SWEAT-HOUSES

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THE SWEAT-HOUSES or *tithe alaise*, so common a feature of north Leitrim, west Cavan and neighbouring parts of Co Fermanagh, were a very effective means of securing relief from a range of health problems, ranging from rheumatism to skin issues. They were bee-hive shaped structures, built entirely of stone without mortar, though with soft clay covering the joints between the stones to prevent heat-loss. They were constructed of materials that were in plentiful supply. Some were quite high, being as much as fifteen to seventeen feet in height. Their internal dimensions could range from four to even ten feet in diameter. Entrance was through a small door of less than four feet in height and never wider than two feet in width.

The sweat-house was first primed by someone (maybe the patient) lighting a fire inside using turf, which heated the stones. Once these had attained a sufficient heat, (which could range from hours to maybe days) the fire was thrown outside and green rushes were spread on the floor. The house was then ready and the patient had to undress, leaving their clothes on a nearby bush and crawl inside on all fours. The door would then be temporarily sealed, using either sods or stones.

There was no set time for how long the patient had to 'sweat it out'. Times of between twenty minutes to an hour were mentioned, but as watches were rare pieces of personal jewellery the rule would have been to stay there for as long as the humidity could be tolerated. At the end of the treatment the patient would emerge to be wrapped in a blanket to prevent catching cold. The treatment was open to members of both sexes, and if the sweat-house was large enough a small group could benefit collectively from the steam.

Various stories grew up around the use of sweat-houses. There were many instances of people emerging from the sweat-house to find that their clothes had disappeared. Another story from Alteen near Dowra Co, Cavan tells how a group of women went to the nearby sweathouse. A young boy, who was something of a troublemaker, followed them. Once they had disrobed and gone inside he climbed up on to the sweat-house's roof and jumped vigorously on top, much to the dismay and concern of the poor women inside.

Sweat-houses have given rise to some mistaken suppositions over the years. The similarity of treatment with the Finnish and Estonian sauna have led some people to suggest a foreign, especially a Scandinavian origin. While it is probable that the Vikings who visited Ireland from the ninth century onwards (whether they had heard about the Harp or not!) knew this form of steam therapy, they came from too far west in Scandinavia – the Finns inhabited the north-east of the Baltic. It is equally probable that it was a treatment which grew up on its own in Ireland and may well have been used over a much wider area of territory than the current distribution of surviving sweat-houses would suggest.

Sweat-houses are viewed as ancient structures, part of the archaeological record of the landscape, but just how old are they? Their use may go back many centuries, if not millennia, but there is some evidence pointing to their construction (or possibly re-construction) as late as the mid nineteenth century. This comes from the records of the Irish Folklore Commission, as taken down in national schools throughout Ireland in the late 1930s. The folklore commissions' records from Kilduff national school just outside Dowra are particularly interesting. Respondents identified not less than three sweat-houses which had been built within memory – those in the townlands of Annagh Upper and Cornagee had been built about seventy-five years earlier (c.1863) while one in Alteen had been erected seventy years' earlier i.e. c.1868. What was more, the people responsible for building them were mentioned by name.

In north Leitrim and west Cavan they remained in use until the early years of the twentieth century. It was stated at Kilduff in 1938 that another sweat-house in Alteen had not been used 'these last twenty years' thereby implying that its use continued till as late as 1918. They were replaced by the fruits of indoor plumbing, such as baths, and inevitably the usages of generations were discarded as twee and old-fashioned in favour of the latest new-fangled gadget, whose efficacy might not be nearly as good.