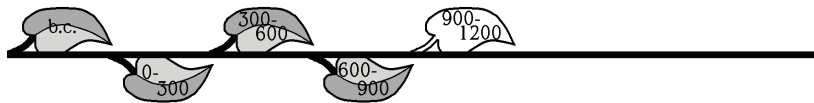


A 12th-Century Commoner



Just as the Anglo-Saxon-Danish culture of England underwent severe changes after the Norman invasion of 1066, so did the Gaelic culture of Ireland after the Normans arrived in 1172. Still, the influence of Gaelic culture can be seen in Ireland today, especially if one is familiar with earlier Irish society. This chapter describes a typical day in the life of an Irish farmer just before the arrival of the Normans in Ireland.

What made the Irish common man, the freeman, different from his English or continental European counterpart was not so much his diet or climate but his society. While the English or continental European common man was subservient to one class, the nobility, as defined by the rules of feudalism, the Irish freeman was subservient to his clan, a group that embraced the spectrum of classes from slave to rich, which made all the difference in allowing for his much greater freedoms, as we shall see. The typical 12th-century Irishman was not a noble but a freeman, called a “boaire” or strong farmer. Here is a description of the day of a boaire named Donagh living near Ferns in 1165.

Shortly before sunrise Donagh awoke to the dim candlelight in his house. The head of his couch, like the other six in the twenty-foot circular house, rested against the wall with the foot pointing toward the central fire. He slipped from the couch and methodically began to dress, as beside him his wife, Sive, rolled out to light

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another candle and do the same. Today would be his last plowing day so he picked out his yellow linen tunic from the seat-chest at the end of his couch. He wrapped this over his woolen underclothes and around his waist, to be cinched finally with his large black leather belt. Next he took down from the hook on the wall his red and blue woolen cloak fringed with fox-fur and fastened it at his shoulder with a plain brass brooch. Finally, sitting down, he tugged on his leather boots and pulled on his gloves. Only a few yellow strands of embroidery remained on the gloves to remind him of his daughter Mor's early attempts at needlework.

Without saying a word he walked over to the fire his wife had just stoked and slipped the cord of his lunch sack around his neck. Picking up a few oatcakes and a skin of milk his wife had prepared for him the night before, he slipped those into the sack resting on his hip and kissed his wife goodbye. With a knowing smile she handed him the bag of oats he'd almost forgotten to bring with him. All was done quietly for neither wanted to disturb Donagh's aged mother, who was failing. As Lorcan, the youngest, was still rubbing sleep from his eyes, Sive put out the candle that had been burning in the center of the house all night (so any passersby would know they were welcome).

Stepping over the threshold of the wattle house,¹ which kept the floor reeds in, Donagh followed the flagstones to the sluggish spring nearby. The round house was situated by several other round houses, some serving as barns for various animals, others as storage sheds, outhouses and even a sunroom. All were surrounded by a low but stout wooden wattle fence that the kindred had helped Donagh make years before to protect the family and animals from wolves and other wild beasts. Upon reaching the well, a small shallow depression outlined with rocks but full of cool crystal-clear water, Donagh dropped the bag of oats on the ground and scooped up handfuls of water to drench his face. The water ran down his finely trimmed mustache as well as through his long brown hair. Shaking his head vigorously, he set about washing his hands with the soap that lay in a small bucket

¹The walls of houses were made of sticks woven together. They would last seven or so years.

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nearby. Refreshed and ready for the plowing ahead of him, he picked up the bag and walked towards the barn. As he passed the pigsty a few squeals erupted. “You’ll be fed soon enough,” intoned Donagh.

He pushed aside the barn door and the strong odor of fresh manure hit his nostrils. Quietly he called out, “Aire. Righ. Come.” From the gloom two large oxen plodded forward. Grabbing their harness and yokes from the nearby wall, he walked them outside, quickly closing the door behind him so none of the other cattle could escape. The remaining cattle, eager to graze, began lowing. Meanwhile, the oxen immediately wandered towards the wooden enclosure’s gate and patiently waited for Donagh to open it.

“C’mon Dub,” Donagh called to his large black guard dog. Already at the man’s side, the animal ran up to the gate and waited with



Inside a boaire farmer’s enclosure

the oxen. The farmer lifted the withe that kept the wooden gate closed, stepped outside and chained Dub to a post. The surrounding sheep, which dotted the open pasture like tufts of grass in a bog, were used to his morning appearance and continued their grazing.

“That’s a good boy,” he said while rubbing the guard dog’s head. “I’ll be back mid-afternoon. You keep everyone safe, you hear?” The dog cocked his head toward Donagh as if in agreement. Turning to the oxen, the farmer yoked them together and then, holding their

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rope in his hand, he followed the path to the nearby servant's white-washed house.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the tree-tops, bathing the meadow and its farmstead in golden light, as Donagh knocked on his servant's door.

"Wake up, Aedh," he shouted before continuing on down the path that led into the surrounding forest of alders, beech and oak. Donagh had a fair distance to walk today. The plot he meant to plow was the most distant one he owned, so he had little time to talk. The servant, Aedh, was to take Donagh's pigs and the pigs of two other farmers into the woods where they would fatten themselves on the plentiful supply of acorns that had fallen in the kindred's woodland last fall.

While he entered the dark woods, Donagh began whistling a tune as thoughts about his servant drifted through his mind. Aedh can talk from morn to night without even pausing to breathe. He's not the smartest, which is why he's a servant in the first place. Keeping the oxen moving at a decent pace, Donagh remembered the time two years before when Aedh killed three of Donagh's cows. Aedh's kindred head,² the man legally responsible for all relatives in the male line of descent for three generations (starting with a great-grandfather) had decided not to have his kindred pay the fine. (If a member of the kindred could not pay a fine, the entire kindred had to pay it, unless they disinherited the member.) The kindred head chose instead to have Aedh work it off. Therefore, Aedh was Donagh's

² The kindred head was responsible for all the relatives in the "derbfine," an Irish term meaning all males who had the same great-grandfather (that is, up to and including second cousins) together with their families. The kindred head was the legal spokesman for the entire derbfine and acted on their behalf whenever one of them required legal help. He could act as a substitute father for any of the derbfine's orphans and also could banish a member from the derbfine if the others in the kindred agreed (normally because the person was too great a legal liability and couldn't be kept in check by the derbfine). The kindred head couldn't pass his position on to his son but had to pass it on to a son in another branch of the derbfine.

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servant until the three cows could be replaced, and then he would be free again to rejoin his kindred.

Soon the small, well-beaten footpath emerged from the forest and cut close to another enclosed group of houses with fewer buildings inside the circular wooden fence. It belonged to Conor, his twenty-year-old son, who had married only last year and with the help of the kindred had built this farm next to his father's. Conor waited with his one ox at the intersection of the footpath and the main road. As an "oaire" (small farmer), one ox was all he could afford. Together they walked to the distant barley field they shared with Donagh's brother, Padraig. Most of their crops were oats and flax, which fed and clothed them, but barley³ brought far more profit and could one day allow Donagh to increase his rank above boaire.

"This should be one of our last plowing days, Da," said Conor amiably as they met. "I suppose you'll be stopping by the mill to grind what's in the bag?" Unable to afford a nice cloak like his father, he pulled his bright-green jacket closer around him to ward off the morning dampness. His brown and black trousers, which were tight-fitting and reached all the way to his moccasins, were held down by a strap that passed below the instep.

"It's a bag of oats I'll be grinding," responded Donagh. "Since the mill isn't on the way home, do you mind bringing my two oxen back at the end of the day?" Conor and his ox swung in to pace alongside as they turned onto the wide main road.

"Consider it done," replied the younger man.

"You'll need to be mending that," Donagh mentioned as he pointed to a deep rut in the road.

"It'll wait," nonchalantly answered Conor.

Donagh stopped, causing the oxen to bump into and almost knock him over. Surprised, Conor turned around to see the mounting frustration on his father's face. "It will *not* wait," he said sharply. "Don't you understand? At any time you can be fined for that rut.

³ Donagh doesn't plant barley in all his fields, because if for any reason it didn't make it to harvest, he and his family would starve. Growing a range of crops is safer; if any one crop failed, the others could support him through the resulting lean year.

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It's on the road in front of your property. Fill it in tonight, after the plowing."

Surprised by the severity of the speech, Conor mutely nodded his head and they continued on.

Finally Donagh, walking in stride, broke the silence, "Sorry lad but it's wee things like that which keep my older brother, Padraig, in the position he's in now, still an ocaire (small farmer) like you, and yet he's older than I. He works at relaxation harder than most men work at their fields, so fines and penalties keep coming his way. I don't want to see you become like him. It's those that lack responsibility, that are a tad lazy, that end up going nowhere in this world. 'The Lord helps those that help themselves.'"

Shortly they stopped at one of the many fields surrounded by a ditch and a low pile of branches, firewood that hadn't been consumed that winter. The low pile would grow taller as the warm weather continued and refuse branches were added to it, until winter would again require its use.

"Waiting on Padraig again," mumbled Donagh as he dropped the bag he'd been carrying and hunkered down at the edge of the road, careful to keep the fringe of his cloak on the deep green grass rather than in the road's dirt.

"Maybe you shouldn't be so tough on him, Da," suggested Conor. "Last time he did have an excuse."

"I'll agree to that. His dog shit in the neighbor's lawn, so he had to pick it up and pay the neighbor an equal amount of butter." Donagh snorted, "If he'd chained up his dog in the first place, he wouldn't have had to pay, which in turn made him late for our plowing that day!"

A man whose face looked remarkably like Donagh's appeared around the corner of the forest pulling an ox, a harness and a yoke. His clothes, more similar to Conor's than to Donagh's, revealed his social station. From a distance, Donagh's brother Padraig waved.

Donagh rose with a smile and unfastened the brooch at his shoulder, allowing his marvelous red and blue cloak to slip to the ground. When his brother was close enough he asked, "You ready to start plowing the barley field, brother?"

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“I’d rather be plowing my wife’s field but that wouldn’t help us feed the mouths we already have,” Padraig laughed. “It would only create another which, in turn, would provoke the Kindred Head against me.”⁴

They yoked up the two ocaires’ oxen and Donagh’s two oxen, attached the harness, made the sign of the cross over the plow they had left here yesterday and began on the largest plot, Donagh’s. Grabbing the handles of the plow, Donagh signaled the oxen to start up, while Conor led them forward in a sunwise direction and Padraig dropped in the seed. The ground opened easily beneath the heavy plow and the smell of fresh earth rose to mingle with that of sweat. When the oxen slowed down, Donagh hit them from behind with his sharp goad. It was a beautiful morning to be plowing, thought Donagh. He started singing a plowing song, and they quickly joined in.

By midmorning Sive was enjoying the wan March sun as she sat with her mother-in-law, Brigit, on a small bench just outside their sunroom, a small circular house with a window cut in its golden thatched roof to allow light in. In her lap she absent-mindedly pet

⁴ Because of societal pressure, Ireland didn’t suffer from overpopulation as many other European countries did. Two factors kept families small except for those of the highest-ranking nobles. First, in Ireland, every few years the land within a kindred was redistributed equally. When a father died, the sons inherited his land equally, but at a time determined by the clan the land was redistributed. A family with twenty sons was forced to live on small portions of land until the land was redistributed, when they earned a larger share of land at the expense of their relatives. However, their relatives put a great deal of pressure on the family *not* to have twenty sons but to stop after four or five, so this situation would not occur. Perhaps the other sons would be sent to monasteries, trained as scholars, or become craftsmen. Second, the amount of wealth one held determined one’s social rank. In the case of a family with 20 sons, each son would inherit only a few items from his father, so each son’s social rank would be much lower than his father’s. A family with only a few sons would allow each son to inherit more, leading to a higher social rank.

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Devil's Paw, their cat. The morning chores had been successfully completed. After she had milked the sheep, her eleven-year-old son Murrough had taken them with the herding dog, cows, and the bull to a neighbor's for grazing. One of the neighbors whose pigs were being looked after by Aedh in return looked after Donagh's livestock. Her seventeen-year-old daughter Mor had milked their two cows, one of which was rented from a noble to replace one of those Aedh had killed, and fed the fowl.

At the feet of the two women, the youngest children, Lorcan and Cacht, pretended to be cooking with leaves and pieces of wood.

"Mother," said Mor, Sive's oldest daughter, as she hung one of her brother's orange linen bed blankets over the enclosure fence to air out, "can I swim down at the River Slaney after I'm done here?" She picked up a blue wool blanket also used for sleeping and threw it over the fence as well, causing the chickens pecking next to it to scatter away in confusion.

"Now what would you be wanting a swim for today?" asked her mother with a smile. She had noticed her daughter spending an unduly long time plaiting her hair and rouging her cheeks in front of their burnished brass mirror that morning. The brightly-colored red fingernails had not been missed either. "It's not very warm in the River," she continued, "and we've hot water here in the tub."

"It's not swimming she's about," croaked Brigit at her side, her eyes gleaming brightly at her granddaughter, "it's young Turlough." The old woman went back to mending the pile of clothes she had beside her. The cock chose this time to belt out a cock-a-doodle-do as he strutted by.

The blush that rose in Mor's face could be seen only momentarily for quickly she turned back to hanging more sleeping blankets over the fence, a chore she did daily. "And would that be wrong?" she softly asked.

"Oh no, child," laughed her mother as she pushed Devil's Paw from her lap and adjusted the yellow hood that covered her hair, a sign she was married. "Turlough's a good lad with a decent future. I suppose I'd rather see you pursued by Dermot MacMurrough's son Connor but you're a bit old for him."

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A cackle burst from Brigit, the grandmother, which brought on a coughing spell, forcing her to lay down her mending needle. Quickly Sive produced a cup of water over which she made the sign of the cross and handed it to the older woman. Drinking deeply, she looked kindly on Sive as her attack ceased. Taking a deep breath, Brigit spoke weakly, "She's saying of course you can go, lass, but since Turlough is too young to take up farming implements, she'd prefer it if no wild oats were sown." Brigit loved to embarrass her granddaughter. The old woman pulled her dark blue cloak tighter around herself, pausing in her mending while she composed herself.

A mischievous expression developed on Mor's face as she asked, "May I take Barley?" She motioned to their horse, really only a work pony, which had been set free to roam in the enclosure hours ago.

"Next you'll be asking us to move out so you and Turlough may move in!" chided Sive. Realizing Mor wasn't sure what her mother's answer had been, Sive quickly said, "Of course you may, lass."

Moments later, Mor finished hanging all the linen and woolen blankets, turned towards her mother and grandmother, and said, "Bye, then. I'll be home in time for dinner." She scampered off through the enclosure gate with a bridle and their brown pony, Barley, following closely behind. Neither woman noticed that on her way out she'd bent down to pick up a sack similar to the one in which Donagh had carried his lunch.

"That's a good one we have," mentioned Brigit as she picked up her mending again. "She'll make a fine wife. Oh, and you will too," the old woman suddenly added as Cacht, Sive's eight-year-old daughter, stood up and leaned against her withered arms.

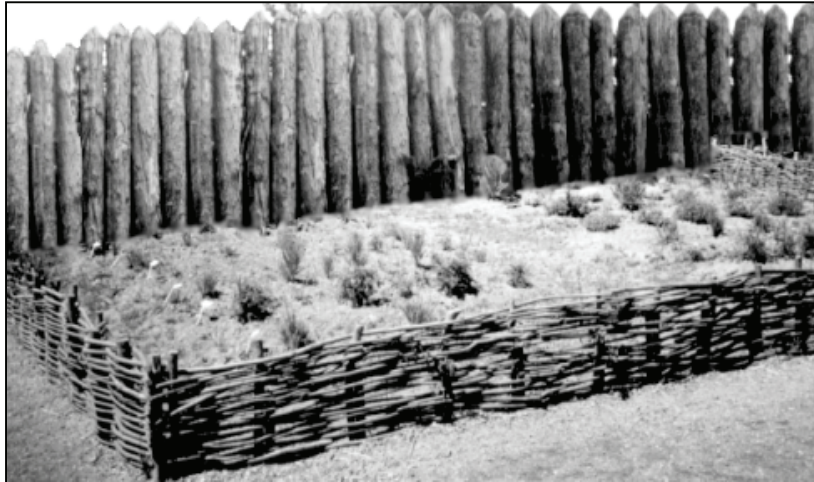
"I want to go, too," said the child, obviously bored with her cooking game.

"Ah, no you don't," quietly answered Sive, "your older brother Murrough should be returning from delivering the sheep and cattle any minute." Cacht turned a glum expression towards her mother, who continued, "and he said he was bringing back Enna, Ashling, Donchad and Dervorghal."

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Cacht's eyes widened and she jumped from her grandmother's side. "Yes," she shouted, "is it surely true?"

"As true as the yellow eye in the blue face you see above you now," answered Sive. "Now help your grandmother stand as I shoo both of you out of the enclosure with young Lorcan here. I need to do some weeding in the garden." She grabbed Lorcan's hand, her youngest of only four years, and together they leisurely walked the short distance through the gate. Just outside the gate was another bench, positioned alongside the fenced-in garden. The meadow that surrounded their farm had a large solitary oak tree, which the grazing sheep collected under during storms. During the day, only the breeze disturbed the long winter grass.



A typical herb garden

Sive wandered over to the earth Donagh had hoed a few weeks earlier and began pulling weeds from among the herbs, garlic, carrots, onions and celery. A small part of the garden had also been set aside for medicinal plants, and here Sive weeded very carefully while softly singing a sweet planting melody. Meanwhile, Brigit pushed aside the clothes she'd brought that needed mending, patted the worn wooden bench on either side of her and invited Lorcan and