



Coshering: O'Rourke's Noble Fare

Choshering (*Cóisireacht*) was the Irish feasting. Fynes Moryson (1617) says when the Irish lords and their followers went out “coshering, they go as it were on progress, to live upon their tenants, till they have consumed all the victuals the poor men have or can get.” But Luke Gernon (1620) gives a more complete meaning: “Cosherings are publick invitations, by occasion of marriages, neighbourhood or the like, and for the present open house.” Stanyhurst (1584) says “Their noblemen, and noblemen’s tenants, now and then make a set feast, which they call coshering, whereto flock all their retainers, whom they name followers, their rhymers, their bards and harpers that feed them with music: and while the harper twangeth or singeth a song all the company must be whist (quiet) or else he chafeth like a cutpurse, by reason his harmony is not had in better price.” The chanting of bardic poetry to harp accompaniment was a key element that will be examined in more detail.

Seating, Furnishing and Dishes

In 1529, the ambassdor of the emperor Charles V recalled his meeting with the Earl of Desmond, who was accompanied by “500 halberdiers” (galloglass) at Dingle. The Earl professed his loyalty to Charles, and “We then banqueted upon the ground.”

And Fynes Moryson (1617) adds that it was the custom to sit “with crossed legs like tailors,” quoting the account of a Bohemian baron who visited O’Cahan at the height of Tyrone’s Rebellion. An anonymous Spanish account of Ireland in 1579 states: “They freely seat themselves on hay, or straw, or grass; but they avoid the hard ground and benches.” So the feast was frequently an outdoor affair, Barnaby Rich saying (1610), “The manner of their sitting in this great

feasting is this: stools nor tables they have none, but, a good bundle of straw strewed about the floor, they set themselves down one by another.” Derricke (1581) specified—

Their cushions are of straw, of rushes, or of hay,
made bank-set-wise with withies, their tails to underlay.

Withies are flexible green willow stems, and Logan (in *The Scottish Gael*, 1831) surmised that these were used to bind cushion-like seats of straw, rushes or hay, splaited into matts or hassocks. These straw seats (*bhatail*) could be simpler than this, though, and lasted late enough to be described by the Irish Folklore Commision, where we read of men who sat “on a wad of straw (*ar bhatail chochain*),” and “a wee cushion...or a bottle of straw to go under them.”

Dubliner Richard Stanihurst confirmed all of this in 1584; “In their coshering they sit on straw, they are served on straw.” Rich continues, “Another burden of straw, being shaken over their legs, doth serve them to set on their dishes. Perhaps, if it be in the time of summer, ...in stead of straw they use green rushes... This is both table and tablecloth, whereon they use to place their dishes. Victual they shall have plenty—beef, mutton, pork, hens, rabbits, and all together served in a great wooden platter.” Derricke says:

Their platters are of wood, by cunning turners made.
But not of Pewter, (credite me), as is our English trade.

His famous woodcut shows three large dishes laid on what appears to be a long, low board. John Harrington, after visiting Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, in 1599, spoke fondly of the “fern table and fern forms, spread under the stately canopy of heaven.” and Moryson in

1617 wrote “...indeed they have no tables, but set their meat upon a bundle of grass, and use the same grass as napkins to wipe their hands.” But low, portable furniture was occasionally carried to booleys, and Pococke described traditional Irish seating in 1754 “All their vessels are of wood, most of them cut out of solid timber, their stools are long and narrow like a stilion, and their table is a long sort of stool about twenty inches broad and high and two yards long: their food chiefly oatcakes baked on the griddle...”

In 1683, John Dunton feasted with O’Flaherty in Iar-Connacht, in a very archaic manner, and described the board— “At the upper end where the lady sate was placed an heap of oaten cakes, above a foot high, such another in the middle and the like at the lower end; at each side of the middle heap were placed two large vessells filled with Troander or the whey made with buttermilk and sweetmilk, which being about two days old was wonderfull cold and pleaseing in that hott time of the day.” Elsewhere, he describes the wooden vessels the Troander was served in: “the woman of the house took a square wooden vessell called a meddar all of one piece cutt out of a tree; and putting some soure milk in it, into which she dipped her nasty fingers twice or thrice to pick out some dirt, she carried it to a cow for they were all before their doores, and with the milk she made a syllibub, which they call Troander; I was surprized at the pleasing taste and extraordinary coldness of it, on such a sudden.”

Utensils

Moryson (1617) says “They desire no broth, nor have any use of a spoon.” The only utensils were, as Derrick says, “a foyner of three quarters of a yard long,” for a knife—

Long stabbers pluck they forth, instead of
handsome knives,
and with the same they flash me out, good God!
what pretty shives.
Not shives of bread, I mean, for that were very rare,
But gobs of flesh not boiled enough, which is their
common fare.

This is confirmed by the anonymous Spanish account of 1579, which says, “The knives which are used at table are so long, that they exceed even their daggers in size.” The ordinary *sgian fada*, or long knife commonly carried by the kerne, was about 18" long in the blade, but this may indicate a longer knife used for eating.



Replicas of traditional Irish vessels by Robin Wood. The *lamhogs* (front) are turned; the the *methers* (rear) carved.

Cuach is the word for goblet in the Book of the O’Byrnes, a 16th century compilation. This may represent the “eared” drinking bowl of that same name that survived in later Highland context. According to the State Papers Turlough Looney O’Neill (fl .1570) drank wine from a wooden bowl.

Portions and Places

In 1394, Richard II received the four principal Irish chiefs’ submissions in Dublin and chronicler notes that the chiefs were used to “eating and drinking next to their minstrels and servants and sharing the same tankard.” They were much put out when Richard’s heralds insisted that they occupy a high table while their servants were relegated to a lower one. In his Voyage through the Kingdom of Ireland in 1681, Dineley mentions that the Irish dance ‘after their country fashion, that is the long dance one after the other of all conditions: masters, mistresses and servants.’ showing the same relatively democratic approach to social relations in the Gaelic community.

Nonetheless, the seating was by a strict hierarchy, and preserved the Iron Age practice of apportioning cuts of meat by status—as in the “hero’s portion.” The Spanish account of 1579 states: “The more honourable person sits in the center; the next in dignity sits at his right, and so in order until the range of seats is filled. All sit facing the door; that thus, they say, they may always be ready to repel the attacks of their enemies.” Derricke claims that “Friers have the chiefest and highest rooms at feasts among the Irishry...” and says “Before he takes his rome, a Frier doeth beginne to blesse the Rebell (Chief) with his wife (an example of the sort of blessing said at such a feast is given at the end)...

And next his Surgion he doth sette at Friar's side,
And then himself his rome enjoyth adorned
with his Bride.

(In fin) the hellishe route like luckie fellowes mette,
Doe sit them doune on strawe or gronde, their
victualles for to gette.

Dr. Hanmer (Chaplain to the Duke of Ormond) wrote a "Miscellaneous Collection Relating to Ireland" around 1594, found in the State Papers, which sets out the apportioning at Gaelic Irish Feasts, which incidentally enumerates the inmates of a Chief's household—

Cow.—

The head, tong, and feet to the smith.

Neck, to the butcher.

2 small ribbs, that goe with the hind quarters, to the Taylor.

Kidneys, to the physitian.

Marybones to the dony-lader (*duine laidir* lit. strong man, probably the Lord's galloglass), the strongest man in the hous.

Udder, to the harper.

Liver, to the carpenter.

A peece to the garran-keper. (garran=pack horse)

Next bone, from the knee to the sholder, to the horse-boy.

Choise pece of the beef to the Shott.

The hart, to the cow-heard.

Next choise pece to the housewif of the house.

The third choic to the nurse.¹

Tallow, for candles.

Hide, for wyne and aquavita.

Black poodings for the plowman.

Bigge poodings for the wever.

Kylantony [Kyl-Anthony?], the a—e pooding, to the porter.²

Dowleagh, a brode long pece, lying upon the gutts, to the calf-keper.

Sweete-bred, to hor that is with child.

Rump, to him that cutts the beef (i.e., the Chief).

Tripes to the kater.³

The drawer of water hath the great bigg poding.

Mutton.—

Head, the horse boy.

Neck, the garran-keper.

Liver, the carpenter.

Sholder, to the astronomer.⁴

Bag pooding, for the man that brings water.

The hart and the feet for the shepherd.

Skyne, for the cook.

(¹ The "nurse" was not the modern servant of that name, but a woman who tended the sick and wounded.)



²When Feagh MacHugh O’Byrne was proclaimed traitor in 1595, he sent his “porter” to Dublin as a spy.

³Sir John Davies says the meat eaten in the houses of the Monaghan chieftains was stolen out of the English Pale, for which “every one of them keepeth a cunning thief whom he calleth his caterer.” And Campion observed that whenever the Irish “sent their *cators* to pryloyn their neighbors or friends,” the Brehons were called on to judge and punish the offense by a fine.

⁴“Astronomer” indicates the “physitian,” as the doctor used astrology to guide his treatments .)

As Derricke says, “As for the greatest Karne, thei have the cheefest stuffe, Though durtie tripes and offalls like please underknaves enoufe.”

Not surprisingly, this all mirrors Highland practice, recorded by Dr. Johnson at the end of the 18th century during his tour of the Hebrides— “When a beef was killed for the house, particular parts were claimed as fees by the several officers or workmen. What was the right of each I have not learned. The head belonged to the smith, and the udder of a cow to the piper; the weaver had likewise his particular part, and so many pieces followed these precriptive claims that the Lord’s was at last but little.”



Feasting in the Castle of CuConnacht Maguire, as depicted in the diorama at Enniskillen Castle.

Summary

James Logan in the Scottish Gael offered a good summary of the foregoing:

“An extract from the work of Barnaby Riche will give an idea of the coshering feasts of the Irish, and the viands with which the company were enlivened. Good bundles of straw, or, in summer, green rushes were laid on the floor, on which the guests sat down, another bundle being shaken over their legs, on which were placed the dishes and meat.

The rhymers sang, and the harpers played, whilst the company regaled upon beef, mutton, pork, hens, and rabbits, all put together in a great wooden dish. They had also oaten cakes, and good store of aqua vitae, without which it was not to be termed a feast, and on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, when, according to their religion, they dare eat no meat, they substituted plenty of fish.

Derrick gives some other particulars of Irish banquets, which farther illustrate the manners of the people. Before they sat down, the priest blessed the whole party, and repeated his benediction before they rose from the table, after which, we are given to understand, they were well prepared for an assault on the English, a favorite pastime. The seats were formed of straw, or hay, plaited into mats or hassocks. They used wooden platters, and “ a foyner of three quarters of a yard long,” for a knife. Milk was their common drink, but on great occasions the uisge beatha was handed about in basins. The bards and harpers were not brought in until the repast was finished.”

The 18th century Clanrickard Memoir gives a good description of this performance. The Poet (*fili*) himself “sat proudly by,” the actual performance being carried out by the harper and the “rakry” (*recaire*), “whose proper function that was,” and who had gotten it by heart from the fili and now chanted it to harp accompaniment. A poem would frequently be composed to mark the occasion of a great feast, with references to those present.

The Cooking

Derricke says that the meat was partly boiled, and partly roasted:

“Whereof they part do roast, and other some they boil: Thus what between the sodde and roast, fierce hunger they assail.”

This was still the case in 1683 when John Dunton feasted with O’Flaherty—

“...we had at dinner no less than a whole beef boyld and roasted, and what mutton I know not so profewsly did they lay it on the table.” Later he says, after hunting with O’Flaherty’s and his “18 long greyhounds,” “we return’d home where to beef and mutton we had venison, boyld and roasted...”

In ancient Tara, two cows, and two tinnés, and two pigs was the quantity for dinner. This allowance was for a hundred men. (this matches a claim that a cow would feed 40).

As we saw above, there were also “large brown oatcakes of a foot and a half broad bak’t before the fire,” as Dinely described them (1680). Oat cakes were set on a hardening stand before the fire, and turned occasionally as they baked, They were cut into quarters called “farles” for serving.

Appendix I

Luke Gernon left an entertaining description of feasting in an Irish Castle, attening a “Cosher”—

But we will goe to the gentleman that dwells in the castle. See the company yonder, they are ryding to a coshering, lett us strike in among them. (Cosherings are publick invitations, by occasion of marriages, neighbourhood or the like, and for the present open house.)

We are come to the castle already. The castles are built very strong, and with narrow stayres, for security. The hall is the uppermost room, lett us go up, you shall not come downe agayne till tomorrow. Take no care of your horses, they shall be sessed among the tenants. The lady of the house meets you with her trayne. (At solemne invitements, the Benytee, so we call the good-wife of the house meets at the hall dore with as many of her femall kindred as are about her all on a row; to leave any of them unkist, were an indignity though it were done by the lord president.) I have instructed you

before how to accost them. Salutations paste, you shall be presented with all the drinckes in the house, first the ordinary beere, then aquavitae, then sacke, then olde-ale, the lady tastes it, you must not refuse it.

The fyre is prepared in the middle of the hall, where you may sollace yoursef till supper time, you shall not want sacke and tobacco.

By this time the table is spread and plentifully furnished with variety of meates, but ill cooked, and with out sauce. Neyther shall there be wanting a pasty or two of redd deare (that is more common with us then the fallow). The dishe which I make choyce of is the swelld mutton, and it is prepared thus. They take a principall weather, and before they kill him, it is fitt that he be shorne, being killed they singe him in his woolly skynne like a bacon, and rost him by ioynts with the skynne on, and so serve it to the table. They say that it makes the flesh more firme, and preserves the fatt. I make choyce of it to avoyd uncleanly dressing. They feast together with great iollyty and healths around; towards the middle of supper, the harper begins to tune and singeth Irish rymes of auncient making. If he be a good rymer, he will make one song to the present occasion.

Supper being ended, it is at your liberty to sitt up, or to depart to your lodgeing, you shall have company in both kind. When you come to your chamber, do not expect canopy and curtaynes. It is very well if your bedd content you, and if the company be greate, you may happen to be bodkin in the middle. In the morning there will be brought unto you a cupp of aquavitae. The aquavitae or usquebath of Ireland is not such an extraction, as is made in England, but farre more qualified, and sweetened with licoriss. It is made potable, and is of the colour of Muscadine. It is a very wholsome drinke, and naturall to digest the crudities of the Irish feeding. You may drink a knaggin without offence, that is the fourth parte of a pynte. Breakfast is but the repetitions of supper. When you are disposing of yourself to depart, they call for Dogh a dores, that is, to drink at the doore, there you are presented agayne with all the drinckes in the house, as at your first entrance. Smacke them over, and lett us departe.

Appendix 2

Rendered into English by Dean Johnathan Swift with the aid of Duaid MacFirbis, and reflecting the 16th century feasting of Brian O'Rourke

O'Rourke's noble fare - Will ne'er be forgot
By those who were there - Or those who were not.
His revels to keep, - We sup and we dine
On seven score sheep, Fat bullocks and swine
Usequebaugh to our feast - In pails was brought up,
A hundred at least, - And the madder our cup,
O there is the sport! - We rise with the light
In disorderly sort, - From snoring all night.
O how I was trick'd! - My pipe it was broke,
My pocket was pick'd - I lost my new cloak.
I'm rifled, quoth Nell, - Of mantle and kercher,
Why then fare them well, - The de'il take the searcher.
Come, harper, strike up; - But, first, by your favour,
Boy, give me a cup: - Ah! this hath some savour.
O Rourk's jolly Boys, ne'er dreamt of the Matter
'Till roused by the Noise, and Musical Clatter
They bounce from their Nest, no longer will tarry
They rise ready drest, without one Ave Mary.
They dance in a round, cutting Capers and ramping a
Mercy the Ground did not burst with their Stamping
The Floor is all wet, with Leaps and with
Jumps while the water and Sweat, Splish Splash in their
Pumps

[...]

Good Lord, what a sight, after all their good Chear
for people to fight in the midst of their Beer
They rise from the Feast, and hot are their Brains
a Cubit at Least, the Length of their Skeans
What Stabs and what Cuts, what Clatt'ring of Sticks
What Strokes on Guts, what bastings and kicks.
With Cudgels of Oak, well harden'd in Flame
an hundred heads broke, an hundred struck lame
You Churl, I'll maintain, my Father built Lusk
The Castle of Slane and Carrick Drumrusk
The Earl of Kildare, and Moynalta his brother
as great as they are, I was nurs'd by their Mother
Ask that of old Madam, She'll tell you who's who
so far up as Adam, She knows it is true
Come down with that Beam, if Cudgells are scarce
A Blow on the Weam, and a kick on the Arse.'

Pléaráca na Ruarcach i gcuimhne gach uile dhuine
Dhá dtiocfaidh is dá dtáinic is dá maireann go fóill.
Seacht bhfichid muc, mart agus caora
Dhá gcasgairt don ghasraidh gach aon lá.
Ceád páil uisce bheatha is na meadra dhá líonadh,
Ag éirghe ar maiden is againn do bhí an spóirt.
Briseadh do phíopa-sa sladadh mo phóca-sa,
Goideadh do briste-sa loisgeadh mo chlóca-sa,
Chaill mé mo bhaireád, m'fhileád,
Ó d'imigh na gairéid, ár seacht mbeannacht leó.
Cuir s[raic ar a' gcláirsigh sin, seinn suas a' plearáca
sin, An bucsa sin, 'Áine, agus gredóg le n-ol!



O'Rourke's Hall, in Lietrim. Site of the Christmas revels described in O'Rourke's Nobel Fare.