

Parish Customs and Pastimes

CHAPTER

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In the old days, during the long winter nights, the only form of entertainment available to people was to visit the neighbours, or “go to cúirt” as they called it. There, sitting around the open fire, the events of the locality were discussed; births, marriages, deaths, weather, crops, fairs and markets. It was an occasion of great excitement if a stranger came into their midst - he might have some news from further afield.

As the night progressed, the talk usually turned to ghost stories which would send shivers down the spine, so that the nervous “cúirteoir” would be afraid to go home until someone accompanied him. There were tales of the “Cóiste Bodhair”- the Dead Coach. This coach was drawn by two headless horses and was driven by a headless coachman, and was usually encountered on a narrow, lonely road. You could never get past it no matter how you tried; you had to go into a gateway or climb over a ditch until it passed. Then there was the field where you came across the “Féar Gortha”- the hungry grass. It occurred on the spot where someone had died of starvation during the Famine. If you walked on that grass, you instantly collapsed with hunger. Therefore, it was always advised that you have a bit of oaten bread in your pocket, and you would recover immediately on eating it. Other

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fields had what was known as a “stray”. This was in a field where an unbaptised child was buried. If you happened to go into that field at night, you could not find your way out until cock-crow in the morning. You also had to turn your coat inside out.

The “Banshee” was a little old woman who sat under a lone bush combing her long white hair. There was such a bush beside Quinn’s house in Tristaun until it was blown down in a storm. She cried for people whose names began with ‘Ó’ or ‘Mac’. A large black dog was known to prowl the Tristaun road. He was supposed to be the faithful “Dog of Aughrim”. He had stayed by his slain master’s side for months after the battle until someone came and shot him. After that he roamed the roads at night howling at the moon.

Thomas Quinn was the local fortune teller. He could read your fortune from cards or from tea leaves. He had a cure for sties, using a thorn from a gooseberry bush to puncture the sty, thereby releasing the inflammation.

‘Julia’s Lough’ is at the end of Padraic Kelly’s land, across the stream from Templepark graveyard. According to folklore, it got its name from a man ploughing there on a Sunday. The horse, named Julia, took fright and both the horse and ploughman were drowned in the Lough

Card playing was a very popular pastime, the most popular game being “Twenty-Five”. Mick Larkin’s in Kilnahown, McKeigues’ in Somerset and Hobbs’ in Ardranny, were some of the houses where serious card games were played. Only good players were tolerated at those games. They usually played for big stakes; sometimes for turkeys, geese or even, a pig’s head.

The most popular entertainment of all was the country house dance. Nearly every house at some time had occasion to have a dance; at weddings, after the station, when the threshing

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was done or when the “Yanks” were home. There was no lack of musicians. Every village had someone who could play the accordion, the melodeon, the fiddle, the tin-whistle or the Jew’s harp. If all else failed, someone could lilt for the dancers. Sets were danced all night, until the morning sun started to peep in the window. In Walshe’s of Shanvoley, they used to lock the door so that no one could go home. Dances were also held in Coleman’s barn in Gorteenaveela. The barn is still there today. You were not allowed in there unless your boots were clean. Sonny Kelly was the regular musician; normally he would play the concertina.

McKeigues’ of Somerset was another venue, usually on Saturday nights. The musicians were Molly Doorey, fiddle; Pat Joe Costello, accordion; Tom Downey, accordion and Christy Higgins, melodeon. Quinns in Somerset usually held their dance on Sunday night and the “Mummers’ Spree” was always held in Fordes’, since they had the biggest kitchen. Paddy Burke’s in Gannaveen had regular dances in the old kitchen with the flagged floor. The dance usually took place when the father was out; he was not too keen on the dancing. Paddy remembers one night after a Station when they encouraged the father to go to Lawrencetown for a few drinks and when he was gone, the dance commenced. By the time he returned, he was nice and merry and he joined in the dancing, just as merrily as the young lads. The musician at that venue was usually Jack Colohan.

Sean Mullery’s in Kellysgrove was the venue for dances on Sunday nights and crowds came from all over the parish. The English soldiers who were stationed in Garbally at that time, used to come out to join in the dances. The parish priest, Fr. Fallon, did not approve of dancing and he often arrived on Sunday nights with his blackthorn stick, and cleared everyone from the house. The musicians in Kellysgrove were Thomas and Stephen Quinn and

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Tom Lyons. At Hurneys' in Tristaun, whenever a few young people came in, the gramophone was taken down and sets were hammered out. If there was no music available, Pat Hurney lilted sets, barn dances and waltzes until he ran out of breath.

Céilí dancing was in its heyday in the parish during the middle years of the 1900s. The Old School was the venue and the music was provided by the Clontuskert Céilí Band. The older people in the parish can vividly recall the many enjoyable nights which they experienced in that popular location. The members of the band were; Michael Costello, Pat Joe Costello, Tom Madden, Jackie Clarke, Pakie Brock, Gus Hanrahan, Sonny Kelly and Martin Higgins.

John Kenny's of Atticoffey was a notable house for an evening's entertainment. There was a shop there and the local farmers would leave their 'shopping' until their day's work was completed. When supplies had been purchased they retired to the kitchen, where they would chat, play cards or tell stories, and the 'woman of the house' would provide everyone with the customary cup of 'tae' before night's end. At the side of John Kenny's house and shop, there was a large barn. During harvest-time and spring, farmers brought corn there to be thrashed with flails. When the work was completed, willing volunteers cleaned and decorated the threshing floor for a 'Barn Dance'. Local musicians would gather and the dancing and 'craic' would go on into the early hours. Perhaps the most unexpected participant at one of these sessions was the legendary boxer, Jack Doyle, who called one evening with his film-star wife, Movita. Jack was a very handsome man, 6ft 4in tall, and a world-renowned boxer at the time. He treated all present to a few 'renditions' in his fine tenor voice, before leaving for a concert at Pollok's in Lismany. Pat Murray, who owned part of a land steward's house in Lismany, had converted the old laundry

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area with its tiled floor, into a dance hall.

The “American Wake” was a party given for someone who was going to America. In those times people did not come home for long periods and many never returned at all. Everyone came to the party and enjoyed a great night’s merriment until it was time to say goodbye. Tears were shed because people knew there was a strong possibility they would never meet again. That is why these occasions were referred to as “American Wakes”.

Around Christmas time, the Mummers caused great excitement. A group of lads and girls dressed up in outlandish costumes, wore masks and, accompanied by a musician, they called on all the houses in the locality and danced a set and sang a song. They were given a donation of money, a drink or a bit of Christmas cake. After Christmas they held a giant “spraoi” in someone’s house. The men paid two shillings each and the women were admitted free. Tea and loaf and jam and maybe a drink were provided.

“Pitch and Toss” was a game that was played during the summer evenings at nearly every crossroads where a few men congregated. The “Square” in Lismanny was the most popular venue. Any number from four to twelve pitched two pennies to a fixed marker, usually a stone. Whoever got nearest to the marker was the first to toss. He would put down two shillings and sixpence on the ground and the others subscribed until they had the same amount put down. All the pennies that were pitched were then tossed two at a time from a pocket comb. The ‘tossler’ won all the pennies that came up heads and he also won the five shillings on the ground, if he ‘headed’ more pennies than he ‘harped’. Otherwise, he had to forfeit the five shillings, which was divided between the subscribers to the first bet. Then all the pennies that were ‘harped’ went to the next ‘tossler’, the man who was second

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nearest the stone when pitching. Then the game started all over again.

Hurling and Camogie were the pastimes for the younger people during the summer. Sam Walshe's field beside the wash pond was the local 'sportsfield', which was kindly donated free, gratis and for nothing. When the sheep-washing season was over and the pond had been washed out and the water was clean again, all the lads usually went bathing when they had finished hurling. They undressed in the hill of furze nearby and went "skinny dipping", since nobody had swimming togs then. A local girl remembers a crowd of girls going down one evening and hiding all their clothes. When they came out of the river they had nothing to put on. Mrs. Walshe provided towels, sheets and bits and pieces of clothes to make them decent for going home.

Hallowe'en was another occasion in the yearly calendar when the youngsters dressed up and went from house to house seeking sustenance and if nothing was forthcoming, they played tricks on the household. As part of the 'divilment' on these nights, farm gates were taken down and erected somewhere else, doors were tied with ropes on the outside with water barrels left leaning against them. When the door was opened, all the water spilled in around the house. Chimneys were sometimes stuffed with a bag of straw and the unfortunate inhabitants were seen to emerge, coughing and spluttering from the acrid smoke. Without doubt, it would have been an easier and a wiser option for the householder to have treated the revellers when they made their initial request.