



IN WEST CORK LONG AGO

Do you know the type of tools your ancestors used in rural Ireland in times gone by? The type of food they ate and how they prepared it? What they drank? What they wore? What kind of games they played?

Do you know about their matchmaking system and how they celebrated a wedding? What they did at wakes and how they prepared for the burial?

Do you know if they really believed in fairies and ghosts? How they reacted to new inventions?

Those of you who only have a razy idea about your ancestors lives will find this book a mine of information. Flor Crowley knew the old people and their customs and he gives us a vivid picture of day-to-day living on a farm in West Cork over sixty years ago.

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Flor Crowley In West Cork long ago



only thank God for the change but still feel some regret that those who worked so hard for so little reward should be forgotten by those who now fill their places.

'The Spud'

It is an historical fact that the potato more than any other crop dominated the farming system of Ireland in general, and of West Cork in particular, all through the nineteenth century and the trend had not significantly changed well into the present century. In 1910 the potato was still the main crop on most West Cork farms, and, rather remarkably the system of growing them had changed very little since the great famine days and before. It was a simple system, perhaps a little primitive by the standards of more recent times, but it had the merit of producing the sort of potato, sound, medium-sized, dry and floury, that more modern methods have been unable to produce. The early variety in those days was either the Red Elephant or the Epicure and the beautiful, yellow-tinted Champion was the main crop, a potato of such perfection for table use that is equal has never since appeared despite the obvious attraction of the Kerrs Pink and the Golden Wonder in our own time.

How were the Champion and Red Elephant grown? Primitively perhaps, but successfully, with a fair reward from a maximum of hard work and care. First, a sound ban field of fair size was selected, and the fences cleared of all bushes and briars. Then butt-full after butt-full of farmyard manure was drawn out and spread heavily over the field, manure that had accumulated during the previous winter when the cattle had been housed at night, their stalls cleaned out each morning and spread over the *aiteann gaolach* and *raithneach* that had been cut during the winter and deposited in thick layers over the yards. The resultant admixture, cow dung and furze, was known as long dung and was regarded as the best possible manure for any crop.

With the manure neatly spread over the entire surface of the field the ploughing of the ridges began. At that time spuds were grown exclusively in ridges, as they had been for more than a century before. The idea of sowing them in drills came in some years later, but in common with all new ideas it was slow to catch on with the very conservative farming community of certain parts of West Cork, the objection being that in order to plant in drills the ground had to be broken up to the detriment, they feared, of the crop of winter wheat which was always grown the following year in the garden ground. As events proved, that fear was as groundless as the earlier fear of spraying the crop against blight. The old people had condemned spraying as 'flying in the face of the Lord'.

Ploughing the ridges for garden was an exact science. For one thing, each ridge had to be arrow straight, otherwise the ploughman was at fault and quite likely to be mocked by anybody who happened to see his work. The first sod of the ridge had to be turned with extreme care, not always an easy process on a fairly rough field and with a pair of horses—a *seisreach*—pulling the plough. Normally a well-trained *seisreach* worked well together but in this highly demanding task the ploughman had to aim them in a dead straight line from one fence of the field to the opposite—not a simple thing to do while keeping a wary eye on his plough as well.

The second sod of the ridge was ploughed the opposite way about to lean against the first sod and so the rib of the ridge was laid down. Two more sods from each side were turned in the same way and then the ridge was completed, six sods to the ridge all through the field and a furrow eighteen inches, or two sods, in width between every two ridges.

Then came a second exacting job, the hacking of the ridges, done always with a *grufan* and usually by the labouring man. It would have been a back-breaking as well as a back-bending task if the man engaged in it hadn't

the best coal.

Hand-turf was produced when the turf-mould was too brittle to be used as shovel-turf. The cap was cleaned in the ordinary way, and the bog-stuff shovelled out on to the adjoining bank and piled up haphazardly for the time being. Later on the bog-stuff was spread evenly over the bank and then broken to a texture as fine as possible. This process of breaking was not easily done nor was it achieved the first time over. Normally, there was a second round of breaking, sometimes a third round, after which the mould was as fine as flour. The term flour is not entirely inapt in this context since the remaining steps in the production of hand-turf differed only in degree from the steps taken by a woman in making a cake. She wets the flour and kneads it to the necessary consistency. Having done that, she moulds it into its final shape and puts it into her oven to bake.

When the bog-stuff is refined to the maximum and spread out evenly over the bank, water is then bucketed out of the bog—the type of bog in which there is always an abundance of water—and channelled through the mould. The workers mix, or knead the mould and the water until the entire mixture takes on a consistency not unlike that of the cake mentioned above. The mixture is spread out thinly and evenly over the bank and only then the final phase of the work undertaken, the phase which gives its distinctive name to this type of turf.

The workers mould the mixture with their hands into individual sods, and it is left for a week or more until the top surface has dried into a fairly solid crust. Then a hay-knife is used to cut the sods apart, each sod is placed on end, standing upright on the bank so that there can be some chance of all-round drying. A week later the turf is stoked, from which point the same process of drying and saving is followed that has been traditional in shovel-turf making.

Is the making of hand-turf another of the forgotten rural arts? It is quite possible that future generations might never

know what hand-turf is like, how it is made, what it can be like as a fuel.

Fairs and Markets

The monthly cattle and pig fair and the weekly market provided a relief of sorts from the tedium of country life. This amusement was, of course, only for adults unless one of the younger folk happened to be press-ganged into service to help driving cattle to the fair, or if he was so badly in want of a pair of boots or a coat he might be taken along.

The weekly market, rather more than the monthly pig and cattle fair, had a domestic urgency all its own. The poultry, normally several dozens of them, were housed in a special office, the hen-house or *cro na gcearc*, an out-office exclusively reserved for them and for the ducks when ducks were included among the farm live-stock, which was not very often. It was a form of farm segregation that each domestic animal and bird had its own house: the stall, or *cro na mbo*, for the cows; the stable, or *cro na gcapall* for the horses; the pig-sty, or *cro na muc*, for the pigs; the goose-house, always a very modest structure leaning against the gable of the stall or the stable, for the geese, *cro na nge*. All these had to be cleaned out regularly, usually a task for the garsuns of the house, and the dung piled in a common heap in the yard, manure for next year's crops.

In the *cro na gcearc* there were laying boxes all round the floor as well as in all four corners in which the hens layed their eggs in the daytime. There were also perches upon which the several dozens of hens of the farm roosted at night. Apparently, like the cows, each one of which never failed to find its own place and its own stall, and would go into none other than its own, the hens also were creatures of habit. Each hen had her own exact spot on the perch and always roosted there. Each hen had also her own box in which to lay, and even though she shared this box

with several other hens, she never used any other one—except that occasional outlaw of the flock which preferred to lay out on a fence or under the stalks in the potato garden. This outlaw was extremely secretive about her outside nest and, if the nest wasn't found and the eggs collected out of it, the time came when she started to clock and hatch out, making her appearance only once every couple of days in the farmyard for food and water. When she did that she was watched and her nest was discovered, robbed of its eggs, and the hen herself placed under an up-turned kitch until the clocking went off her.

This hen was the exception in the flock, the vast majority of whom layed their eggs, as all respectable hens were expected to do, in their laying boxes in the fowl house. Modesty was never a characteristic of a hen laying her egg, any more than it was in that more intimate matter of her relations with the farmyard cock with whom she copulated openly and brazenly anywhere and everywhere he approached her with his obviously suggestive strut. The two cocks, or three, that formed part of the flock fought many a battle royal whenever they met, which was not often, for with the self-preservation with which nature endows all its creatures, the weaker birds avoided the stronger and older ones without in any way relinquishing their claim to a fair share of their ladies' favours.

Her egg safely laid in her box, the hen emerged from the fowl-house crowing at the top of her shrilly penetrating voice, proclaiming to the world that a new egg had been produced, a new chick born to the world if that egg were hatched rather than sold.

While some eggs were hatched, most eggs were sold after a few had been eaten at the farmer's table. For the youngsters of the time an egg was a rarity indeed. When you did something out of the ordinary like finding the nest of a hen who had been laying out, your mother, in a moment of rare expansiveness, boiled an egg for you. That

egg was at once a reward and a bribe, a reward for services rendered, a bribe for services to come.

Most hens layed early in the day, all of them before dinner time. Not long after dinner the eggs were collected, usually by the mother of the house, who used her apron in lieu of a basket, by way of receptacle. An apron full of eggs was as common in those days as the same apron full of oats for the hens that layed them, for the mother had charge of the hens of the farmyard and of everything appertaining to them. When the eggs were collected and cleaned, they were packed away in baskets until market day in town, when, together with the large roll of home-made butter, they were to be sold either in the shop where the family was dealing, or to egg-and-butter buyers who travelled from Cork for the day, and through whom the produce of the farm was conveyed to the city markets and city shops, or, alternatively overseas.

Frequently, the eggs and butter were sold to a shop and out of the proceeds the messages for the family for the coming week were purchased. These were kept to a minimum: tea and sugar, yellow meal and bran, those things that could not be produced at home. The balance of trade between the shopkeeper and the customer was to the advantage of both. It ensured that the shopkeeper had a ready supply of eggs and butter for his over-the-counter customers, and it ensured also that he would be willing to allow tick to his country supplier to tide him over those lean winter and early spring months when eggs and butter were both at their lowest point of production. It was an ever-recurrent cycle and it rarely failed to function satisfactorily for both sides.

Not all the eggs were sold in town however. There was the huckster as well, the travelling egg-buyer who called each week with his horse and car, laden high with egg-boxes. A fair portion of the eggs of the farm went to him, and we, the younger members, often watched in wonder the unfaul-

ing dexterity with which he counted the eggs, three between the fingers of each hand, six eggs at a time, a dozen in every two rounds.

The weekly market was usually the domain of the women folk of the farming community. Most of them travelled to market by donkey and cart, except on that rare occasion when the boss tackled the horse and went to town as well, usually on the pretext that he had forge-business. Whatever that business might have been, it was always interspersed with business of a lighter vein which required taking a few convivial half-ones at one or other, or several, of the taverns in the town. The result was a fairly well-on boss when he arrived home, usually late in the evening. But then the poor man's chances of conviviality were so rare that nobody really begrudged him that occasional day out, even though his better-half seldom failed to find suitably critical words to describe his condition when they got home.

The monthly fair was the man's business and man's business only, the pig fair on the last Tuesday, the cattle fair on the last Wednesday of each month. It might be bonhams or fat pigs for the pig-fair. It was seldom both, for the breeding cycles of the farm sow were so spaced that the fat pigs from a previous litter were always ready for sale before the bonhams of the next litter had reached the saleable age. That, too, was a useful cycle of events and it helped tremendously towards keeping the family economics in a reasonably safe state, but only just!

Each farmer had to have the best bonhams or the best pigs at the fair, and when a tangling session between seller and potential buyer was concluded, a session in which down-right abuse, very patent lies and split-the-difference tactics all played their part, the deal had to be clinched in the most convenient pub, usually the one most noted for keeping the best drop. After that first drop the worries of the day were over, the worries of many other days as well.

For the wherewithal to pay the rent and rates was safely in pocket, the rent and rates that were nightmares of so many struggling farmers in the hard times of two generations ago.

The cattle fair was different only in the sense that the springer or the heifer or two which the farmer had for sale was driven to the fair on foot, not taken by horse-and-crib as the bonhams and pigs were. The bargaining was just the same as before except that the farmer found in the cattle-dealer an even more accomplished adversary than the pig-buyer had been.

From the start it was a case of one sharp tongue pitted against another, one tough-as-teak business man tangling with another, and neither prepared to give away a soft penny. Both of them knew exactly how far the other was prepared to give or take so that almost before the bargain had begun each of them knew how it would finish. But the ritual of buying and selling had to be observed to satisfy the ego of both parties. The farmer who sold for too little or the jobber who paid too much was always an object of scorn.

The cattle sold and marked, the ticket handed over to the seller, they were then driven over to the railway. The toll was paid on the way to the station, one of the few remaining remnants of the Big House regime. The cattle safely in the appropriate truck, the farmer could then collect his money from the jobber, and with money in his pocket, a rare enough experience for him, he felt like a lord. He was, at times, foolishly capable of acting like one. That was after the first drop had soothed away his tensions and dispelled the spectre of both his debts from the past and his doubts for the future. These spectres, he knew, would be back in more hideous forms on the morrow. But this was today and sufficient for the morrow the evils thereof!

Home Fare

What was stirabout, and how was it made? The answer is that there was no fixed or universal way of making this wonderfully wholesome food. Yellow meal, first introduced into West Cork in the famine years of 1846 and 1847, was the basic ingredient of stirabout of all sorts, and only the other ingredients varied. Yellow meal came in ten stone meal bags, sometimes in twenty stone bags and it came in three grades, coarse, medium and fine. The fine variety was the most popularly used in stirabout.

On churning day, invariably the day before the local market at which the home-produced butter was sold, there was always a bountiful supply of lovely -slightly yellow butter-milk in each farmhouse. That was, of course, before the advent of the creameries, or the home-operated separator.

Butter-milk had a multiplicity of domestic uses. As well as being more pleasant to drink than new milk, and at least as satisfying to drink as thick milk—the variety that remained in the pans after the cream had been skimmed off—the butter-milk was the best of all beverages for the wetting of a cake for home consumption, the beautiful home-made brown George bread whose secret recipe only our mothers and grandmothers had.

Butter-milk had one other use, for the boiling of stirabout. While tastes might often have differed, for many stirabout eaters only the variety boiled in butter-milk was deemed as real stirabout. No other variety had the same body and fell short in the vital matter of taste and filling capacity, both of them urgent necessities in a generation when novelties were rare and luxuries rarer still. To many of us, stirabout was a luxury, and it tasted better than any of the genteel foods that have come to take its place. Pig's food, you say! Perhaps, but wholesome food as well, and as a certain grandfather used to say, perhaps with perfect truth: 'Many of those who came before you died for want

of enough of it!'

A first cousin to stirabout was what was colloquially known as Macroom oatmeal, an oatmeal fine as one-way flour and rather closely resembling it, except that one was made from oats, in those days black oats, and the other from wheat.

Macroom oatmeal made wonderful porridge, but for those with the stomach to take almost anything short of stewed nettles, and possibly even those, Macroom oatmeal was at its best raw and mixed into a quart basin of thick milk. Again, you say pig's food. Again I agree, if only the gustatory standards of 1979 are to be taken into account. But the standards of 1979 and 1919 are not quite the same. Neither are the palates.

With the crude diets of their time, how did it happen that most of our grandfathers grew into the giants of men they were when a mere six-footer would have been a *piosan*. How did so many of them live well into their eighties? It wasn't because of the refinement of their food. It wasn't because of the ease and leisure of their lives. It wasn't because of medical care; most of them never saw or needed to see a doctor from the day they were born to the day they died! What was it, then, that made them the straight-backed, stately men they were? They appeared to have the secret of perfect health, the secret of long life. What that secret was they carried down to the grave with them.

If the less fortunate one here and there suffered from pains or crippling of the back or hip, it was the result of a blast or fairy-stroke, never the result of extreme hardship neglect, frequent wettings and insufficient clothing. The blast could not be cured, and there was no escape from the fairy-stroke, in an age where men were as innocent as they were ignorant.

Yet with all their innocence and all their inherited ignorance, they were still nature's noblemen, clean-tongued, clean-minded, with nothing devious in their natures from

birth to death. What they took to be curses were prayers in disguise, and they were always uttered in Gaelic which was never far from the surface in any of them. *Mhuire, Mhuire! M'anam on diabhal! sceilimis ort! greadagh chugat! Scuirid to you!* or in a rare moment of something approaching the vulgar, *mo chac ort!* The name of the Lord was never less than reverently used. Slang was unknown to them and obscenities came into fashion only after most of them were dead.

Fairies were real to those grandfathers of ours as those of us realised who sat and listened to their never-ending fairy stories on a winter's night around a turf fire with a block of black oak to liven it up. These frequently repeated stories made up for the total absence of reading material, and the time came when they believed them as their grandchildren did.

Big families were the norm then and later. Their philosophy was simply founded on the faith. 'The Lord will look out for His own! The Creator never made a mouth but He also made something with which to fill it! God is good!'

There was a natural shrewdness behind the innocence and the ignorance. The not very comely daughter must be a teacher where her salary ensured her of suitors galore. The less brainy son was to be the farmer, where, in their simple way, they believed brains to be less necessary than brawn and where natural intelligence would be entirely wasted. The tall, strong son was for the police, the lazy lad of the family was for America where he would later make his own fortune and theirs as well. The quiet, studious youth 'might be a priest, with God's help'. It was all planned out in simple minds and the strange thing was that a good deal of it came to happen.

The term home-cured bacon might confuse a few young people. Here also we touch upon the territory of a rustic expert, the man who came to kill the pig and who came a night or two later to save the pig, an operation invariably done after the ordinary day tasks had been completed.

The pig itself was either fattened on the farm or else bought specially at the local monthly pig-fair. It was required to be at least two hundred pounds in weight, with good back and well-rounded quarters. When the poor pig was ready the local expert was called in. What normally happened then we leave unrelated although it can be very vividly recalled. Many of us youthful rustics got our first glimpse of blood and violent death on these occasions, and our sympathies were always on the side of the pig, for all it was worth to him.

The pig, by the way, was always a barrow rather than a sow, for what reason nobody seemed to be very certain. It was one other custom which had probably come about by chance but which was rarely ignored.

Immediately the pig was dead it had to be scraped, and to make the scraping more effective the entire carcass had to be immersed several times in a large barrel of scalding water, to soften the bristles as a man does before shaving. The scraping was done with the sharpest knives available and it was continued until the entire carcass was as smooth as the proverbial baby's bottom. We have all heard of hairy bacon but few of us ever saw it in those days of our youth.

The scraping done, the carcass was lifted into the farm kitchen—the killing had been carried out just outside the backdoor. A light crowbar was inserted between the sinews of the pig's hind *cruibins* and the entire carcass raised to the kitchen ceiling where two horse-shoes had been nailed, one opposite the other on adjacent cross joists supporting the ceiling. Later these ceased to exist in that primitive form as we became more modern in our outlook and methods.

Suspended by his heels, the pig hung head-down until he almost touched the floor beneath. A pan or keeler was placed in the floor under the carcass to catch the blood which still dripped. To help in this necessary process of dripping a large, well-washed raw potato was pushed into the animal's mouth and left there until the salting operation

began two nights later.

The opening of the pig came next. That also can be left unrelated, beyond the fact that the younger male members of the household waited anxiously for the bladder to be removed and handed to them. That bladder, after a day or so curing in the smoke up the kitchen chimney, could be blown up by sticking a goose-quill into the *scrugal* and blowing with all your power. Those bladders provided for many a country youth his first football and even though they were much too frail to last long even when kicked with bare feet, they supplied us with innocent fun.

Two days after the killing came the salting. A bag of very coarse salt had been purchased in town, and a large, thoroughly scoured barrel (usually a forty-gallon barrel) was placed very carefully in position in the cubby-hole under the stairs just behind the back door.

The carcass was cut down by severing the sinew through which the crowbar had been run and it was laid on the kitchen table. You moderns can shudder all you like at that thought, but on the kitchen table it was laid, the same table on which the dead grandfather or grandmother of the house had been laid out for their waking. That table served a succession of purposes in those days: the scholars did their homework on it, their mother did her baking, ironing and sewing on it, the *scoraiochters* played their games of '35' on it the entire winter through, Mass was said on it the morning of the Stations, and yet its well-scrubbed white-deal top was always clean.

Cutting up the pig had to be done in exactly the right way with each slab of meat from the head to the *cruibins* extracted in the best recognised fashion. As each piece was cut out it was placed in a keeler of salt on the kitchen settle and the salt rubbed in with care and vigour, not merely on the surface but into every crevice that could be seen. The whole pig could be spoiled if the salting was not properly done. With so many mouths depending on that meat for

most of the year to come, the salting was never done other than expertly.

Piece by piece the freshly salted meat was placed in position in the meat barrel behind the door. When the last piece was in, the barrel was covered over with extreme care, hermetically sealed as far as it was possible to do that with the rude fittings of the time. A check was kept for several days afterwards to ensure that the pickle was rising. If the pickle was rising everything was going well.

After a full fortnight in the pickle the meat was fully cured. Then piece by piece it was taken out of the barrel and small holes cut on each piece into which those long rows of nails on the joists of the kitchen ceiling were to go, for there was to be no hiding away of this precious meat. Every last piece of it hung from its own nail on the kitchen ceiling, a guarantee that nobody would go hungry that winter, nobody in the house nor in the labourer's cottage on the farm.

What with the open kitchen hearth and the frequent vigorous blowing of the fire-machine near the hob, all the smoke didn't always go up through the chimney, wide and yawning though it was. A fair part of the smoke and possibly a part of the finer particles of the turf-ashes as well, found their inevitable way on to the bacon on the ceiling. But nobody saw anything wrong about that, nor, indeed, anything wrong about the fact that before the bacon was finally finished its colour had often changed from fresh pink to sooty black. It was, in fact, the original smoked bacon, and no bacon ever since has tasted half as well or half as natural. Soot, smoke, ashes and all, it was great food for hungry bellies, while it lasted, when it was boiled in a pot-full of white common cabbage or swede turnips it was eaten at the kitchen table, top-heavy at dinner-time with floury, laughing Champions.

The meat was strong, but so was the home-made butter, the bastable bread, the thick milk, the stirabout; and those who grew up on them were strong indeed.

the following Sunday, when the entire cycle is repeated. Like the towering of a shot grouse, there is a perfectly logical explanation for the lodging of a ferret. As he gets older he gets more adept at cornering his rabbits in the burrow, usually deep down towards the bottom. The cornered rabbit puts up no more defence than the captured hare does when he is being savaged by the dogs. The rabbit and the hare alike simply squeal until they are dead. You can hear that squeal deep down in the borrow and you know immediately that another lodge is at hand. The ferret, unlike the dogs which ignore the hare once he is dead, sucks every last drop of blood out of the carcass. Then, replete with blood, he settles down to sleep on top of the still-warm carcass. While he sleeps in warmth and comfort you wait outside. While the ferretting phase of life never actually passed away, a time came as you grew a little older when another and newer interest pushed it partially aside. All your young life you had been watching shooting parties in and around the wood, three brakes and a turf-bog from where you lived. You had listened with ever-growing longing to the yell of the beaters, for these were landlord shooting parties to which only the gentry were invited. When you were old enough to be a beater yourself you joined the ranks of the mighty even if at a very humble level. You learned to shout 'Cock-out' with the most stentorian of them, but unlike most of the others, whose interest in the day's work was merely mercenary, you watched and noted and learned, saw where a cock got up, noted the kind of spot where a cock might be expected, learned by studied observation how he flew and how he made the most advantageous use of every tree and bush to cover his flight. There is no tactician on this wide earth more expert than an escaping woodcock, and there is no other game-bird that can plunge such deep and abiding tentacles into your soul. If, of course, you are born with the soul of a future game

lungs that never needed the aid of a loud speaker, he tore heading towards the Big Marsh, murder in his blood, I am convinced. Luckily the offending huntsman didn't wait to argue the point with the four-pronged pike. Instead he beat a hasty undignified retreat, and we never saw the same man back in that or any other neighbouring marsh again. Something sentimental went out of our simple lives when that little hare was killed, an Arkle among hares, of the type that cannot be reproduced. Soon afterwards our attention was attracted towards ferretting rabbits. Where the ferret came from is not entirely certain but he gave us many a pleasant Sunday for months, monitored, as he was, by two less than half-bred farm-dogs who learned to develop a strange affinity towards him. The two were as useful as twice their number of rabbit-nets, and between the ferret, the dogs and ourselves, we made fair inroads into the rabbit population of the district, until, that is, the ferret grew old and tired, and turned into a lodger. If you have never been a ferreter and if you have never waited in a bleak winter evening at the side of a fence or under a rock for a lodged ferret to re-emerge from some rabbit-burrow, the virtue of patience has never been fully developed in your soul. You can listen at the mouth of the burrow until your ears whistle with the sheer intensity of your concentration; you can pull down fences by the ton, as we so often did to the annoyance of so many neighbouring farmers, but you will never get that lodging ferret out until he decides to come out, by which time you are a fit subject for pneumonia. When the ferret finally emerges you grab him like a lost treasure, push him into his special box, charge cross-country homewards, sit and willing to eat not only the legs from under the table, but also the table itself and everything on it. You swear never to take out that bloody ferret again—until

shot.

Those early days in that old wood where we had many a run from an over-zealous keeper who disputed our right to collect the Christmas holly, planted in us not merely the seeds of the craze for game shooting which has never fully faded, but also the instinct which soon made some of us realise that we were by nature born poachers. To that old wood we turned on the rare free day when 'The Boss' was at a fair or market and the rusty old single-barrel over the clevy in the kitchen was no longer under parental observation.

You sneaked towards that old wood, accompanied by the same two mongrels that combined cattle-dog with watch-dog with rabbit-dog and cock-dog. They were never cock-dogs, of course, nor did they pretend to be. But being rabbit-dogs they became cock-dogs by accident rather than design, for it follows in the never-failing precepts which govern the laws of nature that rabbits and woodcock very often shelter in the same type of cover, often in the same cover, and when your rabbit-dog beats a bush for his rabbit very often he flushes your woodcock as well.

In that old wood beyond the brakes and the turf-bog I learned the ways of woodcock. It was in that old wood that I shot my first-ever woodcock on a bleak Christmas day while the family were at midday Mass and I was minding the house. The old Keeper had gone to midday Mass, too. Hadn't I heard the crack of his axle leaving his house an hour before! The family gone, the Keeper absent, the old gun looking invitingly from its perch above the clevy, a half-box of No. 6 Kynoch cartridges hidden behind the second-last of the NKM toffee-boxes that stood in military precision under the settle, the dogs thumping expectant tails on the flag floor—they all combined to constitute a temptation and a challenge that could not be resisted.

So to the wood I went, complete with the boss's hob-nails, the boss's old rusty gun, his carefully hidden cart-

ridges, and his cattle-dogs, but, unfortunately, without his blessing. The time-limit was one hour before the spuds had to be put on to boil for dinner. So a maximum of profit had to be crammed into that short space of sixty miserable minutes. There was a corner over there where a cock had often been put up for the guns of the gentry in those beating days and it was worth a try, well worth it, in fact. The dogs had barely gone into the covert, propelled, it seemed, by two wildly wagging tails, when out he flashed, the most wonderful woodcock of my life. Straight into my face he flew, the sort of shot that the most accomplished experts are almost certain to miss. I never knew if I raised the single-barrel or aimed. It seemed to fire itself. If I fired at all it was defensively but by some remote chance the woodcock fell stone dead.

Athletics had little part in our activities in those early days although we heard stories from our elders, probably embroidered in the telling, about great men like 'The Ross-carbery Steam-Engine' Den O'Leary, the mighty Jer Cotter, the weight-thrower, and that amazing man in town who could straighten two half-hundred weights in each hand. Those stories awakened our interest. Later when we made an early acquaintance with *Our Boys* and *Ireland's Own*, both of which ran enthralling serials about our great athletic giants of the past that first interest soon developed into a phobia.

Flapper sports meetings became popular in those patriotic-minded years between 1917 and 1920, meetings that are remembered now more because of the cycling party of British Military which always attended them than for anything else. One such meeting is particularly remembered above all the rest, the meeting at Kilnadur on the church holiday, 29 June 1918. On that day a military aeroplane approached from the south-east, swung low over the sports-field and landed, by necessity or by design, we never knew which, in a wheat field four hundred yards away. It was the

been able to do so. A bird equipped with a long, probing beak, his food was found in soft veins and water-logged bogs which are few and very far between these days, and so are snipe. Where one could flush twenty snipe years ago one would be lucky to find one or two today. The number is decreasing year by year as marshes and wet ground continue to disappear from the face of the earth.

The woodcock, the prince of all Irish game birds, has suffered as much as his lesser cousin, the snipe, by the changing countenance of our countryside. Like the snipe, he is also equipped with a long beak for probing into the very same kind of ground to find its food, ground that is now no longer generally available to either of them. Unlike the snipe, however, which always preferred to rest on the same sort of ground in which he found his food, the woodcock found his favourite habitat in Sally clumps on the edges of bogs and marshes or else in heavy cladars of furze bushes in little frequented rough-lands.

Clumps of Sally are rarer today than marshes, and cladars of furze bushes are little more than a memory of the past. Agricultural progress put paid to them as it has done to so many old fences and so much wet land. We oughtn't to complain, probably, but when you spend a long, searching day over what used to be the best woodcock ground in your native parish and find a cock or two where you often found thirty, you cannot very well not complain. You feel that you, at least, are one of the victims of progress.

How many song birds do you see in our well-tilled lands these days, those lovely little friends of yours in the days of youth? How many robins do you see in your hedges and fences? Where have they all gone and why? The little cheeky, smirking robin to which you offered bread-crumbs outside the backdoor is rarely outside that door now. The blackbird that you plotted against and laid your fit-hole to capture long ago is scarcely there any more for your grandsons to study and love. The thrush, the Caruso of them all,

is now as rare as human Carusos in a pop age. The lark seems to be a relic of other times, or could it be that we have lost the ability to hear him or the will to travel to those parts where he might still be found?

What has happened to them all? One hears about seed-dressings of the last decade and of other things allegedly fatal to the bird life of the country. If the explanation for the clearly dwindling bird numbers lies here, surely there must be a remedy somewhere? Those who invented effective seed-dressing must also have the ability to invent something which might be less lethal to the feathered friends of our community.

The corncrake, a wonderfully welcome summer visitor of another generation, no longer comes, the victim, we are assured, of the silage-cutter and the combine-harvester. There wasn't a hayfield, a meadow or an oat field in early summer that hadn't its corncrake chorus in my youth, and while we seldom saw him we learned to love him and to look forward to his arrival at least as much as we looked forward to the arrival of the cuckoo and the swallow.

The corncrake was more your friend than ever the elusive cuckoo was. While the cuckoo was a flitting voice heard only at a distance and then only indistinctly, the corncrake was near you, all around you, by night as well as day, for his unmusical but strangely impelling song was as much of the late night and of the early morning as it was of the bright sunshine of high noon. Once one corncrake raised his rasping voice in one meadow or hayfield, a dozen of his kind rasped back at him, a cacophony of raucous sound that turned to sweet music the more you listened to it, a music that nobody ever hears today, and which, we suspect, only the older folk among us miss.

Why has the grouse almost disappeared from our hills and mountains, the grandest natural grouse grounds that the Creator ever made; Where have the partridges gone, those chicken-like creatures which our grandfathers told us

were as plentiful in their younger days as winter starlings? You never saw one in your own time and you often wondered why they had died out and gone. You were one of those who tried to reintroduce them, quite unsuccessfully, some years ago. Your home country was, it seemed, no longer partridge land for a reason which you do not know.

Roads, Woods, The Bandon

As with the fields and one-time marshes, so also with the roads. Sixty years ago, and later, all the roads of West Cork were exactly as our ancestors had known them since time immemorial; dirt-track car-passages at best, pock-marked, stone-strewn, dangerously rough ways at worst, ankle-deep in dust in summer, equally ankle-deep in mud and muddy water in winter and far into spring.

Originally the roads had been constructed for the slow sedate age of horse-cart travel and shanks mare. Little width was required as long as two carts could pass each other. Bends mattered little with slow-moving traffic when nothing was ever likely to move at more than a dozen miles per hour. A smooth surface also mattered little in the days before springs were known when people accepted the severe jolting of common horse-cart transport.

In the early construction of roads engineering was of minimum significance compared with the importance of saving land. When a straight road meant encroaching on good fields then the field was spared and the road followed a more circuitous route. For the past sixty years local councils have been expending ever-increasing sums of public money in an effort that has not entirely succeeded in removing the worst of the bends. In those efforts the traditional significance of saving land no longer matters. The predominant demand is for wider, straighter, safer roads, irrespective of cost either in money or in land—although both commodities have been at least ten times more valu-

able in our later lifetime than they were during the lifetime of our great-grandfathers. Most of the roads were then converted into some semblance of what they now are from the miserable cross-country tracks that they had been for hundreds of years.

I remember the roads of the early quarter of the present century. I remember what they were like in summer and in winter; how they were maintained even in the bare minimum of repair which the transport of the time required. I recall the man sitting at the road-side breaking stones from dawn to dark with a special hammer spreading those same broken stones, rough-edged and uneven, over the patches of pot-holes which could be seen everywhere; the man cleaning the water-tables with a shovel; the man boiling a black kettle over a furze-stump fire in a sheltered corner on the side of the road. I remember him well, the old road-contractor of the past, a man who knew us all as we passed by and probably knew our business just as well as he knew ourselves.

That road contractor had the responsibility for the care of a given stretch of road, under the supervision of a surveyor, as he was called, who paid him frequent and unannounced visits to ensure that the stones were broken and spread, the pot-holes filled and the water-tables kept open. It was the archaic system of road-keeping which had remained unchanged since the roads had become public roads under the Municipal acts of the early 1830s. It changed only in our own time, in the 1920s, when 'Direct Labour' was introduced to take its place. In West Cork the transition from the traditional to the modern was not accepted with enthusiasm at the beginning, for conservatives by nature as most of us are, we do not believe absolutely in being the first by whom the new is tried, although many of us have little objection to being the last to lay the old aside.

In the 1920s greater road-changes occurred. The principal main roads were rolled and tarred, a slow and by no

served a lifetime of apprenticeship. To watch him hack away non-stop from end to end of the ridge you would have thought that the work was no more than child's play—until you tried it yourself—and then you soon found out—it was the next thing to impossible to leave the surface of the ridge as smooth behind you as the workman had done.

With the ridge hacked the time had come for the sticking of the sciollans. A necessary preliminary to this work was to fashion a pouch from a half-sack meal bag by tying one corner of the mouth of the bag to the corresponding corner of the bottom of the bag with a length of rope in such a way that when you hung the rope around your neck you had a very serviceable pouch into which you put the sciollans for planting. That done, you got an ordinary spade, a well-worn one for preference, the easier to cut its way through the sods underneath and so allow a clear passage for each sciollan down to the manure beneath.

The sticking was another skilled occupation, but one much more easily mastered than the ploughing or hacking. It consisted of putting a row of five sciollans across the width of each ridge, with each cut of five sciollans approximately one foot from the one before it. The job presented no great difficulties once you had got into the hang of timing the plunge of the spade and the cast of the sciollan to accommodate each other. When you pushed the spade forward, having sunk it down to the bucan in the ridge, you had made the hole into which the sciollan was to be put. When you succeeded in pitching each sciollan into its own hole each time without missing and without having to bend in any way to do it, you were then a qualified sticker.

The sticking didn't complete the planting process. The holes made by the spade, each now containing its own sciollan, had to be closed carefully for two reasons. The first was so that no crow, the farmer's worst enemy in those days, could steal the sciollan. The second was to keep the tender sciollan from being touched by frost which would

render it useless for growing, and there were as many frosts then in early March as there are now. Early March was the time for sticking and any farmer who hadn't the spuds down by St Patrick's Day was a *fuar-the*.

Closing of the holes was done with a *fairichin* and if you have never seen or used one, your agricultural education is not complete. It was a simple construction, a short block of timber, a foot long at most, with a hole for the handle half way along its length. The handle was firmed into the hole just as the handle of a course brush is firmed. That done you had the ideal medium for closing the holes and the potatoes were duly sat.

Three weeks later came the first earthing before the young stalks had begun to peep over the ground. A furrow plough was used to dig the earth in the furrows between the ridges. It was always drawn by one horse and it was calculated that three runs of the plough, which had no board, along each furrow was sufficient. All available help was then recruited to shovel the earth out of the furrows carefully on the ridge, each worker covering half the ridge at each side of him until the field was done.

Two weeks later the stalks appeared and two weeks after that the second earthing was done. This was similar to first earthing only you now had to be careful with the earth so as not to smother any of the weaker stalks in the ridge.

If you were a careful farmer you put out the first spray, a solution of blue-stone and washing soda, before the stalks blossomed. You put out your second spray a fortnight after they had blossomed and in certain weather conditions you put out a third spray in early August. Each spray was done with the old type of budget spraying-machine which imposed upon you what was probably the hardest work of all attached to the growing of the potato crop.

In mid-August you eventually got the smell of blight which indicated that the period of growth for your potato was almost over, that typical smell that mystified, then

terrified, our forefathers in the famine years of 1845, 1846 and 1847, and indeed, many times after that. The difference was that you got the smell in August and they got it in June when the infant spud was only a *criochan*.

Digging potatoes grown in ridges allowed no ploughing, no potato diggers as later became common in drill-grown potatoes. You planted your potatoes with the spade. You dug them with the spade—a slow, wearying task for the men, even for the best diggers among them, and a cold, unwelcome task for the youngsters, girls as well as boys, who on unpleasant October evenings after school, had to tuck in and pick what ridges of potatoes the men had dug since their early after-breakfast start. You had been barefoot at school and you were barefoot when you began your hours long stint of picking. By the time the last potato of the day was picked, your hands were pinched and cold from the damp earth and your feet, tough though they had become after months of bootless living, were as cold and miserable as your hands.

We earned our keep in those days but everyone else earned it the same way. You became quick at segregating the white potato from the black, the half-*criochan* from the out-and-out *criochan*. You left the black spud behind you on the ground and also the out-and-out *criochan*—they were picked later and boiled for the pigs. The white potatoes were picked into kitches or panniers and when each pannier was full it had to be taken to the pit to be emptied, and filled, and emptied again in ever recurring sequence until the work was done.

Those panniers, too, were little works of rural art. They were made with willow or sally rods, beautifully interwoven. A ketch produced by a real expert was so durable that it was capable of lasting for a number of years. I doubt if the art of making panniers has survived. I have not seen one for several years past, so it might well be that this useful touch of rural life, like so many others, died out with earlier

generations.

The potato pit was ever a source of wonder and admiration for those who could never make one themselves. A well-made pit started as a shallow trench somewhere in the potato field. When the day's digging and picking was placed on it, the potatoes were neatly traced up into a long narrow ridge-like pile, tapering evenly from ground level to a sharp edged top. They were carefully covered over with straw, or more often with *luachar*, the kind of fine litter which grew and still grows, in every marsh in West Cork. Then the real pit-making began, the art of earthing the pit, with shovelful after shovelful of loose earth being piled eight inches deep over the potatoes, the two sides of the pit being built up at the same time until they met at the top in a perfect edge. Then the whole pit was patted smooth with the back of the shovel and your potatoes were safer than they could ever be in a house. You removed them later when you wanted to sow your winter wheat in the field out of which you had dug your potatoes. It was a process that never varied, not, at least, while that generation of West Cork farmers lived to carry it on.

The Oats

Oats came close to the potato as the most popular crop with black oats not yet giving place to the white variety which came into fashion some years later. Oats were generally far preferred to barley, which was later to supersede them totally.

The seed sower, or corn drill, had not reached into the remoter areas sixty years ago and the scattering was always done by hand. In this sphere also you had the specialist, for while most farmers and farm labourers were competent scatterers there was the occasional individual who was recognised as superior, who scattered the seeds evenly, who never varied his swing or broke his stride and never left a

blank or covered the same ground twice. The scatterer is one other man who no longer exists in West Cork, I'm afraid. He went out with the advent of the corn-drill and has never come back.

The preparation for the corn crop cannot have changed very much in sixty years. What has changed almost out of recognition is the type of grain sown and the harvesting. The first real change came when the scythe replaced the reaping-hook. Then the horse-drawn reaping machine replaced the scythe, and that in its turn was replaced by the reaper-and-binder, which in the non-stop evolution of things, was duly replaced by the combine-harvester. That modern monster, while it has made life so much easier, has also done much towards wiping out for ever so many of the old arts of farming, wiped out, too, the very attractive social occasion that made the cutting and threshing of the corn one of the high spots of the rural year.

Gone is the art of binding, of stook-making at the heel of the evening, of stack-making in many sizes from the humble *dugadan*, or hand-stack to the more imposing haggard-stack. Gone, too, is that ever-popular function, the day of the threshing, and with it has gone the event which lent for so long so much colour and enjoyment to country life. Here, too, the process of evolution has been progressive, starting with the day when the flail was ousted by the horse-worked threshing machine. This comprised a drum and a pot, turned by four horses, two at each end of the long shaft that radiated out from both sides of the pot. The revolving pot attached to the drum by a long spindle, supplied the motive power which caused the drum within the drum to rotate at terrific speed, threshing each sheaf in turn as it was fed in by a special operator well acquainted with this dangerous and exacting work.

The horse-machine threshed the corn but didn't winnow it, that is, remove the chaff from the grain, a special arrangement which suited the conditions of the times admirably.

Barns were almost unknown in those days and the oats were stored in a specially-prepared part of the haggard. The *siogog* was probably the most intricate of all the older rural constructions. Perfectly circular in shape, it was built up to a height of about five feet with nothing more than loosely-twisted *sugan* ropes made out of the newly threshed straw. It was topped with a covering of straw, laid carefully in a way which ensured that no rain could find its way through to the grain inside. The completed structure was the picture of perfect symmetry, and the one man in each townland who was capable of shaping a *siogog* or *doimhineog* as it sometimes called, was really a man apart.

The *siogog* disappeared when the grain-barn came into popular use and the horse-machine was ushered out by the original steam-engine, a cumbersome unwieldy machine which, rather strangely, predated the tractor-type threshing engine. The steam engine, perhaps because of its very size and imposing appearance, had about it a glamour which its successor, the tractor thresher, could never emulate. The whistle with which the steam engine always heralded the beginning and the end of work in each haggard made it tremendously popular with the younger generation who would have loved to blow that whistle but were rarely permitted to do so. What they were permitted, even compelled, to do was to draw barrel after barrel of water from some neighbouring stream or spring to keep up the steam while the threshing was in motion. Or as they grew a little older, they had to get on top of the thresher itself and cut the binders for the man whose task was to feed the thresher. Later still, as their muscles grew apace, they had to take a pike and help with the piking of the straw.

For all its glamour, the steam engine had one very considerable draw-back. In the poorly built roads of the time, many close to a bog, it was often unable to travel without sinking. This sinking was so common that it contributed in no small way towards the eclipse of this majestic machine

and its replacement by the humbler but more serviceable tractor thresher. This, in one form or another, remained the threshing medium in West Cork until the combine appeared on the scene some twenty years ago.

In pre-combine days, making the rick was a particular art on threshing day. A foundation was laid down with all the care that might have been given to laying the foundations of a new dwelling-house. As the straw emerged from the mouth of the thresher, it was piked by the three strongest men in the haggard on the rapidly growing rick. Here it was fitted and tenderly patted into place by men on the rick, six of them usually, the recognised rick-makers of the locality, each man a perfectionist who took a personal pride in his work and who never laid a careless or badly placed pike of straw.

What the secret of their remarkable art might have been we of the younger generation never knew and never troubled very much to discover. They talked a rick-making jargon between themselves which was quite unintelligible to us. 'Keep the middle packed' was one of their invariable precepts for rick-making or corn-stacking before the threshing. How keeping the middle packed was going to help we did not know or understand then, but we can now in our mature years, make a reasonably accurate guess.

As the rick grew its sides were so constructed that both bulked outwards in perfect balance with each other until one with an uneducated eye for the work thought that the whole edifice must surely slip away and fall. It never did, of course, and as one of the best makers once assured us, 'it never will as long as you keep the middle well packed.' It was some brand of engineering genius, entirely unconscious perhaps, but it was never known to fail.

When the maximum girth was achieved the work of drawing in the rick began, a steady balanced process with both sides being drawn in at exactly even angles and never a sop put astray on either side. With a quantity surveyor's

exactitude they judged how rapid the drawing-in had to be so that the very last pike on top of the completed rick corresponded with the very last sheaf to come through the thresher. If it was guess-work it really worked. If it was judgment, it was sheer genius. One way or the other, there was never too much nor too little straw to finish off the rick. Just enough, and anything more or less would have been a reflection on the qualifications of the six rick-makers.

As the rick advanced in height the work of the pikers got more and more difficult. When it became impossible to reach the level of the rick from the ground, a ladder was placed against the end of the rick. One man stood on a rung half way between ground-level and the top of the rick. Each successive pike of straw was passed up to him by the ground-crew and he passed it on to the top of the rick to a man who, in turn, passed it along the top to the man who would eventually lay it in place. The whole exercise was a model of team work, everything running smoothly as clock-work until some piker on the ground, anxious to show off his own strength and at the same time to raise a laugh at the expense of the man on the ladder, handed him a pike of straw too heavy for him to handle in his precarious perch. If he allowed that pike of straw to drop back to the ground, or worse still, if it pulled him off the ladder with it, he was in disgrace. It was all in good fun, of course, for laughter was always part of these occasions, and if there was some horseplay too when the boss wasn't looking (the boss being the man who owned the haggard) that was no more than part of the high good humour of the day.

Loop of Straw

As the rick reached its neatly pointed apex it had to be tied with long, closely twisted sugans, made by letting the straw fistful by fistful into a rapidly lengthening rope which was

normally twisted by one of the younger men present. The sugan was started by making a loop of straw around a stick, somewhere over a foot in length. This stick was twisted hand-over-hand left to right (never right to left) while the feeder fed his fistfuls of straw into the receiving end of the growing rope and the twister backing away at each twist added new length to the rope. With two, three, even four sugans being made at the same time by different teams of feeders and twisters many a race developed to find who finished first.

The sugans were rolled into balls, shaped for some reason like rugby balls. As the rick was finally topped a sugan was placed over it and the ends dropped down on either side where they were securely tied so that none of the straw on top of the rick could be blown off by the wind. Pike by final pike was placed in position, sugan after sugan was tied, in the end the entire rick looked what it was, a model of the rick-makers art, narrow of base, wide of bulge, knife-edge of top, straight and balanced as a church-spire, the work of a team of very humble men who could not explain to you the source of their own genius, and never tried to do so.

The combine has probably brought with it its own concomitant arts, but it has been the means of killing off so many of the arts in which our older generations excelled that one finds it difficult to balance the financial values of the new against the cultural values of the old. Against, among other things, 'the time' that so often followed on the night of the threshing and to which everybody looked forward so keenly. 'The time' is gone for ever and very little has come to replace it.

The Winnowing

When the winnowing of the wheat and oats began in spring the *siogogs* had to be stripped and opened. One of the

pleasures of life was to watch for the rats, or mice, as they scampered for safety out of the *siogogs*. On such occasions rat mortality was high, what with agile youngsters and a couple of canny farm dogs which had been trained by successive seasons of rat hunting.

Did the rats and mice spoil the grain? Not very much, and if they did nobody was ever known to have died, of Weil's disease or of anything else, as a result. The whole thing was but one small cog in the wheel of living on a farm in those rather primitive days.

The winnowing was in itself a highly important and thoroughly specialised part of farm life sixty years ago, and the method of performing it probably hadn't changed in a century or more. It was a relic of the times when the threshing of corn and wheat was done with flails: two five-foot sticks tied securely together at one end by raw-hide thongs, one stick, the handle part, being held in the hand and swung swiftly around the labourer's head to give the flail stick maximum momentum as it was brought down in full force on each successive sheaf of corn until every last grain had been flailed out of it.

Two flailers, even three at times, stood around the *lar* on which the sheafs were being threshed. (The Irish term *bualadh* must surely have originated here, the accepted old term for threshing.) Watching those men at work, each swinging his flail with power and speed, his eye eternally on the sheaf he was helping to flail, even the most uninitiated could not help but marvel at the timing and precision of the strokes. Never once was there a clash of flails or an ill-tuned stroke. Each flail got in its *bualadh* and its withdrawal movement exactly in time. The second flail hit exactly the same and the third completed its circuit just as the first was ready to take its next turn. It was a perfected rhythmical, closely co-ordinated performance which only experts could have achieved—almost as much a marvel as the mechanical marvel devised in 1916 when Fokker found a way of firing

bursts of machine gun bullets between the twin blades of the propellers of an aeroplane rotating at full speed.

The flails beat the grain and the chaff out of the ears of corn. Before the grain could be used for any one of several purposes the process of winnowing, that is, of separating the chaff from the grain, had to be carried out. It was very simply and successfully done by those who knew how to do it, and who had been doing it all their lives.

The bags of combined chaff and grain were brought to some exposed spot in or near the haggard on a windy day. A winnowing sheet, a twenty-foot square of meal-bags stitched together, was laid carefully on the ground. The winnower brought out the old brown *bodhran*, a contraption the size and shape of a sieve but made exclusively from sheepskin. He filled the *bodhran* with grain and chaff and tilted it into the wind. (It had always to be into the wind, as it had always to be a windy day.) With slow and steady movements he allowed a thin sprinkling to fall from the *bodhran*: not too much to defeat the purpose of the exercise, not too little to prolong the task unnecessarily.

To give added height to the fall of the grain he more often than not stood on a chair or an inverted kitch and so exposed the grain and chaff to the force of the wind for the maximum time. The wind itself did the rest. It blew away the chaff and the tailing, the lighter seeds that had been threshed with the oats from the weeds which had grown along with the corn. The oat itself, heavier by far than the rest, fell almost perpendicularly onto the winnowing sheet, as it was expected to do. Later the winnowed grain was gathered into bags, and it was ready for mill or market, or even for seed if required.

The process of winnowing survived the flail by at least two generations. When the horse-powered threshing machine eventually replaced the flail, the grain and the chaff still emerged from the drum together and were enclosed in the *siogog* awaiting the day of winnowing. The steam

engine arrived in the second decade of the present century, the tractor later. Both of them winnowed the grain as well as threshing it, as the combine does today. So the day of winnowing went out with the departure of the 'pot and drum' and one other rural art was lost. Flailing had been lost decades earlier, except in the case of the rare cottage dweller who still insisted on flailing his own quarter acre of corn as long as he was able to sow the oats and swing the flail. For some of these old labouring men had been slaves by necessity for so long that they had almost become slaves by choice in their later years.

The Hay and the Turnips

Close behind the potato and the corn came the hay in that distant age before silage was invented. Cutting the crop, turning it, grass-cocking it, re-cocking it, drawing it in, making the rick in the days before hay-sheds appeared in all their galvanised glory—it was part of the long, sunny days of summer long ago, all part of the pleasant but tiring task of saving the hay.

The rick like the straw rick, had to conform with very definite specifications.

It had to have everything that the straw-rick had, and much more. It had to be so tapered towards the top so that no drop ever got in. Its *cos* had to be pulled and trimmed until one got the impression that it had been shaved. Its sides bulged out over the *cos* with the perfect balance of a forty-shilling pot. The finished rick would have pleased the eye of Wren himself, in its perfect lines, its stately stand, its curves and dome-like finish. It was the work, not of any Wren, but of untaught, unread country men, mostly farm-labourers, who did their work in the only way they knew, and saw nothing unusual about it.

That rick of hay, like the shed-full of later years and the silage of more recent years, fed the farm animals during the

ensuing winter and spring months. The milch cows got their hay in the stalls, the horses in the mangers of their stables, the calves in their special outhouse, the heifers at the sheltered side of some field. The straw was used as complementary fodder to the hay, and care coupled with judgment had to be exercised to ensure that neither the hay nor the straw was gone before the end of April. The old lesson of the cow on Fool's Day was never far from any farmer's mind. They always treated the month of April with respect and reserve—but they made sure that they still had fodder in the ricks to the very end of the month.

The turnip, and the mangold too, meant more to West Cork farmers then than they do today. Sugar-beet has pushed them almost into oblivion, particularly the mangold which now seems to be as rare as the farm-horse. Both crops were planted probably in much the same way as the sugar-beet crop of today, with the same preliminary ploughing, harrowing, and cross-ploughing, except that it was all done by horse in the old days, and on a lesser scale. The opening of the drills must still be the same sort of process although done with modern machinery compared with the single-board and double-board plough of former years.

Possibly less farmyard manure is used these days and more artificial manures, but the returns in the old days were satisfactory enough without being extravagantly abundant. The farmer who had a fair supply of both these crops for his cattle in winter had little to fear. The turnips were pulped in a special pulper, sliced instead of pulped for dry cattle, pulped and mixed with crushed oats as a mess for the milch cows. The turnip was also an acceptable replacement for cabbage on the farmer's own dinner table where the ever-present potato, bacon and cabbage alternated with potato, bacon and turnip, all home-produced.

Two distasteful tasks always followed the growing of both turnips and mangolds, the thinning and the snigging. More often than not, thinning the turnips was done by the

youths of the family, after school in the early summer evenings and on Saturday, the one day of the week when the slavery of school gave place to the slavery of the turnip-field, the turf-bog or the potato-field, according to the demands of the season. Whether it was the turnip-field, potato-field, or bog, it was still slavery, but the turnip-field had a savagery all its own.

The thinning had to be done on your knees over which you had already secured a folded bran-bag, to protect the old working trousers as much as to protect yourself. You crawled at snail-pace along the drill from end to end of the field, frequently clutching in your hand a fistful of the withered *aiteann gaolach* furze which had been used as a base for the long dung that had been spread in the drill. It was an experience that you didn't relish then nor fully forget for the remainder of your life, but it was part of living and growing up on a farm and of course it did you no harm at all for all its nastiness.

The snigging or pulling of the turnips and mangolds was always done by hand. It was an autumn task after the potatoes had all been dug, picked and pitted, when the weather had already lost the touch of summer that had lingered on in September and taken on instead the tang and bite of the coming winter. The turnips, the mangolds too, were always wet and cold, their stumps rough and hard, and before you had properly started, your hands were freezing cold, your feet as well for you were usually barefoot. It was the way of things in those days, and at ten, or less, you became part of it whether you liked it or not. It was a hard apprenticeship for the life ahead, but it served its purpose.

The Turf

Turf is still fairly extensively cut in many parts of West Cork, but not to the same extent as in our grandparents' time, when, with the furze stump it was the main, almost

the only, source of fuel.

The production and drying of turf, shovel turf, that is, has changed little in the last half-century. The turf-bank is cleared, the *barr-shod* pitched into the cut-away bog. A turf-shovel has already been prepared by the simple expedient of cutting the two ears and the top off an ordinary farm shovel. This is a fair substitute for the more popular *slean* of the war years, more serviceable, in fact, than the *slean* in many of the bogs of West Cork in which *creathails* of old bog-oak are so frequently found. *Creathails* make magnificent firing when they are chopped up with a fir-hatchet and properly dried out. If you are lucky enough to be able to lay in a supply of fir, or bog-oak, you will require no fire-lighters to get your home fires burning.

If you use a *slean* for turf-cutting, you dig out each sod behind you as you dig out potatoes with a spade. If you use a turf-shovel you cut out each sod in front of you, and you take pains to shape each sod to a certain width and a certain thickness. You deposit the sods on to the bank where a spreader, always a boy, takes them on a pike and spreads them out with care and precision to dry. The turf is left in that position for a week.

Turning the turf came next and you did the turning either with a pike or by hand as you decided yourself. It was, in fact, one of the few things in life in which you had any choice. A week after the turning came the stooking another job for the young fellows in their after-school hours and on their Saturdays. The stooking was done in the simplest possible fashion. You stood two sods on edge, leaning against each other. You stood two more in line with them in the same way, then two more and two more after that, making a base of eight sods for your *stuchan*. Then you placed sods flat on top of those—as many sods as you could in the stook without making it so top-heavy that it might fall over. If it did so, you had to start all over again, and you very soon learned to avoid making extra work for

yourself.

Two young lads could, and often did, stook a fair-sized bank of turf in one day, even when allowing for the occasional outburst of devilment that seemed to be a natural thing in every bog, that outburst of *cadhran* pegging which often went beyond the realms of fun. You never forgot however, that himself might be calling to inspect progress at any time, and if he wasn't satisfied the results might not be too pleasant. In those days sons were never spoiled by sparing the rod.

The taking of the turf came later again, with the original *stuchans* being reconstructed so that three, even four, of them could be built into a bigger and broader stook, which was the final stage of the drying process. After that you came with a donkey and cart and drew out the turf to some spot where it could be reached by the horse and butt, for the donkey could travel where the horse could not, and bogs are, by their nature, wet and soft and giving under foot.

Butt-load by butt-load, the turf was drawn home and piled into a large rick—the old-fashioned turf-rick which was so much a part of every West Cork country home, farmer's or labourer's. The turf had to be benched at the edges to keep it in place and that benching, like the making of the *siogog* or the hay-rick, was highly skilled work, done only by somebody who had been doing it for years. Like the straw-rick and hay-rick, the turf-rick had to be drawn in as it grew higher so as to present as narrow a top as possible to the wind and rain. That top was very handily covered over with litter or briars, or both, and on top of this a thick layer of turf-bruss by way of rain deterrent. Your turf was safe then, dry and ready for the fire when you required it. This was called shovel-turf, the most widely used variety, but there was also the hand-turf, made in a different way, produced in a different shape, heavier than shovel-turf and considered to be very much better firing, second only to