

MARE'S TAILS AND FROG'S JACKETS

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MY GRANDFATHER, Henry Joe, was a dedicated amateur forecaster. Standing on our concrete 'front street', he'd look to the 'butt of the hill' for 'mare's tails', 'goat's hair' or 'mackerel' cloud patterns, or a red sky at night 'the shepherd's delight' — though we had no shepherds in Arigna that I could think of, only sheepmen with 'spyglasses' watching flocks where they weren't supposed to be in the Coillte plantation. And these being the Cold War years we were inclined to finish the proverb saying, "Red sky in the morning, nuclear warning".

Henry Joe had both long and short range indicators. Frogs wearing bright 'jackets' meant a good summer; dark-skinned frogs were camouflaged for dull, wet weather. The heron flying upstream meant a dry spell, or the cattle lying down in the pasture chewing the cud was a good sign, though the cattle standing under the hedge with the daisies in the pasture closed and the trees looking silver with the leaves lifted by the breeze meant rain. A heavy harvest of haws foretold a hard winter; crows building their nests lower down in the trees meant a stormy one.

One of the most unfailingly reliable short-term indications of the weather where we grew up was seeing a neighbour cut all of his meadows. The man was 'steeped in misfortune', and regardless of the forecast you could count on the weather breaking whenever he cut.

Of course for men like my grandfather, and our luckless neighbour, second-guessing the weather could make the difference between having enough fodder for the

winter, or the heartbreak and expense of having the whole lot rotted into the ground. And there is a story told about a small parish in Connemara where the men wouldn't dare cut a blade of grass until they rowed out to Inishmore Island to talk to a canny old Aran-islander who reassured them that the weather would stay fine, or warned them that they should delay the hay saving because there was a storm coming in. For years the people of that parish never failed to get their hay. And then one summer, the men rowed out to the island as usual to ask the old man what was in store. He said he couldn't tell them. They asked why not? He'd never let them down before. And he said he was sorry, that the battery was gone in his radio and he missed the forecast.

At home we had a PYE 'solid state' valve radio on a high shelf in the kitchen, a wire 'aerial' reaching from the back out through a hole drilled in the window frame and tied to the top of a tall elm tree. With her ear bent to hear the announcer my grandmother would warn, "They're giving out rain on the radio."

Then we rented a television: a black and white 'Pilot' set with 'snowy' reception. And my father spent the better part of his time standing behind it cursing under his breath and adjusting the 'vertical hold' knob.

But technology was improving, and along with little black cut-out clouds that often slipped out of place on the weather map on the television, we had weatherman Paddy McHugh talking about 'skimmishes', and later, with a little stick in his hand,

he'd point to the latest breakthrough in weather forecasting—the satellite picture. Though Maureen Potter reckoned that those endlessly grey and white swirls of cloud that he pointed to were in fact where Paddy had blown cigarette smoke over the carpet in RTE and taken the photograph himself.

Today we have weather 'babes' on TG4 cheerily telling us, 'steallsaidh báisteach go lá na cinniúna'. And though we might poke fun, by and large Met Éireann get their forecasts right a whole lot more often than my grandfather ever did. Added to which, in North Sligo alone, I've seen the sky blue and the road dry in Ballyconnell, wet at Lissadell, dry again at Drumcliff, but with a shower in Rathcormac and growling thunder in Glencar. While on Inishbofin this year the owner of 'The Dolphin' never stopped giving out about the weather forecasters in Dublin talking about rain being general over Ireland while it was perfectly dry outside his front door; because 'Bofin', he maintained, never got any credit for having a micro-climate.

I hadn't the heart to tell him that we hold the same belief here, seeing the rain clouds pile up against Ballintrillick or roll up Ballisodare Bay into Sligo while it's dry in Maugerow—where by the same token there might not be a puff of wind in Sligo town but you'd feel the car pushed sideways on the New Road by a 'whillet' of the barbaric black wind we get out on this peninsula. The challenge for the forecasters being that every part of Ireland delights in its own micro-climate.