Sroan Bread and Bawnbee

The forces of late-medieval Irish chieftains, and the insurgent lords of the Nine Years War, were fed largely by the Creaghts (*Caoraigheacht*), or vast cow herds and their attending men, women and children. This has been touched on in Creaght and Creat, another paper in this series dealing with the shelters put up by these herders. Here we will examine the food they provided to their lord's military forces at pre-arranged rendezvous.

As late as the 19th century, isolated west coast communities practiced transhumance during the summer, moving serially with their herds from the main settlement to as many as three or four upland grazing pastures. There is evidence that in earlier times they ranged farther.

> *There is a great knowledge gained by experience, as to feeding their cattle on all these mountains, they find that for six months or some certain time they thrive on the same spot and then fall off, so that they move 'em to other parts; some parts are fit for cattle of different ages, and some at different seasons of the year.*
>
> *Pocoke's Tour of Ireland, 1752 p. 93*

Wartime Practices

Captain Nicholas Dawtrey—an old "Irish Hand" with 30 years experience serving the Queen in the country—wrote at the height of Tyrone's Rebellion (1597), describing the military practices of the Gaelic Irish in his "Booke of Questions and Answars."

Dawtrey describes the age-old tactics of the Irish, setting up a defense in depth and protecting the herds which were their main wealth. The Creaghts would be moved in from the borders in times of threat, with a close guard of kern and horsemen—the "rising out," or non-professional element of the Chief's forces. These kern and horsemen would keep watch over the Creaght from positions in woods adjacent to the pastures.

(Lest we think of them exclusively as peasants, the people of the Creaghts themselves were said to be "of the best blood of the country"—no doubt related in many cases to the Lordship's horsemen who formed their guard. When the Earl of Tyrone took sudden flight from Rathmullan in 1607, his eldest son Con could not be found and was left behind. He was with his fosterer's Creaght, pasturing deep in Tyrone.)

The Chief's professional fighters—galloglass and bonnaughts—were thrown forward in woods along the approach of the enemy, occupying strategic "passes"—a generic Elizabethan word for difficult straights or crossings—where the enemy might best be engaged.

Closest to the enemy would be a chain of sentries. The sentries guarding stream crossings would be horsemen, while those on hill tops would be foot (usually "shot").

This was the classic place of the Chief himself, as immortalized in Gaelic poetry, which often dwells on the long nights the Chief spent standing on horseback, guarding his borders against incursion, his icy horseman's staff freezing to his hand and rainwater dripping off his helmet.

As soon as the sentries spotted the English on the move, riders were sent miles back to the Creaghts, shouting "Hugat an Sloo" (Here comes the Army) or "Hugat an Sassenach" (Here comes the English), allowing the herds to decamp in the opposite direction, staying one step ahead of their adversaries.

Buried Oats and Butter

Upon arrival at one of the known refuge pastures, the Creaght would retrieve butter and have bread baked within two hours, sufficient to feed themselves and the accompanying Gaelic soldiery.

In Ulster oats were routinely buried in grain pits in woodland clearings. In more peaceful regions, the burying of grain in woods was considered a known prelude to rebellion.

Grain Burnt from the Straw

Dawtrey describes how the grain was preserved from enemy action and prepared for storage:

> "They cut it before it be full ripe, that it will take no fire in the field as it standeth. And when they have cut it their manner is to carry it presently into the next woods, and there they will wither [dry] it in green pleckes [green clearings], until it be so dry as it will take fire. Then they burn it themselves out of the straw, and put it into cleaves [*cliabh*— baskets], which they bury in the ground. And this kind of burnt corn will make a kind of bread called Chroanes[1] [Sroans], which bread is a strong and hearty kind of bread with butter."

A few years later (1617), Nine-Year's War veteran Fynes Moryson wrote: "The foresaid wild Irish do not thresh their oats, but burn them from the straw, and so make cakes thereof;" This burning of the corn in the straw was outlawed by an Act of Parliement in 1635, but continued, and was also practiced in the Highlands. It was described by MacIan in his Highlanders at Home (1845):

> "The corn and meal prepared in this ancient manner is called Graddan, from grad, quick, speedy, and the operation after reaping is thus performed :—A woman sitting down takes a handful of corn, and holding it by the stems in her left hand, she sets fire to the ears, which immediately flame up; but to prevent them being burnt, with a small stick held in her right hand, she dextrously beats the grain off the straw, the moment when it is sufficiently done. For sifting the meal from the husks, a sheep's skin, perforated by a small hot iron, is stretched on a hoop."

A more recent description is by A. Fenton (Processing Cereal Grains in Scotland):

> "The technique called *graddaning*, is recorded from the early 1600s. The job was done by women. They held handfuls of corn in one hand, set fire to the ear end, then beat off the grain with a stick just as the husk burned through. The grain was then dried and partly parched, ready for grinding (following winnowing) in the hand-mill."

Dawtrey's account also says that the oatmeal was stored in calf skins within the baskets, and this reminds us that a crannock was a basketwork measure, lined with hide, supposed to hold the produce of 17 sheaves in Tudor Ireland.

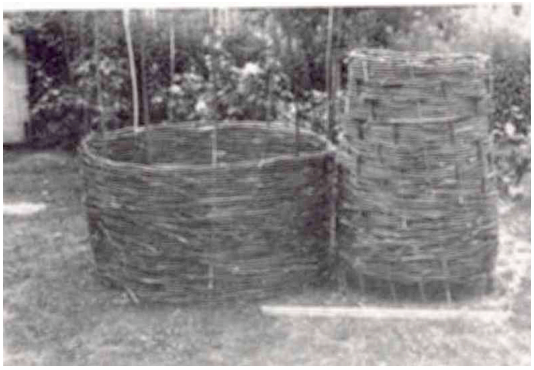
Sroan Bread

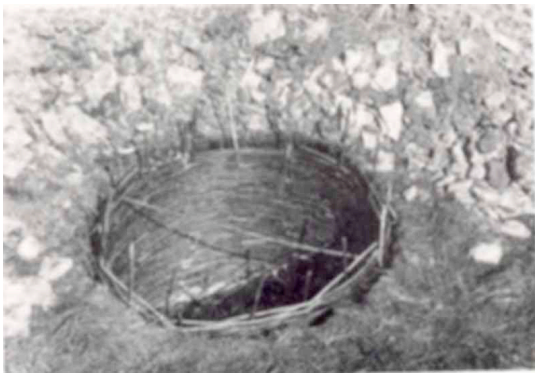
In the Survey of Payments of the Lordship of MacCarthy Mor in 1596 (JRSAI, 1906, p. 365) this definition is given:
"A Sroan of oatmeale is a gallon and a half of oatenflower made of burnt oates and because that in the payment of the Sorren [a "cutting" taken by the Irish Chieftains] the quirren of butter and Sroan of meale are of like number. . . A Quirren of butter is a measure of a pottle or fower pounde."

Thus, we read that the lands of Slught Mac Rurry owed "eight quirrens of butter and eight sroans of oatmeal per ploughland, which amounted to 100 quirrens and 100 sroans, valued at 50s. sterling." And a later inquisition, at Enniskillen in 1608 found the Bishop of Clogher was entitled to "thirty sroghans of oate breade, or five shillings in lieu thereof." etc.

[1]Chroanes, more normally spelt Srones, Sroghans etc. in the documents of the time, "and thirtie sroghans of breade,";
(Note to Dawtrey's account by Hiram Morgan)

Ancient grain pits in a woodland clearing in Weston-super -Mare, Worlebury Hill Fort.





Above: Wicker pit liners for grain storage pits. Below, a pit liner in place. From an archaeological experimental site.

Grain Pits

Dr. P. J. Reynolds has conducted experimental archaeology with grain storage pits at Butser Farm in U.K. and Cologne, Germany and found that grain could be stored this way up to 18 years, and that pits could be reused indefinitely. Preferably dug in limestone, sand or clay, the pits were basket-lined and sealed with clay.

(In an interesting parallel, Massachusetts Indians buried corn and other valuables in underground circular storage pits, about five to ten feet deep and three to five feet across, the sides converging towards the top. They were built into slopes to ensure drainage. They were lined with clay, baked, or else with vegatable matter, like mats or bark. "They put their corn and other grains in large grass sacks deposited them in trenches, and piled sand overhead three or four feet above the surface, taking out what they needed from time to time."The women sometimes concealed the storage holes by pouring water on the soil above or lighting fires over them to conceal all signs of soil dislocation.)

Hand Mills

Captain Nicholas Dawtrey continues his account of 1597, saying:

> "For the grinding of their corn they have great store of hand mills, which lie hidden as other things in all parts of the country, and wheresoever their Creaghts be, their people will have hidden corn mills to make meal, for come they never so late to sit down in any place, within two hours after they will not only have corn ground, but made into bread and baked also."

The quern or hand-mill is the oldest machine used for grinding grain. It consisted of two stones, one above the other, the former turned round by a handle and having an opening in the top to admit the grain. This primitive kind of mill, even for long after 1745, was used all over the Highlands to convert the scanty supply of grain into meal. The quern was generally driven by two women sitting opposite each other.

MacIan in his "Highlanders at Home" says the hand mill "in the Irish idiom is *Bronn*, and in the Lowland Scots it is named *Quern*. The stones are eighteen to thirty inches in diameter, the undermost being rather larger than the upper, and having a spike in the centre as a pivot on which the other is turned. The women, when at work, seat themselves on the ground, beside the [Quern], and with a stick, which is fixed into a hole in the margin of the stone, turn it round while they pour in the grain by a central opening. There are generally two females employed, who sit opposite to each other, and as usual in almost all their avocations, they lighten their labours by appropriate songs."

MacIan continues, describing a traveller's arrival at a destination where there was no bread: "The woman of the house, however, speedily supplied this want; for taking a reaping-hook, she went to the field, cut a sufficient quantity of corn, and quickly separating the grain from the straw, winnowed it in the open air, dried it in an iron pot, ground it by the Quern, and presented it in well—baked Bonaich—cloich, or cakes prepared on a stone before the turf fire; the time occupied in these various operations not exceeding half an hour! It is maintained all over the Highlands, that the meal thus manufactured is more pleasant to the palate and is more wholesome than what is dried and ground by the aid of machinery, and the graddan meal is preferred for bannocks . . ."

Ancient hand mill being used in late 19th century Ireland.

Highland hand mill in use, 1750.

Quern-Stones

Quern-stones are a pair of stone tools for hand grinding a wide variety of materials. The lower, stationary, stone is called a quern, whilst the upper, mobile, stone is called a handstone. They are thought to have originated in Spain 2500 years ago and were brought to Britain by Celtic refugees from the Roman invasion of Gaul in the 1st century BC.

As the name implies, the rotary quern used circular motions to grind the material, meaning both the quern and the handstone were generally circular. The handstone of a rotary quern is much heavier than that of saddle quern and provides the necessary weight for the grinding of unmalted grain into flour. Rotary quern handstones are often referred to as either "beehive" or "disk" type. In some cases the grinding surfaces of the stones fit into each other, the upper stone being slightly concave and the lower one convex.

Garnett in his 1800 tour of Scotland describes the use of a hand quern as follows - The quern consists of two circular pieces of stone, generally grit or granite, about twenty inches in diameter. In the lower stone is a wooden peg, rounded at the top; on this the upper stone is nicely balanced, so as just to touch the lower one, by means of a piece of wood fixed in a large hole in this upper piece, but which does not fill the hole, room for feeding the mill being left on each side: it is so nicely balanced, that though there is some friction from the contact of the two stones, yet a very small momentum will make it revolve several times, when it has no corn in it. The corn being dried, two women sit down on the ground, having the quern between them; the one feeds it, while the other turns it round, relieving each other occasionally, and singing some Celtic songs all the time.

Irish quern of medieval date.

Quern-stones from Belcarra, Co. Mayo.

Hand mill being used by Arab women in North Africa, the supposed place of its origin.

Traditional bannocks, or oat cakes, cut into "farls' or quarters.

Oatcakes—a Recipe

Bannock (*Bannóga arán coirce*), the oldest and most traditional of Irish foods. originally cooked on a griddle and allowed to harden on a hardening stand. The bannock was cut into four quarters, or "farls."

2 cups roughly crushed oats
1 teasp. salt
1 cup flour, sifted
1 teasp. baking soda
2 tablsp. butter
Extra oats for rolling

Mix the oatmeal with the flour, salt and baking soda. Make a well in the mixture. Heat 2 tablsp. water and add the butter; bring to the boil and then pour into the well of dry ingredients. Quickly mix together. Knead lightly and add a little more water if the mixture does not form a stiffish dough. Roll out and cut into 6 inch rounds and cook on both sides on a heated griddle,or bake on a lightly greased baking tray at 350 for half an hour or until a golden colour. Makes approximately 15 oatcakes. Eaten hot running with country butter. Oats had to be fresh from mill.

18th century wrought iron Donegal "harnen" stand, for standing up a bannock to harden before the fire. Earlier models were simply made of a similarly sized tripod of three mated branches.

Irish Customs to Protect the Butter During the Churing

- Crosses of St. Brigid, the most 'important' female saint in Ireland, were hung in cow byres.
- Dairies had to be built well away from Ring Forts which were the territory of fairies: if you annoyed them they may disrupt the butter making process.
- You had to tie a red rag on to the cow's tail after milking and making the butter, this had protective qualities for the cow.
- You must never lend or borrow any vessel used to contain milk or make butter.
- Tie a piece of Rowan wood to the butter churn paddle to keep off witches.
- Put a horse shoe under the churn when making butter for good luck.
- For really good butter stir the milk with the hand of a dead, preferably executed, man!!

"Bawnbee"—White Meats

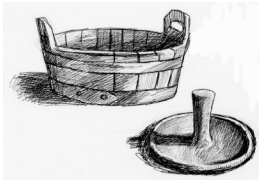
Bánbídh (Bawnbee) or 'white meats' formed a major part of the Irish diet, and included sour milk (*bainne clabair*), curds and whey, buttermilk, butter and cheese. Women's work included milking cows, churning, cheese-making and producing *bánbídh*. Captain Nicholas Dawtrey continues his account of 1597, saying:

> "to every soldier [the rebel leaders] give a gallon of butter, and two gallons of meal for 5 days victual, and milk or ale to drink, or 5 white groats in lieu of their drink."

He says the people wrapped the butter in tree bark, "which butter they hide in bogs, or rivers, or in fresh water pools." The butter would be retrieved from these places of storage when a Creaght set up camp, and entertained Irish soldiers. Butter was such a staple of the Irish troops diet, that English captains of Irish companies of the Earl of Tyrone, before his rebellion, were termed "Butter Captains." Luke Gernon, in 1620, described the range of bawnbee available in—

"the baser cabbins, where you shall have no drink but Bonyclabber [*bainne clabair*], milk that is sowred to the condition of buttermilk, nor no meate, but mullagham [*mallabanne—mulchan*, made of buttermilk beaten to form a soft cheese with curds pressed, but not in a mould or cheese farl, & used for food in the *Bualies* or Dairies and often given as rent or tiribute), a kinde of choke-daw cheese, and blew butter, and no bread at your first coming in, but if you stay half an hower you shall have a cake of meale unboulted, and mingled with butter baken on an yron called a gridle, like a pudding cake."

Left: Bog butter packed in a one-piece wooden "mether."



Above: Dairying implements—milk keelers and butter workers.

Dutch factors (left) oversee Irish butter production in Munster in the 1680's, when it had been commercialized. The process and implements were the same as in the previous two centuries. At right a woman churns butter in a stave churn, a milk keeler at her feet. In the foreground, a man brings rolls of freshly churned butter on a "losset" or shallow wooden tray with flat handles pierced for the fingers. The women are using a long handled tamper to tamp the butter into staved kegs.

Also from around 1680, a woman seated on a three-legged stool milks a small black "Kerry" cow, its forelegs tethered with a hay-rope spancel. She milks it into a staved keeler, a staved stoup is seen at right.

Scottish research indicates that chemical analysis has determined that bog butter was in fact true butter or dairy fat. The fat content is found to be 15% higher compared to modern butter, and no salt was added, but it was otherwise very similar. The color is usually white to pale yellow, and contemporary accounts speak of blue spots and many cow hairs being present. Garlic was added, for flavoring obviously, but perhaps to aid preservation. It is not always present. Some Irish sources claim that some examples do not in fact resemble modern butter, and derive from animal fat.

Security, preservation and sour flavor are all reasons for which the surplus butter was buried. The finds mostly date to the 17th century, but extend back to 200 AD. The practice seems to have died out in the early 19th century, before the famine.

Oak losset with bog butter from Durness, Scotland, dated AD 960-1260. Except for the absence of open slots for the fingers on the handles, this resembles the later "losset."

"And butter to eat
with their hog,
was seven years
buried in a bog"

Irish Hudibras, 1689

Curds and Whey was what we now call "Cottage Cheese." Bonnyclabber was once sold in stores in the American South. It is self-fermented from curdled sour milk. Raw milk that has soured is not like pasteurized milk which becomes putrid and rotten. The end result resembles Cottage Cheese.

Right: A firkin (above) and mether, (right) of bog butter, both carved from solid wood with rebated bases. The lid of the firkin is now missing.

Below: Experimental archaeology, with butter prepared in wooden and fabric containers, and buried in the bog, being retreived later. The taste was said to be like old spermaceti.