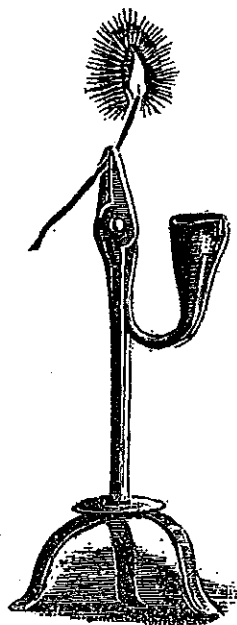


GWERIN

A Half-Yearly Journal of
FOLK LIFE

Edited by
IORWERTH C. PEATE.



Price: Seven Shillings and Sixpence net
Annual Subscription: Fifteen Shillings net post free

GEE AND SON LIMITED

DENBIGH

VOL. III, No. 2, 1960

CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|--|------|
| Editorial Notes | 1 |
| Calum I. Maclean, by STEWART F. SANDERSON | 3 |
| Irish Food before the Potato, by A. T. LUCAS | 8 |
| Oatbread of Northern England, by FRANK ATKINSON | 44 |
| Notes: | |
| Ritual at a Welsh Healing Well, by D. PARRY-JONES | 56 |
| 'Directions for makeinge Settinge Doggs', by D. B. HAGUE | 57 |
| New Books: | |
| McKay, J. G., <i>More West Highland Tales</i> | 60 |
| Dorson, R. M., <i>American Folklore</i> | 61 |

EDITORIAL NOTICES

GWERIN is published half-yearly in June and December. The ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION (including postage) is Fifteen Shillings, payable through your bookseller or direct to Gee & Son, Ltd., Publishers, Chapel Street, Denbigh, Wales.

Articles or Notes offered for publication should be sent to Dr. Iorwerth C. Peate, St. Fagans Castle, Nr. Cardiff, Wales, and a stamped addressed envelope enclosed. They should be typewritten. The Editor is not responsible for the opinions expressed by contributors.

Books for review should be addressed to Dr. Iorwerth C. Peate, Editor of *Gwerin*, St. Fagans Castle, Nr. Cardiff, Wales.

Irish Food Before The Potato

A. T. LUCAS

IRISH food presents a remarkable continuity of tradition from the time of the earliest documentary evidence down to the widespread adoption of the potato in the late 17th century.¹ Indeed, the introduction of the potato might be regarded as an ethnographical disaster, leading to a fearfully over-simplified existence for a very considerable fraction of the population with the consequent disappearance of many of the activities associated with the older methods of food production and a quite abnormal truncation of many aspects of Irish rural life in the 18th and 19th centuries. For the purpose of the present study, therefore, attention will be concentrated on the pre-potato period except when it is desirable to note instances of the continuation of the old order into later times. While some studies of particular aspects of Irish diet or of the diet of particular periods have been made,² no previous effort to view the subject as a whole has been attempted and the conclusions drawn in the course of the present article are, naturally, to some extent tentative.

CORN

Perhaps because we have accepted the conventions of epic poetry and heroic saga too wholeheartedly, we are inclined to believe that the staple of ancient Irish diet was meat, whether of domestic origin or the product of the chase, but the sober fact seems to be that from prehistoric times to the close of the 17th century corn and milk were the mainstay of the national food. There is no lack of direct proof of the cultivation of corn in ancient Ireland³: the bread and ale which are taken for granted in innumerable texts presuppose its growth, while the many references to ploughing constitute a similar proof, for the land was ploughed for no other crop, except, perhaps, flax. The indirect evidence is equally abundant.

¹ A summary of this article was delivered to Section H of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at its meeting in Cardiff in September, 1960.

² e.g. O'Sullivan, W. K. in O'Curry's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*. London, 1873, vol. 1, pp. ccclxii-ccclxxviii; Joyce, P. W. *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*. London, 1903, vol. 2, pp. 104-158; Ó Sé Mícheál, 'Old Irish Buttermaking', *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 54 (1949), pp. 61-67 and 'Old Irish Cheeses and other Milk Products', *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 53 (1948), pp. 82-87.

³ *J.R.S.A.I.*, vol. 74 (1944), pp. 124-145.

There seems to be little doubt that a water mill of a simple kind, with a horizontal wheel and with no gearing, was known in this country at least as early as the 7th century.¹ There are many references to mills in the early literature and the intricate disquisitions concerning them in the law tract *Coibnes Uscti*² show that the legal rights and rules connected with them had already been systematized as early, probably, as the 8th century.³ Later literature, such as the lives of the saints, is full of references to mills, while the Anglo-Norman documents dealing with lands and the registers of religious houses fairly teem with them. The overall impression is that the mill must have been one of the commonest features of the countryside. Excavated examples show that these mills called for a good deal of skilled carpentry and considerable labour in digging races to lead water, often for a long distance, from a stream and it is obvious that their erection was not to be undertaken lightly unless there were large amounts of corn to be ground.⁴ To this corn there must be added that which was ground at home on the querns which survive in large numbers from all periods. Still another proof of the importance of corn in the national economy are the references to its destruction in time of war. A scrutiny of the various annals reveals that the spoiling of the enemy's corn was a prime piece of contemporary strategy. If the corn was ripe, it was burned down; if it was green, it was uprooted. This practice was an accepted part of the conduct of war and there are over eighty instances of it recorded between the years 936 and 1536⁵.

The kinds of corn grown were oats, barley, wheat and rye and, so far as can be judged, their economic importance was in that order. We hear little about rye and it appears to have been of small moment. Wheat and barley have been grown in the country since neolithic times⁶ but there is no record of oats from the prehistoric period⁷. Within the historic period, as at present, climatic conditions over most of the country favoured the growing of oats and barley rather than of wheat and there can be little doubt that during the greater part of that period oats has been the most important

¹ *J.R.S.A.I.*, vol. 83 (1953), pp. 1-36.

² *Ériu* vol. 17 (1955), pp. 52 ff.

³ Except where stated, the dates assigned to texts are those given by the editors of them.

⁴ *J.R.S.A.I.*, vol. 83 (1953), pp. 1-36; vol. 85 (1955), pp. 100-113; Fahy, *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 61 (1956), pp. 13-57.

⁵ *F.M.*, vol. 2, pp. 637, 881, 979, 981, 1061, 1069, 1071; vol. 3, pp. 153, 265, 371, 387, 493, 495; vol. 4, pp. 669, 687-9, 699-701, 753, 769, 799, 811, 857, 1101-3, 1133, 1153, 1153-5, 1155-7, 1163, 1173, 1187, 1199. *A.U.*, vol. 2, pp. 75, 141-3, 247, 289, 331, 387, 411, 415; vol. 3, pp. 21, 37, 45, 65, 115-7, 117, 121-3, 231-3, 319, 321, 355-7; 563, 567, 579-81, 611. *A.Clonn.*, pp. 189, 193, 246, 272, 294, 305, 311, 318. *A.Conn.*, pp. 133, 139, 147, 195, 221, 237, 283, 353, 415, 443, 525, 535, 577, 659, 665, 695; *A.I.*, pp. 329, 345, 417. There is, of course, some overlapping among the entries between the different annals.

⁶ Jessen & Helbaek, *K. Dan. Vid. Selsk. Biol. Skrifter* 3, No. 2 (1944), and Helbaek, *P.P.S.*, 18 (1952), pp. 48 ff.; *U.J.A.*, vol. 18 (1955), pp. 75-76.

⁷ *P.R.I.A.*, 55 B (1953), p. 245.

crop. Since no agricultural statistics of even the sketchiest kind can be wrung out of any of the documents at our disposal before late medieval times and since the individual kinds of grain are mentioned comparatively rarely, we can only infer from the general tenor of the evidence that barley ranked next in importance, followed by wheat.

The grain, of whatever kind, having been harvested and threshed, had, owing to its moisture content, to be dried in a kiln (*áth*) before being ground. When dried, it was converted into meal in a mill (*muileann*) or quern (*bró*). If it were to be made into bread, the meal could be sifted to obtain a finer flour in a sieve (*criathar*), which is frequently mentioned in connection with bread-baking.¹ The dough was kneaded in a trough (*losad*)² and baked on a griddle (*lann*)³ of some kind, or a baking flag (*lec*).⁴ There is no evidence, archaeological, literary or pictorial, to suggest that the built-up oven common on the Continent was ever found in Ireland as a native cultural element. It was probably introduced by the monastic orders, since it was the quickest and most economical method of producing bread in quantity for a large community, and it was spread in the towns and villages which grew up in the areas of Norman settlement, principally in the eastern half of the country.⁵ The size of the cakes baked in early Ireland is indicated by a stanza in the metrical Rule of St. Ailbe of Emly which mentions 'a cake of thirty ounces, in measure by twelve inches (in size)'⁶ and a sentence in the Laws which speaks of 'twenty-four cakes of woman-baking, being two fists in breadth, and a fist in thickness'.⁷ The term 'woman-baking' implies that there were also cakes of 'man-baking' and there are many references to such. In the *Senchus Mor* the size of a certain vessel is indicated by the statement: 'It takes the materials of three cakes of man-baking or six of woman-baking to fill it.'⁸ The *Bretha Crolige* mentions 'twenty loaves of man-baking'⁹ and in the *Judgements of Cotenancy* the fine for the trespass of hens is defined as 'three cakes of man-baking with their condiment'.¹⁰ In ancient, as in modern, Ireland there appears to have been a strict division of work between the sexes and the whole climate of opinion would seem to have been against the intrusion of the male into the woman's sphere of bread baking. It is possible that the custom originated in the early monastic communities where a woman

¹ *Laws*, vol. 1, pp. 147, 149; vol. 2, p. 153; vol. 3, p. 277; vol. 4, p. 9; vol. 5, p. 407.

² *Laws*, vol. 1, pp. 147-149; vol. 2, p. 153; vol. 3, p. 275; vol. 4, p. 9; *Silv. Gad.*, Irish text, p. 87, English text, p. 94.

³ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 48 (1931), p. 359; *Laws*, vol. 1, pp. 127, 143; vol. 5, p. 407.

⁴ *Corm. Gloss.*, p. 103; *Laws*, vol. 3, p. 275; vol. 4, p. 11.

⁵ Lucas. *Béaloidéas*, vol. 26, pp. 60-63. ⁶ *Eriu*, vol. 3 (1907), p. 103.

⁷ *Laws*, vol. 2, p. 255.

⁸ *Laws*, vol. 2, p. 177.

⁹ *Eriu*, vol. 12 (1938), p. 25.

¹⁰ *Laws*, vol. 4, p. 117. See also *Laws*, vol. 5, pp. 31, 40, 45, 47, 49, 51, 85, 87, 89, 101, 111, 113.

would not have been tolerated and the cook was a man. Colmcille had a baker with him in Iona, but he was a Saxon.¹ It will be observed in the quotation from the *Senchus Mor* above that a cake baked by a man is twice the size of one baked by a woman, but this may reflect the ancient male jurist's idea of the fitness of things rather than reality.

Since oats was the chief grain crop, it is highly probable that oaten bread was the commonest kind, even in early times. It is referred to in the *Vision of MacConglinne*, which is dated about the 12th century,² and it certainly appears to have been the usual kind of Irish bread at the time when the independent testimony of English writers becomes available in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1560, the food rents of Shane O'Neill are said to have consisted in part of 'cakes of oaten bread'³ and measures of oaten meal appear in the stipends paid to soldiers in 1585⁴ and 1595.⁵ Measures of oaten meal and cakes of oaten bread are cited in rents paid in Ulster in 1610.⁶ Cuellar (1588),⁷ Moryson (1605-17),⁸ Rich (1610),⁹ Boullaye le Gouz (1644),¹⁰ Head (1674),¹¹ Dineley (1681),¹² an anonymous writer (1689)¹³ and Stevens (1690)¹⁴ all state or convey the impression that the bread of the Irish in general was oaten bread and it continued to be the bread of large areas of rural Ireland down to the 19th century.

Barley bread was known in early times and is especially associated with the spare diet of ascetic monks. Of St. Ciaran of Saigher, it is said: 'This was his dinner every night, a little bit of barley bread and spring-water as drink with it.'¹⁵ It is also mentioned in the lives of St. Molaise of Devenish,¹⁶ St. Maedoc of Ferns¹⁷ and Colman son of Luachan.¹⁸ What evidence there is seems to suggest that it declined in popularity down the ages, although it continued to be eaten in certain districts down to the 19th century, notably in Co. Wexford.¹⁹

If oaten and barley bread were the commoner kinds, there is no lack of proof that wheaten bread was regarded as the greater delicacy. In the

¹ *Adarnan*, pp. 208-209.

² *Aislinge*, p. 88, line 18.

³ *Cal. Carew MSS., 1515-1574*, p. 308.

⁴ *Fiants Eliz.*, p. 89.

⁵ *Cal. S.P.I., 1592-1596*, p. 412.

⁶ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, James I, Ireland*, pp. 375-376, 383.

⁷ *U.J.A.*, vol. 1 (1895), pp. 182, 186.

⁸ *Itinerary*, vol. 4, p. 197.

⁹ *Description*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Tour*, pp. 8-9.

¹¹ *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 10 (1904), p. 95.

¹² *Observations*, p. 23.

¹³ *Prognostication*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Journal*, p. 139.

¹⁵ *Oengus*, p. 89.

¹⁶ *Sibb. Gad.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, p. 226.

¹⁸ *Meyer Colman*, p. 59.

¹⁹ *Young Tour*, p. 89; *Shaw Mason*, vol. 3, p. 410; *Taylor Tourist*, p. 253.

9th century tale, the *Feast of Bricriu*, Bricriu sings the praises of the seven-year old bull which is the hero's portion of his house but, in enumerating the choice foods on which it has been brought to condition, even his hyperbolic language can reach no higher than 'five score cakes of wheat, cooked in honey withal'.¹ When St. Molua was at school with St. Finian, he was sent one day to sow corn 'which was not wheat' but by the power of his sanctity it ripened into wheat.² Another day he was sent to the mill to grind grain 'which was not wheat' but it was changed by his merits into 'the purest wheat'.³ In the life of St. Finian of Clonard we are told: 'Now this was his daily refection—a bit of barley bread and a drink of water. On Sundays, however, and on holydays, a bit of wheaten bread and a piece of boiled salmon.'⁴ Of Conall the Red, a wealthy landholder in Connacht, it is said: 'Never, too, was his house without the Three Sacks, to wit, a sack of malt for preparing yeast, a sack of wheat for preparing the refection of the guests, and a sack of salt to make every food taste well.'⁵ These quotations could be multiplied to show that wheaten bread was a food of higher status than oaten or barley bread. It was the bread for feast days and important social occasions, the bread of chieftains and kings.

There is some evidence for the admixture of pea- and bean-meal with the bread corn in the 17th century⁶ and, no doubt, bread of mixed grain was common enough, as it was in the diet of labourers in Dublin and Meath in the early 19th century.⁷

In ancient times, as now, the normal 'condiment' of bread was butter. The outrage on the proprieties of hospitality which the lack of it betokened is reflected in an obit in the annals under 1486: 'Neidhe O'Mulconry, head of the inhospitality of Ireland, died. It was he who solemnly swore that he would never give bread and butter together to guests.'⁸

By no means all the corn grown in ancient and later times in Ireland was consumed as bread. Probably as much, or more, was eaten in the form of porridge. There is a certain amount of evidence in English documents of the 16th and 17th centuries which, with whatever reservations we accept it, suggests that the native Irish of the period did not use bread very extensively. In 1533, the King's Council in Ireland complains that some of the English occupiers 'have admitted to be their tenants those of the Irishry, which can live hardily without bread or other good victuals'.⁹ Diego Ortiz, the Spanish emissary sent by Philip II to report on the state of Ireland,

¹ *Fled Bricrend*, pp. 8-9.

² *V.S.H.*, vol. 2, p. 214.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁴ *Lismore Saints*, p. 229.

⁵ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 14 (1893), p. 27.

⁶ *Present State*, pp. 151-152; *Observations*, p. 23.

⁷ *Parl. Papers*, vol. 21, appendix (D), supplement pp. 50, 104.

⁸ *F.M.*, vol. 4, p. 1141.

⁹ *Cal. Carew MSS., 1515-1574*, pp. 50-51.

says the Irish 'use but little bread'.¹ Derricke (1581),² the State Papers (1581),³ Rich (1610)⁴ and *Advertisements for Ireland* (1623)⁵ all state that the Irish ate little bread. It is just possible that in these statements the term bread is intended in the restricted sense of wheaten bread but, if it is used as a general name, they can only imply that much of the corn, which was extensively grown in the country at the time, was eaten as porridge. In the law tracts, porridge is cited among the foods fed to children and the following summary by O'Donovan of a passage from the *Senchus Mor* reveals the existence of a variety of kinds of it:

The children of the inferior grades are fed to bare sufficiency on stirabout made of oatmeal on buttermilk or water, and it is taken with stale butter. The sons of the chieftain grades are fed to satiety on stirabout made of barley meal upon new milk, taken with fresh butter. The sons of kings are fed on stirabout made of wheaten meal upon new milk, taken with honey.⁶

'Fair white porridge' made of sheep's milk, and porridge 'the treasure that is smoothest and sweetest of all food', are referred to in the *Vision of MacConglinne*.⁷ Another dish allied to or, perhaps, identical with porridge (*littiu*, modern Irish *leite*) was *brochán*. The word occurs in the *Vision of MacConglinne* but the contexts afford no clue to the ingredients.⁸ *Brochán* is mentioned a number of times in Colgan's modern Irish 17th century paraphrase of the *Rule of Tallaght*, originally composed in the 9th century. It may, of course, replace an older word but, at all events, we learn that the preparation consisted of meal boiled in water.

If a festival happened to fall on one of these evenings, and they did not happen to have a draught of whey-water or ale, he [i.e. Mael Ruain] gave them leave to make porridge (*brothcán*) of meal and water, the amount of meal added being only a quarter of a *cingit* (i.e. a vessel for measuring); and Mael Ruain ordered them not to drink a full draught of this but only to sip it.⁹

Here the *brochán* is thin enough to be drunken but it is probable that this is merely the result of Mael Ruain's ascetic adulteration of it and that its normal consistency was something more substantial. Another watery declension from what might be called the standard porridge was *menadach* or gruel, of which another tract dealing with the monastery of Tallaght, and dating to about the 8th century, describes three kinds: 'Gruel upon water, gruel between two waters and gruel under water.'¹⁰ The same text

¹ Quoted in Salaman *Potato*, p. 210.

² *Image*, pp. 53, 54-55.

³ *Cal. S.P.I.*, 1574-1585, p. 318.

⁴ *Description*, p. 40.

⁵ *Advertisements*, p. 9.

⁶ *Laws*, vol. 2, footnote pp. 150-151.

⁷ *Aislinge*, pp. 32, line 35; 98, lines 29-30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 33, line 14; 99, line 18.

⁹ *Hermathena*, vol. 44 (1927), p. 27.

¹⁰ *P.R.I.A.*, 29 C, p. 158.

also refers to a kind of *menadach* made by mixing meal with butter. Porridge, particularly oatmeal porridge, continued in use down the centuries in Irish diet and retains a measure of popularity to the present day.

MEAT

Having seen something of the place occupied by cereals in the diet, let us now examine the position in regard to meat. There appear to be comparatively few references to the use of mutton in ancient Ireland and Moryson, writing at the turn of the 16th century, says that it was seldom eaten by the Irish¹. The impression conveyed by such evidence as exists is that sheep were reared primarily for their wool and that mutton was only a casual item in the menu. From the archaeological excavation of habitation sites of all periods from neolithic to medieval², we know that beef was eaten but it is quite another matter to ascertain the extent to which it was eaten. It is prudent to remember that even a large quantity of cattle bones from a single site may, when spread out over, perhaps, a hundred or two hundred years of occupation, represent no more than a very modest weekly ration of meat per person for a large household. Moreover, all the literary evidence, from the time of the earliest sources down to the 17th century, shows that the vast bulk of the cattle population consisted of cows and that male animals were reared only in small numbers for breeding and draft. It seems undeniable, too, that these great herds of cows were raised primarily for their milk, which, as will be seen later, formed a most important item in the national food³. In these circumstances, it is clear that no cattle were reared specifically for slaughter and that such beef as was consumed must have come from unwanted bull calves, old cows past their prime and animals which met their deaths or were maimed beyond recovery by misadventure. Some modification of this statement would have to be made where the higher ranks of society were concerned but in the present study we are dealing only with the population as a whole. This estimate of the role of beef in the diet is confirmed by our richest single source of information about Irish food, the 12th century *Vision of MacConglinne*, in which references to foods derived from cattle carcasses are far outnumbered by those derived from the pig, while, in substantiation of what has been said about mutton above, references to it are fewer still⁴. It is further corroborated by opinions voiced by English writers of the

¹ *Itinerary*, vol. 4, pp. 198-199.

² e.g. *P.R.I.A.*, 58 C (1954), p. 449 (neolithic & bronze age); *J.R.S.A.I.*, 74 (1944), p. 37 (iron age); *P.R.I.A.*, 47 C (1942), p. 75 (6th-7th cent. A.D.); *P.R.I.A.*, 52 C (1949), p. 110 (8th-10th cent. A.D.); *P.R.I.A.*, 53 C (1950-1951), pp. 241-242 (7th-10th cent. A.D.).

³ *Record*, pp. 75-85.

⁴ *Aislinge passim*.

16th and 17th centuries. Sir Henry Sydney, describing his visit to a devastated part of Thomond in 1576, remarks: 'If they were not a people of more spare diet than others are, both of flesh and bread and drink made of corn, it were not possible that a soil so wasted could sustain them.'¹ Francisco Cuellar, relating his adventures in Ulster in 1588, says: 'On feast days they eat some flesh, half cooked, without bread or salt, for that is their custom.'² Spenser, in 1596, outlining a policy for harassing the Irish enemy in winter, argues: 'Flesh he hath, but if he kill it in winter, he shall want milke in summer, and shortly want life.'³ *Advertisements for Ireland*, 1623, referring to cattle, say: '... besides the common sort never kill any for their own use being contented to feed all the year round upon milk, butter and the like and do eat but little bread.'⁴ Head, describing the food of the Irish in 1674, states that they 'seldom eat flesh or drink strong beer but at fairs and public solemnities.'⁵ A German account of Ireland in the 17th century reports that the Irish eat little meat.⁶

By far the most important kind of flesh meat eaten in ancient, medieval and later times seems to have been pork or bacon. Pig bones have been found in large quantities in habitation sites dating from neolithic times onwards and, while a proportion of these may belong to wild swine, there can be little doubt that the pig was a common domestic animal in all periods. As in the case of corn, we are not dependent merely on overt references to the consumption of pork and bacon to demonstrate this. Other domestic animals can have been reared without any view to their eventual consumption as food. Horses were bred for riding, traction and transport and were never eaten in Ireland. Sheep can have been bred chiefly for their wool and, as has been said, the paucity of references to mutton suggests that this was the case. Cattle can have been reared primarily for their milk and the evidence is explicit enough to establish it as a fact that this was so. Pigs, however, when alive, can be put to no use and, when dead, furnish no by-products which would make it worthwhile raising them for these alone; so the object of breeding and tending them must have been to eat them. Accordingly, if we find pigs to have been an important part of the economy, they must have also been an important part of the diet. This is what we do find and one of the indirect proofs of it are the repeated references to oakmast, since mast was recognised as a fattening food for swine from early times. Swine fattened on it are mentioned in Adamnan's 7th century life of Colmcille.⁷ A story, purporting

¹ *Cal. Carew MSS. 1575-1588*, p. 47.

² *U.J.A.*, vol. 1 (1895), p. 186.

³ *View*, p. 162.

⁴ *Advertisements*, pp. 8-9.

⁵ *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 10 (1904), p. 95.

⁶ *U.J.A.*, vol. 11 (1948), p. 70.

⁷ *Adamnan*, p. 135.

to explain the origin of the place-name Sruthar Matha and which is found in both the prose and verse *Dindshenchas*, relates that in the western part of the Plain of Macha there was an oakwood

and no mast was ever like its mast for size and for fragrance. When the wind would blow over it the odour thereof would be smelt throughout Erin, to what point soever the wind would carry the scent, so that it was a heartbreak to the swine of Ireland when it reached them.¹

The older literature contains many similar references to mast.² So important was the mast crop that its increase was reckoned among the benefits which the mystic influence of a good king's reign brought to his people. The prosperous state of the country during King Conaire's reign was signalized by 'oakmast up to the knees every autumn.'³ Indeed, in the formula of vital foodstuffs which waxed under the benign influence of a good king, mast is usually joined with corn, milk and fish.⁴ Conversely, the mast crop is sensitive to the malign influences radiating from evil persons. When Conn refuses to put away the evil woman, Becuma, whom he has married, he is threatened in the following terms: 'A third of its corn, and its milk, and its mast to be lacking in Ireland so long as she will be with you.'⁵ When Diarmait, chief poet and chief master of druidism to the king of Connacht, was killed by a spear-cast, his son 'went to overlook Rathonn and curse it, that no corn might grow from the land there, and that the cows might give no milk, nor the trees in its woods mast, as far as his eye could see.'⁶ So important was the mast crop that in the much more mundane context of the annals bumper yields of it are recorded time and again. They are noted fourteen times between 576 and 1310 in the *Annals of Innisfallen*,⁷ twelve times in the *Annals of Ulster* between 768 and 1185,⁸ while both the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland* and the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* record under 1038 that the mast was so abundant that year that even the 'runts' or undersized piglets of the litters were fattened.⁹

The practice of feeding swine on mast was also an integral part of Anglo-Norman economy in Ireland. The right to pasture pigs was called *pannagium* or 'pannage' in the legal terminology of the time and grants of rights of pannage in their woods appear in innumerable covenants between

¹ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 16 (1895), p. 54; *Met. Dind.*, part 4, p. 173.

² e.g. *Met. Dind.*, part 3, pp. 149, 383, 388, 405; part 4, p. 161; *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 22 (1901), p. 283; *Celtica*, vol. 4 (1958), p. 206; *Silv. Gad.*, p. 165; *Ériu*, vol. 16 (1952), p. 186; *Ériu*, vol. 5 (1911), p. 117; *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 16 (1895), pp. 40, 279; *Laws*, vol. 4, p. 103.

³ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 22 (1901), p. 28.

⁴ e.g. *Magh Rath*, p. 101; *Silv. Gad.*, p. 289; *Ériu*, vol. 9 (1921-1923), p. 54; *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 22 (1901), p. 168; *Laws*, vol. 4, p. 53.

⁵ *Ériu*, vol. 3 (1907), p. 163.

⁶ *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, p. 37.

⁷ *A.I.*, pp. 77, 167, 181, 217, 233, 253, 271, 293, 321, 327 (twice), 367, 403.

⁸ *A.U.*, vol. 1, pp. 237, 241, 291, 337, 455, 469; vol. 2, pp. 16, 43, 81, 129, 205.

⁹ *F.M.*, vol. 2, p. 835; *A. Clon.*, p. 176.

overlords and their tenants. The accounts of the manor of Carlow¹ and the registers of such religious houses as the Priory of Tristernagh, Co. Westmeath,² and the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, Dublin,³ reveal it in being in the 13th century, while it is commonplace in documents of the 14th and 15th centuries in the *Red Book of Ormond*.⁴

Another indication of the importance of pigs is the frequency with which swineherds are mentioned in the early literature, and it is stated in the Laws that 'swine must sleep in a sty secured with four strong fastenings by night, and must have a swineherd with them by day.'⁵ It is to be noted, too, that the hagiographers of the Irish saints take it for granted that the early monasteries kept their herds of pigs.⁶

That the pig, whether fresh as pork or salted as bacon, was a favourite food is apparent from every early source at our disposal: sagas, tales, law tracts and lives of the saints. As has been already pointed out, the references to it in the great corpus of Irish foods, the medieval *Vision of MacConglinne*, far outnumber those to any other kind of meat, while later sources show its continuing popularity through recent centuries to the present day.

Bacon (*tinne* or *senshaille*) was not the only kind of salt meat in use for 'corned beef' (*boshaille*) is mentioned a number of times in the *Vision of MacConglinne* and other sorts of meat were, no doubt, salted down to preserve them when they were available fresh in amounts surplus to immediate needs.

Some kind of puddings or sausages were made. One called *maróc* is mentioned several times in the *Vision of MacConglinne*. In a description of a hermitage in the Land of Food, it is said: 'There was a gate of tallow to it, whereon was a bolt of sausage (*gerrcend maróci*).'⁸ Elsewhere, sausages appear as the knocker of a door (*semtille maróci*)⁹ and as 'scollops' or thatching rods.¹⁰ These contexts, it will be observed, are consistent with the *maróc* being a long thin object like a sausage or pudding. What was, evidently, another kind of sausage is mentioned in the *Vision* under the name *indrechtán*. In the fantastic land described in the *Vision*, where

¹ Hore, Philip Herbert, *History of the Town & County of Wexford. Old and New Ross*. London, 1900, pp. 26, 29, 35.

² *Register of the Priory of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Tristernagh*. Edited by M. V. Clarke. Dublin, 1941, pp. 2, 46.

³ *Register of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, Dublin*. Edited by Eric St. John Brooks. Dublin, 1936, pp. 178-179, 270.

⁴ *The Red Book of Ormond*. Edited by Newport B. White. Dublin, 1932, pp. 29, 51, 70, 125, 127, 148.

⁵ *Laws*, vol. 4, p. 103. Translation emended by Plummer, *Ériu*, vol. 10 (1926-1928), pp. 119-120.

⁶ *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, pp. 101-102; *V.S.H.*, vol. 1, pp. 40, 90, 101-102.

⁷ *Aislinge*, pp. 60, 78, 80, 88, 90.

⁸ *Aislinge*, p. 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

everything is made of food, a horsewhip is referred to, 'the cords whereof were twenty-nine fair puddings (*indrechtána*) of white-fat cows.'¹ Presumably, the thing in question consisted of cow's intestines filled with some edible substance but the writer knows of no context which would give any clue to the nature of the stuffing used either in the *indrechtán* or the *maróc*. Cow and sheep puddings (*putóga caorach agas bó*) are mentioned in the mid-17th century satire *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*.²

Hunting and fowling, no doubt, contributed something to the diet but, except for a few tantalisingly vague references to traps and snares of various kinds, we can gain little knowledge about these pursuits. We must certainly be on our guard against allowing ourselves to be misled by the conventions of the poetry of the Fenian Cycle into overestimating the role of venison and wild boar in the national diet, for none of the other kinds of texts lends any support to the belief that these were of any importance. Fishing must, of course, always have been a major source of food to the coastwise population, while on inland waters fish were taken in weirs and with nets, lines and spears.

One kind of meat was certainly not eaten in ancient Ireland and that was horseflesh. In fact, what evidence there is about it suggests that it was the subject of a definite ban or tabu. Once, when Colmcille came from Iona to 'the Hinbinan isle' he ordered an indulgence of food, but one Neman, in a hypocritical excess of zeal, refused to accept the indulgence, whereupon the wrathful saint said to him: 'There will be a time in which thou wilt furtively eat mare's flesh with robbers in a wood.'³ The prophecy was fulfilled, for the man, having returned to the world, was found one day eating such flesh from a wooden grill with robbers in a wood. The very use of the word 'furtively' (*furtive*) conveys the impression that eating horseflesh was something of which even robbers were ashamed. A similar prophecy of degradation was pronounced by St. Enna against a hypocritical layman who refused to accept proffered hospitality.⁴ The law tract *Bretha Crolige* states: 'It is not right to give horseflesh to any invalid'⁵ but a penitential of the Old Irish period is much more forthright: 'Anyone who eats the flesh of a horse . . . does penance for three years and a half.'⁶ In a poem of the early 12th century, called the *Headless Phantoms*, it is related that Finn and his companions are lured into a magical house where a grey-haired churl presides who kills and flays their horses, cuts them up and roasts the flesh. When it is cooked, he offers some to Finn, who answers in disgust: 'Thou churl, take off thy food: horseflesh I have never eaten, and never

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

² *Gadelica*, vol. 1 (1912-1913), p. 228.

³ *Adamnan*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, footnote p. 51, quoting Colgan, *Act. SS.*, p. 709 b.

⁵ *Ériu*, vol. 12 (1938), p. 21.

⁶ *Ériu*, vol. 7 (1914), p. 147.

yet will I eat, for the matter of going foodless for one mealtime.¹ This ban on horseflesh may have been introduced by the early churchmen who regarded it as being associated with pagan rites. It may, of course, be much older but, whatever its origin, it has persisted throughout the history of the country and remains as strong as ever to the present day.

MILK AND MILK PRODUCTS

Since the earliest times from which we have written records and, most probably, from far back in the prehistoric period down to the introduction of the potato, milk and its products were one of the most important sources of food. Part of the evidence for this hinges on the importance of cattle in ancient and medieval Irish economy and the predominance of this role has already been stressed. Attention has, in addition, been drawn to the fact that a vast proportion of these cattle consisted of cows and that these cows were kept primarily for their milk.

Hospitality in ancient Ireland was not merely a virtue, it was an overriding duty, and an indication of the important place held by milk in the diet is the frequent mention of it as food for guests. A favourite setting for a miracle in the lives of the saints is when guests come on an unexpected visit and the embarrassed saint finds himself or herself with an empty larder and nothing to set before them. The embarrassment is short lived for the saint soon sets matters to rights by miraculously producing food in all the abundance which the law of hospitality requires. The interesting thing to note is how often the refreshment so provided consists of milk or comprises milk as an indispensable item. Miracles of this nature are detailed, for instance, in the lives of St. Fechin of Fore,² St. Samthanne,³ St. Brigid,⁴ St. Ciaran of Saigher,⁵ and St. Ciaran of Clonmacnoise.⁶ The fact that milk, directly or indirectly, forms the subject of many other miracles in the lives of the saints is another pointer to its supreme importance.⁷ The profane literature of early times is even more profuse of references to milk and its paramount place in the national diet.

Milk and milk products are conspicuous among the many kinds of food which appear in the medieval *Vision of MacConglinne* and they maintained their ancient status in the diet down to the 17th century. According to various English commentators on the Irish scene, milk constituted virtually the sole food of the ordinary people during the summer season.

¹ *Duanaire Finn*, Part I. Edited by Eoin MacNeill. London, 1908, p. 129.

² *V.S.H.*, vol. 2, p. 79.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁴ *Oengus*, pp. 57, 65; *Lismore Saints*, p. 197.

⁵ *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, p. 107.

⁶ *Lismore Saints*, p. 268.

⁷ e.g. *V.S.H.*, vol. 1, p. 23 (St. Abban); vol. 2, pp. 192 (St. Moling), 212 (St. Molua), 242-243 (St. Ruadhan); *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, p. 111 (St. Ciaran of Saigher); *Adamnan*, pp. 155, 125-126.