GOODBYE TO THE PEAT BOG

Eileen McNabola

IT WAS WITH great sadness that I learned of the cessation of turf cutting on a number of bogs in rural Ireland.

For centuries turf has been our main source of fuel heating and cooking in our homes, It was used to run our locomotives, heat the iron to shoe our horses fuel our lime kilns and numerous other uses.

My memory of the bog is one of great content, a feeling I got as I escaped to that cerene place to work or play. In late Spring and Summer many an evening I spent saving the turf and truly enjoying the surroundings. The corncrake croaking in the hedges nearby, the frogs leaping in the bog holes and the peace and beauty all around was a therapy no medic could prescribe for a nervous condition. To dangle you feet in the bog water was really soothing and very good for tired feet too. How well I remember the day of the tuif cutting. In my youth, this was done by hand and in later years the great turf machines took over. This took a lot of the hard work from the farmer, but it meant the children could not help as they were now 'in the way' and could get injured. My father cut all the turf by hand using a 'Slane' or a spade to cut each sod and throw them out to waiting hands of a helper who built them evenly on the barrow, then he would wheel the full barrow out to the spread ground where he tipped his load and hurried back for a repeat performance. Sometimes three or four neighbours would come to give a hand and thism meant all the years turf would be cut in a day.

The children were often banished from the bog for any kind of mischief such as throwing clods at the adults or putting obstacles in the way of the barrows. Our main job of the day was bringing meals to the workers. No time could be wasted leaving the bog for a hot dinner in the farm house. So the meals brought to the hard working men generally consisted of lots of hard boiled eggs, a big dish of home cured ham or bacon cut in thick slices and nearly two or three soda cakes, depending on how many men were on the bog working. A little gallon of tea washed down the food and a contented bunch went back to work after their feast. I always thought any kind of food tasted better in the bog, perhaps it was the outdoor fresh air or just the novelty of a picnic.

At the end of the day it was a joy to see the whole spread bank covered with black piles of turf. It looked like a large black carpet, and my fathers good wishes to the men meant he was thankful to one and all for their generous help and he too would return the favour in due course when his neighbours were cutting their own turf.

A week or ten days later it was the turn of the children to get to work. All the piles of turf were now dry enough to be spread evenly on the ground in order to dry out. This was no easy task especially where the piles had been thrown too close together. If the weather remained mainly dry, all the sods had to be turned to dry on the other side, this was a back breaking job and many a night I went to bed with an aching back and legs but we knew the work had to be done and we were happy to be able to do it.

No televisions or radios adorned our homes to amuse us, so when lessons were done after school, we were happy to head for the bog. We had lots of fun too catching frogs and lady birds, making daisy chains and listening carefully to identify the different song birds. We played leap frog and hide and seek but we never forgot our reason for being in the bog was to save the turf. We knew how necessary the turf crop was to the household during the long winter ahead.

If the weather was suitable the turf was ready to clamp after another week or ten days and with all the clamps in straight rows we felt we had achieved our goal for that year. Of course later on my father had to draw them to the house with the horse and cart and he would tip them out of the cart in front of the shed and the children had to throw them into the back of the long shed. When the turf got high in the shed, it was my job (being the smallest) to climb up and pack them tightly up to the roof. Many a scraped knee I got at this job as the turf were now so hard and dry. I honestly believe the children of today would rebel at such hard work.

As the old folks say 'Hard work never killed anyone'. The youngsters in Ireland would benefit greatly from the exercise and good clean bog air if they spend some of their spare time rearing turf instead of watching television.

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The Long and Winding road
that leads to your door
Will never disappear
I've seen that road before
It always leads me here
leads me to your door

PAUL McCARTNEY