

'A DAY IN THE BOG - LA SA bPORTACH'

'A day in the bog' - 'La sa bPortach'. How many of us remember having to write about this titled topic during our school days? A timely reminder perhaps that the days of the summer holidays were approaching with haste. Days, we knew, when visits to the bog were inevitable! Love it or hate it, the Irish bog and all aspects of peat turf, from the careful planning of its cutting, to its often, detailed methods of harvesting, to the tolerating pursuits of being able to finally bring it home for household use, will always be synonymously associated with the Irish Summer season.

This, unofficial national fuel, drawn from the earth, remains for many, in particular, rural dwellers, a standard and staple part of annual, countryside life. The bog, somehow, seems to reconnect us with our past. The yearly 'pilgrimages', be they few or many, re-echo thousands of footsteps taken by our ancestors to those same locations, for similar activity, throughout the previous centuries. Past generations of family ancestry, associated with each 'plot', are, as it were, 'dug into' and 'reclaimed' each year in the bog, reaffirming each family's connection with *their* land and *their* bog, through nature and time.

It was said, that late Spring, usually around Easter, was the opportune time to begin work on 'opening the bank' for the cutting of the turf. Spurred on by increasingly brighter days with the hope of ever better weather, especially sunshine, the farmer, if beginning or 'opening' a new section of the bog, first, cleared off the top layer from the top of the bog. Removing approximately 2 to 3 feet deep of heather root and soft, light brown matter, a rectangular area was cleared for the commencement of turf cutting proper, on this, new 'floor' area. This cleared, upper bank, known in Irish as the 'Eann-ach' followed on directly from the previous years cut area, which had been cut out, to a now, lower 'floor area'. These lower 'floor portion areas' were known in Irish as (singular) 'Faslach'. The subsequent water, draining from the bog which had being cut away, usually lay parallel, in front of each (preceding) 'Faslach'. New turf sods, cut out of the new bank, the new 'floor area', were then thrown up from each cut, upon the upper bank - the 'Eannach', or, if suitable, also around the previous years 'Faslaigh' - (plural). Sometimes the assistance of a wooden wheelbarrow helped with the task. This time-honoured method of cutting turf, following on from former generations, continued in Ireland until the mid 20th century.

The famous Irish sleán or slane, a much treasured, hand operated, work implement, known to farmsteads up and down the country, will of course, always be associated with the bog and with turf cutting in former times. Its simple, yet effective, two sided, unique shape and structure, fashioned by the local blacksmith of the area, presented each of its operators with albeit, through tough, physical labour, their own distinct rhythms of styles, stances and throwing methods. However, spare a thought for those poor souls of previous generations, who, had to fashion sods from wet turf scooped directly from the bog by their bare hands alone! That particular practice of making 'hand turf', has, thankfully, lost its significance.

It was not uncommon in the past to see many people working in the bog, each group to their own plot, each group at varying stages of work. "God bless the work! - You too, you too!" was the greeting of the day. Hard work and bog air guarantees a strong appetite for food and the standard food consumed in the bog, was, for hard working men, usually hard-boiled eggs. Easily stored in jacket pockets they were an original fast food that only required a quick peeling from a long thumbnail! Thick, cold meat sandwiches of soda bread, perhaps along with strong tea were a fine feast. Anyone that has ever tasted tea made in, or brought to the bog (usually in a whiskey bottle within a strong woollen sock), will tell you that there really is nothing to compare it to!

Such poetic meandering however belies the current reality of the Irish bog and turf cutting. Much has been documented on trying to maintain the balance of caring for and maintaining, our special eco-systems that are the Irish bogs, together with the reliance of rural dwellers who wish to continue their rights to use their local bog for domestic fuel purposes. The modern methods of turf cutting and bog maintenance have arguably affected the landscape of the bogs. Careful monitoring of both, will serve to ensure the best outcome.

Following on from the decline in sleán cut turf, the first cutting machines to enter local bogs in this area were those owned and operated by the former Irish Sugar Company or Comhlucht Suicra Éireann, (CSE). Operating from about the mid to late 1960's until about the 1980's, these large and cumbersome diesel powered machines, 'lay' on top of the bog and whilst cutting out sections of turf on one side of the machine, they 'spat out' or spread, lines of (often unbroken, messy), turf sods in long, tightly knit rows, from a long arm-like structure. The 'sausage machine' was a tractor operated machine which sliced into the bog like a chainsaw to produce though its feeder, approx. 5 to 10 sods wide, (depending on

each machine) of round, sausage-like, streams of turf. The 'sausage machine' was most active in this area, during the late 1980's and early 1990's and was gradually disliked, as it was said to weaken the upper banks, from which it cut.

After these machines, the modern 'hoppers' began to dominate. Fast and reliable, they present turf, pre-cut and in neat, 10 sod-wide lines, for the persons about to save it. A digger operates in co-operation with the 'hopper' machine. It digs out large, deep chunks of turf and deposits them into the feeder container of the 'hopper' machine. This large container then churns up the loose chunks of turf while the machine travels along, and spreads upon the ground, the neat, sod rows. The deeper the machine goes, to grab the chunks of turf to feed into the 'hopper', the blacker the turf produced and consequently, the nearer to the next level of ground material (beneath the peat layer), it has reached. This deep turf is known as 'stone turf' and it produces, from its richer, darker, more compacted material, a better, longer flame and stronger heat when burned. It is obvious then, that this is the most favoured form of turf sought. Cut turf, is commonly measured in yards. Length by width, divided by 9 will give you the number of square yards needed. The average price per yard of turf cut by a hopper machine is €5.00 per yard. On average, depending on the household, a yearly cut would equate to between 50 and 100 yards.

Whilst modern, machine led operations, have made things a lot easier for turf cutting nowadays, nevertheless, the methods of saving the actual turf, remains practically unchanged. Vital to methods of harvesting or 'saving' turf, is of course the weather. Dry days are essential directly after cutting, to get that first 'skin' on the turf and, following on, while bog breezes help matters, cut turf, needs the sun's rays to properly dry out. Many, with the advantage of good weather, begin to 'save' by turning each sod either by implement, such as a spade, fork, rake or hoe, or by hand which, as one can imagine, is very tough on the back! Sometimes, depending on the conditions of the turf, the ground and/or the weather, people may begin to 'save' by 'footing' directly off the ground. Either way, the objective is to get it dry and home in the fastest time possible and with the least amount of handling involved.

'Footing' involves collecting about 6 to 8 turf sods and placing them on end in a circle, supporting each other, by meeting in a point at the top. In Irish these are called 'grogins' (grow-geens) or when built larger, - 'duthains' (doo-hawns). An interesting article from 1842 in Co. Kildare, mentions that there are no less than 6 distinct operations for the

provision of turf: 1, cutting - (by slane), 2, spreading - (scattering to dry), 3, footing - (as described), 4, rickling - (10 footings laid on their sides, one deep x 2 high), 5, clamping - (small stacks, 12 sods x 6 x 4) and 6, drawing home - (donkey cart/baskets). Despite all the hard, physical stretching, grabbing and placing of turf sods, some, if not, all of these tasks, must still be completed by today's turf saver also, as unfortunately, no-one has yet invented something which can match the dexterity of hand, involved in executing such procedures!

A bog is really a wonderful place for wildlife. The variety of smells, sights and sounds of the flora and fauna associated with the bog and in its environs is indeed special. Annual visitors working in the bog will recognise the familiar call of the cuckoo, (said to be especially lucky if heard from your right ear!) or indeed, the shrill call of the curlew, sadly in decline and they will know for sure when its time for home, when the dreaded midges begin to bite! Depending on the location of the bog, one may discover such a diverse mix of mosses, grasses, flowers, shrubs, plants and trees, not to mention of course, ants, frogs, snails, flies, bees, butterflies, birds and perhaps even a glimpse of an elusive stoat, weasel or fox.

In the general Milltown community area, we are fortunate to have many areas of bog that provide a home for wildlife as well as catering for domestic fuel needs. Local townlands with bogs, include, Ardnagall, Carrowntoatagh, Cloondroon, Kilgevrin, Lurgan and Tonmoyle. In 1902, the famous Lurgan Log Boat was discovered in Lurgan bog, within our parish, the story of which you can read, on this website. But amongst the obvious uses for turf cut in the bog, - fuel for the fire, there now exists, many different crafts and gifts associated with Irish peat turf. Maybe you have purchased recently, a key ring or a celtic cross for a friend or relative made out of turf? What will come next, turf furniture perhaps! There is nowadays, even peat/turf flavoured incense on the market, to take you back to your childhood days and allowing you to close your eyes and reminisce, on those days long ago you spent in the bog. A day in the bog, - La sa bPortach!