

## Food as ‘Motif’ in the Irish Song Tradition

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The beef and the beer of the Saxon may build up good, strong hefty men;  
The Scot goes for haggis and porridge and likes a ‘wee drap’ now and then;  
The German may spice up a sausage that’s fit for great Kaisers and Queens,  
But the Irishman’s dish is my darling – a flitch of boiled bacon and greens.

They laughed at the pig in the kitchen when Ireland lay groaning in chains,  
But the pig paid the rent, so no wonder our ‘smack’ for his breed still remains,  
And what has a taste so delicious as ‘griskins’ and juicy ‘crubeens’,  
And what gives health, strength and beauty like bacon, potatoes and greens?

### Background

The above song ‘Bacon and Greens’ was written by Con O’Brien and first appeared in print in September 1930 in the *Cork Weekly Examiner*. This Irish love affair with pig meat was still evident in Pat Short’s chart topping 2006 song ‘The Jumbo Breakfast Roll’ which describes the Celtic Tiger phenomenon of wrapping the components of the cooked Irish breakfast in a half baguette for consumption by cash-rich, time-poor citizens. These same ingredients (bacon, sausages, black pudding etc.) form part of the popular all-day Irish meal known as a ‘mixed grill’ described so evocatively in the writings John McGahern (Maher 2014). Considering the primacy of food in people’s lives generally throughout history, it is logical that food be reflected in their songs and poetry. This paper will scour close to a thousand years of songs and poetry in both the Irish Language and in English to explore the food ‘motif’ in the Irish song tradition, in order to ascertain what light it might shine on our understanding of Irish culinary history and heritage.

I have long been fascinated by the Irish song tradition in both languages, and in recent years I have combined my passion for food with my love of songs and poetry (Mac Con Iomaire 2012; Mac Con Iomaire 2013). The catalyst for writing this paper however was a statement by Hasia Diner in her book ‘*Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*’ where she argues that only the Irish—unlike the Italians and Jews who are also subjects of her book—did not have a richly developed food culture, and that ‘unlike

other peoples, Irish writers of memoirs, poems, stories, political tracts and songs rarely included the details of food in describing daily life' (2003: 85). She continues to argue that those who 'observed the Irish and recorded their voices rarely represented them as wanting to eat better or craving particular items', hoping to eat more to avoid hunger but not dwelling on 'particular tastes or special dishes'. These arguments, I suggest, need to be challenged and contextualised. As Goldstein (2014) notes 'any reader who delves deeper than *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt's memoir of poverty so desperate that he subsisted largely on bread and tea, discovers that in fact Irish literature is replete with descriptions of food.' This food, she suggests 'claims a beautiful simplicity as an elemental expression of the land and the sea—natural delights such as smoked mussels and salmon, rock lobster and dulse, fennel-scented soda bread, and floury potatoes.'

Diner (2003) makes three key claims that I hope to unpack. Firstly she discusses the failure of Ireland to develop an elaborate national food culture. Secondly she suggests that food was rarely mentioned by poets, song writers etc., and thirdly, she proposes that the Irish rarely craved particular foods or showed discernment in their food choices. In preparing this paper, I have explored songs and poems that range from the 8<sup>th</sup> century up to the modern day. This paper makes no boasts to being the definitive work on the food motif in Irish song, but merely aims to make a strong enough case to dispel the suggestion made by Diner that the Irish writers of poems and songs 'rarely included food in describing daily life'. In fairness to Diner, towards the end of her book she notes the risk in asserting the examples she has given to all 'the women and men who ate and hungered in Italy, Ireland, and Jewish Eastern Europe' (2003: 226). She acknowledges that blanket statements are problematic due to regional variations, changes over time and idiosyncrasies among families and individuals, as these societies were complex and defy generalisations. Her initial statement, however, has at least sparked this research paper, which hopefully may lead to further research.

## **Methods**

This paper will focus particularly on food as 'motif' in the Irish song tradition, particularly harvesting examples from the Irish language tradition which I feel Diner may not have been familiar with. Two major compendiums recently published, one in the English language *The*

*Penguin Book of Irish Poetry* (Crotty 2010) and one in the Irish language *Leabhar Mór na nAmhrán* (Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012) have been comprehensively examined and augmented by a number of other publications (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 1981; Kennelly 1984; Ó Lochlainn 1984; Ó Coigligh 1987; Clifford 1992; Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007; Vallely 2008) and with discussions with scholars of the Irish song tradition.

## **General Overview**

Ireland's culinary history varies from the first inhabitants who were hunter gatherers; to the Neolithic farmers; the introduction of Christianity and monasteries; the influence of Vikings and Normans in development of commercial towns and cities; the various Elizabethan and Cromwellian Plantations; the introduction of New World foods (potatoes etc.) and new beverages (chocolate, coffee and tea); the rise of an Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy; the Great Famine of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; the rise of industrialisation, commercialisation and growing middle class; independence; war-time neutrality; European integration to the foodways of modern Ireland's multi-ethnic globalised society. One is cognizant of the bitter histories lurking behind the old familiar binaries – Planter and Gael, Protestant Ascendancy and Hidden Ireland. This paper discusses songs and poetry ranging from the ancient Gael with their myths and sagas, captured in writing by the early Christian missionaries, to the goliardic poetry of the medieval monks, through to the bardic poetry of Gaelic Ireland prior to the Flight of the Earls (1607) and the defeat of the last Gaelic families at the Battles of the Boyne (1690) and Aughrim (1691). This leads to what is known as the 'poems of the dispossessed' (Ó Tuama and Kinsella 1981) through to the pre-famine songs of Antaine Ó Raiftearaí (1784-1835). Contemporary famine related songs, although few, are discussed as are the growing interest in all aspects of Irish culture during the Gaelic Revival in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century.

## **National Food Culture**

In Europe, the Crusades and the development of towns brought a market for new foods and spices from the Middle East which came to symbolise upper class medieval cuisine. Spencer (2004:66) notes that Italian, Spanish, English and French cuisines were all influenced by ancient Persia in some way or other. Mennell (1996:40-44) suggests that differences between

strata of society in manners of food were more striking during this period than differences between countries. According to Flandrin (1999:349), the relative uniformity of the medieval regime gave way following the Reformation, food and cuisine diversified along national lines. The concept of National food, therefore, is relatively modern. What is more reasonable to discuss is the concept of regional cuisines which are influenced by geography, climate, religion and tradition. Myrtle Allen has noted that in Ireland we belong to a 'geographical and culinary group with Wales, England and Scotland as all countries share traditions with their next door neighbours' (Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman 2011: 81). Unlike France or Italy, where there is a distinct difference between the food eaten in the north and south of those vast countries, the climate and regional food of the British Isles does not vary dramatically.

During the early modern era, increasing emphasis on a community of manners and tastes greatly altered the nature of the pleasure that people took in eating and drinking in company (Flandrin 1989:265). As Mintz (1996:96) has argued, both *grande cuisine* and *haute cuisine* arose out of political and social change. A phenomenon which occurred historically in capital cities and courts was that regional cuisines contributed to the appearance of a national cuisine since ingredients, cooking methods and specific dishes formed the repertory of chefs who cooked for persons whose knowledge, taste and means transcended locality. Zubaida (2014) highlighted that a nation's cuisine is its court cuisine. For many centuries until the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, the court cooking of Ireland was influenced by what was served in Dublin Castle or the Vice-regal Lodge. There is evidence that suggests that the hospitality of the Dublin court was on par or even superior to that of the court of St. James's in London (Robins 2001: 94-5). The food tradition of the court at Dublin Castle and of the 'Big Houses' of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy is currently being researched (Mac Con Iomaire and Cashman 2011; Cashman 2012; Mac Con Iomaire and Kellaghan 2012; Cashman 2014; McConnell 2014). Diner (2003: 85) argues that Ireland failed to develop an elaborate national food culture. I ask whether Ireland could have a national cuisine prior to independence in 1922? If we take the court cuisine to represent a national cuisine, as suggested by Zubaida (2014), then there is sufficient evidence to suggest that an elaborate national food culture did co-exist in the 'Big Houses' alongside with the cuisines of the middle classes, strong farmers, and the more limited diet of the poorer peasants, as was the case in other European countries such as England, France and Italy.

## Early Sources

From the earliest recorded poems and songs within the Irish tradition, food as a ‘motif’ is discernible. From the asceticism of monastic life where nature’s bounty is celebrated in the Anonymous 8<sup>th</sup> century ‘The Hermit’s Song (Marbán to Guaire)’, it is clear that the island of Ireland supplied a rich variety of foodstuff for her inhabitants:

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.  
(Crotty 2010: 12)

*Buile Shuibhne* (The Frenzy of Sweeney) is an account of the madness that overtook Sweeney at the Battle of Mag Rath (639AD) cursed by Saint Ronan whose psalter he had thrown into a lake. Robert Graves (1895-1985) dubbed it ‘the most ruthless and bitter description in all European literature of an obsessed poet’s predicament’. Sweeney’s diet changes in his frenzied state, as he notes:

‘our choice for a fresh meal is watercress always’

and later Sweeney states:

Acorns taste,  
as sweet as ever  
and I still savour  
the hazel’s coffer,  
  
but unmet lust  
and unseasoned grief  
mar a man’s life  
when his home is lost  
(Crotty 2010: lviii, 85).

Food references are found in many of the myths and legends from early Irish literature including ‘The Salmon of Knowledge’, ‘Bricriú’s Feast’, and the epic ‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley’. Indeed Queen Meave of Connacht, the chief protagonist of that famous cattle raid, was killed by a lump of hard cheese hurled at her from a sling!

Then of course there is the 12<sup>th</sup> century food satire masterpiece ‘*Aisling Meic Con Glinne*’, which is not only the forerunner but arguably the ancestor of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Norman satire ‘The Land of Cockayne’, as Crotty (2010: lxv) notes ‘a poem intriguingly congruent with the Gaelic “The Vision of Mac Conglinne” in the gastronomic if not the erotic features of its imagined earthly paradise’. This may be seen as one of earliest examples of goliardic poetry, where the gluttonous monks are satirised. There is also the long running motif of hospitality at play here where anyone who risks shirking their duties of hospitality to a stranger faced the risk of parody and satire. The Gaelic rules of hospitality enshrined in the Brehon Laws have been outlined in detail by Simms (1978) in what is known as ‘Guesting and Feasting’. In MacConglinne’s vision, the protagonist rows in a coracle of lard across a lake of new milk:

The fort we reached was beautiful,  
With works of custards thick,  
Beyond the lake.  
Fresh butter was the bridge in front,  
The rubble dyke was fair white wheat  
Bacon the palisade.

Stately, pleasantly it sat,  
A compact house and strong.  
Then I went in:  
The door of it was hung beef,  
The threshold was dry bread,  
Cheese-curds the walls.

Smooth pillars of old cheese  
And sappy bacon props  
Alternate ranged;  
Stately beams of mellow cream,  
White posts of real curds  
Kept up the house’  
(Crotty 2010: 58).

Also mentioned in the vision are a well of wine, beer and bragget in streams, and a lake of juicy pottage; a forest tall of real leeks, onions and carrots stood behind the house. Within the

house was a chief in a cloak of beefy fat and men with necklets of cheese and bits of tripe around their necks. This gastronomic masterpiece lists the numerous meats (bacon, mutton, beef, corned beef, tripe, beef lard) and also outlines the importance of whitemeats (butter, milk, buttermilk, new milk, curds, cheese etc.).

### **Cattle, Whitemeats, Honey and Apples**

A study of songs and poetry from the earliest period also heightens the understanding that it was the cow and all its by-products (milk, cream, butter, buttermilk, curds, cheese, veal, beef, corned beef, lard, offal etc.) that best represents Irish cuisine and culture rather than the potato which was a late introduction to the diet. Recent osteo-archaeological evidence shows that a larger proportion of veal and beef were eaten than had been previously imagined. A detailed history of beef in Irish culture is available (Mac Con Iomaire and Gallagher 2011). It is clear that due to the demand for milch cows for the dairy industry, that some male calves were killed for veal. Valley (2008: 109) notes that to the modern ear it seems strange to hear veal included in a list of inferior foods as seen in the song ‘Sweet Baltray’ written by John Shiel in the late 1800s, a local poet from the banks of the Boyne, east of Drogheda, Co. Louth.

There was assortments of fresh meat  
For those who wished the same to eat,  
Hearts, lights and skirts lay on each plate  
Though no-one dare say “Nay!”  
Pig’s cheeks and croobs and fine fed veal  
And dumplins made of oaten meal  
That night in sweet Baltray.  
(Valley 2008: 111)

Veal is also mentioned by the poet Patrick O’Kelly in his ‘The Doneraile Litany’ which was printed in a book in 1808 as a curse on the town of Doneraile in Co. Cork for one of the citizens of that town stole a watch given to the poet by King George IV in Dublin (Valley 2008: 80-1). Some reports suggest that Lady Doneraile persuaded the poet to withdraw the affront in exchange for another timepiece, but despite this, the song was so good, it had already travelled beyond recall and redemption in the oral tradition.

May beef or mutton, lamb or veal  
Be never found in Doneraile  
But garlic soup and scurvy kail

Be still the food for Doneraile.

An English traveller in Ireland, William Bulfin, picked up the following lines in 1904:

Bacon is bacon, and mutton is mutton, not bad to eat.  
Bacon is bacon, and mutton is mutton, but only beef is meat.  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 163)

Possessing milch cows could be signs of humble pride as in ‘The Black Stripper’ or a sign of boastful pride in the case of ‘The Woman of Three Cows’ (Ó Lochlainn 1984: 58, 129-31). Long before Patrick Kavanagh’s mother ‘made the music of milking’, there has been a long tradition of milk, butter making and cheese visible in many songs such as ‘*Na Gamhna Geala*’ (The White Calves), ‘*Seoladh na nGamhna*’ (Driving the Calves) and ‘*Cailín Deas Crúite na mBó*’ (The Pretty Milk Maid) some of which fit in to the tradition of *pastourelle* poetry. Within this *pastourelle* tradition, a maiden could lose her innocence, disguised as a food metaphor as in the songs ‘A Bunch of Thyme’ or ‘The Maid that sold her Barley’ (Ó Lochlainn 1984: 122-3). In many of these songs other foodstuffs are mentioned as similes for the young maiden’s lips which are often the colour of berries or as sweet as honey. The lyrics often show awareness of nature’s seasonality as in Raiftearaí’s love song ‘*Peigí Mitchell*’ (Ó Coigligh 1987: 91) where

‘*Béilín deas is milse blas ná mil na mbeach faoi Cháisc*’  
– her beautiful mouth a sweeter taste than Easter honey’ (Author’s translation).

Easter honey is also mentioned along with wheat, yellow meal, and ripe apples in the song ‘*Is Buachaill Deas Óg Mé*’ (I am a Nice Young Boy). In Colm de Bhailís ‘*Cnoc Leitir Móir*’ (The Hill of Letter More) he notes that the bees are there daily on the tops of the branches and the honey is so plentiful that it can be drunk:

*Tá na meacha go laethúil ar bharr na gcraobh ann,  
Mil ann chomh fairsing, is is féidir í a ól*  
(Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012: 336)

Another metaphor in these songs is the use of the apple, which may or may not refer to fertility. Apples and orchards have long histories in Ireland particularly in certain counties. In ‘*An raibh tú ag an gCarraig*’ (Were you at the Rock), the poet asks ‘*An bhfaca tú an t-úll ba chumhra is ba mhílse bláth?*’ – did you see the most fragrant apple and the sweetest apple



blossom? (Author's translation). *Bláth na n-úll* (Apple blossom) is a common trope among songs in the Irish tradition.

### Songs of Praise

There is a long tradition in both song and verse in praising various geographical regions or townlands for their fertility and the abundance of foods they provide. Antaine Ó Raiftearaí (1784-1835) has a number of such songs including '*Cill Liadáin*' (Killedan) and '*Béal Átha na hAbhainn*' (Ballynahivnia). In the former, which is reputedly written in order to win back the favour of the poet's former patron Frank Taafe, there is mention of wheat, oats, barley, rye, bread flour and meat; illegal whiskey makers; planting and ploughing and fertilising without manure; kilns and mills working constantly. Also mentioned is a range of fish (listed further below) and a number of quadrupeds and game including lambs, sheep, goats, kids, sows, piglets, milch cow, calves, doe, deer, and hares. The poem also mentions the famous Galway Blazers hunting with dogs barking and horns blowing 'which would raise your heart; cellars until morning being plundered with drink for the hundreds and beds for to sleep' (Ó Coigligh 1987: 44-6) (Author's translation).

In *Béal Átha na hAbhainn*, there are fish in the river and fruit on the trees, fine green leaves and berries, cherries, sloe, apples, wild plums, with mast growing on top of branches; the woodcock; the doe in the glen with the dogs and the fox in trouble with the (Galway) Blazers; rye, rape and wheat, springing corn, oats throughout; The plough team in spring spreading the seeds and the plains being opened by the plough; tables laid and cooks serving , pullets, turkeys and geese, fatted kid or lamb and ducks, mutton and beef at the front of the dish; crabs, lobster, gurnard, mackerel, salmon and dressed turbot, ling, pollock, cod, wrasse, and tortoise is not need in the feast (Ó Coigligh 1987: 42-4). This reference to tortoise is pertinent as turtles were very much in vogue at this time in both England and Ireland with turtle suppers *à la mode* using live turtles shipped from the Caribbean. In another song '*Plancstaí an tSirideánaigh*' (Sheridan's Planxty), Raiftearaí mentions fleshforks for the cooks and hooks for the pot, and mills for milling flour (Ó Coigligh 1987: 51).

The most epic food song / poem of the nineteenth century must be Raiftearaí's '*Bainis an tS'leacháin Mhóir*' (Ó Coigligh 1987: 110-14), a satire of a wedding to which the poet was

not invited, where the poor couple had as a wedding breakfast only potatoes and salted herrings. It comprises eleven stanzas outlining the food and drink served at the banquet including material culture. Seven types of meat and poultry, eight game birds, fifteen finfish, five shellfish, cakes and yeast bread are listed. Drinks include ale, porter, whiskey, punch, brandy, rum, madeira and negus. White dishes, pewter plates, sharp knives, skewers, delft, china, tureens, teapots, white and speckled dishes, jars, tankards, glasses, tables, table cloths are described. The wedding turns into a mighty battle, however, with collected beggars spilling blood with cudgels. It is slightly ironic that Raifteirí's epic is a satire of a real wedding where the banquet was only potatoes and herring, since a few decades later Alfred Percival Graves (1846-1935) composes a poem 'Herring is King' which goes;

Let all the fish that swim the sea,  
Salmon and turbot, cod and ling,  
Bow down the head, and bend the knee  
To herring, their king! To herring their king!  
(Crotty 2010: 972)

## **Fish and Seafood**

Fish appear championed individually or mentioned collectively in numerous songs and poems. The type of fish can imply status as in Aogán Ó Raithille's (c. 1670-1729) lament for the loss of his patrons, the Great MacCarthys, following the Jacobite rebellion '*Is Fada Liom Óiche Fhíorfhliuch*', where he writes:

And it's not on winkles, no, nor dogfish that I was reared.(Crotty 2010: 280)

In Raifteirí's '*Cill Liadán*', the poet describes water in the lake and the river running through it, weirs made and nets ready, the pike, trout, eel, crab, winkle, mackerel, seal, salmon, wrasse, sea trout, tortoise, lobster, striped turbot, gurnard and fish there as plentiful as turf.

There was a tradition at the end of Lent to hold 'Herring funerals' where herrings would be beaten up and down the streets and thrown into the river and a dressed lamb then paraded back up the town to celebrate the end of fasting and a return to eating meat. Jonathan Swift, however, also championed the herring in verse:

Be not caring,  
Leave of swearing.

Buy my herrings,  
Fresh from Malahide,  
Better never was tried.  
Come, eat them with pure fresh butter and mustard,  
Their bellies are soft, and as white as custard.  
Come, sixpence a dozen, to get me some bread,  
Or, like my own herrings,  
I shall soon be dead  
(Laffan 2003: 94).

*Scadán* is the Irish for herring, and features in a number of Irish placenames such as Balscaddan *Poll Scadáin* (Herring Hole) in Howth and *Baile Scadáin* (Herring Town) close to Balbriggan, in County Dublin. In the Gaelic oral ‘*sean nós*’ tradition there are a number of songs called ‘*Amhrán na Scadáin*’, celebrating herrings. There is a clear discernment between various types of herring noted in Seán Cheoinín’s *Amhrán na Scadán*:

*Is tá na scadáin ag teacht i dtír ó dhíthrá go lán mhara againn,  
Is tá na mná gá gcrúinniú le buicéid is le bradógaí  
Is tá tuilleadh scadán agam péin mar is maith an t-anlann fataí iad,  
Is cuireadh na scadáin lábán ann go dtí an fishmeal factory*

The herrings coming ashore from low tide to high tide,  
The women are collecting them with buckets and with nets  
I have plenty of herrings myself for they are an excellent accompaniment for potatoes  
And we will send the cock herrings on to the fishmeal factory  
(Ó Néill 1988: 29-30) (Author’s translation)

The song ‘*An Faoitín*’ champions the whiting and notes that the wealthy people’s fish are being shipped over to England but that they leave behind the whiting which is a real scandal. Another song from this tradition ‘*Amhrán na mBolmán*’ composed by Mary Mháire Sheáinín Uí Chonghaile which captures a highly unusual incident in the *Trá Bháin* area of Connemara one Sunday when, in Biblical fashion, thousands of horse – mackerel came ashore landing on rocks and in green fields and drains. The locals were bringing them up from the shore in baskets and bags and had a wonderful feast. The final verse throws light on cooking techniques used at this time:

*Ach tarraing amach gríosach anois féin agus róstaigí ceann,  
Beidh blas ar do bhéal is ná habair nár ith tú do sháith  
(Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012: 113, 636)*

But pull out some embers right now and roast yourselves one  
You’ll have the taste on your mouth and don’t say you didn’t get your fill  
(Author’s translation)

The most well-known song in this fish genre must be Molly Malone who sells ‘cockles and mussels alive, alive oh!’ but also within the Dublin ballad tradition, both ‘Biddy Mulligan the pride of the Coombe’ and ‘Sweet Daffodil Mulligan’ fit the genre, the latter of which has a refrain of ‘fresh fish’ often sung between verses.

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.  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 21)

There is a long tradition of street sellers of food many of which were captured by the eighteenth century artist Hugh Douglas Hamilton in his *The Cries of Dublin* which has depictions of women selling oysters, pickled herrings, salmon and another of ‘scalding fishwives!’ Many verses have been written about oysters from Edward Forbes ‘The Anatomy of the Oyster’ (Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 99) to Seamus Heaney’s ‘Oysters’, the opening poem to his 1979 collection *Field Work*.

Our shells clacked on the plates.  
My tongue was a filling estuary,  
My palate hung with starlight:  
As I tasted the salty Pleiades  
Orion dipped his foot into the water  
(Heaney 1979: 3).

Edible seaweeds also appear in the song tradition with *duileasc* (dulse) appearing in ‘The Races’ (see below). Carrageen Moss, also edible seaweed, remains much used as a thickening agent and was a popular Irish dessert. The song ‘*An carraigín*’, which was first collected by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1934, champions the harvesting of carrageen over normal seaweed, which was dried on the rocks and shipped to Galway and from there to Dublin on the train (Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012: 171, 663).

## **Fairs, Races and Street Food**

The Kerry poet Sigerson Clifford (1992: 13) has a ballad ‘The Winkle Woman’, where

In the dusk of the evening I will hurry down  
And sell my periwinkles in the cold strange town:

Clifford (1992: 57) also has a poem about ‘The Races’ where three distinctively Irish foods are mentioned, edible seaweed (dilisc), pigs trotters (crubeens) and a hard candy stick (Peggy’s Leg):

There were tents and umbrellas where all kinds of fellows,  
sold dilisc and shellfish and the juicy crubeen,  
And Peg’s legs the size of a peeler,  
On the day of the races in Cahirsiveen.

The crubeens and sugar sticks are also mentioned in the song ‘The Galway Races’:

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 thruppence to be suckin’ while you’re able.  
(Crotty 2010: 957)

There are a number of food trades mentioned in ‘The Humours of Donnybrook Fair’ including confectioners, cooks, fruit hawkers, butchers, brewers and bakers (Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 171-2). The licence for Donnybrook Fair which had run from the thirteenth century was purchased by concerned citizens in 1855, as the fair had become synonymous with rioting and brawling. A Catholic Church was built on the site.

One of the most popular street foods still to this day is Fish and Chips. Italian immigrants were the first to sell fish and chips from street carts in the late nineteenth century and then from ‘fish and chip shops’ or ‘chippers’ as they are still commonly known. The Italian origin and the famous Dublin slang ‘One and One’ which refers to one fish and one chips are captured in the Peadar Kearney (1883-1942) popular song ‘Fish and Chips’ also sometimes known as ‘The Liffeside’.

As down by Anna Liffey,  
My love and I did stray.  
Where in the good old Liffey mud  
The sea-gulls sport and play  
We caught the whiff of ray and chips

And Mary softly sighed,  
'Oh! John, come on for a Wan an' Wan  
Down by the Liffey side.'

So down to Rabaiotti's  
Together we did go,  
And the rapture then that filled our hearts  
No poet e'er could know.  
We started atin' double wans,  
And Mary softly sighed,  
'I'd live for ever atin' chips  
Down by the Liffey side.'  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 200)

### **Regional Food and Wild Game**

The '*ballach*' or wrasse appears particularly in Raiftearaí's poetry, and this fish was traditionally salted and air dried in Connemara and on the Aran Islands. In the Anonymous 'Galway to Soho', the waiter in the London café declares that 'we have Galway Salmon', and despite also having 'turbot, halibut and sole on the bone' points out 'but our salmon is best and that's widely known' (Mac Con Iomaire 2012). Jimmy Crowley has written a song about the famous Cork blood pudding titled 'Clonakilty Blackpudding'. Crubeens and a distinctly Cork speciality blood sausage made from sheep's blood called 'drisheen' appear in another Cork classic 'The Boys of Fairhill':

If you come to Cork you'll get drisheen,  
Murphy's stout and pig's crubeens.  
Here's up them all says the boys of Fairhill.  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 26, 67)

As in many cultures, where the lords of the manor held claim to fishing and fowling rights in their areas, there was a tradition of poaching among the common Irish people. This is captured in a number of verses, particularly in the 'Tinker' songs of Clifford (1992: 9) where a tinker's son who enters school asks:

Will Euclid teach me to how to light a fire from green twigs in the rain?  
Or how to twist a pheasant's neck so it won't cry out in pain?

In his song 'The Tinker's Wake', Clifford (1992: 23) writes:

Many a head he cracked,

In a rowdy fair of Puck,  
Many a goose he stole,  
And many a plump fed duck.  
Many a salmon he poached.  
But now he will poach no more;  
The tinkers knelt and prayed,  
And went through the open door.

## Potatoes

The Irish tradition has songs praising and lamenting the humble potato. They help to dispel the widely held view that the potato diet was always monotonous, or as Diner (2003: 84) suggests ‘the Irish experience with food – recurrent famines and almost universal reliance on the potato, a food imposed on them – had left too painful a mark on the Irish Catholic majority to be considered a source of communal expression and national joy’. The paucity of famine related songs in the ‘*sean nós*’ canon probably stems from the fact that the famine was so shocking and painful to be remembered often in song. The song ‘*Na Prátaí Dubha*’ (The Black Potatoes) written by Máire (Molly) Ní Dhroma around the year 1850 concerns the effects of the famine on sending her neighbours in Ring, Co. Waterford to the poorhouse, overseas or to the graveyard (Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012: 476). The famine is also recalled in songs such as ‘Skibbereen’;

Oh son, I loved my native land with energy and pride,  
‘till a blight came over all the land, our sheep and cattle died,  
Our rent and taxes were to pay, I could not them redeem,  
And that’s another reason why I left old Skibbereen.

Before the famine, the early historical origins of the potato are captured in ‘The Potato’ (Ó Lochlainn 1984: 160-1):

They say Sir Walter Raleigh (so it’s generally agreed),  
Implanted in our valleys fair, the first prolific seed.

There are other playful songs such as ‘*Raithneach a Bhean Bheag*’ also known as ‘*Amhrán an Steaimpí*’ written in the decade before the famine by Roderick Ó Dálaigh from *Úibh Ráthach* in Co. Kerry. *Steaimpí* is a local Kerry name for Boxty which is a potato cake made from grated raw potatoes fried in butter, most popular in the North-Western counties. The repeated last line of the song points out that stampy or boxty are not the same unless they are spread with butter. The song, according to Daithí Ó hÓgáin, tells of a big house in *Barra na*

*hAoine* which had plenty of food but where the ladies of the house were too full of airs and graces to ever make stampy, yet textual analysis of the song reveals that it accurately describes the process of making boxty: cleaning the potatoes, scraping them, squeezing the liquid, and an old woman on her hunkers spreading the embers and frying them on the griddle (Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012: 526, 818). There is the commonly found verse about boxty:

‘Boxty on the griddle, boxty on the pan;  
if you can’t bake boxty sure you’ll never get a man!’

Other potato dishes such as ‘Colcannon’ are celebrated in songs such as ‘The Auld Skillet Pot’:

“Did you ever eat Colcannon, made from 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 your mother used to make?”

The chorus:

"Yes 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 they the happy days when troubles we knew not,  
And our mothers made Colcannon in the little skillet pot."

There are songs such as ‘Ode to a Pratie’ published in 1903 by Antrim farmer Pat McCarty which lists eleven different varieties of potatoes grown in his native County which has been long renowned for potatoes. The Irish have long favoured the floury rather than waxy varieties of potatoes. For a detailed discussion of the various potato breeds over the centuries in Ireland and how they grew in popularity, see Mac Con Iomaire and Gallagher (2009). In recent years, the ‘lumper’ potato much reviled due to its famine connection has been re-established in Antrim to popular acclaim. They are now used by Pádraig Óg Gallagher of Gallagher’s Boxty House in Dublin to make seasonal boxty.

Thy name is Murphy. On the Antrim hills,  
There’s cruffles and white-rocks; there’s skerries, too, and dukes,  
And kidney – which is early; and champions and flukes –  
Which doesn’t help the farmer much to pay his bills:  
The sort’s not recommended. Then there’s early rose,  
And forty-folds, and flounders – which is bad;  
And magnum bonums: - if good seed’s to be had  
It is the biggest pratie that the country grows,



And tastes not bad. Some grows best in rigs  
And some in drills. There's some ye cund't ate;  
There's others dry and floury that's a trate;  
And weeshy kinds, that's only fit for pigs.

Now Irishmen knew their potatoes and also expected hospitality and were not short of shaming any individual who failed to provide what was considered fair. Such was the case of a '*spailpín*', or casual farm labourer, who hired with Darby O Leary or 'The Galbally Farmer' in Co. Tipperary to dig potatoes and work by the day. The anonymous author who penned this ballad c.1890 mentions in the final verse that he had previously worked in at least eleven different Irish towns with decent respectable farmers, 'but such woeful starvation I never yet seen as he got from old Darby O Leary'.

I well recollect it was Michaelmas night,  
To a hearty good supper he did me invite,  
A cup of sour milk that would physic a snipe –  
'Twould give you the trotting disorder.  
The wet old potatoes would poison the cats,  
The barn where my bed was swarming with rats,  
'Tis little I thought it would e'er be my lot  
To lie in that hole until morning.  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 119-20)

On a lighter note, the traditional '*sean nós*' song '*Máire Mhór*' has a line of endearment '*mar is tú a chuirfeadh na fataí móra i dtaisce ar leic and teallaigh dhom*' – for you would keep the large potatoes safely by the hearth for me (Author's translation) (Ó Conghaile, Ó Tuarisg et al. 2012: 435).

### **Comic food songs in the Irish tradition**

The long tradition of comic songs and poetry, sometimes called 'Ireland's Other Poetry' contains a significant number of food and drink themed examples, ranging from the eighteenth century to more recent times. An early version comes from Oliver Goldsmith (1730-74) from 'Retaliation' and it shows the wit that the Irish were renowned for from Dean Swift through to Oscar Wilde, Brendan Behan, Spike Milligan and continues to the present day with entertainers such as Pat Short.

Of old, when Scarron his companions invited,  
Each guest brought his dish and the feast was united.  
If our landlord supplies us with beef and with fish,

Let each guest bring himself, and he brings the best dish:  
Our Dean shall be venison, just fresh from the plains;  
Our Burke shall be tongue, with a garnish of brains;  
Our Will shall be wild-fowl, of excellent flavour,  
And Dick with his pepper shall heighten their savour;  
Our Cumberland's sweet-bread its place shall obtain,  
And Douglas's pudding, substantial and plain;  
Or Garrick's a salad, for him we see  
Oil, vinegar, sugar, and saltiness agree;  
To make out the dinner, full certain I am  
That Ridge is anchovy, and Reynolds is lamb;  
That Hickey's a capon, and by the same rule,  
Magnanimous Goldsmith a gooseberry fool.  
(Crotty 2010: 315-6)

One of my own personal favourites is 'The Irish Jubilee'. It is a song that stems from Irish American politics in the mid nineteenth century where the newly elected candidate remarks:

"they made me their Senator, to show them my gratitude,  
we'll have the finest supper ever given in this latitude."

The background is explained in Mac Con Iomaire (2013). There are some brilliant comic lines and clever word play such as:

We ate oatmeal until we could hardly stir about,  
Catsup, hurry up, sweet kraut and sauerkraut,  
Dressed beef and naked beef and beef with all its tresses on,  
Sody crackers, firecrackers, Limburg cheese with dressing on,  
Beef steak, and mistakes were down the bill of fare,  
Roast ribs, spareribs, and ribs we couldn't spare;

Although born in India, Spike Milligan (1918-2002) was a proud Irishman by ancestry and by passport. His food related piece of nonsense 'You Must Never Bath in an Irish Stew' advises:

You must never bath in an Irish stew  
It's a most illogical thing to do  
But should you persist against my reasoning  
Don't fail to add the appropriate seasoning.  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 264)

During the years of the Celtic Tiger, one foodstuff above all else 'The Jumbo Breakfast Roll' seemed to capture the imagination of not only our sociologists (Share 2011) but also our comic lyricist Pat Short whose single of the same name spent six weeks at no. 1 in the Irish charts in 2006. This effectively was the mixed grill, described so well in a number of John

McGahern's novels (Maher 2014), but wrapped up in a *Cuisine de France* demi-baguette so it could be eaten on the go by the army of builders who were so busy during the property boom they could hardly stop to eat.

Two eggs, two rasher, two sausage, two bacon, two puddings one Black and White  
All placed like a tower on top of each other and wrapped up good and tight,  
If you're having some tea, the milk is over there and you'll find sugar in the bowl,  
Says she 'Do you want some sauce on that?', says I 'I do in my roll!'

## **Discussion**

Diner (2003) makes three key claims that this paper has aimed to challenge. Firstly she discusses the failure of Ireland to develop an elaborate national food culture. I have highlighted earlier in the paper that the concept of a national cuisine is a fairly recent one and argued that prior to independence in 1922, how was Ireland supposed to have developed an elaborate national food culture? If we take Zubaida's (2014) description of a national cuisine being the court cuisine, then we can argue confidently that Ireland had developed an elaborate national food culture which centred on the 'Big Houses' of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, currently the focus of doctoral research (Cashman 2012; Mac Con Iomaire and Kellaghan 2012).

Secondly, Diner suggests that 'unlike other peoples, Irish writers of memoirs, poems, stories, political tracts and songs rarely included the details of food in describing daily life' (2003: 85). This research paper has highlighted numerous examples, in both languages, over a period of a thousand years, from all over the island of Ireland, and from across the various social strata of Irish society that clearly shows the Irish song tradition is replete with reference to food in describing daily life. From the anonymous goliardic 12<sup>th</sup> century *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, to the poetry of Aogán Ó Rathaille, Oliver Goldsmith, Jonathan Swift, Antaine Ó Raiftearaí, to the more modern Sigerson Clifford, Spike Milligan and Pat Short, a full listing would fill a fair sized compendium, ranging across a number of styles and genres.

The third claim of Diner's, where she proposes that the Irish rarely craved particular foods or showed discernment in their food choices can be clearly dismissed with a few examples from this paper alone. A level of discernment and craving better food is evident in a number of

Raiftearaí's songs / poems. Although the feast described in '*Bainis an tS'leacháin Mhóir*' is fictional, it is clearly based on contemporary banquets among the upper echelons of Irish society, such as the Taafe family who were the poet's patrons in Mayo in the early part of his career. As a poet and musician, Raiftearaí would have performed in the houses of the Anglo-Irish gentry and was therefore familiar with their dining habits.

Discernment happens not only among the upper echelons of society. Taking potatoes as an example, there is clear evidence of discernment how the Irish favoured one variety over another as outlined in Pat McCarty's 1903 'Ode to the Pratie' which mentions eleven different varieties ranging from dry and floury 'that's a trate' to 'weeshy kinds, that's only fit for pigs'. In '*Raithneach a Bhean Bheag*' the process of making boxty illustrates not only daily life but discernment is found in the repeated last line of the song which points out that stampy or boxty is not the same unless spread with butter. Many songs refer to butter that 'your mother used to make', indicating a preference for a particular taste, which is in line with the international reputation Irish butter held for centuries. Rose Cork Butter was a particular commercial brand advertised in the *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* as early as June 1771.

In '*Amhrán na Scadáin*' a clear distinction is made between the good herrings that were seen as a great accompaniment / sauce for potatoes but the '*scadáin lábán*' (cock herrings) were sent to the fishmeal factory. The Doneraile Litany firmly outlined the distinction between butchers' meats and 'garlic soup and scurvy kale'. Discernment is also evident in terms of seasonality, with mention of Easter honey, and also welcoming the return of lamb following Lent with the 'herring funerals'.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Ireland's food heritage is still at an early stage. Goldstein (2014) points out that Ireland has suffered twice for its famines and food shortages: 'first due to very real deprivations; and second because these deprivations present an obstacle to the exploration of Irish food. All too often the story begins and ends with potatoes or famine.' But again, she suggests, 'literature can be revelatory.' The forthcoming decade should reveal much as doctoral research into various aspects of our culinary tradition get published. A recent publication uses a food lens to explore the writings of Maria Edgeworth, Jonathan Swift,

Bishop Synge, James Joyce, John McGahern, and Sebastian Barry with revealing results (Mac Con Iomaire and Maher 2014). Indeed, the eminent Irish historian, Joe Lee (1989: 384) has noted that it is to the writers that one must turn to get insights with regard to the ‘larger truth’ of Irish culture and society at any given moment in time. This paper seeks to include writers of song and verse among the above.

*Aisling Meic Con Glinne* pre-dates and inspires similar early European compositions. Similar to the watercress eaten as a fresh meal in *Buile Shuibhne*, the foods (winkles and dogfish) mentioned by Aogán Ó Rathaille give insight into the changing circumstance of the poet when his Gaelic patrons were defeated in the late seventeenth century. The rich vein of food and drink running through the songs of Raiftearaí merits a comprehensive study all of its own.

When Irish people discuss their national cuisine, the obvious is often hidden in plain sight. It takes a holiday or period abroad to identify the foods we love that are not widely available outside of Ireland. Irish immigrants often ask visitors from home to bring over Superquinn sausages, Barry’s tea, Tayto crisps, Moro bars, not to mention real Irish butter. Indeed there are specialist shops in Irish airports where Irish smoked salmon, brown bread, smoked mackerel and a selection of Irish farmhouse cheese and jams are sold. The most common meal described in the various fictional texts of John McGahern is what would have been referred to as the ‘mixed grill’ -lamb chops, sausages, black pudding, tomatoes, eggs and fried bread. As a boy growing up in Dublin the 1970s, I often watched my father eating mixed grills anticipating his leaving me a bit of sausage, and craved the day I would be a working man and could have a mixed grill every evening! Perhaps our national dish is the ‘Irish breakfast’, ‘mixed grill’ or else the ‘bacon, potatoes and greens’ of the opening song. It is simple hearty peasant food, not sophisticated court cookery. Corned beef was mentioned as early as the twelfth century in ‘Aisling Meic Con Glinne’ although more popular in Irish-America these days than at home. The songs also reveal a plethora of foods available to modern foragers (blackberries, heathberries, whortleberries, nuts, apples, sloes, cress, and wild garlic). Ireland’s hospitality industry with the current focus of foods being local, ethical and artisanal might recall the Kerry playwright and novelist John B. Keane who opined:

‘when bacon is boiling with its friend cabbage,  
there is a smell from the pot that would tear the heart out of any hungry man!’

I leave the last word to Con O'Brien with the third verse from the song that opened this paper:

Let your curing factories cure flitches and mild flavoured 'cheeks',  
But give me a farmer's smoked gammon that hung o'er the chimney for weeks,  
Where the scent of the peat-fire perfumed it by just the most natural means,  
And let butter-sauce stand for a relish – 'tis then you have bacon and greens.  
(Wyse-Jackson and McDonnell 2007: 300-1)

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