

An Siopa Bróga



Gréasaí

Shoe Boot and Belt Maker

By Emma Laffey

INTRODUCTION

In this short booklet I will be introducing the reader to a small insight into the workings of the local shoemaker/cobbler or lesser known as Griosáí Gaedheal . The trade was nearing its end is now but thankfully making a comeback.

My favourite childhood book was The Elves and the Shoemaker was one of many stories collected by The Brothers Grimm. The illustrations as a child transported you to the shoemakers shop. Magic was woven between the shoemaker and the Elves and with some research this too is intertwined into our own Irish oral heritage.

The shoemaker is long linked here in Ireland with the fairies and this can be clearly seen within the Duchas Schools Collection of 1938. Students from ages 10-12 collected local folklore resulting thankfully that we have some brilliant written heritage about our local shoemaker.

Shoemakers were in almost every town and village across the country, making new shoes for the wealthy, repairing shoes for the poor all the while bringing some magic alongside their skilled work with tales of the fairies.

I will begin with some information about our local shoemaker found in the Duchas Schools collection and through the Irish census.

Local Shoemakers

There were many shoemakers/cobblers in the East Galway area with many stories attached to them here are a few that I found.

Mountbellew 1911 Census Francis Fuery Shoemaker aged 16

https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Galway/Mount_Bellew/Mount_Bellew_Town/468511/

Derrylissane 1911 Census John Jarrett Shoemaker aged 75 from Mayo

<https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Galway/Derryglassaun/Carrowferrikeen/468262/>

Ballymacward 1901 Census Thomas Scarry Shoemaker aged 67

<https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Galway/Ballynacward/Whitepark/1367639/>

Colemanstown 1901 Census Michael Connolly Shoemaker aged 45

<https://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1901/Galway/Colmanstown/Colmanstown/1385849/>

Mr Wilson Laught Moylough Galway who made shoes from cows skin

Patrick Kelly & son Colemanstown Galway

Thomas Jordan Shudane Lough Monivea Galway

Johnny Murray Ahascragh Galway

Michael Lally and his brother made clogs Ahascragh known as "The Clogger Lallys"

Pat Downey Leitrim Beg Galway

The travelling shoemaker Patsy Moylan whose nickname was "The Gréisaidhe." Leitrim Beg Galway

The travelling shoemaker Peter McKeigue Kiltormer who made boots

Nowadays it is very hard to imagine what it was like to walk into a shoemaker shop, to hear the sounds, smell the leather and see shoemaker at work. There are some cobblers still around that can give us an idea of what it was like but they are mainly in our bigger towns and cities.

There is a great description of a shoemaker who was sometimes known as the Groisáí Gaedheal in The Duchas Schools Collection, he is described as, a man with a yellow complexion due to the tannin from the leather rubbing off his skin. He had a stool with one side for sitting on and the other had a small box for his tools. Shoemaker used a bench, an awl, a last, a hammer, a pincers, and a lot of small nails.

Thick leather was used to make boots for the men and a lighter leather was used for ladies boots. Leather hides used were cow, horse, doe, sheep and even rabbits. A pair of boots during this period cost roughly 10s per pair. It was very tedious work, the person purchasing a new pair of shoes would go into their local shoemaker and be measured and fitted. It generally took up to two weeks to receive your new shoes.

The shoemaker was linked with all trades in their local village. They were uniquely connected with blacksmith as he made all the tacks and tools for the shoemaker to make and mend the shoes. Blacksmith sold the nails 50 jigs for a half penny. The iron that they used to make the nails out of was nail rod. There were many parts of the shoes and boots known as Gaeilge and thankfully the children from the Duchas Schools Collection have written them down. Tessie Burke and Rita Lally from Menlough Girls National School Galway recorded most of these words below.

Taoibhín - for piece on side of shoe

Barracín - for piece on top of shoe

Cúilín - for piece of back of shoe

Loipín - old shoe or stocking

Leipreacán - fairy (shoe-maker)

Troighthíní - Woolen stocking came up to the knee had no soles, vampless stocking - Vampless (without toes)

Croigín - Stockings pulled up their legs with holes in toes (cow skin)

Caobín - Bun - to repair a broken shoe with piece of leather

Not everyone during this period were fortunate enough to have a pair of shoes or boots. Children up to the age of 12 went around barefoot. Many people were eighteen before receiving their first pair of shoes. Some would only receive their shoes when they had to emigrate to USA. It wasn't uncommon to go up to the bog and see many of our older men wearing no shoes while cutting turf during summer months. Sheepskin during winter times were used for children to quote a piece from Duchas Schools Collection.

"In former times sheep skin shoes for children were made, especially for snowy weather, something like our sandals. These were tied on with thong made of the sheep skin, and to quote Brian O'Lynn with the skinny, side out and the course side in its "mair go leor" said Brian O'Lynn".

Gaddyduff School in Donegal they say they used "martings" which were shoes you could wear on both left and right foot. Very much like pampooties from Aran Islands. Some were made from canvas with a tar placed on outside as said from Scoil Naomh Pádraig Donegal "Foot coverings were worn in my district in former times according to Patrick Mac Colgan of Ballymagaraghy and were made of canvas tarred on the outside. There is an old saying that if you put on one shoe and lace it before putting on the other shoe, you will have St. Colmcille's curse on you."

James Kelly Movice Donegal says "The first boots that came into being were locally know as "blutchers". There were only two holes for laces on them. It is said that farmers who had servant boys hired, made the boys wear these as it took the boys only a short time to lace them in the morning. These also were only worn at Mass at first. The people carried their boots to a hill above Bocan chapel. There they sat down and put on their boots. When they came back there again they took off their boots and carried them home. In this way a pair of boots lasted a person about six years."

Clogs were very popular for many years. They were cheap the soles were made out of Alder wood and the tops made out of leather. Iron was placed on sole of the clog to make it last longer. People would carry their shoes/clogs to mass to save them. Only putting them on as they reached the church.

Buying shoes was a huge luxury to the poor. Even to have polish to keep your shoes was even harder come buy. People used butter and mixed ashes from the fire to make their own polish. Another way they made polish known as "blackening" Soot from the houses and pots was carefully scraped off and mixed with cream to soften it. The mixture was rubbed with a brush and then left to dry. Then a soft cloth was used to polish. Straw was sometimes burned and mixed with cream or oil and then applied to leggings or boots.

Laces for the wealthy were leather however for the poor a Beet of flax was used to make shoe laces. Ballyhaise NS wrote the following:

Every year a "beet" of flax was kept over to a make family boot laces for a year. A few strands of flax was rubbed between the thumbs until it was fine and silky. A few strands of this were twisted and plaited like a rope. This was dyed black with soot from the crook and was used as a boot lace. It was very strong.

Many men made their own watch-chains from horse-hair. These were jet black and lasted a life-time.

Another way they made boot laces and known locally as "whangs" labourers took a piece of leather, cut it round in shape and carefully mark concentric circles. These he cuts out and when the whole piece is stretched he has produced a strong lace.

The women have their own story too when it comes to shoes. Wealthy womens footwear were made from soft calves leather into fine boots and shoes to suit all seasons. However the poorer women generally made shoes themselves very rarely had shoes until they were about to be married or like the men when they emigrated to the USA,

Women made "spatters" which were made from wool into a long stocking drawn up to the knees also known as troighthníni. Another is "vamps" which were made from homemade spun thread. The shoe began at the feet covering the instep up to the calf of her leg.

Quote from JJ O Dowd Castleblakney in Duchas Schools Collection:

"People didn't begin to wear boots in former times until they would be about fourteen or fifteen years of age. There was one old woman that went in her bare feed all the year round named "Máirín Rúa" because she had red hair."

Quote from Rita Lally Menlough GNS in Duchas Schools Collection:

"My father told me that the people used not wear shoes until they would be about 18 or 19 years of age. Some people used not wear any shoes at all. There was a woman in Polnabrone and she never wore a shoe. "

Quote from Annie Waldron St. Josephs Glennamaddy NS in Duchas Schools Collection:

Long ago when the eldest girl in a house would get married the next girl would get a new pair of shoes.

There were many traditions and superstitions surrounding the shoemaker and with peoples feet. What I found consistently threaded through "Care of the Feet" project in the Duchas Schools Collection was the mentioning of the fairies.

The Fairies

The Fairies are mentioned numerous times through this folklore collection. A superstition that is mentioned over and over in many of our counties is not to throw out the water you washed your feet in at night or the fairies will be after you or the old people said if they did not wash their feet every night the fairies would be tickling their feet all the night.

Quote from Caitlin Ni Dhonnachadh Cooloo NS from Duchas Schools Collection:

“This is a story my grandmother told to me. One night a woman did not throw out the feet water. At night the fairies came to the door and said to the feet water "Uisce cosach leig isteach mé" they said this a few times and then the feet water let them in. She did not have the feet water in the house”.

Quote from Maire Ní Reachtaire Levally Tuam from Duchas Schools Collection:

“They used wash their feet every night but they used never throw out the water after doing so. They used leave it within until next morning. They said it was not right to throw it out as the fairies would have power over you if you did”.

Quote from Maggie Marry Monknewtown NS from Duchas Schools Collection:

“When the people washed their feet long ago they used throw a piece of red fire into the water. It is also said that they would not throw out the water without saying "take care of the feet".

Not alone is there superstitions surrounding the shoemaker but poetry is mentioned several times too. The Callanan brothers who were both poets were known to writing poems about different things that happened in their locality. One time they had no paper and proceeded to write their poem on the inside of their shoe!! They are buried now in Killeneen Graveyard Craughwell.

Another of these poems was found again in the Duchas Schools Collection from County Cavan.

A shoe maker named Carroll lived in the townland of Longfield. He got an order for a pair of boots from a farmer named Pat Brady Drung who was a local poet. The order was in poetry & Micky referred to in poem was Pats brother. Reference is made to grease & it appears at that time butter was used in place of polish & was believed to be a protection against damp feet.

The Order.

Dear Mr Carroll I hope you will attend
To these few lines I'm going to pen
A pair of boots I want with speed
of which I'm surely in great need.
My measure I took no need to send
on Mickys last you may depend.
They fit full well from heel to toe
Although the ramps are somewhat low.
Make the quarter high to hide my hacks
And pave the toes with the nicest tacks.
As for polish they would demolish
not so much it would be foolish
For you know last summer butter was dear
And cows do calve but once a year.
And if on Saturday you have them made.
Whats your demand it will be paid.
The cash you know it will be ready
So try and oblige your friend Pat Brady.

James Dowher Longfield.

Laragh Boys NS

Laragh

County Cavan

For not just shoes were made at a shoemakers. Many items that were needed from leather were made here. There is quotes that shoemakers made bellows for the blacksmiths forge

Bellows made by shoemaker: Moylough GNS Duchas Schools Collection:

Bellows.

It is made by shoe makers from leather. It is full of wind inside. A big pole is tied from it and when pulled up and down it lights the fire.

GAA football made from sheeps bladder brought to shoemaker to leather

Football was very rarely played as no football could be got. When a pig was killed the youths got it's bladder and then they went to a shoe-maker to sew a cover round it. When the cover was sewn the ball was blown up with a quill.

Similarly a sliotar was made by shoemaker. he would first gather up some rags and then place them into leather and stitich up the ball for hurling match.

Wax was another item regularly used by shoemaker with reason but in one story told shoemaker placed wax in his mouth to keep it soft all the while prevent himself from getting toothache as wax covered his teeth.

Sean Fahy Leitrim Beg: Duchas Schools Collection:

Pat Downey from Leitrim used make and mend shoes. When he would be stitching the shoes he used to put the lump of wax into his mouth. He said that he never had a toothache and that it was the wax preserved his teeth. Whenever he got a cut or a prod he put wax on it to cure it.


One last small tradition local people used to do was when a couple was getting married they would tie an old shoe to the horses tail for good luck. Very similar to what we do today tying old cans and shoes to the back of the honeymooners car.

Maura MacNamara Ganty NS Duchas Schools Collection:

“When the newly-married would come down from the altar after the ceremony, those present used to throw rice and old shoes at them. They used also hang an old shoe to the horse’s tail or mane because it was supposed to bring good luck. The people used to vie with each other to see which would have the best and fastest horse going and coming home from the wedding. For that reason they used give the horse an extra feed of oats, before the marriage”.

Over the years the shoemaker begins to disappear from our rural villages. Big factories like Donaghys Boot Factory in Drogheda County Louth started to appear mass producing boots and shoes. Imported shoes from England too. Making shoes and boots cheaper and more affordable to the poorer community. My Grandfather Seán Kierans worked for twenty seven years in Donaghys Boot Factory. I don't have a photo of him at work there but there is one below of a Johnny Carroll in a similar role who also worked there.

Connacht Tribune 1909-current, 10.07.1915, page 4




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Up-to-date Methods. Best Material.
Always ready to time.



**Shoemakers Advertisement
in The Tuam Herald**

**Johnny Carroll Donaghys
Boot Factory Drogheda**

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Photograph Front Cover courtesy of:
Cormac Bonner & Ray Bonar

William Bonner Shoe Repair Shop Convoy Donegal
c1905

William Bonner b1851 (on right) his son William (b1888)
in middle and his wife Margaret Mc Laughlin b 1855

Link to you tube video to watch a shoemaker at work
from the RTÉ series Hands

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXHvlnMGyR0>