

All-Ireland Final in Ballinamore

Kevan Murphy

OUR NATIONAL SCHOOL was split in two, there were two factions, we were the 'towns' and they were the 'countrys' i.e. they came from the country and we resided in the town. There wasn't any animosity between us, everybody got on well together but any time there was a need for teams such as in football, tug-o-war or a faction fight, the familiar cry went up 'It'll be 'countrys' against the 'towns'.

Us 'towns' were intrigued by our country cousins and their strange ways, they talked and talked about cattle and grass and tractors until those bovines they talked about came home. They came to school on bicycles or were dropped off from speeding tractors making their way with rattling milk cans to what they called the 'Kraymery', they brought their lunch to school, batch loaf sandwiches with milk in screw cap whiskey bottles, they were dressed immaculately always with shirts buttoned up to the top, they never missed a day at school unless they were going to a mart and if they hadn't their homework done they were always exonerated with the same old excuse-'we had visitors last night, sir'.

Us 'towns' could only dream of a time when those benevolent 'visitors' would come to our houses in the evenings and free us from homework. Despite our differences we were indebted to those 'countrys' though. They brought something of great cultural significance to our drab school lives, No, it wasn't just the black and white sheepdog that insisted on following them to school



Vincent Moran, Mohill, representing Sligo, winner of the All-Ireland Conker Championships 2002 being presented with the perpetual trophy

once in a while, they brought something we would never forget – Conkers!

I can still remember the day I witnessed a conker match for the first time, a circle of 'countrys' grouped together in the porch of the old school taking shelter from the rain, they were very secretive and reluctant to give us 'towns' a look in. 'What have they? What are they at? Is it fags? Pictures of wimmen?' No it was much better, it was something we would never have thought possible even from those ingenious 'countrys', it was a game of some sort, for two players, each contestant had threaded a shoe lace through the seed of a horse chestnut tree and with a pendulum motion swung his so called 'conker' to try and smash his opponents.

It was an unbelievably simple game but it had everything - rivalry, cunning, action and danger! We stood there looking on like cave men

watching fire for the first time. We couldn't wait to get home that evening to hunt for our own chestnuts.

Dr Farrelly had a tree inside his gates and another with long spreading branches on the rock. There high up on those magnificent boughs we could see the spike covered husks of the horse chestnuts. We shook those branches for all we were worth, an odd chestnut hit the ground with a thud, we threw sticks and stones up to try and dislodge a few more. Then out of sheer desperation we climbed up and out onto those long limbs to reach our 'fools gold', we realised then why the timber of the horse chestnut tree is worthless, as those long limbs invariably snapped and we also hit the ground with a thud, a much louder and more painful thud. From there, bruised but unbroken but winded and contemplating knocking on Dr Farrelly's door for first aid, we limped out to May McGovern's at Willowfield. There were several chestnut trees along the old avenue there and another few at Gaffney's, another stood far out at Herbie Taylor's, we had to collect the biggest and best conkers no matter how far it took us. Those 'countrys' had to be beaten at their own game.

Next day at school it was 'countrys' against the towns' once again, this time combat with conkers. Of course the 'countrys' were again far ahead of us on the evolutionary scale when it came to their humble little game of conkers, they had many strategies we knew nothing about and many rules of engagement such as 'first crack on tangles' and 'move your

conker - free knuckle shot' to name just two. They also insisted on holding up their conker in front of the school wall when it was our turn to strike, so if we missed, as we often did, we would pulverize our conker against the wall.

Despite our hand picked best of the Willowfield road conkers, they seemed to be no match for the conkers of the country, for reasons we learned of only years later, they had used many dirty tricks of the trade to make their conkers stronger, they soaked them in vinegar, varnish and various other hardening agents. They used conkers that they had stored from the year before and so were rock hard, there was even a rumour going around that they had filled hollowed out conkers with concrete!

When we finally left national school we left the game of conkers behind too. In secondary school we had to conform to their ways and adopt their rules and play their games, the best on offer was basketball, a

pitiful, pathetic pastime confined to the exercise yard with no danger in it unless you accidentally-on-purpose kicked that big stupid ball and were spotted from one of the machine gun towers and summoned to the staff room. No, there was no fun in basketball, even the girls played it and how we longed for conkers.

Years later, in 1999 our longing came to an end as we reverted back to our childhood once again when a few of us, both 'country's' and 'towns' came together for the common good to bring our humble school yard game of conkers to the masses and to the new millennium.

John Ryan's pub Ballinamore was the venue for the first All-Ireland Conker Championships and a woman emerged the winner! We were all beaten at our own game this time; Aileen Sweeney representing Mayo also won the All-Ireland title again in 2001.

We are proud to hold an All-Ireland competition of this magnitude in

Leitrim each year and indeed in Ballinamore. Its popularity has grown beyond all our expectations; each of the 32 entrants fights hard for the title and to get their name engraved on the specially commissioned perpetual trophy in the shape of a conker.

Unlike the days of yore, cheating is no longer possible as all conkers are supplied on the night and taken from the same horse chestnut tree every year. Each of the 31 bouts are strictly refereed by an Eslin man, (the only conkers referee in the country) Aidan Mc Crann, who claims he learned how to referee conkers 'out of a book'.

The event is now held in Pat Joes pub each year at Halloween, we discovered that this is the time of the year when the conkers are ripe and have fallen down on the ground where they can be easily and safely collected.

Ni thagann ciall roimh aois. Sense doesn't come before age.

SUNDAY MORNING

Ronan Gallagher

*Corner boys stand on well-worn feet
Suck wet woodbines, two fingered,
Through yellow stained teeth.
Church bells call the pious to meet,
A gentle breeze rustles a chip bag street.
O'Carolan sits on his concrete seat,
Beneath the shade of a leafy sheet.
Chattering neighbours meet and greet
Folded newspapers and ice cream treats
Under a haze of shimmering heat.
Sunday morning,
On Main St.*

ELEGY FOR A YOUNG WOMAN

John Rooney

*I can see the childish scrawl,
With her name written in red biro,
On the Art Exam Christmas test,
'Sandra McDermott'
in plain letters, and recall;
A quiet child with the rest
of the class in Mohill Vocational
School, fourteen years ago.
Now I am told,
That Sandra at twenty-eight years old
Is lying in a grave, lifeless and cold;
As the local paper is full of praise
For her joyous and friendly ways;
Illness and Death seemed to conspire
In ending Sandra's days entire*

MOHILL 1914

Liam O' Brien

*Standing in the rain
Listening
To the recruiters speak
Foreign lands
Freedom for small nations.
O Carolan sits there now
No concerto for ye boys
Just a uniform
And the only new boots
You ever got
To run 20 yards
Or did you get further
To see their eyes,
Before your long sleep
In a grey ridge
Far away from your own.*