

A day in the bog.

Lá ag an bportach

I am a great fan of Seamus Heaney's poetry and I often delve into one of his collections. When I retired a friend of mine gave me a present of all his collections. I have recently read his lovely Poem "Digging" from his 1966 collection "Death of a Naturalist". It recalled great days in the bog .

Digging by Seamus Heaney

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man in Toner's bog  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

The days in the bog were part of our lives growing up in the Kingdom. When the year turned the corner of St `Paddy's day turf appeared quite often in the lexicon of many a house. My father would take down the hay knife and sharpen it, likewise with the sleán . When finally, we heard the question 'When is good Friday this year? We knew the turf was in the air. And so Good Friday was early rising to clean the top rough sod off the turf bank to be ready for cutting turf for the winter fires on Easter Monday. This was like a religious turf feast.

We marked about a yard wide down the length of the bank and started the cutting and marking with the hay knife and sliced it off with the wide spade . Then we had a look and ensured all drains were clear so that there would be no excess water staying around. All this had to be finished by noon because we had to be home to attend the Stations of the cross.

So, Easter Monday and cutting day were fast approaching. There was always great preparation the night before . We had a cutter and another man for pitching the sods came with us, so we had to provide all the food. The big chunk of ham had been cooked ,two loaves of bread, the pound of Lee Strand Creamery butter, Hard boiled eggs, packet of Galtee cheese, some homemade currant bread and some Marietta biscuits were packed .as well as the loose tea ,milk, a few knives and spoons and we were ready for a day in the bog.

Our man on the sleán was Micky Quirke and he would be in the bog around 6.45 to start the cutting and mark out the size of area needed to spread the turf out for drying. Con Sugrue was the man taking the sods and was tossing them out to my father who landed the top row of sods on to me for spreading in serried rows ready for footing and drying .

As the youngest of the team, I was the designated tea boy. My first job was to get sufficient cipini and dryish turf to start a fire. Next the old blackened kettle was produced and then I was despatched to go back to the well for water. When the water was procured it was boiled on the fire. When it was boiled several spoons of tea were dumped into the kettle and it was left to brew for a few minutes. It was always great strong tea and as the lads said

'You could trot a mouse across it. Then the cuisine a la Mick started. The pan loaf and butter were opened, and it was every man for himself . Generous chunks of ham were piled up on well- buttered bread with a slice of cheese on top of that ,topped of with a dollop of Colemans mustard. This was fine al fresco dining a la Mick at its best. The boiled eggs were generally eaten from the hand and this was capped off with a few Marietta biscuits liberally coated with butter. The final treat was a slice of my mother's homemade currant bread. Then it was straight back to business and the young lad tidied up. I always had to keep the tea and pour it into a couple of bottles with added milk . I carefully rolled up the paper corks and stuck them into the bottles. There was nothing better than cold boggy tea ,corked with the sloppy paper corks, for the thirst and 4 o clock snack with the currant bread.

These bottles were wrapped in socks for the evening ,for what reason I will never know. As the cutting progressed, we got deeper into the bog and the quality of the turf improved with each sod being as black as coal. This was the real deal as regards quality turf. It was much harder work ,tossing it out from a lower position and every muscle was strained . We worked a full day and at the end we exchanged pleasantries with the Browns and the Howards who were cutting adjoining banks of turf. We bid farewell to the bog and arrived home tired and weary and praying to god for fine weather to save the turf and have it ready for early turning. As we said, "we've done our bit now its in the lap of the Gods". Now we had to wait and hope the weather kept fine till we lifted the turf for footing to let the wind blow through. This was a painstaking, back breaking exercise .You had to bend down to pick up every sod of turf and make the base tripod of sods and keep them standing . We were lucky most years with this laborious crop and got the reek made early enough in summer. All turf had to be home in the yard before Tralee Races and The Rose of Tralee. Bringing home the turf was a great occasion . We would get two big lorries of turf clamped up high by our bogman driver .Then finally when it was home in the yard it was stacked away in sheds ready to keep the home fires burning for another winter. Neighbours came to inspect the harvest of turf with each passing their own comment on the quality of the turf. Our bog was located in Gleann Scoithin [the vale of the little flower] and we passed Queen Scotias grave on the way up. Queen Scotia [Friel] was reputed to have been a daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh. She was Queen of the Celtic Milesians who defeated the Tuatha De Danann [the tribe of the gods]. She tried to jump over the Valley and fell to her death. Her grave is marked with a huge stone down in the valley. The bog men related stories about the battle of Sliabh Mish on Knockmichael Mountain in the Sliabh Mish Mountains on the edge of the Dingle Peninsula, just outside Tralee in the Kingdom of Kerry. You can Google Scotia for a great wet day read. It is fascinating stuff bringing us back to the time of Moses. On top of the hill in Scotia's Glen there lived a family of sheepmen. When we used to pass the house in the mornings one of the brothers, Tom, was out shaving. He used a white enamel pan with some hot water brought out from the range, a bit of glass stuck in the ditch served as a mirror .He made a good lather with some carbolic soap and shaved away quite happily totally oblivious to the curious gaping of passers-by at this bare topped mountain man. He just continued with the greeting"" Welcome to Gleann Scoithin," are ye right for pikes and sleans lads? Ye know where they are in the shed". We thanked him .

He continued Shaving.

Mick O Callaghan. 21/11/2020