

# The Bog at Carrowlustia

Fr. Meehan grew up in Sligo but spent extended periods in North Leitrim with relatives. He was a professor in Maynooth before going to America where he joined the Benedictine Abbey at Valyermo, California in 1963. He died on August 6th 1994. He was a learned scholar and author of many books and articles. This extract is taken from his book *'Before I Die'*. In the book he wrote that despite having travelled extensively he believed he was never going to see a land as wonderful as Sligo and North Leitrim.

*Pictured below is Michael Rooney on the bog at Glencar.*



*That Sligo boyhood! Kiltycooley; the cousins at Kinsellagh and Kilcoon; the school at Rathcormac; the bog at Carrowlustia. Sligo town shimmering down there by the bay, 'Memory Harbour', under Knocknarea, every morning when he emerged after breakfast to greet the new day. People had described it endlessly nowadays of course in print because of Yeats, and there was little point in his adding to the chorus.*

From what was all considered a wonderful time it was the bog at Carrowlustia (and no one, to his knowledge, had ever described that) funnily that stood out most prominently in his memory. Those long spring days when the expedition would be mounted in the fairly early morning. His dad, his brother Charlie and himself: the girls never came, or were never allowed to come, to the bog. The horse and cart readied, food for the long

## Rev. Denis Meehan

day away, and off we go.

Throughout the Spring there would be many such days. First the 'cutting' of the turf; then the 'spreading' as the sods dried a little; then the 'footing' as they dried some more; then the 'clamping'; and finally the 'putting out' to the road, from where the lot would be carted home for Winter fuel. The cutting was very much a man-sized task, with the special winged slean or turfspade: stripping the turfbank first of all overgrowth, and then cutting steadily down, eight or ten spits, until you reached the 'daub'. The bottom layers were always the best: hard, heavy black sods with the consistency of coal. During this operation Charlie and himself would be interested spectators. They would tend with considerable pleasure the open air turf fire that had been kindled, and run on messages to the only visible house, Tom MacSharry's cottage on the edge of the bog. They really felt they were pioneering in the wilderness, where no woman or girl could ever be allowed to come.

Mostly the days would be good. But sometimes the elders would miscalculate the weather signs; and on at least one occasion anyhow he recalled being caught on the bleak moor in a particularly nasty thunderstorm. He was very frightened, but didn't want to admit it as Charlie and himself huddled, with canvas sacks over their heads, under a 'kesh' (a primitive footbridge of turf and heathers, spanning a bog stream). But in general the memories of the bog were altogether heavenly. Blooming heather; soft

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*"...cutting steadily down, eight or ten spits, until you reached the 'daub'"*

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springy moss and bog cotton; the purest of mountain streams, with a brown bog tinge to the water, and trout hovering in every deepish pool. The tea made with this bog water always tasted different and better; and, boy, how one ate.

Footwear of course was out of the question. Even some of the straining turfcutters found it more convenient to go barefoot. And as for Charlie and himself, by the end of the turf season their feet and legs would have acquired the con-

# “..... Turf fires would be kindled all across the moorland”

sistency of leather, and be indistinguishable in colour from the turf itself.

For all the operations after the initial cutting they too would have to work of course. But on the whole it was fun work. The freshly cut sods had to be piled on special barrows. A man 'wheeling' to each man 'cutting', catching the heavy sod as it came flying his way, and trundling off his barrow when loaded to higher ground where there would be good 'drying'. 'Wheeling turf' was heavy work too, just as heavy as cutting, but not requiring so much skill.

'Spreading' meant tackling all those dumped barrow loads a few days later, after they had dried a little. You tried to give each individual sod its own place in the sun; and maybe you would, if thorough, go back over the lot again and 'turn' them, exactly like cakes in an oven. From here on in the boys could be useful, maybe more useful than anyone else. They came into their own.

'Footing' was the next stage. You took four of the gradually drying sods, stood them on their ends in a sort of pyramid, and placed another one on top. More air, more 'drying'. For 'clamping' you just put together six or seven of the footings into a fairly regular little rick, like a bricklayer setting up a wall. Suitable intervals of course had to be observed between each operation; and all the time the turves were becoming harder and drier.

Then came the 'putting out', and this was really the boys' own job. The only girl ever implicated, in his memory, was someone lucky enough to be born a daughter of Tom MacSharry or his ilk. Grownups of course would never have the nimbleness or alacrity necessary for coping with the various crises; when donkeys just felt like lying down in the middle of a bog stream, or felt skittish and decided to career off over the heather.



Sean Rooney

You assembled a team of donkeys: your own, your neighbours', wherever you could get them. They would all be fitted with 'crecls', wickerwork panniers hanging on either side. You shepherded them all the way up to Carrowlustia along the road, a good hour or more. Maybe you rode a bike: maybe you just straddled behind the crecls on one of the donkeys. You felt immensely proud - this was your thing. All day long you loaded the donkeys from the clamps and then shooed them towards the road. There might be 10 or 12 donkeys, and the trail was nearly half a mile. You crossed 'keshes', forded streams. Maybe now and again you lay down by some stream and tried to catch a trout with your hands. If a donkey got into trouble (they frequently did), you just unhooked his crecls and waited for him to extricate himself. He always did. Then you just stacked the turf by the roadside and left to the elders the dull job of getting them home.

No Sligo memory will ever compare with that one. Carrowlustia, he imagined, must have been on the old butter



COMING HOME: Michael, Fergal and Aoife Rooney, Glen-

route from Sligo to Manorhamilton. There were traces of a trail across the mountains, and some local folklore. That would be the route the Hamiltons took in the 18th century on the famous expedition when they raided Sligo, and were subsequently plunged to their death at Lugnagall, further north. It was a normal commercial trail in those days.

But, in his time, the whole area had reverted to mountain wilderness; and few people, other than turfcutters, ever made their way up there. The spring turfcutting was in a way one of the most communal, and pleasant, of occasions. Turf fires would be kindled all across the moorland. Everyone owned a turfbank, and neighbours would be recognised at work on this or that hillock. Lunchtime visits would be exchanged. The atmosphere was one of holiday and good cheer. It was a children's, especially a boys' paradise. Goodness knows what has become of it by now. In fact he wasn't all that sure of the name: he had never seen it in print. That was the way his dad, and other neighbours, pronounced it. □ □