Islands showed the ingenious method of combining seaweed, sand, soil, and manure to make fields over time. Contemporary dialectology has witnessed a step-change from gathering linguistic data from non-mobile, older, rural males (NORMS) to feature transmission within complex social networks with close analysis of form diversity in terms

**136** Ó Fiannachta, *An Práta*.

**137** Máirtín worked in Mulhall's Grocery Shop, 5 Newtown Park, Blackrock from 1980–86. Mulhall's was originally part of the Amalgamated Wholesalers' Piggybank brand, and bought their potatoes directly from the Dublin Wholesale Vegetable Market twice

weekly. Joseph (Joe) Mulhall (1916–1977), father of Frank and Shea had served a seven-year apprenticeship from the age of twelve in Murphy's of Mary Street before joining the Findlaters grocery chain. He bought his shop in Newtown Park around 1955 and the business closed and was sold in 1997. For more on the

growing urban middle class and their shopping habits, see Tony Farman, *Privileged Lives: A social history of middle-class Ireland 1882–1989* (Dublin: A & A Farman, 2010).

**138** <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/crops/potatoes/research---breeding-programme/>

**139** Brian Ó Curnáin,

'Cróineolaíocht na Gaeilge Iarthraidisiúnta i gConamara', *Éigse* 39 (2016), 1–43.

**140** David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

**141** Tara McConnell, "Honest Claret": *The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2022); Wine references pepper

of sex, age and social class. It is this step-change that has led to the identification of the new 'post-traditional' categorisation of Irish speakers born after 1970.

A number of pernicious fallacies have been identified. The value of adopting a quadrivial paradigm focussing on a maritime reading of Gaelic culture has also been discussed. Archaeological evidence from analysis of bog bodies shows that some aristocratic Irish-speaking males were using imported grooming hair products from the Mediterranean over two thousand years ago. High status food items such as spices and wine were clearly imported by sea routes alongside this pine-resin hair gel, as evidence of wine in Ireland predates Christianity and its use in the Eucharist.<sup>141</sup> Evidence from Irish language written sources such as *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* and the placenames database reveals a sophisticated and richly varied diet in Ireland prior to the arrival of the potato. Ireland was the first European country to adopt the potato, a New World crop, as a staple. Another satirical source, *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*, assists in pinpointing the acceptance of the potato among the general populace to the second half of the seventeenth century. Analysis of the same source by Susan Flavin confirmed Ireland's connectedness with European ideas, belying the belief that Ireland and its culture was insular and closed off from the world.<sup>142</sup> The Irish soon developed a rich vocabulary around the cultural tradition of potato cultivation, harvesting, and consumption. A further rich Irish language source *Cín Lae Amhlaoibh* revealed how most farmers had planted peas and beans in the late eighteenth century, but that the potato displaced them, putting them 'out of date', except among the gentry.<sup>143</sup> There has also been a tendency among commentators (particularly travellers' accounts) to present discussions about food in Ireland before the famine in a binary fashion (wealthy or poor).<sup>144</sup> Nicholas J. Wolf reminds us that as late as 1840, Ireland had as many as four million Irish speakers, within all social classes and religious persuasions, who could be found in every county.<sup>145</sup> Against this, Tomás de Bhaldraithe in the introduction to *Cín Lae Amhlaoibh* notes the vivid descriptions in Humphrey O'Sullivan's diary of the fine meals of the middle classes that disprove claims that the Irish-speaking natives did not have a varied diet or were not proficient in the art of cookery.<sup>146</sup> It is hoped that this chapter will enrich the growing literature on both Irish food history and our linguistic heritage, whilst highlighting the importance of securing this knowledge for future generations.

the early historical annals of Ireland, the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*, widely known as the *Annals of the Four Masters*, in which the nomenclature of certain chiefs and Gaelic lords includes the word 'wine', e.g., Turlough of the Wine, Ulick of the Wine, Dermot of the Wine, Donal of the Wine,

and Teige of the Wine. **142** Flavin, 'Food and Social Politics in Early Modern Ireland: Representing the Peasant in The Parliament of Clan Tomas'. **143** de Bhaldraithe, *Cín Lae Amhlaoibh*, 37. **144** For such claims see Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1956), 10;

Morley, *The Popular Mind*, 2 highlights that 'there is no factual basis for Corkery's claims that a middle class did not exist in eighteenth-century Munster'. **145** Wolf, *An Irish-Speaking Island: State, Religion, Community, and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770–1870*. **146** de Bhaldraithe, *Cín Lae*

*Amhlaoibh*, xxx. 'Tá cuntas inti ar bhéilí breátha an duine mheándeisiúil a bhréagníonn an té a deir nach raibh éagsúlacht beatha is oiliúnt in ealaín na cócaireachta ag na Gaeilgeoirí.'

### **Amhrán an Steaimpí**

Roderic Ó Dálaigh (c. 1780?–1870)

Tá tigh mór fairsing i mBarra na hÍnse,  
Bíonn bean acu á ghlanadh agus bean acu á scríobadh,  
Bean eile acu á fháscadh ós cionn corcáin ar a dícheall,  
Agus seanbhean ar a corraghiob á leathadh ar an ngríosaigh,  
Raithneach, a bhean bheag, a bhean beag, a bhean bheag,  
Raithneach a bhean bheag, steaimpí agus ím air.

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**20**

*The Wake for the Dead  
and Traditional Hospitality in  
Ireland in the Twentieth Century:  
Continuity and change*

**Patricia Lysaght**

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the well-known Great Blasket Islander, Tomás Ó Criomhthain, attended the wake of an elderly relative in nearby Dunquin (*Dún Chaoin*) on the mainland, in the Dingle peninsula, Co. Kerry, and subsequently gave a vivid account of the event in his autobiography, *An tOileánach*, published in 1929.<sup>1</sup> He tells us that he had just sold pigs at the Saturday market in Dingle (*Daingean Uí Chúis*) and was about to set out for home when he noticed a man from Dunquin in a horse and cart coming down the street in his direction. He was clearly in a hurry since ‘the horse [was] foaming and sweating plenty’.<sup>2</sup> On being approached by Ó Criomhthain, the Dunquin man told him that his mother had died at midday and that he had come to Dingle for wake provisions. Ó Criomhthain added: ‘The dead woman was close kin to me, and so I, of course, gave up any thought I had of making the Western Island or going home’.<sup>3</sup> He would uphold the traditional obligation of attending his deceased relative’s wake.

The dead woman’s son was accompanied to Dingle for the wake goods by a non-household member, a woman from Dunquin village. Ó Criomhthain commented: ‘that is one of the old customs from generation to generation’.<sup>4</sup> While the deceased’s son would arrange for a suitable coffin and for alcoholic beverages such as whiskey and a barrel of porter,<sup>5</sup> the woman’s task was to take the wake order for the supplies of food, candles and other necessary items, to shopkeepers in Dingle town, who would be accustomed to dealing with such matters. Another neighbour of the deceased, who had also come to Dingle in a horse and cart to assist with transporting the wake supplies—and who would give a lift to Ó Criomhthain to the corpse house—collected the barrel of porter for the wake, something which surprised Ó Criomhthain greatly. Remarking that he had ‘never heard of such a thing at a wake nor ever seen it before this’, he was told that it had been coming into fashion for some time, and, since that was the case, the man of the house in which the wake was being held would have a barrel also.<sup>6</sup>

It was nightfall by the time the deceased’s son, his two neighbours, and Ó Criomhthain, reached the wake-house. By then ‘a good share of people’ had already gathered there. The wake goods were taken from the carts and brought into the house. An oil lamp and a few candles were alight in the kitchen. The deceased was already laid out on the kitchen table positioned by the wall between the door and the hearth area. As it was customary to arrange a number of lighted

<sup>1</sup> Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach* (Baile Átha Cliath: C. S. Ó Fallamhain, i gComhar le hOifig an tSoláthair, 1929), 227–33; Tomás Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, trans. Robin Flower (Dublin & Cork: Talbot Press, 1934), 275–83. English quotations in this paper are from Robin Flower’s 1934 translation

of *An t-Oileánach*, and references to the original Irish passages in Ó Criomhthain’s 1929 text are also given.

<sup>2</sup> Ó Crohan *The Islandman*, 275; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 227.

<sup>3</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 275; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 227.

<sup>4</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*,

275; ‘*Ceann de sna nósaihb é sin atá le sinnsearach ann*.’ Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 227. <sup>5</sup> A strong dark beer brewed with roasted barley or malt.

<sup>6</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 276; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 228. Ó Criomhthain gives the impression that a barrel

of porter featured at weddings as he asked, ‘was it that they were going to have both a wedding and a wake!’ when he saw the barrel of porter on the cart.

candles by a deceased person during the wake, and as candles were among the wake commodities brought from Dingle, Ó Criomhthain remarked that: ‘Two women jumped up and laid hold of the candles and arranged them properly at the end of the table’,<sup>7</sup> that is, at the hearth end of the table on which the deceased was laid out, away from the open kitchen door.

On entering the wake-house, Ó Criomhthain sat near the door, but he was soon given a place of honour in a corner by the fire by the man of the house, the wake host. While he welcomed the comfort the position afforded him as he had been away from his home in the Great Blasket for a number of days, what he liked in particular about it was that he ‘could see all over the house and notice every thing’,<sup>8</sup> and, while he would have been familiar with wakes on the Great Blasket, this was ‘the first wake out of the Island’ that he ‘was ever at’.<sup>9</sup> He thus had a keen interest in the proceedings of this all-night wake.

From his vantage point by the fire, Ó Criomhthain described the kitchen scene in preparation for the wake. A turf fire blazed on the hearth, and kettles for boiling water for the tea that would be served throughout the night were already in position. More people—men, women and children—were arriving at the house. Four women were dressing the corpse:<sup>10</sup>

The feet of the corpse were to the fire and its head to the door.<sup>11</sup> On the other side, facing the door, the whole set-out was. I hadn’t been in the corner long when the house began to fill. There was a great flame of fire, a kettle on the hook above it, two kettles at the side of it, and the gathering was beginning—men, women and children up and down throughout the house. At this moment four people were arranging the corpse finely.<sup>12</sup> ‘A dress for the journey to the other side,’ as one of the women said when they had it done.<sup>13</sup>

All was thus in order, and so the wake, and the dispensing of wake hospitality in the presence of the deceased, could begin. An improvised table was set up (since the corpse was laid out on the kitchen table) by four neighbouring women, and the food that would be served during the wake was placed on it:

Soon after those had sat down, four young women jumped up and laid down a door lid across two stools, and before long I saw all the crockery in the house put together and arranged on the door. Soon I saw three

<sup>7</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 276; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 228.

<sup>8</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 277; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 228–9.

<sup>9</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 281; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 231. <sup>10</sup> See note 12.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Croften Croker,

*Researches in the South of Ireland* (1824; repr., Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 170, states, that it was the male head of the household who was positioned in that way at death (i.e. with his head to the door), in order to avert family misfortune. See also Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish*

*Wake Amusements* (Cork: Mercier Press 1969), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ó Criomhthain wrote: ‘*Insan am so do bhí ceathrar ag cur éadaigh stróinséartha ar an gcorp, “éadach i gcomhair an bhóthair anonn ...”*’ (Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 229). It is not clear if, by ‘éadaigh

stróinséartha’, ‘strange clothes’, Ó Criomhthain was referring to a shroud (*taiséadach*) or the brown habit (*an aibíd dhonn*) as the garment in which the corpse was laid out. See also note 39. For the use of the brown habit in mortuary ritual in Corcha Dhubhne, see, Pádraig Tyers,

pots for tea coming to the edge of the ashes, one woman carrying two, and one the other. They put tea into them and filled them up with boiling water till the three were full to the brim.<sup>14</sup> The other two women were bringing white bread till the door was covered all over.<sup>15</sup>

The provision of alcoholic beverages, served by a male neighbour, was a traditional part of wake hospitality, and Ó Criomhthain soon noticed a man with a large white bucket serving porter to the men in the kitchen. The drink was welcomed—except by Ó Criomhthain as he was a whiskey drinker. This was known to the man of the house, and, as wake host, he poured him a glass of whiskey:

As I was casting an eye over all these preparations, I saw a man coming up towards me from the bottom of the house with a great white bucket running over with porter in one of his hands, and an empty mug to hold about a pint in the other. The first man who met him after he'd come through the door he shoved the mug down in the bucket and filled it and handed it to him. He didn't say: 'Take it away'.

... I kept my eyes fixed from my corner on those who were handing out the food and drink, and I never saw anyone give the back of his hand to the bucket or the stuff in it till it came to where I was. I turned it down, and the man who was sharing it out was startled. It isn't that I like to break a custom—I've never done it—but I didn't care for the drink that was going round, for I've hardly so much as tasted it ever.

Just then the man who could read my disposition right—the man of the house, I mean—was at the other man's heels with a bottle of whiskey and a glass, and he said to him:

'Don't you know he is no porter drinker?' He filled me up a glass out of that bottle and I drank it.<sup>16</sup>

Ó Criomhthain then proceeded to describe the preparation of tobacco and clay pipes<sup>17</sup>—also formerly an integral part of wake hospitality in Ireland—by two men seated at the end of the table where the corpse was laid out:

I glanced over to where the candles were flaming at the end of the table, where were the feet of the corpse, and there were two men there, seated

*Malairt Beatha* (Dún Chaoin: Inné Teo, 1994), 82–3.

<sup>13</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 277; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 229.

<sup>14</sup> The three lines: 'Soon ... brim' represent a revised translation by the author based on Ó Criomhthain's original Irish text: 'Níor ró

*fhada go bhfeaca trí chorcáin té ag teacht go h-imeall na luaithe, dhá cheann age bean acu agus ceann age bean eile. Cuireadh té orthu agus uisce beirbhithé ionnta nó go raibh na trí corcáin lán go smig.'* (Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 229.)

<sup>15</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 277–78; Ó Criomhthain,

*An t-Oileánach*, 229.

<sup>16</sup> Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 278–79; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 229–30. Others, including some of the women, present at the Dunquin wake, were also drinking whiskey, Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 232; Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 281.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Danaher has stated that tobacco was 'in common use in the remotest parts of Connaught' by the beginning of the eighteenth century and by 1900, pipe-smoking was indulged in by both sexes, young and old, Kevin Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1962), 66–7.

on chairs, who were busied over tobacco and pipes; and that was no pleasant job. One of them was cutting it and bruising it, while the other man was crumbling it small and stuffing it into the pipes; and if I didn't feel much more pity than jealousy of those two, I certainly didn't feel less, for often enough before I'd seen a good man faint at that job.<sup>18</sup>

While it was mostly men who smoked pipes at wakes, some women also did so, and their efforts in that regard at that particular wake were described in a mirthful fashion by Ó Criomhthain.<sup>19</sup> He then continued his description of the food—all shop bought—provided at the wake, its presentation in relays to the wake participants, and the invitation by the man of the house to him to partake of it. He also mentioned the dispensing of drink and tobacco to those in the wake-house, and the socialisation that evolved in the wake context in the course of the night:

I had seen the door in the middle of the kitchen all this time... There was everything there in plenty and profusion and leave to draw on it<sup>20</sup>—white bread, jam and tea; there was no butter there, and there never is in houses of this kind.<sup>21</sup> I wasn't the last man to be invited to the board,<sup>22</sup> for the man of the house came to me quickly, and took me and my chair with him, and put me where I could get something, saying:

'You're not like the rest. They're beside their own home, but you are some way from yours.'

I ate my fair share of it, but I didn't overdo it, for I didn't want to make a show of myself in a place of this kind, with a man from the east and a woman from the west present; and, if I was cradled in an island in the midst of the great sea, nobody ever had to complain of my awkwardness or ill manners.<sup>23</sup> A new lot would come to the table when one lot was done until all the company were satisfied, and they'd chat a little till the bucket would come round now and again.

So we spent a good part of the night; tobacco going in plenty; some of them sending their pipes three times to the tobacco place to be refilled; and all that before the day lightened ...<sup>24</sup>

**18** Ó Crohan *The Islandman*, 279; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 230. Fainting while cutting and crumbling tobacco was probably due to the concentrated aroma of the tobacco.

**19** Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 279–81; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 230–31. It was not unusual for older women to smoke. The pipe-smoking activity of the gifted storyteller, Mrs

Costello, Kilbaha, Co. Clare, was commented on by the Irish Folklore Commission's collector, Tadhg Ó Murchú, when he visited her in the 1940s and in 1950. She smoked a clay pipe. See, for example, Patricia Lysaght, 'From the Kingdom to the Banner: Tadhg Ó Murchú as a Folklore Collector in Southwest County Clare in 1942', in Anne Clune (ed.), *Dear Far-Voiced Veteran*.

*Essays in Honour of Tom Munnely* (Miltown Malbay: The Old Kilfarboy Society, 2007), 126, 127, 128. The provision or use of snuff is not mentioned by Ó Criomhthain in relation to the Dunquin wake.

**20** This means: 'free to take it.'

**21** 'Ní raibh im ann agus ní gnáthach a bheith i dtigh d'á shórt.' Ó Criomhthain, is probably referring to the economic standing of

the family. Butter was an expensive commodity and a substantial amount would have to be bought for an all-night wake. Butter is, however, occasionally mentioned in other accounts of wake hospitality from different parts of the country, *An t-Oileánach*, 232. **22** This refers to the door leaf laid across two stools to form a large table. The corpse was laid out on the kitchen table.

The final segment of the wake as described by Ó Criomhthain incorporated a meal served at dawn for those who had come from a distance, while neighbours returned to their own houses to partake of food, before returning again for the funeral. Ó Criomhthain makes no mention of an after-funeral meal with the bereaved family before he and other Blasket Islanders headed home to the Western Island:

At the dawn of day there was another meal going, but the people whose houses were near didn't take it.<sup>25</sup> About mid-day or one o'clock all the people were gathered for the funeral, and when the priest came they started off towards the churchyard. But the journey wasn't far. Her family burying place was in Dunquin.

That was the wake that interested me most, and the reason was that there was drink at it—a thing I had never seen before.<sup>26</sup> There have not been many wakes since without a cask or two, and I don't think much of the practice, for it's the usual thing that wherever there is drink there is horseplay, and that's not a fit thing in a house of the kind.<sup>27</sup> The funeral was on a Sunday, and all the Islanders who were ashore went in it, and it was late in the evening before we got home.<sup>28</sup>

Tomás Ó Criomhthain has provided us with a succinct account of the organisation surrounding the occurrence of death in a family, particularly the provision of hospitality, in the closing decade of the nineteenth century in the Dingle peninsula, Co. Kerry. The hospitality in question consisted of a simple meal featuring shop-bought food and the serving of alcoholic beverages to the wake participants. To what extent does Ó Criomhthain's account, especially in relation to hospitality, resonate with records of wakes and funerals held in other parts of the country in the early decades of the twentieth century? To answer this question, recourse has been had to the evidence provided by responses to a questionnaire on death customs preserved in the National Folklore Collection (NFC), University College Dublin. The questionnaire was issued to correspondents throughout Ireland in the 1970s, and a sample of the responses, pertaining especially to counties on the western seaboard areas of the country, is relied on here.<sup>29</sup> Although no specific

**23** Compare this with an episode of bad manners brought to the attention of Mourna Crozier when she attended a wake during fieldwork at the foot of the Mourne Mountains, Co. Down: 'That bad manners, for example, are totally unacceptable at a wake was stressed when a woman beside me said, as a munching cleric piled his plate with yet more food, that he had

"never been known to let a plate past him". Mourna Crozier, "'Powerful Wakes': Perfect Hospitality', in Chris Curtin, Thomas M. Wilson (eds), *Ireland from Below. Social Change and Local Communities* (Galway: Galway University Press, Officina Typographica, 1987), 89–90. **24** Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 281–2; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 232–3. **25** If neighbours were thought

to avail excessively of wake hospitality they could be considered to be short of food themselves. It was thus necessary, on any occasion, to tread the fine line between accepting neighbours' hospitality and being thought to be in need of it. **26** The keg of porter is what Ó Criomhthain is referring to here. **27** For reports of drinking alcohol at wakes mentioned by travellers in

Ireland from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, and accounts of unruly behaviour arising therefrom, and also the directives concerning it issued by episcopal Synods and by individual bishops during the same period, see Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*, 16–25. **28** Ó Crohan, *The Islandman*, 283; Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach*, 233.



Figure 1 *The Wake*, J. C. Trimbell. From: Mr & Mrs S.C. Hall, *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, &c.*, Vol. 1. 1841, 223.





question on wake hospitality was included in the questionnaire, information of a general nature on this topic was usually provided by the respondents. It is thus apparent that many of the same patterns, procedures and protocols concerning the provision, preparation, and the dispensing of wake hospitality, evident in Ó Criomhthain's account, also pertained in these western counties, in varying degrees, in the early decades of the twentieth century, and even later in some places. It is also evident from the sources, however, that attitudes to wake hospitality, and to the wake event itself, were changing as the century progressed.<sup>30</sup>

### A Decent Wake: The Role of Hospitality

From the above-mentioned archival records, it is evident that throughout Ireland, once death had intervened, the deceased person was left undisturbed for a number of hours. This was in order to allow *rigor mortis* to set in so that the body could be prepared for the laying out, that is, for the presentation of the corpse during the wake—a public vigil or watch kept by family and community over a deceased person prior to burial. But the corpse house itself was a hive of activity during this time as a variety of arrangements had to be set in motion in preparation for the wake. If the person had passed away early in the day, a one-night wake, with the funeral and burial taking place on the following day, was usual.<sup>31</sup> In this scenario, it was necessary, after the required interval, to prepare the deceased for the laying out, a task usually carried out by a local woman or women, helped by a man when the deceased was male.<sup>32</sup> After being physically prepared, he or she would be dressed immediately in the brown habit,<sup>33</sup> if it were already available, or as soon as possible thereafter.

Then the corpse-house, especially the kitchen area, would be re-arranged to accommodate the wake participants, as well as the preparation and dispensing of food and drink. Since hospitality was a central element of the wake, suitable provisions had to be obtained as soon as possible, as wake necessities were not acquired in advance of a person's death. Recourse to wake goods involved a trip to the nearest village or town, usually to the shop in which the family normally dealt, and which would be familiar with the filling of wake orders for different sections of the community. It was, of course, important for the honour of the deceased and that of his family, that all of those attending the wake would be offered food and drink. A north-Clare informant expressed the matter pithily as follows: *'Bá mhór an náire saolta linn dá mbeadh cead ag éinne a rá gur fágaadh*

**29** The questionnaire responses are preserved in the following volumes of the National Folklore Collection (henceforth NFC), NFC 2104–2107, 2153. (1978). See also, 'Die Totenwache' in Hans Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag, 1952), 151–72, based on the

results of a questionnaire on death issued by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1938. **30** See also in this context, Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*, 12–13. **31** Otherwise the funeral took place on the second day after death.

**32** The immediate family did not normally help with

the laying out as this was considered a task for people outside the family, though a distant relative might provide assistance. A correspondent from Bantry parish, Co. Cork, stated: 'In each district there were certain women who were expert in laying out, and one of these was always sent for. Very seldom two took

part as they wouldn't agree on details.' He added: 'Old people had always "booked" a special person to lay them out' (NFC 2105: 98). That old or ill people might express a wish as to who would lay them out, was also referred to by a Tralee, Co. Kerry, correspondent (NFC 2105: 38). **33** See note 39. **34** NFC 548:

*tart nó ocras air tar éis theacht go dtí tórramh*, 'It would be a great shame for us if anyone was at liberty to say that they had been left thirsty or hungry after coming to a wake'.<sup>34</sup> A Co. Cork respondent remarked that, 'A good wake was judged by the amount of beer and food supplied'.<sup>35</sup> These sentiments were well known throughout the country and acted as a yardstick in the provision of wake hospitality. But it was also understood and accepted, both locally and by the shopkeepers who supplied the wake provisions, that while middling and strong farmers and better-off members of the community could be expected to provide a fairly lavish wake, less well-off families had, of necessity, to be more circumspect with their wake outlay. The quantities of food and drink required also depended on whether the wake would last for one or two nights.

But how were the wake goods procured in rural Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century? Usually two or more people went for the supplies to a nearby town. While there was a practical basis for this in order to ensure that the coffin, as well as food, drink, tobacco, snuff, and other wake necessities, such as candles and possibly also the brown habit, were procured, a respondent from Co. Cork in stating that: 'Even in broad daylight two people always went together for provisions for the wake', gives the impression that there was safety in numbers at the crisis of death.<sup>36</sup> The following accounts are fairly typical of how wake provisioning was dealt with in the countryside, and they echo also the arrangements mentioned by Tomás Ó Criomhthain in his experience in this regard in the Dingle peninsula.

In west Limerick, for example, a male relative of the deceased and a neighbour, and also a neighbouring woman, usually went for the wake supplies:

If the household did not own a horse of their own, a more well-off neighbour would give his horse and common cart<sup>37</sup> to bring what was needed. Usually two men and a dependable woman would go—the men to take care of the drink side and the ordering of the coffin ... The woman who went to town with the men took care of the food for the wake—at least one 10-stone flour sack<sup>38</sup> of baker's bread, called also white bread [*arán bán / arán geal*] in them times, jam, biscuits, wine and minerals for the women—and also the brown habit (Carmelite habit) if it was not already in the house.<sup>39</sup>

579. Seán Mac Mathúna, aged 62, Luogh, Doolin, Co. Clare, 1938. **35** NFC 2105: 92. **36** NFC 2105: 104; parish of Bantry, Co. Cork. Possibly arising from fear of the dead, it was usual that two people took part in the various duties associated with a deceased person from the moment of death until after the funeral.

Cf. Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970), 218, 221. First published 1942. See also Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 159. **37** A two-wheeled horse-drawn cart, with large wheels shod with iron bands. **38** What is probably meant here is that a bag capable of

holding ten stones of flour was filled with large loaves of white baker's bread. **39** NFC 2105: 132. As to the 'brown habit', those who were enrolled in the Brown Scapular were entitled to be waked in the brown habit of the Carmelite Order, usually the tunic and scapular elements. The Brown

Scapular is 'the badge of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, patroness of the Carmelite Order.' It consists of 'two pieces of cloth, about 3 in. by 2 in. joined by strings, put on over the head, and worn back and front under the clothes' (*The Catholic Encyclopædic Dictionary*, London: Waverley,

In Kilbegnet parish, Co. Galway, ‘Three men used to go, and do go up to the present day for a “burying charge”, that is, necessities for the wake and funeral—refreshments, coffin, etc.’<sup>40</sup> In the Moher area of north-west Clare:

a member of the household with a neighbour went by horse and trap to the local pub-cum-grocery for provisions for the wake. These included two quarter casks or one half-barrel of stout, bottled stout, whiskey, and wine—usually invalid port or sherry, shop bread, jam, snuff, plug tobacco, clay pipes, cigarettes, tea and sugar, tins of biscuits and currant cakes.<sup>41</sup>

Much the same procedure was followed in south-west Clare, and, as the wake order was likely to be substantial, shopkeepers would keep a close eye on which of them got the business:

In the early morning, the supplies for the wake would be ordered. A lad or two would go off in to Kilkee—or Kilrush as it was usually—to get two, three or four half-barrels of stout, maybe half a dozen bottles of whiskey, plenty of sweet loaf, biscuits, cakes, snuff, tobacco, and a dozen or maybe more clay pipes. This was fifty years ago, when whiskey was only 2d a glass and a shilling bought a gallon of porter.

The ‘Wake Order’, as this supply was known, was always bought from the shop where the family of the corpse dealt. And nothing was paid for until after the funeral. Sure ‘twas many a row or spleen that was caused between farmers and the cousins who had pubs or shops in the towns (Kilkee or Kilrush), when they wouldn’t get the ‘Wake Order.’ And, as all of the West was nearly related in them days, there was always someone expecting the ‘Order’, and surely someone else was bound to come by it (get it).<sup>42</sup>

Further to the north—in Donegal town—prior to the First World War:

It was the custom for some responsible member of the family to go to the nearest village or town to purchase the provisions—commodities—for the wake-house, from the shopkeeper who was often the undertaker. He knew the commodities needed ... tea, sugar, jam, loaf bread<sup>43</sup>

1931), 476. See also, Patricia Lysaght, ‘The Uses of Sacramentals in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Ireland. With special reference to the brown scapular’, in Nils Arvid Bringéus (ed.), *Religion in Everyday Life, Papers given at a symposium in Stockholm*,

13–15 September 1993 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1994), 200–18. <sup>40</sup> NFCS 16: 57 (NFCS: Schools’ Collection, 1937–38, National Folklore Collection) County Galway <https://www.duchas.ie/en/>

[cbes/4613671/4606941](https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4613671/4606941). <sup>41</sup> NFC 2105: 68 (Moher, Liscannon parish, Co. Clare). The respondent added: ‘Many of the teenagers were inaugurated into the drinking habit at wakes, and with the heat of the kitchen and smoke and drink, the

wake developed into a merry occasion ... and teenage boys and girls took advantage of the occasion’ (NFC 2105: 70). For the so-called ‘merry wake’ from the early-modern period to the nineteenth century, see Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*,

A list of wake goods from Fanad, Co. Donegal, not only mentions the kinds of food items usually ordered for a wake, but also the quantities involved, at least in that part of the country:

All wakes follow set procedures. Orders are placed for wake goods with the local grocery store. They are accustomed to this and orders have a standard amount of goods as follows:

200 cigarettes	1 doz. boxes of matches
1 lb. flake tobacco	1 lb. plug tobacco
2 boxes mixed biscuits	2 doz. loaves [bread]
4 lbs. butter	2 lbs. jam
3 lbs. tea	6 lbs. sugar <sup>44</sup>

While both flake and plug tobacco are included in the list, clay pipes are not mentioned. This may be an omission, or it may be that it was pipefuls<sup>45</sup> of tobacco, rather than clay pipes filled with tobacco, that were offered to the wake participants in that area of the county. In another part of the same county—Donegal town—however, in the pre-First World War period, as well as twist tobacco and snuff, ‘six dozen clay pipes, which then cost a halfpenny each, were not forgotten’ as part of the wake order.<sup>46</sup> The innovative inclusion of a substantial quantity of cigarettes—something noticeable in other areas of the country as well<sup>47</sup>—and boxes of matches, should also be noted.

That the above mentioned fairly modest Fanad wake-order was supplemented by gifts of food brought by women participants to the wake is also indicated by the Fanad account. It would appear to have been part of wake-going procedure in that area, and the gift of food was presented to the household and accepted in a formal manner:

Each lady visitor brings a cake which she hands to the host or hostess on entering the wake-house. Usually, no words are exchanged as the gift is presented, as it is done as unobtrusively as possible, and ‘thanks’ is never given but the parcel is accepted as a due tribute.<sup>48</sup>

A further Donegal correspondent mentioned that, ‘The neighbours came with soda bread, potato bread, milk and butter’,<sup>49</sup> while another stated that tea and

esp. chapters 2–8, 10–11.

<sup>42</sup> NFC 1414: 158. Mrs. Annie Leahy, 88 years, Moveen, Kilkee, Moyarta parish, Co. Clare. <sup>43</sup> NFC 2107: 36.

<sup>44</sup> NFC 2107: 23, 24–24a.

<sup>45</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin has stated that clay pipes filled with tobacco, if such were

available, ‘or else pipefuls of tobacco’, were offered to all at a wake (Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*, 14–15).

<sup>46</sup> NFC 2107: 36.

<sup>47</sup> In the Inishowen area of Co. Donegal, clay pipes were in use at wakes up to the 1940s, while thereafter

cigarettes ‘were passed around’ (NFC 2107: 15). In the Moher area of northwest Clare, pipes and tobacco were given to the older people, while ‘cigarettes in saucers were passed around in recent years’ (NFC 2105: 69; [1970s]).

<sup>48</sup> NFC 2107: 24a. The

reference to ‘due tribute’ may indicate that such a gift was expected and may refer to reciprocation for a similar gift given by the bereaved family at previous wakes in the locality.

<sup>49</sup> NFC 2107: 36.

sugar were brought—usually one pound of tea and two pounds of sugar, as a part contribution to the wake hospitality.<sup>50</sup> Further south—in Co. Cork, and in an obviously more prosperous part of the country—‘Neighbours cooked legs of mutton, boiled home-cured bacon, often a pig’s head, and made large cakes of bread. These were brought to the [wake]-house... Tea was served non-stop with the cold meats’.<sup>51</sup> But another Co. Cork correspondent noted, that in his area, ‘all sympathisers got tea, loaf [shop] bread and jam’ adding that ‘homemade bread and butter were never given at a wake—that was considered a sign of meanness’. He continued: ‘And if anybody gave homemade blackberry jam that was the ultimate in meanness’.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, the provision of hospitality by the bereaved family was a central aspect of the wake. It was prepared and served by neighbouring women, not by the bereaved family members:

The neighbours made themselves generally useful, making and serving tea, cooking and washing up. The members of the deceased’s family did nothing.<sup>53</sup>

And all wake participants were expected to accept wake hospitality:

Tea was served to everyone present and it was supposed to be an insult not to take it. This tea was made by the neighbours and friends, not by the people of the house. Cakes and biscuits were served with the tea as well as butter and jam. Cigarettes were passed around.<sup>54</sup>

From these quotations it is evident that, once a wake was under way, the role of the members of a bereaved household was to act as hosts of the event—to accept the condolences of those visiting the wake-house, to invite them to view the corpse, and then to offer hospitality—while it was the neighbours who actually prepared and served the food and drink provided by the family for the wake.

The serving of alcoholic beverages was also an important element of wake hospitality. The impression given by the source material is that alcoholic drink was provided in one form or another at most wakes in the early decades of the twentieth century, often in a fairly liberal fashion, although the situation could vary from place to place. In some parts of Co. Donegal, for example, alcohol was not generally served at a wake, but some would be provided for those who

**50** NFC 2107: 31. A half a pound of tea and two pounds of sugar are also mentioned as wake gifts in Donegal by Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 162.

**51** NFC 2105: 92.

**52** NFC 2105: 99. **53** NFC 107: 36 (Donegal Town).

**54** NFC 2107: 30–31 (Fanad,

Co. Donegal). Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 162, also mentions the obligation to accept wake hospitality.

had performed certain tasks for the bereaved family (preparing the corpse for laying out and the digging of the grave, for example).<sup>55</sup> In other areas of the same county, however, such as in the Rosses in the west, it appears that, as economic circumstances improved after mid-century, a glass of whiskey might be given between two and four o'clock in the morning to those sitting up overnight in the wake-house.<sup>56</sup> An account from Donegal town states that before the First World War, whiskey was provided, but it was kept aside for the special guests at the wake. Sometimes a keg of porter was also supplied for the men attending the wake, while ginger wine or port and biscuits were available for the ladies.<sup>57</sup> In Co. Leitrim, prior to the First World War, a barrel of porter was provided, as well as several bottles of whiskey and minerals.<sup>58</sup> In north-west Mayo, a barrel of porter would be on tap, or a couple of gallons of *poitín* [illicit whiskey], or both, would be provided,<sup>59</sup> while in parts of Connemara in west Galway, *poitín* appears to have been the typical drink at many wakes in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> In the west and south-west areas of Co. Clare, a barrel or barrels of stout, bottled stout, whiskey and wine, are referred to as wake provisions,<sup>61</sup> while draught stout and whiskey, and bottled stout or *poitín*, are mentioned as wake beverages in parts of Co. Cork.<sup>62</sup>

When alcoholic drink for the wake came in barrels or kegs these had to be tapped so that the beverage could be served. A man with the necessary skill and know-how was required for this task. This is how the matter was dealt with at wakes in the west Limerick area:

Two half tierces (kegs) of stout<sup>63</sup> was the usual compliment for a wake. The 'cocking' [tapping] of the barrel was a ceremony in itself. There was always a special man in every locality to do this. If it was done by an amateur, he could make a mess of it. If it was 'high', it would fly all over the place and a lot of it [would] go to loss.<sup>64</sup>

Then the stout was served in the following manner in that area. As had happened in Dunquin at the wake attended by Tomás Ó Criomhthain, a large white enamel bucket—which normally would have held milk or spring water for household use, and was thus commonly available in rural kitchens—was employed for this task:

Then there would be a white enamel bucket filled and a pint saucepan-full given to each man who was a stout drinker. It was great honour to

**55** NFC 2107: 19 (Gweedore, Co. Donegal). **56** NFC 2107: 9. **57** NFC 2107: 36. **58** NFC 2107: 133. **59** NFC 2107: 154 (Belderrig/Belderg [Béal Deirg] area, Co. Mayo). **60** NFC 2107: 82. **61** NFC 1414: 157. **62** NFC 2105: 92 (Banteer: draught stout and

whiskey; the correspondent also stated that the drink might be dispensed to male wake participants in a shed, in order to relieve crowding in the wake-house); NFC 2105: 100 (Bantry parish: bottles of stout or *poitín*). **63** A strong dark beer brewed

with roasted barley or malt. **64** NFC 2105: 135.

be given the job of taking around the bucket and filling the pints with a jug. This was done several times during the night. Some thirsty souls would have their pints empty in a short while. The man with the jug and bucket was supposed to know this without looking and [would] refill them right away. Most of the others would not have to be refilled so often, except to put a top on it. The non-drinkers of stout got port wine or minerals. The women were taken into the room [parlour] for port wine and biscuits.<sup>65</sup>

Part and parcel of wake hospitality in west Limerick (as elsewhere in the countryside), was the provision of clay pipes and tobacco in the early decades of the twentieth century, although the inclusion of cigarettes as part of wake hospitality was also coming to the fore,<sup>66</sup> due in some measure to the shortage of clay pipes in some areas during the Second World War.<sup>67</sup> Where pipes were available, however, and as each wake was a unique pipe-smoking occasion, new pipes were provided specifically for the wake in question, and spare pipes were disposed of afterwards. The smoking of tobacco at wakes was usually associated with an invocation for the repose of the soul of the deceased and for the souls of all the dead. Thus, even non-smokers tended to accept a pipe and make an attempt to ‘reden’ it, out of respect for the deceased.<sup>68</sup>

The tobacco had to be prepared for the wake participants and this also required the services of a man or men familiar with such a task. Then the pipes were filled, both jobs being usually done in the kitchen of the wake-house, and handed out to those present:

Another job that had to be done was to cut up the big roll of tobacco (one pound of ‘Bendigo’, I think was the usual [amount]) and fill the clay pipes. There was a special man of experience for this also. It was a great honour to be let help do the cutting, but he did the filling.

**65** NFC 2105: 135. An invocation for the repose of the soul of the deceased person might also be said on receiving drink at a wake – see, for example, NFC 2107: 168, Kilbride parish, Co. Roscommon. **66** See note 47. **67** NFC 2107: 9. Rosses, Co. Donegal. According to the respondent in question, as clay pipes got scarce during the Second World War (1939–45), people became wary in case of re-use at wakes, and thus the smoking of clay pipes in the wake context was dropped: ‘*Bhíodh leisce nó drogall ar dhaoine piopa a chaitheamh*

*a bheadh i ndiaidh teacht amach as béal duine éigin eile.*’ ‘People were reluctant to smoke a pipe which had come out of someone else’s mouth’. An account from Inishowen, Co. Donegal, stated that pipes were in use there until the 1930s (NFC 2107: 19), while a Co. Fermanagh account indicated that pipes, tobacco, and snuff featured at wakes until the Second World War, but not thereafter (NFC 2107: 58). **68** Ó Súilleabháin 1969, 9. A prayer called ‘Paidir an Tobac’ (‘The Tobacco Prayer’) might also be recited on getting tobacco at a wake,

Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire, S.J., *Ár bPaidreacha Dúchais* (Baile Átha Cliath: Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, 1975), 72. Hartmann (*Der Totenkult in Irland*, 161) mentions that those who could not, or did not want to smoke at a wake, would take a pipe, break the shank and throw it under the table on which the deceased was laid out, presumably while uttering the invocation for the dead. In this way, the obligation to accept wake hospitality and to pray for the deceased and all the faithful departed, was fulfilled. **69** NFC 2105: 135–36. A Co. Cork correspondent added

that the ‘special man’, who was usually in charge of preparing the tobacco and filling the pipes ‘felt very hurt if this task were given to anyone else’ (NFC 2105: 100). The practice of praying for the dead when the pipe was lit was not confined to wakes but was generally practised. There is also a legend well known in Ireland about ‘*Sprid an Tobac*’ / ‘The Spirit of the Tobacco’, which tells of a man out on a night who met a ghost who was smoking a pipe. Three times the ghost offered him the pipe, and each time the man took a smoke, he offered a prayer for the souls of the

They were then handed around to everybody who was smoking, and some who had never before smoked, had their first smoke at a wake, and never forgot it. Everyone who took a pipe said: ‘The Lord have mercy on the dead’, or ‘The light of heaven to all the poor souls’.<sup>69</sup>

Because of the invocation ‘The Lord have mercy on the dead’, said on receipt of a pipe at a wake, wake tobacco was apparently known in Sonnagh, Kilbegnet parish, Co. Galway, as ‘Lord have Mercy’ tobacco.<sup>70</sup> Clay pipes left over after the wake were not subsequently used by the bereaved household.<sup>71</sup> They might be brought to and left at the cemetery, stuck in the eaves of a thatched roof, hidden in a stone wall, or, as stated in an account from Tralee area, Co. Kerry, actually buried in the ground: ‘It was the custom to bury all clay pipes etc. left over after a wake’, and ‘One still finds a cache of new clay pipes [buried] in old haggards’.<sup>72</sup> On Scattery Island, Co. Clare, the left-over clay pipes were broken after the funeral and, on the following Sunday, when going to Mass in Kilrush, were dropped by a family member in the channel near Cappagh Pier.<sup>73</sup> In some cases, elsewhere, any pipes ‘remaining over’ were returned to the shop in which the wake goods were purchased.<sup>74</sup>

While the clay pipes were filled with prepared tobacco and handed out in the kitchen of the wake-house, or outside in the yard in good weather, snuff, on the other hand, was often left on a plate in the corpse-room where it was placed near or on the deceased.<sup>75</sup> Then mourners having viewed the corpse and offered condolences to the bereaved relatives, would:

turn to look at the corpse again, and take a pinch of snuff from the saucer, which was always laid on top of the corpse, and say, ‘The Lord have mercy on all the poor souls.’ I can still remember some of the old people saying, *Trócaire is grásta ar na hanamacha* (‘Mercy and grace on the souls’).<sup>76</sup>

dead. The ghost told him that he needed the prayers of a Christian to get to heaven, and, as the man had prayed for him, he was saved at last, Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, 67–8; Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 161. **70** NFCS 16: 57–8: ‘Pipes and “Lord have Mercy” tobacco are part of the burying charge’; ‘Pipes were filled and left in a scib (‘skep’) outside the door of the house for the people. A man would be told to hand the pipes in the scib to each one who would call in, and as each took the pipe he said, “The Lord have Mercy on the Dead”, hence the name of the

tobacco’ (1937). For details of the ‘burying charge’ in Co. Roscommon, see 2107: 168.

**71** Apparently, a wake participant could bring home the clay pipe (without wake tobacco) that he had received and smoked at a wake—a west Limerick respondent writing in 1978, stated: ‘I can still remember when my father went to a wake we looked forward to the next day. We were sure of a pipe to make bubbles which we were told was a sin’ (NFC 2105: 136). **72** NFC 2105: 38–9 (1978). **73** NFC 1358: 384. Cappagh Pier was where the Scattery islanders landed for a visit

to Kilrush and surrounding areas on the mainland, and from whence they departed when returning to the Island. See also Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 161, concerning the disposal of left-over wake pipes. **74** NFCS 16: 57. **75** NFC 2105: 38; According to the informant from Ballyduff, Tralee, Co. Kerry, writing in 1978, snuff was still provided at wakes there ‘until recent years.’ A Co. Cork respondent stated that snuff might also be available in the kitchen ‘on white frilled paper and placed on various tables and on the [counter of] the dresser (NFC 2105: 92).

In other areas, snuff on a plate might be passed around among the wake participants in the course of the night (NFC 2105: 69). **76** NFC 2105: 136 (west Limerick). The practice of praying for the dead when snuffing was not limited to wake occasions, but was generally observed when snuff was used.



Food, drink, and tobacco were offered throughout the night for those still in the wake-house, and breakfast was also provided for those who had stayed up with the corpse and for relatives who had travelled a distance to the wake. On Scattery Island, for example, the men (four or six) who had sat up with the deceased in the corpse room during the night, were formally given breakfast the following morning. This was prepared by a neighbouring woman in the corpse house and consisted of bread, butter, tea, and a boiled egg each, after which the men went to their respective homes to rest prior to the funeral. The priest (and the server) who came to Scattery Island from Kilrush to say the Mass for the dead in the house of the deceased, were treated to breakfast afterwards in a neighbour's house, before the funeral started.<sup>77</sup>

With the ending of the wake and funeral, the obsequies drew to a close, and the family had the consolation of knowing that hospitality in the traditional fashion had been provided for all those who had visited the corpse house to pay their respects to the deceased:

A decent wake was very important, and no greater tribute could be paid to a family than that 'they waked him decent', and old people on their deathbed asked specifically for a 'decent wake'.<sup>78</sup>

Having thus fulfilled their traditional hospitality obligation to the deceased and the community, the family and relatives, especially those who had come from a distance, usually returned to the bereaved family's house after the funeral and burial, to a meal prepared by a neighbour or neighbours. From Fanad, Co. Donegal, we hear that:

After the funeral the nearest relatives came back to the house along with the chief mourners. A meal (dinner) had been prepared by some girls who stayed to prepare it.<sup>79</sup>

That this was a typical post-funeral procedure elsewhere in the country is evident for the source material. Then the family itself acknowledged the assistance provided by neighbours and friends in dealing with a death situation. Whiskey was often given to those laying out the corpse,<sup>80</sup> to those digging the grave,<sup>81</sup> and, in south-west Clare, to those coffining the corpse,<sup>82</sup> while these tasks were in progress. In like fashion, the neighbours who, in a farming community, had

**77** NFC 1358: 379–80. It would have been difficult to prepare and serve the priest's breakfast in the corpse house as Mass for the dead was celebrated in the kitchen. Then the coffining of the corpse had to be completed and the remains removed from the kitchen, prior to the

commencement of the funeral. **78** NFC 2105: 99 (Parish of Bantry, Co. Cork). Elderly people without relatives might also make arrangements for wake hospitality (and other aspects of their wake and funeral) prior to death (Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 165). For the ritual

wake in Ireland, including the provision of hospitality, see also: Patricia Lysaght, 'Wakes' in Glennys Howarth, Oliver Leamen (eds), *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 472–4; Patricia Lysaght, 'Wakes and Visitation' in *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human*

*Experience* (London: Sage, 2009), Vol. 2, 981–4; Regina Sexton, 'Wakes', in Laura Mason (ed.), *Food and the Rites of Passage* (Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2002), 130–39. **79** NFC 2107: 33 (Fanad, Co. Donegal). **80** NFC 2105: 92 (Banteer, Co. Cork); see also 2107: 51 (Co. Donegal).

attended to the livestock and farmyard tasks of the bereaved family, those who had prepared and dispensed the wake hospitality, and those who had stayed in the house during the funeral and prepared a meal for family and relatives on their return, were not forgotten. These were often given the surplus wake goods as such items would not be used by the bereaved family itself. A correspondent from Gweedore, Co. Donegal, stated the matter as follows:

Then at night the neighbours who had assisted during the wake would come to the house. The Rosary was said and the leftovers from the wake—tobacco, bread, jam and so on—were divided among them.<sup>83</sup>

The same thing happened elsewhere—in Bantry parish, Co. Cork, for example:

Any food (bread or jam), and any tobacco and snuff left over after the wake, was shared out among the neighbours, especially among the women who stayed minding the house during the funeral time.<sup>84</sup>

In this way, the neighbours were thanked for their assistance during the upheaval in family and community routines caused by the recent death, and the leftover food and other items linked to the event were disposed of in a traditional and acceptable manner.

### Conclusion

In Ireland, in the nineteenth century, and in the early decades of the twentieth, the principal occasion on which hospitality was provided by a bereaved family on the occasion of death, was during the wake.

It is evident from the source material analysed for this chapter that the kind and quantity of hospitality offered at wakes varied according to the economic standing of the deceased's family in the early twentieth century. The emphasis was mainly on shop-bought foods, such as tea, sugar, white baker's bread, jam, cake and biscuits. These were served with tea—for which milk and sugar were also provided. Tea consumption was widespread among all sections of society in Ireland by the late nineteenth century, and concerns about its possible effects on nutritional and mental health were critically raised by lay, medical and psychiatric commentators in the course of the century.<sup>85</sup> Tea consumption was very high in districts along the north-western, western, and south-western coastal

<sup>81</sup> NFC 2107: 154 (Belderg, Co. Mayo, NFC 2105: 93); (Banteer, Co. Cork, 2107: 19). From the Moher area of Co. Clare, we hear that: 'A neighbour usually pointed out the grave to the diggers and gave them a bottle of whiskey or *poitín*. The pointing out of the grave was very

important as infringing on a neighbour's grave was the cause of major rows, and still is [1970s]' (NFC 2105: 68).  
<sup>82</sup> NFC 1414: 151, 1950s: 'Of course there is a custom that is sadly dying out. The people who put a dead person into a coffin, be they men or women, are supposed to

get a little *taoscán* [a small quantity] of whiskey... Long ago if there wasn't a drop of whiskey for the men and women who coffined a corpse, there would be hell to pay. But all the old customs are going from us.' See also Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland*, 162.  
<sup>83</sup> NFC 2107: 21 (author's

translation from Irish).  
<sup>84</sup> NFC 2105: 104. <sup>85</sup> See: 'The decaying post-Famine body: tea, bread and nutritional decline', in Ian Miller, *Reforming Food in Post-Famine Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 85–104.

areas, and large quantities of sugar were also consumed.<sup>86</sup> Tea, together with homemade bread, constituted morning and evening meals in many households in rural Ireland by the end of the nineteenth century<sup>87</sup> while baker's bread, readily available in grocers' shops, was linked to particular occasions or events. Thus, together with tea, shop bread was served to threshing groups, at Christmas time, and at wakes, for example. There was also a practical dimension to the serving of tea, baker's bread and jam at wakes, as, in this way, it was possible to provide a simple but acceptable meal to the often large numbers attending these events.

The serving of intoxicating drink, including spirits (legal or clandestine), often the more substantial hospitality element of wakes, diminished as the twentieth century advanced, and bottled stout, for example, was preferred to the draught variety as time went on. Cigarettes were also coming into vogue although tobacco, clay pipes (where available), and 'a token saucer of snuff',<sup>88</sup> might occasionally still be provided for older people at these events until after mid-century.<sup>89</sup>

It is also apparent from the source material examined in this chapter that the wake itself as a ritual event at the crisis of death, was declining as the twentieth century progressed, as was the erstwhile liberal provision of hospitality that it had entailed, though the rate of change in both contexts varied in different parts of the country for a variety of reasons. Following the obligation arising from the new Code of Canon Law in 1917 that a corpse should be removed to the local church the evening before burial, so that the funeral liturgy and Mass would be celebrated there rather than in the corpse house,<sup>90</sup> one-night wakes gradually became common in much of the country.<sup>91</sup> By the 1950s, it appears that one night wakes had become more or less general,<sup>92</sup> and that the wake itself had become an attenuated event in many parts of the country, with the result that the hospitality element—once so central to the wake experience—had also become much less substantial than formerly.

**86** According to Louis Cullen: 'In the quarter century after 1850 tea drinking spread explosively first in the east and south. In the 1860s it was still little known in the congested districts of the west, but by the 1880s the rural community everywhere was engulfed by addiction', Louis Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland 1600–1900* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1981), 187. The scale of tea-drinking in the Fanad district of Co. Donegal (an area mentioned in this paper) in the last decade of the nineteenth century, was considered to be 'injurious

to the people'; see Patricia Lysaght, "When I Makes Tea, I Makes Tea...: Innovation in Food—The Case of Tea in Ireland," *Ulster Folklife* 33 (1987), 49. **87** Cullen 1981, 176: 'With tea consumption having become universal in the twenty years after 1850, the popular Irish rural breakfast had evolved into boiled eggs, bread, butter and tea'. **88** NFC 2105: 38 (Ballyduff, Tralee, Co. Kerry). **89** NFC 2105: 69 (Moher, Co. Clare). See also note 47. **90** Patrick Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 213. **91** In some areas, however, two-night wakes

continued for some time. In the parish of Bantry Co. Cork, for example, two-night wakes were apparently still generally held in the 1930s, with certain families still adhering to that tradition for another decade 'as the new custom [one-night wakes] was considered a sign of meanness' (NFC 2105: 98). **92** Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*, 16, 164–5. A correspondent referring to the Rosses area of west Donegal stated that even in the 1970s, some families were still reluctant to change to a one-night wake, in order to enable relatives in England or Scotland to

travel home to attend the wake (NFC 2107: 9). **93** Val O'Connor, an undertaker, North Gate Bridge, Cork, is credited with introducing the funeral-home concept into Ireland in 1967, thus replacing especially the family home as the place, in which, traditionally, a deceased person was laid out, waked, and coffined, prior to removal (by an undertaker) to the church or cemetery. **94** See for example, 2107: 5; Kiltcevoge, Co. Donegal. The respondent noted that the custom still survived in some families (1978); see also, NFC 2107: 132; Ballinagleragh, Co. Leitrim.

But the greatest change in wake hospitality in the twentieth century, however, occurred due to changing approaches to dealing with a dying or deceased person. As recourse to homes for the care of the aged and the dying became more pronounced, it became less common for elderly people to die or to be waked in home surroundings, prior to removal to the church for the funeral Mass. The provision of mortuary chapels in hospitals also often had the same result. It was, however, the establishment of funeral parlours or funeral homes to which a deceased person could be transferred after death in order to be prepared for viewing by family, neighbours and friends, prior to removal to the church or cemetery, that led to the most significant change in traditional funerary hospitality, from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>93</sup> This new (and fashionable) trend in the management of a deceased person, meant that in places where such facilities were available, the pre-funeral wake, with its strong hospitality focus in the presence of the deceased, was not any longer the primary opportunity or occasion for the family of the deceased to meet and provide hospitality for relatives, friends and neighbours—actually the role of the latter, particularly in the wake-house context, was no longer necessary. While in some parts of the country, drinks for those who had attended a funeral were provided by the bereaved family in a local public house,<sup>94</sup> it was the trend towards the provision of a meal for funeral participants in a hotel or hostelry after the removal of the deceased to the cemetery for burial which gained prominence and that has essentially remained the central rite of hospitality at death. It is this post-funeral meal that nowadays, in most cases, continues to provide the social framework within which death is acknowledged and life celebrated.

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**21**

*‘Lashings and Leavings’:  
Foodways as represented in the  
National Folklore Collection*

**Jonny Dillon and  
Ailbe van der Heide**

## Beginnings

The majority of the collections held today at the archives of the National Folklore Collection (henceforth NFC), University College Dublin, were amassed under the auspices of *Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann*, the Irish Folklore Commission (1935–1970). However, the groundwork for these collections predates the Commission, having been laid down by its predecessors, *An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann*, The Folklore of Ireland Society (1927–) and *Institiúid Bhéaloideas Éireann*, the Irish Folklore Institute (1930–1935). These organisations made important contributions to the study of foodways in Ireland, mainly through the expansion of their collecting efforts, beyond an initial focus on the study of oral literature, to include broader consideration of many aspects of material culture and social tradition. The archives and library of the NFC offer unparalleled research opportunities in the field of popular tradition, and in recognition of its world significance and outstanding universal value to culture, the NFC's Irish Folklore Commission Collection has been inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.<sup>1</sup>

The Folklore of Ireland Society, established by James Hamilton Delargy (Séamus Ó Duilearga) (1899–1980)<sup>2</sup> and others in January 1927, had as its aim to 'collect, arrange and if feasible publish ... a journal dedicated to the study of Irish folklore'.<sup>3</sup> In attempting to bring broader awareness to its field of enquiry, the Society aimed to publish collections of folklore submitted by its membership through its journal *Béaloideas*.<sup>4</sup> To this end, Delargy as editor of *Béaloideas* penned a series of editorials in which he petitioned members of the Society to begin collecting folkloric texts themselves,<sup>5</sup> a process which he guided by means of a list of simple instructions, emphasising the importance of verbatim recordings and the provision of contextual data.

These first editorials, while entreating members of the Society to collect folk tales, place names, calendar customs, nature and plant lore, folk-medicine, charms, prayers, beliefs, superstitions and proverbs, made no explicit mention of foodways or other aspects of material and social culture. It was only after a six-month study trip to Scandinavia and parts of Germany undertaken by Delargy from April to October of 1928, that his field of folk cultural enquiry had broadened sufficiently to include these topics also. On this trip, Delargy visited Scandinavia, Finland, Estonia, and Germany, where he met with international scholars of folklore and ethnology who instructed him in the methods of collection and classification of folk tradition employed in their respective

<sup>1</sup> The Irish Folklore Commission Collection 1935–1970 (2017) UNESCO. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/memoryoftheworld/registry/449> <sup>2</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/o-duilearga-seamus-james-hamilton-delargy-a6353>  
<sup>3</sup> NFC, CHR/1926/1, Séamus

Ó Duilearga to Reidar Christiansen (14 January, 1926), pp. 1–2.  
<sup>4</sup> Séamus Ó Duilearga, 'Editorial', *Béaloideas* 1: 1 (1927), 4–5. <sup>5</sup> Séamus Ó Duilearga, 'Editorial', *Béaloideas* 1: 4 (1928), 416.

institutions and countries.<sup>6</sup> The impetus for Delargy's travels abroad came about as a result of his introduction in Dublin to the Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1878–1952) of the University of Lund. Von Sydow, who was in Dublin to attend a lecture of The Folklore of Ireland Society, had long recognised the importance of comparative study between Scandinavian and Irish folk traditions,<sup>7</sup> and, having established a folklore collection in Lund in 1908,<sup>8</sup> he was keen to assist Delargy in his work to document Ireland's folk traditions. For two and half months, Delargy attended von Sydow's lectures in Lund,<sup>9</sup> during which he learnt 'how to organise ... and also how to deal with [folkloric] material when collected'.<sup>10</sup> He was, however, also particularly inspired and influenced at this time by Åke Campbell (1891–1957), of the *Landsmålsarkivet* ('The Dialect and Folklore Archive'), Uppsala, a friend of von Sydow's and an authority on ethnology. It was Campbell who impressed upon Delargy the importance of the material aspects of folk culture with visits to Skansen<sup>11</sup> and the Folk Life Museum at Fristad, sites that expanded Delargy's understanding of the scope of folk culture. It was these trips that revealed to Delargy 'a new world which lay right under my nose in Ireland but which I never noticed'.<sup>12</sup>

That 'world' was displayed at the Folk Life Museum in Fristad (Figure 1), where Delargy noted the display of various objects associated with butter and cheese making, moulds, small hand churns of wood along with wooden plates, dishes, baskets, trays, horn and wooden spoons, forks and knives, pepper and coffee mills, dressers and cupboards, wooden water-bottles, cups, saucers, kettles, teapots, all kinds of tin and copper plenishings, flails, kneading troughs, stone querns, and other items. Concerning this period, Delargy wrote that Campbell's 'talks to me here on *hembygdsgård* [local heritage conservation] ... opened my eyes and "made me furiously to think". I see now what a great work lies to be done in Ireland and how necessary it is for us to get our people interested in their own country-life'.<sup>13</sup>

While the outlines of Ireland's folk tradition began to appear in the initial volumes of *Béaloides*, Delargy, on returning to Ireland, realised that the work that needed to be done was beyond that which could adequately be carried out by a volunteer organisation such as The Folklore of Ireland Society.<sup>14</sup> Immediately after his return to Dublin, therefore, he approached the State in search of support

**6** Séamas Ó Catháin, *Formation of a Folklorist: The Visit of James Hamilton Delargy to Scandinavia, Finland, Estonia, and Germany*, *Scribhinni Béaloidis/Folklore Studies* 18 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), xi–xiv.  
**7** Bo Almqvist, 'C. W. von Sydow agus Éire: Scoiláire Sualannach agus an Léann Ceilteach', *Béaloides* 70 (2002), 3–49, 6–8.  
**8** Nils-Arvid Bringéus,

'Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, A Swedish Pioneer in Folklore', *Folklore Fellows Communications* 145: 298 (2009), 1–272, 105.  
**9** Micheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2008), 89. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/32115>  
**10** NFC, *Delargy Diaries* (7 June 1928).  
**11** The open-air

folk-museum located on the island of Djurgården in Stockholm, Sweden.  
**12** Séamus Ó Duilearga to his brother Jack Delargy (16 June 1928) reproduced in: Séamas Ó Catháin, *Formation of a Folklorist*, 165.  
**13** Séamus Ó Duilearga to Jack Delargy (16 June, 1928) reproduced in: Séamas Ó Catháin, *Formation of a Folklorist*, 163; the word *hembygdsgård* also means

local folk museum, living history museum, usually run by the local community.  
**14** Bo Almqvist, 'The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy', in pamphlet 3, *Scribhinni Béaloidis/Folklore Studies* (Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloides Éireann, 1979), 4.

Fristad Folkhögskolas Museum.

A large number of ethnographical objects donated by the students of the Folkhögskola from time to time, are housed in a large building which was formerly used by the military band when Fristad was a military camp.

Among the objects preserved I have noted the following:

Agricultural Implements.

Ploughs (showing development), harrows, rollers, spades, rakes, shovels, gropes. Sleighs, carts, carriages. Hay-forks. Horse collars and bridles, saddles, side-saddles. Yokes for oxen. Cow-bells, horse-shoes. Scythes, reaping-hooks. Flails, wooden spades.

Objects associated with

(a) Butter<sup>a cheese</sup>-making eg. moulds, <sup>and</sup> hand churns of wood.

(b) Spinning & weaving eg. spinning-wheel, winders, distaffs, bobbles. A loom, ~~etc~~

(c) Other trades: carpenter & shoemaker's tools. Saw, hammer, gouge, augers, hatchets, axes, lasts.

Other objects: wooden plates, dishes, baskets of various kinds, trays, horns & wooden spoons, forks & knives, pepper mills, <sup>a coffee</sup> becks, brasses & cupboards, troughs and tubs, barrels (some made out of tree stumps) wooden water-bottles, cups & saucers, kettles, kaggs & all kind of tin and copper plumbings, flail, kneading troughs, stragguans, bear-rolls, spears, harpoons, guns, traps, picks, pickles, daggers. powder-horns, snuff-mills, carved work boxes, old peasant prayer books & almanachs (some enclosed in rough leather covers) lanterns, clocks, candlesticks of brass & pewter, crinoids, snuffers, sun-dials, old chests, rush light. cupboards. washing machines. Old peasant dress. Old stools & chairs. Smoothing irons

fristad  
10/8/1928

Figure 1 Delargy's notes regarding the displaying of tools and implements at the Folk Life Museum at Fristad, Sweden, 1928. (National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin)



and funding for an institute tasked with the collection and preservation of Irish folklore.<sup>15</sup>

Through support provided by the Department of Finance, the Irish Folklore Institute was established in 1930.<sup>16</sup> By 1931, Delargy was reporting that the Institute had already recorded a collection of ‘over one million five hundred thousand words’, representing ‘the largest manuscript collection of the folklore of a Celtic country in existence’, and containing a body of material illustrative of the social, economic and cultural life of the Irish peasantry.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the recording of oral literature, the Institute conducted a pioneering material culture survey. Åke Campbell—who had so inspired Delargy during his travels in Scandinavia in 1928—was invited by the Institute to visit Ireland in June of 1934. He spent five weeks travelling through parts of the country in order to survey the ‘culture landscape’,<sup>18</sup> a project that resulted in the creation of over 400 drawings, sketches



**Figure 2** Åke Campbell's sketch of the hearth of Pats Ó Conaill, Cill Rialaigh, showing, left to right: a bread griddle, a frying pan, a pot-oven, a three-legged pot, pot-hooks, hanger and fire crane, a trivet (griddle stand) and a tongs. County Kerry, 1934. Reference: NFC A021.18.00056 (National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin)

**15** Séamas Ó Catháin, 'Institiúid Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1930–1935', in *Béaloideas* 73 (2005), 87–88. **16** NFC, AB/135/2 Irish Folklore Institute Minutebook (12 March 1930), 7. **17** NFC, AB/135/2, Irish Folklore Institute Minutebook, 'Memorandum: The Grant-in-Aid to the Irish Folklore Institute, Dublin' (1931). **18** Åke Campbell, 'Irish Fields and Houses',

*Béaloideas* 5 (1935), 58. **19** NFC, CHR/1934/2, Séamus Ó Duilearga to Reidar Christiansen (12 November, 1934). **20** Pats Ó Conaill was Seán Ó Conaill's eldest son who had inherited the Cill Rialaigh holding—see Séamus Ó Duilearga (ed.), *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill* (Baile Átha Cliath: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1977), x; Máire MacNeill, *Seán Ó Conaill's Book* (Baile Átha Cliath: Comhairle

and plans of farm buildings.<sup>19</sup> Visual records of house interiors, along with information concerning common household implements and utensils used in food production, were also generated as part of this project. At Cill Rialaigh, in south-west Kerry, Campbell made a detailed drawing of the hearth in Pats Ó Conaill's house<sup>20</sup> (Figure 2) which shows a bread griddle, frying pan, a baking pot, a three-legged pot on a cooking arm, a trivet (griddle stand), and a tongs.

Despite these advances, the Institute ultimately failed to live up to Delargy's hopes,<sup>21</sup> and in May of 1933, he sought renewed support from the State for the collection and preservation of Ireland's folk traditions.<sup>22</sup> Following a meeting with Éamon de Valera, Delargy was promised a sum of £3,000 per year to support the work of folklore collecting in Ireland, and in 1935, the Irish Folklore Commission was established.<sup>23</sup> A government memorandum from that period describes how the Commission's collectors would travel the country recording and transcribing oral traditions, which they would post back to headquarters in Dublin,<sup>24</sup> along with diaries recording details of places visited and the results of their enquiries.<sup>25</sup>

With a systematised collecting structure beginning to take shape, Delargy sought out an individual who would oversee the arrangement and description of the material received by the Commission from its collectors. To this end he recruited 'excellent fellow and first-rate collector'<sup>26</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1903–1996).<sup>27</sup> Ó Súilleabháin had carried out some collecting work on behalf of the Irish Folklore Institute, and at the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935, he was appointed Archivist by Delargy. Following his appointment, Delargy immediately sent Ó Súilleabháin to *Landsmålsarkivet* in Uppsala, located to the north of Stockholm in Sweden, where he was trained in the cataloguing of folk traditions.<sup>28</sup>

It was during this period that Ó Súilleabháin familiarised himself with the classification and subject indexing systems which had been developed by Åke Campbell, Herman Geijer and Sven Liljeblad at *Landsmålsarkivet* in 1934. Here, the broader panorama of folk tradition, including the subjects of material culture and foodways, along with many other expressions of popular custom and tradition, was opened up to Ó Súilleabháin. Reflecting on his time at *Landsmålsarkivet*, Ó Súilleabháin remarked that 'it was only when I went

Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1981), iii. Seán Ó Conaill (1853–1931) was considered one of the best storytellers in Munster, and Delargy had collected his repertoire between 1923–1931.

<sup>21</sup> Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> NFC, AB/135/2, Irish Folklore Institute Minutebook (22 May 1934) 118–22. <sup>23</sup> NAI, TSCH/3/S9244, 'Proposal for the Establishment of an

Irish Folklore Commission'.

<sup>24</sup> UCDA, P150-2535, 'Notes on the Collection of Irish Folklore' (13 February 1935).

<sup>25</sup> NAI, TSCH/3/S9244, 'Memorandum—Collection of Oral Tradition in Ireland', Séamus Ó Duilearga to Éamon de Valera (18 May 1933), 11. <sup>26</sup> NFC, Delargy Diaries (19 May 1933). <sup>27</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/o-suilleabhain-sean-a6442>

<sup>28</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Preface', in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Educational Co. of Ireland, 1942), vii.

to Uppsala that I saw the real scope of folklore. Many of the people in Ireland think of folklore as merely folktales, riddles, and proverbs. But working with Herman Geijer, Sven Liljeblad, and Åke Campbell completely wipes that idea out of one's mind'.<sup>29</sup>

In adapting the Swedish system for use in an Irish context, Ó Súilleabháin developed and implemented a framework by which fieldwork collections made by the Commission's folklore collectors could be meaningfully described and managed. Now that the Commission had systematised its primary collecting methods through a network of full- and part-time folklore collectors, Delargy and Ó Súilleabháin endeavoured to undertake a new and hugely ambitious folklore-collecting initiative. They would broaden that network to include approximately 50,000 people, when, with the support of the Department of Education, they recruited an entire generation of schoolchildren as folklore collectors from 1937 to 1939.<sup>30</sup>

### The Schools' Collection (1937–1939)

The Schools' Collection was a once-off collecting scheme initiated by the Irish Folklore Commission in collaboration with the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), which commenced in September 1937, and ran until January 1939.<sup>31</sup> The scheme worked on the basis that folklore collecting would replace the element of 'composition' on the school curriculum for that period, meaning that schoolchildren, while the scheme was in operation, would collect folklore from their parents, grandparents, and others, and transcribe the material thus collected into their school copybooks as part of their school work. Though the scheme was voluntary, Delargy and Ó Súilleabháin spent time speaking to branches of the INTO around the country about its operation and the work that it would entail, with the result that more than 5,000 primary schools participated in the endeavour,<sup>32</sup> generating 1,128 bound volumes of material and 1,124 boxes of unbound children's copybooks.<sup>33</sup> This work was undertaken by children aged between eleven and fourteen years of age who were in the fifth and sixth classes in primary schools across the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State, at that time.<sup>34</sup>

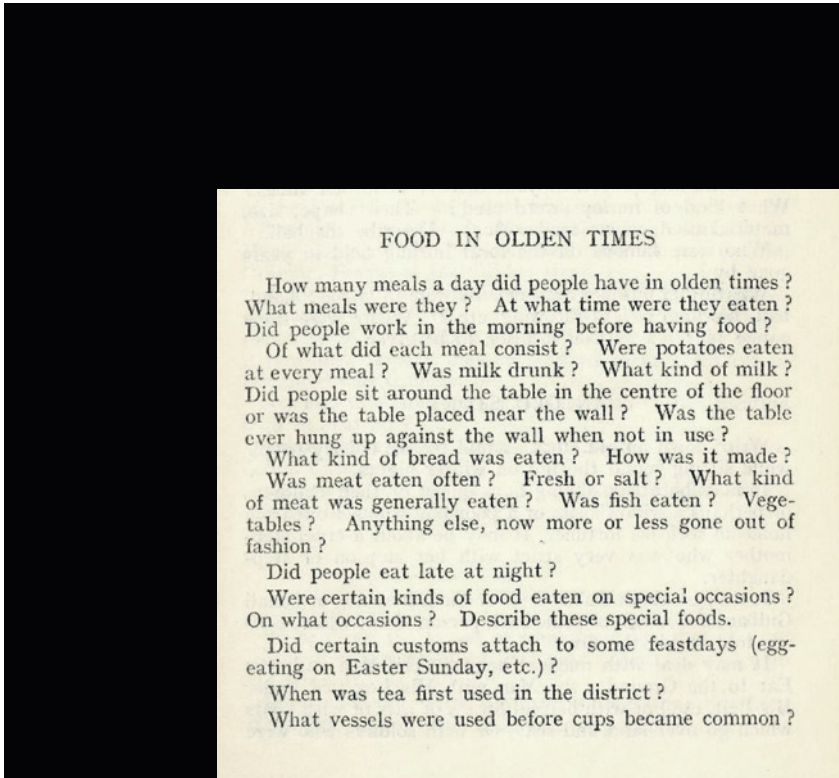
Two booklets, one in English and another in Irish, distributed to schools in preparation for the scheme, provided detailed instructions to be followed by teachers and pupils regarding the kinds of material and metadata that should

<sup>29</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Archiving Folklore' in Stith Thompson (ed.), *Four Symposia on Folklore* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1953), 113.  
<sup>30</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Willing Volunteers All Over Ireland Gather Up The Fragments', *Irish Independent*, 3 October 1938.

<sup>31</sup> Séamas Ó Catháin, 'Scéim na Scoil' in Margaret Farren and Mary Harkin (eds), *It's us they're talking about: Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School 1998* (Donegal: 1998) <https://www.duchas.ie/assets/pdf/schools-scheme-ocathain.pdf>  
<sup>32</sup> Patricia Lysaght, 'Collecting the Folklore of Ireland: The

Schoolchildren's Contribution', *Folklore* 132: 1 (2021), 1–33, 8.  
<sup>33</sup> Rosita Boland, "Men who could catch horses and rabbits by running after them": the Schools' Collection' in Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Séamas Ó Catháin, Ríonach uí Ógáin and Seosamh Watson (eds), *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection/Seoda*

*as Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 139. <https://www.duchas.ie/assets/pdf/15.03.30-fiontar-uchas-ie-alt-rosita-boland.pdf>  
<sup>34</sup> Séamas Ó Catháin, 'Súil siar ar Scéim na Scol 1937–1938', *Sinséar* 5 (1988), 19–30; A similar Schools' Scheme was initiated in Northern



be recorded.<sup>35</sup> These booklets, compiled by Ó Súilleabháin and published by the Department of Education as *Irish Folklore and Tradition* and *Béaloideas Éireann*, respectively, contained simple, example-based questions grouped under fifty-five subject headings. Many of these topics were formulated with a view to the gathering of local traditions, and many of the subjects included would have appealed directly to children.<sup>36</sup> Of the topics mentioned, traditions surrounding food were directly sought after under four headings: Food in Olden Times (*Bia na Seanaimsire*), The Potato Crop (*Na Prátaí*), Bread (*Arán*) and Churning (*An Chuiqeann*), though food could also be mentioned indirectly under sections concerning the Famine, marriage customs, festival observances, markets, and herbs.

The topics were selected so that one single subject, such as 'Food in Olden Times', might prompt several different kinds of composition content (Figure 3).<sup>37</sup>

Ireland in 1955–56; for the background to the collecting of folklore in Northern Ireland, see Briody, *Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, 290–96.

<sup>35</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folklore and Tradition* (Dublin: the Department of Education, 1937) <https://www.duchas.ie/assets/pdf/>

*irish-folklore-and-tradition.pdf* and Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Béaloideas Éireann* (Dublin: the Department of Education, 1937) <https://www.duchas.ie/assets/pdf/beal-eireann-1937a.pdf> <sup>36</sup> Lysaght, 'Collecting the Folklore of Ireland: The Schoolchildren's Contribution', 7. <sup>37</sup> Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folklore and Tradition*, 5.

**Figure 3** 'Food in Olden Times' from 1937 booklet, *Irish Folklore and Tradition*.

While the sections on food and bread focused primarily on the past, prompting children to ask their elders for more information, the sections concerning the potato crop and churning pose questions in the present tense, resulting in many children giving an account of their own direct experience of these food-provision practices in their answers. It seems that many of the teachers were very diligent in following the directions set out under the scheme, and the material in the Schools' Collection often gives direct answers to the questions asked, thus providing detailed accounts about agricultural practices, food-production strategies, and recipes. In 2013, the Schools' Collection manuscripts began to be digitised and made available on the online platform, *Dúchas.ie*.<sup>38</sup> Since 2015, the scanned material has been open to volunteer public transcription on *Meitheal Dúchas.ie*, and to date over 440,000 pages of material have been transcribed by members of the public at home and abroad. Because of the digitisation process and the subsequent crowd-sourced transcription of this material, the Schools' Collection has become much more accessible and searchable for a wide audience nationally and internationally.

The questions listed under the heading 'Food in Olden Times' prompted the participating children to gather material about mealtimes—when they were eaten, where and how they were eaten, and what they consisted of. Questions posed under this topic also enquired about food eaten on special occasions and on feast days, as well as making enquiries regarding the introduction of tea to the district, and information about drinking vessels. A survey of the accounts shows that the meals most often reported on were breakfast, dinner and supper, with children commonly stating that breakfast was not eaten until after a period of work had been completed in the morning. The most popular foods listed for all three meals were porridge, potatoes, milk of different kinds, and bread (particularly oaten bread). Many festivals are also mentioned in these accounts, and the collection features descriptions of customs regarding the consumption of pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, the practice of fasting throughout Lent, the eating of eggs at Easter, and the consumption of apples and nuts at Halloween, as well as a goose or cock at Martinmas.<sup>39</sup> However, more detailed descriptions of festive foods are generally found in accounts concerning specific festivals of the year, such as the following collected in Inniscarra, Co. Cork:

**38** A collaboration between the National Folklore Collection, UCD and Gaois, Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge, Dublin City University. See also Gearóid Ó Cleirín, Anna Bale agus Brian Ó Raghallaigh, 'Dúchas.ie: ré nua i stair Chnuasach Bhéalóideas Éireann' in *Béalóideas* 82 (2014), 84–100. <https://doras.dcu.ie/24926/3/14.07.25%20Alt%20B%3%Agalóideas.pdf>

**39** For further information

on food in various festive and calendar days see Patricia Lysaght, 'Bealtaine: Women, Milk, and Magic at the Boundary Festival of May', in Patricia Lysaght (ed.), *Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 208–29; Caitríona Nic Philibín, 'Exploring Food Traditions within the four Quarter Days of the Irish Calendar year. (M.A. Thesis: TU Dublin,

2021). <https://doi.org/10.21427/tz8n-nc09>; Caitríona Nic Philibín and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'An exploratory study of food traditions associated with Imbolg (St. Brigid's Day)', *Folk Life* 59: 2 (2021), 141–160 <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957428>; Stephanie Byrne and Kathleen Farrell, 'An investigation into the food related traditions associated with the Christmas period in Rural Ireland',

*Folk Life* 59: 2 (2021), 123–40 <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957427>.

[Hallowe'en is a] popular time with youngsters who can provide apples and hot-cross buns. Barmbracks are also in evidence and provide food for comment. Apples are used in two ways. An apple is suspended from the ceiling by means of a string and children, in turn, try to get a grip on it with the mouth. Use of the hands is strictly forbidden. A successful grip leads to possession of the apple when another is provided and the fun continues. Later a tub of water is provided into which an apple is dropped. Attempts at withdrawing the apple with the mouth are made with a view to getting possession and hands must be kept off. This game involves considerable wetting of the head but the inconvenience is borne cheerfully in the hope of securing the prize. A sixpenny bit or three penny bit is sometimes substituted for the apple, and proves equally fascinating. The barmbrack is produced at tea time and the main idea is to get the ring which suggests early marriage. The pea is supposed to bring poverty; the rag is an indication that the [recipient] will finish up as a tramp and the stick entitles the receiver to exercise stern authority over his or her spouse later on. Even very poor people manage to secure a barmbrack, however small, which means a busy time for our local baker.<sup>40</sup>

The section on bread prompted children to ask their elders about bread in past times, enquiring specifically as to the types of cereal grain used to make bread, and the various types of bread made in former times. Children were also prompted to enquire about methods employed when making bread, the frequency of bread-making in their household and the kinds of baking vessels used, along with questions concerning the marking of bread loaves before baking. The children provided detailed responses to all of these questions, with the most common descriptions of bread-making relating to oaten bread, wheaten bread, and soda bread. Griddle bread, baked on a griddle over the fire or on a griddle placed on a trivet over embers on the hearth, is also frequently mentioned in the Schools' Collection, as are accounts with information concerning potato cakes and boxty.<sup>41</sup>

There are over 2,700 accounts concerning the potato crop in the Schools' Collection, with detailed descriptions of planting methods, and the growing and harvesting of the crop, along with explanations of the various methods and utensils employed in undertaking this work, being provided.<sup>42</sup> The questions

**40** NFCS 347: 435–3. Collector: Conchobhar Ó Liatháin, Teacher at Matehy National School, Inniscarra, Co. Cork. <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921718/4893367>

**41** Further descriptions of different kinds of bread can be found in Kevin Danaher, *Irish Country People* (Cork: Mercier

Press, 1966), 44–50, and Bríd Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey: The Story of Traditional Irish Food & Drink* (Swords, Co. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1991).

**42** For further information on potatoes within the Schools' Collection, see Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dónall Ó Braonáin, 'Seventy-two

Words for Potato: Exploring Irish language resources for Food History' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUT+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 19, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87>.

17

## Different kinds of Churns

There are no creameries in this part of Co. Roscommon so all the churning is done in the homes of the people. There are three kinds of churns in use; the barrel churn, the box or cylindrical and the plunger or upright. The one most commonly used is the barrel churn as it is easy to manipulate and clean.

As shown it rests on a frame and the complete barrel is turned round by means of the handle. There is a circular glass in the lid so that we know when the churning is done; there is also a ventilator in the lid to let off excessive heat. There is also a large plate of iron on the bottom to balance the heavy lid.



The box or cylindrical churn is an ideal one for churning small quantities. There are revolving dashes on the inside to which the handle is screwed on the outside. It is worked by twisting the handle and holds from 3 to 8 gallons.



Figure 4 NFCS 260: 17.  
Descriptions of Churns.  
Collector: John Ryan,  
Kilteevan National School,  
Co. Roscommon. Teacher:  
Patrick Ryan

also prompted children to give information regarding types of potatoes grown locally, and whether or not any local names existed for them. Practices concerning the preparation of the ground for planting by ploughing and harrowing, for example, were also mentioned by the children, along with information concerning the use of animal dung or seaweed as fertiliser, and the processes of moulding and spraying the growing plants. In some instances, children directly describe their own part in helping to pick the potatoes after they were dug out in the autumn in preparation for storage and for use as food during the winter and spring months.

Information regarding butter and churns can be found in over 3,200 Schools' Collection accounts, with participants in the scheme providing detailed descriptions of churns (Figure 4), the frequency with which churning was carried out in the home, by whom, and how it was done.<sup>43</sup> Information regarding local stories, sayings or proverbs connected to churning was also sought as part of this topic, opening up the possibility for children to include information relating, not just to the practicalities of food production, but also to aspects of popular belief and custom pertaining to the topic. Many first-hand accounts are provided regarding churning, with children's mothers most often being described as taking charge of butter production in the home. Various common churning methods are described, as well as a general description of the family churn, its dimensions, and its constituent parts. Popular customs and beliefs are at times also noted with regard to butter production: it was for example, a common practice for anyone entering a house where churning was in progress, to declare, 'God bless the work!' or to take a 'dash' at the churn, in order that they might not be thought to have 'stolen' the butter 'profit'<sup>44</sup> from the home, either accidentally or through malevolence. Risk to the butter 'profit' could also, it seems, be guarded against by the placing of a piece of a glowing coal or ember from the fire, or an object made of iron, beneath the churn as a means of protection.

### A Handbook of Irish Folklore

With the growth of the Commission's holdings through the success of the Schools' Scheme, coupled with the increase in material being received from full and part-time fieldworkers around Ireland, Ó Súilleabháin began to formalise a subject-based card catalogue for the description of folkloric material collected by the Commission's field workers. This system was based on the Swedish model in use at Uppsala, which Ó Súilleabháin had adapted for use in the Irish context.<sup>45</sup>

**43** For detailed illustrated accounts of butter making drawing on sources from the Schools' Collection, see Claudia Kinmonth, "Joined in Butter": the material culture of Irish home butter-makers, using the dash churn, up to the late nineteenth century' in Mac

Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 16.

**44** The ability of the milk to yield butter; for further details about popular beliefs associated with butter making, see Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Caitríona Nic Philibín, 'Exploring the Food-Related

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bealtaine (May Day) within the Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Collection Digital Archive', *Études Irlandaises* 47: 1(2022), 15–32. <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.12548>

**45** Ó Súilleabháin, 'Preface', *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, viii.



The subject index was arranged under fourteen major subject headings,<sup>46</sup> under which were grouped further sub-headings, in a hierarchical structure, which allowed the archival collections to be approached from a variety of cross-referenced topics by researchers. Throughout the late 1930s, this system was adapted by Ó Súilleabháin to form a practical guidebook for folklore collectors, containing thousands of questions and examples of traditions, which had 'already been recorded from oral sources in Ireland'.<sup>47</sup> The book, first published by The Folklore of Ireland Society in 1942, was a ground-breaking work. It was hailed at the time of its publication as an 'invaluable' tool for the student working in the field, and serving as a template, which would allow one to create an 'archive of all the folklore of his chosen district'.<sup>48</sup>

'Food and Drink' as a sub-heading appears in chapter two of the *Handbook*, under the main subject heading 'Livelihood and Household Support', and the range of topics included are broader than one might at first assume. Featured questions concern appetite, hunger and thirst, fasting and abstinence, eating and drinking, household beverages, the cooking of food, special kinds of food, vegetables, condiments, and the preservation of food, and bread. Concerning the preservation of food, the *Handbook* enquires as follows:

What means were adopted locally to preserve food from contamination and decay? The use of salt and pickle in the preservation of fish, meat, butter, and other foods should be described. Methods of using salt for food-preservation. Use of smoke as a preservative (smoked bacon or fish). Was sugar used for preserving purposes? How? Describe the methods by which milk, eggs, and jams were preserved. Sun-drying of fish or meat. Methods of excluding air from food (burial, use of grease or oil etc.).<sup>49</sup>

In addition to avenues of enquiry regarding food and drink, queries concerning the types of meals eaten are also found in the *Handbook*. These include detailed questions being posed regarding mealtimes, the names of meals consumed throughout the day, the times at which meals were taken, whether or not work was performed before taking breakfast, and changes of habit in this regard. As well as questions focusing on the material aspects of food production and consumption, detailed enquiries are also made in the *Handbook* concerning customs and practices around the table at mealtimes:

**46** Settlement and Dwelling, Livelihood and Household Support, Communications and Trade, The Community, Human life, Nature, Folk-Medicine, Time, Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practice, Mythological Tradition, Historical Tradition, Religious Tradition,

Popular Oral literature and Sports and Pastimes.  
**47** Ó Súilleabháin, 'Preface', *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, xi.  
**48** M.T., 'A Handbook of Irish Folklore by Seán Ó Súilleabháin', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* Seventh Series 13: 1 (31 March, 1943), 27.

**49** Ó Súilleabháin, 'Preservation of Food', *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, 88.

Which was the seat of honour at the table? Was a guest placed at the head of the table, or alone at one side of it? Where were the parents, grandparents or other relatives, children and servants seated at table when no guests were present? Who sat at the head? Did any members of the household eat apart (*ithe iargcúlta*)? Give details. Lucky and unlucky numbers at table. Who served the food before or during the meal? How was the food served? Who got the first portion (*an chéad ruth do'n bhídh*)? Table-manners. Give details of these as illustrated by the manner of eating, removal of head-gear, solicitude shown for others, methods of asking for something, passing food and condiment to others, leaving some food uneaten (*fuighleach an táilliúra*), rising from the table before all have finished their meal etc. Conversation at table (*scéal* or *comhrádh búird*). Washing up after meals.<sup>50</sup>

Information concerning food in folk tradition is not limited to the sections dealing specifically with food, drink, and meals in the *Handbook*. Indeed, prompts and queries concerning food in folk tradition may be found under an array of different headings throughout the *Handbook*. These include material relating to household implements and utensils, descriptions of certain trades and occupations, explorations of relations between rich and poor, details regarding specific population groups, nature, folk medicine, calendar customs, religious observances, historical tradition, popular beliefs and customs regarding the otherworld and the fairy host, and so on. The *Handbook*, and the large subject-index card catalogue which was developed from it, are still employed today as the primary finding aids for material contained in the Main Manuscript Collection. This series of manuscripts consists of over 2,400 bound volumes of folklore, recorded and transcribed by full- and part-time collectors for the Irish Folklore Commission, and its predecessors, The Folklore of Ireland Society and the Irish Folklore Institute, as well as by the Commission's successor institutions.<sup>51</sup> Select materials collected today under the auspices of the NFC are still bound, paginated, and added to this series.

50 Ó Súilleabháin, 'The Table for Meals', *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, 91–92. 51 The Department of Irish Folklore 1971–2005, The UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection, 2005–2015, The National Folklore Collection/Cnusach Bhéaloideas Éireann 2015–.

### The Audio Collection

Unlike the Schools' Collection, which was a standalone project, the Audio Collection is not an entirely separate entity from the Main Manuscript Collection of the NFC. The Commission, working on limited resources since its foundation in 1935, used Ediphone recordings on wax cylinders mainly as an aid for transcription,<sup>52</sup> and when recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy against paper transcriptions submitted to the Commission by the fieldworkers, the wax cylinders were then shaved blank and sent back into the field for reuse by collectors.<sup>53</sup> As a result, many of the accounts recorded in the earliest years of the Commission are held only in the form of manuscript transcriptions. The Commission began to produce higher quality audio recordings from the late 1940s, when they procured a disc-cutting machine,<sup>54</sup> and the use of tape recorders in the 1950s and early 1960s further changed how the collectors worked, as well as the medium and formats on which material was collected by the Commission. From the early 1960s onwards, all full-time collectors were equipped with tape recorders,<sup>55</sup> and, as a result, the capacity to capture permanent sound recordings of traditional material expanded enormously.

The creation of the audio collection was, therefore, a continuation of the work done by full-time collectors for the Irish Folklore Commission, and later by the staff of the Department of Irish Folklore. The audio collection also contains material that has been gifted or donated to it by other bodies, collectors, and so on. As a result, the audio material often has a content range similar to that contained in the Main Manuscript Collection. An internal subject catalogue of audio recordings can be parsed by NFC staff as part of their own work, or on behalf of researchers. Thus, a search for 'food', references 154 recordings, while searches using other keywords such as 'milk', 'bread', 'meal', etc., unveil further audio material. Tape references also exist for Irish language food terms such as '*bia*', '*arán*' and '*bainne*'. Some examples of Irish-language accounts dealing with food include material recorded in 1966 by Leo Corduff of the sound archive of the Irish Folklore Commission and the Department of Irish Folklore, from Mícheál Ó Guithín, son of Peig Sayers,<sup>56</sup> who spoke about pickling mackerel and other foods on the Great Blasket Island.<sup>57</sup> The audio collection also contains material recorded by Séamas Ó Catháin, Department of Irish Folklore, from the *seanchaí* Seán Ó hÉinrí from Cill Ghallagáin, Co. Mayo, talking about food eaten during the Great Famine.<sup>58</sup>

**52** Anna Bale, 'Guthaí agus Glórtha: an Chartlann Fuaime', in Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Séamas Ó Catháin, Ríonach uí Ógáin and Seosamh Watson (eds), *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection/Seoda as Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 164. [https://www.duchas.](https://www.duchas.ie/assets/pdf/guthai-agus-glortha-an-chartlann-fuaime.pdf)

[ie/assets/pdf/guthai-agus-glortha-an-chartlann-fuaime.pdf](https://www.duchas.ie/assets/pdf/guthai-agus-glortha-an-chartlann-fuaime.pdf) **53** Briody, *Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, 338. **54** Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'Sound Recording of Folk Narrative in Ireland in the Late Nineteen Forties', *Fabula, Journal of Folktale Studies* 22 (1981), 312–15. **55** Briody,

*Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, 346. **56** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/sayers-peig-peig-mhor-a7940> **57** See NFC T0331 and T0332. **58** NFC SOC004.1, NFC SOC008.1.

One fundamental difference, however, between the content of the Audio Collection and the Irish Folklore Commission's manuscripts' collection, is that the former captures the later collection of material carried out in urban areas. The Commission, in terms of its work, was strongly focused on rural and Irish-speaking areas of Ireland, from 1935 onwards. This tendency is generally reflected in the earlier material in both of the manuscript collections already mentioned.<sup>59</sup> The later recordings carried out by the Department of Irish Folklore and held as part of the Audio Collection under discussion here, present a broader picture of Irish society, featuring, as they do, previously ignored urban areas and societal groups.

### **The Urban Folklore Project (1979–1980)**

The Urban Folklore Project (UFP), under the direction of Séamas Ó Catháin, was an important collecting project as it aimed to record material from people living in the inner-city Dublin area, as well as from counties around the greater Dublin region. The project was hugely successful, generating over 700 tape recordings and 14,000 photographs. Foodways feature in many of the accounts recorded from the inner-city inhabitants, ranging from recipes and meal practices to photographs of urban markets (Figure 5). Social conditions, oral histories, and foodways of the early twentieth century are featured in the UFP recordings, which also contain accounts of the distribution of food during the 1913 Lockout, descriptions of the looting of food during the 1916 Rising, and examples of food cooked as part of tenement life in Dublin. Coddle, the famous Dublin dish, is mentioned in the following extract collected from Mary Spencer from Ringsend:

You made your coddle ... well you were supposed to get ham rashers, but I can tell you in them days we didn't get ham rashers, we hadn't got the money for them. You went down to the aul' shop, and he'd have all these bacon bits. There'd be ham bits, there'd be bacon bits in it. Now, he'd keep them for you, if you asked him to, say the day before, say I'll be down tomorrow, keep me, he kept the bits and you got a half pound of sausages or maybe a pound of sausages. Now beef sausages you got, not the pork sausages, the big beef sausages. And two good Spanish onions, which you won't see nowadays. Aw they were beautiful, I haven't seen them in years. They were beautiful big

<sup>59</sup> The introductory note, written by Delargy to *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* reads; '[In Ireland], as elsewhere the shoddy imported culture of the towns pushes back the frontiers of the indigenous homespun culture of the countryside...'; Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, v.



**Figure 5** NFC  
C050.06.00115. Woman  
scaling fish at a fruit and  
vegetable market, Arran  
Street. Photographer:  
Bróna Nic Amhlaoibh,  
November 1979 as part  
of the Urban Folklore  
Project.

onions, but there was a lovely mild taste off them. Aw they were beautiful now. Well, you got two good Spanish onions. Now, you put your bacon bits, and your sausages and your Spanish onion in, and you simmered it. And you never tasted anything like it. Now if you could buy potatoes, you could throw potatoes in, if you wanted to make a kind of a stew out of it, for the kids. Many a time I done that for their dinner. But if you didn't, you could take it with bread. You know what I mean, aw it was gorgeous. Gorgeous. But that was a relish, if you had that for your tea you were lucky, you generally only had a bit of bread and butter for your tea. Or maybe a bit of rye bread, you know what I mean. But if you had a coddle you were well off.<sup>60</sup>

### The Photographic Collection

The Photographic Collection of the NFC is extensive, containing over 80,000 photographs, almost all of which were taken by collectors and staff of the Irish Folklore Commission and the Department of Irish Folklore, with some being donated to the Collection by friends of the archive, as well as by other related bodies.<sup>61</sup> While the photographs capture many aspects of folk tradition, they are of the utmost importance in the documentation of material culture. Photographs are catalogued by subject and follow the format applied in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, with each subject heading corresponding to a chapter in the *Handbook*: A: Settlement and Dwelling, B: Livelihood and Household Support, and so on.<sup>62</sup> Most photographs containing images of food can be found under category B: Livelihood and Household Support, although, in similar fashion to the Main Manuscript Collection, material of interest regarding foodways can also be found under other sections, such as Trades, Time and Festivals, and a number of other categories.

Of the staff of the Irish Folklore Commission, Caoimhín Ó Danachair (Kevin Danaher) (1913–2002)<sup>63</sup> took a significant portion of the photographs, which today comprise the NFC Photographic Collection. Ó Danachair took nearly 20,000 photographs in total, and his specialisation in ethnology led to his documenting traditional houses and settlement patterns, as well as crafts and many other aspects of material culture. Writing in 1977, Ó Danachair articulated succinctly the purpose of assembling 'a body of visual material' in the context of the work of the Commission and its successors:

<sup>60</sup> NFC UFP0588. Collector: Ann O'Reilly, Urban Folklore Project, July 1980. For further examples see NFC UFP0494 and NFC UFP0641.

<sup>61</sup> Anne Burke, 'Framing the Archive: The Photographs', in Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Séamas Ó Catháin, Ríonach úí Ógáin & Seosamh

Watson (eds), *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection/Seoda as Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann*, 124.

<sup>62</sup> The identifying letters used in the Photographic Collection are as follows; A. Settlement and Dwelling, B. Livelihood and Household Support, C. Communication

and Trade, D. The Community, E. Human Life, F. Nature, G. Folk Medicine, H. Time and Festivals, I. Popular Belief and Practice, J. Mythological Tradition, K. Historical Tradition, L. Religious Tradition, M. Folklore Collecting, N. Games and Pastimes.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/odanachair-caimhin-danaher-kevin-a2392>

1. To preserve the visual characteristics of the tradition.
2. To provide illustrations for the aural and written materials.
3. To provide teaching materials.<sup>64</sup>

A series of photographs taken by Ó Danachair in Dún Chaoin in 1947 captures the process of making soda bread (Figure 6), and many other photos document the hearth, dressers, tables, and other physical objects used in the making, eating, and the serving of food.<sup>65</sup> Full-time collector Michael J. Murphy, working mainly in the northern part of Ireland, also took many photographs of agricultural life, including depictions of threshing, potato spraying, and the saving of the harvest.<sup>66</sup>

Not all of the full-time collectors carried cameras, however, but in 1949, and again in 1959, Delargy hired the artist Simon Coleman to accompany three collectors in order to sketch various aspects of material culture. Coleman accompanied Seán Ó hEochaidh in Co. Donegal in December 1949, and ten years later, he returned to work for the Commission again, this time accompanying the collectors Ciarán Bairéad and Proinsias de Búrca in their work in Co. Galway, briefly also visiting north-west Co. Clare. This second visit lasted several months.<sup>67</sup> On both occasions, Coleman, in addition to depicting farm machinery, farming implements, and farming practices, also sketched the interiors of houses, hearths and dressers, as well as providing detailed drawings of household objects, such as butter prints, iron bread stands, and tools for the churning and the making of butter (Figure 7). One of his sketches depicts a scene in which a farmer is preparing the ground for potatoes on Inis Oírr, Co. Galway,<sup>68</sup> and in another, a family in Co. Donegal is seen sitting together eating potatoes from a wicker basket placed on top of an old, disused churn (Figure 8).

Photographs donated by Domhnall Ó Cearbhaill<sup>69</sup> depict people collecting seaweed (Figure 9) and beach combing, as seaweed and shellfish were consumed as a useful supplement to the ordinary diet, and they were also used as a form of fertiliser for crops.<sup>70</sup> Photographs by Maurice Curtin include images of collecting

**64** NFC CÓD/02/03.

**65** Several of these photos and drawings by Áike Campbell and Simon Coleman from the NFC are utilised and discussed in Clodagh Doyle, “‘Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin’: Hearth Furniture from the Famine to Rural Electrification’ in Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion*, chapter 18 <https://doi.org/10.21427/SWHY-oK87>.

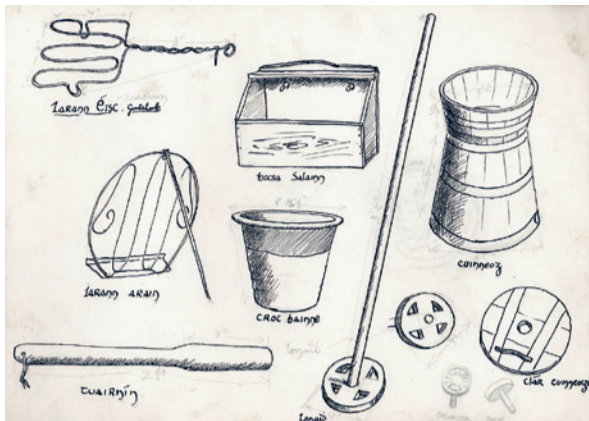
**66** See NFC B028.25.00003–B028.25.00016, NFC B024.25.00001–B024.25.00008 and NFC B024.32.00001–B024.32.00003 for some

examples. **67** Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, ‘Sketches from the field: the Simon Coleman collection’, in Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Séamas Ó Catháin, Ríonach úí Ógáin and Seosamh Watson (eds), *Treasures of the National Folklore Collection/Seoda as Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 15–23; See also Patricia Lysaght, ‘Simon Coleman, RHA, in Northwest County Clare (1959) on Behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission’, *Béaloideas* 76 (2008), 267–75; Patricia Lysaght, ‘Simon Coleman RHA and the

Irish Folklore Commission: Fieldwork in North County Galway in 1959’, *Béaloideas* 78 (2010), 148–67; Patricia Lysaght, ‘An Artist on Inis Oírr and Inis Meáin: Simon Coleman’s Visit to the Aran Islands in 1959 on Behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission’, *Folklore* 131: 1 (2020), 1–33. **68** NFC B024.01.00033. **69** Domhnall Ó Cearbhaill (1891–1963), a Co. Offaly native, was a Primary School Principal in Glasnevin, Dublin. He worked closely with the Irish Folklore Commission and was a member of The Folklore of

**Figure 6** Opposite top. NFC B110.18.00007. A woman making soda bread in Dún Chaoin, Co. Kerry. Photographer: Kevin Danaher, 1947.

**Figure 7** Opposite below. NFC B129.29.00001 Household implements drawn by Simon Coleman, Gort a’ Choice, Co. Donegal, 1949.





the harvest, markets, and oyster sellers in Co. Louth (Figures 10 and 11), as well as games played at the Hallowe'en feast (Figures 12 and 13).<sup>71</sup>

### The Research Library

The process of amassing the specialist library of the NFC began before the founding of the Irish Folklore Commission, as Delargy wrote in the first issues of *Béaloideas* that donations of books had already been received by The Folklore of Ireland Society by June of 1928,<sup>72</sup> and that *Béaloideas* was being exchanged for several other journals of folklore by Christmas 1928.<sup>73</sup> This exchange process continues today, allowing the NFC to accumulate other national and international journals of folklore and related subjects, thereby creating a large collection of print journals spanning many decades. Following the foundation of the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930, a grant was received from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust for the purchase of a number of books.<sup>74</sup> The Commission continued the accumulation of published material, receiving many donations from institutions and individuals in Ireland and internationally, but also by purchasing books over the years. It acquired several important specialist libraries, including that of the aforementioned Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von



**Figure 8** This page. NFC A026.29.00003 Interiors: *Ag ithe na bpreátaí* (eating potatoes from a basket) by Simon Coleman, Donegal, 1949.

**Figure 9** Opposite. NFC B039.01.00010 Shore Gathering: Gathering Seaweed, Co. Galway. Photographer: Domhnall Ó Cearbhaill, date unknown.

Ireland Society. <https://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=3054>.

**70** See NFC B039.01.00003–B039.01.00017 for more images of seaweed gathering by Domhnall Ó Cearbhaill.

**71** See NFC N013.06.00021–N013.06.00082 for Hallowe'en games, NFC C050.15.00006–C050.15.00009 for markets and oyster sellers and NFC B028.15.00001–B028.15.00006

for images of the harvest.

**72** Séamus Ó Duilearga, 'Editorial', *Béaloideas* 1: 3 (1928), 308. **73** Séamus Ó Duilearga, 'Editorial', *Béaloideas* 1: 4 (1928), 418. The countries listed by Delargy in this exchange are Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Germany, Austria and Czecko-Slovakia. The

journals received in NFC in exchange for *Béaloideas* continue to be listed in current issues of the journal. **74** Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, 350.





**Figure 10** NFC  
C050.15.00006. The oyster  
vendor Peter McKeivitt,  
Carlingford Co. Louth.  
Photographer: Maurice  
Curtin, c. 1950.



**Figure 11** NFC  
Co50.15.00009. The oyster  
vendor Peter McKeivitt,  
Carlingford Co. Louth.  
Photographer: Maurice  
Curtin, c. 1950.



**Figure 12** NFC  
N013.06.00021. Hallowe'en  
games, Bobbing for Apples,  
Co. Dublin. Photographer:  
Maurice Curtin, c. 1935



**Figure 13** NFC  
No13.06.00026. Hallowe'en  
games, Snap Apple (with  
candles), Co. Dublin.  
Photographer: Maurice  
Curtin, c. 1935

Sydow, and the library of the Icelandic scholar Sir William Craigie (1867–1957). Both of these acquisitions demonstrate Delargy's wishes for the library to reflect international folkloristics and comparative folklore study, as well as the study of Irish folklore, and the library holds publications relating to folklore from many parts of the world.<sup>75</sup>

The library does not follow the standard Dewey Decimal Classification, but is instead organised by subject in a way that is reminiscent of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, though it does not follow the *Handbook* directly. The library is a closed-access library, and a large portion remains uncatalogued, though books can be accessed by requesting titles and subject matter from NFC staff.

While there is a particular section of the library dedicated to the subject of food, further material may be found under sections pertaining to agriculture, time, particular localities, and so on. Memoirs written by Blasket Islanders are particularly rich in material on foodways, as is demonstrated by Patricia Lysaght in Chapter 20 of this book and in other publications.<sup>76</sup> Older publications on food held in the NFC library include Catherine Alexander's *Cheap Receipts and Hints on Cookery: Collected for Distribution amongst the Irish Peasantry in 1847*. This book, significant for its publication during the worst year of the Great Famine, includes advice on cooking, as well as recipes for the use of Indian corn and other cereals, soups, and other meals.<sup>77</sup> More recent publications include work by staff of the Commission and the later Department of Irish Folklore. Caoimhín Ó Danachair published *A Bibliography of Irish Ethnology and Folk Tradition* in 1978,<sup>78</sup> which categorised publications by subject, following the layout of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*. A supplement to this bibliography was published by Ó Danachair and Lysaght in 1980,<sup>79</sup> and both works include articles and other publications relating to food. Bríd Mahon,<sup>80</sup> drawing on the manuscript material of the NFC collection, published *Land of Milk and Honey: The Story of Traditional Irish Food and Drink* in 1991.<sup>81</sup> Lysaght has worked closely with the primary fieldwork collections of the NFC and has published and edited widely on foodways in Ireland and internationally.<sup>82</sup> The NFC library also holds publications on the foodways of Italy, Germany, France, Sweden and Denmark, as well as of Great Britain and the USA.

**75** Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, 350–53.

**76** Patricia Lysaght, 'The Wake for the Dead and Traditional Hospitality in Ireland in the Twentieth Century: Continuity and Change', in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (EU+ Academic Press, 2023), chapter 20. See also Patricia Lysaght, 'Food-Provision Strategies on the Great Blasket Island: Strand and Shore' in Séamas Ó

Catháin (ed.), *Northern Lights: Following Folklore in North-Western Europe: Aisti in Adhnó do Bho Almqvist/Essays in Honour of Bo Almqvist* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001); and Patricia Lysaght, 'Food-Provision Strategies on the Great Blasket Island: Livestock and Tillage' in Trefor M. Owen (ed.), *From Corrib to Cultra: Folklife Essays in Honour of Alan Gailey* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast in association

with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 2000).

**77** Catherine Alexander, *Cheap Receipts and Hints on Cookery: Collected for Distribution Amongst the Irish Peasantry in 1847* (Armagh: Printed by J. M'Watters, 1847). NFC 400.V.69 **78** Kevin Danaher, *A Bibliography of Irish Ethnology and Folklore* (Dublin and Cork: Mercier Press, 1978).

**79** Kevin Danaher and Patricia Lysaght, 'Supplement to a Bibliography of Irish Ethnology and Folklore' in

*Béaloideas* 48/49 (1980), 206–227. **80** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/mahon-brid-bridget-a10273>

**81** Mahon, *Land of Milk and Honey: The Story of Traditional Irish Food & Drink*. **82** See Lysaght's work as Chair of the International Ethnological Food Research Group, including many of the Proceedings of the Ethnological Food Research Conference since 1994.

**83** Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, xv.

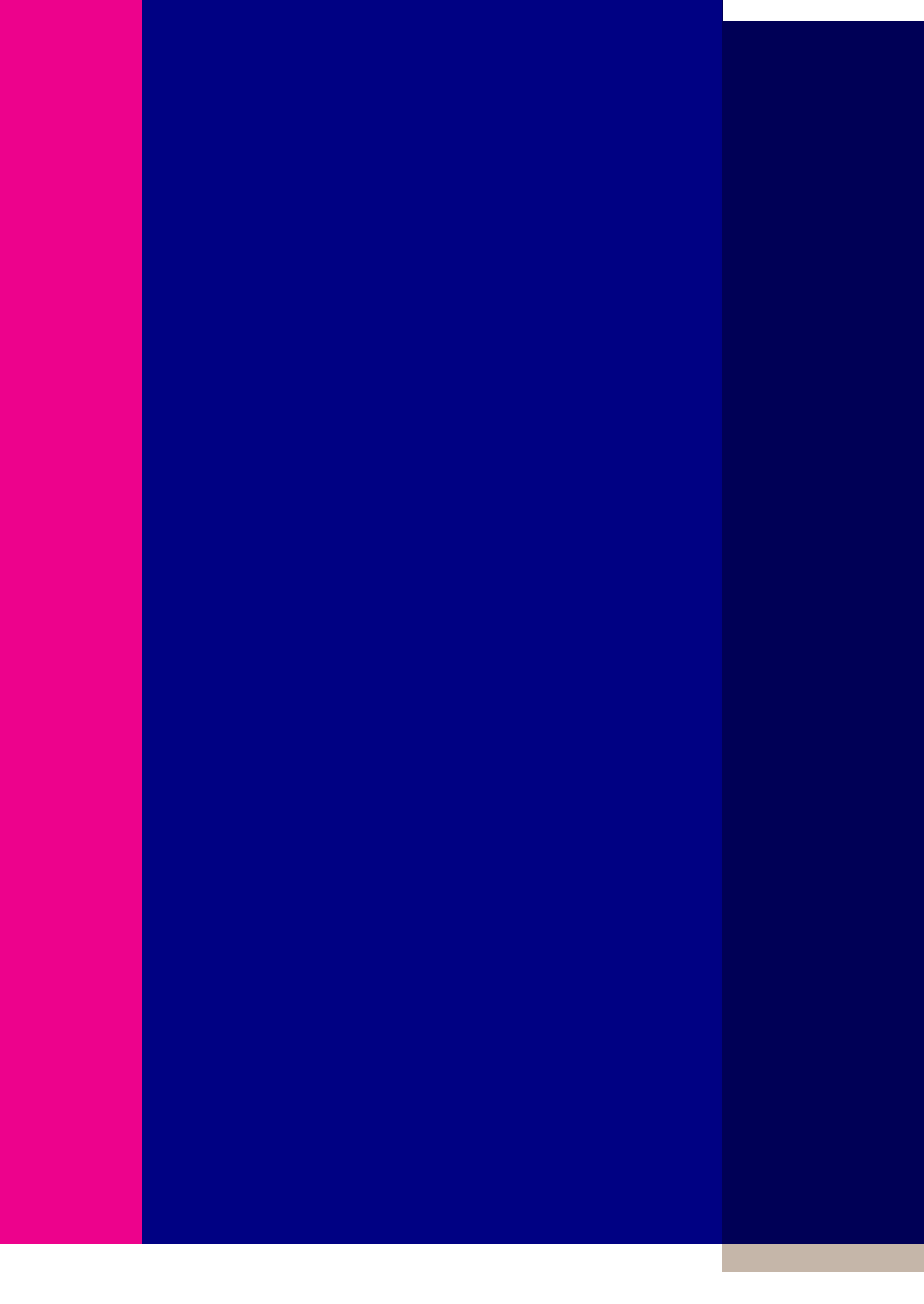
### Conclusion

The earliest systematised, large-scale collections of folk tradition in Ireland, while initially focusing largely on oral literature, were expanded upon to include foodways and various other aspects of material culture, by the late 1920s and early 1930s. These early collections, made by the Folklore of Ireland Society and the Irish Folklore Institute, offer valuable insights into foodways in Irish life and custom, and served as the foundation on which later collections by the Irish Folklore Commission were amassed, classified, and managed. The early broadening of intellectual horizons concerning folklore beyond the sphere of oral literature, occurred largely as a result of the inspiration and assistance provided by Swedish folklore scholars to their Irish counterparts, and by Åke Campbell in particular in the field of material culture. Campbell, who introduced Delargy to this 'new world' of material culture which he had not previously noticed, and who assisted Seán Ó Súilleabháin in adapting the Swedish system of folklore/folklife classification to suit the Irish material, was a friend and guide to folklore scholars in Ireland. His work and that of other Swedish folklore scholars had a formative influence on the development of folklore studies in this country. Indeed, Ó Súilleabháin's *Handbook* is dedicated to 'the Swedish People whose scholars evolved the scheme for folklore classification outlined in these pages' along with the Irish people who preserved for us a 'rich treasure of traditional lore' over generations.<sup>83</sup> Through the successes of the 1937–1939 Schools' Scheme, many thousands of accounts concerning food production, consumption and custom were recorded by schoolchildren from their parents and grandparents. This material, now hosted online on [Dúchas.ie](http://Duchas.ie), and undergoing transcription by the public, allows for easy access to, and detailed research into Irish folk tradition, including various aspects of food traditions in Ireland, by a broad and diverse audience. Between these digitised collections and the fieldwork collections and publications accessible by means of in-person visits to the NFC archive, the avenues for exploration, research, collaboration and outreach in the areas of foodways at the NFC offer a particularly rich panorama of traditional life and culture in Ireland.

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Section 6

# The development of modern Irish food and identity



## Buying Winkles

Paula Meehan

My mother would spare me sixpence and say,  
'Hurry up now and don't be talking to strange  
men on the way.' I'd dash from the ghosts  
on the stairs where the bulb had blown  
out into Gardiner Street, all relief.

A bonus if the moon was in the strip of sky  
between the tall houses, or stars out,  
but even in rain I was happy—the winkles  
would be wet and glisten blue like little  
night skies themselves. I'd hold the tanner tight  
and jump every crack in the pavement,  
I'd wave up to women at sills or those  
lingering in doorways and weave a glad path through  
men heading out for the night.

She'd be sitting outside the Rosebowl Bar  
on an orange-crate, a pram loaded  
with pails of winkles before her.  
When the bar doors swung open they'd leak  
the smell of men together with drink  
and I'd see light in golden mirrors.  
I envied each soul in the hot interior.

I'd ask her again to show me the right way  
to do it. She'd take a pin from her shawl—  
'Open the eyelid. So. Stick it in  
till you feel a grip, then slither him out.  
Gently, mind.' The sweetest extra winkle  
that brought the sea to me.  
'Tell yer Ma I picked them fresh this morning.'

I'd bear the newspaper twists  
bulging fat with winkles  
proudly home, like torches.

Of Natal Charts and End Games  
to *Urania*—*Muse of Astronomy*  
Paula Meehan

Not the clock to measure time and tide, but the moon,  
her waxings, her wanings, her track across the star-  
spangled heavens, trining and sextiling planets  
to net and land another whole incarnate soul,  
to earth this karma in the shelter of the house.  
Cellular mirrors celestial, the spinning globe  
slows to rest with the mother's cries, the child's first breath;

while elsewhere in the house, a different room, a death,  
a last glimpse of ceiling as the light fails lobe by lobe.  
Upstairs, someone dreams of walnuts, a new blouse,  
someone makes coddle, snuffs a candle, humps coal,  
sips Vartry water, tastes trace of phyllite, quartzite,  
greywacke, shale, slate—bedrock lithographies from far-  
off Wicklow—while Angelus bells ring out the noon.

*‘Cookery Notes’: Domestic  
Economy ‘instructresses’ and  
the history of their cookbooks  
in Ireland*

**Dorothy Cashman**

In 1902 William Coyne, Superintendent of Intelligence and Statistics for the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI), edited an edition of a comprehensive text about Ireland on the cusp of a new century.<sup>1</sup> In his chapter on the Congested Districts Board, Coyne recounts an example of the enthusiasm with which the six Domestic Training classes initiated by the Board four years previously were embraced:

These classes have without exception been very well attended, and 435 pupils in all have been instructed. As an instance of the anxiety of the young women to obtain the benefit of this course it may be mentioned that at Sneem in County Kerry sixteen of the pupils at the evening class lived at an average distance of  $4\frac{3}{4}$  miles from the class-room and therefore walked over nine miles a day for four months in the winter. One girl walked sixteen miles a day and attended on seventy-two days out of eighty-one.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter looks at the sudden ‘surge’ in publication of Irish cookbooks from the late nineteenth century onwards, and one apparently anonymous one in particular, with research conducted by Joanna Bourke, Katie Barclay, and Ciara Breathnach on women, domesticity, and housewifery in rural Ireland providing a backdrop.<sup>3</sup> Bourke investigated how and why in the generation prior to 1914 the women that populated Coyne’s edited collection ‘[bade] farewell to labour in the fields and in other men’s homes, they enlisted for full-time work in the unpaid domestic sphere’.<sup>4</sup> The statistics cited by Bourke for paid employment of women in Ireland between 1880 and 1911 are bleak, tracing a steep downward curve: in 1861, 846,000 women were employed; by 1911 the number had dropped to 430,000.<sup>5</sup> Technology promoted by the Co-operative Movement saw many women displaced in dairying and butter-making,<sup>6</sup> while

**1** William P. Coyne (ed.) for Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, *Ireland. Industrial and Agriculture* (Dublin, Cork, Belfast: Browne and Nolan, Ltd., 1902). The book was one of the outcomes from Ireland’s participation in the International Glasgow Exhibition of 1901. <https://archive.org/details/irelandindustri01coyngoog>  
**2** ‘The Congested Districts Board for Ireland’ in *Ireland. Industrial and Agriculture*, 258–70, 270; Séan M. Ó’ Conchubair, ‘The Congested Districts Board, cont.’, *The Irish Monthly* 69: 821 (Nov. 1941), 517–25, 519; *Tenth Report of The Congested*

*Districts Board for Ireland* (Dublin: Alex. Thom for His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1901). Coyne uses the text from this report in his chapter. The classes were doubled that year to twelve.  
**3** Historically Ireland’s need for printed cookbooks was largely supplied from British publishers, even allowing for the pirating of texts in Ireland prior to the Act of Union as a separate issue. In an Irish context, the publication of cookbooks on the island in this period did indeed amount to a comparative ‘surge’. **4** Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery. Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland*

*1890–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Introduction. On how this intersected with issues surrounding social class see Maura Cronin, “‘You’d be disgraced!’ Middle-Class Women and Respectability in Post-Famine Ireland’ in Fintan Lane (ed.), *Politics, Society and the Middle Class in Modern Ireland* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 107–29.  
**5** Joanna Bourke, ‘Best of All Home Rulers: The Economic Power of Women in Ireland’, *Irish Economic and Social History* 18 (1991), 34–47, 36. Also Charles Booth, ‘The Economic Distribution of Population in Ireland’, in Coyne (ed.), *Ireland. Industrial*

*and Agriculture*, 64–72, 69, for his analysis of the steady progression in numbers of those employed in paid domestic service between the years 1841–1881. **6** Joanna Bourke, ‘Dairy women and Affectionate Wives: Women in the Irish Dairy Industry, 1890–1914’, *Agricultural History Review* 38: 2 (1990), 149–64. See also Maura Cronin, ‘Remembering the creameries’ in Mark McCarthy (ed.), *Ireland’s Heritages. Critical Perspectives on memory and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2005), 169–88. Also, this volume Claudia Kinmonth, “‘Joined in Butter’”: The Material Culture of Irish home Butter-Makers

‘improving impulses’ gradually pushed their long-standing association with poultry aside.<sup>7</sup> Labour traditionally performed by women gravitated ‘out of the farmyard and into the fields, forming part of crop rotation schemes: out of territory convenient for female workers and into distinctly male territory’.<sup>8</sup> It is an argument that has provoked much discussion and analysis, and one which Katie Barclay engages with directly in subsequent research, arguing for a combination of statistical evidence alongside a broader socio-cultural analysis of alternative sources.<sup>9</sup> Ciara Breathnach brings the Congested Districts Board, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, and the DATI into focus in her study on the role of women in the West of Ireland in the same period.<sup>10</sup> What Breathnach has to say about these agents of the state is a good point of departure for discussion about the emerging authors of the period and their cookbooks—‘These institutions did not intentionally displace the role of women in the rural economy. It was a combination of modernisation and the increasing opposition of the clergy to paid female employment that enforced housewifery on Irish females’.<sup>11</sup>

The balance of power was arguably more often shifted rather than lost. How women negotiated their domestic lives, and the spaces in which they lived those lives, was complex and complicated.<sup>12</sup> These gendered and separate spheres of influence were now central to discussion of Irish educational reform, as described by Ian Miller,<sup>13</sup> and are fundamental to understanding the emergence of a cohort of professional women, the domestic economy instructress, in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland, women who would shape the culinary expression of the island for the next several decades.<sup>14</sup>

In July 1910, Miss Marion Laird (1872–1954), an instructress at the Munster Institute in Cork wrote, with a hint of vexation, to Mr Coyle, principal staff officer at the DATI, regarding ongoing correspondence from the Department requesting the redrafting of a collection of recipes which she had authored; ‘I am in receipt of yours of the 6th inst. When the rush of the first week or two of term is over I will revise the cookery book and let you have it as soon as possible. If this book is given to the public should I not receive some payment? It evidently

using the dash churn, up to the late Nineteenth Century’. **7** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Andrea Cully, ‘The History of Eggs in Irish Cuisine and Culture’ in Richard Hoskings (ed.), *Eggs in Cookery: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2006* (Devon: Prospect Books, 2007), 137–49. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D76J2B> **8** Joanna Bourke, ‘Women and Poultry in Ireland, 1891–1914’, *Irish Historical Studies* 25: 99 (1987), 293–310, 310. **9** Katie Barclay,

‘Farmwives, domesticity and work in late nineteenth-century Ireland’, *Rural History: economy, society, culture* 24: 2 (2013), 143–60, 147. **10** Ciara Breathnach, ‘The Role of Women in the Economy of the West of Ireland, 1891–1923’, *New Hibernia Review/ Iris Éireannach Nua* 8: 1 (Spring 2004), 80–92; See also Patrick Doyle’s chapter in this volume. **11** Breathnach, ‘The Role of Women in the Economy of the West of Ireland, 1891–1923’, 90. **12** Katie Barclay, ‘Place and power in Irish

farms at the end of the nineteenth century’, *Women’s History Review* 21: 4 (2012), 571–88. For analysis beyond the Irish context see Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (London: Allen Lane, 1974) and Christine Delphy, ‘Housework or Homework’ in Christine Delphy, *A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression* (London: Verso, 2016), 78–92, originally published in A. Michel (ed.), *Les femmes dans la société marchandé* (Paris: PUF, 1978). **13** Ian Miller, *Reforming food in post-Famine*

*Ireland. Medicine, science and improvement* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2014), see Ch. 6 ‘Reforming Irish domestic and agricultural education’, 130–52.

**14** The convention of the period was that these women were referred to as ‘instructresses’. On balance I decided to maintain this convention.

**15** National Archives of Ireland (NAI) 92/2/2267.

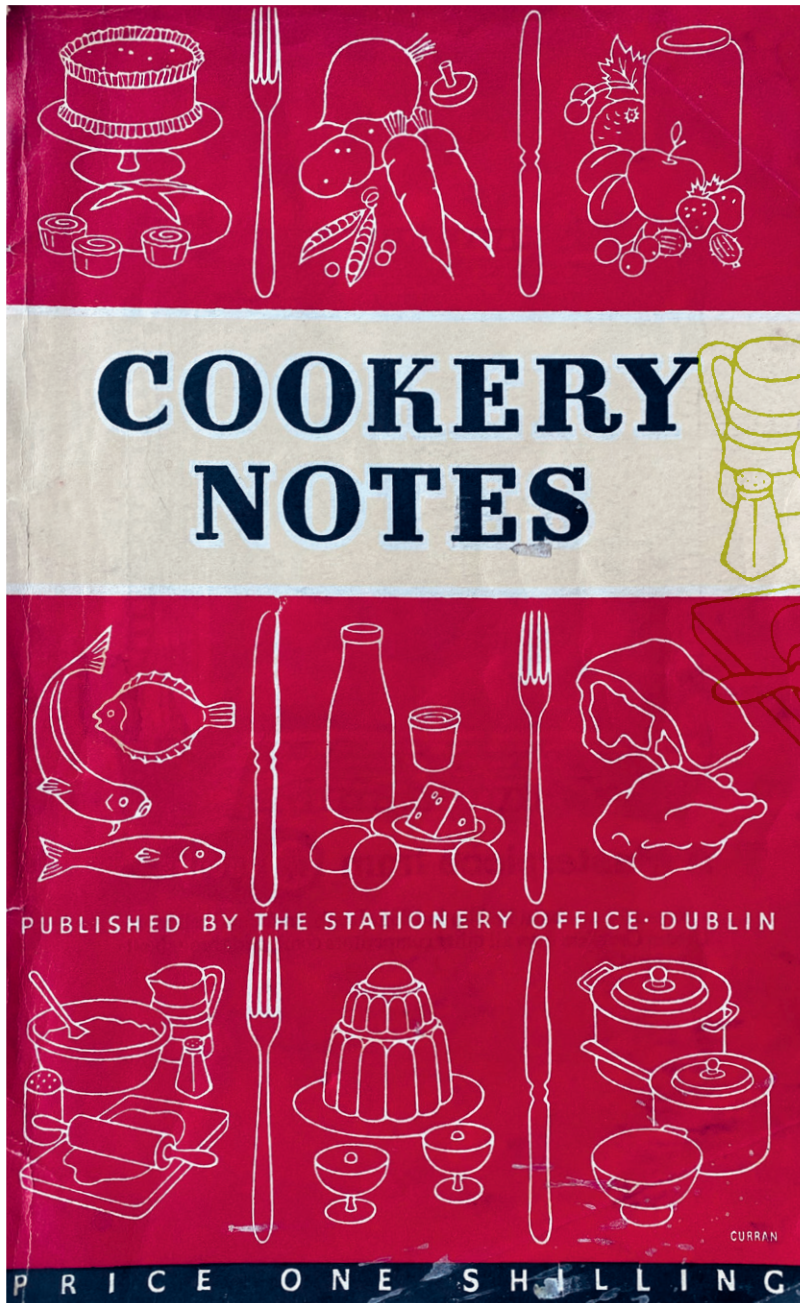


Figure 1 Cover page of 1959 edition of *Cookery Notes* with red cover



supplied a great want'.<sup>15</sup> The book in question was *Cookery Notes*, 'an inexpensive, simple cookery book suitable for beginners', the authorship of which, as will be seen, was effectively anonymised by the Department, and which would remain in print and popular until the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 1) The file relating to it is in the care of the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), and it did indeed supply 'a great want', recorded in painstaking detail by the various civil servants over several years.

Some eleven years previously, *The Epicure* published the first of two directories of 'Schools and Teachers of Cookery and Domestic Subjects'.<sup>17</sup> The entry relating to Ireland extends to referencing three schools in Dublin (Royal Irish Association for Promoting the Training and Employment of Women, Kildare Street; City of Dublin Technical Schools and Science and Art Schools, Kevin Street; Pembroke Technical and Fishery School, Ringsend) and one in Limerick (Municipal Schools of Science and Art Athenaeum). This is in contrast to the wealth of information set out in the second edition of 1909.<sup>18</sup> During the academic year 1907–8, the period when Miss Laird and Mr Coyle were in discussion about that 'inexpensive simple cookery book', Domestic Economy was being taught in fifty-nine Secondary Schools (1,348 pupils),<sup>19</sup> fifty-two Urban Technical Schools (upwards of 4,000 pupils) and also in Rural Districts, where about 330 courses of six weeks' to three months' duration were attended by upwards of 8,000 pupils. DATI also worked in conjunction with three Higher Schools of Domestic Economy (where girls who had completed their general education could complete a course in Household Management) and fourteen Residential Schools of Domestic Training, where instruction was provided over the course of one academic year in Household Management, Cookery, Needlework, Laundry Work, Hygiene, Dairy Work, Poultry-rearing, Bee-keeping, and Horticulture. The responsibility for organisation and administration of these schools fell to the DATI working in conjunction with the Commissioners of National Education, the Intermediate Board of Commissioners and the Congested Districts Board,<sup>20</sup> whose class in Domestic Training was so enthusiastically embraced by the young woman in Sneem.



**16** *Cookery Notes* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1910), Preface. **17** *The Epicure Directory of Schools and Teachers of Cookery and Domestic Subjects* (London: Granville House, 1899), 46.

**18** *The Epicure Directory of Schools and Teachers of Cookery and Domestic Subjects* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, Ltd, 1909), 103–15.

**19** There is a discrepancy between the narrative in the *Directory*, which says that there were fifty-three schools and the actual listing

of fifty-nine. Of the fifty-nine, forty-six were convent schools. On religious sisters in this period see Cairtriona Clear, 'The Voices of Catholic Women in Ireland' in Oliver P. Rafferty (ed.), *Irish Catholic Identities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 200–10.

**20** A.C. Monahan, *Bulletin*, 1926, No. 41, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916), 5–9. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED542637.pdf>

**21** The Radbrook School

in Shrewsbury opened in 1901. The Irish Census of 1901 and 1911 have entries for the Clover family, resident at Proby Square in Blackrock. The family are all recorded as being born in England, the head of family as a 'wine and spirit agent'. **22** Only death certificates could be sourced with certainty for Redington, Warren, and Russell; birth dates have been established based on the information provided as to age at date of death.

**23** Josephine Redington, *The Economic Cookery Book*

(Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1905; London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co; New York: Benziger Bros; Melbourne: Geo. Robertson and Co; Cape Town: J. C. Juta and Co).

**24** Maud Taylor, MBE, was a close friend of Hannah Moylan. See John Lucey, 'Hannah Moylan (1867–1902): Educationalist who was first woman bachelor of science in Ireland', *The Irish Journal of Education* 41 (2016), 61–77. **25** This association took over from the Queen's Institute for the Training and Employment of Educated Women, founded

The directory includes a list of ‘Principals and Officials of Schools and Teachers of Domestic Subjects’. 142 of the entries relate to Ireland, often with additional detail that would by now be almost impossible to come by. To give but two examples: Miss Geraldine Olive Martha Boyle’s entry narrates that she was the holder of a ‘Full First Cookery, Board of Education, High Class Cookery, Liverpool School. Certificates Hygiene, Chemistry, Physiology, First Aid and Home Nursing; Itinerant Teacher, co. Antrim. [home address] Bridge Hill, Limavady, co. Londonderry’, while Miss Elizabeth Clover, with a ‘First Cookery, Laundry, Housewifery, Needlework, Dressmaking’, was employed as ‘Teacher Shropshire Technical School, Radbrook’, yet maintained her address as ‘Blackrock, co. Dublin’.<sup>21</sup> Neither of these women are memorialised in Irish culinary history, however other names recorded will resonate for many. Seven of the named women published cookbooks, pioneers in Irish culinary history.

In 1905 Josephine Redington (1873–1949)<sup>22</sup> published *The Economic Cookery Book*,<sup>23</sup> by which time she was head teacher at the Irish Training School of Domestic Economy, a post previously held by Maud Taylor (1869–1941).<sup>24</sup> From 1903 the DATI had assumed responsibility for the school, also known as the Dublin School of Cookery, and then located at 20–21 Kildare Street in Dublin. The school had previously operated under the aegis of the Royal Irish Association for Promoting the Training and Employment of Women<sup>25</sup> and Redington held the position of head teacher at the school until her retirement, by which time it was re-located to Kilmacud, Co. Dublin.<sup>26</sup> She was also a regular contributor to the Dublin Broadcasting Station, 2RN.<sup>27</sup> *The Economic Cookery Book* went to several editions, including a war-time edition in 1917. *High Class Cookery* and *High Class Cookery II* were published in 1907 and *The Laundry Book* and *The Shamrock Cookery Book* in 1913.<sup>28</sup>

Kathleen Warren (1881–1967) published her *Domestic Economy Notes for Intermediate Certificate Course* in 1907 and *The Tailteann Cookery Book* in 1929.<sup>29</sup> An advertisement for the 1907 book noted that she was ‘formerly headmistress of Messrs Rowntree’s Domestic School, York, where she had charge of classes

by Anne Jellicoe (founder of Alexandra College, Dublin) and Henry Walker Todd in 1860. See Patricia Philips, ‘The Queen’s Institute’ in Norman MacMillan (ed.), *Prometheus’s Fire: A History of Scientific and Technological Education in Ireland* (Tyndall Publications, 2003) [http://www.rjtechno.org/tyndall/tyndall\\_books/prometheus/promfire2.htm](http://www.rjtechno.org/tyndall/tyndall_books/prometheus/promfire2.htm) **26** The school relocated to Kilmacud around 1912 and closed in 1941. Responsibility for training teachers transferred to the newly opened St

Mary’s College of Domestic Science, Cathal Brugha Street, under the control of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee. St Catherine’s Residential School of Domestic Science, founded by the Dominican Order in 1929 at Sion Hill in Blackrock, Co. Dublin closed in 2007, responsibility for the tuition carried on there, largely transferring to St Angela’s College, Sligo, which had been founded by the Ursuline Order in 1952. **27** Commenced operating in 1926, see Brian Lynch, ‘The

first agricultural broadcasts on 2RN’, *History Ireland* 7: 2 (Summer 1999), 42–45. <https://www.historyireland.com/the-first-agricultural-broadcasts-on-2rn/> **28** Josephine Redington, *High Class Cookery* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1907); *High Class Cookery II. Hot and Cold Fish Dishes* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1907); *The Laundry Book* (Dublin and Waterford: M.H. Gill & Son, 1913); *The Shamrock Cookery Book* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1913). **29** Kathleen Warren, *Domestic Economy Notes*

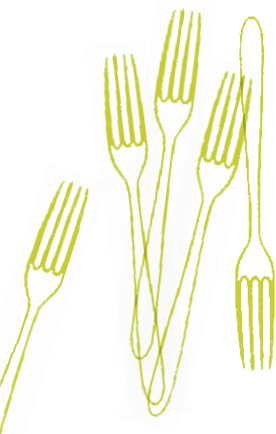
*for Intermediate Certificate Course* (Dublin: Wm Warren & Son, no date). This can be dated to 1907 per *Irish Times* 2 Dec. 1907, 11. Personal copy. Not noted in Elizabeth Driver, *Bibliography of Cookery Books published in Britain 1875–1914* (London and New York: Prospect Books in association with Mansell Publishing, 1989) or Dena Attar, *A Bibliography of Household Books published in Britain 1800–1914* (London: Prospect Books, 1987); Kathleen Warren, *The Tailteann Cookery Book* (Dublin: Wm.



averaging in attendance 300 girls per week'.<sup>30</sup> The school opened in 1904 for girls working in the Rowntree factory, where they were obliged to take cookery classes.<sup>31</sup> According to the 1901 census the printing house at Ormond Quay in Dublin responsible for both of Warren's publications appears to have been in the charge of her widowed mother. Warren attended school at Harrington College, Dublin, and graduated with distinction from the Irish Training School at Kildare Street. In 1907 she was appointed Head Instructress to the Municipal Technical School, Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire), presumably on the basis of her record at York.<sup>32</sup> By 1922 she was Headmistress there and would appear to have continued in that role to retirement.<sup>33</sup>

Brigid Russell's (1875–1947) *Young Housewives Cookery Book* was first published in 1915; although she married the previous year she chose to publish under her single name. Unable to procure a translator for Warren's *The Tailteann Cookery Book*, it was Russell's book that was subsequently selected to be published by An Gúm.<sup>34</sup> (Figure 2 and 3 Warren and Russell) Brigid was Principal of the residential Castlerosse School of Industry, Killarney, founded in 1906 by Viscountess Castlerosse to teach the household arts to young country girls. The school, renamed the Killarney School of Housewifery, subsequently came under the control of the DATI from the Congested Districts Board, surviving until the early years of World War II when it was closed by the Department of Education. In her time there as Head Teacher Brigid worked alongside her sister, Lily, who both taught and was matron. Brigid resigned from her position shortly after her marriage in July 1914 to Richard Crookes, a customs and excise officer. Her replacement was Kathleen Gilhooley, listed in the 1909 *Directory* as 'itinerant teacher, co. Monaghan', another graduate of the Dublin Training School, as was Russell. Richard was transferred to Dundalk in 1917, where he was an early victim of the influenza epidemic of 1918–19. By 1921 Brigid and her young son were living in Dublin where she purchased Ashton, a seafront house at Sandycove, already in use as a hotel. As the proprietress of Ashton, she was one of four women tasked in 1930 with awarding scholarships for a six-month course of training for Women Hotel Cooks.<sup>35</sup>

Two of the Irish-based instructresses named in the *Directory*, Mary Todd (1855–1933) and Margaret McCarthy Judd (1865–1950), were born in England. Todd's career illustrates the mobility that her professional qualification could



Warren & Son, 1929).

**30** *Irish Times*, 2 Dec. 1907, 11.

**31** For the Rowntree association with chattel slavery see <https://www.rowntreesociety.org.uk/currentprojects/rowntree-colonial-histories-and-legacies/statement-on-rowntree-colonial-histories/>

**32** *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Dec.

1907, 3. **33** *Irish Independent*,

11 July 1941, 4. **34** Brigid Russell, *Young Housewife's Cookery Book* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1915). Brigid Russell, *Cócaireacht, aistriú go Gaedhilg a rinne Mícheál Ó Griobhtha* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1942). The English edition was reprinted at least twice. An Gúm is an Irish state

company founded in 1926, now part of Foras na Gaeilge, tasked with the publication of Irish literature, especially educational materials. In 2002 An Gúm took responsibility for printing the much-loved *Buntús Cainte* series from the Stationery Office. [https://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/about\\_an\\_gum/?lang=en](https://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/about_an_gum/?lang=en)

**35** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire,

*The Emergence, Development and Influence of French Haute Cuisine on Public Dining in Dublin Restaurants 1900–2000: An oral history*, vol. 2 of 3, 243–44. *Doctoral thesis. Technological University Dublin*. [doi.org/10.21427/D79K7H](https://doi.org/10.21427/D79K7H). The other three women were Miss Mullins (Gresham Hotel), Miss Rogan (North Star Hotel) and Miss Kathleen

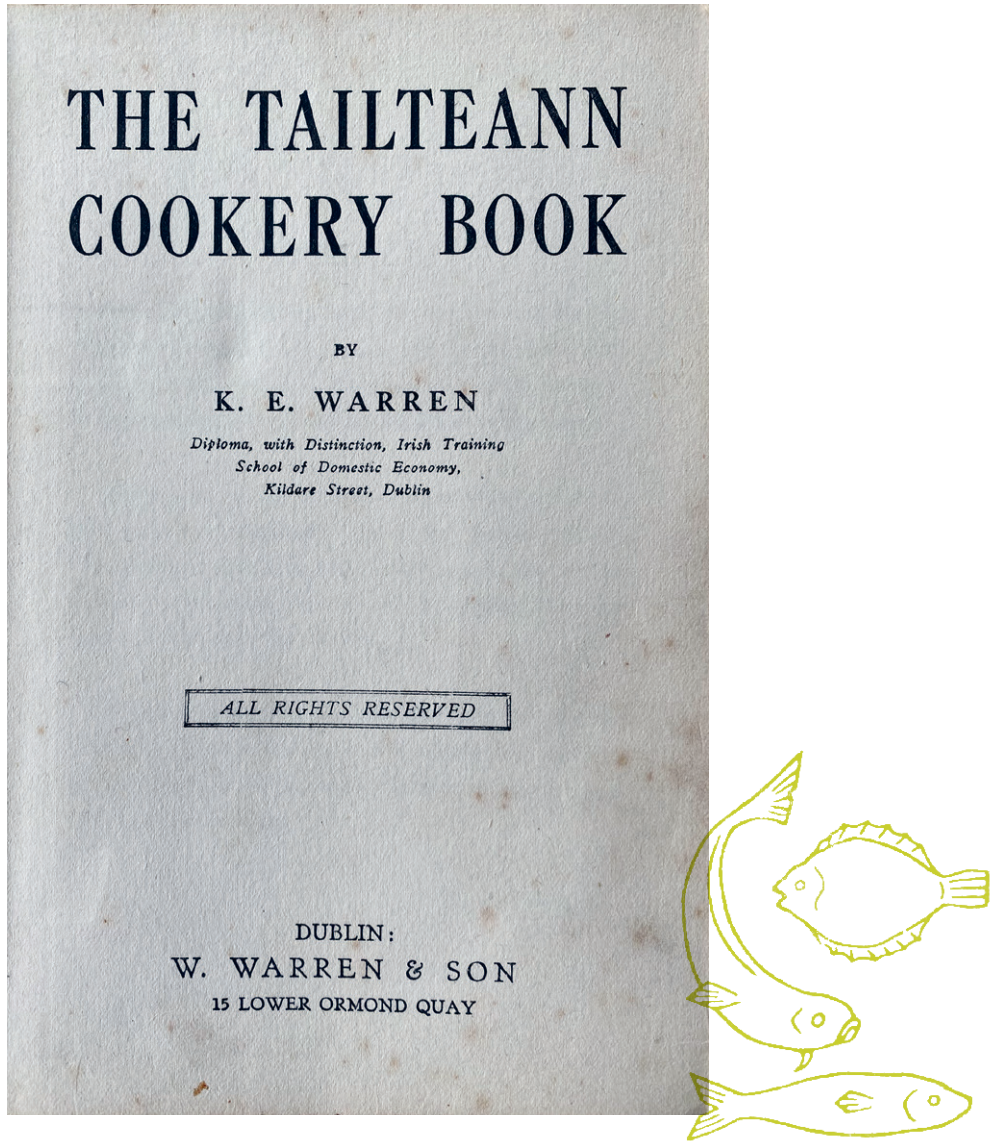
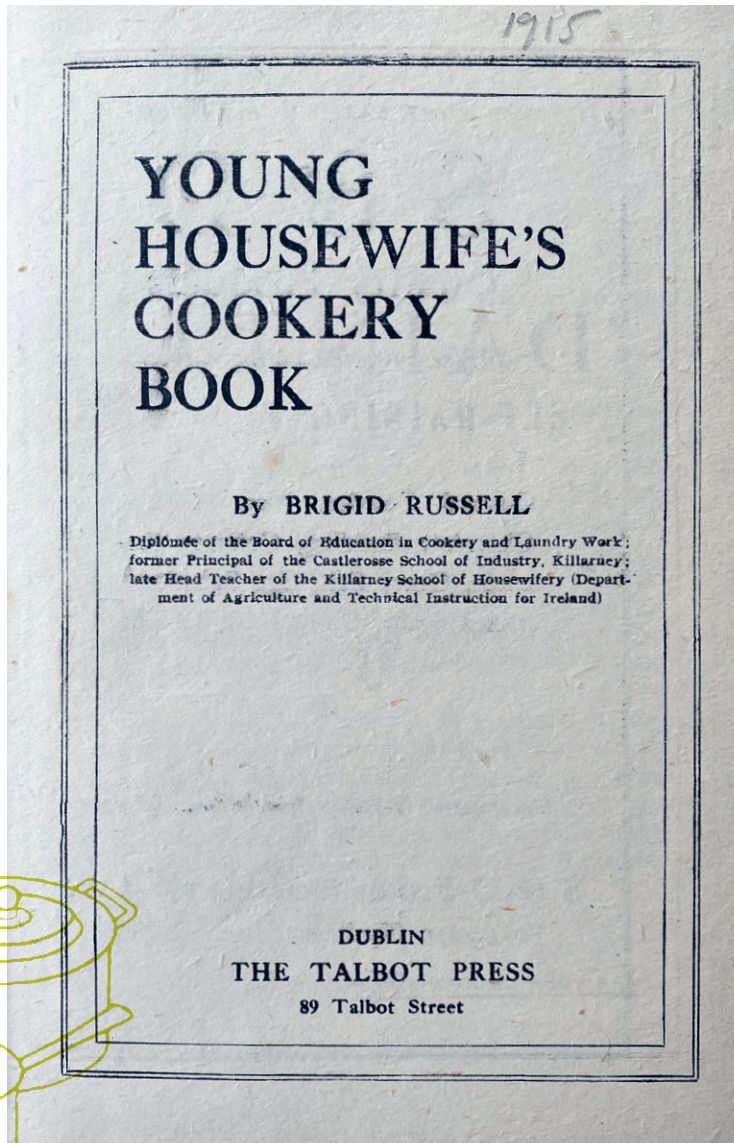


Figure 2 Kathleen Warren's *The Tailteann Cookbook*



**Figure 3**  
Brigid Russell's  
*Young Housewife's*  
Cookery Book

afford. A 'diplomé of the Leeds, London, and Manchester Schools of Cookery and Domestic Economy', her early connections in Dublin were apparently forged through her relationship with the Church Of Ireland Training College, Kildare Place; her book, published in 1890, is dedicated to the students there, with the biographical detail on the frontispiece detailing that she was 'Professor of Cookery' at the Training College and 'Health lecturer to the Dublin Ladies Sanitary Association'.<sup>36</sup> The book appears to have been republished by the Dublin Total Abstinence Society in 1892 in their *Coffee Palace Temperance Journal*.<sup>37</sup> By 1898 she was teaching at both the City of Dublin Technical School at Kevin Street and at the Pembroke Technical and Fishery School at Ringsend and had adopted Bellingham Todd as surname.<sup>38</sup> She was one of four Domestic Economy teachers there, while also teaching cookery alongside Miss K. Clancy at the school in Kevin Street.<sup>39</sup> In 1910 she read a paper to the Women's Suffrage Association at their premises in Molesworth Street on 'The Duties of Mistresses To Servants',<sup>40</sup> and was elected to the Executive Committee of the City of Dublin Municipal Technical Teachers' Association in 1914.<sup>41</sup> Census returns track her religious affiliation as moving from Church of Ireland to the Irish Congregationalist Church, with a career as a journalist and manager of an employment bureau alongside her career as a lecturer. Mrs McCarthy Judd, a diplômée of the London School, was headmistress at the Ringsend and Ballsbridge Technical School and went to print sometime around 1915 with *The Making of a Cook*. Brigid Russell and Mrs McCarthy Judd are the only authors here who published as married women, McCarthy Judd having moved to Ireland with her husband sometime before 1901.<sup>42</sup>

The sixth of the authors from the *Directory* is Florence Irwin (1883–1965).<sup>43</sup> Educated at Methodist College, Belfast, she trained in Cookery, Laundry, and Housewifery at the Edinburgh School of Cookery (Atholl Crescent). Irwin spent eight years as a DATI appointed instructress in Co. Down, narrating her experiences with humour and sensitivity in *The Cookin' Woman*.<sup>44</sup> In 1913 she was appointed house matron at Dunbarton House Hospital, Gilford, Co. Down and two years later Ruth Duffin appointed her as matron of Riddell Hall, the hostel

O'Sullivan (Head of Domestic Science Department).

**36** Mary Todd, *Food Well Cooked: Easy Lessons for all Classes on Cookery* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1890). For a history of the Kildare Place institution, also known as The Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland, see Susan M. Parkes, *Kildare Place. The History of the Church Of Ireland Training College 1811–1969* (Rathmines: CICE, 1984). Later relocated to Rathmines and known as the Church Of Ireland College of Education,

in 2016 it was incorporated into Dublin City University. The Kildare Place National School remains in Rathmines. The Kildare Place institution took its name from its original location, Kildare Place, and should not be confused with the Irish Training School in Kildare Street. The Dublin Ladies Sanitary Association, part of a larger organisational movement, was founded in 1881 by Miss Hamilton Stubber. **37** *Irish Times*, 23 Dec. 1892, 6. **38** *The Epicure: A Journal of Taste* 5 (Dec 1897

to Nov. 1898), 59; *Epicure Directory* (1909), 108.

**39** *City of Dublin, Municipal Technical Schools, Kevin Street; Prospectus, 1910–1911*, 153. <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=proskt> **40** *Freeman's Journal*, 1 Oct. 1910, 8.

**41** *Freeman's Journal*, 21 July 1914, 8. **42** Mrs McCarthy Judd, *The Making of a Cook, Part I* (Dublin and Belfast: Educational Company of Ireland Ltd, 1915?); *The Making of a Cook, Part II* (Dublin and Belfast:

Educational Company of Ireland Ltd, 1915?), personal copy. **43** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/irwin-florence-a10267> **44** See Ch. I, 'Neither Fish, Flesh, Fowl, Nor a Good Red Herring' in Florence Irwin, *The Cookin' Woman* (Oliver and Boyd: Edinburgh, 1949), 1–12, reminiscences and historic food references are scattered liberally throughout, expanding on her earlier *Irish Country Recipes* (The Northern Whig: Belfast, 1937).

for Protestant women students at Queen's University, Belfast.<sup>45</sup> In 1922 Irwin was appointed as the first warden of Stranmillis Teacher Training College by the government of Northern Ireland. Arguably the *grande dame* of Irish food history, she was the first Irish author to reach deep into literary and historic sources for her newspaper articles and cookbooks.

Although they were not authors, two other instructresses deserve mention here, Nellie Gifford (1880–1971)<sup>46</sup> and Elizabeth Bloxham (1877–1962), who is not listed in the *Directory*. Like Irwin, Gifford is described as an 'Itinerant teacher', a category falling under the auspices of either the Commissioners of National Education or the Congested Districts Board (while technically in the employ of the DATI). In the period 1907–8 six teachers listed were attached to the Congested Districts Board: Nora Bowler, M. Brennan, M. Daly, Kate Forrest, M. Houghton, and Olivia Walsh. Forty-six women were listed as itinerant teachers, employed by the Commissioners/DATI, including Irwin and Gifford.

We are fortunate in having recourse to two sources for an understanding of Nellie Gifford's perspective on her career and the times that she lived in.<sup>47</sup> In her description of her family background and their social caste, her sister, Sydney Madge, is withering,

[a]t this time good teachers rarely existed in the schools where people with good incomes sent their children to be educated... [y]ou were trained to look down upon the people of Ireland and of all the other countries as 'natives', you were taught to regard every language but English as a jargon, and so you spoke all languages with a Mayfair accent to show how much you held them in contempt.<sup>48</sup>

One of twelve siblings (six daughters, six sons), it is the sisters who have left an indelible impression on Irish history.<sup>49</sup> Muriel married Thomas MacDonagh while Grace was 'maid, bride, and widow in one day' of Joseph Plunkett.<sup>50</sup> It was the eldest of the sisters, Kate, who was responsible for Nellie's career as an instructress. On sight of an advertisement announcing a new scheme of training whose task was to produce at its conclusion an Itinerant Cookery Instructress, she drew Nellie's attention to the possibility it afforded her of escaping the domestic duties which were her lot in the busy Gifford household. As Anne Clare records, Nellie 'reflected ruefully over the years that she was taken from school earlier than the others because she was considered to have less ability ...

**45** Duffin also co-authored a cookbook. Margaret Roper and Ruth Duffin, *The Blue Bird Cookery Book for Working Women* (Dublin: Educational Company Ltd, 1939?). On Helen and Ruth Duffin see <https://www.dib.ie/biography/duffin-emma-sylvia-a9759>

**46** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/donnolly-helen-ruth-nellie-gifford-a3464>

**47** Anne Clare, *Unlikely Rebels. The Gifford Girls and the Fight for Irish Freedom* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2011); Sydney Gifford Czira, *The Years Flew By. Recollections of Madame Sidney Gifford Czira*, edited by

Alan Hayes (Galway: Arlen House, 2000). **48** Czira, *The Years Flew By*, 10. <https://www.dib.ie/biography/czira-gifford-sydney-madge-john-brennan-a2356> **49** Alan Hayes, "John Brennan": The Woman, Her Life and Her Art', in Czira, *The Years Flew By*, ix–xlvi. **50** Clare, *Unlikely*

*Rebels*, 70. The quote is from the reminiscences of Patrick Gilligan, interviewed in 1970, who remembered Nellie from her time in Meath. **51** Clare, *Unlikely Rebels*, 58. **52** Clare, *Unlikely Rebels*, 69. **53** Clare, *Unlikely Rebels*, 102. **54** Czira, *The Years Flew By*, 5. **55** Constance Markiewicz,

Nellie argued that she gave her attention only to what attracted her'.<sup>51</sup> The course Nellie attended in Kildare Street included laundry and dressmaking; when she was admitted she learned that 'she would require a white apron, that the course would last six weeks, and that as surprised as she was joyful she would then be a salaried lady'.<sup>52</sup> The six-week courses she was to give were held in vacated schools, cottages, or even sheds. Nellie hired a pony, or donkey and cart, to convey the equipment to the 'classroom', locating accommodation for herself in the area for the duration. Of her various postings, Meath was closest to Nellie Gifford's heart, a posting that she was dismissed from for her part in James Larkin's famous address from the balcony of the Imperial Hotel in Dublin during the 1913 lockout.<sup>53</sup> Her sister noted that it was through her posting to Meath that the Gifford sisters developed their 'first link with the land', an intimation of life outside that stronghold of British Imperialism, Rathmines.<sup>54</sup> On her return to Dublin, Nellie became actively involved in the Citizen Army and was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons outpost during the Easter Rising of 1916, where she was responsible for feeding the garrison. This she apparently did with great skill, commandeering foodstuffs from shops and bread vans, and, alongside Mary Hyland, supervising the cooking. Constance Markiewicz described how, when the garrison were all starving, Nellie 'produced a quantity of oatmeal from somewhere and made pot after potful of the most delicious porridge which kept us going'.<sup>55</sup> Nellie Gifford campaigned tirelessly in later life for preserving the historical record of the independence movement and was the moving force behind what is now the National Museum of Ireland collection of 1916 memorabilia.

From the west of Ireland, Elizabeth Bloxham's family were by religion Protestant and by convention, Unionist. We are fortunate in that her personal testimony forms part of the Bureau of Military History collection.<sup>56</sup> Of her family she says, '[w]e had neither influence nor power and as little of this world's goods as had the people amongst whom we lived'.<sup>57</sup> She forged friendships with Arthur Griffith and James Stevens, and was a contributor to the *United Irishman*, Griffith's weekly newspaper. Both Nellie Gifford and Bloxham were active members of *Cumann na mBan*, Bloxham a founder member.<sup>58</sup> She trained in Dublin as a Domestic Economy teacher in 1908 and after working first as a housekeeper at Belfast Technical School she was employed as a teacher in Newtownards, Co. Down, from 1911 until her dismissal in 1916, the second of our cohort to be the victim of a politically motivated dismissal. As a testament to the religious, and political background of the period her testimony to the Bureau is an outstanding

'Stephen's Green (1926)' in Stephen Regan (ed.), *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789–1939* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 199–202, 202. **56** [https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-](https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/)

[of-military-history-1913-1921/57 https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WSo632.pdf#page=1](https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WSo632.pdf#page=1)  
**58** The application form to join *Cumann na mBan* requested information

regarding the applicant's proficiency in skills as diverse as 'the ability to drive a motor' and 'understand its running repair', 'ride a horse? Astride or sidesaddle', 'know your way thoroughly throughout Dublin', 'can you clean and load firearms', alongside questions regarding whether they had

passed examinations in First Aid, 'are you a good cook?', and 'are you a good needlewoman', University College Dublin Archives, Mulcahy Papers, P7/B/86(17). I am grateful to Niamh Jordan, Project Archivist Richard Mulcahy Papers, UCD Archives, for highlighting this document.



source and the manner of her retelling of her story exemplary in its intelligence and strength of character.

Wonderful source as it is, the *Epicure Directory* does of course have gaps, one of which is an entry for Marion Laird. Miss Laird (1872–1954) graduated from what was then known as the Dublin School of Cookery sometime before 1898, as can be gleaned from a letter from its headteacher, Maud Taylor, to the *Anglo-Celt* newspaper. The letter was in response to an article which claimed that Laird had graduated from the South Kensington School: ‘Miss Laird took a first-class diploma under the National Union (England) with which the Dublin School of Cookery was affiliated’.<sup>59</sup> It must have been quite soon after graduation that she was employed to give twice daily classes at the Grammar School in Carrickmacross,<sup>60</sup> publicity for which classes had occasioned Taylor’s correction. After Carrickmacross she can be traced to Dungarvan, where she was engaged as an expert teacher to train nuns of the Sisters of Mercy order in Domestic Science instruction.<sup>61</sup> She started working at the Munster Institute in June 1903, remaining there until August 1925. The Institute was one of two residential agricultural schools for girls in Ireland, the other was the Ulster Dairy Institute, Crookstown, Co. Down. Honor Moore’s (1923–2013)<sup>62</sup> mother and aunt attended the Munster Institute around this time and she has left us an evocative account of the atmosphere:



The kitchen was ruled over by a very idiosyncratic lady who refused to use anyone’s given name, but tagged nicknames onto the current intake every term. The cry would go up, ‘Small, dark Protestant one, come here and make bread’. And my mother would cheerfully set to and make soda bread. Remonstrated with by Matron one day, Cook simply replied, ‘She’s small, she’s dark, she’s the only Protestant body in the school, she doesn’t mind and she makes the best bread, so what’s wrong with that. It’s the truth’.<sup>63</sup>

The Institute’s purpose was to instruct pupils in dairying, poultry keeping, and ‘domestic work, embracing plain cookery, plain needlework, laundry work and home nursing’.<sup>64</sup> Students showing special aptitude were offered an extended course so that they could qualify as teachers in schools of Rural Domestic Economy. The equipment at the teacher’s disposal included ‘a modern closed

**59** *Anglo-Celt*, Letters to the Editor, 10 Dec. 1898, 3. Taylor’s assistant teachers were Rose Mason, Clara Morton, and Grace Townsend. *The Epicure: A Journal of Taste* 5: 49 (Dec. 1897), 58.  
**60** *Donegal Democrat*, ‘Cookery Class Lectures in Carrickmacross’, 17 Dec. 1898, 3. **61** *Waterford News*

and *Star*, Report of Co. Waterford Agricultural and Technical Committee, 29 Nov. 1901, 6. She appears to have worked there for just over two years. **62** Columnist and food writer, Honor Moore co-founded the Irish Food Writers’ Guild with Theodora Fitzgibbon (1916–91).  
**63** Honor Moore, *A Cook’s Life*

<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/honor/1/>, 11. The family were from Newtownards, Co. Down.  
**64** Monahan, ‘Bulletin’, 17.

range, an open-hearth fire and an oil stove and oven'; the utensils were simple.<sup>65</sup> Special attention was paid to the cooking of vegetables, fruit, and bread-making. Pupils were required to take part in the general cooking of the Institute which is where Honor Moore's relative would have encountered 'cook'. Laird's *Cookery Notes* had its genesis here, one of two cookery publications that the DATI were responsible for through their technical and agricultural branches: the agricultural branch for *Cookery Notes*, while the technical branch had ownership of *Simple Cookery*. This was a similar, if slightly more economical collection of recipes compiled by Miss Lough for the use of instructresses in Domestic Economy working under the County and Urban Technical Schemes.

The first iteration of *Simple Cookery* can be dated to 1907, or slightly earlier, as a date-stamped proof copy is on file in the National Archives of Ireland (NAI).<sup>66</sup> While there is a similar proof copy on file for *Cookery Notes*, it is not date stamped but discussion in the file between Miss Laird and Mr Wood, an inspector at the Department, would indicate that an early version of the *Notes* was also in existence prior to that year; a memo dated 26 Nov. 1909 refers to it having been printed by H.M. Stationery Office for the Department 'some time ago'. Miss Laird had intended the revised *Notes* to be given free of charge to her pupils, but was overruled in this by Mr Coyle, who we met previously, who determined that the students should be charged a nominal price of 3d per copy, reflecting the Department's belief that if they were supplied 'gratis', 'then they would be less appreciated'.<sup>67</sup> The various Departmental approvals and subsequent printing took some time, leaving Laird in the embarrassing position whereby pupils promised copies had now left the school—I cannot now collect the money so that I find myself frequently out of pocket. Do you think 100 copies could be given to me free?' Ever the sticklers, it was deemed fair by officials that she not be charged for the 100 copies most recently received by her at the Institute.

It was quickly apparent that her *Notes* were immensely popular—schools all over the country were in correspondence with the department requesting copies. Not only schools, the general public also. May Creighton, of Drumbulkin, Ballinamallard, Co. Fermanagh wrote, 'kindly send me a Technical Cookery Book, for which I enclose three penny stamps and oblige'. Mrs Monaghan of O'Brien's Bridge, Co. Clare also sent in her three penny stamps for 'one of the cookery books same as sold to the pupils at the Munster Institute Cork'. They were two of very, very many, painstakingly recorded. Six copies even found

<sup>65</sup> NAI 2005/68/439. <sup>66</sup> NAI 92/2/2267. My heartfelt thanks to Dr Orla Fitzpatrick for directing me to the NAI, astutely observing that if money was involved then the DATI would have opened a comprehensive file.

<sup>67</sup> NAI 92/2/2267. Unless stated otherwise all quotes following regarding the *Notes* are from this file.

their way to 'Mr Campbell, at the RDS Spring Show'. It was also proving popular within the Department itself, with memos detailing internal purchases such as 'one copy purchased by officer of dept' (many years later, in 1918, 200 copies were reported as 'missing' from the Department stores. It was recommended that an iron 'trellis' be installed to prevent theft). Another print run of 2,000 was ordered. By autumn 1909 discussions were taking place within the Department about selling the *Notes* directly to the public through approved outlets. The response of Mr Bailey, Controller of H. M. Stationery Office, to this belated reaction by the DATI to the success of the book was somewhat caustic; 'your letters of the 26<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> asking us to print and publish a Cookery Book place us in some difficulty. We should have to set up the type again—an expense that could have been avoided had your request been made before we lost command of the type of the work when it was set up as a departmental paper'.<sup>68</sup> In the event he conceded, stipulating that the Department undertook the risk attached to what is termed as 'the venture': 'You would then pay us for the printing and receive the revenue from the sales. 1,000 copies can be printed at a cost of 2 3/5d per copy. 1,500 at 2d. 2000 at 1 3/5d. There would thus be no difficulty in your selling direct at 3d'.

Miss Laird in the meantime had been correcting some misprints and typos in the old edition and adding some new recipes. It is in her correspondence with Mr Coyle that we can get some sense of this woman who has left no other trace in Irish culinary memory. She did not appreciate casual interference by persons unknown in her copy, obvious from some of her exchanges with Coyle: 'The paragraph which is crossed out on p.19 did not appear in the original manuscript. I fail to see where it came from unless you wrote it'. Nonetheless they had a good relationship and she appreciated his input. Alluding to a comment that Mr Coyle had previously made she owns that she did not speak Irish so could not 'devise' a translation for Pot-au-Feu, and would not recommend its inclusion, 'as we at the M.I. [Munster Institute] live under the Dept. of Agriculture we must be even more economical than the French and keep the soup until the next day'. The entry for Barm Brack proves controversial; Mr Coyle is of the view that '[s]urely we should not give this beastly Saxon corruption of the good old Irish "Barn Brack", speckled cake'.<sup>69</sup> It remained as Barm Brack. Her vision for the collection was set out in a memo in the spring of 1910:

Dear Mr Coyle, this book was mainly intended for use in schools such as this, and contains only very plain cookery. For the sake of the teacher,

**68** Use of the term 'departmental paper' denotes the earliest version of *Cookery Notes* which was circulated within the Munster Institute.

**69** 'Barn Brack' itself is a corruption of *bairghean breac*, see Rev. Patrick S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla*, for the Irish Texts

Society (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1904), '*bairghean breac*', *barnbrack* or *barmbrack*, the currant cake used on Hallow' Eve. *Bairín*, a cake of bread, food in general, and '*breac*, speckled'. 'Barm' derives from the leaven used, an ale barm.

I should prefer not to put in too much matter. There is in the book a recipe called 'West Riding Pudding' which if baked in small tins makes very good cheesecakes. There is also a 'Hydropathic pudding' which when made with apples is a plain 'Apple Charlotte'. There are a good many recipes for broths and stews and some of them resemble 'Pot au feu' very closely. I enclose recipe for ginger bread. Yours truly, M. Laird.

Mr Coyle had suggested a recipe of his own for Apple Charlotte, which she tried out on the staff at the Institute. In the event his was included as it is featured along with the Hydropathic pudding.

In the meantime Mr Gill had made an important complicating intervention with the proposal that *Cookery Notes* and *Simple Cookery* should be combined in the one book to be issued for sale by the Department.<sup>70</sup> Miss Lough's objections to *Simple Cookery* being absorbed into a joint publication were many. Although Miss Laird described the *Notes* as comprising recipes for 'only very plain cookery' Miss Lough disagreed, viewing them as being 'of an advanced and elaborate type ... quite unsuited for use by our Co. Instructresses whose pupils in most cases have only the simplest ingredients and methods of cooking'. As far as she was concerned the cost was also prohibitive for her rural classes, '[p]ublications at 1d is what is required for these'. Miss Laird was more amenable to the project, and the proposal was eventually agreed on between the two women. Everything on file indicates that the responsibility for combining the two collections fell to Marion Laird, and that Lough's *Simple Cookery* was subsumed into her publication. In October 1910 the Department ordered 3,000 copies of the *Notes*, 'as revised, to be put on sale to the public. The Dept will pay cost of printing and receipts will be lodged to credit of Endowment Fund'.<sup>71</sup>

Laird's work was not over, with a final request that she draft a preface, and she was reminded that it was understood that she would personally test each of the recipes that were added to this printing. The printing was entrusted to Hely's and the arrangement was that it would be sold through the Stationery Office agents 'in the usual way'. An outstanding issue remained: Miss Laird's memo to Mr Coyle referring to the fact that surely there should be financial recognition for her work if the book was to be sold to the public, recognition that her collection supplied that 'great want'. The copy letter on file is dated 22 November 1910 and is precise in its choice of words: 'I have to inform you that in consideration of your renouncing in their favour all claims to any property in

<sup>70</sup> Horace Plunkett's description of Gill as a 'practical Thomas Davis' is perhaps evident in this very practical intervention <https://www.dib.ie/biography/gill-thomas-patrick-a3476> <sup>71</sup> A portion of this endowment fund was directed towards

technical education. The fund was wound up in 1925.

the publication in question the Department are prepared to grant you an honorarium of Ten Pounds (£10) for your trouble in compiling the notes in question'. The honorarium was calculated carefully: 'the cost of printing will be about £26. 5s and the sale of 3,000 copies will realise about £37 odd. Out of this surplus a gratuity of £10 may be paid to Miss Laird provided she agreed to relinquish all further claims to any property in the book. M. Butler'.

Writing this in a time where personality is to the fore and personal commentary is the norm in cookbooks, the emotional and verbal austerity of *Cookery Notes* is bracing. We have grown to expect some personal involvement with our cookbook authors and for culinary historians of the future this does at least leave a trail of crumbs that can be followed, with circumspection. Not helped by that honorarium which effectively anonymised her, Marion Laird is a difficult person to make acquaintance with. Her profile appears to have been low. It was with some surprise that I realised that she was the sister of Helen Laird, perhaps better known as Honor Lavelle (1874–1957).<sup>72</sup> Born in Limerick, their father was a well-respected chemist and druggist in the city, and the only son, Harry, appears to have been an equally respected surgeon and a keen cyclist. Honor, like Marion, pursued a career in education, supporting her acting by working as a science teacher in Alexandra College, Dublin. Neither Harry nor Honor are present in the family home for the 1901 census night, but John Laird's other four daughters were with him in Rathbane Cottage, Limerick. Marion Laird had a forthright manner, in evidence throughout the NAI file, a manner seized on by the national newspapers when she presented her case before the Civil Service Compensation Board in 1930.<sup>73</sup> Familiar as we are with the political and social upheaval of the years surrounding the period, her case allows a glimpse of the more prosaic working out of Independence on conditions surrounding employment. The basis of her claim was that she had retired from the Munster Institute because her conditions of employment had been altered by the Irish Civil Service: four terms of leave per year had been reduced to two, and she no longer received financial remuneration for extra work. She pointed out that such changes had not been brought into force in Northern Ireland, although she acknowledged that that could change. She stated that if she had been in a position to retire some years previously she would have done so, and what irked her specifically was the lack of recognition for the extra work which would have previously received financial remuneration, no doubt thinking of her honorarium for *Cookery Notes*, and she did indeed refer to her authorship of a

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/laird-helen-honor-lavelle-a4641> <sup>73</sup> See Martin Maguire, *The civil service and the revolution in Ireland, 1912–38: 'Shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr Collins'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

cookery book, a reference not commented on in newspaper reports.<sup>74</sup> She was asked directly for her views regarding the changeover from the British to the Free State Government, specifically as to whether it was welcomed by her. Her answer was in character: 'Well I was always a Unionist before that but I was never a very strong politician (laughter). Mr Doolin—You had no objection to serve under a native Government as such? Miss Laird—None at all. I was satisfied to serve on'.<sup>75</sup> This was five years after her resignation from the Institute and I have no sure sight of her. A Miss Laird was appointed as full-time teacher to Strabane Technical School in 1939. This may possibly account for that reference to conditions in the North of Ireland above, and the comment about retiring. If this is our Miss Laird she would have been sixty-seven and that Miss Laird was still there five years later.<sup>76</sup> She was resident in Rathmines in Dublin at the time of her death at the age of eighty-two, close by to where her brother Harry had resided, and where her niece now lived.

Margaret Lough (1865?–),<sup>77</sup> of *Simple Cookery*, Miss Laird's silent co-author, retired as an Inspector of Domestic Education in 1929.<sup>78</sup> She had trained at the Liverpool School of Domestic Science and was appointed to the Athenaeum in Limerick in 1898.<sup>79</sup> The Athenaeum had passed into the control of Limerick Corporation two years previously with a remit to boost technical education. From there she appears to have worked for a period at the Municipal Technical School, Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire), Co. Dublin, before joining the DATI where she was appointed as Inspector of Technical and Secondary Schools, and examiner for the Intermediate Board. She was a member of the very extensive Lough family of Killeshandra, founders in 1896 of the Killeshandra Co-operative Agricultural and Dairy Society, now part of the Lakelands Group. On the occasion of her twenty-fifth anniversary as an Inspector for the Department she retired on superannuation and the Domestic Science teachers hosted an 'at home' for her at Electricity House, 39 Grafton St, a fine building, now demolished.<sup>80</sup> She was gifted 'a wireless set and stone marten stole from the instructresses, and a gold watch from her male colleagues on the inspection staff'.<sup>81</sup> Her replacement as inspector was a Mrs Donovan, who had taught in Mayo, whom it was noted 'ha[d] the capacity to conduct classes in Irish'.<sup>82</sup>

In October 1911, Mr Coyle had the pleasure of informing Miss Laird that the first issue, 3,000 copies, of the new version of *Cookery Notes* had been almost disposed of and another order was in train, again for 3,000 copies. He suggested the inclusion of a recipe for salt herrings, which she wisely rejected, '[t]he cooking

**74** £10 in 1910 would convert to £923.25 in 2023, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> approx. €1,052. See also Ian Miller, 'Starvation in Modern Ireland', this volume, for the effect on pensions. **75** *Evening Herald*, 29 May 1930, 5.

**76** *Ulster Herald*, 15 June 1940, 5; *Ulster Herald*, 14 Oct. 1944, 7. **77** In the 1911 census Margaret Ellen Locke, Government Inspector, was registered as a lodger in Antrim. Her age was stated as 49. I can find no definitive match for a corresponding birth certificate but it

may be Margaret Lough born in November 1865, Drumaddagorry, Clones, Co. Monaghan. **78** *Irish Independent*, 21 June 1929, 4. **79** *Irish Examiner*, 17 Oct. 1898, 6. **80** <https://www.archiseek.com/2015/1860s-no-39-grafton-street-dublin/> **81** *Irish Independent*, 24

June 1929, 10. **82** *Connaught Telegraph*, 21 Sept. 1929, 4.

of salt herrings is really such a simple thing that I do not see much necessity for putting it in'. Third and fourth issues of the same print run quickly followed. By 1914 the run was increased to 8,000, further increased in February 1916 to 10,000. In 1922 the sixth edition was printed, and the price was 6d. That same year the *Notes* were translated into Irish for publication.<sup>83</sup> The 1942 edition included 'A Simple Guide to Wholesome Diet', a Department of Local Government and Public Health publication, along with the addition of 'some new "economy recipes", specially adapted to suit existing conditions'. Caitríona Clear kindly furnished an image of the 1944 edition, which belonged to her aunt, Nancy Clear—editions emerge like 'splinters of the true cross'.<sup>84</sup> (Figure 4) The 1951 edition gives its print run to that date as 'One hundred and eighty-six thousand'. The *Notes* continued to be sold through the Government Publications Office in the GPO Arcade, subsequently at their office in Molesworth Street. Some years ago I had the pleasure of compiling a bibliography of Honor Moore's collection of cookbooks and she was proud of the fact that she had in her possession three editions of the *Notes*, a fourth she had given to Myrtle Allen, and remarked that one of her daughters used a further revised edition in primary school in Dublin in the 1960s. The National Library of Ireland also have copies, one of the most interesting of which is included among the Niall Montgomery papers.<sup>85</sup> Missing the original cover, it was re-covered in brown wrapping paper, obviously much used and loved, grease-spattered and distressed. Which is how so many of the copies no doubt met their end. Extant copies of older cookbooks tend to be more durable, bound, and usually hard backed. The more ephemeral, such as *Cookery Notes*, arguably penetrated further, were more widely consulted, and paradoxically physically less in evidence for all of these reasons. The archive at the Department of Agriculture has a proof copy of the 1924 edition, the 'sixtieth thousand' edition, at which stage it was also being sold and distributed by Eason and Son, still priced at 6d. They also have a 1959 edition. It had by this time been repackaged in a more modern red cover but frustratingly lacks the print run information of the original editions, the last of which I can find, the 1951 edition, marks it as the 'One Hundred and Eighty-sixth Thousandth'.<sup>86</sup>

As can be seen, this early chronology of printed cookbook authorship in Ireland is of a very specific and particular pedagogical type, even given that all cookbooks are pedagogical by nature. It is a history that is closely connected to, and shaped by the pedagogies and practices of domestic science and home economics with known exceptions: an apparently anonymous 1767 publication;<sup>87</sup>

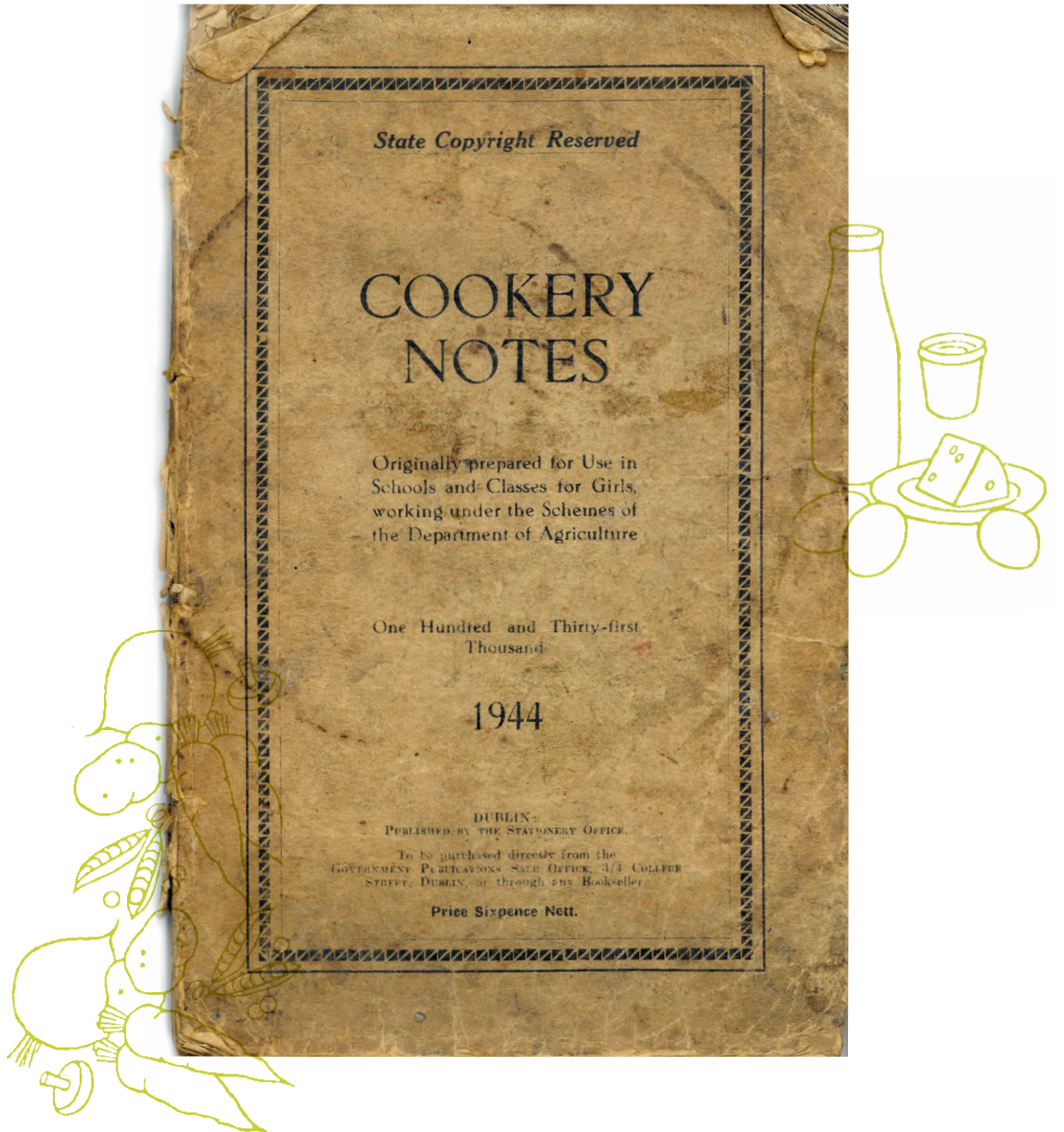
**83** Micheal O'Cionnfhaoiladh (trans.), *Tigheas & cócaireacht* (Dublin: Muinntear Guí agus a gCuid, 1922). **84** A phrase that Laura Shapiro uses in connection with the gifting from friends of books, leaflets, and recipe collections when trying to reassemble the past, *Something from the*

*Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), x.

**85** National Library of Ireland, MS 50,118/31/6. Montgomery numbered among his friends Niall Sheridan, husband of Monica Sheridan <https://www.dib.ie/biography/sheridan-monica-a804> and was also

a close friend of C.P. Curran, husband of Helen Laird/Honor Lavelle. On Curran and his friendship with Joyce see Helen Solterer and Alice Ryan (eds), *James Joyce Remembered, Edition 2022* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2022). <https://www.dib.ie/biography/>

curran-constantine-petercon-a2317 **86** My sincere thanks to Paolo Defant, librarian at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and his colleague Jennifer Byrne, for their help with locating these copies. **87** Ceres, *The Lady's companion: or, accomplish'd*



**Figure 4** Image of 1944 edition of *Cookery Notes*, noting 131,000 copies printed



Catherine Alexander's *Cheap Receipts and hints on cookery*, printed for private circulation;<sup>88</sup> and A. M. Gordon's *The New domestic cookery; formed upon principles of economy* (Dublin: James M'Glashan, 1849) which is an enigma.<sup>89</sup> Another book published 'somewhat anonymously' in 1905 by Mrs Bernard Hackett, with a dedication to Sir Charles Cameron (1830–1921), is a relative outlier for Ireland.<sup>90</sup> Described by Éamonn Mac Thomáis as 'one of the greatest humanitarians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century', Cameron was tireless in his pursuit of a better quality of living for the poor of Dublin.<sup>91</sup> Reviewed in the *Weekly Irish Times*, Hackett is remarked on as 'well known in Dublin circles', her work as 'containing little that is elementary in [a] pretty and useful volume', coming up decidedly short when compared in the review to Redington's *Economic Cookery Book*, with its 'nearly 200 pages of really valuable knowledge'.<sup>92</sup> At that stage Redington would appear to have been the touchstone for what an Irish cookbook should be. Her works penetrated the public consciousness, perhaps because her pedagogical impulses were more friendly, placed within the domestic rather than the educational environment.

A statement in the *Irish Press* in 1935, twenty years after the publication of Redington's first book, lauded hers as 'the first cookery book to be used for teaching in Irish schools'.<sup>93</sup> In fact Fannie Gallaher (1854–1936) had published *Lessons in Domestic Science* many years before Redington, but both the woman herself and her work would appear to have slipped from consciousness.<sup>94</sup> There is no source to indicate that Gallaher was professionally trained, she never alluded to it that I can ascertain and was better known as a novelist and journalist. Respectively, Gallaher and Redington's books illustrate the shift from the pedagogical impulses of domestic science to the more accessible framework adopted within the domestic economy worldview.<sup>95</sup> Another author and journalist, Charlotte O'Connor Eccles (1864/5–1911) was a friend of Horace Plunkett, working closely with him at the DATI. In 1901 she was employed by Plunkett to travel the country delivering lectures on 'Science in the Household', comparing the situation in Ireland with how it was developing in other countries across Europe.<sup>96</sup> Three years later she was involved in a pilot project in Dromore, Co. Tyrone, instituted by Plunkett, under the patronage of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, travelling

director in the whole art of cookery.... By a lady (Dublin: Printed for John Mitchell, Dublin). Not republished anywhere else, the dedication specifically addresses 'the ladies of Dublin'.

**88** Catherine Alexander, *Cheap Receipts and hints on cookery* (Armagh: Printed by J. M'Watters, 1847).

**89** A.M. Gordon, *The New domestic cookery; formed upon principles of economy* (Dublin: James M'Glashan, 1849). Not listed in bibliographies

compiled by Attar or Driver, the British Library copy is dated 1851 per their website. See also Amanda McCloot and Martin Caraher, 'The evolution of Home Economics as a subject in Irish primary and post-primary education from the 1800s to the twenty-first century', *Irish Educational Studies* 38: 3 (2019), 377–99.

**90** Little Mary's, *Up to date dishes. Easily Cooked* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis and Co. Ltd; London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. Ltd,

1905). Driver, *Bibliography of Cookery Books*, does not ascribe an author. **91** Éamonn Mac Thomáis, 'Sir Charles A. Cameron (1830–1921)', *Dublin Historical Record* 22: 2 (June 1968), 214–24, 214. See also <https://www.rcsi.com/cameron/index.html> **92** *Weekly Irish Times*, 3 June 1905, 10. **93** *Irish Press*, 'Careers for Women, No 2. Domestic Economy Teaching', 16 Feb. 1935, 4. **94** F. M. Gallaher, *Lessons in Domestic Science* (Dublin: Browne &

Nolan, 1885), revised and enlarged in 1906, 'a special edition for the use of schools in connexion [sic] with the National Board of Education in Ireland'. Gallaher's *Short Lessons in Domestic Science* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1906) was published concurrently. Attar dates Gallaher's book as 1894. This was a revised and enlarged version of the 1885 publication which was advertised in the January 1885 edition of *The Athenæum*. <https://>

from house to house demonstrating how the knowledge from the local Domestic Economy classes could be carried from theory into practice.<sup>97</sup> As Bridget Hourican notes, *No. 18 Blank Street*,<sup>98</sup> her 1903 pamphlet about a fictionalised Dublin family and their struggles on the domestic economy front, 'was said to be in every house in Ireland'.<sup>99</sup> That same year her *Domestic Economy Reader* was published as part of the Reverend T.A. Finlay's Schools and College Series.<sup>100</sup> Kathleen Ferguson (1875–?), was another graduate of the Dublin School, although, reminiscent of the rebuke issued by Maud Taylor regarding Miss Laird's alma mater, the *Epicure Directory* describes her as a graduate of the Liverpool school. Ferguson is the seventh of our authors from the *Directory*, publishing *Lessons in Cookery and Housewifery for the Use of Children*, in two parts, followed by five further books on various aspects of Cookery and Housewifery going to print by 1908.<sup>101</sup>

Cooking was part of housework and good, nutritious cooking contributed to the health of the nation. It was also experienced as an oppressive burden, and ideology around it was wielded with some skill by the state and the Catholic church. In the home it was women's, unpaid, work. As Mary McAuliffe so succinctly articulated, while the 1922 Constitution had granted all citizens equality across religious and social spectrums, for the State and the Church the model of an acceptable Irishwoman was one who was respectable, married, and reproductive.<sup>102</sup> She was a homemaker. Discourse on women within the home became more focused as the century progressed. There were always dissenting voices, and presumably more men could cook than were public about it. George Russell's son recounts an incident where Russell interjected with instructions on cooking to an incompetent friend with '[m]an, ... you don't need all that grease in the pan. Give me a bowl; I must pour off three-quarters of it. You slice the potatoes while I cook the cutlets'.<sup>103</sup> In 1909 he railed against the 'mystification' of cooking with a broadside declaring that '[w]omen make a mystery of cooking, as they do with other things, and invest it with difficulties, whereas it is perfectly simple. The process of catching a vegetable, killing, and cooking it, is of infantile easiness and yet H.G.B. would have us believe it is a Cabinet matter'.<sup>104</sup> There is an argument that if cooking was being 'mystified', then it was perhaps an unconscious adjustment by women faced with a gradual loss of autonomy

www.dib.ie/biography/gallaher-francesca-fannie-mary-a10268. **95** See also Miller, *Reforming Food*, 147. **96** *The Epicure, A Journal of Taste* 3: 88 (March 1901), 'Notes and News', 110. See also, M. Salm, 'Travelling Cooking Schools for Rural Regions, in Germany', *Journal of Home Economics* 1: 2 (1909), 164–67. **97** *Ulster Herald*, 8 July 1905, 7. **98** Charlotte O'Connor Eccles, *No 18 Blank Street. A story of Dublin* (Dublin: Office of the Irish Messenger, 1903).

The 9<sup>th</sup> edition in the NLI is dated 1927. **99** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/eccles-charlotte-oconor-a2874>. **100** Charlotte O'Connor Eccles, *How Mary Fitzgerald learned Housekeeping* (Dublin: Fallon, 1903). **101** Kathleen Ferguson, *Lessons in Cookery and Housewifery for the use of Children. Leabhairini na Seamróige Bk. I* (Athlone: Athlone Printing Works, 1900); *Lessons in Cookery and Housewifery for the use of Children Bk. II* (Dublin: James

Duffy, 1901); *Catechism of Domestic Science* (Athlone: Athlone Printing Works and the Westmeath Independent Office, 1901); *Sick Room Cookery* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1904); *Advanced Lessons in Cookery* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1905); *Advanced Lessons in Cookery Bk. II and Bk. III* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1908). **102** Mary McAuliffe, 'Was 1918 a false dawn for Irish women?' *Irish Times*, 10 Dec. 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/>

was-1918-a-false-dawn-for-irish-women-1.3705917. **103** 'Æ', by Diarmuid Russell' in Henry Summerfield (ed.), *Selections from the Contributions to The Irish Homestead* by G. W. Russell, Æ, Vol.1 (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978), 1–9, 6. **104** 27 March 1909, 'Notes of the Week. The Government's Responsibility for Our Cookery' in Summerfield (ed.), *Selections from the Contributions to The*

as indicated by Bourke and Barclay. Bourke makes a cautionary point when she remarks that ‘historians do not generally share the values of the housewives they are studying, and they have trouble taking these values seriously. We need to ask ourselves what is the meaning of housework to housewives; they did not disparage it as we do’.<sup>105</sup>

Housewifery, of which cooking was but one aspect, is a complex, gendered, knowledge network, where social status also plays an important role. In a meeting in November 1901 of the members of the Drummully Farm and Garden Society, Killeshandra, the Rev. Finlay, who we encountered previously in connection with the Schools and College series, has much to say regarding the adoption of technical instruction, the encouragement of cottage gardening and cottage industries.<sup>106</sup> He furthers this discussion with specific comments on the desirability of ‘the cultivation of more economy and a more scientific way of cooking amongst the wives and daughters of the farming classes’. In this regard he specifies that cookery classes were of great importance, noting that ‘[i]n some of the continental countries no girl was allowed to get married until she was able to demonstrate that she was trained in thrifty ways as a house keeper and skilled in cookery and it would be a very good principle if this was also adopted in Ireland (Hear, Hear)’.<sup>107</sup> Finlay is entirely clear about the domestic division of labour: it is ordained that the housewife should cultivate habits of thrift in the home, following the habits of the girls in the continental countries that he has referred to and the ‘man of the house’ should, ‘after his days’ work, employ himself in some mechanical way and make himself handy’.<sup>108</sup> There are countless newspaper reports reinforcing the tenor of this message. By 1928, Rev. Morriscoe, Bishop of Achonry (1869–1946), is somewhat more blunt in his comments than Finlay had been. Speaking after the annual tests at Swinford Technical Schools he said that for four-fifths of the houses in his diocese ‘training in the various forms of domestic science and household management was of more importance than any form of mental equipment’ and that ‘it did not need a theorist to see that, since the overwhelming percentage of our girls had to play the part of housewives, it became the supreme duty of those burdened with promoting the nation’s welfare, to provide them with opportunities of preparation for the duties of household management’.<sup>109</sup>

To some the import of that message amounted to being confined or thwarted in their expectations, to others it was likely experienced as a form of power. One should of course not assume that the person who performs housework is the least

*Irish Homestead*, 184.

**105** Bourke, ‘Housewifery in working-class England’, 172.

**106** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/finlay-thomas-alloysius-a3094> **107** “The Happy Change. Co-operative re-union at Killeshandra.” Important address by Rev. T. J. Finlay, S.J. From Our

Reporter’, *Anglo-Celt*, 30

Nov. 1901, 7. **108** ‘The Happy Change’. For a reading against this see Oakley, *Housewife*, 1–9. **109** *The Liberator*, 19 June 1928, 4–5. The diocese extends through counties Mayo, Roscommon, and Sligo.

powerful person.<sup>110</sup> Tensions within the kitchen, that highly gendered space, are complex. Robert Lynd recounts a tale, perhaps apocryphal, which highlights this.<sup>111</sup> Returning home having been trained in cookery at a technical school, a farmer's daughter sets about proving her newfound talents in getting ready the midday dinner, 'a magnificent steak pudding the likes of which had never been seen in the house before'. Her prowess is lauded by her father who declares 'we must always let Mary do the cooking after this'.<sup>112</sup> His wife is utterly dismayed: "Oh!", she lamented, wringing her hands. "After me cooking and slaving for you for twenty years! And now to have my own daughter put against me!" And she finished with a flood of tears.<sup>113</sup> In the ensuing backtracking it was silently established that 'no one ever dared to propose Mary as family cook again. Thus in at least one house, the old cookery won its decisive battle against the new, and a family that might be taking in health with its food still sits down at meal-times to hard and knobbly matter swimming in watery gravy'.<sup>114</sup>

Miss Laird's *Cookery Notes* and the emergence of a distinctive tradition of printed cookbooks and recipes are placed within this historical background and are best understood and appreciated within that context. *Cookery Notes* is picked up for commentary in the newspapers down through the years as various editions are released. Two articles are of note. In 1964 the collection is reviewed at length by a correspondent ('Traveller' by name and apparently seventy-one years of age) for the *Donegal Democrat*. 'Traveller' analyses the *Notes* in detail, and is unstinting in his praise for the collection, which he discusses at length, even down to the section on hygiene. Remarking that while ostensibly available from Government Publications in Dublin and 'any bookseller', in reality it was not widely accessible—'how long is it since there was a bookseller in the County of Donegal?' He raises an interesting point which is worth quoting in full:

When I asked a certain fellow who knows a lot of whys and wherefores if he could explain why better facilities were not provided for making this book easily available to householders in their own towns and villages he put his finger along his nose, grabbed my copy of the book and finger-pointed: 'Advantages of Home-made Bread', 'Rules for making Cakes', 'Rules for making Pastry, Puddings, etc.', 'Rules for making Sauces', 'Rules for making Jams', 'Rules for making Soups'. Then he asked what the manufacturers and shop-keepers were likely

**110** Bourke, 'Housewifery in working class England', 182.

**111** Robert Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland* (London: Mills & Boon, Limited, 1909), 22–23. Lynd is an interesting interlocutor here, see <https://www.dib.ie/biography/lynd-robert-wilson-a4962> where he is described as 'at

his best as a light essayist concerning everyday affairs, maintaining an incessant interest in the lives of people of all kinds.' **112** Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland*, 22. **113** Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland*, 23. **114** Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland*, 23.

to do about a Government publication which seeks to restore the old cookery skills and independence of prepared foods which they have well-nigh destroyed in this generation.<sup>115</sup>

Ten years later the collection was picked up by Joan Tighe, a well-known feature writer and editor.<sup>116</sup> She reviews *Cookery Notes* alongside Rosie Tinne's then recently published *Irish Countryhouse Cooking*.<sup>117</sup> While she praises the recipes in the *Notes*, 'all of "economy" standard ingredients', she continues with the proposition that 'Rosie Tinne's volume is however in another class. If only for its sketches of old houses and the beautiful script attached to recipes it is a delight'.<sup>118</sup> The Countess of Altamont, the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, the Countess of Iveagh, and Mrs Ivan Allen, now better known as Myrtle Allen,<sup>119</sup> are among the contributors, all of whose presence would have denoted a certain social standing and ambition regarding the aspirations of the collection. Tinne, a Cordon Bleu cook and co-owner with her husband of Snaffles restaurant in Dublin, is quoted as saying that it seemed to her 'wrong that Ireland's gastro-nomic reputation should rest on cottage cooking and it is for this reason that I set out to collect recipes from the houses where higher standards have prevailed for many generations and where superb meals can still be enjoyed today'. The irony appears to have been lost on both Tinne and Joan Tighe that Miranda, Countess of Iveagh, of Farmleigh, Castleknock, contributed a recipe for Dublin Coddle, while Tighe reprints in the column 'that splendidly simple "Potato Cakes" recipe from "Mountbatten of Burma" under the crest and sign of Classiebawn Castle, Cliffoney, Co. Sligo',<sup>120</sup> a considerably less sophisticated recipe than that given in *Cookery Notes*.

Later generations may not be familiar with Miss Laird's work, but she was the predecessor of the much-loved authors of the very popular *All in the Cooking*, first published in 1946 and reprinted in a paperback version in 2015.<sup>121</sup> Miss Laird was one of a professional cohort of redoubtable women. As career women they were socially prominent, evidenced not least by the coverage they were afforded in newspapers of the period. Yet it is perhaps an irony that the main archive where their presence leaves a significant trail is that archive in the NAI, within which Marion Laird was so effectively anonymised by officialdom. Like all women in Ireland, they were the victims of what Judith Harford and Jennifer

**115** *Donegal Democrat*, Traveller, 'An Invaluable Guide to Better Eating', 10 July 1964, 9.

**116** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/tighe-joan-a10185>

**117** Rosie Tinne, *Irish Countryhouse Cooking* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1974).

**118** *Evening Herald*, 'Topics by Joan Tighe', 2 Dec. 1972, 6.

**119** Myrtle Allen's *The Ballymaloe Cookbook* (Cork:

Agri Books, 1977) is arguably one of the most revered cookbooks in the Irish canon, alongside Marnell, Breathnach, Martin and Murnaghan's *All in the Cooking* of 1946. See below.

**120** *Evening Herald*, 'Topics', 6. Louis Mountbatten (1900–1979), 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma. On 27 August 1979, the IRA detonated a bomb on Mountbatten's fishing

boat, killing him, along with his grandson, Nicholas Knatchbull, Paul Maxwell, aged 14, and Lady Brabourne. Patricia Knatchbull, her husband John, and Nicholas' twin brother Timothy were injured but survived the blast.

**121** Josephine B. Marnell, Nora M. Breathnach, Ann A. Martin and Mor Murnaghan, *All in the Cooking* (Dublin: Educational Company of

Ireland, 1946); Facsimile Edition of the third edition [1969], *All in the Cooking* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2015), with a Foreword by Anne A. Brown (née Martin), 'in my 97<sup>th</sup> year'; Marnell, Breathnach, Martin and Murnaghan, *All in the Cooking Bk II* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1963); Facsimile Edition, *All in the Cooking Bk II* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2022);

Redmond have described as what was ‘effectively, patriarchy as policy’ as the century progressed.<sup>122</sup> And again, there is a supreme irony in that ‘the matter’ that they taught was precisely what facilitated that very policy in so many cases.<sup>123</sup> I have only touched on this here as my primary concern was to secure their place in the history of the recipe in Ireland and allow their own personalities some room. They deserve to be recognised as an important voice in the development of the cookbook on the island, and in our understanding of what Irish cuisine is, marshalling our transition from a manuscript tradition through to later celebrity authors.<sup>124</sup> Some of the anachronistic concerns underlying their texts may inspire a form of despair, or even rage, in the modern reader. The form of the modern cookbook would probably be unrecognisable to these women; if not the form itself, then the way that discussion and debate around sustenance, gustatory and mental, has evolved.<sup>125</sup> And yet, there they are, these pioneer authors. I see them as staunch: those decades as the century turned was their time, the sea that they swam in. I developed a particular attachment for Marion Laird—her *Cookery Notes* makes manifest multiple histories, on many different levels, for which she deserves due recognition.

### Chronological list of named publications

- Ceres**, *The Lady’s companion: or, accomplish’d director in the whole art of cookery....* By a lady (Dublin: Printed for John Mitchell, 1767)
- Alexander, Catherine**, *Cheap Receipts and hints on cookery* (Armagh: Printed by J. M’Watters, 1847)
- Gordon, A. M.**, *The New domestic cookery; formed upon principles of economy* (Dublin: James M’Glashan, 1849)
- Gallaher, F. M.**, *Lessons in Domestic Science* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1885)
- Todd, Mary**, *Food Well Cooked. Easy Lessons for all Classes on Cookery* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1890)
- Ferguson, Kathleen**, *Lessons in Cookery and Housewifery for the use of Children. Leabhairini na Seamróige Bk. I* (Athlone: Athlone Printing Works, 1900)
- Ferguson, Kathleen**, *Lessons in Cookery and Housewifery for the use of Children Bk. II* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1901)

See also, Mor Murnaghan and Mona Hearn, *Cooking for All* (Dublin; Cork: Educational Company of Ireland, 1966).

<sup>122</sup> Judith Hartford and Jennifer Redmond, “I am amazed at how easily we accepted it”: the Marriage Ban, teaching and ideologies of womenhood in post-Independence Ireland’, *Gender and Education* 33: 2 (2021), 186–201, 187.

<sup>123</sup> Miss Laird used the term ‘matter’ in correspondence with Mr Coyle as quoted above—‘For the sake of the teacher, I should prefer not to put in too much matter’.

<sup>124</sup> On the manuscripts and the early history of printed cookbooks in Ireland see Dorothy Cashman, ‘An investigation of Irish culinary history, with particular reference to the genre of

County Kilkenny (1740–1830) vol. 1, ch. 3 *Doctoral thesis. Technological University Dublin* <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tourdoc/37/> <sup>125</sup> I am thinking here particularly of Rebecca May Johnson, *Small Fires. An Epic in the Kitchen* (London: Pushkin Press, 2022), and her observation ‘between holding a critical position and tasting the sauce, there are a lot of questions’, 19. Arguably the

world view of the texts here is closer to Martha Rosler’s analysis of the semiotics of the kitchen, than any appreciation of the sensory endowments that we expect from our culinary texts today.

- Ferguson, Kathleen**, *Catechism of Domestic Science* (Athlone: Athlone Printing Works and the Westmeath Independent Office, 1901)
- Ferguson, Kathleen**, *Sick Room Cookery* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1904)
- Redington, Josephine**, *The Economic Cookery Book* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1905)
- Little Mary's**, *Up to date dishes. Easily Cooked* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis and Co. Ltd; London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. Ltd, 1905)
- Ferguson, Kathleen**, *Advanced Lessons in Cookery* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1905)
- Laird, M.**, 'Anon' *Cookery Notes* (Dublin: printed for the Stationery Office, 1907?); First revised edition (Dublin: the Stationery Office, 1910)
- Lough, M.**, 'Anon', *Simple Cookery* (Dublin: printed for the Stationery Office, 1907?)
- Redington, Josephine**, *High Class Cookery* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1907)
- Redington, Josephine**, *High Class Cookery II. Hot and Cold Fish Dishes* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1907)
- Warren, K. E.**, *Domestic Economy Notes for Intermediate Certificate Course* (Dublin: Wm Warren & Son, [no date] 1907)
- Ferguson, Kathleen**, *Advanced Lessons in Cookery Bk. II, and Bk. III* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1908)
- Redington, Josephine**, *The Laundry Book* (Dublin and Waterford: M.H. Gill & Son, 1913)
- Redington, Josephine**, *The Shamrock Cookery Book* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1913)
- McCarthy Judd, Mrs**, *The Making of a Cook, Part I* (Dublin and Belfast: Educational Company of Ireland Ltd, 1915?)
- McCarthy Judd, Mrs**, *The Making of a Cook, Part II* (Dublin and Belfast: Educational Company of Ireland Ltd, 1915?)
- Russell, Brigid**, *Young Housewife's Cookery Book* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1915)
- Laird, M.**, 'Anon', Micheal O'Cionnfhaoiladh (trans.) *Tigheas & cócaireacht* (Dublin: Muinntear Guí agus a gCuid, 1922)
- Warren, Kathleen E.**, *The Tailteann Cookery Book* (Dublin: Wm. Warren & Son, 1929)
- Irwin, Florence**, *Irish Country Recipes* (The Northern Whig: Belfast, 1937)
- Duffin, Ruth, and Margaret Roper**, *The Blue Bird Cookery Book for Working Women* (Dublin: Educational Company Ltd, 1939?)

**Russell, Brigid**, *Cócaireacht*, aistriú go Gaedhilg a rinne Mícheál Ó Griobhtha (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1942)

**Marnell, Josephine B., Nora M. Breathnach, Ann A. Martin and Mor Murnaghan**, *All in the Cooking* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1946); Facsimile Edition of the third edition [1969], *All in the Cooking* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2015), with a Foreword by Anne A. Brown (née Martin)

**Irwin, Florence**, *The Cookin' Woman* (Oliver and Boyd: Edinburgh, 1949)

**Breathnach, Nora M., Ann A. Martin and Mor Murnaghan**, *All in the Cooking Bk II* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1963); Facsimile Edition, *All in the Cooking Bk II* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2022)

**Murnaghan, Mor and Mona Hearn**, *Cooking for All* (Dublin; Cork: Educational Company of Ireland, 1966)

**Tinne, Rosie**, *Irish Countryhouse Cooking* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1974)

**Allen, Myrtle**, *The Ballymaloe Cookbook* (Cork: Agri Books, 1977); (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1984); (Dublin: Gill Books, 2014)

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**23**

*Hunger and Starvation  
in Modern Ireland*

**Ian Miller**

In 1927, Daniel Sullivan died in Castletownbere Hospital, West Cork. For most of his life, Daniel's family had lived quite prosperously. Before independence, the British fleet had been stationed in the local harbour, providing Daniel with a ready market for his farm produce, fowl and eggs. However, the Sullivans since fell on hard times. Recently, Daniel had applied to the West Cork Board of Assistance but was denied relief as he owned land. In consequence of this fateful, parsimonious decision, the family began to starve. One Saturday in 1927, a neighbour visited Daniel's house to find Mrs Sullivan lying dead on the floor. Daniel had been the first to discover his wife's corpse, having crawled across the floor to check why she was ignoring their child's calls for water. Upon discovery, Daniel and his five children all looked weak and sickly. They had no beds or bedclothes. They slept on hay. A few pounds of yellow meal and half a loaf of bread was all the food in the house.

The following Tuesday, seventeen-year-old Timothy and four-year-old Rita died too. Nursing staff had to cut the coverings from the children's emaciated bodies. Thrown into grief and suffering, Daniel became 'demented' and died himself the following day. At an inquest, cries of '47' were voiced, a reference, of course, to the *annus horribilis* of the Great Famine (1845–52). It was noted that the Sullivans would probably have been granted relief, had they re-applied. But instead, they starved. Newspapers, sympathetic to the plight of these families and eager to record their fate, insisted that at least twenty other families in Cork faced similar circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Starvation occupies a pivotal position in the Irish collective memory, for obvious reasons. The Famine. Hunger striking. Both immediately spring to mind. Irish hunger strikes have produced somewhat romanticised views of Irish starvation, especially those authors who invoke and mythologise hunger striking as an ancient, pre-British invasion weapon used by honourable Irish protestors against the dishonourable British, who metaphorically (literally, some would argue) now had to deal with a protesting person starving on its very doorstep. According to some accounts, even St Patrick waged a hunger strike.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the Famine is rightly depicted as a period of distress, hunger and misery for which the British state has to concede at least some culpability. But what of day-to-day hunger and starvation outside of these unusual, extreme events?

This chapter draws attention to pitiful stories such as Daniel's to highlight my argument that until relatively recently, many Irish families faced hunger and starvation as a matter of course. This was especially the case in times of economic

<sup>1</sup> 'Poverty in West Cork', *Irish Times*, 1 April 1927, 5; 'West Cork Famine', *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 April 1927, 8. <sup>2</sup> See for example, David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Hunger Strike* (London: HarperCollins, 1987), 14.

stress. The Great Depression (1929–39), for example. But even during times of relative affluence, the prospect of starving loomed for the very poorest. As this chapter argues, hunger was not an exceptional condition in modern Ireland. For many, it was simply the norm. Some people willingly decided to starve rather than face indignities such as the workhouse. It is the normality of starvation, rather than its exceptionality, which forms the basis of this chapter. Until the nineteenth century, more pertinent to the lives of many was the tradition of food rioting which, as James Kelly outlines, had its last notable phase in Ireland in the 1840s.<sup>3</sup> Here, I examine a later period, roughly covering the 1870s through the 1930s, to explore the meanings and fears of starvation in everyday life for Ireland's poorest residents, the ways in which starvation was politicised and the changing management of, and attitudes towards, starvation in Ireland over time.

What exactly do I mean by 'starvation'? In post-independence Ireland, starvation was a nebulous, vaguely used term. As Daniel's plight reveals, 'starvation' sometimes referred to the actual physical event of a hungry death. However, in 1932, starvation was declared in Derry to describe 500 families still alive although subsisting upon tea and white bread only.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, five years earlier, the Galway Hospitals' Committee had described reliance upon the very same diet as 'semi-starvation', and as a seasonal, rather than permanent, problem. Inhabitants of the Renvyle peninsula enjoyed potatoes, milk, butter and eggs during the summer, but resorted to tea and bread in winter.<sup>5</sup> In these accounts, 'starvation' referred more to a condition of extreme hunger, and the suffering which it caused.<sup>6</sup> Tom Scott-Smith discusses at length the nature of malnutrition (or under-nutrition as it was once known), whereby individuals might have access to foodstuffs, but not necessarily those which best sustain health (both long-term and short-term). While more scientifically precise, thinking of starvation purely in biological terms can draw attention away from the complex socio-economic and political determinants that produce and sustain hunger, as Scott-Smith argues.<sup>7</sup> This essay discusses starvation in its broader sense, recognising its multiple meanings.

### Living on tea and white bread

There are tendencies in some strands of Irish culinary history to romanticise Ireland's dietary past. For example, in her enjoyable book, *Ireland's Green Larder*, Margaret Hickey provides a chapter on tea which entirely overlooks the drink's historical association with distress, poverty and despair.<sup>8</sup> The same can be said

**3** James Kelly, *Food Rioting in Ireland in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: The 'Moral Economy' and the Irish Crowd* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 19. **4** 'Starvation in Derry', *Irish Times*, 29 September 1932, 5. **5** 'Semi-Starvation: Plight of People in the Gaeltacht',

*Irish Times*, 16 April 1927, 9. **6** Nadja Durbach, *Many Mouths: The Politics of Food from the Workhouse to the Welfare State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 146. **7** Tom Scott-Smith, *On an Empty Stomach: Two Hundred Years of Hunger Relief* (Ithaca: Cornell University

Press, 2020). **8** Margaret Hickey, *Ireland's Green Larder* (London: Unbound, 2018), chapter 9. **9** Julie E. Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008). **10** Leslie A. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and Famine: A History of Food and*

*Nutrition in Ireland, 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 103–4. **11** Glyn Jones, 'The Introduction and Establishment of Roller Milling in Ireland', in Andy Bielenberg (ed.) *Irish Flour Milling: A History, 600–2000* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003). **12** Jack Magee, *Barney:*

for British histories of tea drinking which explore the drink's centrality to middle-class identity while overlooking the extent of reliance on tea among the poor.<sup>9</sup> Without denying that a cup of tea provided joy and pleasure for many Irish people, dependency upon the drink increased in the post-Famine period. After the Famine, tea became cheaper and more accessible to the Irish poor. Stewed on the stove all day long, it was drunk strong and black. Poor families spent large amounts of money on tea, often at the expense of more nutritious foods.<sup>10</sup>

Around the same time, new technological developments allowed bakeries to produce white bread that was less expensive, but less nutritious, than whole-meal bread.<sup>11</sup> Famed Belfast baker Barney Hughes is often recalled as a hero for feeding the city's working classes with cheap bread between the 1820s and '70s. Not without good reason. Hughes' cheap Belfast Baps undoubtedly helped keep many impoverished families alive, even during the Famine.<sup>12</sup> But there was a downside to this working-class hero's bread. In the 1860s, Belfast surgeon William McCormac complained in the local press about the declining quality of working-class diets.<sup>13</sup> In his sophisticated dietary surveys, conducted that same decade, British surveyist Edward Smith commented on the rising popularity of tea drinking across Ireland.<sup>14</sup> As the decades passed, the post-Famine Irish began to look notably shorter, frailer and weaker.<sup>15</sup> By the 1890s, those old enough to remember pre-Famine times observed a population that had visibly declined, both physically and mentally.<sup>16</sup> This wasn't simply nostalgia. The potato diet, for all its ills, had once provided solid nutrition. The same could hardly be said for tea and white bread.

Elsewhere, I have argued at length that after the Famine, the Irish diet diversified. For most people, this ended a precarious dependence on the potato crop. However, as diets changed, nutritional well-being suffered. Poorer families had limited cooking skills, knowledge or education. Milk was often adulterated. Persistent poverty precluded access to the most nutritious foods. Irish traders exported nourishing meat products such as beef to England while importing less nutritious products such as cheap bacon and tea.<sup>17</sup> Matters worsened significantly at times of economic distress, including the sharp economic decline of the 1870s to 1890s, the First World War and the Great Depression that followed it.

Physicians and psychiatrists blamed tea for causing chronic dyspepsia (or indigestion) which, in turn, weakened both the nerves and mental faculties.<sup>18</sup> The stomach's nervous excitement paved the way for psychiatric disorder. Concern peaked in the 1890s when Dublin Castle initiated an official investigation into

*Bernard Hughes of Belfast, 1808–1878* (Belfast: Ulster History Foundation, 2001).  
**13** Henry M'Cormac, 'To the Millowners, House Proprietors, Employers and Others of the Town of Belfast', *Belfast Newsletter*, 31 January 1863, 3. **14** See for example, *Sixth Report of the Medical*

*Officer of the Privy Council, House of Commons Papers, 1863* [3416], xxviii, 216. **15** Cormac Ó Gráda, 'The Height of Clonmel Prisoners 1845–9: Some Dietary Implications', *Irish Economic and Social History* 28 (1991), 24–33. **16** See for example, *Report from the*

*Select Committee on Industries (Ireland), House of Commons Papers, 1884–5* [Cmd.288], ix.1, 7; *Royal Commission on Labor: The Agricultural Labourer, Vol IV. Ireland. Part III. House of Commons Papers, 1893–4* [C.6894-xx], xxxvii Pt. 1.265, 20. **17** Ian Miller, *Reforming Food in Post-Famine Ireland:*

*Medicine, Science and Improvement, 1845–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).  
**18** Ian Miller, *A Modern History of the Stomach: Medicine, Gastric Illness and British Society, 1800–1950* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), chapter one.

rising asylum admissions. At the time, emigration was causing significant population decline although, curiously, asylum admissions kept on rising rather than reducing proportionate to changes in the general population level. Lunacy Inspectors George Plunkett O'Farrell and E. Maziere Courtenay blamed these rising admissions on the inability of many families to purchase nutritious food, causing what they termed, the 'insanity of malnutrition'.<sup>19</sup> Across the island, almost all asylum superintendents blamed poor nutrition, and specifically over-reliance on tea, for rising incarceration rates. Prominent psychiatrist, Thomas Drapes, wrote, 'we see [tea's] effects in the number of pale-faced children, who are brought up on it instead of the old time-honoured, but now nearly abandoned, porridge and milk'.<sup>20</sup>

The prospect of starvation presented difficult questions for families. What were the cheapest foods available? Were they nutritious? How important was nutrition if struggling to physically survive? Was a slow death from starvation preferable to facing the poignant indignity of pauperism and the workhouse? And if some food became available, who most deserved it? The work-seeking father? The mother and wife? The children and infants, so dependent on being fed well early in life to guarantee a healthy adulthood?

It was in the context of these awful, unanswerable questions that many Irish families decided upon a frugal diet, lacking in nutrition, which typically consisted of tea and white bread. This diet signified an impending descent towards hunger and starvation, perhaps even death. In the words of two authors in 1917, 'even where there is no actual shortage of tea and bread, tea and bread will not make a ration to bring up healthy children to develop Ireland. Fats and protein are essential, and they are not forthcoming'.<sup>21</sup> When recounting stories such as Daniel's, newspapers often commented on the family's deterioration towards a tea-and-white-bread diet, sharing a common understanding with readers that a diet of such wretched sparsity indicated a slippage into unthinkable levels of impoverishment.

The impoverished, starving poor did not always receive much sympathy in the nineteenth century. In his book on hunger's modern history, James Vernon argues that the least compassionate Victorians saw the hungry as 'figures of opprobrium and disgust, as suffering their fate due to a lack of industry and moral fibre'. Perhaps hunger was a good thing, from this perspective? It might teach the lazy and indigent lessons on the importance of working.<sup>22</sup> In light of this attitude, many doctors condemned and criticised excessive tea drinkers for

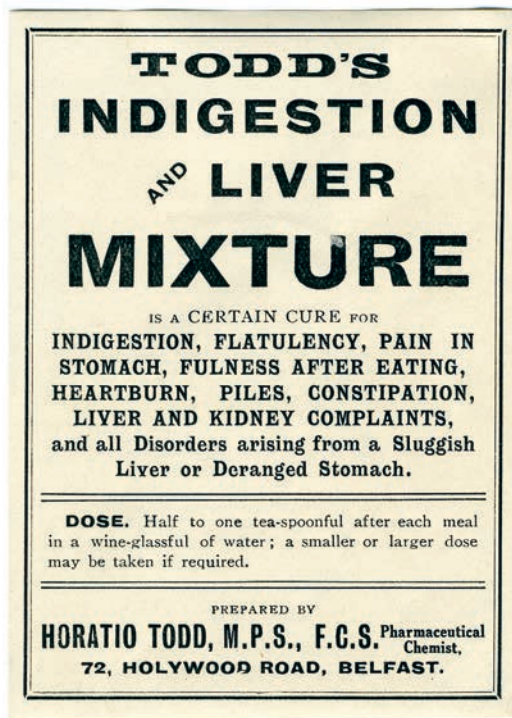
<sup>19</sup> *Alleged Increasing Prevalence of Insanity in Ireland: Special Report from the Inspectors of Lunatics to the Chief Secretary*, House of Commons Papers, 1894 [C.7331], xliii.647, 4–5.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Drapes, 'On the Alleged Increase of Insanity in Ireland', *Journal of Mental*

*Science* 40: 171 (October 1894),

519–48, 535–6. <sup>21</sup> Lionel Smith-Gordon and Francis Cruise O'Brien, *Starvation in Dublin* (Dublin: Wood Printing Works, 1917), 21.

<sup>22</sup> James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 2.



their alleged recklessness, lack of restraint and budgeting carelessness. Women, in particular, were accused of drinking thickly stewed tea all day long solely for the thrill of nervous exhilaration. While doing so, they foolishly got themselves increasingly addicted to caffeine (or theine, as it was then called).<sup>23</sup>

These perspectives failed, or maybe refused, to acknowledge that milk was often adulterated, watered down, infected with tuberculosis or simply too costly. In reality, dependence upon tea as a dietary staple was a necessity, not a choice. Doctors' moralising attitudes failed to grasp bleak working-class realities. In times of need, working-class mothers made heart-wrenching decisions

**Figure 1** Gummed label, for 'Todd's Indigestion and Liver Mixture'. Horatio Todd, M.P.S., F.C.S. Pharmaceutical Chemist. Ulster American Folk Park Collection. © National Museums NI.

**23** Miller, *Reforming Food*, 92–101.

to economise, and to go without, by serving nutritious food to other household members. Fathers needed strength for the workplace, the young to ensure healthy physical growth. In light of these priorities, mothers sacrificed their own health. Tea was useful as it suppressed appetite and quelled hunger pangs. Rather than recklessly seeking hedonistic pleasure, these families were navigating, to borrow a modern term, 'food poverty'. Nonetheless, in the eyes of many, the activities of excessive tea drinkers threatened the very physical and mental fibre and vitality of the Irish nation.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, the discovery of a starved body more often aroused suspicion than compassion, and the Victorian press played a pivotal role in spreading feelings of distrust. In 1888, Jane Cooke was accused of deliberately starving her husband to death, causing national controversy.<sup>25</sup> Unwanted illegitimate children were at high risk of neglect and starvation, with mothers accused of infanticide.<sup>26</sup> Considerable confusion surrounded incidents of people found starved to death despite having enjoyed a steady income. Sometimes, these deaths were illness-related. In 1896, Edward Scully, of Ballymahon, suffered severe stomach complaints caused by cancer or an ulcer which discouraged eating, the gastric pain being too unbearable.<sup>27</sup> Others who died with some wealth were depicted as miserly and/or 'intellectually incapacitated'. In 1911, the press described seventy-year-old Belfast labourer Peter Hughes as a miser, after he was found dead and starved with over £50 in his pocket. A journalist commented that both his brother and sister had spent time in the local asylum.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, the decades preceding independence saw growing reflection upon the structural determinants of poverty and also the idea, popular among nationalists, that innutritious diets were being imposed by the British government. Visions of a future independent island focused upon the self-sufficiency, prosperity and, importantly, full stomachs that would ensue once Ireland freed itself from British shackles. Nationalists saw opportunities in the rampant starvation around them to claim that Britain had a long-term agenda, stretching back to the Famine at least, of starving the Irish into submission. Since the Famine, this process had become subtler. Starvation was inflicted surreptitiously through economic systems that disadvantaged Ireland, and through food policies (or their absence) that quietly, but insidiously, undermined Irish health. In the post-Famine period, a food trading system evolved in which Ireland exported much of its nutritious food (e.g. meat, butter) to Britain while allegedly leaving the Irish with little else to live on but cheap meats and adulterated foodstuffs

**24** Ian Miller, 'A Dangerous Revolutionary Force Amongst Us': Conceptualising Working-Class Tea Drinking in the British Isles, c.1860–1900', *Cultural and Social History* 10: 3 (July 2013), 419–38. **25** 'The Coachford Starvation Case', *Freeman's Journal*, 11 February 1888, 5.

**26** 'Alleged Death from Starvation in Belfast', *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 November 1892, 3. **27** 'The Alleged Death from Starvation', *Freeman's Journal*, 3 October 1896, 7. **28** 'Miser Dies of Starvation', *Skibbereen Eagle*, 18 March 1911, 1.

and, in worse case scenarios, only tea and white bread. Where was the logic in feeding Britain while leaving the Irish hungry, asked critics?

This transition towards understanding hunger through socio-economic structures rather than immoral mothers was exemplified in Maud Gonne's anger at the introduction of free school meals in England and Wales, but not Ireland. Christine Kinealy observes that much of Gonne's life has been overshadowed by her fame as W.B. Yeats' love interest. However, her important role in assisting with poverty and subsistence crises in Ireland during the 1890s has largely been ignored.<sup>29</sup> Equally overlooked are her campaigns for school meals' provision in the following decade.<sup>30</sup> By then, it was compulsory for children to attend school, but little thought had been given to how they should be fed. If there was little food at home, packed lunches were not always feasible. Indeed, it seemed that providing food at school might help alleviate widespread dietary problems.

Provocatively, Gonne described the lack of legislation as deliberate 'school-day starvation'. She formed the Ladies' School Dinners Committee and argued in the *Irish Review* that 'hundreds of child [sic] lives are being sacrificed. Thousands of Irish boys and girls are being condemned to life-long physical suffering and mental inefficiency'.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, Gonne argued that 'some of our National Schools appear terrible and tragic factories for the destruction of our race'.<sup>32</sup> In Gonne's re-interpretation of Irish hunger, starvation was not the fault of careless, tea-crazed mothers but instead the socio-economic relations imposed by Britain and Ireland's colonial relationship.

Gonne's arguments overlooked issues such as the stigma associated with school meals, which made them unpopular even among those people who needed them most.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, her campaign brought to public attention the poignant reality of hunger for many Irish young, and the senselessness in maintaining punitive Poor Law policies and blaming mothers for problems largely out of their control. Educating mothers and schoolgirls on matters such as nutrition and cookery could help alleviate problems in the home, but no amount of education could resolve the basic problem of food not being available.<sup>34</sup>

### First World War

In 1918, an author named James Esse published a short story, *Hunger: A Dublin Story*. It provided a woeful account of the realities of hunger for many Dubliners written from the point of view of a budgeting housewife. We do not learn her name, underscoring the fact that, for many, this was an atypical experience.

**29** Christine Kinealy, 'The Real Famine Queen?: Maud Gonne and Famines in the 1890s', in Christine Kinealy and Gerard Moran (eds), *Irish Famines before and after the Great Hunger* (Hamden: Quinnipiac University Press, 2020), 239–60: 239.

**30** Ian Miller, *Reforming*

*Food*, 162–9. **31** Maud Gonne, 'Responsibility', *Irish Review* 1: 11 (December 1911), 483–5, 483.

**32** Maud Gonne, 'Meals for School Children', *Irish Times*, 16 October 1912, 9. **33** Durbach, *Many Mouths*, 147–8.

**34** For education, see Miller, *Reforming Food*, chapter 6.





In Gonne's re-interpretation of Irish hunger, starvation was not the fault of careless, tea-crazed mothers but instead the socio-economic relations imposed by Britain and Ireland's colonial relationship.

**Figure 2** Maud Gonne actively campaigned for school meals legislation to be introduced in Ireland, after school meals legislation was passed in England and Wales during 1906. Reproduced courtesy of Creative Commons.

When we meet her, the protagonist has been married for four years and given birth to three children. The eldest, 'a cripple', had an unspecified disability. The husband was a house painter who earned up to 35 shillings a week, although only in summer. Few people wanted their houses painted in winter, so income had to be stretched across the year.<sup>35</sup> The fictional choice of painter as occupation was apt. Up to a third of Dublin's painters were unemployed in the winter months. The employment difficulties facing painters were later highlighted in a 1927 Committee on the Relief of Unemployment.<sup>36</sup>

Due to their limited financial resources, Esse described the family as living 'just over the death line of starvation'. In one notable passage, Esse describes how usual and common was feeling hungry, so much so that the poorest accepted it as a way of life, as part of nature even. In Esse's words, 'She had not known for three years what it was like not to be hungry for one day, but life is largely custom, and neither she nor her husband, nor the children, made much complaint about a condition which was normal for them all, and into which the children had been born'.<sup>37</sup> The implication here was that such families had never known anything but hunger. The husband was described as a robust man who 'could have eaten a lot if he got it', and who kept suggesting to his wife that they have 'one wild blow out': a feast unlike anything they had recently experienced. The more sensible wife, depicted (unlike the Victorian tea-crazed housewife) as fully in control of her budgeting, refused, for the consequence would be 'days of whole starvation instead of the whole days of semi-hunger to which they were accustomed'. She continued to worry, however, that her hungry husband might be tempted one pay day to have a 'wild orgy of eating', as he 'wanted to be filled as tightly as a drum, and with such a weight and abundance of victuals that he could hardly be lifted by a crane'.<sup>38</sup> However, ultimately the husband was depicted as an honourable, hard-working man (if he could find work, that is) who resisted temptations to be reckless.

Then the war broke out. Times became even tougher. No-one wanted their houses painted anymore. They had more important things to spend money on. Food prices rose. For this family, meat and vegetables became unaffordable. So did potatoes. Something needed to be eliminated from the food bill, but what? At this point, her husband secures work in Scotland and departs. The youngest child then dies from an unnamed hunger-related disease. The wife goes out begging in the streets. Her thoughts on this are as follows: 'She was frightened, for one can be arrested for begging, and she was afraid not to beg, for one can die

<sup>35</sup> James Esse, *Hunger: A Dublin Story* (Dublin: Candle Press, 1928). <sup>36</sup> *Committee on the Relief of Unemployment, 1927* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1928), 4. <sup>37</sup> Esse, *Hunger*, 9. <sup>38</sup> Esse, *Hunger*, 11–12.

of hunger. She got a penny here and a penny there and bought bread; sometimes even she got a twist of tea'.<sup>39</sup> Soon after, her second child dies of hunger. Only the 'crippled' child remains. At the story's end, she learns that her husband, still in Scotland, has been found dead. The cause? Hunger and exposure. The fate of the mother and crippled child is left uncertain.

As brought to life by Esse's tragic tale, the First World War further worsened Irish food problems. By then, dietary scientists had developed a more sophisticated understanding of food intake, buttressed by a fuller awareness of calories and vitamins. They contributed to the war effort an understanding that the working classes could only remain healthy at times of dearth if they consumed a particular balance of nutrients. Absent foods needed to be substituted with those containing the same nutrients. Throughout the war, these new ideas about nutrition encouraged a rethinking of hunger and the drawing up of more precise guidelines on nutritious food intake. Unsurprisingly, diets consisting of tea and white bread remained low on the list of healthy lifestyles. Nadja Durbach observes that during the First World War, malnutrition became an increasingly sensitive issue, especially if occurring in children.<sup>40</sup> In Ireland, debates on nutrition remained interwoven with broader political discussions on the nature of Anglo-Irish food trading relations, and perceptions of the British as intent on starving Ireland, as witnessed in Sinn Féin's efforts to take control of the food supply to stop Britain imposing starvation to suit its own ends.<sup>41</sup>

The commencement of war led to much panic buying. Lionel Smith-Gordon from the Co-Operative Movement immediately undertook a survey to assess how much food was available in Ireland, hoping to place its distribution on a well-informed basis and stem the panic. Smith-Gordon warned that farmers should stop exporting to Britain at the expense of the home market, and to avail of the British market only once Irish stomachs had been looked after.<sup>42</sup> Denis Kelly, Lord Bishop of Ross, similarly advised farmers not to breed livestock for the British market. Instead, land should be set aside for cabbage and winter vegetables and, looking forward, potatoes and grain, described as 'the food of our people'. 'Of course, we hope to have some left for export', added Ross, 'but we are concerned here today more directly with the feeding of the Irish people'.<sup>43</sup> As the war progressed, the Worker's National Committee worked out that the cost of living had risen 65% between July 1914 and July 1916.<sup>44</sup> In 1916, the Dublin Trades Council, also recognising the problem, encouraged the government to

<sup>39</sup> Esse, *Hunger*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Durbach, *Many Mouths*, 146. <sup>41</sup> Miller, *Reforming Food*, 191–2.

<sup>42</sup> Lionel Smith-Gordon, *Ireland's Food in Wartime* (Dublin: Co-Operative Reference Library, 1914), 7–8.

<sup>43</sup> Denis Kelly, *The War and Ireland's Food Supply: An Appeal to the Irish Farmer*

(Dublin: Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, 1914), 3–7.

<sup>44</sup> National Library of Ireland, MS 17.113, Resolutions and Articles Regarding the Food Supply in Ireland, 1916–1918, 'Leaflet: Worker's National Committee', 1916.

enforce 75% of agricultural land for the growth of non-exportable food crops.<sup>45</sup> Some British critics accused the Irish of selfishly hoarding its food.<sup>46</sup> Experts such as Smith-Gordon saw the situation more as essential self-preservation and self-sufficiency. For the impoverished and starving, war simply worsened their already dire situation.

Harsh Victorian attitudes to hunger and poverty continued to give way to more compassionate perspectives that focused on the socio-economic conditions that caused extreme hunger. A 1906 report on unemployment in Dublin had taken care to describe 'genuine and exceptional distress among labourers of good character in Dublin by reasons of want of employment'. The inclusion of 'good character' was no doubt deliberate. It marked a concerted effort to recast the unemployed as morally reputable individuals, as people who genuinely wanted to work in unfavourable socio-economic circumstances in which employment simply could not be found.<sup>47</sup> War bolstered such perspectives, as clearly the trade disruption across the Irish Sea and English Channel caused by conflict was hardly the fault of the Irish poor. However, there had never been much expectation that the state should intervene in the 'natural way of things'. *Laissez-faire* policies still held much sway. As both Vernon and Scott-Smith discuss at length, it was only from around the mid-twentieth century that hunger became politically unacceptable.<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, some considered standing back and watching people starve to be deeply unsatisfactory, and stressed the need for state intervention in managing the food supply. It had been long feared that hunger and starvation could lead to revolution. These perceptions had been common in the late-Victorian period with regards to the tea and bread diet.<sup>49</sup> Against the backdrop of the Easter Rising (1916) and Russian Revolution (1917), Lionel Smith-Gordon and Francis Cruise O'Brien published their book *Starvation in Dublin*. In this, they warned that 'administrators' only usually became interested in hunger at times when the poor threatened to become 'troublesome'. As they warned, 'if the administrators do nothing, and we ourselves do nothing, that mood may visit the people as it visited the people of France in 1789, when there arose a scarcity of grains, and the people of Russia'. The authors added that 'we hear distant murmurings from the people which makes us fear that the matter is urgent'. Smith-Gordon and O'Brien pointed out that in Dublin, there existed a vast number of people with insufficient food to nourish themselves and their families, due to unemployment

**45** National Library of Ireland, MS 17.113, Resolutions and Articles Regarding the Food Supply in Ireland, 1916–1918, 'Dublin Trades Council Memorandum', 1 October 1916. **46** National Library of Ireland, DATI, *Ireland as a Food Supplier of Great Britain* (Dublin: B. & N., 1918), 4. **47** National Library of Ireland, *Report of the Dublin Committee on the Unemployed* (Dublin, 1906), 6. **48** Vernon, *Hunger*; Scott-Smith, *On an Empty Stomach*. **49** Miller, 'A Dangerous Revolutionary Force Amongst Us'.

and wages that were failing to rise in line with the heightened cost of living. The authors concluded that ‘nothing gets done until violence or plague makes action urgent and inevitable’.<sup>50</sup>

Smith-Gordon and O'Brien believed that ‘the working classes of Dublin had never dreamed of eating eggs, butter or any but the most meagre forms of fish for the last three years’.<sup>51</sup> They needed bread, margarine, bacon, tea, milk, sugar and potatoes as dietary staples, adding that ‘tea is not necessary but so ingrained is the habit of consuming it that for our purpose it must be classed as a necessary’. However, in the context of war, even potatoes had become a luxury. Milk was scarce, expensive and bad. Mothers had to stand by, due to the public scandal of Dublin’s milk supply, and watch their infants die. Meat was hard to find.

As the authors insisted, a large proportion of Dubliners now lived on tea and white bread. However, during the war, both these food items had risen in price and lowered in quality.<sup>52</sup> In reality, it seems unlikely that the families depicted so poignantly by Esse had revolution on their mind. Relieving hunger was foremost in their minds. Indeed, as Esse suggested, their perceptions of hunger as a natural part of life might well have discouraged them from perceiving food as a political problem.

### Starving in independent Ireland

After independence, it proved harder to blame the British. True, one might still point towards ongoing economic interdependence across the two islands that continued to disadvantage Ireland. But the Irish states, north and south, were now responsible for managing their own conditions of hunger. The fight for independence, followed by the Civil War, undoubtedly disrupted food supplies. In 1921, the American Committee for Relief in Ireland warned that 100,000 Irish people faced starvation, partly due to the destruction of creameries.<sup>53</sup> Critics of partition blamed it for crippling industry in the north-east and causing widespread unemployment.<sup>54</sup> It was estimated that the cost of living had risen 140% since 1914.<sup>55</sup> Rather than ushering in a utopia of food and plenty, the post-independence/partition period hardly saw much improvement. However, globally, the interwar period was rife with unemployment and related hunger problems. Some historians describe this as hunger in the midst of plenty. Food was relatively abundant, but unaffordable to the poorer.<sup>56</sup> In the 1920s, a cost-of-living crisis was followed by the Great Depression.

**50** Smith-Gordon and O'Brien, *Starvation in Dublin*, 5–6, 11–12. **51** Smith-Gordon and O'Brien, *Starvation in Dublin*, 14. **52** Smith-Gordon and O'Brien, *Starvation in Dublin*, 16. **53** Samuel D. McCoy, *Distress in Ireland: A Survey by the American Unit under the Auspices of the American Committee for*

*Relief in Ireland* (New York: The Committee, 1921).

**54** *Partition of Ireland: The Root of Discontent, Disorder and Distress* (Omagh: North-West of Ireland Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd, 1938), 3.

**55** National Library of Ireland, MS 17.262/1, Notes, Extracts, News Cuttings, Reports and Letters Relating to the Cost

of Living, Dietary Scales and Budgeting, ‘Workers’ Family Budget, Drogheda’, July 1920.

**56** Scott-Smith, *On an Empty Stomach*, 75.

Sadly, interwar accounts of Irish dietary conditions remained almost unchanged from those penned fifty or so years earlier. Diets consisting of tea and white bread still loomed large. The Irish diet was discussed at length in a 1925 pamphlet written by the Earl of Dunraven entitled *Cheap Food for the People at Large*. The Earl observed that ‘we are a badly nourished nation’, adding that ‘we Irish are bad cooks. France is pre-eminent in that art ... the English are very bad, but the Irish are the worst of all’. Despite a high cost of living, wholesome nutritious foods such as fish were inadequately cultivated in Ireland. Even before the war, claimed the Earl, ‘the peasantry in other European countries were far better nourished than our peasantry’. Since the war, things got even worse. The Earl lamented the lack of milk available for children and adults alike, and lambasted the tea and white bread diet. ‘Without additions, it is not body building or sustaining. It is bad for children and not much good to adults’, he insisted. However, the poorest had little else to eat. The price of butchers’ meat was now abnormally high. The Irish didn’t seem to like cheese, noted the Earl, to his bewilderment. Thinking ahead about the consequences for a newly-formed, but small, nation, the Earl commented specifically on the need for ‘well-nourished brains’, ‘essential for active and constructive national thought’. He added, ‘If Ireland is to be a nation making its mark on the world, if Irish ideals and aspirations are to materialise, they must emanate from a healthy population, and be prosecuted by vigorous brains’. This idealised image of healthy nationhood contrasted starkly with life’s realities.<sup>57</sup>

It was in this context that deaths such as Daniel Sullivan’s, outlined at the start of this chapter, occurred. While the existence of more compassionate attitudes must be acknowledged, many relief officials steadfastly clung to the older ways of placing blame, especially at times when their parsimony was suspected to have caused a hunger-related death. The poor had always abhorred applying for Poor Law relief, no matter how bad times became. The aforementioned 1906 report into unemployment investigated 1,300 unemployed Dubliners. Only six admitted to having resorted to Poor Law relief, preferring to receive help, when needed, from charitable societies.<sup>58</sup> In his book on the subject, John O’Connor describes workhouses as ‘the most feared and hated institution ever established in Ireland’. The 1919 Declaration of Independence sought to abolish the ‘odious, degrading and foreign workhouse system of poor relief’. O’Connor also points somewhat romantically to a pre-British, and honourable, tradition and custom

<sup>57</sup> Windham Thomas-Quin Dunraven, *Cheap Food for the People at Large* (Dublin: Eason & Son, 1925), 3–8. <sup>58</sup> National Library of Ireland, *Report of the Dublin Committee on the Unemployed*, 6.

of caring for the sick and poor under Brehon Law.<sup>59</sup> In reality, Irish governments struggled to find adequate solutions to the sheer scale of hunger and despair in the interwar years. They faced demands to close down the hated workhouses. Accordingly, there was an expansion of home assistance in the 1920s, as an alternative to the workhouse, followed by Fianna Fáil's Unemployment Assistance Act (1933) which provided means-tested relief, although many people still felt that these were run along Poor Law lines. Fears persisted about the undeserving poor claiming help, and receiving relief still carried much stigma.<sup>60</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Boards of Guardians who oversaw the workhouse suffered from lack of funds. In the south, the closure of workhouse hospitals meant that many people had to travel further (to the nearest large city or town) to receive care. Global economic depression placed great strain on Ireland's welfare systems, north and south.<sup>61</sup> Some more generous local authorities announced that starvation prevailed locally as part of their emotive pleas for additional relief funding allocation. In 1925, Clonmel Corporation announced that children were dying from starvation and that distress was rife in the town. Its members wanted to secure additional funds with which to provide more adequate relief.<sup>62</sup> However, there was usually much disagreement about whether or not a general state of starvation prevailed. As Smith-Gordon and O'Brien sardonically wrote in 1917 about those who chose to ignore the starving poor, 'there are some who feel apparently that a state of starvation has not been reached until they find children dying or dead in the streets; to these no appeal short of feeling want themselves will succeed. But for others, a glance at the colour and general aspect of the children of Dublin at present will be enough'.<sup>63</sup>

In contrast, other local authorities keenly refuted claims of distress and starvation. In November 1928, rumours spread across the island that starvation was widespread in Portadown. Stormont dispatched an inspector, S. Corbett, to investigate, who claimed not to have witnessed anything unusual. The local Justice of the Peace insisted that 'there is starvation in the back streets of the town' but others were satisfied that the Board of Guardians was distributing outdoor relief, complemented by charitable relief from the various churches. The President of the Urban Council, which represented trading interests, commented that he had never witnessed starvation in seventy years of living in Portadown. He swiftly turned discussion towards the subject of beggars, and other disreputable types who supposedly refused to work, before deeming the matter closed.<sup>64</sup> In the *Irish Independent*, traders claimed that Portadown had

**59** John O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland: The Fate of Ireland's Poor* (Dublin: Anvil, 1995), 13, 17.  
**60** For an overview, see Mel Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003).  
**61** Virginia Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland, 1838–1948*

(Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2006), 55–6. **62** 'Children Die from Starvation', *Irish Independent*, 8 August 1925, 7.  
**63** Smith-Gordon and O'Brien, *Starvation in Dublin*, 21.  
**64** 'Distress in Portadown, but no Starvation', *Irish Times*, 21 November 1928, 11.

been unduly scandalised.<sup>65</sup> Evidently, a need was felt to uphold the town's trading reputation, and this took primacy over attending to the town's hidden starvation.

In Athy, 1931, confusion reigned about whether a man named Godfree had died from starvation or not. Empty stomachs need time to recuperate before digestion should re-commence. In the revolutionary period, some hunger strikers had learnt this the hard way. Those who came off hunger strike and ravenously ate their first meal soon found themselves struck down with agonising gastric pain.<sup>66</sup> Many in the local community considered Godfree, his wife and three children to be 'practically starving'. Shortly before Christmas, after receiving some pay, Godfree treated himself to a big meal, the first meal he had enjoyed in days. He died shortly afterwards in terrible agony. His death was reminiscent of the unnamed husband's desire for a gluttonous meal in Esse's short story. Reportedly, this was the second death connected to hunger in Athy that week alone.<sup>67</sup>

Godfree's plight was nationally discussed and drew critical attention towards the town's welfare systems. Calls were made for an inquiry. However, the local Home Help Society defensively insisted that reports were exaggerated, adding that its resources were under considerable pressure. The problem, according to the Society, was that Godfree was weaker than most other men. It was his own weak condition that precluded him from securing physical work. Suffering from stomach ulcer, he should have known better than to scoff a large Christmas meal in case his ulcer fatally perforated. Once again, authorities appealed to the victim's apparent recklessness and carelessness about his own health. But, unlike in the late-Victorian period, sympathy was more forthcoming. Journalists emphasised instead the stringent conditions attached to receiving welfare. As an *Irish Times* journalist mournfully wrote, 'Godfree had one shilling a day to live on. How it was done, he did not know'.<sup>68</sup>

Relief authorities routinely brought up the 'bad stomach' when attempting to clear themselves of blame. In 1933, Mr Cooney, now a widower, blamed the death of his wife on Geesala's Assistance Officer, Mr McAndrew, for having refused her relief. Cooney was convinced that his wife had died from starvation, although McAndrew denied this. McAndrew insisted that Mrs Cooney had long suffered from a bad stomach before dying naturally from bronchitis. One witness called upon at the inquest was a local hotel proprietor who claimed to have known Mrs Cooney for fifty years, during which time she had never been short of food. There was food in the house when she died, and her husband was

<sup>65</sup> 'Portadown Scandalised', *Irish Independent*, 21 November 1928, 11.

<sup>66</sup> Ian Miller, *A History of Force-Feeding: Hunger Strikes, Prisons and Medical Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111.

<sup>67</sup> 'Alleged Cases of Starvation: Call for Inquiry',

*Irish Times*, 7 January 1931, 5.

<sup>68</sup> 'Case for Inquiry: Alleged Starvation in Athy', *Irish Times*, 10 January 1931, 11.



able to afford a coffin. However, a local Royal Irish Constabulary man accused the hotel owner of lying and conspiring.<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, most journalists now described hungry deaths using a language of tragedy, and presented the starving unemployed not as work shy, but as men eagerly looking for work which did not exist. Once again, the emphasis was placed on the structural rather than the moral and personal. In 1921, speaking at a Belfast Corporation meeting, William Twaddell MP, announced that, in Belfast, 'starvation was staring a great proportion of their population in the face'.

Twaddell added that: 'the workers preferred honest toil to outdoor relief, but it was impossible for them to get employment at present, and, he added, they are driven to the last stages of desperation'. 'If', added Mr Lawther, 'anything can be done to help hungry children in Belfast, for God's sake let us do it, for we have plenty of them'. Mr Henderson added: 'In the Shankill Road district, the people are in absolute starvation. I was speaking to a woman today [Monday] who had not had a meal since Saturday'. The Local Government Board said they had queues of people each morning begging for assistance, but funds were running low.<sup>70</sup>

Problems persisted throughout the decade. In the north, until 1927 the impoverished were still expected to enter the workhouse, a year when outdoor relief was unusually provided due to exceptionally high levels of distress across the city. In 1929, reports once again emerged from Belfast of widespread starvation due to a combination of influenza, poverty and starvation. Rev. Montgomery of the Shankill Road Mission explained to the *Northern Whig* that 'there has never been so bad a time'. He blamed high unemployment levels, the cessation of Bureau allowance, and the introduction of more stringent outdoor relief. He added:

One of the worst features is that the men are falling into sickness through general weakness following starvation. The consequence is that they are unable to continue their search for work, and the family is worse off than ever. We have crowds at the mission every day for food, fuel and clothes, and it is pitiful to see them with their pale, starved faces and dispirited air. Hundreds of people in Shankill are not living; they just manage to exist.<sup>71</sup>

By the early 1930s, Protestants and Catholics alike in Belfast and Derry joined together on protest marches and demonstrations. And once more, in 1932, Protestant clergymen announced to the press that 12,000 people in Belfast were

<sup>69</sup> 'Allegations from Erris: Death from Starvation', *Ballina Herald*, 28 October 1933, 3.

<sup>70</sup> 'Starvation Plight in Belfast', *Irish Independent*, 4 October 1921, 5. <sup>71</sup> 'Belfast Poverty and Starvation: Influenza Adds to People's Misery', *Irish Times*, 30 January 1929, 5.



**Figure 3** In the opening decades of the twentieth century, photographer J.A. Hogg took various pictures of life in Belfast, and the extent of poverty that prevailed in many communities. This photograph from 1912 portrayed life on Croziers Row in the Boundary Street area of Belfast (situated at the bottom of Shankill Road). © National Museums NI.

close to starvation, with 3000 families having only fourpence a head per day for food.<sup>72</sup> Subsequent oral histories covering the thirties depict Belfast's working classes as experts in budgeting, but as always feeling hungry and unable to afford food, a situation made worse by what interviewees considered to be an ongoing *laissez-faire* approach in state-led relief systems.<sup>73</sup>

Historians often focus on the tear-jerking images of starving children that were prominent, for example, during the Dublin Lockout, especially in the nationalist press. Margot Backus describes this as 'images of imperilled innocence'.<sup>74</sup> I have refrained from elaborating on the Lockout, as Backus and others have this well covered, and due to my emphasis on 'normal' rather than exceptional times. However, it should be added that this emphasis on childhood in the Irish historiography obscures other groups, most notably the elderly, whose abject condition of starvation was oft discussed. Pensions were introduced in Ireland in 1909, although the costs were far higher than anticipated. Indeed, the high applicant numbers applying for this means-tested assistance rendered further visible the extent of poverty across Ireland. Many elderly people switched from Poor Law relief to pension. In the revolutionary decade, pensions doubled in response to rising prices. When independence occurred, the British transferred to Ireland a £4 million per annum pension bill. In 1924, Ernest Blythe notoriously reduced pension expenditure. Pensioners aged under eighty faced a weekly reduction of one shilling, and more stringent qualifications were attached to pension applications. It also made it more difficult for people to divest of property and then apply. Between 1924 and 1925, the number of pension applicants dropped by six per cent.<sup>75</sup> In this context, reports of the starving elderly appeared frequently.

In January 1925, a relieving officer in Kilmihil, Co. Clare, entered a house to find an elderly woman lying in the corner of a filthy, verminous room. She was more or less naked, with only a dirty rag covering some parts of her body. Her husband was found in a similarly deplorable condition, weak and hungry, as were the couple's two daughters, aged thirty-six and forty. Journalists described the family dismissively as eccentric, although noting that they had fallen on hard times. They owned fifty acres of land, but all their cattle, with the exception of one aged cow, had died the previous year. An attempt was made to move the family to the local workhouse, although the lady died before this was possible. Her starving husband was admitted to the local hospital, where a doctor described him as in 'an indescribable condition of vermin and dirt'. He too died shortly afterwards.

**72** 'Stateliness and Starvation', *Irish Independent*, 28 September 1932, 6. **73** Ronnie Munck and Bill Rolston, *Belfast in the Thirties: An Oral History* (Newtownards: Blackstaff Press, 1987), 68–70.

**74** Margot Backus, 'The Children of the Nation': Representations of Poor

Children in Mainstream Nationalist Journalism, 1882 and 1913', in Maria Luddy and James M. Smith (eds), *Children, Childhood and Irish Society, 1500 to the Present* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 357–77, 359. **75** Cormac Ó'Gráda, 'The Greatest Blessing of All: The Old Age Pension

in Ireland', *Past and Present* 175: 1 (May 2002), 124–61.

By all accounts, this was not an isolated case in the region. In New Hall, near Ennis, another elderly couple had been found similarly living in filth, eating from a calf's carcass lying in their kitchen. Their house had no windows or roof. Despite all of this, the couple, described as being of 'unstable intellect', refused to leave their dwelling. Regardless, the house was closed on sanitary grounds and plans made to send the inhabitants to the workhouse, although the woman died before this could be achieved. The starving man was admitted to the hospital but similarly died shortly afterwards. Once again, the doctor commented on the man's indescribable condition of vermin and dirt.<sup>76</sup>

Another harrowing case occurred in 1929. Mary A. Gaskin, aged 75, was found in the back room of a Temple Bar tenement house in Dublin, where she had lived for 11 years. Mary had been brought to Mercer's Hospital unconscious and suffering from malnutrition. Dr Walshe blamed her death on heart failure following starvation and neglect. Mary was fortunate enough to have kind neighbours who provided informal assistance. According to one of these, shoemaker Thomas Byrne, 'she would not take relief, and if such a thing was offered she would be insulted. She had refused to see a doctor', At an inquest, it transpired that the Garda Síochána had found the apartment to be in a shocking condition of dirt. Old rags and broken furniture littered the floor. Some of it dated back 60 years. Windowpanes were broken. Several cats lived in the place. There was not a mouthful of food or water to be seen, nor a bed, table or chairs. One garda hoped never again to see such a shocking sight.<sup>77</sup>

In 1939, siblings Martin and Mona Boyle, aged 70 and 65 respectively, were found dead in their Ballaghaderreen house due to lack of nourishment and exposure. Sergeant Harman noted that there was no bed or bedding in the house. Nor was there food, other than a bit of flour, and even this had been saturated by the rain pouring through the roof. The house contained no cooking utensils. The bodies were partly naked, found lying in the pools of water that covered the floor. There was no fire or turf. A cow was tied at the end of the kitchen. It had recently given birth to a calf, which was lying dead on the floor. The couple were found to be in receipt of four shillings each for relief.<sup>78</sup>

To provide yet another harrowing example, in 1933, a Waterford labourer named Patrick Kennedy died in the County Hospital. A local sergeant had visited Kennedy's house to find his wife lying on an old bedstead with no mattress or bed clothing. The clay floor underneath the bed was damp and moist. Rain poured in upon Mrs Kennedy through holes in the roof above her. A brother,

**76** 'Deaths from Starvation: County Sligo', *Irish Times*, Revolving Conditions in County Clare', *Irish Times*, 16 January 1925, 8.

**77** 'Died from Starvation: Inquest on Destitute Dublin Old Woman', *Irish Times*, 14 February 1929, 5.

**78** 'Man and Sister Found Dead: Starvation in

Martin Kennedy, also lived in the house, although he had initially refused entry to the sergeant. After finally gaining entry, the sergeant dispatched Patrick to the Hospital where Dr Shipsey found him to be suffering from slow starvation and exposure. Martin was thin, pale, weak and gaunt and answered questions in a weak, feeble voice. It transpired that Mrs Kennedy, aged 82, had been confined to the house for 11 years. All the family had to live on was her pension of ten shillings per week. Nonetheless, the family were not in debt and had never applied for outdoor relief.<sup>79</sup>

It should be noted that hospitals were widely distrusted. At worst, in the eyes of the poor, these were places in which doctors dissected and experimented upon bodies, rather than cared and healed. Many hospitals were attached to workhouses, which hardly helped their reputation, despite having specialist sick beds and advanced medical services.<sup>80</sup> Historian Eugenie Scott observes that large numbers of chronic cancer patients were treated in workhouses as they were not allowed into other hospitals due to being considered incurable.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, many people continued to view these institutions unfavourably. During a 1924 typhoid fever outbreak in Galway, sufferers refused to leave their houses to go for treatment. As an alternative, home nurses were dispatched. At least one family was reported to be subsisting on black tea and dry white bread. The wife refused to attend hospital and died, leaving behind her husband and children who consented to hospital admission only after much persuasion.<sup>82</sup>

In the interwar period, many impoverished people came to view welfare as a right, recognising that they endured pitiful circumstances usually through no fault of their own after all. This perspective contrasted with the harsher Victorian approach of punishing people for their poverty, and of viewing starvation as a problem of morals rather than socio-economic circumstance. In the 1930s, hunger marches passed through British cities, giving some people their first actual view of poverty and hardship. They drew attention to the fact that no work meant no food.<sup>83</sup> That same decade, sociologists penned compassionate accounts of their experience of being unemployed, exploring this from both its physical and psychological dimensions. In Britain, during the 'hungry thirties', sympathetic studies such as Seebohm Rowntree's surveys of York produced widespread alarm about the sheer levels of poverty and the proportion of children and elderly living in such conditions.<sup>84</sup> No-one suggested that the jobless should be maintained in comfort and luxury, or that they should they be left to suffer in an impoverished, starved condition. Meanwhile, physicians investigated

**79** 'Death from Slow Starvation: Shocking Conditions', *Irish Times*, 4 January 1933, 5.

**80** Jonathan Reinarz and Leonard Schwarz (eds), *Medicine in the Workhouse* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 1.

**81** Eugenie Scott, 'The

Provision of Medical Services for the Treatment of Cancer in Nineteenth-Century Ireland' (PhD diss., Ulster University, 2022). **82** 'Starvation: Plight of the People of Connemara', *Connacht Tribune*, 26 January 1924, 4.

**83** Vernon, *Hunger*, 240, 249.

**84** John Stevenson and Chris

Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression* (Harlow: Longman, 2010), 43–4.

nutritional well-being among the impoverished in the hope of offering solutions and adequate intervention.<sup>85</sup> In Ireland, while some extent of victim-blaming persisted in the 1930s, many of Éamon de Valera's critics looked towards structural factors such as the high taxes being placed on tea, sugar, bread and flour, and the ongoing exportation of nutritious Irish food products to Great Britain. According to one politician, this was 'not a question of international difficulties; it was a matter of bad management and stupid policy'.<sup>86</sup> In fact, much debate ensued about whether Irish structural or individual issues were responsible.

Well into the century, mothers still received journalistic condemnation if suspected to have starved and neglected their children.<sup>87</sup> However, the more general trend was towards sympathy and compassion, and as viewing the starved as unfortunate victims of circumstances beyond their control. The economy, for example. This fits with Vernon's arguments that this re-conceptualisation of the hungry as innocent victims of failing political and socio-economic systems over which they had no control led to new ways of governing and managing hunger less focused upon the moral reform of the individual.<sup>88</sup> Often, a willingness to deny or concede that families or communities were in a truly starved condition depended largely on one's opinion on the desirability of people claiming relief or learning to be self-reliant.

This chapter has explored suggestions made by Scott-Smith and others that we need to think of terms such as nutrition, hunger, and starvation beyond their basic biological realities, to instead better understand the complex socio-economic and political determinants that produce and sustain hunger.<sup>89</sup> It has presented Ireland as a country in which conditions of hunger were a commonplace experience outside of unusual events such as the Famine and hunger striking. Moreover, it has directed a critical eye towards perspectives, especially common in the nineteenth century, that blame individuals for their (and their families') hunger while overlooking the complex socio-economic, political and cultural environments surrounding the hungry. Food is multifaceted and depends upon an encompassing humanities-based approach to fuller understand the effects and consequences of its absence. These understandings are acutely relevant in the twenty-first century as Ireland (at the time of writing) enters a post-Covid period of food poverty and cost-of-living crisis which will inevitably force families to make challenging budgeting and dietary decisions which demand complex understandings and interventions.

**85** John Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment, c.1790–1990* (London: Routledge, 1994). **86** 'Right to Strike: Unemployment and Starvation', *Irish Times*, 24 June 1937, 8. **87** 'Mother's Neglect: Child's Death from Starvation', *Irish*

*Times*, 18 January 1933, 3.

**88** Vernon, *Hunger*, 3. **89** Scott Smith, *On an Empty Stomach*.

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I sell apples and oranges, nuts and split peas,  
Bananas and sugar stick sweet,  
Of a Saturday night I sell second hand clothes  
And the floor of my stall is the street.  
I sell fish of a Friday laid out on a dish  
Fresh mackerel and lovely ray  
I sell lovely herrings, such lovely fresh herrings,  
That once swam in dear Dublin Bay.

—**Excerpt from ‘Biddy Mulligan the Pride of the Coombe’**  
(traditional ballad)

And it’s there you see confectioners with sugar sticks and dainties,  
The lozenges and oranges, the lemonade and raisins;  
The gingerbread and spices to accommodate the ladies,  
And a big crubeen for thrupence to be suckin’ while you’re able.

—**Excerpt from ‘The Galway Races’**  
(traditional ballad)



**24**

*Food in Ireland  
in the 1930s and 1940s*

**Bryce Evans**

This chapter examines food in independent Ireland during the sixteen years of continuous Fianna Fáil governments (March 1932 to February 1948). Such a focus is justified by three key considerations. First, these years witnessed two important periods of political and economic shock which impacted Irish foodways: the Economic War (1932–38) and the Emergency (1939–46). Second, this chapter examines how aspects of the corporatist-ruralist ideology of the early Fianna Fáil administrations played out in practice, with particular focus on food production, supply, and distribution. Finally, these two decades were a formative period in the complexion of the independent Irish state, commencing with the coming to power of one of the ‘great men’ of modern Irish history, Éamon de Valera, and ending with the passage of the Republic of Ireland Act 1948. As discussed subsequently, these important political and economic transitions were also accompanied by a landmark cultural anniversary belonging to popular historical memory and therefore less easy to capture, but one which nevertheless still held sway over attitudes to food and foodways in Ireland: the centenary of the Great Famine (1845–51).

Despite the continuing relevance of Ireland’s great nineteenth century catastrophe in the mid-twentieth-century imagination, many of the leading studies on Irish food history tend to focus their attention on the pre-independence period.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, everyday food experiences in 1930s and ’40s Ireland continue to attract popular public attention. The deprivations of the era have underpinned many a memoir of social life in the nascent state.<sup>2</sup> For example, one work on children’s meals in Ireland has nostalgically looked back to the relative hardships of the era, focusing in part on the impact of sugar rationing on children with a sweet tooth.<sup>3</sup> In a similar spirit to popular works extolling the dietary, ecological and lifestyle benefits of British wartime ration-book consumption during the Second World War, the potato-dominated plainer Irish fare of the period has even led to popular calls for the public to get back to basics with simpler home-grown foods rather than obsess over diverse international cuisine.<sup>4</sup>

While acknowledging that the average Irish diet in the 1930s and ’40s avoided some of the current health defects associated with the current trend towards the consumption of high sugar / ultra-processed food, this chapter seeks to address the period on its own terms. It therefore avoids the strictly subjective or the anecdotal by instead focusing on how the overall food situation was informed by the social relations and economic circumstances of the time. In doing so, it seeks to bring a greater academic scrutiny to the Irish foodways of the era,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Leslie Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and Famine: A History of Food in Ireland, 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Ian Miller, *Reforming Food in Post-Famine Ireland: Medicine, Science and Improvement, 1845–1922* (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 2014). <sup>2</sup> The most famous example of the type of autobiographical literature set in this period remains Frank McCourt’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angela’s Ashes* (New York: Scribner, 1996). <sup>3</sup> Damian Corless, *You’ll Ruin Your Dinner: Sweet Memories*

*from Irish Childhood* (Dublin: Hachette Books, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> For popular British-focused works in this vein see, for example, Patricia Nicol, *Sucking Eggs: What Your Wartime Granny Could Teach You About Diet, Thrift and Going Green* (London: Vintage Books, 2010) and Eleanor

Boyle, *Mobilize Food: Wartime Inspiration for Environmental Victory Today* (Altona: Friesen Press, 2022); See also Philip Boucher-Hayes and Suzanne Campbell, *Basket Case: What’s Happening to Ireland’s Food?* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009).

focusing on dietary habits, policy, trade restrictions, criminality, and memory across the two decades.

### The Economic War

Irish food production and supply in the 1930s was overwhelmingly shaped by the Anglo-Irish Trade War, or Economic War (1932–38). This diplomatic and trade dispute was waged over the issue of land annuities due to the British Crown under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which the Fianna Fáil administration of de Valera pledged to withhold through the Land Act (1933) that had instead allocated the money to local government. The elimination of these payments was of immediate financial benefit to smaller farmers and the trade conflict also brought some prosperity to urban centres, where a side-product was cheaper food. There is evidence, too, that the dietary standards of Ireland's urban dwellers improved during the decade with meat more available (since less was being exported to Britain).<sup>5</sup>

The classic anthropological/sociological study of Irish agricultural life in this period is *Family and Community in Ireland* by Harvard academics Conrad Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, who spent several years in Co. Clare in the early 1930s undertaking the 'Harvard Irish Survey'. This landmark study conveyed a fairly widespread ability to live off the land, with smallholders characterised as possessing 'a garden in potatoes and cabbage with a few oats and turnips' and 'a large flock of ducks, geese, hens, and several pigs'.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, then, Arensberg and Kimball's research would seem to point to rural life resembling the 'countryside bright with cosy homesteads' invoked in Éamon de Valera's famous St Patrick's Day address of 1943.

The situation was not so rosy, however, in other regards. The failure to establish a merchant navy during the period would have negative consequences for food supply during the Second World War, when Ireland would again feel the force of British economic warfare.<sup>7</sup> Protectionist policies were of benefit to some producers and consumers of food, but less useful to others, with policy often emerging in an *ad hoc* manner.<sup>8</sup> Moreover the removal of the British export market, although mitigated by the 1935 Coal-Cattle pacts, was devastating for food producers and exporters and led to great waste in the form of mass culls of livestock.

The question of food supplies during the anticipated European war was partially addressed by government in 1938, with the formation of the new Emergency

5 J. Peter Neary and Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Protection, Economic War and Structural Change: the 1930s in Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* 27: 107 (1991), 252–55; David Johnson, *The Interwar Economy in Ireland* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1989).

6 Conrad Arensberg and

Solon Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 7; see also Bryce Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War: Farewell to Plato's Cave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 75.

7 Bryce Evans, 'A semi-state

archipelago without ships, Séan Lemass, economic policy and the absence of an Irish mercantile marine' in *Working Papers in History and Policy* 6 (2012), 1–18, also accessible as Bryce Evans, 'Ireland's Accursed Seablindness: the early lack of a Merchant Marine' (open

access via [https://www.academia.edu/1878454/Irelands\\_Accursed\\_Seablindness\\_the\\_early\\_lack\\_of\\_a\\_Merchant\\_Marine](https://www.academia.edu/1878454/Irelands_Accursed_Seablindness_the_early_lack_of_a_Merchant_Marine))  
8 Mary Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922–1939* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 173–79.

Supplies Branch of the Department of Industry and Commerce under Seán Lemass. Yet this new 'organisation for central purchasing and selling', later to become the Ministry of Supplies, was to prove a mixed blessing because Lemass's peremptory manner and gargantuan portfolio sometimes collided with the more nuanced aspects of food production and distribution. Moreover, while a rationalisation of food supply and pricing was certainly necessary in a wartime economy, Ireland's position of neutrality would soon see food supplies fall victim to a belligerent attitude from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill when it came to trade and shipping.

### War, Trade, and Food

The coming of the Second World War in 1939 would bring great disruption to essential supplies of food and fertilisers as famine, once more, would stalk the European continent. The estimated twenty-million deaths attributable to starvation during the 1939–45 conflict throws into relief the at-times desperate efforts of Ireland's government to ensure its population remained fed.<sup>9</sup> Ireland's lack of a sizeable merchant marine, coupled with the intransigence of Churchill, would on several occasions threaten to propel the country back to starvation. With Ireland reliant on shipped supplies secured by the British fleets, Churchill viewed de Valeran neutrality as essentially selfish, an opinion echoed by Belfast poet Louis MacNeice in his poem 'Neutrality' (1942), which concludes with the memorable put-down of the policy in the images of dead sailors eaten by fish: 'to the west off your own shores the mackerel are fat with the flesh of your kin'.<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to pressure neutral Ireland to formally join the Allied war effort, Churchill periodically slashed the export of the vital ingredients needed to run a modern agricultural economy: fertilisers, feeding stuffs, pesticides and petrol.<sup>11</sup>

The results were felt by ordinary people. A United States intelligence agent posted to Ireland, who had the luxury of ample financial support from his government, recorded a loss in weight of twenty pounds after living in Dublin for a month. With bellies rumbling and the centenary of Ireland's Great Hunger approaching, there were reports of the Phoenix Park deer, and even Dublin Zoo animals, going missing and of Dublin prostitutes asking for payment not in cash but in sought-after commodities like soap or tea.<sup>12</sup> Some of these stories were apocryphal of course, but they speak to the generally impoverished public nutrition of the Emergency period, especially in urban areas.

<sup>9</sup> This figure, probably an underestimate, is repeatedly cited in Lizzie Collingham's global history *The Taste of War: World War II and the battle for food* (London: Allen Lane, 2011). <sup>10</sup> MacNeice, cited in Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: a cultural history of Ireland during the*

*Second World War* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 14. See E.R. Dodds (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber, 1966). <sup>11</sup> Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War*, 52–70.

<sup>12</sup> Martin S. Quigley, *A U.S. Spy in Ireland* (Dublin: Marino Books, 1999), 63;

D.83222 Walter Mahon-Smith, *I Did Penal Servitude* (Dublin: Metropolitan, 1945).

As wheat production waned the state desperately introduced the 100 percent black loaf, which used ground bone or lime powder to supplement the flour, and in turn inhibited calcium absorption, leading to a significant increase in childhood rickets.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, food production was seriously compromised by a devastating Foot and Mouth outbreak in 1941, which necessitated the destruction of many cattle. There were three million sheep in the country in 1940; by 1943 there were half a million fewer.<sup>14</sup>

Against this backdrop, Anglo-Irish trade regularly reverted to barter, with Irish ministers and diplomats on several occasions forced to rely on the intervention of friendly contacts within the British establishment to secure essential supplies. British Minister for Food Lord Woolton was one such figure; another was Anglo-Irish peer Lord Granard who, on one occasion, predicted ‘famine conditions in Ireland’ in order to secure much-needed chemicals and fertilisers from Britain.<sup>15</sup> Typical of the barter arrangements with which Ireland limped through the Emergency were the tactics adopted by Lemass as Minister of Supplies between 1942 and 1944 when, in an effort to preserve wheat supplies, he withheld the export of Guinness bound for British and American troops in Northern Ireland, forcing the British, in turn, to release agricultural products.

Naturally enough, the majority of people remained unaware of these fraught negotiations and the challenges of securing food supply during a global crisis. Although many people experienced absence in this period, for others the Emergency was a time of relative abundance, particularly compared to the austerity of the British ration-book diet. Certainly, meat was generally available in better quality and quantity than across the Irish Sea. ‘Gastro-tourism’ became a Dublin phenomenon at the time and elite restaurants like Jammet’s became destinations for epicureans frustrated by wartime privations. As Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire has documented, certain of Dublin’s fine-dining venues were also able to avail of the black market to continue to offer mouth-watering menus.<sup>16</sup> Away from the Dublin restaurant scene, however, the absence of a more prosaic pick-me-up would be keenly felt.

## Tea

The worrying general scarcity of wheat in Ireland during the Emergency (discussed in greater depth subsequently) would be overshadowed in the popular imagination by the absence of tea. At the outbreak of the Emergency Ireland had the highest per head consumption of tea in the world.<sup>17</sup> Tea was another

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War*, 69–90.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Supplies, ‘Historical Survey.’ National Archives of Ireland (NAI), IND/EHR/3/C1, part IV, 161.

<sup>15</sup> See Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> See Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Haute cuisine

restaurants in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C: Food and Drink in Ireland* (2015) (2015), 371–403. [https://doi.org/10.3318/priac.2015.115.06\\_](https://doi.org/10.3318/priac.2015.115.06_)

<sup>17</sup> Figures cited in Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 239.



**Figure 1** Fruit and flower sellers at the General Post Office on O'Connell Street, c. 1946. Author: Willem van de Poll. Reproduced courtesy of the Dutch National Archives.

commodity that fell victim to the British squeeze on supplies, ensuring a boom in the black-market price of tea, widespread lamenting of its unavailability, and the concoction of bizarre substitutes including one based on turf mould.

That tea was probably the most missed foodstuff during the Emergency speaks to the fact that food rationing in Ireland was introduced belatedly and rather haphazardly, following an earlier policy of often-fluctuating maximum price orders issued by the Ministry of Supplies, which many consumers and retailers struggled to keep up with. Urban diets also underwent a noticeable decline in nutritional value during the war years. Per the *Irish Press*, a government pamphlet of 1942 reported that a diet consisting essentially of tea, bread, and factory-made jam was prevalent in inner city Dublin.<sup>18</sup>

The degree to which tea was missed is illustrated by a long-running exchange of letters in the usually sedate pages of the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* over the extent to which overpaying for tea on the black market was or wasn't a sin. While the Catholic Church was generally supportive of the state's measures to guarantee food supply through rationing and agricultural quotas, the absence of tea raised the hackles of many Church figures and prompted a long debate in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* over whether state law and moral law were the same thing. This in-depth theological dispute, which played itself out in the periodical's letters pages, boiled down to the question not of *whether* it was permissible to pay over the controlled price for tea, but of exactly *how much* over the state's maximum price it was morally justifiable to pay for so desirable a commodity as tea.<sup>19</sup> Episodes like this speak to a more widespread reversion to the black market in foodstuffs—or at least the 'grey market'—than is often acknowledged given the conformist parameters of Irish society at the time.

The absence of foodstuffs in Emergency Ireland was aggravated by the belated introduction of a comprehensive rationing system (introduced in 1942). This is an important point. Prior to this, the state used the censored press to publish maximum price orders for foodstuffs, which appeared with confusing frequency. The rapid fluctuation of the permitted price for any given foodstuff led to many retailers falling foul of the team of retail inspectors assembled by the Ministry of Supplies. Prominent Dublin food retailer Findlaters, in particular, found itself in a war with Supplies, which refused its owner Dermot Findlater's offer of his expertise in managing food supplies and instead slapped a succession of fines for overcharging on the business.<sup>20</sup> All too often, the state failed to consult with the private retail trade and resorted to the big stick instead. This aggravated

<sup>18</sup> *Irish Press*, 23 June 1942.

<sup>19</sup> See *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* (Dublin: Brown and Nolan, 1943), July–December.

<sup>20</sup> Alex Findlater, *Findlaters: the story of a Dublin merchant family, 1774–2001* (Dublin: A. & A. Farman, 2001), 405–12.

shortages and, when it came to tea, resulted in one of the most memorable cartoons of the period appearing in satirical magazine *Dublin Opinion*, where the state's Emergency Scientific Research Bureau—established to innovate around supply shortages by devising substitute foods—was lampooned for producing a tea substitute so unpleasant it caused its cartoon drinkers to gag to death.<sup>21</sup>

### Black Market

The theological debate over a fair black-market price for tea speaks to the fact that food was subject to a booming black market during this period. The land border with Northern Ireland witnessed an extensive cattle-smuggling trade during the 1930s. Cross-border smuggling of cattle increased during the Economic War, with 33,000 cattle seized by Customs officers in 1932, rising to a figure of 80,000 in 1934, the year before the Coal-Cattle pacts were struck between the British and Irish governments, deals which did not signal the end of the trade dispute but at least returned trade to a more normal footing.<sup>22</sup>

Smuggling continued apace during the Emergency, but the introduction of separate rationing systems either side of the border meant that whereas cattle were the most smuggled item in the 1930s, the reciprocal smuggling vogue of the 1940s was smaller consumables. Of these, several foodstuffs featured widely. The introduction of the 'black loaf' (discussed previously) south of the border resulted in more smuggling of white flour from north to south. The greater availability of meat on the Irish ration, meanwhile, saw foodstuffs like bacon, beef and butter illegally travel north in great quantities. And tea, of course, was frequently smuggled north to south to meet the great consumer demand south of the border. The 'new smuggling' (in which cattle had been replaced by smaller foodstuffs) was often a female affair, with foodstuffs concealed in prams and various items of feminine attire.<sup>23</sup>

The domestic black market also underwent something of a boom, thanks to the late introduction of food rationing and consequently the well-established practice of consumers engaging with the black market. Common to nearly all wartime societies, records show that the majority of people engaged in the black market but justified it to themselves as an occasional act: a 'grey market' transaction, legitimised by the notion that one wasn't infringing fair supply in the manner of a racketeer or gangster and was only dabbling in the dark trade. In fact, such dabbling did undermine fair supply at a time when wages stagnated and standards of nutrition fell.

<sup>21</sup> *Dublin Opinion*, September 1941. <sup>22</sup> See David Johnson, 'Northern Ireland as a problem in the Economic War 1932–1938', *Irish Historical Studies* 22: 86 (1980), 150; Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War*, 91–109. <sup>23</sup> For an overview of mid-century cross-border

relations which frequently mentions smuggling see Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Border: The Legacy of a century of Anglo-Irish Politics* (Dublin: Profile Books, 2019); for an in-depth account focusing on this period see Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War*, 103–121.



While engagement with the ‘grey market’ was extensive, there were also popular movements geared towards self-sacrifice, reduced consumption, and the common good. The ‘No Bread for Breakfast League’—which possessed the apt acronym NIBBLE—was formed in Dublin in an attempt to conserve valuable wheat and flour supplies. Similarly, the ‘celebrity chef’ of the era, Maura Laverty,<sup>24</sup> attempted to explore and amend Irish habits of consumption. Her *Kind Cooking* (1946) addressed the Famine roots of Irish aversion to certain foodstuffs. These included explanation of why certain types of vegetables (peas, beans, parsnips and carrots) were considered ‘part of Protestantism and foreign aggression and couldn’t be good or lucky’ whereas others (potatoes, onions, cabbage, turnips) were deemed acceptable to Catholics.<sup>25</sup> Laverty linked Irish foodways to the Christian and pre-Christian spirituality preserved ‘in all Catholic countries’, but attributed the Irish ‘respect’ for bread to ‘stories that have been handed down from the Famine’. The lasting cultural impact of the Great Famine will be discussed in greater depth subsequently; that Laverty referred back to it relatively frequently in her work from this period demonstrates the degree to which it was a fixture of cultural memory at the time. Meanwhile, the clamour for a more intelligible and fairer system of price control and food distribution was led by women’s voluntary organisations such as the Irish Housewives’ Association.<sup>26</sup> The lobbying of the IHA and other female voluntary groups for a comprehensive food rationing system has largely been unacknowledged, but certainly constituted an important impetus behind the introduction of such a scheme in 1942.

### ‘Till or Go to Jail’

There were significant differences between the experiences of urban and rural dwellers in Ireland in these two decades. Country dwellers had a greater ability to live off the land, as conveyed in the observations on life in the west of Ireland by Harvard academics Arensberg and Kimball in the 1930s. At the same time, those living in outlying and remote areas were sometimes more vulnerable to the depredation caused by the high prices typical of a protectionist economy. Moreover, with the fuel supply problems of the Emergency ensuring that motorised transport became a great rarity, rural people experienced dislocation from food supplies caused by the lack of transport; there was a much lower density of commercial food stores in rural areas.

<sup>24</sup> For more on Maura Laverty, see Caitríona Clear, ‘Fact and Fiction in Maura Laverty’s food writing, 1941–1960’ in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EUt+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 26, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-oK87>.

<sup>25</sup> Maura Laverty, *Kind Cooking* (Tralee: Kerryman, 1946), 29. These ingredients were the basis of Irish stew, the history of which is discussed in Dorothy Cashman and John Farrelly, ‘“Is Irish Stew the only kind of stew we can afford to make, mother?” The history of a recipe’, *Folk Life: Journal*

*of Ethnological Studies* 59: 2 (2021), 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2021.1957420> <sup>26</sup> See Alan Hayes (ed.), *Hilda Tweedy and the Irish Housewives Association: a link in the chain* (Dublin: Arlen Press, 2012).

The ‘No Bread for Breakfast League’—which possessed the apt acronym NIBBLE—was formed in Dublin in an attempt to conserve valuable wheat and flour supplies



**Figure 2** Oven at Phelans premises, Broad Street, Waterford, Ireland, 1940s. Source: National Library of Ireland on The Commons.

By far the most significant government intervention in the agricultural marketplace of the time was the Compulsory Tillage scheme. The Government wanted Irish farmers to cultivate wheat and other cereal crops rather than using their land for dairy or other purposes to cope with supply problems caused by the European war. The Department of Agriculture duly sent inspectors to nearly every farm in the state to assess the quality of the holding and issue a quota of how much of the land was to be put under tillage, based upon the size and quality of the farm. More sinister, however, was the threat issued by the Department of Agriculture before the harvest of 1940: any farmer who did not fulfil his quota would have his land seized by the state. Given the history of evictions and land agitation in the 19th century, these controls proved contentious, aggravated by quotas which escalated annually. The measures were ‘state instruction at the point of a bayonet’, according to a senator of the time.

In line with its general approach during the Emergency, the government refused to consult farming bodies and preferred an approach that merged diktats with emotional blackmail. The blunt instruction ‘Till or Go to Jail’ was repeated across the local and national press. This was usually accompanied by pleas from religious and political leaders that farmers prevent starvation, and images of children above the words ‘They Depend on You’.<sup>27</sup>

Such an approach elicited resistance. As an *Irish Times* editorial put it, ‘farmers are notorious anarchists’ and unlikely to comply when faced with state compulsion. As predicted, there were many accounts of inspectors physically attacked or chased off farms. Resistance was most robust in traditional grazing counties, with the highest documented non-compliance in Meath and Westmeath.

Between 1941 and 1945—when the scheme was at its most draconian—the state responded to a fairly widespread dissidence by confiscating some 7,365 acres. This figure may appear relatively small at first glance, but must be properly contextualised by the fact that around 60% of Irish farms at the time were under 30 acres, and often much less. Many evicted farmers were old and infirm, while others argued, quite reasonably, that they simply did not possess the modern productive aids such as fertilisers, lime, pesticides, other chemicals and—crucially—tractors required to meet the quotas. Given the imperative of the very survival of the state, however, leading government ministers were unsympathetic, with Lemass, for one, bluntly urging ‘the elimination of incompetent or lazy farmers’.<sup>28</sup>

**27** Bryce Evans, ‘Coercion in the Irish Countryside: the Irish Smallholder, the State, and Compulsory Tillage 1939–45’, *Irish Economic and Social History* 38 (2011), 1–17.

**28** Bryce Evans, ‘Till or Go to Jail’, *RTÉ Brainstorm*, 9 March 2022. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2022/0309/>

1285275-ireland-compulsory-tillage-scheme-farmers-second-world-war-history/

The greater availability of meat on the Irish ration, meanwhile, saw foodstuffs like bacon, beef and butter illegally travel north in great quantities. And tea, of course, was frequently smuggled north to south to meet the great consumer demand south of the border



**Figure 3** Arva market square on fair day. Pre-1940s. Source: Jim Gormley. Author: Barry Gormley.

### The Memory of Famine at its Centenary

It should be emphasised that the threat of starvation in wartime Ireland was a realistic one, particularly in the years 1940 and 1941. Thanks to the ravages of war, millions of people, even in relatively well-off countries in western Europe, fell victim to starvation in the early 1940s. It is of note that the figure of twenty million deaths as a result of starvation and its associated diseases—mentioned previously—actually exceeded the nineteen-and-a-half million military deaths.<sup>29</sup> Some of the worst instances of starvation occurred in Leningrad (1941/42), Bengal (1942/43) and Vietnam (1945). The British wartime supply squeeze of Ireland was overseen by Lord Fred Leathers, British Minister of War Transport and the same man who has received much of the blame for exacerbating the Bengal Famine by refusing the British cabinet's instruction to divert food to India in the summer of 1943.<sup>30</sup> Worryingly for the Irish government, Western Europe saw famine in the later years of the conflict in Greece (1941/42), the Netherlands (1944/45) and Poland (1944).

There were people alive in the 1930s and '40s who could claim to have experienced the Great Hunger (1845–51) first-hand. More important, however, was collective memory of Famine in Ireland. Recalling his childhood, the author John McGahern wrote of his father's unsuccessful efforts to supplement his wages as a Garda by growing and selling potatoes in the mid-1940s:

The only potatoes I remember him selling were a few bags of seed potatoes in the spring. One year he took to giving away bags as presents. They were not appreciated because of their association with the famine, but people were polite and accepted the presents even if they were to dump the potatoes later.<sup>31</sup>

There is little other evidence for the Great Famine being a shared memory so haunting that, in a time of relative hardship, it drove people to throw away perfectly good food because of its unlucky associations, but this is not to doubt the sincerity of McGahern's reflection. The historical memory of extreme hunger hung over this period, indeed the memory of mid-Victorian starvation as a colonial crime was an underlying impulse behind Fianna Fáil policy at the time.

<sup>29</sup> Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food*, 1. <sup>30</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *Eating People is Wrong, and other essays on Famine, its past and future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 53.

<sup>31</sup> John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber 2006), 165. My thanks to Peter Beirne of Clare County Library for pointing me to this.

It is no coincidence that there were a number of notable literary explorations of the Great Famine from this era, most notably Liam O'Flaherty's novel *Famine* (1937), but including other substantial works which addressed the tragedy specifically—such as Gerard Healy's play *The Black Stranger* (1945), Elizabeth Bowen's *Bowen's Court* (1942), and David Thomson's play *The Great Hunger* (1948), and explicitly, most notably Patrick Kavanagh's long poem *The Great Hunger* (1942).<sup>32</sup>

Popular responses to the Famine's centenary were accompanied by official responses. In 1943 Taoiseach Éamon de Valera first envisaged the production of a definitive history of the Famine as a way of marking the centenary. In January 1944 he met with Richard Hayes, the Director of Ireland's National Library, to discuss the idea. Hayes and de Valera agreed that the state could not produce such a history in-house but instead should commission a trained historian whose name was already established and favourably known. Hayes deliberated for a month before returning to de Valera with the names of two professors: one, Theodore Moody, was based in Trinity College and the other, Robert Dudley Edwards, University College Dublin.<sup>33</sup> Their joint editorship of the new Famine history was announced in the press in April 1945. The book would not see the light of day until 1956, by which point the joint editorship had been passed on by Moody to another UCD historian, T. Desmond Williams, with Williams and Edwards publishing the book as *The great famine: studies in Irish History 1845–52*, an edited collection which ended up striking more of a revisionist tone than its original commissioners had intended.<sup>34</sup> Despite the book's long gestation, its commission by the state in 1945 is itself significant in underlying the extent to which memory of famine existed in this period and motivated policy.

Similarly, in July 1948 workmen set about removing the John Hughes statue of Queen Victoria from outside Leinster House. Another response was the state documentary *A Nation Once Again* (1946), a ruralist piece released to mark the 100th anniversary of Thomas Davis's death, which credited the Young Irelander with foreseeing everything great about modern Ireland, from government publications policy to turf production and the tillage programme.<sup>35</sup> There were other deliberate markers of the Famine's 100th anniversary at this time. The painting *Gorta* (Hunger) by Lillian Lucy Davidson was displayed in 1946 at Dublin's National College of Art alongside seventy-seven other paintings in

**32** Liam O'Flaherty, *Famine* (London: Gollancz, 1937); Gerard Healy, *The Black Stranger* (Cork: Opera House, 1945); Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court* (New York: Knopf, 1942); David Thomson, *The Great Hunger* (London: BBC, 1948); Patrick Kavanagh, *The Great Hunger* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1942). **33** Untitled Memorandum, 25 January 1944. National Archives, Department of the Taoiseach, S13626. **34** Robert Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (eds), *The Great Famine: studies in Irish History 1845–52* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1956). **35** *A Nation Once Again*. Directed by Brendan Stafford, written by John D. Sheridan. National Film Institute of Ireland.

a special state art exhibition marking Thomas Davis's centenary. Ten of the paintings depicted the Famine. Alongside Lillian Davidson's (1879–1954) *Gorta* were displayed *Famine* by George Campbell (1917–79); *An Ghorta* by Maurice MacGonigal (1900–79); *Connemara Cottages abandoned during the Famine* and *The Emigrant*, both by Louis Le Brocquy (1916–2012); *Bliadhain na Gorta* by Padraic Woods (1893–1991); *Famine* by Muriel Brandt (1909–81); *Ocras, 1850* by Cathal MacLúain; and *Evocation of 1846–47 Famine* (decorative design) by Michael O'Farrell. MacGonigal's painting came with the inscription, taken from an 1848 editorial in *The Times*, 'the Celt has gone and gone with a vengeance, and soon he'll be as rare on the banks of the Shannon as the Red Indian on the banks of the Manhattan'. MacLúain's was also inscribed with the explanation 'hundreds of thousands of emigrants, driven largely by hunger and destitution following on the Famine, left Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century'.<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

In appraising the Irish government's record on food management during the Emergency, it is notable that there were no recorded cases of death with starvation as a principal cause. In this light, the state clearly fulfilled a fundamental humane duty in preventing the instances of famine witnessed elsewhere in Europe during the war and so painfully a part of Irish historical memory. On the other hand, though, many people in this period were still opting to swap hunger pangs for the promise presented by emigration, a trend which continued throughout the 1930s and 40s and which would belie the cosy ruralism of political discourse in this period.

By the end of the Second World War, as the centenary of the Famine loomed, the shortcomings of Ireland's protectionist economic policies were all too evident. The catchy nationalist slogan 'burn everything British except their coal' had accompanied the Anglo-Irish economic war of the 1930s, but the cessation in trade between Ireland and her largest market had caused living standards to decline for the majority of people and, in turn, aggravated emigration. When British trade sanctions were again imposed in the Second World War these problems worsened. The hardest truths to emerge from these trade disputes were the holes in the government's protectionist agrarian vision. Simply keeping the food in the country, as John Mitchel had urged during the Famine, just wasn't viable in the mid-twentieth century and surpluses led to the mass destruction of calves.

<sup>36</sup> Carmel Doyle, 'Lillian Lucy Davidson', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <https://www.dib.ie/biography/davidson-lilian-lucy-ulick-burke-jennifer-maude-a2420>; *Irish Times*, 31 August 1946; Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible* (Durham, NC, 1997).

Contrary to de Valera's vision, Ireland was not self-sufficient; it continued to be an agricultural export economy, where the large grazier was proving more economically efficient than the small farmer. Meanwhile, the Irish people—whether in town or country—survived, as this chapter has shown, and often *despite* rather than *because of*, government policies directed at the management of food.

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**25**

*'The President Requests the  
Pleasure': Irish state dining,  
1922–1940*

**Elaine Mahon**

When examining the seminal texts that establish the history of Irish diplomacy, food, dining and protocol have not received any form of considered analysis.<sup>1</sup> This work addresses that lacuna<sup>2</sup> while at the same time contributing to the body of research on Irish food history.

Interest in the topic stemmed from an article that discussed the material contained in the first volume of the series *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy* (DIFP),<sup>3</sup> relevant to the negotiations leading to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in London on 6 December 1921. One aspect of the Treaty negotiations that had not been covered in DIFP was the social side, the drinks receptions and dinner parties hosted by the Irish delegation in London. That first generation of Irish diplomats were faced with a hard and unrewarding task, and the notion of ‘dining for Ireland’, which was a popular term among Irish diplomats in the 1990s when the article was published, would not have occurred to them.<sup>4</sup>

The discussion that follows explores dining with Irish heads of state and heads of government based on a chronological scope from the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 to the 1937 Constitution of Ireland. It draws on the archives of the Department of External Affairs in particular, with most of the relevant files never having been consulted prior to this. It begins with an overview of the social engagements and entertainment by the Governor-General, the representative of the British King in the Irish Free State. It quickly becomes clear that between 1922 and 1932, the Irish government, led by William T. Cosgrave, undertook a broad range of hospitality, entertaining important persons from around the globe. Between 1932 and 1940, the Fianna Fáil government led by Éamon de Valera built on the foundations of state hospitality put in place by the Cosgrave administration but also implemented significant changes in official entertaining. The 1937 Constitution of Ireland provided for a head of state and a head of government, respectively the President of Ireland and the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), and for the first time, state hospitality offered by the head of state and the head of government became clearly distinguishable. On entering office, Douglas Hyde established a series of ‘firsts’ in state entertaining by an Irish President.

In a period where much of the historiography of Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s is described as a ‘history of disappointment’<sup>5</sup> marked by an enduring tendency to ‘critique, rather than contextualise’,<sup>6</sup> this chapter seeks to answer the questions raised on reading Kennedy’s article: how *did* the Irish state entertain

**1** Patrick Keatinge, *A Place Among the Nations: Issues of Foreign Policy* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1978); Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and Europe 1919–1989*, 2nd edition (Cork: Hibernian University Press, 1990); Michael Kennedy and J. M. Skelly (eds), *Irish Foreign Policy, 1919–1966: From Independence to Internationalism* (Dublin:

Four Courts Press, 2000); Ben Tonra, Michael Kennedy, John Doyle and Noel Dorr (eds), *Irish Foreign Policy* (Dublin: Gill Education, 2012). **2** Elaine Mahon, ‘Irish Diplomatic Dining, 1922–1963’, unpublished PhD thesis, Technological University Dublin, 2019; this will be the focus of the monograph: Elaine Mahon, *The Minister Requests the*

*Pleasure: Irish Diplomatic Dining, 1922–1963* (Oxford: Peter Lang, forthcoming). **3** Michael Kennedy, ‘In Spite of All Impediments’: The Early Years of the Irish Diplomatic Service’, *History Ireland* 7: 1 (1999), 18–21; Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, and Eunan O’Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, Volume 1,*

1919–1922 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1998).

**4** Kennedy, ‘In Spite’, 20.

**5** Anne Dolan, ‘Politics, Economy and Society in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939’, in Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland* 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), vol. 4, 323–48, 323.

**6** Séan Donnelly, ‘Catholicism and Modernity in Irish

its important guests? Which venues were used, how were menus created and what food was served?

### Entertainment by the Governor-General, 1922–32

Under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921, the twenty-six counties of southern Ireland were established as *Saorstát Éireann*, the Irish Free State, a self-governing dominion of the British Commonwealth, obliged to recognise the British king as head of state and a Governor-General as the monarch's representative in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The Irish Free State would be governed by an Executive Council consisting of a President and Ministers, each with responsibility for a particular portfolio.<sup>8</sup>

The Governor-General resided at the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park, the private residence of the Viceroys prior to independence. The maintenance and furnishings of the Lodge were the responsibility of the Office of Public Works (OPW)<sup>9</sup> who also supplied furniture, tableware and cutlery.<sup>10</sup> Provision was also made for a domestic staff comprising 'a housekeeper, a butler, a hall porter, a charwoman, ten maids, three footmen, three odd men, two cooks and two chauffeurs'.<sup>11</sup>

The court traditions of balls, *levées* and drawing-rooms that had pertained under the Viceroys at Dublin Castle<sup>12</sup> did not resume with the arrival of the new Governor-General although social engagements were part of the role. Official ceremony was more restrained compared to the Viceregal court,<sup>13</sup> as the Governor-General was responsible for expenditure on entertainment and received a modest stipend for these expenses.<sup>14</sup>

Both of the Governors-General who were in office between 1922 and 1932, Tim Healy (1922–28) and James McNeill (1928–32), had busy social calendars, and received deputations and accepted addresses of welcome from numerous social bodies.<sup>15</sup> From 1924 onwards, the Governor-General held garden parties to entertain groups of up to two thousand guests,<sup>16</sup> with one party in June 1925 described as one of the most fashionable functions that had been held in the Irish Free State 'since the passing of the old *régime*'.<sup>17</sup>

Political Thought: The Case of Aodh de Blácam', *Modern Intellectual History* (2022), 1–251. **7** Brendan Sexton, *Ireland and the Crown, 1922–1936: The Governor-Generalship of the Irish Free State* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 16. **8** For a detailed discussion on the formation and role of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State, see Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Free State: Its Government and Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1934), 172–89. **9** The OPW was transferred

from the British Treasury to the Department of Finance of the Irish Free State in 1922 under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, see Rena Lohan, *Guide to the Archives of the Office of Public Works* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1994), 16–21, and Ronan Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance 1922–1958* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1976), 35. **10** National Archives of Ireland (NAI), OPW 5/22679, Governor-General's Residence, Furniture, File. **11** Sexton,

*Governor-Generalship*, 109. **12** The full title was Lieutenant General Governor of Ireland although they were more generally known as the Viceroy, and his wife, the Vicereine, see Rachel Wilson, 'The Vicereines of Ireland and the Transformation of the Dublin Court, c. 1703–1737', *The Court Historian* 19: 1 (2014), 3–28; Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Tara Kellaghan, 'Royal Pomp: Viceregal Celebrations and Hospitality in Georgian Dublin', in Mark McWilliams

(ed.), *Celebration: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2011* (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2012), 163–73; Joseph Robins, *Champagne & Silver Buckles: The Viceregal Court at Dublin Castle, 1700–1922* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2001). **13** There was no state entry into Dublin on the inauguration of the new Governor-General and the ceremony took place in private as opposed to at Dublin Castle as had been the case under the Viceroys, see Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*,

Throughout his term in office, Tim Healy maintained a long-standing correspondence with his sister-in-law, Anne, widow of his deceased brother, Maurice. His letters told of forthcoming events and described some of the visitors who stayed at the Viceregal Lodge. One such visitor was the Maharaja of Alwar, Sir Jai Singh Prabhakar, who was a guest of the Governor-General on several occasions (Figure 1). ‘He dresses beautifully’, wrote Healy:

and his gems are wonderful without being flashy. He wears a diamond in his headdress and his buttons are also jewels. He wears a silk robe at dinner and is attended by his ADC who wears a different turban from his Lord. The Maharaja will not sit on leather or eat beef ...<sup>18</sup>

Healy’s successor, James McNeill, together with his wife, Josephine McNeill,<sup>19</sup> have been described as entertaining a ‘good deal’ and ‘in style’.<sup>20</sup> They held garden parties for large numbers and entertained individual guests of honour, such as Sir Thomas Beecham.<sup>21</sup> Like Healy, they hosted visitors at the Lodge during visits to Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Being received by them was described by one guest as ‘like being received by royalty’,<sup>23</sup> with one thank you letter reading:

This is the most difficult ‘bread and butter letter’ I have ever had to write because the jam on the bread was so delicious and so thickly spread. I find no words to describe its excellence and my gratitude and delight.<sup>24</sup>

The Dublin Horse Show, which took place in August each year, was part of the London season,<sup>25</sup> and many of the notable attendees stayed with, or were guests of, the Governor-General during their stay in Ireland. During that week, and indeed throughout the rest of the year, the Irish government often proposed the names of certain people who were visiting Ireland to the Governor-General and suggested that they might be invited to dine at the Viceregal Lodge.<sup>26</sup> By way of example, over the course of a two-week period in August 1926, guests at the Viceregal

98, 115, 154. **14** John Coakley, ‘The Prehistory of the Irish Presidency’, *Irish Political Studies* 27: 4 (2012), 539–558.

**15** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 100. **16** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 99.

**17** *Irish Times*, ‘American Doctors, Tour of Dublin Hospitals’, 20 June 1925, 9.

**18** University College Dublin Archives (IE UCDA), Healy/Sullivan Family Papers, P6/A/164, Letter, Healy to Mrs Maurice Healy, 6 August 1926. **19** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/>

mcneill-josephine-a5284; for the study of Irish women diplomats from 1946 to 1990, see Ann Marie O’Brien, *The Ideal Diplomat?: Women and Irish Foreign Affairs, 1946–90* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2020). **20** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 117.

**21** *Irish Times*, ‘Eminent Musician To Visit Dublin, Sir Thomas Beecham On League of Opera At Viceregal Lodge’, 20 July 1929, 6.

**22** Guests included Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens, the English architect, and his wife, Emily;

Achille Fould, the French Under-Secretary of State for Agriculture and his wife Henriette; and the Irish scholar, Osborn Bergin. IE UCDA, Papers of Josephine McNeill, P234/120, Pencil sketchings by Lutyens, 9 August 1929; IE UCDA, Papers of Josephine McNeill, P234/37, Letter, Fould to McNeill, 11 August 1931; IE UCDA, Papers of Josephine McNeill, P234/2, Letter, Bergin to McNeill, 6 June 1932.

**23** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 117. **24** IE UCDA,

Josephine McNeill Papers, P234/106, Letter, Lavery to McNeill, n.d. 1930; the term ‘bread and butter letter’ refers to a letter of thanks which it was customary to write having been entertained overnight on a Sunday or longer, see Lilian Eichler, *The Book of Etiquette* (New York: Nelson Doubleday, 1924), 90–91. **25** Louis Stanley, *The London Season* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), 174. **26** Examples include P. J. Dillon, Acting Agent General for Queensland in 1924,



**Figure 1** Photocall on the steps of the Viceregal Lodge, 21 May 1927. From L–R: Martha Gogarty, Oliver Gogarty, Maharaja of Alwar's aide-de-camp, Tim Healy (Governor General), John Doyle (Comptroller of the Household), the Maharaja of Alwar, Sir Jai Singh Prabhakar, Erina or Maeve Healy, Elizabeth Healy (Source: IE UCDA, Healy/Sullivan Family Papers, P6/F42) (Credit: Lafayette Photography)

Lodge included Sir James Aiken, Governor-General of Manitoba Province in Canada, and his secretary, Major Hennessy; Alton Parker, an American judge and former Democratic candidate for the United States Presidency, and his wife Mary; G.K. Chesterton, the English writer, and his wife Frances; Sir John Lavery and Lady Hazel Lavery; the British novelist, Sir Compton Mackenzie; and Sir Walter Grant Morden, Vice-President of Canada Securities Corporation Ltd., and his wife Anne.<sup>27</sup>

There was a paucity of funds available for government entertaining and a somewhat apathetic attitude towards External Affairs in the first years of the state,<sup>28</sup> so it is possible that behind closed doors this arrangement suited the Executive Council while, at the same time, reinforcing the status of the Governor-General and the prestige attached to an invitation to the Viceregal Lodge.

### Dining with Cumann na nGaedheal, 1922–32

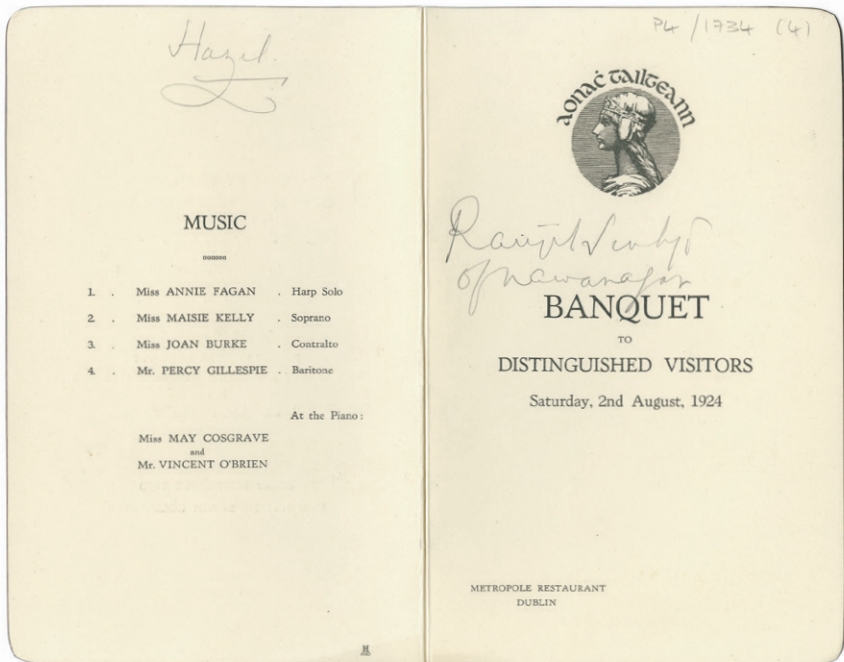
In the first decade after independence, official policy under the Cumann na nGaedheal government led by the President of the Executive Council, William T. Cosgrave, was to keep state hospitality as exclusive as possible and ‘restricted to Ministers of foreign Governments, distinguished publicists of international repute, and to a certain extent, industrial magnates’.<sup>29</sup> Government spending on state hospitality gradually increased over the course of the decade, but initial expenditure was low, for example £97 in 1923–24 (equivalent to approximately £5,890 in 2021),<sup>30</sup> £620 in 1927–28 (approximately £20,300), and £1,700 in 1928–29 (approximately £76,900).<sup>31</sup> These were small amounts, noted one DEA official, compared to other governments who ‘spent considerably more and entertained on a lavish scale by comparison’.<sup>32</sup>

Phillip Collier, Premier of Western Australia in 1925, both the Maharajah of Alwar and Canadian MP, Henri Bourassa in 1926, and US Senator James Phelan in 1928; Mahon, ‘Irish Diplomatic Dining’, chap. 2. **27** IE UCDA, Healy/Sullivan Family Papers, P6/A/99, Letter, Healy to Mrs Maurice Healy, 1 August 1924. **28** In a 1923 government debate External Affairs was described as ‘a Ministry for finding a job for somebody’, see Dermot Keogh, ‘Ireland: The Department of Foreign Affairs’, in Zara Steiner (ed.), *The Times Survey of Foreign Ministries of the World* (London: Times Books Ltd., 1984), 275–96, 280; the Department of Finance was not in favour of developing External Affairs and enjoyed snubbing acting-secretary Joe

Walshe in particular up to his appointment as full secretary in 1927, see Michael Kennedy, ‘“Nobody Knows and Ever Shall Know from Me That I Have Written It”: Joseph Walshe, Éamon de Valera and the Execution of Irish Foreign Policy’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 14 (2003), 165–183; subsequent attempts by Finance to minimise entertainment expenses led to strongly worded exchanges between the two departments, Mahon, ‘Irish Diplomatic Dining’, chap. 2–4. **29** NAI DFA GR/1/256/3–299, Memo, Fahy, 11 May 1929. **30** This calculation is based on the Retail Price Index (RPI) which tracks the changes in the cost of a basket of goods over time, the most recent year available being 2021, see Laurence Officer and Samuel

Williamson, ‘Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a UK Pound Amount, 1270 to Present’, available: <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/index.php>. These are approximate calculations of the modern value of these amounts calculated in pounds sterling in keeping with the currency of the Irish Free State during the period under discussion. Although new coinage was issued by the Irish Free State on 12 December 1928, its currency did not change on gaining independence from Britain, the pound sterling remained the currency of Ireland until 13 March 1978, see Paul Caffrey, ‘Nationality and Representation: The Coinage Design Committee (1926–1928) and the Formation of a

Design Identity in the Irish Free State’, in Linda King and Elaine Sisson (eds), *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating Modernity, 1922–1992* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 75–89. **31** The substantial increase for 1928–29 can be attributed to expenditure on the visit of United States Secretary of State, Frank B. Kellogg, in August 1928; Mahon, ‘Irish Diplomatic Dining’, chap. 2. **32** NAI DFA GR/1/256/3–299, Memo, Fahy, 11 May 1929.



Despite stated policy and a modest budget, the Irish Free State government undertook a range of high-level entertainment between 1924<sup>33</sup> and 1931, consisting of lunches, dinners, receptions and garden parties, during which hospitality was extended to guests from the four corners of the globe.<sup>34</sup> Justification for entertaining 'distinguished visitors'<sup>35</sup> varied—particular note was taken of those whose impression of Ireland had the potential to influence the international community or to establish links with other countries—and was offered as a means to cement relationships, reward friendships and establish new connections.<sup>36</sup>

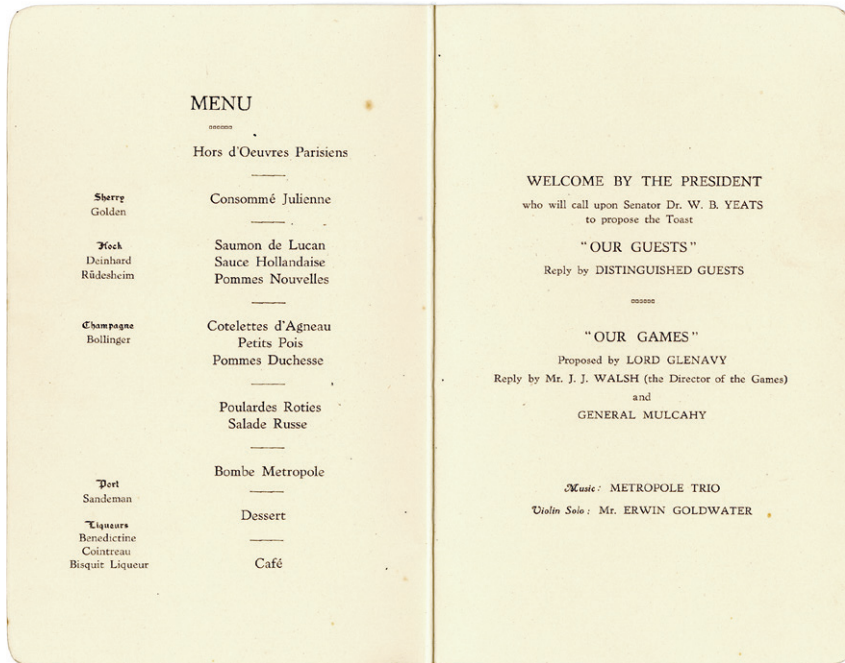
The reception and entertainment of important visitors was arranged by the Department of External Affairs, working, where necessary, with other government departments in whose activities a particular visitor might have an interest.<sup>37</sup> Although each Minister was entitled to make demands on the entertainment budget provided for in the Oireachtas Committee on Finance for External Affairs,<sup>38</sup> the majority of entertainment appears to have been offered by the President of the Executive Council, W.T. Cosgrave, the Ministers for External Affairs, and officials from the Department of Defence. Forthcoming visits had

**Figure 2** Banquet menu for distinguished visitors at the Tailteann Games, Metropole Restaurant, 2 August 1924 (Source: IE UCDA, Hugh Kennedy Papers, P4/1734)

**33** This is the year that the Department of External Affairs began keeping these records; Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2. **34** Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2. **35** This is the term used by External Affairs between

1922 and the early 1960s when the term changed to 'distinguished persons'; Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chaps 2 and 5. **36** Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2. **37** NAI DFA GR/1/256/3-299, Memo, Fahy, 11 May 1929.

**38** The Oireachtas is the legislature of Ireland, see: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/>



to be announced in advance to the Department of External Affairs so that the Minister could gauge the importance of a particular visit.<sup>39</sup> Each government Department was entitled to offer official entertainment although it was up to the Minister for External Affairs<sup>40</sup> to decide whether entertainment should go ahead, and if so, what type and to what extent.<sup>41</sup>

There were no designated state reception rooms available for use by the Irish government during this period; Dublin Castle was mooted as a venue but was unavailable due to the presence there of the law courts.<sup>42</sup> As a result, guests were entertained at a selection of venues across Dublin city centre, such as the Metropole Restaurant (Figure 2), as well as at Irish Army barracks. Cosgrave also liked to entertain at his home in Templeogue, a suburb of south Dublin, and held several garden parties there.<sup>43</sup>

Conveniently located in the city centre and close to government buildings, the Shelbourne Hotel on St Stephen's Green was the venue most often used by the Cosgrave government for entertaining prestigious guests.<sup>44</sup> The most significant of these events was the state banquet held in honour of United States Secretary

<sup>39</sup> NAI DFA GR/1/256/3–299, Memo, Fahy, 11 May 1929.

<sup>40</sup> During the time of the Cumann na nGaedheal government (1922–32), the following Ministers for External Affairs were in office: Desmond FitzGerald, August 1922–June 1927; Kevin

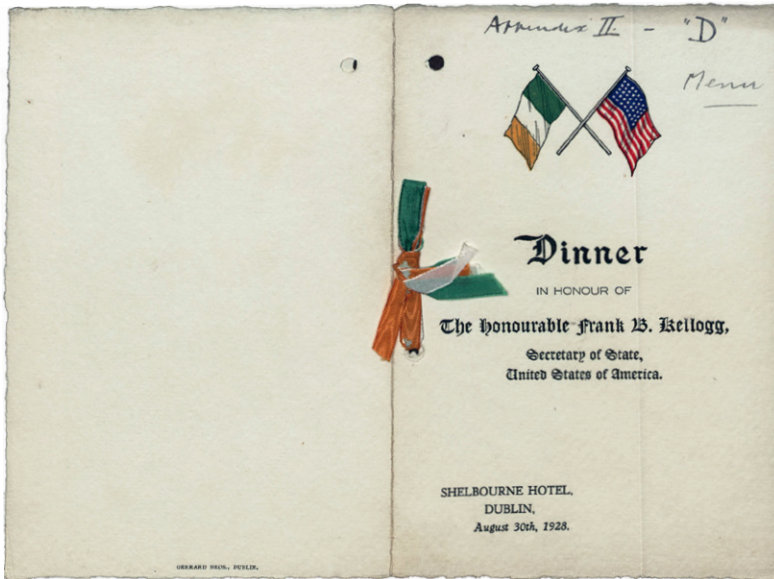
O'Higgins, June 1927–July 1927; William T. Cosgrave (acting), July 1927–October 1927; Patrick McGilligan, October 1927–March 1932, see Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, and Eunan O'Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish Foreign*

*Policy, Volume II, 1923–1926* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2000), and Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, and Eunan O'Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, Volume III, 1926–1932* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2002). <sup>41</sup> NAI DFA

GR/1/256/3–299, Memo, Fahy, 11 May 1929. <sup>42</sup> *Irish Times*, 'The Week's News of Ireland, Dublin', 17 August 1929, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2.





**Figure 3** State banquet menu in honour of Frank Kellogg, Shelbourne Hotel, 28 August 1928 (Source: NAI, TAOIS S5731)

of State, Frank B. Kellogg, during the first official state visit to the Irish Free State in August 1928 (Figure 3).<sup>45</sup>

Irish state dining menus during this decade followed the international fine dining sequence of the period, and confirm the influence of French *haute cuisine* in Dublin restaurants through the presence of foreign-born chefs, trained in the classical French tradition, and who worked in Dublin city hotels.<sup>46</sup> Menus were between ten and eleven courses long, beginning with an *hors d'oeuvre* followed by soup, a fish course, an *entrée*, the remove, the roast, a sweet and savoury *entremets*, and finished with dessert and coffee (Figure 4).

### Protocols for State Entertainment

Shortly after Kellogg's visit in August 1928, and for the first time since the inception of the Irish Free State, work began on establishing written state protocols for receiving important visitors when Cosgrave requested that 'a detailed memorandum setting out the ceremonial [procedures] to be observed in the reception of distinguished visitors to the state' be drawn up.<sup>47</sup> Subsequent correspondence shows that the Department of External Affairs was carrying out the work of a protocol division, even though it had not been assigned the official title.<sup>48</sup> In 1929, the following list of categories was approved, bringing protocol firmly under External Affairs remit:<sup>49</sup>

#### Protocol

1. Supervision of and action on all matters involving ceremonial and precedence:
 

(a) gun salutes	(d) arrival, etc.
(b) escorts and bands	(e) anthems
(c) military naval staff	(f) flags
2. Presentation of Credentials

**44** Examples include Vice-Admiral Guy H. Burrage, Commander of the *USS Detroit* (1926); the French-Canadian Member of Parliament and Editor of *Le Devoir*, Henri Bourassa (1926); Sir James Parr, High Commissioner in London for New Zealand (1927); Governor-General (outgoing) Tim Healy (1928); Governor-General (incoming) James McNeill (1928); Papal Nuncio Paschal Robinson (1930); Prime Minister of South Africa General James Barry Hertzog (1930); Canadian Prime Minister Richard Bennett (1930); Australian Prime Minister James Scullin

(1930), and Lord Mayor of Boston James Curley (1931); Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2. **45** Elaine Mahon, 'Irish Cuisine: Irish Diplomatic Dining', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies, The Food Issue*, 41 (2018), 124–55. **46** On the influence of French *haute cuisine* on public dining in Ireland, see Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'The Emergence, Development and Influence of French Haute Cuisine on Public Dining in Dublin Restaurants, 1900–2000: An Oral History', 3 volumes, unpublished PhD thesis, Dublin Institute of Technology, 2009, available: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/>

[tourdoc/12/](https://arrow.tudublin.ie/); on French hegemony in the culinary profession, see Amy Trubek, *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). **47** NAI DFA GR 256–3, Letter, McDunphy to Private Secretary, 11 September 1928; prior to this, the first diplomatic protocol established was the official Order of Precedence, approved by the Executive Council in October 1926, NAI DFA 5/335, Letter, McDunphy to Walshe, 13 October 1926; Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2. **48** NAI DFA GR 256–3, Letter, Fahy,

11 May 1929; although there was a 'Protocol and General Matters' Section in the Department of External Affairs by July 1947, a Chef de Protocol was not appointed until 1949, see Michael Kennedy, 'The challenge of multilateralism: the Marshall Plan and the expansion of the Irish diplomatic service', in Till Geiger and Michael Kennedy (eds), *Ireland, Europe and the Marshall Plan* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 102–30; the first Irish Chef de Protocol was Denis McDonald, <https://www.dib.ie/biography/mcdonald-denis-ronald-a5639> **49** Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2.

3. Miscellaneous Appointments with M/EA
4. State functions: ceremonial and precedence
5. Visits of Royalty and distinguished persons
6. Departmental functions
7. Correspondence relating to functions under auspices of this Dept.
8. Tickets for foreign gallery in Dáil and Seanad
9. Immunities and rights of delegations, etc.
10. Customs and other courtesies to diplomatic passports etc.
11. International congresses, conventions, etc. in I.F.S.
12. Diplomatic list records
13. Congratulations and condolence
14. The observance of State holidays by legations

The Department of Defence would be responsible for ceremonial aspects such as the carriage and display of the national flag, guards of honour, military escorts and gun salutes,<sup>50</sup> while External Affairs would lead the management of incoming visits and all logistics concerning distinguished visitors to the Irish Free State.

### Dining with Fianna Fáil, 1932–40

Éamon de Valera, the leader of Fianna Fáil, the opposition party, was an avowed opponent of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. When that party won the general election in 1932, it set about restructuring the framework of Anglo-Irish relations and brought in a new era in Irish foreign policy.<sup>51</sup> De Valera believed that the President of the Executive Council should hold the External Affairs portfolio 'so that there might be no doubt as to the authority with which the Minister spoke'.<sup>52</sup> The choice of the External Affairs portfolio was a signal of the importance he attached to Irish foreign policy and an indicator of how he would direct Ireland's external relations in the years which were to follow.<sup>53</sup>

As Minister for External Affairs, de Valera also placed the Department of External Affairs on a superior footing in terms of the Order of Precedence established in 1926.<sup>54</sup> As President of the Executive Council, de Valera ranked second on the Order of Precedence after the Governor-General, and External Affairs now ranked above the other departments, a fact clearly demonstrated when a new Order of Precedence was approved in April 1933.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Irish Defence Force Regulations D.F.R. 30 1929 became operational on 15 March 1929. It was entitled 'Flags, Honours, Salutes, Etc.' and covered how the National Flag of Saorstát Éireann should be displayed, when it could be used, how it should be hoisted, lowered and folded, repaired, replaced and stored.

<sup>51</sup> Ronan Fanning, *Éamon*

*de Valera: A Will to Power* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 161; Catriona Crowe, Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh, and Eunan O'Halpin (eds), *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, Volume IV, 1932–1936* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2004), xi–xvi; Deirdre McMahon, *Republicans & Imperialists: Anglo-Irish Relations in the*

1930s (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 6–7.

<sup>52</sup> Earl of Longford and Thomas O'Neill, *Eamon de Valera* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971) cited in Fanning, *Department of Finance*, 279; McMahon, *Republicans*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Crowe *et al.*, *DIFP*, Vol. IV, xi. <sup>54</sup> NAI DFA 5/335/57, Letter, McDunphy to Walshe, 13 October 1926; the list was

reviewed in 1929 to include a wider range of classes but remained unchanged until it was amended under Fianna Fáil in 1933; Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 3.

<sup>55</sup> DFA 5/335/57, 'Official Order of Precedence amongst the Ministers', April 1933.



**Figure 4** Menu for state banquet in honour of the Papal Nuncio Paschal Robinson, Shelbourne Hotel, 15 January 1930 (Source: IE UCDA, Hugh Kennedy Papers, P4/1735)

### The Governor-Generalship under Éamon de Valera

Curtailing the powers and office of the Governor-General had remained firmly part of de Valera's objectives and, by November 1932, he succeeded in having James McNeill removed from office.<sup>56</sup> Under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, McNeill's replacement was nominated by the Irish Free State government and de Valera chose Domhnall Ó Buachalla, one of his most loyal supporters.<sup>57</sup> It was agreed with Ó Buachalla that social engagements would be limited to those deemed necessary by the government; communication would be routed through the Department of the President; and he would not entertain nor receive deputations or addresses of welcome.<sup>58</sup> In what was justified as a cost-cutting measure, it was decided that he would not reside at the Viceregal Lodge but in a rented house in south Dublin.<sup>59</sup>

The President of the Executive Council began to gradually take over the ceremonial aspects of the role of the Governor-General, including all state hospitality and related protocols. One of the first demonstrations of this took place in March 1933 at the St Patrick's Day reception at Dublin Castle, followed by a change in the procedure for the reception of diplomatic envoys to the Irish Free State. Both are explored in the sections that follow.

### State entertainment under de Valera

Among de Valera's decisions on taking up office was that Dublin Castle would be used as an official state venue. The law courts had moved to the Four Courts on Inns Quay in October 1931, several months prior to Fianna Fáil coming to power,<sup>60</sup> and Dublin Castle was free to be designated for use by the government as it saw fit. By choosing Dublin Castle, de Valera was firmly, and publicly, reappropriating the building that had symbolised British presence in Ireland for so long. The Castle began to be used for official events, starting with the state reception during the Eucharistic Congress of 1932.<sup>61</sup>

While the Eucharistic Congress has been referred to as 'the first international showpiece' of de Valera's administration,<sup>62</sup> the state reception nevertheless took place under the direction of the Archbishop of Dublin, Edward Byrne, who was

**56** Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland: Revolution and State Building*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1994), 69. **57** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 152–54. **58** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 152–54. **59** Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 152–54; Fanning, *De Valera*, 163; Adhamhnán Ó Súilleabháin, *Domhnall ua Buachalla: Rebellious Nationalist, Reluctant Governor* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2015), 272–75. **60** William Derham, '(Re)

Making Majesty: The Throne Room at Dublin Castle, 1911–2011' in Myles Campbell and William Derham (eds), *Making Majesty: The Throne Room at Dublin Castle, A Cultural History* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2017), 265–306, 283–85. **61** The Eucharistic Congress is an international gathering of ecclesiastics and lay people in a demonstration of Catholic faith. Held every two years since 1881, Dublin was chosen as the location of the 1932 Eucharistic

Congress to coincide with the 1,500th anniversary of St Patrick's arrival in Ireland, see: Rory O'Dwyer, 'On show to the world: the Eucharistic Congress, 1932', available: <https://www.historyireland.com/on-show-to-the-world-the-eucharistic-congress-1932/> **62** Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican: The Politics and Diplomacy of Church-State Relations, 1992–1960* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 70. **63** NAI DFA 34/43B, Letter, Farren to Cosgrave,

31 January 1931. **64** The Papal emissary took the principal seat on the dais in St Patrick's Hall accompanied on both sides by the members of his suite while de Valera and members of the Executive Council stood among the other guests in the congregation. **65** NAI DFA 34/275, Invitation; this is the wording used on invitations issued on behalf of de Valera between 1934 and the enactment of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland. **66** NAI DFA 34/275, Letter, Murphy to Secretary,

the official host of the Congress and of the Papal Legate, Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri. The reception was not an Irish state occasion in the same sense as the banquet and reception for the American Secretary of State in 1928, where Cosgrave had been convenor as well as host. Archbishop Byrne's office had made it clear that hospitality offered by the archbishop took precedence over that of the state. A government function was most welcome, his office conveyed, but would have to take place in accordance with the archbishop's wishes and after any event held by him.<sup>63</sup> Certain characteristics of the reception, such as the playing of the Papal Hymn and the absence of any Presidential Salute reinforce this, as do other aspects such as the seating arrangements,<sup>64</sup> all of which were subtle displays of the precedence of the Catholic Church over all of those present, including the Irish government. The first state reception held solely in the name of the Irish Free State took place at Dublin Castle on 17 March 1933, and is discussed below.

### St Patrick's Day Reception, Dublin Castle, February 1933

The 'President, Minister for External Affairs'<sup>65</sup> gave a state reception in St Patrick's Hall at Dublin Castle on 17 March 1933<sup>66</sup> in honour of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps.<sup>67</sup> It was the first time that Dublin Castle was to be used since the Eucharistic Congress and approximately 500 guests were expected to attend.<sup>68</sup> The catering firm, J.E. Mills of 8 Merrion Row, Dublin, was invited to submit a quote for light refreshments as well as claret, sauterne, and cider cups.<sup>69</sup> The menu (Figure 5) was similar to that served at the Eucharistic Congress but included high-status commodities such as *consommé*, lobster, and *foie gras*, making it a more prestigious menu at 3s.6d. per person (approximately £10.26) compared to 2s.6d per person (approximately £7.30) at the reception during the Eucharistic Congress.<sup>70</sup>

The choice of St Patrick's Day for the reception is notable. It was the first time that Dublin Castle was being used for an official event on St Patrick's Day since the inception of the Irish Free State,<sup>71</sup> a date that had traditionally marked the close of the Viceregal season under British rule.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, with the Governor-General out of view and Fianna Fáil's success in the January 1933 general election

Department of Defence, 28 February 1933; St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland and is celebrated each year on 17 March. **67** NAI DFA 34/275, 'Statement released to the Irish Press, Irish Independent, The Irish Times and The Cork Examiner', Murphy to Conway, 6 March 1933. **68** NAI DFA 34/275, Letter, Murphy to Secretary, OPW, 28 February 1933. **69** NAI DFA 35/84, St. Patrick's Day Reception at Dublin Castle, 1933, Catering, File; the firm had worked with External

Affairs several times by this point and had catered events such as the state reception at the Mansion House for the Australian Prime Minister, James Scullin in 1930 and the state reception at Dublin Castle during the Eucharistic Congress in 1932. Mills had also worked with the Department of Defence at McKee Barracks for events such as the visiting US Navy officers in June 1927, the crew of the Bremen flight (the first east-west nonstop transatlantic flight) in

July 1928, and the visiting military show jumping teams who participated at the Horse Show each year; Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 2. **70** *Consommé* is a labour-intensive dish, while lobster is one of the costliest seafoods in the world, and the production of *foie gras* is expensive, seasonal and highly regulated, all of which contributes to the high cost of these finished products, see Alan Davidson, *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 254, 311, 460.

**71** See for example *Evening Herald*, 'State Reception, Brilliant Scene at Dublin Castle', 18 Mar 1933, 2 and *Irish Independent*, 'St. Patrick's Day Reception in Dublin Castle, Brilliant Scene in Famous Hall', 18 March 1933, 8. **72** *Irish Times*, 'State Reception in Dublin Castle, Brilliant Scene in Famous Hall', 18 March 1933, 10.

still in recent memory, the reception was an occasion for de Valera to demonstrate his authority and reinforce his status. He achieved this with ceremonial displays typically associated with a head of state. These included the salute by the Second Infantry Battalion, followed by the Presidential Salute performed by the No. 1 Irish Army Band on his arrival in the Upper Castle Yard with his wife, Sinéad, and his inspection of the guard. He then entered Dublin Castle where he received a further salute by members of the special escort troop in ceremonial uniform who lined both sides of the staircase and presented arms.<sup>73</sup> For a President of the Executive Council and Minister for External Affairs, who attached such importance to foreign relations and for whom symbols were of such significance, these were important displays of status in the presence of his international guests.

### Opening up the Viceregal Lodge, August 1933

By this time, there was also another venue available. The Viceregal Lodge had lain unoccupied since November 1932 and in August 1933, de Valera decided to host a reception there in honour of the delegates of the Fifth Biennial Conference of the World Federation of Education Authorities.<sup>74</sup> While this might be considered another means by which de Valera was reappropriating symbols of British rule, it also made sense to hold the reception there given the capacity of its grounds. The Lodge had also been considered for the reception during the Eucharistic Congress but grazing rights on the adjacent fields had prevented the reception from being held there.<sup>75</sup>

The cost of preparing the Viceregal Lodge and gardens for the party was estimated at £213.10.0 (approximately £12,730).<sup>76</sup> One thousand chairs were hired, a temporary bridge was built to facilitate access from the south entrance, duckboards were laid for guests' carriages, and mats were placed at strategic points to prevent the heels of ladies' shoes going through gaps in the floors.<sup>77</sup> It was a considerable amount of work and the expense involved in opening the Lodge for a single day was ultimately deemed too costly to repeat.<sup>78</sup> The Lodge was not used again until it became the official residence of the first President of Ireland, Douglas Hyde, in 1938.<sup>79</sup> Dublin Castle remained the primary venue for state hospitality throughout the 1930s, in particular that offered by de Valera, and is discussed below.

<sup>73</sup> *Evening Herald*, 'State Reception, Brilliant Scene at Dublin Castle', 18 March 1933, 2.

<sup>74</sup> NAI OPW 5/12946/33, Letter, Fahy to Secretary, 15 May 1933; *Irish Press*, 'Teachers Honoured, 2,000 Guests at the Viceregal Lodge', 3 August 1933, 7; *Irish Times*, 'The State Garden

Party, Mr de Valera's Guests', 3 August 1933, 2. <sup>75</sup> NAI DFA 34/43B, Note, Walshe, 15 July 1931. <sup>76</sup> NAI OPW 5/12946/33, Letter, Murphy to Doolin, 15 May 1933.

<sup>77</sup> NAI OPW 5/12946/33, 'Viceregal Lodge Phoenix Park, Arrangements for Garden Party, 2 August 1933', File.

<sup>78</sup> NAI OPW 5/12946/33,

Letter, Doolin to Secretary, 15 May 1933. <sup>79</sup> For the biography of Douglas Hyde and study of his presidency, see Brian A. Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot: Douglas Hyde and the Foundation of the Irish Presidency* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2016).

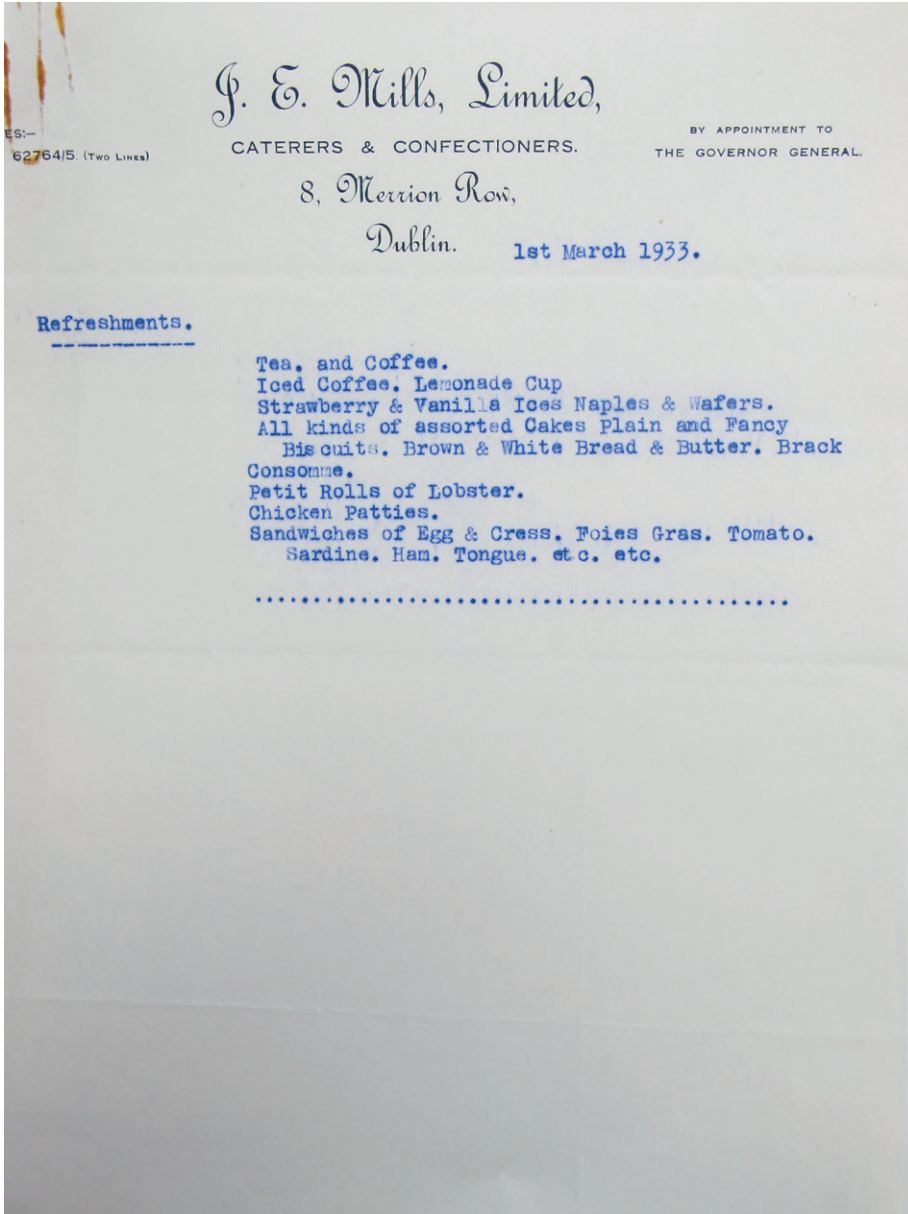


Figure 5 Menu for the St Patrick's Day state reception, Dublin Castle, 17 March 1933 (Source: NAI DFA 34/275)



### The Reception of Diplomatic Envoys to the Irish Free State under de Valera

In keeping with the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, diplomatic envoys to Ireland presented their credentials to the Governor-General at the Viceregal Lodge.<sup>80</sup> In May 1933, in what would be his only intervention in the reception of diplomats to the Irish Free State, Ó Buachalla, McNeill's replacement as Governor-General, accepted the Letter of Credence from the new French Minister, Pierre Guerlet.<sup>81</sup> The Governor-General was accompanied to the ceremony by de Valera and after the ceremony, Guerlet was accompanied by de Valera to the exit on his departure.<sup>82</sup> It was reported that Ó Buachalla had left ten minutes after the French Minister and that 'he passed out unnoticed except by the doorkeeper and a Civic Guard on duty there'.<sup>83</sup>

Appropriating the public elements of the ceremony was a subtle indication of the importance de Valera attached to the symbols associated with his position, while, at the same time, showing disregard for the office of Governor-General. All that remained in terms of the procedure was to take over the ceremonial aspects, which had taken place inside the building away from public view. De Valera achieved this less than six months later when King George V granted the Executive Council's submission that Letters of Credence and Recall be presented henceforth to the President of the Executive Council rather than to the Governor-General.<sup>84</sup> When the new United States envoy, William McDowell, arrived in March 1934, he presented his credentials to de Valera at Government Buildings,<sup>85</sup> and when a new Order of Precedence was approved in April 1934, all mention of the Governor-General had been removed.<sup>86</sup> By eclipsing the representative of the British monarch and reinforcing the separation between Ireland and Britain in this way, de Valera moved one step closer to removing symbols of British colonialism and gained ground in the recognition of Irish sovereignty.

### Irish State Hospitality at Dublin Castle under de Valera

Following this, de Valera made a series of further changes surrounding the arrival and departure of foreign envoys. He moved the credentials ceremony to Dublin Castle where he began to host a formal banquet in honour of each new minister to formally welcome them to their post. When an envoy left to take up a post elsewhere, a banquet was given in their honour also. This marks the start of a new chapter in official hospitality by the Irish Free State, which was extended

**80** For an example of these ceremonies under Healy and McNeill, see 'First Minister to Irish Free State' and 'With Full Honours, 1930', available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWVF-8doaP8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHWeXiCR6wc>

**81** French Minister Charles Alphonse's Letter of Recall

was also presented but the minister was absent due to illness, see Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 158.

**82** *Irish Times*, 'A Colourful Ceremony, French Minister's Credentials', 15 May 1933, 4; *Irish Times*, 'French Minister Visits Governor-General, At Government Buildings', 20 May 1933, 10.

**83** *Irish Times*, 'A Colourful Ceremony, French Minister's Credentials', 15 May 1933, 4.

**84** This is discussed in detail by Sexton, *Governor-Generalship*, 159. **85** *Irish Times*, 'United States' Minister, Presentation of Credentials', 27 March 1934, 7; *Irish Times*, 'Mr. McDowell's Reception, Statements on Change in

Procedure', 31 March 1934, 7.

**86** Both acting and previous Governors-General were listed in orders of precedence prior to this; NAI DFA 335/57, Order of Precedence, 28 April 1934.

in 1935 to include certain visitors to Ireland and established Dublin Castle's status as the primary venue for official entertaining by the Irish government.<sup>87</sup>

The banquets were held in the Throne Room, the Picture Gallery, or the small Dining Room, depending on the number of guests. The assertion that de Valera appropriated the Throne Room—where most of the banquets were held—as a stage for his own brand of majesty<sup>88</sup> could be said to have extended to the menus served, given their resonance in international state banquets of the period. Those served at Dublin Castle contain no trace of the meagre repasts and frugality for which de Valera was known<sup>89</sup> and were more reminiscent of the 'stout, claret and good Tipperary beef' that de Valera had relished earlier in his career as a teacher at Rockwell College.<sup>90</sup>

State hospitality was offered on over thirty occasions at Dublin Castle between 1934 and 1940 making it the primary venue for state entertaining over the course of those years, and each occasion was catered by J.E. Mills. Save for small lunches and private dinners held in his rooms in Leinster House, de Valera entertained almost exclusively at Dublin Castle during this period. In March 1935, he hosted a dinner in St Patrick's Hall for Cardinal Joseph MacRory, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, and with this, extended dining at Dublin Castle to a distinguished member of Irish society. An examination of the background of those subsequently entertained at the Castle suggests that when the prospect of offering state entertainment to important visitors arose, de Valera gave priority to the relationship between the Irish Free State and the United States, and between the Irish Free State and the dominions of the British Commonwealth.<sup>91</sup>

Lunch menus were between seven and eight courses long, and banquet menus between eight and ten courses. In keeping with *haute cuisine* in France and Sweden in the same period, the Dublin Castle menus followed the requisite sequence of fine dining, beginning with an *hors d'oeuvre* followed by soup, a fish course, an *entrée*, the remove, the roast, a sweet and savoury *entremets*, and finished with dessert and coffee.<sup>92</sup> *Haute cuisine* and the influence of the French culinary tradition on dining in Dublin as previously mentioned continued to be very much in evidence. Menus featured dishes such as *Bisque*, *Trout Meunière*, *Mignons de Boeuf à la Chasseur*, *Asparagus Mousseline*, *Anges à Cheval* and *Charlotte à l'Orange*, all of which can be found in *Le Répertoire de la Cuisine* or *Larousse Gastronomique* by name and/or preparation, clearly identifying their origin in the French culinary register.<sup>93</sup>

**87** Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 3. **88** Derham, *Majesty*, 286. **89** McMahon, *Republicans*, 42. **90** David McCullagh, *De Valera, Volume I: Rise 1882–1932* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2017), 41–42. **91** Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 3. **92** Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Arranging the Meal: A History of Table Service in France*

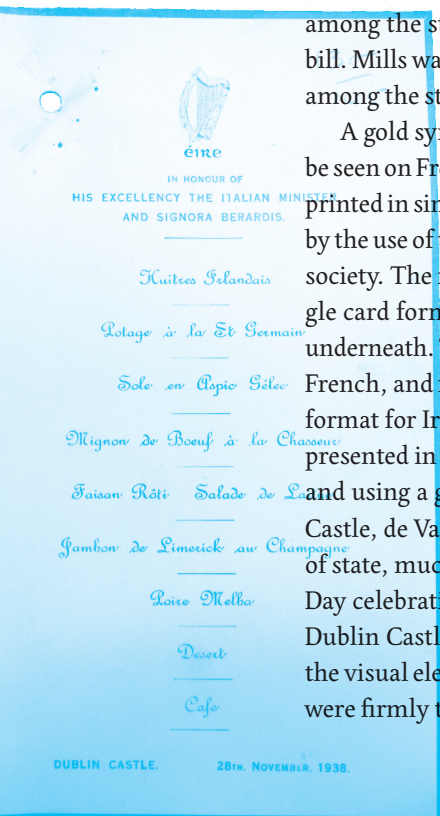
(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 98–106; Ulrica Söderlind, *The Nobel Banquets: A Century of Culinary History (1901–2001)* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2010) 95–96. **93** Louis Saulnier, *Le Répertoire de la Cuisine*, 17th edition (Kent: Leon Jaeggi & Sons, 1914), *Bisque*, 43;

*Meunière*, 10; *Anges à Cheval*, 238; Prosper Montagné, *Larousse Gastronomique* (London: Hamlyn, 2009), *Chasseur, à la*, 206; *Mousseline*, 598; *Charlotte*, 204–5.

Irish ingredients featured on the Dublin Castle menus from the outset. At the first banquet in honour of American Minister McDowell in April 1934, the menu offered 'Roast Irish Lamb, Mint Sauce, French Beans', followed by Limerick Ham, which also featured on other menus.<sup>94</sup> Oysters were a popular *hors d'oeuvre* and *Huitres Irlandais* opened the banquet for Italian Minister Vincenzo Berardis (Figure 6) in November 1938.<sup>95</sup> Proposing Irish food and specifically amending menus to feature these items suggests knowledge of high-quality produce, as well as a desire on the part of External Affairs officials to highlight Irish ingredients to foreign guests on the menus served by the Irish state.

After each banquet, External Affairs forwarded the bill from J.E. Mills to the Department of Finance who then issued two Payable Orders addressed to the caterer. The first was to settle the account, the second was for distribution among the staff as a gratuity and amounted to approximately 5% of the total bill. Mills was then required to certify, by letter, that the tip had been distributed among the staff that had attended the dinner.<sup>96</sup>

A gold symbol and gilt edge is the standard mark of a head of state and can be seen on French, Italian, Swedish, American, British and Belgian state menus printed in single card format as early as 1856.<sup>97</sup> The status of the host is indicated by the use of the symbol and serves as a marker of the host's leading rank within society. The menus from the Dublin Castle series were printed in a similar single card format with a gilt edge, featuring a gold harp with the word *Saorstát* underneath. The names of the dishes were typeset in gold, and written in English, French, and *franglais*, as was customary at the time. This became the standard format for Irish state banquet menus until the 1960s when menus began to be presented in English and French or French and Irish. By reproducing the harp and using a gilt edge on the state menus at banquets offered by him at Dublin Castle, de Valera was once more making use of symbols associated with a head of state, much as he had done for the ceremonial aspects of the 1933 St Patrick's Day celebration discussed above. With the Governor-General out of view and Dublin Castle reinstated as an official venue of the Irish government, by 1934 the visual elements of official character associated with dining at Dublin Castle were firmly those of a head of state.



**Figure 6** Menu for the Berardis banquet, Dublin Castle, November 1938 (Source: NAI DFA 135/145)

**94** NAI DFA 35/152, Menu for Minister McDowell, 4 April 1937; NAI PRES/P414, Menu 'In Honour of His Excellency the Spanish Minister and Senora Aguilar', 19 December 1935. **95** NAI DFA 135/415, Menu 'In Honour of His Excellency the Italian Minister and Signora Berardis', 28 November 1938. **96** NAI DFA 35/135, Letter, Kenny

to Mills, 22 June 1934; NAI DFA 35/152, Letter, Lovell to Kenny, 5 November 1934; this is an interesting element given media reports in Ireland in recent years relating to staff wages and the distribution of tips in the restaurant industry and which led to The Payment of Wages (Amendment) (Tips and Gratuities) Act 2022, available:

<https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/legislation/payment-of-wages-amendment-tips-and-gratuities-act-2022.html> **97** See for example: Laurent Stéfani, *À la Table des Diplomates: L'Histoire de France racontée à travers ses grands repas, 1520–2015* (Paris: Editions Iconoclaste, 2016), 103, 137, 180, 261; Susanne Groom, *At the King's Table:*

### Dining at Áras an Uachtaráin, 1938

When the Constitution of Ireland came into operation on 29 December 1937<sup>98</sup> it provided for a head of state, the President of Ireland, and a head of government, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister). The first President of Ireland, Douglas Hyde, was inaugurated on 25 June 1938 and took up official residence at Áras an Uachtaráin, formerly the Viceregal Lodge.<sup>99</sup> Éamon de Valera became Taoiseach and remained Minister for External Affairs. For the first time, state hospitality offered by the head of state and the head of government became clearly distinguishable.

On entering office and within the first months of his presidency, Hyde established a series of ‘firsts’ in state entertaining by an Irish President. They represented the international suite of state entertainment and consisted of a first lunch, a first reception, a first garden party, and the first official dinner, each of which is discussed below.

#### The First Lunch

On the day of his inauguration and to celebrate his entry into office, President Hyde held his first lunch at Áras an Uachtaráin.<sup>100</sup> His guests of honour were the members of the Presidential Commission and the Council of State.<sup>101</sup> J.E. Mills was asked to cater for the lunch and suggested two menus, the final one chosen being made up of a selection of dishes from across the two.<sup>102</sup>

Hyde was determined that Áras an Uachtaráin would be a ‘bastion of Irish culture’ and had requested that his staff be Irish speaking.<sup>103</sup> It is not surprising then that the menu was written in Irish.<sup>104</sup> It differed from the single card format used by de Valera at Dublin Castle and was presented in booklet form, similar to those at the banquet for Kellogg in 1928 and the Papal Nuncio in 1930 shown above. The state harp was printed on the outside, in gold, along with the words ‘*Ar dhul i gcúram a oifige do Dhubhghlas de h-Íde mar Uachtarán na hÉireann, Árus an Uachtaráin, Meitheamh, an 25adh, 1938*’<sup>105</sup> (Figure 7).

In keeping with lunch menus served at Dublin Castle during the same period, guests were offered eight courses. The meal started with *mealbhacán* (melon), *anairthe smudán* (turtle soup) and mayonnaise *gliomach* (lobster mayonnaise), followed by *stéigeanna uain-féola, péise agus prátaí* (lamb cutlets with peas and potatoes), *lus súgach anlann fíona gléigil* (asparagus in white wine sauce), *sú talún agus uachtar* (strawberries and cream), *torthaí* (fruit) and *caife* (coffee).<sup>106</sup>

*Royal Dining Through the Ages* (London: Merrell Publishers, 2013), 189. **98** Government of Ireland, *Irish Statute Book. Constitution of Ireland*, available: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html> **99** On the choice of Áras an Uachtaráin as the President’s official residence, see Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 173–174. **100** NAI PRES

P312, Lunch to Ministers, File; for a full discussion on Hyde’s inauguration, see Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 13–30. **101** The Presidential Commission and the Council of State comprise a number of ministers and senior state officers to aid and counsel the President where necessary, see Michael McDunphy, *The President of Ireland, His Powers,*

*Functions and Duties* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1945) 33–40; see also <https://www.president.ie/en/the-president/presidential-commission-and> <https://www.president.ie/en/the-president/council-of-state> **102** NAI PRES P312, Letter, Lovell to McDunphy, 17 May 1938. **103** For a detailed discussion on Hyde’s ‘Gaelic Presidency’, see Murphy,

*Forgotten Patriot*, 172–77. **104** NAI PRES P312, Menu. **105** Translating to: ‘Douglas Hyde on taking up his office as President of Ireland, Áras an Uachtaráin, June the 25th, 1938’. **106** NAI PRES P312, Handwritten Menu in Irish and English.

P312



AR TUL I SCURAM A OIFISE  
 DO  
 OUBHLOS DE H-IOE  
 MAR  
 UACHTARAIN NA HEIREANN

ARUS AN UACHTARAIN  
 Meiteam, An 25ad, 1938

menu



Mealbacan Reoite



Anairte Smuolam, Sle-glan



Mayonnaise Sliomais



Laca Os Rosta, Saileau Onaiste

Ponari Francaea

Patai Na



Susa Talman Reoite 7 Uactar



Fas an Don Oioe ar Croucon



Tortai



Capé

Figure 7 Lunch menu offered by President Hyde to celebrate his entry into office, Áras an Uachtaráin, 25 June 1938 (Source: NAI PRES P312)

### The first garden party

The first official garden party held at Áras an Uachtaráin took place on Saturday 17 June 1939.<sup>107</sup> Over 2,300 guests were expected to attend. Two firms, J.E. Mills, and Mrs B. Lawlor of the Nás-na-Riogh Hotel, Naas, Co. Kildare, were invited to submit tenders for the event.<sup>108</sup> The contract was awarded to Mills on the basis that the menu was judged to be of better quality than that proposed by Mrs Lawlor. At a rate of 3s.6d. (approximately £9.49) per person for the first 1,000 guests and 2s.6. (approximately £6.79) per guest thereafter, Mills' menu also cost £300 (approximately £16,270), which was lower than Mrs Lawlor's estimate which came in at £325 (approximately £17,630), a difference of £25 (approximately £1,356).<sup>109</sup> Mills guaranteed 'everything of the best description, in plenty with first class attendance', pointing out that they manufactured 'everything in the way of edibles' themselves and, 'in the making, only use the best of materials procurable'.<sup>110</sup>

Mills' buffet menu (Figure 8) for the President's garden party in July 1938 is similar to that of the President's reception which took place in September 1938, and both are similar to Mills' menu for the state reception for St Patrick's Day at Dublin Castle in 1933. Of note is the presence of commodities such as lobster and *foie gras*, the similarities between all three menus suggesting that this type of fare was the standard offering at state receptions by this time.

A further similarity between this reception and the St Patrick's Day reception in 1933 was that alcohol was not served to the general body of guests, but only to special guests, such as government officials and members of the Diplomatic Corps.<sup>111</sup> Michael McDunphy,<sup>112</sup> Secretary to President Hyde, had suggested this on the grounds that it would 'increase the expense out of all proportion and would be extremely difficult to control',<sup>113</sup> no doubt keeping in mind that the cost of entertaining was borne out of the President's pocket.<sup>114</sup> A number of select guests were received by the President in the Reception Room and were provided with cocktails and other refreshments before the party began. They included members of the Government, Parliamentary Secretaries, the Attorney-General, the Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann, the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann, the Chief Justice, the President of the High Court, Cardinal MacRory, the Apostolic Nuncio and relatives of President Hyde.<sup>115</sup>

For the first time, refreshments for staff on duty emerges in the records. Provision was made for the caterer to offer refreshments for stewards, ushers, gardaí, chauffeurs, ministers' escorts and office staff who were not guests but

**107** NAI PRES P447, Memo, 'Presidential Garden Party, Saturday, 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1939. General File', 5 July 1939. **108** NAI PRES P912, Memo, 'Garden Party, June 1939, Catering', 30 May 1939. **109** NAI PRES P912, Note, de Buitléar to

Secretary, 18 May 1939. **110** NAI PRES P912, Letter, Lovell to McDunphy, 19 May 1939. **111** This had also been the case at the state reception at the Eucharistic Congress. **112** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/mcdunphy-michael-a5651> **113** NAI

PRES P912, Memo, 'No Liquor supplied, Nature of refreshments for guests', McDunphy, n.d. **114** Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 267. **115** NAI PRES P447, Memo, 'Presidential Garden Party, Saturday, 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1939, General File', 5 July 1939.

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Dublin.

Dear Sir.

We will be pleased to supply Light Refreshments as undernoted inclusive of all Appointments, Attendance, Marquees, etc. for 1,000 guarants guaranteed at the rate of 3/6 per head, and all over and above 1,000 guests will be supplied at 2/6 per head.

We guarantee everything of the best description, in plenty with first class attendance and trust to have your esteemed order.

Yours faithfully  
J.E.Mills Ltd.  
*J.E. Mills*

Buffet Refreshments

- Tea. Coffee. Iced Coffee.
- Lemonade. Orangeade. Sauterne & Claret Cups
- Ices. Naples & Wafers.
- Cakes. Plain and Fancy in Variety
- Petit Sandwiches of Cucumber Foies Gras. Tomato.
- Egg. Salmon. Sardine. Ham. Tongue etc.
- Rolls of Chicken & Mushroom
- Lobster Boats.
- Cocktail Fancies.
- .....

*admission 2,000 first  
cost = £300*

Figure 8 Buffet menu for the first garden party hosted by President Hyde, at Áras an Uachtaráin, 17 June 1939 (Source: NAI PRES Pg12)

who were on duty at the garden party. A serving area for staff food was set up in a shed in the garage quadrangle where ‘the usual refreshment’ was made available, namely ‘wine or two bottles of stout’ with ‘as many sandwiches as they might care to take’.<sup>116</sup> These staff were permitted to eat in the catering tents along with the stewards and members of staff of the President’s house. While this is the first time the issue of staff food emerges, the reference to ‘the usual refreshment’ in the records suggests that this was established practice by the time this event took place.

Afterwards, stewards received additional refreshments and were served ‘wine and whiskey from the President’s cellars’.<sup>117</sup> This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it shows a hierarchy of prestige within the refreshments served to staff in that, in addition to receiving ‘the usual refreshment’, extra alcohol was served to stewards compared with other staff. Secondly, the wine and whiskey came from the President’s cellar which indicates that a stock of alcohol had been laid in at Áras an Uachtaráin by 1939.<sup>118</sup> Other than the practical and economic reasons for keeping a stock of alcohol to avoid mark-up by a caterer, maintaining a wine cellar gave a sense of permanency to Áras an Uachtaráin which was not evident in Dublin Castle in the period prior to this.

These protocols were drawn up by McDunphy, in his role as Secretary to the President. He had been the ideal candidate for the position when it arose, having previously served as Assistant Secretary in the Department of the President of the Executive Council where one of his responsibilities was to be the official liaison with the office of the Governor-General.<sup>119</sup> That post had given him invaluable experience which was put to considerable use when drawing up ‘the precedents and ground rules’ relating to President Hyde’s office and produced a voluminous collection of files as a result.<sup>120</sup> Less well known are those files relating to entertainment and which generated a significant collection of documents, some of which are discussed in this chapter.

### The First Reception

Just before leaving for holidays at his home in Ratra, Co. Roscommon, President Hyde informed McDunphy that he wished to hold a reception for the Gaelic League.<sup>121</sup> The League, which Hyde had co-founded in 1893, was the national movement for the revival of the Irish language.<sup>122</sup> His principal guests were to be those who had been members from the time of the League’s foundation until his departure in 1915, and the date was set for Saturday, 24 September 1938. It was the first official reception given by a President of Ireland.<sup>123</sup>

**116** NAI PRES P912, Memo, ‘Refreshments for staff apart from the general body of guests’, McDunphy, n.d.  
**117** NAI PRES P912, Memo, ‘Refreshments for staff apart from the general body of guests’, McDunphy, n.d.

**118** A corresponding project to lay in a stock of wine and champagne for entertaining in Iveagh House began in 1946, Mahon, ‘Irish Diplomatic Dining’, chap. 5.  
**119** Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 128. **120** Murphy,

*Forgotten Patriot*, 128.  
**121** NAI PRES P617, General Note, McDunphy, 17 August 1938; Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 122.  
**122** Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 156; *Irish Times*, ‘President’s Reception,

Friends of Irish Language’, 26 September 1938, 2.  
**123** NAI PRES P617, President’s Gaelic Colleagues, Reception 1938, File; *Irish Times*, ‘The President’s First Reception’, 15 September 1938, 4.



Preparations began immediately and McDunphy organised a meeting with the OPW's Furniture Clerk, Charles Sholdice, to discuss requirements.<sup>124</sup> The President's reception room, the Secretary's room, the ballroom, the buffet room and the adjoining corridors were to be opened and prepared for use. One hundred gilt-legged Bentwood chairs were to be brought from storage at Dublin Castle for seating inside, one hundred garden seats were to be placed outside on the lawn and trestle tables were to be provided for serving refreshments.<sup>125</sup>

Mrs Lawlor was the only caterer invited by McDunphy to tender for this event. This was likely the result of a letter from Charles O'Connor of Lucan House, a close acquaintance of Hyde's from the Gaelic League, suggesting that her firm be considered if the services of a caterer were ever required.<sup>126</sup> McDunphy discussed the choice of Mrs Lawlor's firm with External Affairs, who raised no objection,<sup>127</sup> and a meeting was arranged with Mrs Lawlor on 19 August 1938 where she was requested to tender for the provision of a 'running buffet'.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to the food and beverages, Mrs Lawlor agreed to provide floral decorations, gold and silverware, the table appointments, and a number of small tables around the ballroom.<sup>129</sup> Mrs Lawlor did not provide alcohol and cigarettes, both of which were typically included by the caterer for the banquets at Dublin Castle. Instead, an order for alcohol was placed by the President's staff, who then offered drinks to certain guests as previously minuted by McDunphy.<sup>130</sup> Mrs Lawlor was asked to guarantee an Irish-speaking waiter for the President's table, and to ensure, where possible, that the remainder of the waiters and waitresses were Irish speakers.<sup>131</sup> Mrs Lawlor later confirmed that she had booked four Irish-speaking attendants in all, two male and two female.

Several days beforehand, the question arose as to whether meat sandwiches should be served given that the day of the reception, Saturday, was a fast day.<sup>132</sup> President Hyde was from a Church of Ireland background and was not bound by the rules of fasting imposed by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>133</sup> McDunphy decided that a larger number of seafood fillings should be served but that a small quantity of meat sandwiches should be available nonetheless.<sup>134</sup> The proposed menu was readjusted to take into consideration any guests who might be fasting on the day and is the first example of a state menu specifically tailored to cater for this (Figure 9).<sup>135</sup>

**124** NAI PRES P617, Report of meeting with Mr Sholdice, O'Ceallaigh, 18 August 1938.

**125** NAI PRES P617, Report, O'Ceallaigh, 30 September 1938. **126** NAI PRES P530, Letter, Lawlor to O'Connor, 6 July 1938; NAI PRES P530, Letter, O'Connor to Hyde, 9 July 1938; *Irish Times*, 'An Irishman's Diary', 21 February 1995. **127** NAI PRES P617, Report, O'Ceallaigh, 17 August 1938. **128** NAI PRES

P530, Memo, 19 August 1938; a 'running buffet' refers to a buffet which remains in place throughout an event and is constantly replenished.

**129** NAI PRES P530, Memo, 19 August 1938. **130** NAI PRES P617, Report, O'Ceallaigh, 30 September 1938.

**131** NAI PRES P530, Memo, 'Reception Sept. 1938, Catering', 20 September 1938. **132** Irish Catholics fasted for between a third and half of the year into

the mid-twentieth century. The Church imposed fast days on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays and prescribed abstinence from meat, eggs, and dairy. For more on fasting in Ireland up to the mid-twentieth century, see Marjorie Deleuze, "'Well, we didn't pass a bit o' remarks on it. It was second nature to us": The Rituals of Fasting in Ireland before Vatican II', *Canadian Journal of Irish*


*Studies, The Food Issue*, 41 (2018), 226–49. **133** Mary Robinson, 'Douglas Hyde (1860–1949). The Trinity Connection', *Hermathena, Quatercentenary Discourse* (1992), 17–26. **134** NAI PRES P530, Memo, 'Reception Sept. 1938, Catering', 20 September 1938.

**135** On 'keeping Lent' in the splendour of the Viceregal Lodge during an earlier period, see Grace Neville,

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PARK LANE, LONDON.

Aug. 20th. 1938

QUOTATION for Reception 150/300 Guests.  
3/6 per head inclusive.

MENU (Buffet)

Tea (Indian & China) Coffee. Iced Coffee.  
Lemonade Claret Cup. Cider Cup  
Brioche of Lobster & Chicken  
Dainty Sandwiches of Chicken, Ham,  
Tomato, Egg & Cress, Cucumber  
Assorted French Pastries. Assorted Cake  
Bread & Butter. Brack & Butter.  
Cherry Log  
Ices, Maples & Wafers

\* \* \* \*

We will bring along some small tables to be placed round the adjoining room where guests can be seated for tea.

Figure 9 Buffet menu for the first reception offered by President Hyde, at Áras an Uachtaráin, 24 September 1938 (Source: NAI PRES P530)

### The first official dinner

In April 1939, President Hyde decided to host an official dinner on a regular basis at Áras an Uachtaráin.<sup>136</sup> He wished to help facilitate a social relationship with ministers and their wives and representatives of other interests throughout the state.<sup>137</sup> A total of six dinners were scheduled between April 1939 and April 1940. They were not intended to be large events and were limited to a maximum of thirty-four guests due to the size of the dining table at the Áras.<sup>138</sup> The dinners were considered too large an undertaking for the domestic staff and Hyde gave approval for outside contractors to cater these events.<sup>139</sup> The first official dinner was held on 27 April 1939 and was followed by another on 16 May 1939.<sup>140</sup> Mills was the sole caterer invited to submit a menu for the first dinner<sup>141</sup> and competed with Mrs Lawlor for subsequent contracts although Mills was also awarded the contract for the second dinner.<sup>142</sup>

As the garden party was taking place in June, Hyde decided to move the dinner to September.<sup>143</sup> Following the outbreak of the Second World War on 1 September 1939, the schedule of dinners was postponed until the following spring when a further four dinners were organised. The first dinner of 1940 was held on 5 February and catered by Mills, the second was held on 1 April and catered by Lawlor's.<sup>144</sup>

The choice of Lawlor's was part of a concerted effort on the part of McDunphy to widen the circle of invited caterers, among which he hoped to include Restaurant Jammet and the Dolphin Hotel, to ensure better service by instilling a sense of competition.<sup>145</sup> Mills' work always received excellent reports but when Mrs Lawlor's catered for the dinner on 1 April 1940, the feedback McDunphy relayed to her was that diners had to wait too long between courses, there were not enough serving staff, the fish was unattractive and the soufflé, while excellent in taste, took too long to be served.<sup>146</sup> This might have been the type of service that Joe Walshe<sup>147</sup> was alluding to when he described catering by Mrs Lawlor's firm as 'the rough and tumble variety' in 1934.<sup>148</sup>

Mills was awarded the contract for the third dinner on 15 April 1940.<sup>149</sup> Jammet's had replied to say that they did not do outside catering.<sup>150</sup> The Dolphin Hotel submitted a tender and was selected to cater for the fourth dinner on 29 April 1940.<sup>151</sup>

'Food, Feast and Famine in the Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell' in this volume. **136** NAI PRES P1285, Memo, 'Periodic Dinners, Guest Lists', 12 April 1939. **137** NAI PRES P20, Memo, 'Lunches given by President, General File', McDunphy, 18 October 1939. **138** NAI PRES P829, Memo, 'Dinner - April 1939', McDunphy, 28 March 1939. **139** NAI PRES P1285, Memo, 'Fortnightly Dinners',

McDunphy, 14 March 1939. **140** NAI PRES P1605, Memo, '1st Official Dinner, 27th April 1939'; NAI PRES P1605, Memo, '2nd Official Dinner, 16th May 1939'. **141** NAI PRES P1605, Letter and Menu, Lovell to McDunphy, 19 April 1936. **142** NAI PRES P1605, Memo, '2nd Official Dinner 1939, 16th May 1939'. **143** NAI PRES P784, Memo, 'Omission of Dinners during Summer', McDunphy, 21 June 1939. **144** NAI PRES

P1605, Memo, '1st Official Dinner 1940, 5th February 1940'; NAI PRES P1605, Memo, '2nd Official Dinner 1940, 1st April 1940'. **145** NAI PRES P1605, Memo, 'Official Dinners, Catering', 2 April 1940. **146** NAI PRES P1605, Note 'To be brought to Mrs Lawlor's attention', McDunphy, n.d. **147** Joseph (Joe) Walshe was appointed secretary of the Department of External Affairs in 1922

where he remained until his appointment as Irish Ambassador to the Holy See in 1946, see Aengus Nolan, *Joseph Walshe: Irish Foreign Policy 1922-1946* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2008). **148** When the tenders for catering for the state reception for the Eucharistic Congress were submitted, Mrs Lawlor's was not selected despite being the cheapest. The Department of Finance

The caterers charged the same price as had been charged at Dublin Castle between 1934 and 1940. The meal cost 15 shillings per person (approximately £40.48) and alcohol was provided and charged, based on consumption.<sup>152</sup> Two menus were submitted by each caterer for each dinner and, as in the case at Dublin Castle, the final menu was created from a selection made across the two. McDunphy made the selections and numbered each dish to indicate his choice (Figure 10). For example, the selected *hors d'oeuvre* was number '1', the chosen soup was number '2', the required *entremets* was number '3' and so on. The menu was then returned to Mills with the note 'Order as numbered apprvd [sic], if gastronomically correct'.<sup>153</sup> McDunphy's selection demonstrated a knowledge of French *haute cuisine* and menu sequencing, yet gave the caterer the possibility to inform him in the unlikely event that his choice was not entirely sound.

The first official dinner menu was nine courses long and printed in booklet form, on an embossed matt white card with a gold harp and the words *Áras an Uachtaráin* on the outside followed by the date, in gold, in Gaelic typescript.<sup>154</sup> Inside, on the right-hand side, the menu was printed in gold, exclusively in French, a deliberate break away from using Irish or English which is noted on file.<sup>155</sup> Mills received forty blank menu cards and supplied the final, printed, menu on the evening. The printing cost £1.5.0 (approximately £67.80) and was added to the caterer's bill.<sup>156</sup>

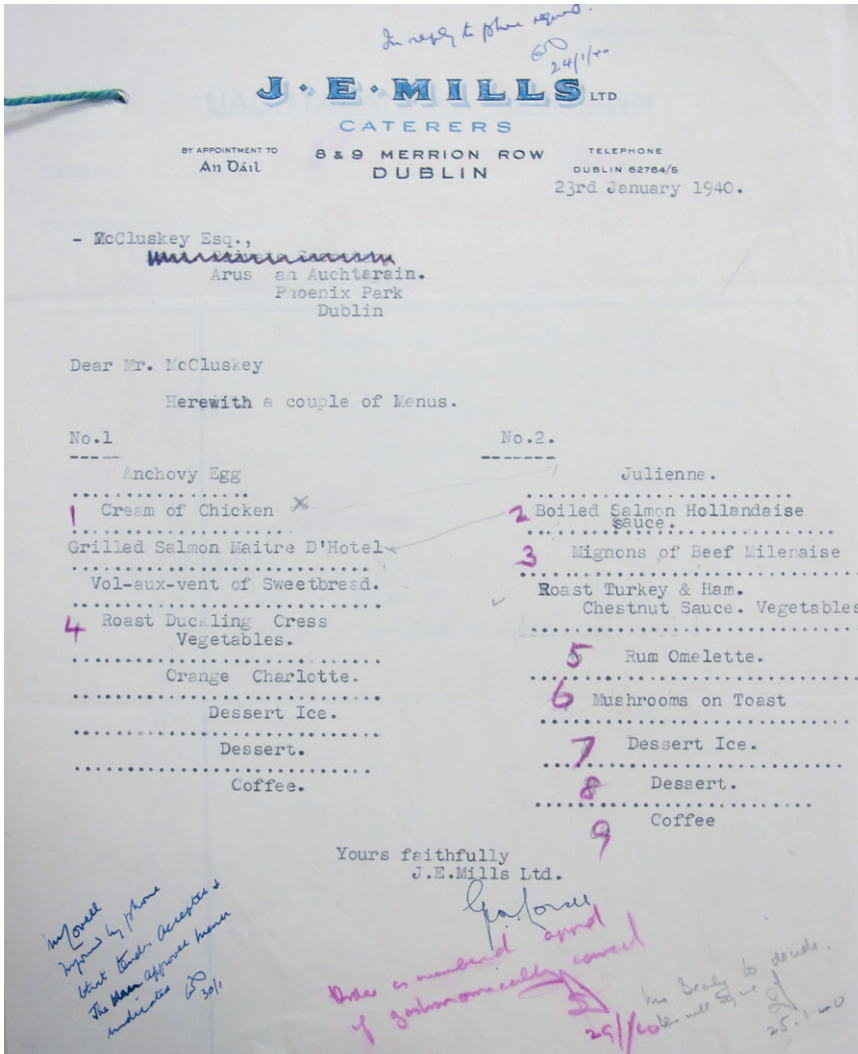
The menu for the first dinner opened with oysters (served on crushed ice, with brown bread and butter, lemon quarters or shallot sauce), followed by cream of chicken soup, salmon *Maitre d'Hôtel* (a savoury butter containing chopped parsley and lemon juice, served in liquid form in a sauceboat or solidified, in rounds or slices), *côtelettes* of foie gras (croquettes made with foie gras and diced truffles, formed into the shape of lamb cutlets, coated in egg and seasoned breadcrumbs, and fried in butter), spit-roast leg of lamb served with a *salade russe* (small dice of carrots, turnips, French beans, peas, truffles and mushrooms, tongue and ham, lobster, gherkins, fillets of anchovies and capers coated with mayonnaise and garnished with beetroot, eggs and caviar), followed by an iced *Mont Blanc* as the sweet *entremets* (sweet brioche soaked in kirsch syrup, garnished with ice-cream, whipped cream and chestnut purée), asparagus *croustade* (asparagus on puff pastry) as the savoury *entremets* and finished with fruit and coffee (Figure 11).<sup>157</sup>

queried this and was informed by External Affairs that they were unsure if the firm had experience of catering for such large numbers, and that in any event they did not 'make their own cakes, pastries and ices', NAI DFA 34/43A, Letter, Murphy to O'Hegarty, 7 January 1932. In notes for a forthcoming meeting with de Valera, Walshe described catering by Mrs Lawlor's as 'the rough and

tumble variety' although it is not evident to which event he was referring, NAI DFA 35/126, Memo entitled 'To remind the President to Discuss with in Cabinet', signed Walshe, 12 February 1934; on Walshe's relationship with de Valera, see Kennedy, 'Nobody Knows', 165–83. **149** NAI PRES P1605, Memo, '3rd Official Dinner 1940, 15th April 1940'. **150** NAI PRES P1605, Memo, 'Official Dinners, Catering,

2 April 1940. **151** NAI PRES P1605, Memo, '4th Official Dinner 1940, 29th April 1940'. **152** NAI PRES P829, 'Statement of Expenses relating to 1<sup>st</sup> Official Dinner', 27 April 1939. **153** NAI PRES P1605, Menu proposed by Mills with annotations by McDunphy, 29 January 1940. **154** NAI PRES P829, Menu. **155** NAI PRES P829, Memo, 'Notes on Arrangements, Menu Cards', 1 May 1939.

**156** NAI PRES P829, 'Statement of Expenses relating to 1st Official Dinner', 27 April 1939. **157** Montagné, *Huitres*, 29; *Maitre d'Hôtel*, 762; *Côtelettes de Foie Gras*, 381; *Quartier d'Agneau*, 535; *Crouîtes*, 292–93; *Mont Blanc*, 220; *Croustade*, iii.



**Figure 10** Menu selection by Michael McDunphy for an official dinner at Áras an Uachtaráin (Source: NAI PRES P1605)

As Mills catered this dinner, it is not surprising to note similarities in menu content with Dublin Castle. It follows the sequence of fine dining yet contains a subtle change in the designation of the dessert course. State menus in Ireland reflected those abroad which usually simply stated 'Dessert' as the penultimate course whereas this menu informs the President's guests of what would be served during that course.<sup>158</sup>

Precedence at the table was in accordance with the ranking of male guests, as was customary.<sup>159</sup> Ladies followed the precedence of their husbands. President Hyde sat in the middle of the long rectangular table and his sister, Mrs Annette Cambreth Kane, who acted as hostess, sat opposite him. External Affairs assisted with arrangements and drew up a table plan of where guests should sit in order of precedence.<sup>160</sup> A new Order of Precedence, drawn up following the 1937 Constitution, ranked the President in first place, the Taoiseach in second, Cardinal Mac Rory third, followed by the Apostolic Nuncio in fourth and the Tánaiste, in fifth place. These guests formed the core of the dining table with the remaining guests radiating outwards towards the end of the table seated in order of importance.

McDunphy also established the use of a table plan shown to each person by the President's aide-de-camp Éamon De Buitléar<sup>161</sup> just before dinner.<sup>162</sup> It consisted of an oval-shaped tray standing on four legs, covered in a sheet of plate glass, the inside covered in black velvet. Name cards were placed in position on the velvet in order of precedence and were kept in place by the glass plate. This is the first mention of a table plan of this nature and the procedure to indicate seating to each guest was a new development that does not feature in Irish state dining prior to this.

As the process of official entertaining took shape at Áras an Uachtaráin, McDunphy established a system of forms to be distributed between the President, the President's aide-de-camp, the Housekeeper and himself. The system was intended to ensure that the President knew exactly whom he was to receive, when, and in what circumstances. Likewise, the Housekeeper would know the type of meal to be prepared, the number of guests to be provided for and where the meal was to be served.<sup>163</sup> This is the first written procedure of this kind that appears in the records.

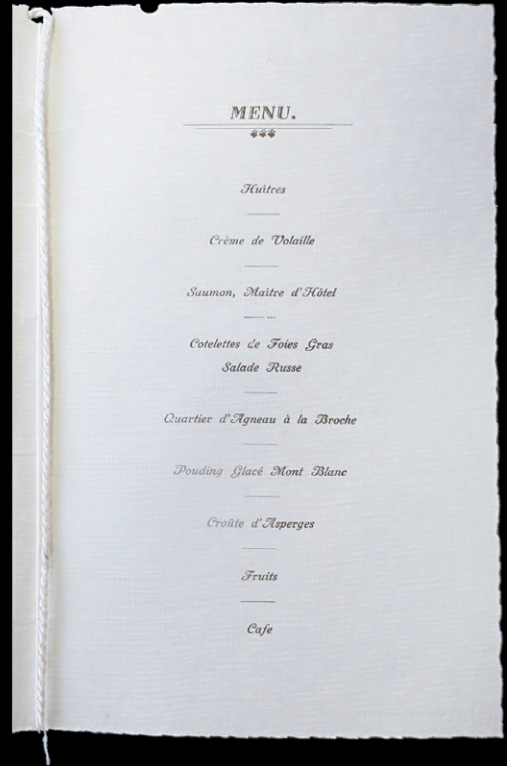
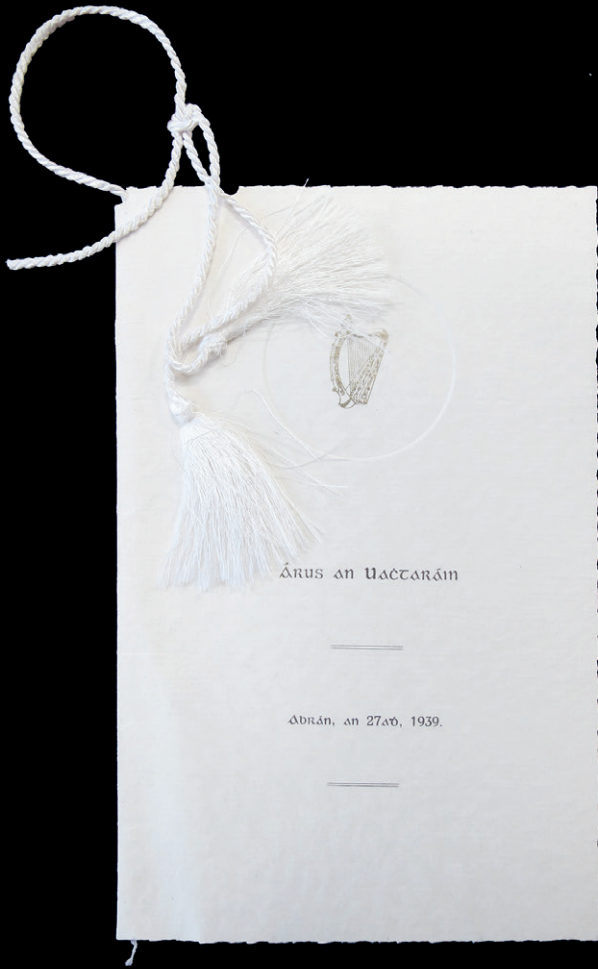
McDunphy drew up detailed instructions for entertaining visitors to the Áras. They stipulated whether tea or coffee would be served, if alcohol would be included, who might be offered cigars and cigarettes and which items might

**158** Flandrin, *Arranging the Meal*, 87–88, 105; changes were taking place in fine dining menus abroad and these began to be reflected in state menus in Ireland also. Menus were becoming shorter and would continue to do so over the 1940s and 1950s to eventually settle on the

three-course menu sequence of starter, main course and dessert that we recognise today, see Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining', chap. 5. **159** NAI PRES P829, 'Precedence at Table'. **160** NAI PRES P829, Letter, Table Plan and Order of Precedence, Boland to

McDunphy, 24 April 1939. **161** <https://www.dib.ie/biography/de-buitlear-eamon-a10031> **162** NAI PRES P1158, Memo, 'Dinners and Luncheons, Permanent Table Plan', 12 April 1939; NAI PRES P784, Memo, 'Notes on Arrangements, Table Plan', 1 May 1939. **163** NAI PRES

P425, Memo, 'Co-ordination of arrangements', McDunphy, 6 October 1938.



**Figure 11** Menu for the first official dinner hosted by President Douglas Hyde, Áras an Uachtaráin, 27 April 1939 (Source: NAI PRES P829)

need to be arranged in advance. They varied depending on whether the person was a diplomat, minister, chauffeur or attendant, or a person working in the grounds, and were modified depending on whether that person was visiting the President or the Secretary in an official or unofficial capacity.<sup>164</sup> He also wrote up reports after events, with one particular memorandum in July 1943 scathingly describing how the poet Patrick Kavanagh, who had been invited as a member of the press, had not observed protocols and ‘behaved throughout the reception as if he were one of the principal guests’. According to the memo, Kavanagh also ‘wore sandals without socks and generally looked untidy and not altogether clean’, all of which resulted in McDunphy deciding to enter a ‘caveat on his social card’ for future invitations to the Áras.<sup>165</sup>

President Hyde fell seriously ill on 13 April 1940. On his doctor’s advice, the two dinners, arranged for 15 April 1940 and 29 April 1940, were cancelled and the remaining dinners permanently discontinued.<sup>166</sup> Hyde had suffered a stroke and although he made a partial recovery, he was less publicly prominent for the remainder of his term in office than in the early years of his presidency.<sup>167</sup> Hyde’s social itinerary has been described as being ‘inclusive and healing’,<sup>168</sup> and his ‘quiet diplomacy’ of using presidential engagements at the Áras to bring people together after years of bitterness in the post-Civil War era has been likened to that of Mary McAleese’s presidency during the Northern Ireland peace process in the 1990s.<sup>169</sup>

Although the period of official hospitality at Áras an Uachtaráin covered here is relatively short, it is evident that a range of internationally accepted state entertainments were appropriately established at the residence of the President of Ireland by April 1940. This was, in no small part, due to Michael McDunphy’s meticulous attention to detail, awareness of protocol and organisational skills. Prior to 1937, in addition to serving as Assistant Secretary to the Department of the President of the Executive Council and liaising with the office of the Governor-General, McDunphy had been a member of the Kellogg Reception Committee and instrumental in the organisation of the American Secretary of State’s official visit to Ireland in 1928.<sup>170</sup> It is evident that he brought this vast experience and knowledge to his role at Áras an Uachtaráin, thus ensuring that although the hospitality offered at the Áras was the first of its kind by a President of Ireland, it was carried out with the attention to detail appropriate to rank, status, precedence and hierarchy in line with international practices of the period.

**164** NAI PRES P425, Memo, ‘Cancellation of Dinners owing to President’s illness’, ‘Visitors, Refreshments’, McDunphy, 11 November 1941. **165** NAI PRES 1/P3112, Memorandum entitled ‘Patrick Kavanagh—Pierse Plowman’, McDunphy, 27 July 1943. My thanks to Dr Brian Murphy for bringing this to my attention. **166** NAI PRES P784, Memo, ‘Cancellation of Dinners owing to President’s illness’, McDunphy, 15 April 1940. **167** Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 187. **168** Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 164. **169** Murphy, *Forgotten Patriot*, 165. **170** NAI TAOIS S5731, Letter, McDunphy to Murphy, 20 August 1928.



### Conclusion

Despite the presence of a Governor-General in the first decade following independence, the Irish Free State government, led by William T. Cosgrave, entertained at the highest level, commensurate with international standards. The Department of External Affairs carried out the work of a protocol division from the very beginning, playing a pivotal role in state hospitality for visitors. By 1931, the Department's achievements included the Order of Precedence of the Irish Free State, the successful first visit by an international statesman and responsibility for diplomatic protocol in the Irish Free State. Between 1932 and 1940, the Fianna Fáil government, led by Éamon de Valera, built on the foundations of state hospitality put in place by the Cumann na nGaedheal administration, but also implemented significant changes in official entertaining. Beginning with the state reception for the 1932 Eucharistic Congress, de Valera reinstated Dublin Castle as an official venue of the Irish Free State and began to entertain there almost exclusively, making particular use of symbols typically associated with a head of state. Following the 1937 Constitution, Douglas Hyde was inaugurated as the first President of Ireland and within a year of taking up residence at Áras an Uachtaráin, had established a series of 'firsts' in state entertaining by an Irish President with the attendant protocols and procedures the position required.

Rather than the bleak isolation inferred by Blanchard's description of Ireland as 'an island behind an island',<sup>171</sup> the discussion shows that Dublin was bustling with activity, and that from uncertain beginnings in the 1920s, the Irish government, led by Cosgrave, entertained international visitors from around the globe. External Affairs officials were skilled in ceremonial procedures, up to date with developments abroad, and capable of putting them into practice in an Irish context. De Valera appears to have been more sociable and less frugal than previously believed, and social engagements during Hyde's presidency, though marred by his illness, attempted to connect, and reconnect, various office holders and associations within Irish political and social life.

By 1940, the Irish state had established a framework and culinary repertoire equivalent to its international counterparts, confirming that 'lives were being lived in ways that a historiography convinced of homogeneity and isolation has not really sought to uncover'.<sup>172</sup> This framework would continue to evolve and develop with External Affairs' move to Iveagh House in 1941 where it would oversee projects such as the material culture of the Irish state table in 1946,<sup>173</sup>

**171** Translated from 'une île derrière une île', see Jean Blanchard, *Le droit ecclésiastique contemporain d'Irlande* (Paris: Pichon & Durand-Auzias, 1958), 11. **172** Dolan, *Irish Free State*, 323–48, 333. **173** Elaine Mahon, 'Setting the Irish state table', *Feast* (2016), available:

<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschafart/180/> **174** Mahon, 'The Minister Requests', forthcoming; the visit of President Kennedy in 1963 was considered, at that time, to be the most significant state visit to Ireland since the Eucharistic Congress. In more recent years, the most

significant state visit to Ireland is considered to be that of Queen Elizabeth II in May 2011, see Elaine Mahon, "Ireland on a Plate": Curating the State Banquet for Queen Elizabeth II', *M/C Journal of Media and Culture* 18: 4 (2015), available: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschafart/157/>.

J.E. Mills' replacement by the Hotel Russell in 1948, the appointment of the first Irish Chef de Protocol in 1949, and the state visits of Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco in 1961, and United States President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963.<sup>174</sup>

### **Acknowledgements**

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**26**

*Fact and Fiction in  
Maura Laverty's Food  
Writing, 1941–1960*

**Caitriona Clear**

'The writer who cannot keep away from writing about food, even when she is writing about other things,' was how *Irish Press* journalist Anna Kelly described Maura Laverty, journalist, radio personality, novelist, and food writer, in 1946.<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses on the specific food writing Laverty published in Ireland from 1941 to 1960—her five cookery books and her cookery columns for the *Irish Press* in 1946—but because Anna Kelly was right, some of Laverty's fiction will also feature in it.

### Brief biography

Maura Kelly was born in Rathangan, Co. Kildare in 1907, where her mother had a drapery shop; her father died when the family was very young. In 1924 she set off for Spain as a governess. Progressing to clerical work, she stayed four years in Spain, sending stories and poems home to *Our Boys*, the *Irish Monthly* and 'many English magazines', according to Seamus Kelly, her biographer.<sup>2</sup> Returning home in 1928 to tell her family of her engagement to a Hungarian engineer, she fell in love with Seamus Laverty, then in the Defence Forces, to whom she had been writing while she was in Spain. They married almost immediately and settled in Dublin city, and had two daughters and a son. In the 1930s Maura Laverty, as she now was, presented several programmes on 2RN, later Radio Éireann, on literary, religious, and domestic themes, wrote pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, and wrote for newspapers and periodicals as well.<sup>3</sup> From 1936 she was not only 'Mrs Wyse' the agony aunt on *Woman's Life*, the most popular Irish women's magazine, but also 'Dr Garry Myers', and 'Delia Dixon', the beauty expert.<sup>4</sup> Up to her premature death in 1966, Laverty broadcast and wrote for newspapers, magazines, and periodicals from *The Bell* to *Liberty*, the periodical of the Irish Transport & General Workers Union (ITGWU), from the *Irish Press* to *Woman's Way*.<sup>5</sup> She also wrote four novels, a cookbook and two children's books between 1942 and 1949.<sup>6</sup> Laverty adapted some of the characters from her final (banned) novel, *Lift Up Your Gates*, into popular plays she wrote

**1** 'Child who devoured every recipe and loved it', Anna Kelly, 'Writing for Women', *Irish Press*, 7 January, 1946. Anna Kelly (née Fitzsimons) had been active in the national struggle along with her husband Frank, and was a prolific journalist and writer throughout these years. Angela Bourke, *Maeve Brennan: homesick at the New Yorker* (New York: Counterpoint, 2004), 51, 58, 68 and passim. **2** Seamus Kelly, *The Maura Laverty Story: from Rathangan to Tolka Row* (Naas: Seamus Kelly, 2017), 54–55. Although from Rathangan, Seamus is no

relation to Maura Laverty and Anna Kelly was not connected with her either. Biographical details of Maura's early life are built up from a variety of sources, but Kelly's book is the most convenient and authoritative reference point. Other facts have been gleaned from historian Dr Deirdre MacMahon, who wrote the entry on Maura Laverty for the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <https://www.dib.ie/biography/laverty-kelly-mary-maura-a4698>, and from Barry Castle and Sr Conleth Kelly (details below). **3** Maura Laverty, *St Patrick: Friend of Children* (1931) and *The*

*Prodigal Daughter* (1933), both Dublin: Catholic Truth Society of Ireland. Listed in *Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, First Fifty Years Golden Jubilee Record 1899–1949* (Dublin: CTSI, 1949), 93, 95. **4** Interview with Barry Castle, daughter of Maura Laverty, on 8 July 2001, and email communications with her 25 March 2001 and 29 March 2001. **5** e.g., 'Mistresses & Maids', *The Bell* VI: 1 (1943), 18–24; 'I Remember Madame' *Liberty* Special Commemorative Issue 1959; *Woman's Way* April–December 1963. For discussion on Laverty as WW agony aunt, see Caitríona

Clear, *Women's voices in Ireland: women's magazines in the 1950s and 60s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 27–43, 81–94. **6** *Never No More: the story of a lost village* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1942); *Alone We Embark* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943); *No More Than Human* (London: Longmans Green, & Co., 1944), *Lift Up Your Gates* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1946); *The Cottage in the Bog* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1945); *Tinkler and the Green Orchard* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949).

for the Gate Theatre in the 1950s: *Liffey Lane* and *Tolka Row*.<sup>7</sup> Later, Laverty developed *Tolka Row* into the first Teilifís Éireann family drama. All her life, her main income was from journalism, either in print or on the radio. When *Eason's Bulletin* asked her how she had managed to write so many books in five years, she pointed out that as a freelance journalist, she wrote more words every year than she would write in five full-length novels.<sup>8</sup> Some of her detailed radio scripts for the late 1950s and early '60s, preserved in her papers,<sup>9</sup> show that she came to every programme carefully prepared, and no doubt had always done so.

Laverty's novels are less well-known than her other writing. *Never No More: the story of a lost village*, published in 1942, is dotted with descriptions by the narrator, Delia, of her grandmother's cooking and baking in a fictional Kildare locale in the early decades of the twentieth century. There is less food preparation in *Alone We Embark*, her second novel (1943), but the emotional climax of this novel is a step-by-step description of the making of a flummery with a golden web. The moral centre of *No More Than Human* (1944), the novel based in Spain, is a brilliant cook, La Serena. Good cooking goes hand in hand with domestic order, and in *Lift Up Your Gates* (1946), the big convent kitchen where Sr Martha and her helpers prepare the nourishing penny dinners, is tenement-dwelling Chrissie's idea of heaven: 'Plenty of hot water snorting out of the taps, and beautiful dry clean cloths to polish the delf [sic]'.<sup>10</sup>

Laverty had no formal cookery qualifications,<sup>11</sup> so where did she learn about cookery? As the mother of a young family, she probably learned a lot on the job. The all-wise and all-loving 'Gran' of *Never No More* is a fictional character, and Maura's real-life mother, Mary Ann Kelly, who delegated much of the cooking to a servant because she was busy with her shop, was 'a good cook, not a great cook' according to her youngest daughter.<sup>12</sup> In a note at the end of *Never No More*, Laverty acknowledges her debt to Florence Irwin's *Irish Country Recipes*, but in so doing, perpetuates the 'Gran' fiction:

as I read of these familiar dishes [in Irwin's book] I found myself back in Derrymore again, standing in the buttery with Gran, helping her to prepare lovely meals.<sup>13</sup>

Several, though by no means all, of Gran's recipes—mock goose, ling stew, Indian meal cakes—can be found in Josephine Redington's *Economic Cookery Book*,

**7** Christopher Fitzsimons, *The Boys: Micheal MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards* (Dublin: Irish Theatre Publications, 1995) has an entire chapter devoted to Laverty's plays, 169–74. **8** *Eason's Bulletin* 1: 10 (1946), 3–4. **9** These papers were consulted by me in 2002–3 before they were catalogued:

Maura Laverty papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI), folders 25, 26. **10** Laverty, *Alone We Embark*, 162–67; *Lift Up Your Gates*, 16. **11** Laverty, *Kind Cooking* (Tralee: Kerryman, 1946), 3. **12** Interview with Sr Conleth Kelly (née Joan), sister of Maura Laverty, Brigidine Convent, Tullow, Co. Carlow,

30 July 2002. Maura lived with a grandmother for a year, but everyone agrees that the 'Gran' of *Never No More* is a fictional character. **13** Florence Irwin, *Irish Country Recipes* (Belfast: Northern Whig, 1937); Laverty, *Never No More*, 263. **14** Josephine Redington, *Economic Cookery Book*:

*Tried Recipes etc suitable for all households, schools and technical classes* (Dublin: Gill, 1905); recipes for ling, 35, 40, hot seedy cake, 170, apple dumplings, 44; mock duck (as opposed to goose), 125. The copy I have belonged to the late Bríd Lenihan née O'Flaherty, from her days in Coolarne Domestic Economy

first published in 1905 and still in print and in use in at least one second-level cookery college in the 1940s.<sup>14</sup> Gran's recipes for flummery, scones, and Indian meal stirabout can be found in Florence Irwin's book.<sup>15</sup> Bríd Mahon tells us that Laverty was a regular visitor to the Irish Folklore Commission Archive in the 1940s; could she have picked up food lore there?<sup>16</sup> Anna Kelly claims that Laverty learned her enthusiasm for cookery as a child, from an old cookery book called 'Domestic Cooking By A Lady', which she rescued from a 'bonfire pile of old books and papers' in an abandoned rectory in Rathangan.<sup>17</sup> But while this book might have inspired Maura Kelly, she can hardly have learned to cook from a guide aimed at the well-staffed upper-middle-class kitchens of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Gran's cooking processes in *Never No More*—published in 1942, therefore written in 1941 at the very latest—are described in such lavish and loving detail<sup>18</sup> that Laverty cannot have been going only on what she read in the folklore archives, especially as Mahon only met Laverty for the *first* time in 1942, in Radio Éireann, and Mahon had been working for the Commission since 1939.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the servant who cooked for the Kellys in Rathangan, or the Kilkenny grandmother with whom she lived for a year, were good cooks.<sup>20</sup> Wherever or however she learned about cookery, Maura Laverty was enough of a media authority on it by 1941 for the government to commission her to write her first cookbook.

### **Flour Economy (1941)**

This straightforward collection of recipes, based on potatoes and oatmeal, is aimed at getting Irish people to eat less wheat. The nineteen-page collection includes Irish potato bread, potato buns, potato scones, potato apple pudding, potato jam tart, and every possible variation on porridge and oatmeal, including cold porridge cut into slices and fried, and German oaten cakes. The conscientious housekeeper, the book assures us, is also a good citizen.<sup>21</sup> The same kind of rhetoric and the same kind of recipes were also promoted on the BBC and printed cheaply for distribution in wartime Britain; they can now be found in collections published by the Imperial War Museum.<sup>22</sup> It is no stretch of the imagination, nor indeed, criticism of Laverty, to suggest that she might have copied down some of these recipes from the BBC and added them to her repertoire of economical recipes gleaned from Irwin, Redington, and other authorities, including her own experience.

College, Galway, in the 1940s.  
**15** Florence Irwin, *The Cookin' Woman: Irish Country Recipes* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1949; Belfast: Blackstaff, 1986), 146, 200–01. This was a reprinted and expanded edition of the 1937 volume to which Laverty referred.  
**16** Bríd Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows: memoirs of a*

*folklorist* (Cork: Mercier, 1998), 118–26. **17** Kelly, 'Child who devoured every recipe'.  
**18** For example, Laverty, *Never No More*, the description of the making of champ, 53; apple dumplings, 53–4; mushrooms, 68–9; parsley jelly, 110–11; blood puddings, 162–5; potato apple cakes, 128–9; ling and eel, 31–2.

**19** Mahon, *Green Grass*, 118 and *passim*. **20** Interview with Sr Conleth. **21** Maura Laverty, *Flour Economy* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan/Richview Press, 1941), 8, 9, 11, 13–15, and introduction.  
**22** For example, Marguerite Patten, 'We'll Eat Again': *a collection of recipes from the war years* (London: Imperial

War Museum, 1985); Laura Clouting (ed.), *Victory in the Kitchen: wartime recipes* (London: IWM, 2017).

**Kind Cooking (1946)**

The first edition of this book has distinctive yellow and black line-drawings by Louis le Brocquy at the head of each chapter, and several photographs, every one of which features a product—Fruitfield Mincemeat, Lemon Curd, Tinned Tomatoes, Raspberry Jam and Tinned Fruit, Goodalls Essences, Lamb Bros Candied Mixed Peel, Miller’s Pride Irish Flake Meal, and Grafton Custard De-Luxe. ‘The products featured in this book have the same personal guarantee as the recipes’ are the words printed in small italics on the last page.<sup>23</sup> This edition, therefore, was probably partly sponsored by the company or companies that brought out these products.

*Kind Cooking* has characters and anecdotes twined through the narrative. Lavery uses the same locale (Ballyderrig) and some of the same characters from *Never No More* and *No More Than Human*; Moll Slevin, the family servant, and Nurse Cassidy, the local midwife. Chrissie, the Dublin inner-city heroine of *Lift Up Your Gates*, makes an appearance. The ‘I’ of *Kind Cooking*, therefore, is mostly a fictional one: Lavery’s claim to have been literally born in a kitchen was not, her sister assured me, true.<sup>24</sup> However, the gentle, gambling father whose funeral opens *Never No More*, is based on Maura Kelly’s own father. He is still alive and well in *Kind Cooking*, and when the narrator skips school to pick mushrooms and he is sent (by her mother) to look for her:

I was glad to see him. No one was ever afraid of my father. ‘Is she mad at me?’ I asked. ‘She’ll take your life.’ he told me.<sup>25</sup>

‘No one was ever afraid of my father’ is the most poignant sentence in all of Lavery’s writing. But there is comedy too, like the story of Mag Donnelly, one of her mother’s apprentices to the dressmaking, who had a Christmas cooking disaster, local character the ‘Head’ Mooney, called after his passion for pigs’ heads, and the Gunner Doyle, who, when he had drink taken, would stand by the pump and roar at all of Ballyderrig to come out and be made into puddings.<sup>26</sup>

The book is proudly Irish; the four best Irish things are, Lavery believes, W.B. Yeats, Barry Fitzgerald, potatoes steamed in their jackets, and soda-bread; ‘and the greatest of these is soda bread’.<sup>27</sup> But there is no insularity. She gives some Spanish tips for cooking rabbit, salt cod, chicken, and various sauces. She makes a plea for garlic. She praises Spanish working-class women, whose kitchens:

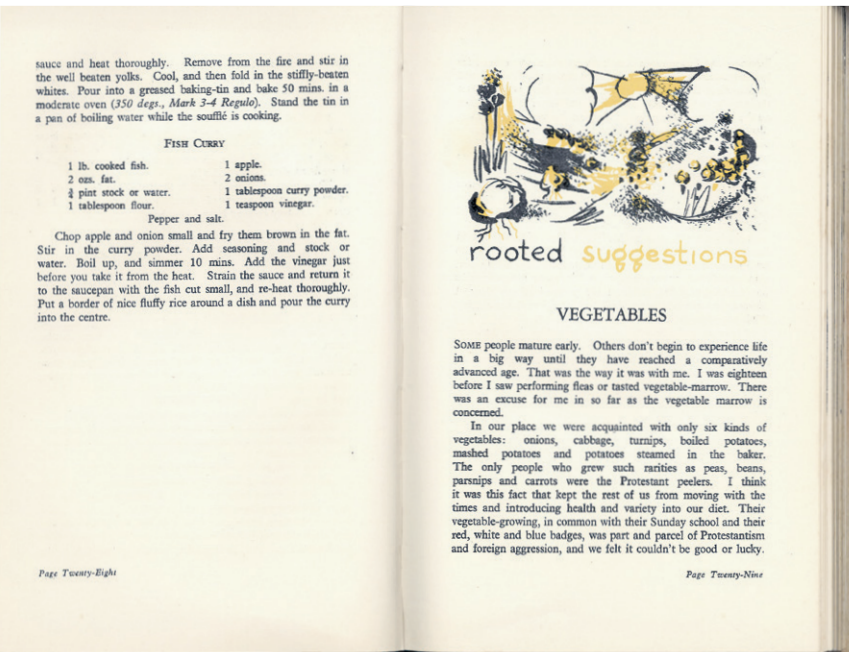
<sup>23</sup> Maura Lavery, *Kind Cooking* (Published for Maura Lavery Miscellanies; Tralee: Kerryman, 1946); *Kind Cooking* was reprinted several times, with slight variations. All references are to the 1946 edition.

<sup>24</sup> Lavery, *Kind Cooking*, Slevin, Cassidy, 1–2 and passim; Chrissie, 78–9; interview with Sr Conleth. <sup>25</sup> *Kind Cooking*, 104. Sr Conleth confirmed her father’s gentleness, and also his gambling habit,

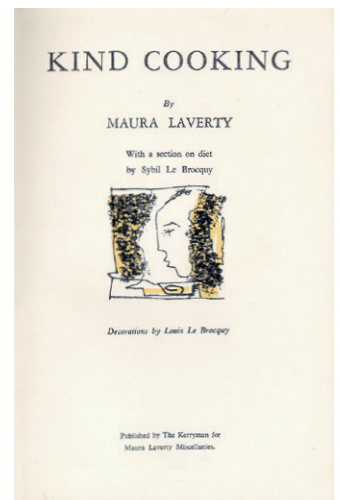
in the interview. <sup>26</sup> *Kind Cooking*, Mag, 46–7; Head, 37–8; Gunner, 77–8. <sup>27</sup> *Kind Cooking*, 70.

were so poorly-equipped as to make our own kitchen at home in the bog seem like an advertisement from the *Ladies Home Journal* ... It was a revelation to see the gorgeous meals they could cook in earthenware vessels over a handful of charcoal.<sup>28</sup>

The book's advice is vivid—don't ever boil anything with cheese in it, or it will get so tough and hard it will be fit only for a lead for the dog; add grated cheese to an already-made sauce instead. She deplores those she calls the Unholy Rollers, who spoil pastry: 'the rolling-pin is applied with the pressure and wildness of a steam-roller gone crazy'. If kneading yeast bread is getting tedious, sing a song in waltz-time to get your rhythm going. Baking yeast bread when there is a perfectly good bakery on the corner, is, she suggests 'nothing short of sinful self-indulgence. But it is the nicest form of self-indulgence'.<sup>29</sup> The reference to a bakery on a nearby corner suggests that Laverty was writing mainly for an urban audience. And a little verse about unexpected visitors needing to be fed indicates a social milieu where the classic 'visitor' fare of tea-and-bread-and-butter and ham-and-tomato won't do:



28 *Kind Cooking*, 4. 29 *Kind Cooking*, cheese, 96; yeast bread, 76; unholy rollers, 46; indulgence, 75.



Figures 1 and 2 *Kind Cooking*, 1946. Double page spread and title page featuring illustrations by Louis le Brocqey.



When friends come unexpected do I fuss and tear my hair  
 Although there's only meat enough for two?  
 No: I walk into my pantry with a calm, unruffled air,  
 I fetch the tin of bully beef that's waiting for me there,  
 I mix it with an onion and a fervent grateful prayer,  
 And for dinner we have savoury ragout.<sup>30</sup>

Sophisticated was one thing; wealthy was something else entirely. 'In our house game means rabbit', is her defiant explanation for not including any recipes for grouse, pheasant, pigeon or wild duck. And the book's final paragraph is a veritable hymn to 'making do':

In practice I mostly use margarine or dripping instead of butter, and unsweetened condensed milk or the top two inches off the bottle instead of cream. One egg, a tablespoon of cornflour and an extra teaspoon of baking powder frequently do duty for two eggs in my cakes ...<sup>31</sup>

It is difficult to know whether this is Laverty's fictional 'I'—the one who claimed to have been born in a kitchen—or the real person who had lost a gentle father nobody was afraid of. It has the ring of truth and authenticity, especially to somebody who can remember these stratagems being used in kitchens up to the 1980s.<sup>32</sup>

### **Cookery columns, *Irish Press* (1946)<sup>33</sup>**

From January to August, with only a few breaks, Laverty wrote the women's page on this newspaper, and it was nearly always about cookery. Her writing was fresh, direct and authoritative in a friendly way. She also answered some readers' queries, which she was quite accustomed to doing already in her 'Housewife' programme on Radio Éireann. Her opening column of 14 January was a reflection on six years of listeners' letters. She made some regional observations:

Dublin has a preference for cakes, Cork and Limerick go in for savouries and meat dishes, Galway and Wexford send a constant demand for such traditional Irish fare as white and black puddings and hazlitt, while Donegal's appetite for soup can never be satisfied.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Kind Cooking*, 110. <sup>31</sup> *Kind Cooking*, rabbit, 54; 125.

<sup>32</sup> I was born in 1960 and following my mother's example, to this day will never use the full amount of eggs required in any baking recipe (except a Christmas cake), and feel decadent when I use butter.

<sup>33</sup> Laverty wrote cookery columns for several publications, but it would be impossible to track them all down. This is taken as an example. <sup>34</sup> "Irish husbands don't care for made-up dishes" says Maura Laverty after six years of Listeners' Letters', *Irish Press* 14 January 1946.

In this column she also quotes cookery tips that listeners send her, e.g., how to turn table sugar into caster sugar (by putting it into a sealed bag and putting it through the mangle). In the weeks and months following she writes about a 'bunty pot' (which sounds like an earthenware stew pot), home-made black and white puddings, pancakes for Shrove Tuesday, soups and fish for Lent, salads, economical recipes for feeding families, flourless cakes, jam-making, puddings, storing butter, and bottling fruit. She gives eight of the 300 ways of cooking eggs, insists on the importance of ovens being at the correct heat, suggests some potato dishes children might like, and playfully gives some simple recipes for newly-wedded married bliss. She praises Chinese cookery at one stage, and devotes a whole column to making coffee, at another, but these articles are outliers—the general focus is on accessible food. Early in the year, she provides a short story about cooking pike: 'How Mr Whelan Found A Wife' is similar to the kind of story that heads off each chapter in the later *Full and Plenty*.<sup>35</sup> She answers readers' queries regularly ('Priest's Housekeeper', 'Mother of Ten')<sup>36</sup> and another article could be written on these queries. In late August, however, without explanation, her column ceases, and Anna Kelly, Mab Hickman and other writers take over.<sup>37</sup>

***The Milky Way To Good Cooking: the recipe book of the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland (1954)***

This slim volume (eighty-three pages of text) is printed on thick creamy paper, and has a coloured drawing of Limerick city's iconic Condensed Milk Factory (or 'Cleeves's' as Limerick people called it) with its tall landmark chimney, on the back. Every second page is headed by a royal-blue drawing of a chef holding a steaming covered dish, followed by four little tins with legs, representing 'Springtime' Evaporated Milk, 'Killarney' Full-Cream Sweetened Milk, 'Kerry' Machine-Skimmed Sweetened Milk, and 'Cleeves' Sterilized Cream.<sup>38</sup> A foreword by the chairman of the Condensed Milk Company, Éinrí Ó Frighil, explains the Milky Way as a galactic phenomenon and promises that Maura Laverty will bring readers 'deep into the realm of gastronomy'. In a chatty preamble Laverty is in prescriptive mode:

With our wedding rings, we housewives accept the double portfolio of  
Minister for Family Health and Chancellor of the Domestic Exchequer.  
To discharge both offices with equal success under present conditions

**35** *Irish Press*, bunty pot, 11 February 1946; puddings, 25 February 1946; pancakes, 4 March 1946; soups, 2 February 1946; fish, 17 April 1946; salads, 22 May 1946; flourless cake, 29 May 1946; jam, 19 June 1946; storing butter, 3 July 1946; bottling, 10 July 1946; eggs, 17 July 1946; oven heat, 14 July 1946; potatoes, 14 August 1946; bliss, 28 August 1946; Chinese food, 20 March 1946; coffee-making, 10 April 1946; Mr Whelan's wife, 4 February 1946. Oddly, given her habit of recycling, this story did not make it into *Full and Plenty* (see below). **36** These Two specific correspondents,

*Irish Press*, 14 January 1946. **37** Another article could and should be written on these very engaging cookery writers, and those in the *Irish Independent* as well. **38** Maura Laverty, *The Milky Way To Good Cooking: the recipe book of the Condensed Milk Company of Ireland*

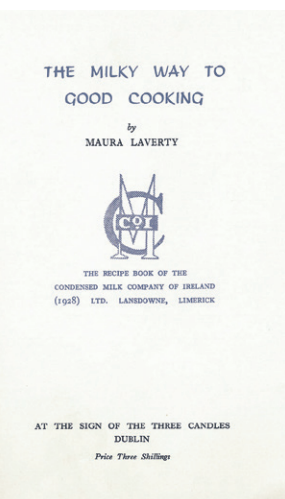
(Dublin: at the Sign of the Three Candles, 1954), passim. Neither the jacket painting or drawing, nor the little drawings are credited.

is not easy ... My own solution of [sic] the problem has been to use more milk in cooking. This is not to say that I merely make more milk desserts than ever before, but that I add nourishment at low cost to the family meals by including milk in every single dish from soup to savoury and from bread to beverage.<sup>39</sup>

Invoking both Moses and St Patrick in favour of this food, she tells the reader that the products of the Condensed Milk Company come from cows who graze on the 'lush sweet grass of the Golden Vein'.<sup>40</sup> The 'Golden Vein' (or more commonly 'Golden Vale') is a collective term for the rich pasturelands of north Munster. The Munster angle is emphasised in the titles of some of the dishes— Knocklong Ginger Bread, Lansdowne Jelly Soufflé, Golden Vein trifle, Shannon Foam and many, many more.<sup>41</sup> There is a special section at the end 'for those who have a refrigerator' (a small minority even of the electrified population at the time) with exotica like Vichyssoise soup and Tomato Cocktail. On the other hand, the advice on cooking times towards the end of the book gives not only Fahrenheit electric oven and gas Regulo times, but a useful indicator for those cooking on the fire in a pot oven or in a range, based on the length of time it takes for a strip of 'unglazed white paper' to brown—half a minute for a very hot oven, two and a half to three minutes for a slow oven, with degrees in between. This advice also appeared in one of her *Irish Press* cookery columns.<sup>42</sup>

A section on feeding babies has a detailed table showing how to dilute that 'perfect baby food', 'Springtime' Evaporated Milk, from birth to 18 months. At least one authoritative baby book of the period recommends using diluted evaporated milk in this way.<sup>43</sup>

Laverty's insistence, quoted above, that she herself adds tinned milk to every single dish in order to make it more nutritious, reminds us that this is the fictional authorial persona and not Laverty herself. Nobody could add the quantities of tinned milk that Laverty recommends to every savoury and sweet dish every day, without inducing a permanent state of nausea. One dish, 'Creamed Eggs'—hard-boiled eggs cut in half and placed in a cooking tin with enough tinned 'Springtime' cream to cover, dotted with butter and baked in a moderate oven—is too rich even to read about. For townspeople in the days before refrigeration, tinned milk was certainly, as Laverty claimed, safer and more convenient than fresh milk. However, her claim that tinned milk is more digestible and 'better'



**39** Laverty, *Milky Way*, 7, 9–10. **40** *Milky Way*, 10–11. **41** *Milky Way*, various place-name recipes, 64, 54, 55, 21. **42** *Milky Way*, refrigerator, 75–9; oven-heat indicator, 74; *Irish Press*, 24 July 1946. **43** *Milky Way*, babies 81–2; *Good Housekeeping's Baby Book* (London: Good

Housekeeping Institute, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, 1952), 93.

**44** *Milky Way*, creamed eggs, 31; nutrition, 11. **45** Kelly, *Maura Laverty Story*, 220–21, found a copy in Pearse St Library in Dublin.

than fresh milk, because nothing is taken from the milk except water, so the 'valuable nutritive qualities ... present in greater concentration',<sup>44</sup> is questionable.

Despite her fame, Laverty's name does not appear on the cover of this book; it is tempting to speculate why this may be. It is the hardest of all her books to find, and there is no copy of it in the National Library of Ireland.<sup>45</sup>



Figures 3 and 4 Opposite and above. *The Milky Way to Good Health* title page and cover.

### **Christmas Fare (1957, reprinted in 1963)**

Laverty, the most atmospheric of writers, never evoked Christmas, the most atmospheric of culinary seasons, in any of her fiction or non-fiction. This useful book of Christmas recipes is devoid not only of stories but (almost entirely) of commentary. Its thirty-one pages give equal billing to turkey and goose, feature several different kinds of stuffing (veal forcemeat, French, chestnut, potato, sage-and-onion); the soups are cream of celery, cream of tomato, and bouillon. The ham is baked with Madeira sauce, and the sauces are bread and giblet gravy. Recipes for Christmas cake, Christmas pudding, a Christmas chocolate log, mince pies, almond icing, royal icing, brandy sauce (i.e., brandy butter) and trifle are also given. There is a lengthy section on Christmas Specialities (*sic*) from many lands—Chankele (almond candles) from Alsace, Gans-Leber (goose livers) from Austria, Christmas Stars (cookies) from Bohemia, and other items from Hungary, Holland, Norway, Italy, Spain, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, and the USA.<sup>46</sup> In *Kind Cooking*, Laverty had told of her plan in 1938 to write ‘Cooking Round The World’, incorporating recipes of many lands which she gleaned from a newspaper appeal in many European countries.<sup>47</sup> These recipes are probably some of those she collected and never got a chance to use. In a seven-page section on Christmas crafts at the very end, Laverty’s personality breaks through only in her dry recommendation that you should use thin white distemper or liquid shoe white ‘if you want your [Christmas] tree to suggest the White Christmas we are all said to be dreaming of’.<sup>48</sup>

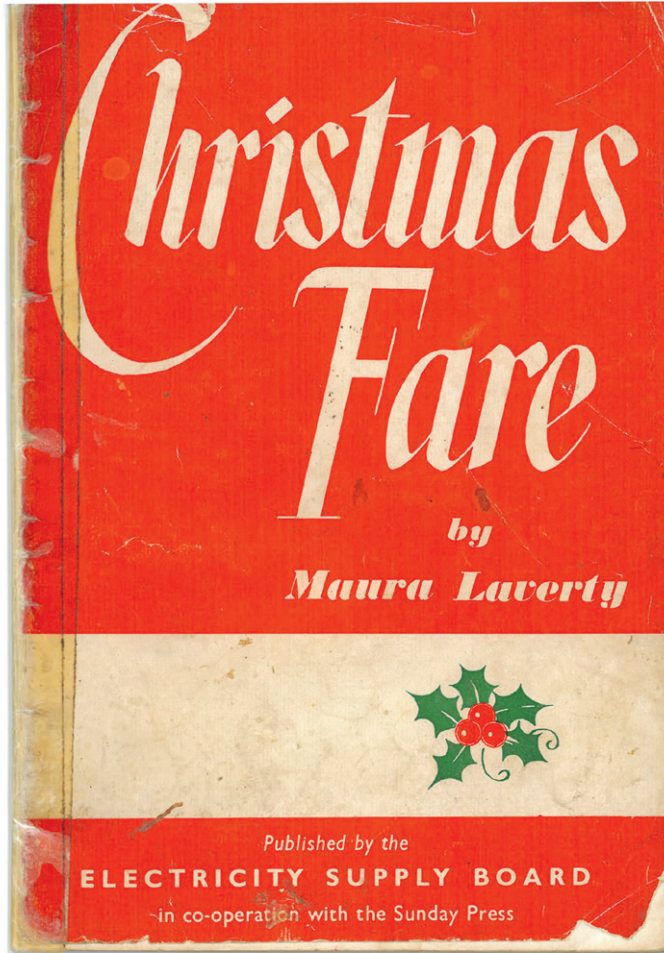
### **Full and Plenty: complete guide to good cooking (1960)**

This, the most famous of Laverty’s cookbooks, was published by the Irish Flour Millers’ Association (IFMA),<sup>49</sup> which, from 1958 at least, had Maura Laverty on a retainer of £250 a year to promote bread. The Association, as it paid over the cheques, told her she must stress the value of *white* bread in particular, and demanded to know the numbers who attended the public lectures for which the IFMA paid her an additional fee of £10 each. A lecture she gave to the Irish Countrywomen’s Association which survives in manuscript in her papers, uses quotations from *Kind Cooking* about the holiness of bread, quotes from her poem ‘The Ballad of an Irish Wheatfield’ (see below) and uses several other international and historical references to hammer home the point that while bread in general is good, white yeast bread is best of all; ‘There is an old-fashioned belief that the browner the flour, the better the bread. This is not true’. Perhaps Laverty

<sup>46</sup> Maura Laverty, *Christmas Fare* (Electricity Supply Board in co-operation with the *Sunday Press*, 1957, reprinted in 1963); traditional dishes, 3–18; many lands, 19–24. <sup>47</sup> *Kind Cooking*, 3. <sup>48</sup> *Christmas Fare*, 31. <sup>49</sup> Maura Laverty, *Full and*

*Plenty: complete guide to good cooking* (Dublin: Irish Flour Millers’ Association, 1960).

**Figures 5 and 6** Opposite. *Christmas Fare* cover and interior spread.



**Potato Stuffing**

- 1 lb. streaky rashers
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 1 small head celery, chopped (enough to make 2 cups)
- 2 tablesp. chopped parsley
- 1 lb. butter or margarine
- 2 teasp. salt
- 2 lbs. peeled potatoes
- 1 teasp. pepper
- 1 teasp. mixed herbs
- 1 large tin evaporated milk

Fry bacon until crisp. Chop small. Cook onions and celery in bacon fat until tender but not brown. Cook, drain and dry out potatoes. Mash and add butter, milk, parsley, salt, pepper and herbs. Combine all ingredients and mix well.

**Sage-and-Onion Stuffing**

- 6 cups breadcrumbs
- 4 medium onions, chopped
- 2 teasp. dried sage
- 2 teasp. mixed dried herbs
- 2 cups hot water or stock
- 2 beaten eggs
- 2 tablesp. chopped parsley
- 1 teasp. pepper
- 1 1/2 teasp. salt
- 2 tablesp. chopped celery tops
- 2 tablesp. bacon fat
- 1 lb. suetana (may be omitted)

Pour the stock or hot water over the breadcrumbs; add eggs and seasonings. Fry the chopped onions in bacon fat until lightly brown. Mix all ingredients thoroughly.

**Bread Sauce**

Stick a couple of cloves in a medium-sized onion and simmer 15 minutes in water to cover. Strain off this water, add 1 pint of milk to the onion and simmer, covered, for 5 minutes. Strain the milk over 2 1/2 ozs. breadcrumbs and add 1 teasp. pepper, 1 teasp. salt. Stir in 1 oz. butter and beat over warm water until butter is melted. Add a dash of cayenne, if liked. The sauce may be made overnight and left in a refrigerator or cool place. To re-heat, place in a covered bowl or double auerpan

and heat gently over boiling water. Do not re-heat in the oven, or the sauce will become a dry paste. A tablespoon of cream or evaporated milk stirred into the sauce at the last moment gives a smooth texture.

**Giblet Gravy**

Prepare the giblets by scalding and scaling fish shanks, wash the liver, cutting away the gall bladder carefully (if the gall bladder has already broken, the liver should be discarded), blanch and clean the heart and gizzard and soak the neck in cold salted water for 1 hour. Cover the giblets with cold water, add a small carrot, a couple of stalks of celery, a few sprigs of parsley and a bay leaf. Simmer, covered, for 2 hours. When the turkey is cooked, remove from the pan all but two tablespoons of the drippings. Blend with this 1 1/2 to 2 tablespoons flour (depending on how thick you like the gravy). Blend over a moderate heat until the flour forms a brown roux. Gradually add 1 pint heated giblet stock. Season to taste and serve in well-heated sauceboat.

**Baked Ham with Madeira Sauce**

- 1 16-lb. ham
- 1 glass Madeira wine
- 1 oz. cloves
- 6 ozs. honey

Scrape the ham, wash well, and soak overnight in cold water (for at least 12 hours). Next day, place in a pot, cover well with cold water, bring slowly to a boil and simmer gently 2 hours. Place the ham on a rack in a baking tin, remove skin and stick cloves over the fat surface. Pour the honey mixed with Madeira over the ham and bake in a moderate oven (325°) 2 1/2 hours, or until the knuckle bone can be removed.



expressed misgivings about promoting this idea, because one letter from the IFMA assured her that bran was ‘unassimilable’ as well as ‘unpalatable’, and another letter, sent a week later, promised to send her documentary evidence of the connection between rickets and phytic acid in brown bread.<sup>50</sup>

The minutes of some of the IFMA meetings, preserved in Maura Laverty’s papers, reveal her suggestions for promoting white bread, including some ideas for advertising copy, ‘Good Eating Begins With Bread: serve it with every meal’, with specific menu suggestions, and charts for young and older children in schools.<sup>51</sup> Laverty, whose radio programme was sponsored by the Electricity Supply Board, was voted ‘Mrs Irish Radio 1959’ so her authority in these matters was unrivalled. In an undated report for the IFMA she outlined her ongoing promotion of wheat on her ESB-sponsored radio programme and gave detailed plans for the summer of 1959 to promote bread in her regular cookery column for the ITGWU *Liberty* magazine.<sup>52</sup>

There is a reference in the minutes of one of the meetings to the ‘recipe book’ being planned.<sup>53</sup> This is *Full and Plenty*, with its distinctive blue and yellow cover, colour photographs, and line drawings by Hansi Collis.<sup>54</sup> The first page of text in it is Laverty’s ‘Ballad of an Irish Wheatfield’ which she wrote when she was Maura Kelly in Spain and sent home to Ireland for publication, and also reproduced in her 1944 novel about Spain.<sup>55</sup>

*Full and Plenty* is organised along the lines of a conventional cookbook, though instead of beginning with soup, and moving to fish and meat, the first three chapters are on bread, cakes and pastry, no doubt in deference to the book’s sponsors. And just as tinned milk should be incorporated into every meal according to *Milky Way*, so should bread, according to *Full and Plenty*’s Preface:

‘More bread means better fed’. Not for nothing has bread been called ‘The Staff of Life’ for bread is a valuable source of energy and of the proteins, Vitamin B, the iron and calcium which are essential if you are to enjoy good health. No meal is complete without bread in some form, for bread helps to make up a balanced diet.<sup>56</sup>

**50** Letter from D.P. Maguire, Irish Flour Millers Association, 32 Nassau St, Dublin 2, to M. Laverty, 1 September 1958, enclosing a cheque for £72.10.00 ‘to cover quarterly payment in advance at the rate of £250.00 per annum for the quarter beginning 1/9/58 with an additional £10.00.00 to cover work done in August.’ On 22 May 1959 Mr Maguire paid her £21 ‘being payment at 10 guineas each’ for lectures delivered in Kildare and Wexford on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May’ and asked her

‘as mentioned to you on the phone’ to let the Association know of numbers attending, ‘reactions and so on.’ On 29 May 1959 Laverty was paid £62.10.00 ‘being retainer for the coming quarter’ together with £3.3.0 for ‘Miss Donnelly’ (presumably a secretary) and it asked to give numbers at the lectures. Copy of a talk to the Irish Countrywomen’s Association (n.d.) on bread. RE brown bread, letters from D.P. Maguire, 22 May 1959, and 29 May 1959 to Mrs Laverty, Maura Laverty papers. Maura

Laverty Papers, NLI, folders 27 and 31. **51** Also, Mrs Laverty’s Draft of Advertising Copy submitted to PR Committee, 23 October 1958. Maura Laverty Papers, NLI, folders 23, 27. **52** ‘Maura Laverty Voted “Mrs Irish Radio of 1959”’ *ESB Radio Supplement* August 1959, No. 5. Report in Maura Laverty papers, NLI, folder 23, 27. **53** Minutes of meeting of the PR Committee of the IFMA, 21 May 1959, held at 32 Nassau St. Attending were Mr G. Shackleton and Mr G.M. Goodbody, Mr M.

MacDonagh. Mr P.D. Odlum sent apologies. Maura Laverty papers, NLI, folders 27, 31. **54** Kelly, *Maura Laverty Story*, 169. **55** Maura Laverty, *Full and Plenty*, opening pages (no numbers); *No More Than Human*, 211–12. **56** *Full and Plenty*, preface, (no pp numbers).





In the actual chapter on bread, she points out that yeast bread is much healthier than soda bread ‘unpatriotic though it may seem’, because bicarbonate of soda reduces Vitamin B content.<sup>57</sup> But there the promotion ends. In the book as a whole, bread is not pushed in every recipe, as tinned milk was in *Milky Way*, nor are the brand names of any flours mentioned in recipes. There is no product placement in the photographs, and there are whole chapters where flour or bread features hardly at all.

What most people remember about this book is that every chapter is headed off by a little story. Some of these had already appeared in other places—three of them in *Woman’s Life* magazine in 1954, and, Seamus Kelly tells us, others in *The Bell* and *The Sign* and other Irish and American publications.<sup>58</sup> The stories give a flavour of Irish life in the 1950s (when the manuscript was written and delivered; it was published and launched in January 1960) and in the living memory of the author. Comical, tragic and just plain interesting, they feature the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, career-housekeepers (of priests and other single men), domestic economy instructresses, women ‘back from’ America and England, a teenage boy from a reformatory, a poacher, a boarding-house keeper, a newly-married couple, an adult with an intellectual disability and

**Figure 8** A second edition of Maura Laverty’s guide to cooking, *Full and Plenty*, was launched in Jury’s Hotel, Dublin. From left, Peter Odum, managing director; Maura Laverty; George Shackleton, Irish Flour Millers Association;

and GE Hetherington, of Hely’s. Photographer: Eddie Kelly. Reproduced with kind permission of the *Irish Times*.

<sup>57</sup> *Full and Plenty*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> None of these stories have names; the one in the eggs chapter, the one in the jam chapter and the one in the sauce chapter, *Full and Plenty*, 346–48, 403–6, 369–71, also featured in *Woman’s Life* magazine 17 April

1954, and Kelly has tracked down some of the others, in various publications, *Maura Laverty Story*, 176–77, 277. <sup>59</sup> *Full and Plenty*, passim, and 403–6. <sup>60</sup> *Full and Plenty*, 92; *Milky Way*, 60.

many other characters. There is a powerful story about destructive sibling jealousy.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the stories, the recipe text is enlivened by comments woven into the recipes from time to time—about pancakes for example:

It is Shrove Tuesday, and the men from the fields tread quickly coming in, because they know there will be pancakes for supper—real pancakes, none of your paper-thin rolled foolishness, but good substantial buttermilk pancakes. There's a clatter of them as high as your hip waiting on the hob, with melted butter and sugar trickling down the sides. What matter if the women of the house has [*sic*] developed thawlock from beating and mixing and turning for the past two hours? It's all in a good cause. Isn't it Pancake Night? <sup>60</sup>

Most of this (down to the word 'sides') first featured in *Milky Way*. In the chapter on soup there is a little story about the 6th century St Columba (aka St Columcille) and the *brothchán buidhe* (yellow broth) that a clever lay brother devised to nourish this ascetic, and there are historical snippets about Brillat-Savarin, the history of honey, the history of rice, Simnel cakes, the Colcannon song, and Lord Edward Fitzgerald.<sup>61</sup> All of this commentary makes the cookery book a very pleasant read.

But what about the cookery? There is good plain and fancy cooking, with processes and pitfalls explained clearly and vividly; any recipe I have tried works, though others have been less impressed.<sup>62</sup> *Full and Plenty* contains all the recipes in *Kind Cooking* and *Christmas Fare*, some of those in *Milky Way*, and many more besides. Although Laverty is rightly credited with preserving and reviving Irish traditional food, she had always included (even in *Flour Economy*) dishes from other lands, and *Full and Plenty* was no exception, with crêpes suzettes, soufflés, apricot pinwheels and many other dishes from Sweden, Norway, France, England, Austria (*Wiener Schnitzel*), Spain, the USA, and many other countries. Broccoli, aubergines and avocado, which did not come into the diet of most Irish people until at least the 1980s, are mentioned and their cooking and consumption are explained.<sup>63</sup>

*Full and Plenty* was an instant best-seller. It is not known whether Messrs Shackleton, Goodbody and Odlum felt it did their product justice, but Kelly tells us that they brought the book on tour with them to Germany in 1960, so they must have liked it.<sup>64</sup>

**61** *Full and Plenty*, Columba, 116–17; Brillat-Savarin, 358; honey 341–42; rice, 365–66; simnel, 53; colcannon, 180; Fitzgerald, 75. **62** The college-trained professional cook Bríd Lenihan (see note 14), for example, thought Laverty was a 'chancer'. Kelly,

*Maura Laverty Story*, 177–79, discusses both negative and positive reactions to this book. **63** The book is so packed with non-Irish dishes and unusual foodstuffs that only a sample will be referenced here; *Full and Plenty*, Norwegian Christmas bread, g; crêpes

suzettes, 89; Danish pastry, 96; Wiener Schnitzel 221; Spanish omelette, 255; Aubergines etc, 154–9. **64** Kelly, *Maura Laverty Story*, 176.

## Conclusion

I love kitchens. The preparation of food has always been to me what literature or music or painting is to others ... and every little step in the preparation of even the plainest dish is an opportunity for self-expression. That sprinkling of chopped parsley beaten into the mashed potatoes is so much more than the final touch demanded by the cookery books. It is the satisfaction of your natural craving for all lovely green-and-white things, like tips of grass spears piercing the snow on a morning in January ... Cookery is the poetry of housework. But it is satisfying in twenty other different ways as well. There is a grand warm companionable feeling to be got out of the thought that every time you baste meat or beat an egg or do any other ordinary little kitchen job, you are making yourself one with the Grand Order of Home-makers, past, present and to come.<sup>65</sup>

This extract (the passage is edited), which represents Maura Laverty's food writing at its most vivid, made its first appearance in her 1944 novel about Spain, *No More Than Human* and was used again in the preamble to *Full and Plenty*. It tells us that Laverty had an original eye for images and similes, but the fact that she used the same material twice reminds us that for her, writing was a trade. The story of the flummery (mentioned above) from her 1943 novel, *Alone We Embark*, was re-published in the *Irish Woman's Journal* in 1966<sup>66</sup> and there are several other examples of recycling in her published work, some of which have been mentioned here. Ever since she won thirty shillings for an essay she wrote for *Our Boys* while she was still at school,<sup>67</sup> Maura Kelly/Laverty had been writing for money. While sponsorship might sometimes have taken from the integrity of her nutritional advice, it did not detract from the quality of her writing. The bread chapter of *Full and Plenty*, as mentioned above, highlights yeast bread. But the short story which heads off the bread chapter showcases the skill of making *soda* bread.<sup>68</sup> However much the IFMA were paying her, Laverty would not compromise the truth of her fiction by pretending that yeast bread was in the everyday baking repertoire of Leinster women of the house in the 1940s and '50s.

<sup>65</sup> *No More Than Human*, 35; *Full and Plenty*, opening pages, no pp. nos.

<sup>66</sup> 'The Golden Web' *Irish Woman's Journal* Jan–Feb 1966.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Sr Conleth.

<sup>68</sup> *Full and Plenty*, 1–4. When she read out this story to the ICA, she called it 'The Raven'. See note 44, above.

<sup>69</sup> *Lift Up Your Gates*, 175.

No company or interest group sponsored her novels however, so the appreciation of baking and cooking in them can be taken as authentic. It is fitting to conclude this article with a typical extract from Maura Laverty's fiction, the glorious description of Mary Morrissey's compulsion to make an apple tart in her 1946 novel set in Dublin, *Lift Up Your Gates*:

That was how it was with her always. Where other people were compelled by the change of the seasons to buy new clothes, or fall in love, or take a few drinks too many, Mary eased herself by going on a culinary binge. Today, because it was October, she had to make an apple tart. Golden leaves, golden crust; pungent chrysanthemums, spicy cloves; fresh tang of the air, tart, juicy apples.<sup>69</sup>

Caitríona Clear's research journey has taken her from nineteenth-century women religious (*Nuns in Nineteenth-century Ireland*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987) to twentieth-century women's magazines (*Women's Voices: women's magazines in Ireland in the 1950s and 60s*, London: Bloomsbury 2016) and along the way she has written about modern women's household work, oral history, economic and social history generally, and the social context of twentieth-century Irish fiction. Her interest in Maura Laverty (1906–1966) novelist, playwright, children's writer, food writer, broadcaster and journalist, has remained a constant throughout all these enthusiasms.

**27**

*'If it's eatin' and drinkin' you  
want, take a spoon and fork to  
a pint of stout': A brief history  
of food and the Irish pub*

**Brian J. Murphy**

The Irish pub has always been an important feature of our cultural life, and is associated with the quintessentially Irish phenomenon of the ‘craic’.<sup>1</sup> It has provided a space in urban and rural settings where communities have come together down through the years to engage in convivial conversation, to celebrate and commiserate, to sing, and sometimes even transact business within its confines.<sup>2</sup> The benefits of the commensal experience it provides across so many diverse locations should not be undervalued. A recent survey carried out by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) in collaboration with the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (DG EMPL) determined that Ireland now has the highest levels of loneliness in the European Union.<sup>3</sup> Communal public spaces such as the Irish pub are crucial in helping address this problem. And yet this great Irish cultural institution has been very much in decline in recent years. In 2022, Anthony Foley of Dublin City University Business School produced a report for the Irish Drinks Industry Group which garnered considerable media attention, with the headline that ‘[t]he number of pubs in Ireland has declined by an “alarming” 21 per cent in the past 16 years’, noting that there were ‘a total of 6,788 pubs in the country, down from 8,617 in 2005’.<sup>4</sup> Ominously, the most recent report released in August 2023 showed continued decline, with the closure of a further 108 pubs in the previous twelve months.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the business model of the traditional Irish pub has become less viable in recent years. Historically, this model consisted primarily of a ‘wet trade’, an unattractive descriptor that came into common usage during the Covid-19 pandemic and which signifies trade based solely on alcohol, although there were always some public houses (inns, taverns) which served some food.<sup>6</sup> Ireland’s strange licencing laws, up until 1960, allowed ‘*bona fide* travellers’ to drink after hours in a public house if they were three miles (or five miles in Dublin) from where they had slept the previous night.<sup>7</sup> This loophole was used by many ‘*mala fide*’ (bad faith) travellers, locals who travelled to nearby hostelries, particularly on Sundays, to be served alcohol. Examples of the *bona fide* pubs on some of the

**1** A Co. Clare publican described the ‘craic’ as ‘*ceol, rince, amhrán, ithe, & comhrá*’ (music, dance, song, eating and conversation) in a 2022 episode of *John Torode’s Ireland* (Discovery+) [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21635740/?ref\\_=ttep\\_ep5](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21635740/?ref_=ttep_ep5); The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as ‘fun, amusement; entertaining company or conversation’. [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/craic\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/craic_n?tab=meaning_and_use) **2** Many rural pubs in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, known as spirit grocers, were licenced premises that also

sold a broad range of goods (usually grocery or hardware), and some also operated as undertakers or auctioneers. **3** Saoirse Mulgrew, ‘Ireland has the highest levels of loneliness in Europe, new study finds’, *Irish Independent* [online] 7 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/ireland-has-the-highest-levels-of-loneliness-in-europe-new-study-finds/a1717927937.html>. (Accessed 05 August 2023). For a UK comparison see also Thomas Thurnell-Read’s 2021 report <https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/>

[Open\\_arms\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_pubs\\_in\\_tackling\\_loneliness/13663715/1](https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/stark-decline-in-number-of-pubs-as-more-than-1800-have-shut-in-16-years-1345483.html) **4** Michelle Devane, ‘“Alarming” 21% decline in pubs since 2005’ *Breaking News.ie* [Online] Available at: <https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/stark-decline-in-number-of-pubs-as-more-than-1800-have-shut-in-16-years-1345483.html> (Accessed 20 August 2022). **5** Anthony Foley, *The Irish Pub: Supporting Our Communities Report*, Drinks Industry Group Ireland, August 2023, 5; Full report <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/39429/> **6** Only pubs that

served a ‘substantial’ meal (costing at least €9) were allowed to re-open during the Covid-19 pandemic. **7** Intoxicating Liquor Act, 1927 (*Bona Fide Travellers*) <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1927/act/15/section/15/enacted/en/html>; See also <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1960-06-08/5/>. The Senate debate on the second stage of the Intoxicating Liquor Debate 1959 which gives a good explanation of the *Bona Fide* traveller by the Minister for Justice, Mr Traynor.

main roads leaving Dublin included ‘Lamb Doyles (Dublin Mountains), Widow Flavin’s (Sandyford), the Dropping Well (Dartry), the Deadman’s Inn (Lucan), the Swiss Cottage (Santry), the Igo Inn (Ballybrack) and The Goat (Goatstown)’ (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup>

Recent health and wellness developments along with changes in cultural attitudes to food and drink in Ireland have altered how we consume for pleasure. Many now adopt a more ‘European’ approach to socialising outside the home which increasingly involves more than just drinking alcohol. To operate a viable Irish pub in the current climate, careful consideration is now generally given to the food offering (Figure 2). Indeed, many would argue that the future of the Irish pub sector is dependent on the profits and benefits provided by that food offering. However, the current relationship between food culture and the Irish pub is a relatively recent phenomenon. This chapter explores the Irish pub’s historical links with food and how that relationship has developed. It also suggests how it might develop in the future and whether the past can help inform success in that regard.

Several books competently outline the history of the Irish pub<sup>9</sup> and many are referred to throughout this work. A common feature among these sources is a marked lack of focus on Irish pub food offerings; not surprising given that the Irish pub was primarily considered a place for drinking. Such sources help confirm that the new focus on gastronomy in many Irish pubs is a relatively recent phenomenon. The title of this chapter is drawn from Sally and John McKenna’s 1989 *Irish Food Guide*, where a small number of pubs do indeed get a brief mention with regard to their food offering. The guide is more generally dominated by other locations of good food, including kitchen shops, markets, food producers, retail shops, wholesalers, caterers, and also encompasses cookery classes. When discussing the pubs of the nation’s capital, the authors suggest that ‘[i]n food terms the wise eater will savour the atmosphere of Dublin’s drinking houses and leave it at that. If it’s eatin’ and drinkin’ you want, take a spoon and fork to a pint of stout’.<sup>10</sup> Robert Connolly in *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Pub* cites a 1971 interview with Trevor Howard, an actor who was part of the cast of the well-known movie *Ryan’s Daughter*, filmed in Dingle, Co. Kerry between 1968 and 1970. In the piece Howard explains to interviewer Gay Byrne ‘that there were 52 pubs in Dingle and no place to eat’.<sup>11</sup>

By the time Sybil Taylor published her book *Ireland’s Pubs: The Life and Lore of Ireland through its finest pubs*, she could provide paragraph descriptions of 143

<sup>8</sup> Sam, ‘Bona-Fides, Kips and Early-Houses’, *Come Here To Me!* (14 February 2014) <https://comeheretome.com/2014/02/14/bona-fides-kips-and-early-houses/>. Although not specifically stipulated in the legislation, it would be expected to supply real ‘bona fide travellers’ with

some comestibles as well as liquor. <sup>9</sup> Sybil Taylor, *Ireland’s Pubs: The Life and Lore of Ireland through its finest pubs* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983); Kevin C. Kearns, *Dublin Pub Life and Lore: An Oral History* (Dublin: Gill Books, 1996); Cian Molloy, *The Story of the Irish Pub:*

*An Intoxicating History of the Licensed Trade in Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002); James Fennell and Turtle Bunbury, *The Irish Pub* (Thames and Hudson, 2008); Bill Barich, *A Pint of Plain: Tradition, Change, and the Fate of the Irish Pub* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA,

2009); Robert E. Connolly, *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Pub* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2010). <sup>10</sup> Sally McKenna and John McKenna, *The Irish Food Guide: a directory of sources for lovers of good food and travel* (Dublin: Anna Livia Press, 1989), 65. <sup>11</sup> Connolly, *The Rise and Fall of the Irish Pub*, 23.



**Figure 1** The Goat Bar and Restaurant, Goatstown, Co. Dublin.

**Figure 2** P. McCormack & Sons Pub, Mounttown, Dún Laoghaire.



pubs throughout Ireland. Although there is some reference to food in some of the accounts, it is not the main thrust of the text, with descriptions limited at times to terms like ‘Good pub grub’. However, sometimes a singular dish might be mentioned: for example, The Abbey Mooney in Dublin has its ‘Speciality curry’ while ‘[g]ood pub grub as well as hot pies’ is applied to the offering in Davy Byrnes.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Davy Byrnes is one of the thirty-six pubs that feature in Joyce’s *Ulysses* as one of Leopold Bloom’s food locations where he orders a gorgonzola cheese sandwich.<sup>13</sup> At other times Taylor mentions comestibles like ‘excellent seafood’, in the context of coastal locations. A case in point is Paddy Burke’s Oyster Inn in Clarenbridge, Co Galway, with its strong association with the famous Clarenbridge Oyster Festival since its inception in 1954.<sup>14</sup> Oysters were the original fast food in industrial cities and were popular in taverns and pubs. Two of Dublin’s most renowned restaurants, The Red Bank Restaurant (c. 1889–1969) and Jammet’s (1900–1967) had oysters in their earlier titles—The Red Bank Oyster Hotel and The Burlington Restaurant and Oyster Saloons—both originating as taverns in the mid-nineteenth century. It is worth noting that the Red Bank—established in 1845 and originally called Burton Bindon’s Tavern—gets its name from a specific type of oyster from the border of Galway and Clare.<sup>15</sup> Following its move to Nassau Street in 1927, Jammet’s had a celebrated Oyster Bar where lunch was served at a marble-topped counter, a cheaper option than eating in the main restaurant. In Cork, situated next to the famous English Market, you will find the Oyster Tavern, one of the city’s oldest establishments, founded in 1792, but which today could be considered a gastropub as it has an equal reputation for its food as it has for its liquor.<sup>16</sup>

Taylor’s book was written in 1983, six years before the McKenna guide, and demonstrates that the situation with regard to Irish pubs and food was somewhat nuanced. Food was certainly available, with some pubs having a good reputation for their offering, however the overriding principle is similar to what McKenna subsequently notes, pubs were primarily drinking houses and food options were limited.

In order to understand the history of food in Irish pubs we must first determine what we mean by a pub and this may not be as easy as it sounds. For a start, it is difficult to define how old the pub is as an institution. Pete Brown puts it well:

**12** Taylor, *Ireland’s Pubs*, 39, 46.  
**13** James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 219; For food in *Ulysses*, see Flicka Small, ‘“Know Me Come Eat With Me”: What Food Says about Leopold Bloom’, in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), *Tickling the Palate: Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 35–46; Flicka Small ‘The Semiotics of Food

in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*’, Unpublished PhD, University College Cork, 2021. For pubs in *Ulysses*, see The Joyce Project <http://m.joyceproject.com/notes/050048pubs.html>.

**14** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘The History of Seafood in Irish Cuisine and Culture’, in Richard Hosking (ed.), *Wild Food: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2004* (Devon: Prospect Books, 2006), 219–33,

227; See also <https://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/2Kitch/aClarenbridgeOysters.html>. **15** Mac Con Iomaire, ‘The History of Seafood’, 225. **16** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Haute cuisine restaurants in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C* (2015), 371–403, 376. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3318/priac.2015.115.06>; There is

also an award-winning Oyster Tavern close to Tralee, Co. Kerry. **17** Pete Brown, *The Pub: A Cultural Institution—From Country Inns to Craft Beer Bars and Corner Locals* (London: Jacqui Small LLP, 2016), 206. **18** See Elizabeth Malcolm, ‘The Rise of the Pub: A study in the disciplining of popular culture’, in J.S. Donnelly Jr and K.A. Miller (eds), *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999).

If you define a pub as a place where people gather to consume alcohol and drink, laugh, chat, confide, bond and flirt, then the first pub was probably a pleasant woodland clearing or desert oasis 50,000 years ago. If you define it as a building specifically designed for this practice pubs of some description are as old as the earliest cities—around 10,000 years old.<sup>17</sup>

Things become even more confusing when we begin trying to understand that history in an Irish context, which like many other countries has had a variety of early iterations of the type of drinking establishment that would eventually constitute an Irish pub.<sup>18</sup> There are competing hostelries such as The Brazen Head in Dublin (established 1198) (Figure 3) and Sean's Bar in Athlone (established 900) claiming the title of Ireland's oldest public house,<sup>19</sup> while the 'shebeen'—an illicit drinking den—has its etymology in the Irish word 'séibe',<sup>20</sup> meaning a mug from which the ale or *poitín* was imbibed in these predominantly rural spaces.<sup>21</sup> From the 1930s to the 1960s, one of Dublin's most notorious shebeens or 'kips'—a brothel-cum-speakeasy that sold whiskey or gin from tea cups till the early morning—was the Café Continental, better known as Dolly Fawcett's, located on the corner of Bolton and Capel streets, reputedly frequented by Brendan Behan.<sup>22</sup> There are many such manifestations which we must consider, from coaching inns to taverns. In his seminal work *All Manners of Food*, Stephen Mennell explains that one precursor to what we now know as the pub, the English tavern, was primarily dedicated to the role of providing drink—'the word tavern originally signified a place where men went to drink wine as opposed to an ale house where beer was sold'.<sup>23</sup> Although both the tavern and the ale house were primarily focused on drinks, with food being a secondary consideration, 'by the eighteenth century many taverns in the capital were noted eating places'.<sup>24</sup> While Mennell concentrates primarily on England, Mac Con Iomaire's research traces the origins of public dining in Ireland, supporting Mennell in that the forerunners of public houses in Ireland were likewise inns, taverns, and indeed ale houses. Although there was an inevitable blurring of the lines in terms of provision, each of the three suggests a different function when viewed through a food lens. Inns were primarily accommodation-based, while also offering

**19** <https://www.seansbar.ie/seans-bar-history>; <https://brazenhead.com/story/>

**20** <https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/s%c3%a9ibe>

**21** For what can be learned from Irish language sources in Irish food history, see Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dónall Ó Braonáin's chapter in this volume; for the history of whiskey in Medieval Ireland, see Fionnán O'Connor chapter in this volume. **22**

<https://comeheretome.com/2014/02/14/bonafides-kips-and-early-houses/>

(Accessed 30 July 2023); see Cathal Goulding, 'My friend Brendan Behan' in E. H. Mikhail (ed.), *Brendan Behan, Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 2 (The Macmillan Press: London and Basingstoke, 1982), 275–282, 279. **23** Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France*

*from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 137.

**24** Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, 137; For examples of food offered in some eighteenth-century inns and taverns in Ireland see Toby Barnard chapter in this volume.

some food; taverns were concerned with the provision of both food and drinks; ale houses were considered by some as more downmarket, with a clearer focus on beer. For a brief period in the mid-nineteenth century, gin palaces made an appearance, some of these transforming into restaurants towards the end of the century.<sup>25</sup> Typically, before the emergence of the restaurant era as we know it today, food was provided *Table d'Hôte*, with relatively limited customer choice. No formal menu was offered as such, and guests were usually seated together at large tables. As Mac Con Iomaire argues, the development of the restaurant was an important turning point in terms of Irish food culture:

With the growth of new public dining clubs and restaurants for the wealthy, pubs and taverns reverted to the working classes.



**Figure 3** The Brazen Head, Dublin with its 'Ireland's Oldest Pub' sign.

By 1888 the *Licensed Victualler's Gazette* states 'in these days when taverns are voted vulgar, it would be almost the ruin of a barrister's reputation to be seen entering a public house unless it were called a restaurant'. This distinction seems to have occurred equally in Dublin as in London.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that while the development of a discrete restaurant culture became a feature of Irish society, the emphasis within the public house sector remained focused primarily on drinking. Clear distinctions begin to emerge when comparing pub cultures in Ireland and Britain. The British situation differed in that a much stronger association between their public houses and food developed in the twentieth century. Reasons for this were complex. The early twentieth century saw a strong temperance movement wield considerable influence in British politics. New initiatives emerged around the time of the first world war and continued to play a role in post-war years. In 1916 the government's Central Control Board (CCB), which was established to regulate the liquor trade, initiated the Carlisle experiment where it took into state ownership the pubs and breweries around three munitions factories, most notably in Carlisle, where excessive drinking had become an issue amongst munitions workers.<sup>27</sup> While the CCB closed many pubs, others were restructured and encouraged to develop a new kind of pub trade, one that encouraged a broader customer base, that wasn't solely interested in drinking, by providing food and other entertainment. These new operations proved very successful and according to Mellows:

This new model pub strongly influenced a movement between the two world wars that would encourage the evolution of the public house into the kind of multifaceted operation we are familiar with today serving the whole community not just drinkers ... The success of the Carlisle experiment encouraged brewers like Whitbread and Barclay Perkins to open their own large scale directly managed houses designed to high specification that had a broad appeal.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, the roll out of food offerings and the necessary ancillary systems would have been easier for breweries with ownership of large numbers of public houses due to the centralised nature of their pub management systems. Thus,

**25** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, *The emergence, development and influence of French haute cuisine on public dining in Dublin restaurants 1900–2000: an oral history* 3 Vols. (Doctoral thesis. Technological University Dublin, 2009), Vol. 2, 93. doi:10.21427/D79K7H **26** Máirtín Mac

Con Iomaire, 'Public Dining in Dublin: The History and Evolution of Gastronomy and Commercial Dining 1700–1900', *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 25: 2 (2012), 227–46, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596111311301612> **27** Phil Mellows 'How did historic alehouses, taverns and

inns evolve into the pubs we see today' *Morning Advertiser* [online] 5 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.morningadvertiser.co.uk/Article/2019/03/05/How-did-historic-alehouses-taverns-and-inns-evolve-into-the-pubs-we-see-today> **28** Mellows, 'How did historic alehouses, taverns

and inns evolve into the pubs we see today'.

throughout the twentieth century, while Irish public houses were principally family owned and focused on drink sales, the large-scale domination of pub chains (Bass Charrington, Whitbread, for instance) with their extensive tied house systems<sup>29</sup> could more easily fulfil the consumer demand for more food focused operations. As a result, food offerings became associated with UK pubs far earlier than in Ireland. However, in 1945 George Orwell, writing in his essay *In Defence of English Cooking* noted that '[p]ubs as a rule sell no food at all, other than potato crisps [sic] and tasteless sandwiches'.<sup>30</sup> Post-war Britain had a resurgence in foodstuffs like the homemade 'British pie and a pint', and 'the Ploughman's Lunch', along with pub snacks such as 'Pickled Eggs' and regional dishes like 'Lancashire Hotpot'.<sup>31</sup> The latter dish developed its own unique following via the BBC's long-running soap opera *Coronation Street* as Betty Turpin's Hotpot, the signature dish offered by Betty (played by Betty Driver), who worked behind the bar in the soap's fictitious local Manchester pub, The Rovers Return.<sup>32</sup> In general, these dishes became strongly associated with the pub rather than the restaurant, promoted as they were by the aforementioned pub restaurant chains, which were never really a feature in the Irish pub sector. Large UK pub restaurant chains like the Berni Inns,<sup>33</sup> Beefeater, and Harvester combined the pub experience with that of the casual restaurant and were owned and managed by companies such as Grand Metropolitan and Whitbread throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s. These companies dominated the UK market and greatly influenced the presence of food in the pub culture there. The sector in Ireland was for the most part structured differently. Despite exceptions such as Beamish and Crawford in Cork and Dublin's Watkins' Jameson, Pim and Co.,<sup>34</sup> (both brewing companies who also owned a number of pubs) the Irish pub sector was not affected to the same extent, as so many pubs were family owned. The separation between the restaurant, which was for eating, and the pub, which was for drinking, was much more marked in an Irish context. In a 2003 oral history interview, Frank Farren recalls how many hotel bars lost out, somewhat understandably given their location, to public houses in being slow to adapt to a changing culture of serving snacks and fast meals as part of their offering.

Right up to the very end they resisted. Luncheon was from 12 to 2 and between 12 and 2 or 2.30 they wouldn't serve a sandwich anywhere. You were selling against yourself. And they wouldn't serve food in the bar,

**29** Tied houses were a dominant feature of the UK drinks industry in the 19th and 20th centuries where large breweries bought up pubs which were then rented out to tenants who were then 'tied' to only selling beer produced by the brewery.

**30** George Orwell, *In Defence of English Cooking* (London:

Penguin, [1945] 2005), 56.

**31** The phrase 'Ploughman's Lunch' was first promoted by the Milk Marketing Board in the 1960s to promote the sales of cheese, especially in pubs, see <https://www.pongcheese.co.uk/blog/a-history-of-the-ploughmans-lunch/>

**32** Jenny Hammerton, 'Recipe of the Month—Betty

Driver's Lancashire Hot Pot', Available at: <https://www.silverscreensuppers.com/betty-driver/recipe-of-the-month-betty-drivers-lancashire-hot-pot> (Accessed 23 August 2023).

**33** The famous Restaurant Jammet's on Nassau Street which closed in 1967 became a Berni Inn in the 1970s,

before becoming a Tex-Mex restaurant called Judge Roy Beans in the 1980s, and is now the location of Porterhouse Central <https://pub.ie/visit/the-porterhouse-central/>

**34** On the history of Beamish and Crawford see Donal Ó Drisceoil and Diarmuid Ó Drisceoil, *Beamish & Crawford. The History of an Irish Brewery*

you'd have to go to the restaurant or you'd have to go to the dining room. You see things were changing but what, the penny never dropped with them. You needed a licence to serve liquor or beer, alcohol, but you didn't need a licence to serve food. But they had the licences but the publicans didn't need a licence to serve food and the publicans started serving food. And they took an awful lot of trade from the hotels.<sup>35</sup>

Farren also recalls that The Red Bank on D'Olier Street 'was the only bar in Dublin literally serving full meals over the counter. Now I'm talking about early '50s. Now it would be towards the late '50s that things really started moving, in the early '60s that the pubs start serving meals.'<sup>36</sup> These pubs would remain the exceptions, as a real focus on food within the pub environment would not occur until the proliferation of the pub carvery throughout the 1980s, as discussed below.

### A Fifty-Year journey

Over fifty years ago the reputation (or lack thereof) of the Irish pub in terms of its food offering was clearly described in a 1972 guidebook, *The Essential Dublin*. One section in the book, 'Pub Grub', starts with a sentence reminiscent of Orwell's earlier lament for English pubs:

Two pieces of yesterday's lightly margarined bread wilting at the edges, enveloping a tiny piece of ham or processed cheese and served with a cup of something only distantly related to coffee is served at lunchtime to the mainly male clientele.<sup>37</sup>

Such a statement is hardly a ringing endorsement of food culture in the Irish pub, and a far cry from the fare then provided by similar establishments in the UK. As the piece goes on to say:

Not all pubs are that bad; some offer toasted sandwiches, and bowls of soup; some even allow you to fumble over the tiny packet of butter to prove that they do use it, but there certainly is no tradition of providing the tasty pies and pastries and unlimited supply of pickles so common in English pubs.<sup>38</sup>

(Collins Press: Cork, 2015).  
On Watkins see Ciarán Murray, 'Dublin's Historic Breweries: Watkins' of Ardee Street', <https://comeheretome.com/2014/05/22/dublins-historic-breweries-watkins-of-ardee-street/> (Accessed 18 September 2023)  
**35** Mac Con Iomaire, 'The emergence, development and

influence of French haute cuisine' Vol. 3, 58–91, 72–73, ~203–07. Interview with retired chef and culinary educator Frank Farren (28 May 2003). **36** Farren interview, 73, ~207. **37** Terry Kelleher, *The Essential Dublin* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Limited, 1972), 64. **38** Kelleher, *The Essential Dublin*, 64.

There was a limited emphasis on food when it came to training those working specifically in the pub sector. Responsibility for training in the industry was in the remit of CERT (Council for Education Recruitment and Training for the Hotel and Catering Industries), who published a booklet in 1974 to help train new bar personnel in bar operations—tellingly, the booklet makes no reference to food at all.<sup>39</sup> Thirty years later, the 2004 edition of *The Pub Manual*, the definitive guide for publicans (published by the Vintners' Federation of Ireland), devoted only three sparse pages out of the comprehensive 177-page volume to food.<sup>40</sup>

This is all a far cry from the pub food culture we know today. The Bar of the Year Awards now include two categories focused on pub food—'Gastro Bar of the Year' and 'Bar Food of the Year'—both of which attract multiple entrants.<sup>41</sup> In 2017, The Wild Honey Inn in Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare was the first pub to be awarded a Michelin Star for food in Ireland<sup>42</sup> and currently is the only Irish pub with this distinction.<sup>43</sup> This can of course be considered a unique offering; however, The Wild Honey Inn was accompanied by twenty-nine other pubs across Ireland in Michelin's 'Eating Out In Pubs' guide for 2018, which all received awards defined by Michelin<sup>44</sup> as *Plate*: 'Good Cooking—Fresh ingredients, capably prepared: simply a good meal'. In one case, Morrissey's in Co. Clare received a *Bib Gourmand*, an award described by Michelin as '[s]imple yet skilful cooking for very good food at a reasonable price'.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond the examples cited above, because of its primarily beverage-focused story, it is tempting to dismiss the traditional Irish pub as having a limited sense of food history. To a certain degree this is the case, but if one delves a little deeper there were in fact a number of important food elements associated with the Irish pub historically. Unlike many other aspects of Irish food history, the food elements discussed below may initially seem quite modest to those interested in gastronomy. However, because the Irish pub is so deeply ingrained in Irish society, further analysis reveals a rich vein of nostalgia for many people. UK pubs have been the Irish pub's closest relatives down through the years and more recent forays into food in Irish pubs have mirrored developments there. This is true in terms of both the carvery and gastropub influence described below. It is hardly surprising, given the strong links between the two nations. Many returning Irish emigrants have spent time working in, managing, or simply enjoying UK pubs. The arrival of television also disseminated British popular culture,

**39** *Bar Service Booklet* printed in 1974 by CERT in Ballsbridge, Dublin. Provided by John Keatley, retired Food and Beverage Lecturer, Publican and Caterer, during a recorded interview with the author at Tallaght, 28 March 2023. **40** Andrew O'Gorman and Paudie O'Donnell, *Pub Manual* (Dublin: Vintners Federation of Ireland, 2004). **41** Simon Kelly, 'The

finalists for Bar of the Year 2023 have been announced'. Available at: <https://www.joe.ie/news/bar-of-the-year-finalists-2023-778174> (Accessed 2 August 2023). **42** Catherine Cleary, 'Ireland's Michelin-star publican:

"We'll stay the way we are"', *Irish Times* 2 October 2017 [online]. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/food-and-drink/>

[ireland-s-michelin-star-publican-we-ll-stay-the-way-we-are-1.3241442](https://www.ireland-s-michelin-star-publican-we-ll-stay-the-way-we-are-1.3241442). (Accessed 30 July 2023). **43** Wildhoneyinn.com. Available at: <https://www.wildhoneyinn.com/about/> (Accessed 1 August 2023).

**44** *The Michelin Guide: Eating Out in Pubs* (London: Michelin Publishers, 2018), 3. **45** *The Michelin Guide: Eating Out in Pubs*, 508–44.

**46** For the history of Pork Scratchings, see <https://hairybarsnacks.com/the-history-of-pork-scratchings/> **47** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'The Pig in Irish Cuisine, past and present', in Harlan Walker (ed.), *The Fat of the Land: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2002* (Bristol: Footwork, 2003), 207–215, 211. Chitterlings are the

including pub-based soap operas, into Irish homes, particularly in urban areas on the east coast and along the border counties where these television stations were more available. Similar to the Irish pub, food culture in the English pub included an array of popular snacks such as crisps and nuts. This included that standard British pub ‘fayre’, ‘pork scratchings’—one that never really caught on in an Irish context.<sup>46</sup> There is historic memory of chitterlings once being a popular bar food in Dublin,<sup>47</sup> and also memory of a very salty Dublin coddle,<sup>48</sup> sold in some Dublin Markets’ district public houses, probably more to increase the customers’ thirst than to line their stomachs. There was also a tradition of women selling cooked winkles outside Dublin pubs in ‘newspaper twists’, as immortalised in Paula Meehan’s poem.<sup>49</sup> And yet as we shall see later, it is the English who claim the term ‘Gastropub’ as their own early 1990s invention, a descriptor which has now become a common feature of Irish, UK and US pub culture.<sup>50</sup> Along with the bar snacks such as crisps and nuts, Irish pubs in the latter part of the 20th century often provided more substantial food offerings such as toasted sandwiches and home-made soup. And indeed, the arrival of the carvery concept had a big influence on the Irish pub. Readers of a certain vintage will remember sweet counters being a feature of, in particular, many rural pubs with ample supplies of Dairy Milk chocolate bars and other treats often served along with ‘a mineral’<sup>51</sup> to placate younger children while their parents enjoyed a drink. This Sunday drive ritual might be somewhat taboo today, not least because of changed attitudes to both drink driving and the negative impacts associated with exposing children to alcohol settings.

### Pub Crisps

The humble packet of crisps has been a staple of Irish pub culture for many years and an array of packet snacks remains a common feature of any Irish pub today. Branded Tayto crisps however are somewhat iconic in Irish culture. Crisps are deep-fried wafer-thin potato slices, known in America as potato chips, which are sold in sealed foil bags. The Tayto Company began making their cheese and onion flavoured crisps in 1954 in Dublin, with the salt and vinegar flavour following later.<sup>52</sup> The word Tayto has become synonymous with crisps in Ireland ever since. The strongly flavoured crisp has been a favourite of the returning Irish emigrant, and along with items like Barry’s or Lyons Tea and Cadbury’s

small intestines of the pig, which require very careful cleaning. **48** Dublin Coddle is a stew made from bacon, sausages, potatoes and onions, personal correspondence with James Murphy from Dublin’s Markets district, a former bar manager and lecturer in Bar Studies in TU Dublin. **49** Paula Meehan, *As If By Magic: Selected Poems* (Dublin: Dedalus Press,

2020). The ‘Buying Winkles’ poem mentions the winkle woman selling outside the Rosebowl bar, which was on the corner of Gardiner Street and Parnell Street (personal communication with Paula Meehan 21 September 2023). **50** See chapter on Gastropub in Jessica Boak and Ray Bailey, *20th Century Pub: From Beer House to Booze Bunker* (St. Albans: Homewood

Press, 2017). **51** The term ‘mineral’ was traditionally used in Ireland to describe a carbonated soft drink and stems from the original term ‘mineral waters’, which were natural spring waters that became popular for their health-giving properties, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries. **52** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Ireland’, in Bruce Kraig and Coleen

Sen (eds), *Street Food around the World: An Encyclopedia of Food and Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 192–96; Founded by Joe Murphy in Dublin in 1954, Tayto Snacks are now owned by German snack food company Intersnack.



Chocolate, holds a special place among both the Irish at home and the nation's ever-growing diaspora. One very Irish version of this item that may have slipped from the collective memory is that of 'Tayto Pub Crisps'. For many of the baby boomer generation and older, these were a distinctively packaged and slightly larger version of Tayto crisps that were sold only in the pub setting. They were a feature of that generation's childhood, with memories of them being used to keep noisy children quiet, as they were washed down with the traditional glass bottle of fizzy orange with a straw. My own childhood memory is of Saturday night excitement building as my siblings and I hoped my father would appear at the door with a brown paper bag stacked with a pack each, when he came home from an evening at the local pub. More often than not, this treat might be accompanied by some bars of Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate, which were also sold from the sweet counter behind the bar in the local pub.<sup>53</sup> Such sweet counters were a legacy from the time when so many pubs operated under the guise of spirit grocers, selling a selection of grocery items alongside alcoholic spirits and other beverages. In the Ireland of the 1970s and 1980s, there was never a consideration that my father or his contemporaries would have eaten anything substantial at the local pub. Home was for eating and the pub was for drinking (and indeed smoking, before the 2004 ban). There were certainly examples of public houses that focused on food, as we can see throughout this chapter, but for the most part these were the exception rather than the rule, and the key focus of the Irish pub was usually alcoholic beverages.

While researching for this chapter, information on the 'Pub Crisps' mentioned above proved quite difficult to pin down. Conversations with friends and colleagues revealed a vague but elusive memory, with discussion inevitably descending into arguments over the merits of Tayto Crisps over King Crisps, another Irish favourite.<sup>54</sup> As part of that search I came across an interesting thread on the social media site Boards.ie that was initiated in 2014 with the following question:

Does anyone remember 'pub crisps' this was actually the name of the crisps, and as far as I'm aware they were only ever sold in pubs! Think they might have been made by Tayto but I'm not certain! All I remember is they were glorious and I want them, now!<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Brian J. Murphy, *Beyond Sustenance: An Exploration of Food and Drink Culture in Ireland* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023).

<sup>54</sup> See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDI2rAgArhE>

<sup>55</sup> Discussion thread on

*Boards.ie*. Available at: <https://www.boards.ie/discussion/2057153186/pub-crisps>. (Accessed 23 July 2023).

Remember having them  
with TK red lemonade.  
Original Pub Crisps !!!!!  
Brilliant !!

My da used to bring them  
home in a brown bag with  
a glass bottle of club orange  
and the taste of them  
together was priceless!<sup>56</sup>

—Rareoldirishstuff



**Figure 4** Left. Tayto  
Pub Crisps beer mat

**Figure 5** Right. Image  
posted on Rare Irish Stuff  
Facebook page



**Figure 6** Carvery in The Grange Pub, Deansgrange, Co. Dublin

A heated debate ensued, with various arguments revolving around whether such 'Pub' Crisps ever really existed or whether they were made by Tayto or indeed King. The discussion continued until an image of a beer mat was posted bearing the legend 'Tayto Pub Crisps' (Figure 4). This thread led to a previous Facebook post from 2013 of a used packet of Tayto Pub Crisps (Figure 5). The post was made on a site entitled 'Rare Irish Stuff' and was posted by Truus Keaney, who captioned the photo 'found this in my attic'.

A total of 131 people commented on this post and another 361 shared the photo. The nostalgia associated with such a simple pub food item is clear from the comments posted in response to the image:

Reminds me of our Wonderful Dad who's no longer with us.  
He would bring them from the pub for us on a Sunday nite [*sic*].

The memories ....my dad use to bring me home a packet of those every night an[d] leave them on my locker ..sometimes i [woul]d wake up in the middle of the night an[d] eat them ...!!!!..

When Pubs were Pubs not restaurants/Diners/ fast food shops.  
Oh my god I was just talking about these the other day. Daddy always brought them home from the pub for us.<sup>56</sup>

The extent of the debate and the many nostalgic references associated with this humble pub snack reflect the fact that even the simplest of foods can resonate with an audience. Crisps remain an important offering in Irish pubs with some 'craft beer' pubs carrying 'posher' brands such as Keogh's, Clinton's or O'Donnell's.

### **The Pub Carvery**

The Irish pub carvery (Figure 6) usually consists of a dedicated food counter where patrons queue up to order their dishes from the chef on duty. Portions are typically generous, and a relatively simple menu includes one or two roast meats, carved in situ (hence the name), a fish dish, and a chicken dish, along with a selection of vegetables including various potato offerings. Though less common now, the sight of a perfectly rounded, mashed potato half-sphere (achieved by using an ice cream scoop) was a signature sight in many pub carveries in early years. Mac Con Iomaire highlights the ubiquitous 'stuffing and gravy' served at carveries, arguing that it 'is at a carvery that you will get the closest public

<sup>56</sup> Rareoldirishstuff  
Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/RareIrishStuff/photos/pb.114988765251787.-2207520000.1392931713./524089284341731/?type=3&theater>.

form of Irish cuisine'.<sup>57</sup> The Irish carvery had its origins in the UK and from there made its way to Irish shores through the demands and experiences of returning emigrants. Like the Pub Crisps mentioned above, the carvery can sometimes attract derision from contemporary 'foodies':

Is there a more unfashionable meal than the carvery? 1970s laughing stocks such as Arctic roll and Chicken Kiev have been reinvented by chefs and rediscovered by food lovers, but the carvery resists any warm glow of nostalgia. It remains the butt of a joke, a restaurant experience that, in the way it seems to encapsulate the narrowness of small-town British life, has become a bleakly comic trope.<sup>58</sup>

However, like the other pub foods mentioned within this chapter, it has played an important role in Ireland's eating-out culture. Though difficult to establish an accurate date, the carvery influence in Ireland was most likely an import from the UK during the early 1980s.<sup>59</sup> Irish publicans and hospitality professionals followed trends in consumer behaviour beyond these shores, reading trade journals, travelling, and also regularly visiting industry trade shows such as Hotelympia in London.<sup>60</sup> Many had also worked in the UK, on the Continent, and in America. Today carveries are an important feature of both UK and Irish dining. The Toby Carvery pub/restaurant brand (now owned by Mitchell and Butler) has 175 outlets across Britain and a thirty-year history of carvery provision. However, the origins and unique history of the carvery can be traced back further, originating as a style of service as early as 1956 in the Lyons Corner Houses. These establishments formed part of the J. Lyons catering empire in the UK, 'which at one time was the largest catering company in the world'<sup>61</sup> – in the late 1800s there were 250 Lyons Corner houses in London.<sup>62</sup> Later, the carvery innovation was taken up by several hotels, and indeed pubs. The Regent Palace Carvery and Strand Palace Carvery are early examples. There are a great many instances of Irish pubs adapting the UK carvery approach described above and indeed expanding its scope to better suit an Irish clientele. Irish pubs were often keen to ensure that the location of the carvery in the pub did not inhibit their normal drinking business, particularly outside food service periods. Publicans often introduced carvery units that were adaptable and could be easily disguised and used as

**57** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Ireland', in Ken Albala (ed.), *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2011), Vol. 4, 197–205. **58** Tony Naylor, 'Call the carvery! Updating a British staple', *The Guardian* [online] 21 June 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple>. (Accessed 22 February 2023). **59** Recorded interview with John Keatley, Retired Food and Beverage Lecturer, Publican and Caterer, 28 March 2023. **60** Hotelympia, the Hotel, Restaurant &

[theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple). (Accessed 22 February 2023). **61** Thomas Harding, 'Would tracing the history of my family's J. Lyons empire be my cup of tea?', *The Guardian* [online] 7 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple>. (Accessed 2 February 2023); National Archive UK. Available at: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/996a102b-178e-491a-b255-7994e9f28dog>. (Accessed 20 July 2023). **62** Anon., 'The Rise and Fall

Catering Exhibition, began in London in 1935 <https://www.hrc.co.uk/hrc-history> **61** Thomas Harding, 'Would tracing the history of my family's J. Lyons empire be my cup of tea?', *The Guardian* [online] 7 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple>. (Accessed 2 February 2023); National Archive UK. Available at: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/996a102b-178e-491a-b255-7994e9f28dog>. (Accessed 20 July 2023). **62** Anon., 'The Rise and Fall

[wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/jun/21/carvery-updating-a-british-staple). (Accessed 2 February 2023); National Archive UK. Available at: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/996a102b-178e-491a-b255-7994e9f28dog>. (Accessed 20 July 2023). **62** Anon., 'The Rise and Fall

additional bar space for more general beverage business.<sup>63</sup> John Clancy, retired chef and culinary lecturer, recalls some scepticism when the carvery was first introduced to the Dubliner pub in Jury's Hotel in Ballsbridge around 1981, but noted that it became an instant success, and contrary to the 'selling against yourself' fear that Farren had mentioned earlier, the availability of food in the bar meant more dining customers.<sup>64</sup>

In terms of food provision, the proliferation of carveries such as those mentioned above in cities such as London reflected the fact that these locations were major centres of work where commuters travelled from considerable distances, without the ability to return home at midday, thus encouraging the need to purchase their lunch in situ. Ireland's towns and cities were smaller, with a more dispersed population—people, usually men, had more opportunity to go home for lunch, resulting in less requirement for dining out during the middle of the working day. Eating out remained, for most of the general public, something you did for special occasions.<sup>65</sup>

For most of the twentieth century, Ireland's road infrastructure<sup>66</sup> was in a very poor state and journey times were (unnecessarily) long. A considerable network of roadside pubs developed carveries, as road traffic increased and publicans realised that clients would require food provision during long journeys. Certain hostelries, such as the Leix County Hotel in Borris-in-Ossory, became official stopping points for the intercity bus network, offering toilet facilities and refreshments for travellers. A carvery, with a relatively limited staff requirement, rather than restaurant style service, often fitted the bill. Though many are now redundant due to much improved travel times, better cars, and indeed drink driving laws, some establishments became renowned for their ability to satisfy the hungry and weary road traveller. Harry's Roadhouse, Kinnegad, the Dew Drop Inn, Kill, and others, were well-known locations for respite from arduous drives. Carveries were also often located in the vicinity of hospitals. Hostelries such as Beaumont House and The Merrion Inn were, and indeed remain, popular because of their location near both Beaumont and St Vincent's hospitals in Dublin. On winning the *Unilever Great Carvery Pub of the Year Competition* in 2017, the Beaumont House manager Paudie Carew spoke about his delight, noting that '[a]s the largest carvery in the country, we pride ourselves on delivering fresh, hearty food to our customers. It's great to be recognised for that service'.<sup>67</sup> Other famous carveries were located en route to airports. It was customary for many rural dwellers to stop in at The Coachman's Inn near Dublin Airport for a meal prior

of the Lyons' Cornerhouses and their Nippy Waitresses', *Flashbak.com*. Available at: <https://flashbak.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-lyons-cornerhouses-and-their-nippy-waitresses-35186/> (Accessed 14 February 2023)  
**63** Among the leading suppliers of these bar

carvery units in the 1980s were the Mulcahy Martin Group which have since become Mulcahy Group and Martin Food Equipment.  
**64** Personal Correspondence with John Clancy, 25 August 2023. **65** Marjorie Deleuze, 'A New Craze for Food: Why is Ireland turning into a Foodie

Nation?', in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), *"Tickling the Palate": Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 143–58.  
**66** After joining the EEC in 1973, Ireland benefited from major infrastructural grants which helped finance

improved road networks and shorten travel times.  
**67** <https://lovindublin.com/food/this-northside-pub-has-just-won-the-best-carvery-in-dublin-award>

to travelling abroad, with Dirty Nellies providing a similar service near Shannon Airport. Other Irish pubs with carveries became renowned stop-off points when travelling to or from sporting or concert events. Examples include The Póitín Still, Rathcoole, popular for both supporters and concert-goers travelling on the M7 for events in Dublin, or indeed Furey's in Moyvalley, for those travelling on the M4. The Goat Grill<sup>68</sup> and The Stillorgan Orchard were particularly popular for their pub grub during race meetings at Leopardstown Racecourse.<sup>69</sup> Much of this function has been replaced by the motorway service areas, such as the famous Barack Obama Plaza off the M7 in Co. Tipperary.

There is no doubt that the carvery now exists as a key staple of the Irish pub's food offering. Although not offered by all, those pubs who do successfully provide this style of food service benefit from a regular clientele kept loyal by large portions of good quality, well cooked food. Its self-service style allows for a quick and efficient experience, suiting today's hectic lifestyles. Carveries are also very popular with retirees, as a convenient and affordable meal which is also convivial. The interaction between the staff and solo or elderly diners is often the only daily communication they have outside of home. This, along with interactions with other customers, helps keep loneliness at bay, while fostering a strong sense of community.<sup>70</sup>

### The Pub Toastie

One of the great stalwarts of the Irish pub food offering has to be the toasted sandwich. Despite the Irish pub's limited engagement with food, the toasted sandwich was always one menu item that could be relied on in most pubs. According to Publin, a popular pub guide website:

Pubs aren't just for the evening time you know. Sometimes a seat in a pub can be a haven from the outside world when you're on a break for lunch or just ambling around town. Sit down, read a paper and enjoy a bit of cheese stretching between two slices of hearty bread.<sup>71</sup>

The popularity of the sandwich in Irish pubs may stem from its role as a staple of the working lunch, and the ubiquity of sliced bread.<sup>72</sup> Early forays into the food sector for Irish pubs came at a time when it was considered acceptable for working people to consume alcohol at lunch time, a practice frowned upon today.

**68** Originally known as The Goat, the pub was acquired in 1982 by Charlie Chawke, of the Adare, Co. Limerick publican family (Bill Chawke's Bar), who soon developed a strong food offering (hence the Goat Bar & Grill), and turned it into one of the earliest dedicated sports pubs. <https://goatgrill.com/>

**69** Another popular stop for Leopardstown racegoers, Blakes Restaurant in Stillorgan, was also famous for its carvery, slow-cooking tougher cuts of meat overnight in AltoSham ovens to tenderise them. Blakes obtained a Special Restaurant Licence in 1988 allowing it to serve pints and spirits. **70** For

further discussion on the role of community pubs, and the 'pub as the hub' concept, see Gráinne Murphy, 'Learning from the UK Experience: How the Social Entrepreneurship Model Can Help Save the Rural Irish Pub', in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Eamon Maher (eds), *New Beginnings: Perspectives from*

*France and Ireland* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023), 241–62.

**71** Anon., 'Pubs for a lunchtime toastie (and maybe a pint) to unwind' Publin Pub Guide [Online] Available at: <http://publin.ie/2020/pubs-for-a-lunchtime-toastie-and-maybe-a-pint-to-unwind/> (Accessed 21 February 2023).

**72** The sliced pan was very



**Figure 7** Opposite. Grogan's Castle Inn, Dublin.

**Figures 8a, 8b and 8c**

Grogan's sandwich making facilities and the end result.





In a chapter dedicated to the sandwich, Vogler describes the emergence of 'lunch-eon' as coinciding with the pushing back of the mid-day dinner to early evening, six o'clock or later, from its position around midday (the seventeenth century) or mid-afternoon (the eighteenth).<sup>73</sup> Vogler notes an early official reference to the sandwich with the Earl of Sandwich's demand for cold beef between bread in 1765, before observing that 'the need for sandwiches and the need for lunch suggest[s] a new kind of relationship between food and work'.<sup>74</sup> Many Irish pubs, particularly in urban areas, offered respite from the busy working day and a lunchtime pint was often accompanied by the traditional pub sandwich. Over time these simple pub sandwiches were prepared with a variety of different fillings and different breads, toasted or untoasted, with a small salad and garnish of crisps on the side. One well-known Irish pub, Grogan's Castle Inn, Dublin, is famed for its toasted sandwich and uses a clear glass fridge behind the bar (Figures 8a, 8b and 8c), which it stacks full of pre-buttered slices of bread early in the morning which are then filled and toasted as per requirements.

The traditional 'toasted special' was a combination of ham, cheddar cheese and usually onion, often complemented by condiments such as brown sauce and mustard. Keatley<sup>75</sup> refers to a practice in the 1980s of the pub toastie being bought in, pre-wrapped in heat resistant clear cellophane, toasted while still in the plastic wrapping and served to the customer with minimum fuss, further illustrating the desire of the more traditional Irish publican to offer some food, with limited engagement with any complex preparation, given their focus on selling beverages.<sup>76</sup> Arguably, that attitude still prevails, with many traditional publicans preferring to outsource food service elements in their pub, or using simple and limited food offerings such as soups, one pot dishes, or in more recent times, types of pizza that require minimal culinary skill and preparation. Up until recently, this approach was mirrored by the publican's attitude to other provisions, such as wine service. Rather than offering a selection of wines by the glass, to accompany food, publicans often preferred to offer quarter bottles of wine, a less complex option in terms of both product knowledge and expertise in ensuring the wines stay fresh through regular stock rotation.

### The Gastropub

The first gastropub is generally agreed to be The Eagle in Farringdon, London, which in 1991 is reputed to have come up with the concept of providing restaurant-standard food in a pub setting.<sup>77</sup>

much a 1900s invention following the successes of Otto Frederick Rohwedder who, in 1927 in Missouri, invented the first automatic commercial bread slicer, Bernice Harrison, *Design Moment: Sliced pan, 1927*, *Irish Times* [online] 15 February 2020. Available

at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/homes-and-property/design-moment-sliced-pan-1927-1.4171465> (Accessed 29 August 2023).

<sup>73</sup> Pen Vogler, *Scoff: A History of Food and Class in Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2021), 29; Up until recently, the

'common' people of Ireland, as famously quoted by the late Kerry politician, Jackie Healy Rae, ate their dinner in the middle of the day. For further ruminations on the history of lunch, see <https://www.ediblegeography.com/lunch-an-urban-invention/>  
<sup>74</sup> Vogler, *Scoff: A History of*

*Food and Class in Britain*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Keatley, Oral History Interview, 28 March 2023.

<sup>76</sup> For the *Publin* podcast titled 'The Great Dublin Toastie Pub Crawl' <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6p68VJiSYoDqNdk3kXxuh9>

<sup>77</sup> Brown, *The Pub: A Cultural Institution*, 86.

The Eagle was founded in 1991 by restaurant manager Michael Belben, and chef David Eyre, who wanted a restaurant but couldn't afford it. Luckily for them at the same time the government had decided that brewers had established a monopoly of pub ownership that gave the general public a bad deal. It did. The beer was expensive, poorly sourced wine was an afterthought and the food was rubbish! The time was ripe for a casual, good value approach to dining using top quality ingredients that until then could only be found in expensive restaurants. *Big Flavours and Rough Edges* was the title of the cookbook. It summed it up, The Gastropub was born.<sup>78</sup>

While it is accepted that Belben and Eyre coined the phrase, there were of course many pubs specialising in food in both Ireland and the UK prior to 1991. However, the concept, as we understand it today, gained particular momentum around that time. In 2017, in an effort to promote Irish gastropubs, *Good Food Ireland* was happy to attribute the origins of the term to the UK, suggesting that 'The Eagle was set up in a recession with the furniture that came with the pub and a coat of paint to brighten the interior. Ingredients were sought from nearby butchers, fishmongers and grocers. It was a totally new concept to the diners of London. The rest, as they say, is history'.<sup>79</sup> Since its original use, the term 'gastropub' has been widely adopted throughout the UK, Ireland (Figure 9), and the US. Much of the gastropub's popularity is attributed to well-known British chef Fergus Henderson,<sup>80</sup> whose 'simple yet expertly crafted fare has shaped the menus of today's gastropubs—meaty, comforting, and hearty. His influence on menus is inescapable'.<sup>81</sup>

The development of the gastropub has mirrored the 2005 aspirations put forward by a former Justice Minister, Michael McDowell. The Minister attempted to incorporate more food offerings into Irish drinking culture with the introduction of the Café Bar licence for bars that wanted to follow a more European approach to selling food and drink. McDowell's endeavour ultimately failed due to powerful lobbying on the part of publicans at the time. His plight was highlighted by the food columnist Joe McNamee in a 2013 article:

Not too long ago, then Justice Minister Michael McDowell expressed a hope we might embrace a more European café culture; that appears

**78** Anon., *The History: The Eagle Farringdon*. Available at: <https://theeaglefarringdon.co.uk/history>. (Accessed 2 August 2023). **79** Anon., History of the gastropub, Press Release March 2017, *Good Food Ireland Guide* [online] Available at: <https://goodfoodireland.ie/blog/>

good-food-irelands-gastropubs/ (Accessed 21 July 2023) **80** Fergus Henderson and his wife Margot originally opened the dining room at the French House pub in Soho in 1992 before opening St John restaurant, where he would earn a Michelin star for his food which focused on his

philosophy of Nose to Tail eating, bringing offal back into fashion. Fergus Henderson, *Nose to Tail Eating: A Kind of British Cooking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999). **81** Hillary Dixler Canavan, 'Gastropubs, From London Trend to American Phenomenon' *Eater.com*.

Available at: <https://www.eater.com/2014/12/5/7329279/gastropubs-history-explained> (Accessed 21 December 2022).



Figure 9 The Donnybrook Gastropub, Dublin 4



Figure 10 Signage for Delicious Food outside O'Shea's Merchant, Dublin

to be happening but with a distinctly Irish twist. The pub has always been at the heart of Irish social life but in recent times many are struggling. But those that have embraced the gastropub model are bucking the trend.<sup>82</sup>

McDowell's Café Bar licence was not the first time that the pub sector caused controversy in terms of food provision. The 1988 Intoxicating Liquor Act was brought into operation in July 1988.<sup>83</sup> One of the Act's many provisions concerned the first-time introduction of the Special Restaurant Licence (SRL), which a recognised restaurant<sup>84</sup> could be granted if the restaurateurs wanted to sell a full range of drinks (beers, wines, spirits) with a substantial meal; a provision that was previously limited to pub licences by law in Ireland. Debates at the time of its introduction demonstrated substantial opposition to the idea; it was felt that restaurants that held an SRL would in time also become *de facto* pubs. The Seanad Éireann record of debates of the time help capture the contentious nature of the SRL introduction.

On the vexed question of the special restaurant licences, there is general agreement that there was a requirement that restaurants should be licensed. With the substantial increase in international travel, people have become quite used to going to a restaurant at a reasonably late time in the evening and having alcoholic beverages with their meal. This is reasonable and the Minister has addressed the subject in a reasonable way. However, there is considerable concern still being expressed by people in the liquor trade that there is ample scope for abuse of this restaurant licence .... Concern has been expressed regarding the waiting area and the designation of the dining versus the licensed area. That will have to be clearly defined in the Bill, so that we will not find in four or five years' time that we have just introduced another tier of pubs.<sup>85</sup>

It is unclear exactly where and when the first named 'gastropub' arrived in Ireland. As we have seen throughout this chapter there were certainly pubs with strong reputations for food before the 1990s, such as The Goat Grill in Dublin, or Harry's Roadhouse, Kinnegad. One enterprising family of publicans from a food perspective were the O'Dwyer's, originally from Upperchurch, Co. Tipperary. Liam

**82** Joe McNamee, 'The secret to foodie success', *Irish Examiner* [online] Available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20221815.html> (Accessed 20 July 2023). **83** Andrew O'Gorman, *A Handbook for the Licenced Trade*

(Dublin: Andrew O Gorman, 1994), 253. **84** A recognised restaurant was one that held a Bord Fáilte certificate. **85** Mr O'Callaghan, Seanad Éireann debate Thursday, 2 Jun 1988—Intoxicating Liquor Bill, 1988: Second Stage (Resumed). Available

at: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1988-06-02/3/> Accessed 30 August 2023) Vol. 119 No. 18

O'Dwyer reputedly developed the concept of the pizzeria within Irish pubs in his Mount Street premises in Dublin in the 1980s, which, with his brother Des, he later rebranded as Howl at the Moon.<sup>86</sup> Another food innovation in the Mount Street pub in the early 1980s was the provision of 'brunch' on weekends, where customers would come in to have a pint, a full Irish breakfast served from a carvery type counter, and read the papers, much to the chagrin of older regulars in this Victorian pub.<sup>87</sup> It is no longer unusual for a pub to advertise a 'full Irish breakfast', 'traditional Irish stew', or 'award winning fish and chips' along with the more traditional Irish music 'Trad Sessions' as can be seen in the signage for O'Shea's Merchant on Dublin's quays (Figure 10). O'Dwyer is also credited as the pioneer of the concept of the 'superpub', a very large pub premises with a variety of bar areas offering music and late-night drinking along with a substantial food menu. The two brothers founded Capital Bars, a pub empire, which during the height of the Celtic Tiger economic boom (1998–2007), numbered eleven pubs and nightclubs in its portfolio, including Howl at the Moon, Café en Seine, Zanzibar, The George, and Break for the Border.<sup>88</sup> Pub and restaurant cultures were interwoven in these concept venues. However, many would argue that because of their scale and theming, the 'superpubs' that emerged in the early noughties differed from the gastropub concept that has become so prevalent in Ireland today.

In Ireland, the emphasis is still on familiar food, with Irish seafood chowder, hearty soups, great homemade bread for sandwiches, good burgers with local butcher's steak, fresh fish and hand-cut chips on the menus of most good Irish gastropubs. Good Food Ireland gastropubs source local ingredients to give a real taste of Irish cuisine in casual surroundings.<sup>89</sup>

One operation that mimicked the gastropub concept was the Café Bar Deli chain, developed and operated by publicans/entrepreneurs Jay Bourke and Eoin Doyle. They opened their first Café Bar Deli operation in the early 2000s in the former Bewley's Café premises on Dublin's South Great George's Street. Other versions were opened in Ranelagh, Dublin, on Academy Street, Cork City, and at the Garavogue pub in Sligo. In 2008 the franchise linked up with businessman Brody Sweeney of O'Brien's Sandwich Bars with a plan to expand into eighteen

**86** Personal Communications with Lorraine O'Dwyer (Liam's daughter), 23 May 2022, and 15 September 2023. The pizzeria was set up in the cellar with Antonio, an Egyptian born chef trained in Italy, making 'authentic' Naples-style pizza. Antonio would later open his own pizzeria, 'Donatello's' in

Maynooth, where Jp McMahon, renowned chef and restaurateur, worked as a teenager. **87** His daughter recalls him being originally ridiculed for the concept of serving breakfast in a pub, but notes that it was a huge success with the 'yuppies' and recalls musician David Essex being a regular for Saturday

brunch. **88** Colin Gleeson, 'Pioneer of Dublin's so-called 'super pubs' has died aged 72', *Irish Times*, 24 February 2023. <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2023/02/24/pioneer-of-so-called-super-pubs-in-dublin-has-died-aged-72/>. Lorraine Dwyer notes that her father spent time in the US researching

authentic TexMex food for Break for the Border, and that they had alligator on the menu when it first opened, but this proved too authentic for the Irish at the time. **89** Anon., 'Good Food Ireland's Gastro Pubs' *Good Food Ireland Guide* [online] Available at: <https://goodfoodireland.ie/blog/good-food-irelands-gastro-pubs/>

locations, however the business fell victim to the recession and over-expansion, which ultimately led to closure.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the lack of clarity around the issue of Ireland's first recognised gastropub, many now use the term as an important descriptor that differentiates them in terms of their combined food and drink offering. Over the years the nation's gastropub culture has gone from strength to strength. The Restaurant Association of Ireland (RAI's) Best Gastropub Award 2022 was won by The Rusty Mackerel in south-west Donegal<sup>91</sup> where the marriage of its food offering, along with other important elements such as live music and a relaxed friendly atmosphere, demonstrate how food, though important in the Irish pub, is just one part of a success story and must be blended with a range of other experiences.

### Conclusion

There is no doubting the uniqueness of the Irish pub, its impact on Irish cultural life, and indeed its important role as a tourist 'product'. In 2012, *The Lonely Planet Guide* famously declared:

There's no better place to sample Irish culture and friendliness than in the pub. Despite all the distractions that the 21st century offers, the pub remains at the heart of Ireland's social life and joining the locals for a drink or three is a must for any visitor to the country.<sup>92</sup>

While there have always been exceptions, historically, the focus of the Irish pub has remained firmly on beverage. More recently, to ensure survival, a great number of pubs have enhanced their food offering, with some establishments such as the Halfway House on the Navan Road in Dublin offering a wide range of food available from breakfast, through to carvery, and bar food late into the night (Figure 11). Many of the historic *bona fide* pubs, such as the Goat Bar & Grill, now have a strong food reputation, while the bypassing of certain towns and the improvement of road networks has put some famed hostelrys out of business. It would be wrong to consider the traditional Irish pub a bastion of Ireland's food heritage. A cursory glance among relatively recent guides and texts, as referenced in this chapter, indicates this. In fact, many would argue that the focus on beverage and the consequent 'craic' are in fact the key

(Accessed 2 August 2023).  
**90** Clare Murphy, 'Crunch forces Cafe Bar Deli to shut', *Independent.ie* [online] 31 August 2010. Available at: <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/herald/crunch-forces-cafe-bar-deli-to-shut/27960710.html> (Accessed 26 August 2023)  
**91** Clare McCarthy, 'This

Irish pub in "the middle of nowhere" is Ireland's best gastropub—but why is it so highly rated?', *Irish Mirror* [online] 22 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/irish-pub-the-middle-nowhere-28050025> (Accessed 30 July 2023).  
**92** The Lonely Planet.com,

available at: <https://www.amazon.com/Lonely-Planet-Ireland-Travel-Paperback/dp/BooGSCLLHo>.

ingredients that make the Irish pub concept so successful. However, as this chapter demonstrates, there are some less obvious pub food items that have a story to tell prior to the sector's more recent adoption of the gastropub model. Pub Crisps, the ubiquitous Pub Toastie and the somewhat retro Pub Carvery have all played an important role down through the years. More recently the relationship between the Irish pub and Irish food has become much stronger. Food sales have provided a lifeline to a declining pub sector that finds itself having to seek out additional revenue streams as well as ways to make itself attractive to new audiences. The 2004 smoking ban was an important influence and helped make the pub's internal environment more suitable to food provision, along with encouraging more families to eat in pubs. The affluence attributed to the Celtic Tiger period helped develop a more European approach to enjoying food and drink, which satisfied a returning diaspora, as Ireland became exposed to the wider world with the expansion of budget airlines and an enhanced ability to travel abroad.

Despite remaining relatively high when compared to the rest of Europe,<sup>93</sup> alcohol consumption per capita in Ireland has declined by 32% since 2001,<sup>94</sup> and there is a notable shift in emphasis towards health and well-being, particularly among younger Irish consumers. There is also much greater control and restriction around alcohol, with the introduction of increasingly strict legislation and reduced drink driving limits. October 2018 'saw the much-anticipated enactment of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act and heralded a recognition by the Irish government that our nation's harmful relationship with alcohol could no longer be ignored'.<sup>95</sup> In such a changing environment the typical Irish pub has had to rethink its association (or lack thereof) with food. The Covid-19 pandemic further increased engagement with food, as pubs expanded their offering and in particular, outside dining opportunities. This was initially brought about through necessity with the introduction of the '€9 substantial meal rule',<sup>96</sup> but post-Covid, publicans saw continued opportunities to enhance revenue through



**Figure 11** Halfway House with signage for Breakfast, Carvery, and Bar Food

**93** Camile Bello, 'Europe is home to the world's heaviest drinkers. Which country drinks the most alcohol?', *Euronews* [online] 30 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/06/30/so-long-dry-january-which-country-drinks-the-most-alcohol-in-europe> (Accessed 07 August 2023). **94** Caoimhe Gordon, 'Alcohol consumption plunges 32pc as rules and youth culture shift', *Independent.ie*. 11 June 2022. Available at: [https://www.independent.ie/business/irish/alcohol-consumption-plunges-32pc-as-rules-and-](https://www.independent.ie/business/irish/alcohol-consumption-plunges-32pc-as-rules-and-youth-culture-shift/41741480.html)

[youth-culture-shift/41741480.html](https://www.independent.ie/business/irish/alcohol-consumption-plunges-32pc-as-rules-and-youth-culture-shift/41741480.html) (Accessed 05 August 2023). **95** Anne Doyle, 'Most recent regulations of Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 implemented', *Drugnet Ireland* 77 (Spring 2021), 15–17. Available at: [https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34282/1/Drugnet\\_Ireland\\_77\\_web.pdf](https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34282/1/Drugnet_Ireland_77_web.pdf) (Accessed 02 August 2023). **96** Fáilte Ireland were called upon by the government to develop policy on the re-opening of pubs during the Covid-19 pandemic, and reverted to the Intoxicating Liquor Act 1962 to advise that only pubs that serve 'substantial meals costing

not less than €9 could open'; Anon., 'Pubs can only reopen if a "substantial" meal costs at least €9' *RTE.ie*. Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/06/16/1147852-food-guidance-covid/> (Accessed 23 July 2023). **97** Alan Hennigan, *The Rusty Mackerel* 2020 Video. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwK94HhYtCc> (Accessed 23 July 2023). **98** Mulgrew, 'Ireland has the highest levels of loneliness in Europe, new study finds'.

food. This changing situation should help protect at least some Irish pubs into the future.

History tells us that the majority of Irish pubs tended to leave food provision to restaurants, coffee shops and hotels. The aforementioned 2022 Gastropub award winner, The Rusty Mackerel's website and promotional video shows how it offers a much more blended customer experience.<sup>97</sup> In addition to excellent food, equal billing is given to the other important elements that make the typical Irish pub so unique; the 'pint', traditional music, and its relaxed and family-friendly atmosphere are all emphasised. It seems clear that the pub is not trying to be a restaurant, but rather a pub that sells good food as one part of what makes up the overall pub experience. This is perhaps something that contemporary Irish pubs can learn from the past. Unlike the UK pub/restaurant chain model where the 'pub experience' often gets diluted in favour of the 'food experience', perhaps the secret to the Irish pub's success and survival is to maintain and be proud of its historical 'beverage experience'. This can then be married with a more contemporary food offering, as appears to be the case with The Rusty Mackerel. When introducing this chapter, the point was made that in 2023 Ireland was officially the loneliest country in Europe.<sup>98</sup> The Irish pub has the potential to provide a much-needed antidote to this problem. Maintaining its historical identity as an Irish pub, where customers meet primarily to drink, share stories, and sing songs is important but the subsequent incorporation of well-prepared local food into that offering should hopefully ensure that traditional Irish pub culture, which has served us so well in the past, will continue to survive for generations to come.

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*'The Matriarch of  
Modern Irish Cooking',  
Myrtle Allen, 1924–2018:  
Her life and legacy*

**Margaret Connolly**

Myrtle Allen (1924–2018) was a pioneering activist, a woman ahead of her time but also very much of her time. She was a custodian of the traditions of the rural landscape and a champion of the food it produced. She was also a mother, cook, food writer, restaurateur, hotelier, community leader and mentor. Following her death on 13 June 2018, the *Guardian* newspaper described her as a woman who created a new Irish cuisine rooted in the farm-to-table concept,<sup>1</sup> while Georgina Campbell called her ‘Ireland’s greatest food hero’.<sup>2</sup> Without doubt, there was a universal acknowledgement of the unique contribution that Myrtle Allen (Figure 1) had made to the Irish food landscape during her 94-year (long) life. Many people outside of the food sector are most likely to associate her with the now internationally renowned Ballymaloe House, the country house hotel with its fine dining restaurant located near the small village of Shanagarry in Co. Cork (Figure 2). But for those who have worked and lived around the provisioning of food and all the ancillary sectors it supports in this country, Myrtle Allen was a woman who championed, nurtured, and led the way for the creation of a confident, resilient, and proud representation of Irish cuisine. Her passion, pride, and belief in the quality of Irish food produced by local farmers, vegetable growers, fishermen, cheesemakers and other food artisans was fundamental to her philosophy of cooking good food in a simple way that was appropriate to where the food came from and where it was being served. One might be forgiven for wondering how this could have been such a big deal, in the Ireland of today, where in the estimation of many, our culinary prowess is on a par with that of France and Italy, countries who have decades if not centuries of culinary accolades in their repertoire. But this is the point: Myrtle Allen was advocating for, and singing the praises of Irish food when it was not the majority view.

In the 1960s, the same decade that Myrtle Allen opened the Yeats Room restaurant at Ballymaloe, the American food writer, Richard Olney, was unimpressed, to say the least, with the food offering available in Irish restaurants, describing the food here as ‘abominable’.<sup>3</sup> At the close of the decade, the international assessment of Irish restaurant food was improving, if the *Guide Julliard de l’Irlande* (Figure 3) was to be believed.<sup>4</sup> This tourist guide to Ireland published in 1969, by two French critics, Henri Gault and Christian Millau, noted that ‘[f]ortunately, things are getting better and our last trip to the island brought us enough satisfaction for us to announce this good news: things are better in the kitchen.’ However, they commented that ‘the tragedy of Irish Cuisine is not that it is bad but that the Irish believe it is very good’.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, there was a certain

1 Charlotte Pike, ‘Myrtle Allen Obituary’, *Guardian*, 21 June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/jun/21/myrtle-allen-obituary>

2 Georgina Campbell, ‘Cookery Feature—Myrtle Allen. The Legacy’. <https://www.ireland-guide.com/article/cookery-feature---myrtle->

[all-en-the-legacy-.13709.html](https://www.ireland-guide.com/article/cookery-feature---myrtle-allen-the-legacy-.13709.html)

3 John McKenna citing Richard Olney in Lynne Kelleher, ‘Ballymaloe guru changed face of Irish cuisine’, *Irish Examiner*, 3 Sept. 2013. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20241801.html>

4 Henri Gault and Christian

Millau, *Guide Julliard de l’Irlande* (Paris: Julliard, 1969), 10–12. Despite things getting better in the kitchen, they still noted how the Irish turned their back on the sea and its rich bounty of seafood, and note that ‘butter, cream or lard seem unlikely to improve the outcome of

boiled vegetables’. They also note the usual dinner menu offered consists of ‘canned grapefruit juice, packet cream of mushroom soup, very gray roast beef, tennis ball parmentier [potatoes], boiled cabbage, boiled carrots, banana or orange—no drink’.

5 Gault and Millau, *Guide*



**Figure 1** Myrtle Allen with buffet lunch and glass of porter, c. 1986. Reproduced with kind permission from Hazel Allen.

**Figure 2** Ballymaloe House, Shanagarry, Co. Cork

amount of truth to these less than favourable reviews in some cases, yet it should be noted that there were consistently about a dozen restaurants around Ireland that were regularly represented in guide books such as the *Egon Ronay Guide*, and the *Good Food Guide*, most of which were serving some version of French haute cuisine.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1970s, apart from Ballymaloe House, Cork had two other high-profile restaurants, Ballylickey House outside of Bantry, run by Georges and Christianne Graves—Christianne was French and the kitchen staff were mostly French—and Arbutus Lodge Hotel in Montenotte in Cork city run by the Ryan family, with son Declan in the kitchen having trained in the Russell Hotel in Dublin and with the Troisgros brothers in Rouen in France. Gault and Millau wrote in their 1969 publication that Ballymaloe House was reputed to be among the best restaurants in southern Ireland, but noted that they were unable to confirm this, since they were turned away due to not having a reservation, and that there was insufficient food in the kitchen for any more guests.

But a quiet food revolution was taking root at this time in Ballymaloe, in a small rural part of east Cork. While for many it was considered more fashionable and more progressive to emulate the food styles of continental Europe, for Myrtle Allen, compiling her menu was all about using produce that was locally sourced, top quality, and cooked in a simple, respectful way. Rory O'Connell, former head chef at Ballymaloe House and instructor at Ballymaloe Cookery School, would later say that for Myrtle 'the immediacy of where food came from affected everything'.<sup>7</sup> In the context of the time, her belief in only using ingredients grown or produced locally was neither fashionable nor commonplace. The prevailing view, both politically and socially, in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s was that as a country, we should be moving away from the traditional approaches and methods of the previous decades. The Irish government's First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958–63) had advocated the application of more scientific methods to agriculture and food production. Traditional reliance on what we could grow ourselves was at that time seen to be at odds with the desire to promote a more industrialised food industry with increased mechanisation and increased productivity. A new era of prosperity brought the promise of a more 'modern' lifestyle which often included exposure to foreign holidays and foreign foods while on those holidays. Television advertising at the time played an important role in promoting new processed foods sold as both convenient and time saving.

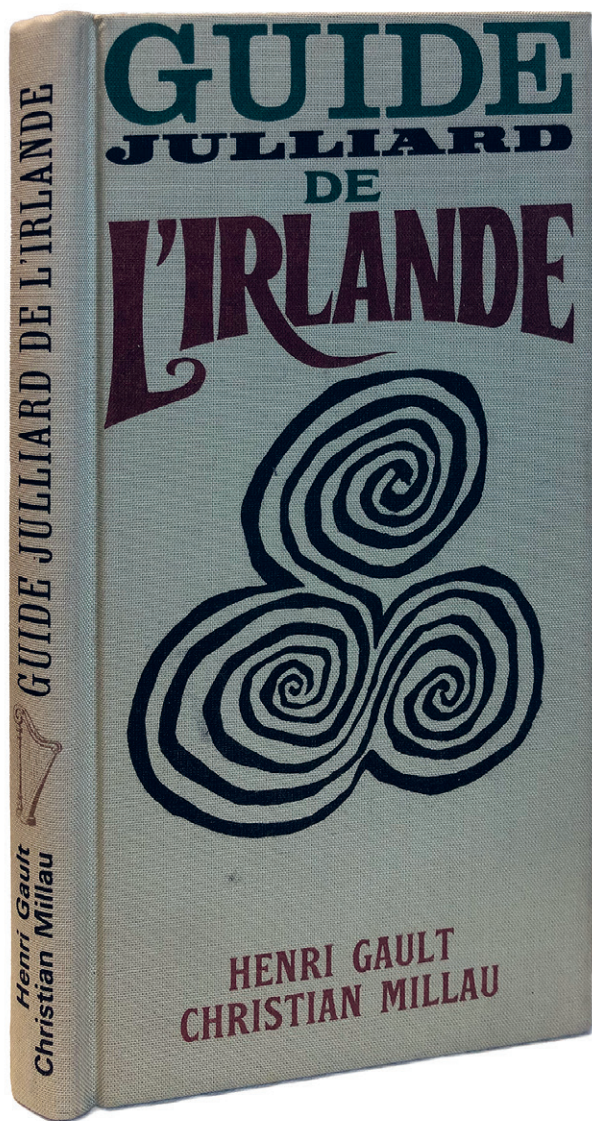
*Julliard de l'Irlande*, 11. They continue: 'Take, for example, the potato in a ball, peeled: it is the national dish, but it is not accompanied by any superfluous preparation such as the addition of butter, tomato sauce, meat juice, cream, goose fat. No, it seems that we don't even pour a drop of water on it, for fear

of making it less virile. This is how the Irish like it and moreover the potato plays the same role for them as bread does for the French'. See more from Cathal O'Shannon's documentary on Ireland's food in the early '70s, 'Cork's Glorious Food', which includes interviews with Mrs Allen, Georges Graves and Declan

Ryan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsO8soBCR8A> O'Shannon (1928–2011) was a renowned journalist and broadcaster <https://www.dib.ie/biography/oshannon-cathal-michael-a10047> **6** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Haute cuisine restaurants in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland', *Proceedings*

*of the Royal Irish Academy Section C* (2015), 371–403. <https://doi.org/10.3318/priac.2015.115.06>

**7** Myrtle Allen: A Life in Food', RTÉ Archives, 18 June 2018 <https://www.rte.ie/lifestyle/food/2018/0618/970436-myrtle-allen-a-life-in-food/>



**Figure 3** *Guide Julliard de l'Irlande* 1969 by Henri Gault and Christian Millau

This push towards embracing all things foreign, if you like, had the perhaps unintended consequence of creating what historian Joe Lee<sup>8</sup> called a national inferiority complex amongst Irish people about what was available to them locally. But Myrtle Allen did not agree. She had travelled and worked abroad, and she believed from her own experience that the quality of Irish food produce was second to none. The strength of belief in what she was doing, combined with persistent hard work by Myrtle and her team led to many prestigious awards for Ballymaloe House. From 1967 to 1969 *Egon Ronay* awarded Ballymaloe House two stars, dropping this to one star in 1970, which they maintained until 1989, apart from dropping the star for a year each in 1982 and 1985. The *Michelin Guide to Great Britain and Ireland* was first published in 1974, and Myrtle Allen was awarded a Michelin star in 1975, the first woman in Ireland to win such an accolade. Ballymaloe House retained that Michelin star under Mrs Allen until 1980, reaffirming her status amongst the culinary leaders of the time, and then was continuously awarded a Michelin Red ‘M’ (representing good food at a reasonable price) until 1994.<sup>9</sup> Myrtle challenged the normative thinking that French food was good and that Irish food was bad, while at the same time her approach to food ingredients embodied the French concept of *terroir*, acknowledging the innate connection between the land and the food it produces. She famously recounted the story of a conversation with her neighbour who supplied butter for the restaurant: “The butter your sister is sending us is very good”, I said to my neighbour one day. “Yes”, he said, “that field always made good butter”.<sup>10</sup> Such was her reputation for championing the cause of Irish food and local food producers, at home and abroad, that in 1985, RTÉ reporter Derek Davis referred to her as ‘somewhat of a Culinary Nationalist’, describing her as having a ‘chauvinistic approach’ to using Irish produce.<sup>11</sup> However, it is worth noting, that it was never part of a grand nationalistic plan to set Ireland on the world food stage, she simply cooked the foods that she had around her and knew how to work with, and it grew from there. When once asked why she didn’t have scampi and other more modern restaurant dishes (at the time) on her menu at Ballymaloe, her answer was characteristically straightforward, ‘well I don’t know how to cook them’. Inconceivable as it may have seemed back in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s that Ireland’s food reputation would come to be revered by international critics, yet alone by those from France, that is exactly what did happen. In 2011 *Le Guide du Routard*, the travel bible of the French-speaking world, wrote that ‘Ireland’s restaurants were unmatched the world over for their combination of

**8** Joseph J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

**9** Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Haute cuisine restaurants in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland’, 397–98.

**10** This quote appeared in the foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

of *The Ballymaloe Cookbook* published in 1985. A slightly different version is cited in Regina Sexton, “This is all very well, but where in Ireland can you get fresh tarragon?”: Myrtle Allen and Herbs: Towards the creation of an Irish Food Identity’, in Mark McWilliams (ed.), *Herbs*

and Spices. *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2020* (Devon: Prospect Books, 2021), 324–37 with the original source there cited as Cork, MS., Allen, The Baberton Spiral Notebook, 2.

**11** Derek Davis, ‘Culinary Nationalist Myrtle Allen’, RTÉ Archives, 11 January

1985 <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0613/g70243-myrtle-allen-ballymaloe-house/>

food quality, value, and service', the guide even going so far as to say that 'the dining experience in Ireland was better than that on offer in France'.<sup>12</sup>

The approach taken by Myrtle Allen undoubtedly inspired a confidence in Irish food at home and abroad, had a trickledown effect on other chefs and impacted on some of the most significant shifts in international culinary thinking in recent decades. In a 2014 *Irish Times* interview, ahead of his speaking at the Ballymaloe LitFest, Rene Redzepi, co-creator of the world-renowned three Michelin-star Copenhagen restaurant Noma, described Myrtle Allen and her family as the most influential food family in Ireland.<sup>13</sup> Darina Allen tells of an early encounter that Claus Meyer, co-creator with Redzepi of Noma, had at Ballymaloe with Mrs Allen. Meyer had come to Ballymaloe for a Euro-Toques gathering, and having tasted Myrtle's very simple food, such as the fresh mackerel from Ballycotton and the locally gathered Carrageen moss, went back to Denmark inspired and a little annoyed, questioning why his own peers copied a Mediterranean style of food using truffles and foie gras, instead of serving their own local food proudly, as Myrtle Allen was doing at Ballymaloe.<sup>14</sup> From this experience would grow what has become known as the new wave of Nordic cuisine led by Meyer, Redzepi and others, re-centering the European culinary compass to the north.<sup>15</sup> This was a pivotal encounter for Claus Meyer, seeing the simplicity and pride with which Myrtle Allen served her local Irish food produce.

### Childhood and education

Myrtle Allen is justly credited with laying the foundations for this new, modern, era in Irish food, but she did not come from a family of chefs or even food producers, in fact she once recounted how, as a child, she was not even allowed into the family kitchen. She was born Myrtle Hill, in Tivoli near Cork city on 13 March 1924.<sup>16</sup> Her father, Henry Haughton Hill, was an architect, and belonged to a renowned family of Cork architects. When Henry was twenty-seven, he joined his father's business as a partner and, like his father, also lectured in architecture at University College Cork. Myrtle's mother was Elsie Stoker whose father had been in the cattle trade in Cork. Elsie was not in great health throughout her life and suffered with a weak heart; and perhaps as a result was very particular about feeding her family healthy food. Even though Myrtle would later recall how she was not allowed cook with her mother, in case she would spoil the food, she did inherit her mother's understanding of the importance of food for health. Myrtle's father had visited Germany in the 1930s to learn about the modernist

<sup>12</sup> Nick Bramhill, 'Irish chefs best in world', *Sunday Independent*, 9 Jan. 2011 <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/irish-chefs-best-in-world/26612329.html>

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Cleary, 'Nom Nom Noma', *Irish Times*, 12 April 2014, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Darina Allen, 'The Role

of Ballymaloe in the Irish Food Renaissance: Eighth Annual Irish Institute of New York Lecture, 2015', *American Journal of Irish Studies* 12 (2015), 143–58, 146. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43657253>.

<sup>15</sup> For more on New Nordic Cuisine, <https://www.norden.org/en/information/new-nordic-food-manifesto>

<sup>16</sup> Obituary, 'Myrtle Allen, Pioneering chef, chatelaine of Ballymaloe House and the first Irishwoman to win a Michelin star', *The Times* 30 June 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/myrtle-allen-obituary-k9qrjz7q6>

org/en/information/new-nordic-food-manifesto

movement in architecture and was a strong believer in embracing new and innovative things if they were good. Myrtle's parents were members of the Church of Ireland and were keen for her to have a progressive education. In the summer of 1939, they had travelled around England looking for a suitable school for her. She was initially sent to Frensham Heights, a co-educational boarding school in Surrey, the ideals of which were evident in their school motto of Think, Create, Explore and were reflective of her parents' open-minded and creative view of the world. With the onset of World War Two, Myrtle moved from the Surrey school and finished her education in Ireland at the Quaker school in Newtown, Waterford.<sup>17</sup> Though she was not brought up as a Quaker, Myrtle would later marry a Quaker and join the Religious Society of Friends. The Quaker principles of fairness, honesty, prudence, and service to the community were something she admired, and the Quaker ethos helped instil a sense of duty and fairness that later translated into her everyday dealings with staff, suppliers, and customers.

### **Family life—Wife and mother**

In 1943 Myrtle married Ivan Allen, whom she had met, by a beautiful coincidence, at a fundraiser for Ballycotton Lifeboats held at Ballymaloe House, some years earlier. In 1948, Ivan and Myrtle bought Ballymaloe House and farm from the then owners, the Simpson family. It was at that time a rambling country house, built on the site of a fifteenth-century Anglo-Norman castle.<sup>18</sup> Myrtle's husband Ivan was a progressive farmer, who had spent time in England learning about apple growing and tomato growing. As a result, he had developed a horticultural business and operated it alongside their mixed farming enterprise at Ballymaloe (Figure 4). Ivan and Myrtle had six children, four daughters, Wendy, Natasha, Yasmin, and Fern and two sons, Tim, and Rory. So, for Myrtle, the early years at Ballymaloe were devoted to looking after her home and family. She settled well into this farming and family lifestyle, and in fact cited the desire to cater for her husband's love of food, and the need to feed her large family and farming staff a healthy diet, as the main reason she initially learnt how to cook, famously recounting how her husband had to show her how to scramble eggs on return from their honeymoon. An innovative, caring farmer and a lover of good food, Ivan's love and respect for the land greatly influenced Myrtle who once said 'I am painfully aware, as a farmer's wife, that almost everything farmers have done in our lifetime for improved production—which usually means survival on the farm—has resulted in a less excellent food product. It is important

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Allen also attended Newtown School but not at the same time as Myrtle.

<sup>18</sup> On the history of Ballymaloe House, see Jane Hater-Harnes, *Ballymaloe, The History of a place and its people* (Chagford: Rushford Publishing, 2016).



for consumers to remember that there must be a serious loss in quality when producers are forced to grow food cheaply'.<sup>19</sup> It is clear from this statement that Myrtle Allen was only too keenly aware of the challenges and complexities facing food producers in Ireland at the time, and rather than passively accepting the prevailing view of the need to modernise food and food production at any cost, she chose to voice a contrary view when presented with a platform to do so.

#### **Finding her voice—writing for the *Irish Farmers Journal***

Myrtle's first article was published in the *Irish Farmers Journal (IFJ)* in 1962, the first of what would be a fortnightly column on cooking advice and recipes for which she was paid five shillings a column. She continued to write this until the early 1970s. The opportunity to write this column had come about by accident rather than by design. It was because of Ivan's work in horticulture and his reputation as an innovative and forward-thinking farmer that Paddy O'Keefe, the then editor of the *IFJ*, had visited the farm at Ballymaloe in the first instance. Having enjoyed her hospitality and in particular the breakfast he was given next morning, he told Myrtle that he was looking for someone to write for the *IFJ* about art, to which she replied that she couldn't do that—even though she had briefly gone to art school she knew that this was an area in which she was never going to shine. But Myrtle further responded that she could write about food, and she could write about cooking. It transpired that having a farmer's wife doing the cookery column was exactly what O'Keefe wanted. In a happy coincidence, the elements that came to form her food philosophy—an emphasis on quality, taste, and a deliberate simplicity in cooking techniques—very much appealed to the *IFJ* editor at the time.<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 4** Ivan Allen with herd of Jersey Cattle at Ballymaloe. Reproduced with kind permission from the Allen family.

Myrtle described her time writing with the *IFJ* as being a great learning curve for her, with the need to come up with new recipes, appropriate for their typical reader, forcing her to improve her cooking skills greatly. In a 2003 oral history interview<sup>21</sup> she described the experience as being like going to university; having to read up on different sources, getting extra cookery books, and of course trying out the recipes for herself and adjusting them as she saw fit, before submitting them for publication. Myrtle was aware that her culinary knowledge was not extensive and saw that writing for the *IFJ* was an ideal opportunity to expand her skills. She set about finding recipes that were both uncomplicated and appropriate for her readership. Among these early sources were Philip Harben's *The Way to Cook*, the West Kent Federation of Women's Institute cookbook, *The Country Housewife's Handbook*, and an Aga cookbook (the kitchen at Ballymaloe was equipped with an Aga cooker),<sup>22</sup> along with recipes garnered from her own short time doing cookery classes at the School of Commerce and Domestic Science at Morrison's Quay in Cork, a building designed by her father.<sup>23</sup> Keenly aware of her own lack of cookery skills, she lamented that so many cookery books were not written with someone like her in mind, an intuition that no doubt contributed to the value that she placed on simplicity in the preparation and cooking of good produce.

At that time in the early 1960s, Myrtle was also the first ever female vice-president of *Macra na Feirme*, a community organisation of young rural people and particularly young farmers.<sup>24</sup> Directly through her activities with the farming community in *Macra* and her writings with the *IFJ*, Myrtle became a pioneering campaigner for local food producers and businesses. She was their voice, and she was keenly aware of the high quality of her local food producers, and of the importance of local business to the welfare of her community: 'Myrtle Allen famously promoted the use of fresh, locally produced, and seasonal produce at a time when doing so was uncommon'.<sup>25</sup> She used her column with the *IFJ* as a platform to inform the reader of the virtues of locally produced ingredients, showing that by cooking local ingredients well and using simple cooking techniques, these dishes could rival (and surpass) those of any imported and

**19** Myrtle Allen, 'Notes on Tastes and Flavours in Practical Cookery' in Tom Jaïne (ed.), *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery* (London: Prospect Books, 1988), 17–20.

**20** Paddy O'Keefe was a friend of the Allen family for many years and would later be instrumental in Myrtle setting up La Ferme Irlandaise restaurant in Paris. <https://www.dib.ie/biography/okeeffe-paddy-a10205>

**21** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'The emergence, development

and influence of French haute cuisine on public dining in Dublin restaurants 1900–2000: an oral history' 3 Vols. (Doctoral thesis. Technological University Dublin, 2009), Vol. 3, 92–119. doi:10.21427/D79K7H; Interview took place in Ballymaloe House on 7 May 2003.

**22** Philip Harben, *The Way to Cook, or common sense in the kitchen* (London: John Lane. The Bodley Head, 1945); The West Kent Federation of Women's Institutes, *The Country Housewife's Handbook*

(Kent: West Kent Federation of Women's Institutes, 1939; second edition 1943). It is likely that the Aga cookbook Mrs Allen used was *The Aga Recipe Book for Four-Oven Cookers* published in 1956. **23** It is highly probable that *Cookery Notes* was used on this course; for more on this cookbook and on the history of domestic economy 'instructresses' and their cookbooks, see Dorothy Cashman, 'Cookery Notes: Domestic Economy "instructresses" and the

history of their cookbooks in Ireland' in Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Dorothy Cashman (eds), *Irish Food History: A Companion* (Dublin: EU+ Academic Press and Royal Irish Academy, 2024), chapter 22. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5WHY-0K87> **24** This organisation was founded in 1944 with the original idea of providing training and support for young farmers <https://macra.ie/pages/history> **25** Keelin Tobin, Breda Hickey, Margaret Linehan, 'East Cork's Quiet

processed foods. She would later go on to co-author a food column in the *Irish Times* with her daughter-in-law Darina Allen (Figure 7). Previously this column was written by Theodora FitzGibbon whose recipes for Christmas Cake and Christmas Pudding had become 'legendary' and were well used in homes in Ireland and abroad for decades. Clearly the Allen women were aware of the mantle they had assumed, as Darina would later say, 'Theodora Fitzgibbon ought to be remembered as a giant in Irish culinary circles'.<sup>26</sup> All these women were following in the footsteps of perhaps the first modern food columnist on the island, Florence Irwin (1883–1965),<sup>27</sup> who wrote a cookery column in the *Northern Whig* from the early years of the twentieth century and who had, in the 1930s and '40s, gathered up and published local recipes in her two collections, *Irish Country Recipes* (The Northern Whig: Belfast, 1937) and *The cookin' woman* (Oliver and Boyd: Edinburgh, 1949). Through her documentation of local foodways and individual recipes, Irwin forged a pathway for others like Theodora, Myrtle and Darina to follow. They understood that the responsibility of writing a Christmas cake recipe was not just about *writing a cookery column*, but that it was an integral part of disseminating and preserving tried and tested recipes, often handed down through generations, mother to daughter to granddaughter, on spatter-stained scraps of paper, to be retrieved annually from a cracked jug on the dresser or an old sweet tin in the drawer, in the lead up to Christmas and that they represented as important a ritual as the decorations or the tree for so many Irish homes.

### The beginnings of Ballymaloe

Myrtle and Ivan's children grew up and went away to school, and though she was writing her cookery column in the *IFJ* at this time, Myrtle is said to have sat down one winter's day and wondered what she was going to do now in her big country house.<sup>28</sup> Her interest and knowledge of food and cooking led her to the idea of opening a country house restaurant, Ivan prudently suggesting that it would be wise to use their own spacious home rather than paying rent on a separate premises. Not everyone approved of this decision. The idea of commercialising a country house was unorthodox at the time and Myrtle recalled that there were initially some raised eyebrows about her venture, but then wryly added that it wasn't too long before some of them were following suit. Her aim for Ballymaloe was to provide the diner with the best of what we now know as Irish Country House cookery. In fact, it is

Revolution: The Role of Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland's Changing Foodscape' (Dublin: Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, 31 May 2016), <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/dgs/2016/May31/27/>

<sup>26</sup> Theodora Fitzgibbon has culinary fans young and old

with a rediscovered version of her classic, *The Pleasures of the table*, published by a young Irish celebrity chef: See, Donal Skehan, *The Pleasures of the Table: Rediscovering Theodora Fitzgibbon* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2014). <https://www.dib.ie/biography/fitzgibbon-theodora-a3212>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.dib.ie/biography/irwin-florence-a10267> <sup>28</sup> The story of how Myrtle began the enterprise at Ballymaloe is documented in the 2018 David Hare InProduction documentary, *Myrtle*

*Allen: A life in Food*, <https://inproduction.tv/https://vimeo.com/73151483/21doed822f>



said that on returning home from school, her own children were disappointed to see that what was being served in the restaurant was the same sort of food that they had grown up with.

Myrtle recognised the value of *authenticity* before it was the buzz word it has since become. A few days before they opened, Myrtle and Ivan placed the following advertisement in the *Cork Examiner*: ‘Dine in a Historic Country House. Open Tuesday to Saturday. Booking essential. Phone Cloyne 16’. They hung new wallpaper and laid a new carpet in the blue dining room, which would later be known as the Yeats Room, called after her husband’s collection of paintings by the Irish artist, Jack B. Yeats (1871–1957). She used her own kitchen table to prepare the food in the early days and enlisted the help of local girls when she needed them. Joe Cronin, who had worked on the farm since 1951, was even drafted in to help Ivan with the wine service in the dining room. Not put off by Joe’s lack of knowledge or experience, Ivan simply told him ‘we will learn together’. Ivan and their daughter Wendy also helped front of house. Myrtle later recounted having nightmares that the cars and people would just keep coming and that she would not have enough food to give them. Fortunately, no such disaster befell Ballymaloe—the food was good, and the restaurant flourished. She cooked using their own produce: unpasteurised milk, cream, veal, pork, homemade sausages, black puddings, herbs, fruit, and vegetables. Ivan went to Ballycotton, their local fishing village, every morning for the fresh catch, and she would not write

**Figure 5** ‘Fairly newly-weds’, Myrtle and Ivan Allen, c. 1949/50. Reproduced with kind permission from Hazel Allen.

the restaurant menus until she knew what had been caught that day. Local beef and lamb came from Michael Cuddigan, the butcher in nearby Cloyne. Right from the beginning she fostered strong relationships with suppliers, ensuring that they were paid properly for producing excellent ingredients.

Even though the intention at Ballymaloe had never been to cook for food critics, the critics liked what she was doing, and when the 1966 *Egon Ronay Guide* called it 'a good restaurant that could justly become famous', Myrtle herself said she knew that she was on the right track. At a time when Irish food suffered from a poor reputation, Myrtle Allen recognised that the ingredients on her doorstep were as good as those from anywhere in the world. Her philosophy was to serve the food she knew: 'I was just going on sort of common sense'.<sup>29</sup> Her common sense can be illustrated in the way she hand-wrote her menus in English; she knew most of her local customers would not understand them if she used the traditional French menu descriptions. This departure from French menu writing was also in keeping with her philosophy of using simply prepared fresh, local, seasonal foods. Ballymaloe began to feature in the good food guides, and top chefs around Ireland, most of them male, started to take notice of her success. As the business grew, more rooms in the family home were converted into guest rooms and gradually Ballymaloe was transformed into a busy hotel as well as a highly acclaimed restaurant. In 1974, Ballymaloe House became one of the founding members of Ireland's Blue Book—a collection of Irish country house hotels, manor houses, castles and restaurants—and in 1975 received the Michelin star. *The Ballymaloe Cookbook* was published in 1977, *Cooking at Ballymaloe House* in 1990, and a revised and updated fifty-year-anniversary edition of *The Ballymaloe Cookbook* was published in 2014.<sup>30</sup>

It would be easy to underestimate the significance of what Myrtle Allen did in setting up a restaurant in her own home in this way. It should be remembered that Ireland at this time was still in the midst of a strong patriarchal and Catholic culture—business, the law, religion, politics, and education were largely controlled by men. Women were, in general, confined to the home, fulfilling housewife duties.<sup>31</sup> As the Irish Free State developed, the concept of the 'male breadwinner' was reaffirmed by the growth of Catholic social values. It was in this context that women in Ireland at the time were encouraged to remain in the domestic sphere and allow men to take what few jobs were available.<sup>32</sup> The Marriage Bar was in place meaning that a woman in the public sector had to give up her job once married, and the practice was also the norm in the private

**29** Mac Con Iomaire, 'The emergence, development and influence of French haute cuisine' Vol. 3, 98, section 88. doi:10.21427/D79K7H

**30** Ballymaloe House opened in 1964, 2014 was the 50-year-anniversary. **31** Caitríona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in*

*Ireland, 1926–1961: Discourses, Experiences, Memories* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000).

**32** Deirdre Foley, "'Their proper place': women, work and the marriage bar in independent Ireland, c. 1924–1973", *Social History* 47: 1 (2022), 60–84, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2022.2009692

sector. For the most part, this heavily gendered ideology was quietly accepted in Irish society at the time, a fact that seems incredulous to many today, as so succinctly expressed by Judith Hartford and Jennifer Redmond in the title of their research paper—‘I am amazed how easily we accepted it’. While a Marriage Bar and the model of male breadwinner was not uniquely Catholic nor uniquely Irish, it had a long-lasting effect. In Ireland, the civil service Marriage Bar was not removed until 1973, on joining the European Economic Community, but legislation introducing the concept of equal pay did not have effect until 1976, and marriage bars in the private sector were not illegal until the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in 1977.<sup>33</sup> Understanding this social and political context of Ireland at the time brings into sharp focus the unorthodox and revolutionary nature of what Myrtle Allen was doing. The idea of a farmer’s wife in her forties opening a restaurant in the dining-room of a remote country house in rural Co. Cork in 1964 would have appeared, as food writer John McKenna described it, ‘as looking like the biggest folly imaginable’.<sup>34</sup> In fact, so out of the way was the location that in the early days those who had reserved a table would get sent a little map to help them negotiate the maze of narrow country roads, many of them without signs, leading to Ballymaloe. In a 1983 interview with *New York Times* reporter Erica Brown, Myrtle would quip that only one person had ever found the place first time around, that was Charles Haughey ‘and that’s because he came by helicopter’.<sup>35</sup> However unlikely, Myrtle persevered, bravely but simply challenging the thinking of that time that French food was good and Irish food was bad, ‘she planned her meals just like a housewife ... and just cooked the food she knew and loved’.<sup>36</sup> Remember that she knew and appreciated the quality of the produce and local ingredients she had around her, at a time when there was a national inferiority complex about the food offering in Ireland. That insight and courage, driven by her strength of belief, brought her success, and her success led to far reaching changes in the type of food served in restaurants in Ireland. Renowned Irish chef, the late Gerry Galvin (1942–2013) described what Myrtle was doing as *revolutionary* at the time. In today’s language, she was the ultimate disruptor. She was creating a new confidence in Irish cooking; and her support and advocacy of local artisan food producers brought the practice of using local, seasonal food to wider public attention.<sup>37</sup> These changes were down to her pragmatic, thoughtful, visionary commitment to the land, its produce, and to her community. Mrs Allen’s husband, Ivan, died in 1998, but she continued to live at Ballymaloe House for the rest of her life. Instructions, handwritten by

**33** Judith Hartford and Jennifer Redmond, ‘I am amazed at how easily we accepted it’: the marriage ban, teaching and ideologies of womanhood in post-Independence Ireland’, *Gender and Education* 33: 2 (2021), 186–201, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2019.

1680807 **34** ‘Myrtle Allen: A Life in Food’ **35** Charles Haughey (1925–2006) was a well-known Fianna Fáil politician and former Taoiseach. [www.dib.ie/biography/haughey-charles-james-c-j-a9531](http://www.dib.ie/biography/haughey-charles-james-c-j-a9531) **36** Allen, ‘The Role of Ballymaloe in the Irish Food Renaissance’, 148.

**37** Katy McGuinness, ‘Myrtle Allen: The Polymath Who Put Irish Food on the Map’, *Irish Independent* 18 May 2019. ‘Myrtle Allen: A Life in Food’.

her, for making the perfect porridge using oatmeal from Macroom, a local mill dating back to the eighteenth century, can still be seen on the kitchen wall at Ballymaloe. J.R. Ryall,<sup>38</sup> pastry chef at Ballymaloe House, recalls how fortunate he was to be in the Ballymaloe kitchens at a time when Myrtle had retired from the running of the house but continued to spend her time teaching the staff instead. He remembers Myrtle coming into the pastry section often, where she would spend the next hour chatting and sharing her stories with the young chefs, whom he felt learnt so much from her experience and expertise.

But it wasn't all plain sailing for Myrtle and the team at Ballymaloe. In an account by Marie-Claire Digby for the *Irish Times* in 2018, Hazel Allen, daughter-in-law and former manager at Ballymaloe, recalled the day they lost their prestigious Michelin star in 1980.

I remember the day we lost the Michelin star. Our head chef was getting married to Darina's cousin. Possibly some of our staff were there, helping with the food. I was here with Myrtle. The two of us thought we had no worries; she could cook, and I could serve the food. It was not a very busy night, maybe 24 for dinner. One of the things on the menu was fried sole on the bone, which is quite tricky to cook. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't get Myrtle to get the food out to me. I went into the dining room and there were men standing up on their chairs and one said, 'If I put a tie on will I get served in this restaurant?'. There were two men quietly sitting in the corner, not saying much but obviously getting annoyed because they weren't getting their food. And the next morning they came down for breakfast and told us they were the Michelin inspectors, and we nearly died.

Of course, Myrtle was disappointed, they all were, but true to her original philosophy of not cooking just to please the critics, she carried on, driven by her own vision and as Hazel says, 'she kind of knew, I think, that Ballymaloe was only barely doing what Michelin wanted and we didn't want to do what Michelin wanted, we weren't going to totally conform'.<sup>39</sup> The Michelin Red 'M' award, which they retained for a further fourteen years, better suited the Ballymaloe philosophy.

<sup>38</sup> J.R. Ryall, *Ballymaloe Desserts, Iconic Recipes and Stories from Ireland* (London: Phaidon Press, 2022).

<sup>39</sup> Marie-Claire Digby, 'Myrtle Allen's method: Don't cook for critics', *Irish Times* 1 June 2018.

### Flying the flag in Paris

The changing fortunes of Ireland's culinary reputation were not lost on Judi Burke Bredemeier of the *Washington Post*, who in March 1983 wrote 'the food-conscious French are standing in line in the heart of Paris to sample Irish stew and black-currant fool, buttery Irish smoked salmon and crusty brown bread, streaky Irish bacon and pork sausage', a fact which she saw as a 'public repudiation, in the toughest of culinary arenas, of all the libellous blarney about Irish cooking'.<sup>40</sup> Eight months later Erica Brown wrote in the *New York Times*<sup>41</sup> that it would take a special sort of person to persuade Parisians to eat porridge, rashers, sausages, and eggs for Sunday lunch, in a restaurant in one of the chic parts of France's capital city; but Myrtle Allen could do it, and in fact did it successfully for a number of years in the early 1980s. The idea of serving good Irish bacon and eggs to a discerning Parisian palate did not seem in the least bit absurd to Myrtle Allen because, she believed, just as she always had done, that the quality of Irish food produce, cooked well and served simply, would sell itself. So, in 1981, driven by her belief in the raw materials she had on her doorstep, she agreed to take over the running of an Irish restaurant on the Place du Marche St Honoré. It was called La Ferme Irlandaise (The Irish Farm) and had been conceived initially as a showcase for Irish produce but had not been entirely successful in its early days. Myrtle had previous international experience with Córás Tráchtála Teo (The Irish Export Board), doing food for Irish events in New York, Belgium, and Holland, where she would insist on bringing over all Irish ingredients to work with. This, and her ever growing reputation led FBD, the insurance wing of the National Farmers' Organisation (later to become the Irish Farmers' Association), who were financing the Parisian enterprise, to ask Myrtle to take over the running of La Ferme Irlandaise. Instantly identifying a key problem as being that the menu was too French, she quickly set about introducing dishes such as Irish stew, Irish smoked salmon, and lamb's liver sautéed in Irish whiskey. The décor also got a traditional Irish makeover, where she introduced antique oak and pine furniture, echoing a more traditional, rural aesthetic, while her neighbour and well-known Shanagarry potter, Stephen Pearce, supplied the restaurant pottery. Myrtle would train up the staff required to work in Paris alongside her own staff at Ballymaloe House and even though this sometimes meant having more chefs than she required in the Ballymaloe kitchens, it meant that, as Myrtle saw it, the staff for the Parisian restaurant was being properly trained in her way of preparing and cooking the menu items. In this way Myrtle felt that she could

<sup>40</sup> Judi Burke Bredemeier, 'Ireland's French Connection', *Washington Post*, 16 March 1983. <sup>41</sup> Erica Brown, 'Irish Fare in County Cork...Or in Paris', *New York Times*, 27 November 1983.



truly showcase the best of Irish produce in the heart of Paris. The day-to-day running of La Ferme Irlandaise was passed onto Myrtle's son-in-law Jim Whelan, a former lighthouse keeper and self-taught wine enthusiast, who was married to the Allens' daughter, Wendy. Myrtle still travelled to Paris five or six times a year, bringing over food produce and newly trained staff as required. One such staff member, Karen Noble, who spent two summers in Paris in the early 1980s, recalls the exhilaration and passion of this venture, travelling over in the van with Jim, and the exacting standards set by Mrs Allen. Karen recalls the Sunday brunch, '*le brunch*', as the highlight of the week, with queues running around the corner, dogs fighting in the dining room (a culture shock to the Irish) and the excitement of up to thirteen Irish staff staying in one large apartment.<sup>42</sup> It was partially the experience of running La Ferme Irlandaise which Myrtle Allen herself attributed as leading to the next significant invitation that came her way.

### **Euro-Toques—A European Community of Cooks**

In the mid-1980s Pierre Romeijer (1930–2018), who owned a Michelin three-star restaurant in Belgium, wrote to Myrtle and explained to her that he was bringing together a European community of cooks who shared a respectful set of beliefs around their profession and the products they used as cooks. In his letter Romeijer asked Myrtle to establish a chapter of the Euro-Toques<sup>43</sup> movement in Ireland. Her guiding principles of using the best quality food produce, cooked in simple and traditional ways, were completely in keeping with the beliefs of this group of culinary professionals. So, in 1986, the Europe-wide organisation was established by chef Pierre Romeijer from Belgium, Myrtle Allen from Ireland, Gualtiero Marchesi from Italy, Juan-Mari Arzak from Spain, Paul Bocuse from France, and Cas Spijker from the Netherlands. Each of these individuals then selected exceptional chefs within their own country to support them in establishing a branch or chapter of the organisation. Myrtle Allen was assisted in setting up the Irish branch by her fellow founding commissioners, John Howard of Le Coq Hardi in Dublin,<sup>44</sup> Declan Ryan of Arbutus Lodge in Cork,<sup>45</sup> and Gerry Galvin of Drimcong House in Galway,<sup>46</sup> who were among the award-winning chef-proprietors in Ireland at the time.<sup>47</sup> The emergence of Euro-Toques was as much to do with politics as it was with cooking—it was very much a reflection of what was happening in the European political landscape at the time. The growing impact and influence of the European Economic Community (EEC now the EU, European Union) was a cause for concern for many of those across the

<sup>42</sup> Pers. Comms. 26 August 2023 <sup>43</sup> Euro-Toques International currently state that they are working to guarantee consumers a healthy diet, defend the European Culinary Heritage and undertake to give the consumer quality and

safety; see [www.eurotoques-international.eu/home.html](http://www.eurotoques-international.eu/home.html) <sup>44</sup> See Michael O'Sullivan, *Le Coq Hardi: The Story of John Howard and His Restaurant* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 2003). <sup>45</sup> For interview with Declan Ryan in Arbutus Lodge on 11 March 2005,

see Mac Con Iomaire, 'The emergence, development and influence of French haute cuisine' Vol. 3, 295–312. doi:10.21427/D79K7H46 Gerry Galvin, *The Drimcong Food Affair* (Moycullen: McDonald Publishing, 1992). <sup>47</sup> For more information on the history

of haute-cuisine restaurants in Ireland, see Mac Con Iomaire, 'Haute cuisine restaurants in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland'.

food sector, with farmers increasingly being hit by new rules and regulations around their production methods and pricing controls. The drive to increase food productivity promoted an expansionist strategy that led farmers towards more intensive agriculture systems. This commercial need to expand, coupled with controlled pricing, meant that small scale food production was no longer a viable option for many traditional farmers. Many chefs feared for the resultant impact on the quality and availability of many traditional foods, which they saw as integral to the food heritage of their respective countries. The mission of Euro-Toques was, and still is, to promote and preserve traditional culinary methods, excellent regional food producers, and standards of culinary excellence; it is easy to understand how Myrtle Allen was an obvious choice for founding member. A key aim of Euro-Toques Ireland<sup>48</sup> is the preservation of Irish culinary heritage and member chefs pride themselves on being the custodians of Irish food culture. Mrs Allen went on to successfully head up the European organisation as Commissioner General for four years from 1994 to 1997. Myrtle always led by example and is reported to have reprimanded the Euro-Toques leadership on one occasion for allowing plastic jiggers of UHT milk to be served at their gathering's tea and coffee break, when they should have insisted on jugs of fresh unpasteurised milk, one of the causes they were supposed to be promoting.

Over thirty years later, Commissioner General for Ireland, Gareth Mullins, emphasised the importance of the beliefs set out by Myrtle Allen, as an inspiration for future generations. Euro-Toques Ireland continues to be a member of Euro-Toques International, which represents more than 3,500 professional chefs and cooks across sixteen European countries. It is the only lobbyists' association of chefs officially recognised by the European Commission, it has a permanent base in Brussels and is afforded an opportunity every year to address the European Parliament with issues of concern to its members. This direct line of communication with those involved in decision making is hugely important for those involved in the food industry.

### **Darina Allen and the Ballymaloe Cookery School**

For many around the world, and here in Ireland, the name Ballymaloe is synonymous with the fine country house hotel and award-winning restaurant, but also with the internationally renowned Ballymaloe Cookery School. In the 2003 oral history interview Myrtle Allen recalled how in the early 1980s, her youngest daughter Fern had expressed an interest in learning how to cook and

<sup>48</sup> Education of young chefs is also strongly promoted by Euro Toques Ireland, see [euro-toques.ie/young-chef-of-the-year/](http://euro-toques.ie/young-chef-of-the-year/)

how they had gone around to some of the London schools; none of them could take her and they were also very expensive.<sup>49</sup> At the same time Myrtle and her daughter-in-law Darina were in the middle of putting on their first three-month cookery course, the idea being that many of the guest rooms at Ballymaloe House would be empty from January until Easter time and this was a way of filling them with participants from the cookery course. They had noticed that many of the guests would ask for the recipe for the brown bread, or how they could make the pastry ‘turn out like that’, and so, entrepreneurial as always, Myrtle and Darina had realised there was potentially a market there to teach people *the basics*, as they saw it. These cookery classes were the perfect way to use their time, and their rooms, during the less busy winter months at Ballymaloe. Darina had a particular interest in starting a residential cookery school as she had previously been given a present of a week-long cookery course in Italy with Marcella Hazan (1924–2013).<sup>50</sup> On comparing the quality of food produce she was exposed to in Italy with what she was used to at home, and having visited the Rialto market in Venice, she describes having ‘a light-bulb moment’, when she suddenly realised that what Myrtle had been saying all those years about the quality of Irish produce was totally true, and realising at the same time that she lived in the perfect place for a cookery school, in the middle of a farm and right beside the sea. But there was also a very practical, economic imperative driving the entrepreneurial move to develop the new cookery school at Ballymaloe. Darina recalls:

When in the 1980s recession, the ‘cheap food’ policy kicked in and the oil crisis resulted in a 400% rise in the price of oil, the long-established Allen family horticultural enterprise which dated back to the 1930s became uneconomic ... We were seriously looking at the prospect of losing the roof over our heads so we needed to rack our brains to think of how we could use the resources and talents we had between us to generate an income in a different way—the Ballymaloe Cookery School, an alternative farming enterprise, was in fact born out of desperation.<sup>51</sup>

So Ballymaloe Cookery School was founded in 1983 by Darina and her brother, Rory O’Connell. Darina had been working with Myrtle at Ballymaloe House since 1968 and in 1970 had married the Allens’ son, Tim. The newlyweds

**49** Mac Con Iomaire, ‘The emergence, development and influence of French haute cuisine’ Vol. 3, 105, section 167. doi:10.21427/D79K7H **50** Marcella Hazan’s cookbooks remain one of the most important repositories of knowledge about Italian cooking for anglophone readers. See Mayukh Sen, Kitchen Notes ‘How Marcella Hazan Became a Legend of

Italian Cooking’, *The New Yorker*, 15 Nov. 2021. Hazan’s recipe for Tomato Sauce is explored at an existential level by Rebecca May Johnson in *Small Fires: An Epic in the Kitchen* (Pushkin Press: London, 2022). **51** Darina Allen, ‘Ballymaloe’s Cookery School Secret of Success’, *Good Food Ireland*.

moved into the nearby farm at Kinoith, where Darina would later establish the Ballymaloe Cookery School. Darina tells an interesting story of how she came to be at Ballymaloe in the first instance.<sup>52</sup> Darina Allen, née Darina O’Connell, was born in Cullohill in Co. Laois. Having completed her secondary schooling with the Dominican nuns in Wicklow, she was interested in both gardening and cooking. She chose to do a degree in hotel management at the Dublin College of Catering, Cathal Brugha Street, in Dublin.<sup>53</sup> Having completed her degree she soon realised that cooking was where her passions lay, and unlike her classmates, she did not want to work in hotel management. Darina herself tells how at that time in the middle to late 1960s, being a woman made it impossible for her to get into one of the top restaurant kitchens in Dublin such as Restaurant Jammet or the Russell Hotel, because at that time ‘men were chefs and women ran tea shops’.<sup>54</sup> She really wanted to cook but as she told one of her lecturers at the time, ‘I can’t get into the Russell’. That same lecturer, Darina recalls, went on to tell her about this ‘extraordinary woman’ in Cork whose name she couldn’t remember at the time (but later gave it to her on a scrap of paper), who had opened up a restaurant in her own house in the middle of a four-hundred-acre farm; she had a garden and farm animals, and unlike most restaurants at the time, handwrote her menu and changed it every day.

It was exactly what Darina was looking for, and in 1968 Darina went to Ballymaloe to work with Myrtle in the kitchen of Ballymaloe House (Figure 7). For Darina it was an inspirational experience, Myrtle Allen taught her how to cook, and at the same time reinforced her own and her mother’s values around food. According to Darina, the kitchen atmosphere was always inspirational—quiet, civilised, and fair—with no egos in evidence. Darina Allen has described her mother-in-law as generous with her knowledge and experience, which helped inspire a whole generation of chefs, and recalls how she was fully supportive of her in setting up the Ballymaloe Cookery School.<sup>55</sup> The cookery school at Ballymaloe (Figure 6), through Darina, her brother Rory, and the influence of Myrtle, together with a dedicated band of staff and assistants drawn from near and far, has also had an impact on the culinary profile of contemporary Irish cooking (Figure 8). Even a snapshot of former attendees at Ballymaloe includes some of the most well-known and dynamic professionals across the Irish food scene and beyond.<sup>56</sup> The list includes Thomasina Miers, Garrett Fitzgerald,

**52** Kate Ryan, ‘Darina Allen: Time to take back control over the food that we eat’, *Echo Live* 14 Dec. 2022 [www.echolive.ie/wow/arid-41027819.html](http://www.echolive.ie/wow/arid-41027819.html) **53** The Dublin College of Catering was run by the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee before federating with the Dublin Institute of Technology in 1978, and merging into Technological University

Dublin in 2019. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, ‘From the Dark Margins to the Spotlight: The Evolution of Gastronomy and Food Studies in Ireland’, in Catherine Maignant, Sylvain Tondour and Déborah Vandewoude (eds), *Margins and Marginalities in Ireland and France: A Socio-cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 129–53, DOI: 10.21427/8ws4-gg21 **54** Allen,

‘The Role of Ballymaloe in the Irish Food Renaissance’, 147.

**55** See also ‘Extract from statement by Myrtle Allen, at official opening of Ballymaloe Cookery School, 1983’, [arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=all](http://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=all) **56** See [www.ballymaloecookeryschool.ie/](http://www.ballymaloecookeryschool.ie/)

Clodagh McKenna, Lucy Hyland, Catherine Fulvio, Denis Cronin, Paul Mc Veigh, Ketty Quigley and Lilly Higgins. One of the best-known alumni is of course Rachel Allen (née O'Neill), who at the age of eighteen came to study at Ballymaloe, returning to work and teach at the school after travelling around the world for a time. While Rachel married into the Allen family she has built a culinary profile firmly in her own right as a cook, author, businesswoman and TV presenter. She always credits her mother-in-law Darina, and of course Myrtle, the family matriarch, as being the source of her own inspiration and guidance.

Along with co-founding the school, Rory O'Connell has worked as head chef at Ballymaloe House for over ten years. He also gained experience working with Nico Ladenis in Chez Nico, London, Alice Waters at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, and in Oxford with Raymond Blanc at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saison. He was twice named Ireland's 'chef of the year', has a successful TV career, and has published three important cookbooks.<sup>57</sup> The Ballymaloe Cookery School has hosted guest chefs from all over the world. Richard Corrigan, a guest instructor in 2008, recalled visiting the restaurant at Ballymaloe as a young man and described what Myrtle Allen was doing there as 'genius', saying that 'when you put skill to simple food, you have genius'.<sup>58</sup> The global standing of the Ballymaloe Cookery School is clear to see when one looks at not only the alumni, but also the culinary superstars that have been guest chefs there over the years. They include Jane Grigson, Madhur Jaffrey, Claudia Roden, Rick Stein, Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall, Diana Kennedy, Yotam Ottolenghi and Jeremy Lee. Even these renowned leaders of the international world of food were impressed by what Myrtle Allen and Ballymaloe were doing; Claudia Roden<sup>59</sup> would later call Myrtle Allen a great inspiration, saying that she represented everything that was wonderful and lovable about Ireland. Jeremy Lee<sup>60</sup> described what was being done at Ballymaloe as true and honest, 'tradition properly done but with a timeless quality' and going so far as to proclaim Ballymaloe a 'beacon for Ireland'.<sup>61</sup>

Far from resting on the success of the cookery school, Darina uses her platform to educate and highlight the role of good food and the ability to cook it as an essential life skill. She believes that practical cookery classes for every child, boy and girl, should be embedded in the school curriculum, saying '[w]e really must empower our young people to cook; too much depends on food. Food should and could be our medicine. If you can't cook, you're totally dependent on other people'.<sup>62</sup> Darina also heads up the Slow Food movement in Ireland which aims to bring together communities of like-minded people who champion the ethos

**57** [www.ballymaloecookeryschool.ie/ballymaloe-cookery-school/rory-oconnell](http://www.ballymaloecookeryschool.ie/ballymaloe-cookery-school/rory-oconnell) **58** [www.ballymaloecookeryschool.ie/guest-chef/richard-corrigan](http://www.ballymaloecookeryschool.ie/guest-chef/richard-corrigan)

**59** Claudia Roden CBE (née Douek; born 1936) is an Egyptian-born British cookbook writer and cultural anthropologist of Sephardi/

Mizrahi descent. [arrow.tudublin.ie/oxfor/7/](http://arrow.tudublin.ie/oxfor/7/) **60** Jeremy Lee, Interview at Ballymaloe Cookery School, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3Kt2qiPxsI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3Kt2qiPxsI)

**61** Lynne Kelleher, 'Ballymaloe Guru changed face of Irish Cuisine', *Irish Examiner*, 3 Oct. 2013 **62** Ryan, 'Darina Allen: Time to take

back control over the food that we eat'.



**Figure 6** Below. Ballymaloe Cookery School.

**Figure 7** Top. Myrtle and Darina cooking together (note the use of a Paddy Irish Whiskey bottle as an improvised rolling pin). Reproduced with kind permission from the Allen family.

of good, clean, and fair food in Ireland. The international Slow Food Movement<sup>63</sup> was founded in Bra, Italy in 1989 by Carlo Petrini, to counter the rise of fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and to encourage people to be aware about the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes, and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. Through her work with the Slow Food movement, young school children from nine local schools are brought to Ballymaloe each year to learn not just about the preparation and cooking of food but about the soil and the growing of the food.<sup>64</sup> Darina believes that educating people about food is the key, '[c]ookery is never just about what's on the plate. Through it, we learn what it takes to grow and farm the food we eat, where it is grown and how, the impact on the environment and our health, animal welfare, nutrition, and community'.<sup>65</sup>

### The extended Ballymaloe family

Writing in the *Irish Examiner* when Myrtle Allen died, Joe Leogue noted that her legacy is a food dynasty, and certainly the Ballymaloe name represents several different enterprises. Alongside the hotel and restaurant and the cookery school, there is also an organic farm shop, an Events Centre called the Ballymaloe Grain Store, the Ballymaloe LitFest (which ran for several years celebrating literature, food, and wine), and of course Ballymaloe Foods, all operated or managed by three generations of Myrtle Allen's family. Myrtle had always made large quantities of chutney using the tomatoes grown in the glasshouses at Ballymaloe and in 1990, her daughter Yasmin turned this into the very successful Ballymaloe Foods, producing a range of food products including the award winning Ballymaloe relish. Yasmin runs this together with her own daughter Maxine. The Ballymaloe name is now a global brand, and the extended Allen family are involved in many successful food businesses. Most notably, perhaps, the grandson of Myrtle, Cullen Allen. Cullen is the Cully of the well-known soup and pie brand Cully & Sully, together with friend and fellow Cork man, Colum O'Sullivan. Cullen Allen had himself attended the twelve-week cookery course at the school founded by his aunt Darina, before setting up Cully & Sully in 2004. Together with O'Sullivan, he successfully created a food brand built on the principles of using top quality food ingredients, simply prepared and locally sourced. The ethos of his grandmother's food philosophy clearly appealed to the US organic food company, Hain Celestial, who bought the Cully & Sully enterprise in 2012, retaining the founding members to guide the brand's progress and expansion.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> [www.slowfood.com/](http://www.slowfood.com/)

<sup>64</sup> Ryan, 'Time to take back control over the food that we eat'. <sup>65</sup> *Irish News*, Jenny Lee, 'Darina Allen on a mission to teach everyone how to cook', <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/people/arid-41257432>

<sup>66</sup> Just Food, 'Hain Celestial

buys Irish soup firm, Cully & Sully', [www.just-food.com/news/us-hain-celestial-buys-irish-soup-firm-cully-sully/](http://www.just-food.com/news/us-hain-celestial-buys-irish-soup-firm-cully-sully/)



**Figure 8** Students learning in Ballymaloe Cookery School. Reproduced with kind permission from the Allen family.





In 1986, Myrtle Allen and her daughter Fern had embarked on another culinary enterprise. This time it was a café, located within the famous Crawford Art Gallery in Cork city.<sup>67</sup> When the café first opened, the food served there was prepared in the kitchens at Ballymaloe and transferred to the Café each day. Many of the graduates from the Ballymaloe Cookery School, including Rachel Allen, spent time working in the café over the years. The Crawford Café became a much-loved city centre spot for visitors and Corkonians alike. Although the family are no longer involved with the café, it still prides itself on Myrtle Allen's ethos of cooking the very best of ingredients, simply and beautifully. In the 1990s Myrtle started the Cork Free Choice Consumer Group, who would meet on the last Thursday of every month in the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork. The group was set up initially in response to the difficulties faced by two small cheese-makers from West Cork trying to sell their produce in the English Market. These producers were finding it impossible to continue selling their traditional

**Figure 9** Myrtle Allen teaching her great-grandchildren Peggy and Scarlett to shell shrimp. Reproduced with kind permission from the Allen family.

**67** Eoin English, 'End of an era as regulars bid goodbye to Crawford Gallery Café', *Irish Examiner*, 13 Aug. 2022 [www.irishexaminer.com/news/munster/arid-40939025.html](http://www.irishexaminer.com/news/munster/arid-40939025.html)

products because of new rules and regulations being introduced at the time. While not a business enterprise, Myrtle Allen understood that as well as trying to fight the bureaucracy of the time it was important to inform and educate the food consumer about the value and quality of local artisan food producers and their products. This may seem commonplace now but back in the 1990s it was ahead of its time.

### **Myrtle Allen and the culinary landscape of today**

Food writer John McKenna described the opening of Ballymaloe House as the ‘Big Bang of Irish Food’, the moment when everything changed.<sup>68</sup> While Myrtle Allen never saw herself as a celebrity, nor indeed as a revolutionary, her influence on cooking and hospitality in Ireland has been enormous. She is now considered the doyenne of modern Irish cooking, and a pioneering entrepreneur who challenged the male-dominated hospitality industry in the 1960s.<sup>69</sup> Myrtle Allen broke new ground by winning that prestigious Michelin star back in 1975,<sup>70</sup> and for all the progress that has been made since, it is still perhaps a stark reminder of the glacial pace of that progress when one sees that in the many years since then only a handful of other women have picked up that same accolade in Ireland: Catherine Healy (Dunderry Lodge, Meath, 1986–1989), Kai Pilz (Shiro, Cork, 1996–2001) and Danni Barry (Deanes EIPIC, Belfast, 2016).<sup>71</sup> Clearly there is still a long way to go. However, in an era where a key mantra is ‘if you can see it, you can be it’, then the foundations laid by Myrtle and those who have followed in her footsteps are both significant and welcome (Figures 8 and 9). Her confident legacy still makes the headlines, displayed as a respectful and grateful badge by new generations of culinary professionals who are wholly aware of the stage she has helped to create for today’s Irish food industry. One such chef is Dublin born Anna Haugh, who named her new London restaurant ‘Myrtle’ in tribute.<sup>72</sup> Anna has travelled and worked in Spain, France, and the UK, and worked with culinary giants such as Philip Howard and Gordon Ramsay, but when she opened her own restaurant in 2019, she chose to name it after the woman she called an iconic Irish chef, whom she regards as one of the most inspiring chefs of her generation. But it is not only women chefs that are inspired by the achievements and legacy of Myrtle Allen. Award winning chef and proprietor of the Michelin starred Galway restaurant Aniar, Jp McMahan,<sup>73</sup> dedicated his 2023 book *An Alphabet of Aniar: Notes for a New Irish Cuisine*, to Myrtle Allen. He explains

**68** Lynne Kelleher, ‘Ballymaloe guru changed face of Irish cuisine’, *Irish Examiner*, 3 Sept. 2013. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20241801.html>

**69** Mary Farrell, ‘Is it Possible to Uncover Evidence of a Gender Revolution within Food Studies and Professional Culinary Literature?’

(Dublin: Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, 31 May 2016). <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/dgs/2016/May31/16/>

**70** Joe McNamee, ‘A pioneer who made her home into a Michelin star restaurant’, *Irish Examiner* 14 June 2018.

**71** Mac Con Iomaire, ‘Haute cuisine restaurants in nineteenth and twentieth

century Ireland’, 391–92.

**72** <https://www.myrtlerestaurant.com/>

**73** Jp McMahan, ‘Irish food was never just one thing’, *Irish Times*, 22 Feb. 2022

how Aniar began as a project to explore the possibilities of the Irish larder in an attempt to produce a new Irish cuisine. It should come as no surprise then to understand the dedication. With all ingredients bar two (white flour and sugar) in the Aniar kitchen coming from Ireland, and most of them sourced locally from the west of Ireland, the radical food philosophy espoused by Myrtle Allen in the early 1960s is now front and centre for the most innovative and progressive leaders of the contemporary Irish food scene.

### Conclusions

It is evident today that those ideas planted by the pioneering Myrtle Allen have spread and taken root all over the country. One need only look at the prevalence of home-grown, locally sourced Irish food ingredients on restaurant menus throughout the country to understand how far and wide the message has spread. There are now hundreds of artisan food producers scattered all over the country with products ranging from farmhouse cheeses, smoked fish, honey, and seaweed to cured meats. The reverence and accolades given at home and abroad to the quality of Irish food ingredients and Irish cooking is testament to the long road travelled and the many battles fought by Myrtle Allen and those like her, who were armed only with the conviction and belief that what they were doing was right and worth the effort.

Through movements such as Slow Food, set up in Ireland by Darina Allen, and organisations like Euro-Toques, originally co-founded by Myrtle herself, much of that work continues. But what is even more significant perhaps is the new wave of chefs, food producers, food writers, and researchers that carry her vision forward with a pride and confidence that only a woman like Myrtle Allen could have inspired. Long before UNESCO recognised gastronomy as an integral part of a country's intangible cultural heritage,<sup>74</sup> Myrtle Allen could see the value of preserving traditional food systems and believed in the authenticity of locally produced ingredients. She famously said Ballymaloe was a Country House and so they served the food of a Country House. While other restaurants were serving peppers, she was serving cabbage. Writer and friend, Claudia Roden would say of her '[b]efore Myrtle, people were ashamed of Irish food, but she knew that recipes and dishes can reinforce national identity with pride and dignity and remind us of a time that has vanished; sometimes that's all that remains of a way of life that has disappeared'.<sup>75</sup> That innate belief in the quality of Irish raw materials was a driving force behind everything Myrtle did.

**74** Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, 'Recognizing food as part of Ireland's intangible cultural heritage', *Folk Life* 56: 2 (2018), 93–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2018.1502402>

**75** McGuinness, 'Myrtle Allen: The Polymath Who Put Irish Food on the Map'.

**76** For research drawn from

the Myrtle Allen Archive, see Sexton, 'This is all very well, but where in Ireland can you get fresh tarragon?'

This chapter is not meant as a hagiography of Myrtle Allen but to mark the events, achievements, and legacy of this remarkable woman, who has had a pivotal influence on Irish food culture over the last half century. Her entrepreneurial legacy is evident in the growing generations of the wider Allen family and their expanding food enterprises. The legacy of her vision for simple, local, seasonal food, cooked well, is apparent all over Ireland and indeed globally, indirectly through her influence on former staff, students, Euro-Toques members and friends. A separate legacy is the archive of personal papers, writings, menu books, and drafts of cookbooks she meticulously kept. Following her death in 2018, her family presented the Myrtle Allen Archive to the Boole Library in University College Cork, where it is hoped it will be accessed and interrogated by future scholars for further elaboration on the Allen matriarch's influence on shaping significant change in Irish social and cultural history.<sup>76</sup>

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## **An Seanduine Dóite** (Amhrán Traidisiúnta)

Chuir mé mo sheanduine isteach ins an choirnéal,  
Ag ól bainne ramhair is ag ithe aráin eorna,  
Dá gcuirfeadh sé a cheann amach bhainfinn an tsrón de,  
Is bheinn féin ansin leis na buachaillí óga.

*Curfá:*

Is óró a sheanduine, a sheanduine dhóite,  
Brón ort a sheanduine, is mairg a phós tú.  
Is óró a sheanduine, a sheanduine dhóite,  
Luigh ar do leaba agus codail do dhóthain.

Dá mbeadh siad agam, tobac agus píopa,  
Muga maith leanna agus builín pingine,  
Naoi n-uibhe agus fiche le bruith ins an ngríosach,  
Rachainnse i mbannaí ar an tseanduine an oíche sin.

Chuir mé mo sheanduine suas in airde,  
Thit sé anuas i dtobán na cáfraithe,  
Nuair a shíl mé é bheith chomh daingean le tairne,  
D'imigh sé leis ina phrioll de phléaráca.

Dá bhfaigheadh mo sheanduine an ní a ba chóir dó,  
Greamanna ime agus greamanna feola,  
Íochtar na cuinneoige is préataí rósta,  
Bhainfeadh sé gliogar as na cailíní óga.

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*Míle buíochas, fad saol, gob fliuch agus bás in Éirinn.*

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## **The Irish Jubilee**

Anonymous 19th Century

We ate oatmeal till we could hardly stirabout,  
Ketch-up and hurry-up, sweet-kraut and sauer-kraut,  
Dressed beef and naked beef and beef with all its trousers on,  
Soda crackers, fire crackers, Cheshire cheese with breeches on,  
Beefsteaks and mistakes were down upon the bill of fare,  
Roast ribs and spare ribs and ribs that we couldn't spare,  
Reindeer and snow deer and dear me and antelope,  
The women ate so much melon, the men said they cantaloupe,  
Red herrings, smoked herrings, herrings from old Erin's Isle,  
Bangor loaf and fruit cake, sausages a half a mile,  
Hot corn, cold corn, and corn cake and honey comb,  
Red birds and red books, sea bass and sea foam.  
Fried liver, baked liver, Carter's little liver pills,  
And everyone was wondering who was going to pay the bill.

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