

“LIVING”—off the Land

*John Rooney, talking to
Agricultural Correspondent,
“Agricola.”*

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sense of isolation.”**

THE SUCCESS stories one generally hears about concern our emigrated brothers. We listen to the tales of “crops of gold at the end of the rainbow.” The emphasis is on going away to improve oneself, to find fulfilment in life and to accumulate wealth.

Our dreams of “faraway hills” cloud the fact that people at home can succeed, and can find fulfilment in life and a good standard of living. John Rooney of Carrickleitrim near Manorhamilton is one among many of these. In the shadow of Benbo, he and his family farm 36 acres of difficult land. There, he has achieved fulfilment and a good standard of living for his family of nine. He discounts the general opinion that farming in north Leitrim is a “wash out.”

John purchased his farm in 1952. “It wouldn’t feed snipe,” aptly described its condition at the time. Opinion considered it ridiculous to imagine how a man could get enough to eat from it, let alone live decently. The dwelling house was thatched and the out-offices poor. Twenty-four of its acres were either heather mountain or were covered with whins. Locally it was known as “a three-cow place.” Alone, the appearance of the heather-clad mountain was fit to break a man’s spirit and send him scurrying for the night mail boat to Holyhead.

John was not lacking in spirit. The assets he brought with him to Carrickleitrim were: four cows, a pride in the land, good managerial ability and a determination to get a decent living from the resources on hand. He realised the need for hard work. He appreciated the importance of advice and good planning. These he knew to be the

key to successful farming. In order to carry more cows and followers, he knew he must invest in the “bag stuff.” John did not believe in conacre as a way out. His feelings are: that “Money is better invested in artificial fertiliser for developing your own farm. One acre of manured land is better than five acres of hungry rented land.” To expand his enterprises, he availed of all the schemes necessary.

The house was reconstructed in 1954. Two years later he got married. By 1960, after years of hard work and making full use of land project schemes, he changed the “three-cow place” to an “eight-cow place.” Now, he carried eight cows and their calves all year round. The “snipe walk tag” was fast becoming a myth.

Stage two, I consider even a greater achievement: The unkindly heather mountain was still practically unproductive. “If I am to expand further, that mountain must grow grass,” said John.

The mountain towers over the farm, his dwelling and out offices are at its base. After seeking advice, he limed seven acres by hand. Using the then new technique of surface seeding and manuring, he got these seven acres into production. He has been liming and surface-seeding the rest of the mountain ever since. Where heather vegetation predominated, now there is a productive clover sward. You can see this transformation if you are travelling on the Cloonaquinn road. Looking across the meandering Bonnet, John’s mountain is a vivid green. I call it “John’s mountain” because I feel he waved a magic wand over it.

By 1965 a ten-cow byre was built. The original "three-cow place" became a ten-cow place. Part of the future plans are conquering the rest of the mountain and carrying twelve cows. This is a fantastic stocking under these circumstances.

Since the limit in cows is twelve, John is going into pigs to supplement his income. At the moment he has two sows purchased from the Pigs and Bacon Commission. He intends to expand his pig enterprise to a ten sow unit and fatten their progeny.

John believes that good farming demands a higher managerial ability than any other business. He strongly feels that advanced planning, together with the keeping of farm accounts are essential for efficient farming. Farm accounts have been kept religiously since he first entered, back in the early sixties, for The Farm Management Competition run

by the County Committee of Agriculture. In this competition he has been regularly winning prizes and last year he was Reserve Champion for the county.

"I have a dread of the 'tree' coming near. It brings with it a sense of isolation. I would have the feeling that it is time for me to get out also." John admits that certain tracts of land are only fit for forestry but too much potentially good land is being planted. He denounces the sophisticated conclusion of those who write north Leitrim off with a "tree." "Trees grow well in north Leitrim land. So the experts say. But so will cattle and sheep if the fertility is improved," says John. "Forestry may be a long-term national asset. I have more time for the immediate national assets of people, cattle and sheep."

Nothing would induce John to leave and get a job, not even £40 per week on a building



Contentment

John Rooney, his wife and family of nine, photographed in their home at Carrickleitrim.

site. First, he admitted he must get a reasonable living from farming, otherwise, he would be forced to get a job. "The land is in my blood," says John. Life on a farm suits his temperament better than the monotonous hum-drum of life at the end of a conveyer belt or the dust of a building site. "You are master of your own destiny. You benefit from improvements made and the satisfaction is yours," agreed John.

His wife too would prefer life on a farm to life in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a housing estate. "A woman's home is her place. The present-day farmer's wife must have all the amenities of her town sister. These include running water, bathroom, toilet and if possible a washing machine." These facilities, she believes, should attract

girls to marry farmers. Drudgery must be cut to a minimum.

Both John and his wife are convinced that television is now a social necessity in rural Ireland. Since the emphasis is more on travel nowadays, their car is also a social necessity.

What rewards has John got for his labours? He has a comfortable home for his wife and family. Running water, bathroom and toilet are on hand. A television mast is over his chimney. A car stands outside his door. His children are within easy reach of school, and first-class schools they are. "I will never be rich," says John, "but am I not as well off as my town neighbours? I have worked to achieve a standard of living and a level of contentment acceptable to my wife and family. This, I think, I have achieved."

LIATHDRUIM IN VIENNA



The Army showjumper Liathdrum, seen above competing at Vienna Horse Show with Captain E. V. Campian in the saddle. Liathdrum was bred by Mr. Francis McKeon, Drumshanbo.