



Historical Information

taken . . .

from Thomas Dunne of Ballinagar County Offaly

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The following account is an English translation of that written in Irish by An tATHAIR ERIC Mac FHINN in 1945. He was then a member of the teaching staff of University College Galway. He was a native of Eyrecourt County Galway, born 1895, and a priest of the Diocese of Clonfert. He was also a dedicated and leading member of Coimisiun Bealoideas Eireann (Irish Folklore Commission).

In collecting the information for this account, An tAthair Eric was engaged in the work of the Commission during his summer holidays. It is likely that he had travelled from his home in Eyrecourt to Ballinagar by bicycle, his usual means of transport. The original account submitted by him for the archives of the Commission is now part of the archive of Roinn Bhealoideas Eireann (Department of Irish Folklore), University College, Dublin.

Monsignor Eric Mac Fhinn died in 1987 aged 92 years.

(Parish of Killeigh - pronounced 'Cilli) - Diocese of Kildare.
Barony of Geisheal. Co. of Offaly. Information which I received
from Thomas Dunne, Ballinagar, in that Parish, on 22nd and
23rd August 1945. Thomas is about 60 years of age.)

1 (a) My father was born, said Thomas, in the year 1836.
When he was a young man, of 18 years of age, there was a general
Census taken of the parish. Father Kinshella it was who
organised that census. According to what was found out from
the general census, there wasn't one where ther' was three before.

When the Church of Ballinagar was first built (before
the Famine), the congregation coundn't get place to stand, (even)
they having to stand without any seats. (A very fine Church
is the Church of Ballinagar; Father Kinshella it was who built it.
There is a small house at the Chapel gate, in which the School Master
used to live - a very small house it is; there is no one there now.

The population went down - it is rising again now;
there is a very good population in it now.

My father, said Thomas, was going to school at the
time of the Famine. My father said that there didn't live in
the district after the Famine but a third of the people who were
at school with him.

As for houses - the Digbys allowed sub-letting -
subdividing - Trench put a stop to that. The country before
the Famine was quite full of houses taat were not paying any rent
to the landlord, the people of those houses working for the farmers.
The Digby wer' very liberal in that way. Those houses used
to be, some of them on the land, some of them on the side o' the road

(b) . . . People then were carefree. There was^a Christian pond between the people. They used to help one another.

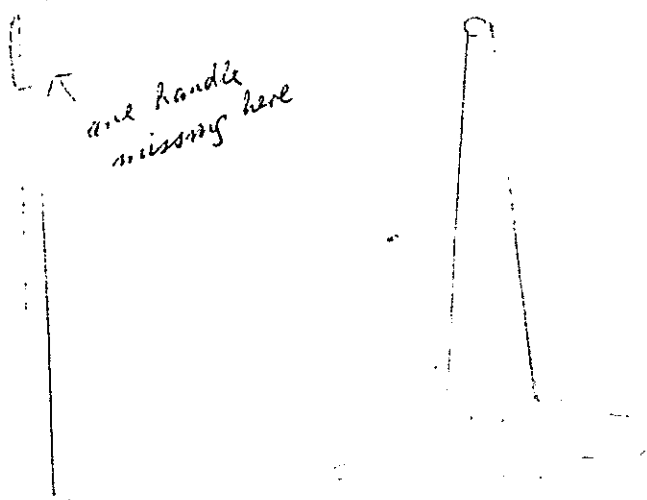
(c) It was potatoes they used to have (as their staple diet). "Cups" were the potatoes which the people used to eat here. "Lumpers" were what they used to have to feed the cattle with.

My mother, said Thomas, was able to spin both flax and wool - that died too. A tailor used to go from house to house. There were two noted waevers here. A waever here called Bell, cud put beehives an greyhounds on the linen. Bell from Curragh, Geashill, was a famous waever of linen.

My mother had a hooded cloak, said Thomas, which belonged to her own grand-mother - my mother was born in the year 1840.

(d) People used to sit beside the fire and they would talk and gossip. My mother had a rushholder and grisset, said Thomas, and she understood makin' her own lights.

(Thomas showed me an iron rushholder which he still has in the house. Here is a very rough illustration of it (A), and a rough illustration of the grisset (B). There was a handle on the grisset)



The shop didn't enter into their life at all. In kind you wer' payen that time.

The bootmaker or the tailor would go to the house, an' be ped with wheat.

There was a famous old fair around here - there used to be tents and faction fights in it - the fair of Castlebrack - the great Dunne used to be there long ago. The year 1889 was the last year that fair was held - Marriage arrangements used to be made at that fair. Ther' was a thousand years behind that fair.

At that time there were pipers and musicians in this side of the country, and after that also. Celebrated musicians were Charles Hackett from Knochdangan and Tom Flynn. My own father was a well-known fiddler, ^{said Thomas,} but he never learned the pipes. A great piper was Sam Sutherland. There was a wanderen piper who was called Goolden.

There was one thing and it was an eternal worry for the people at that time - the rent. It was in order to pay the rent that any money they had was needed. A certain day, and a certain time was laid out for every person for payment of the rent - they had to wait in a line in front of the office. There were cases when the man was not there when his name was called - that he left, for instance, his place in the line for some reason - and when he came with the money immediately after that, it wouldn't be taken from him. Unless you would be there when your name was called, you would be thrown out. That was the custom that Trench had after that, and people had a great fear of Trench.

There was a time too, later too than the Famine, and there were three men here - on this farm - working for a shilling a day, without food, but they would give potatoes with it - that ud' be 'till very recently. I myself say, said Thomas, ten pence a day, in winter, but food would be given with that. A shillen a day, without food, ud come to the early nineties.

My mother remembered, said Thomas, the finest girls to work for their keep - in the height o the downfall. Boys and girls pressed themselves on the farmers for the shelter uv a roof.

One thing that time was the poor people wer' always sure of relief. They would not be given money; they would be given oatmeal. A saucer of oatmeal would be given to a person; he used

to have a small bag for it. Hefty men that cud carry them ud get potatoes. They used sell the oatmeal which they gathered that way.

Old Mrs Gumley of Ballinagar lived, Gad rest her, until 1904; she was a hendred years of age. She said to me, said Thomas, that her mother was able to say her prayers in Irish. She heard her say her prayers in Irish.

My father had Irish words, said Thomas, but he couldn'd say that he had Irish. The grand-father of the father of Thomas had Irish.

Father Kinshella, the parish priest, kept a Book of Killeigh, and he put records in it about the time before the Famine and after it.

Raepers from Connacht came that time and for some time after that. They would not follow roads - the new roads - when they used to come. They would follow certain pathways, "the Connacht pass", that is the 'walk-way' on which the reapers came from Connacht - the old road. The stiles at the ditches on those paths had to be kept for them.

(Thomas says there is a mention in the book of Canon O Hanlon "History of Queen's County" of the old pathways through the woods, and Thomas is of the opinion that they were the same as "the Connacht pass".

There was one pathway - (which used to go over the Shannon, Thomas think at Banagher) - that pathway goes along the southern side of the village of Killeigh. The Connacht people used to come in droves to the harvest fields in Leinster.

There was another pathway - it seems it went over the Shannon at Athlone - by old Crahan on the southern side of Crahan hill, by Rahugh. The stiles had to be kept there for them too. They came with their wives, and their belongens in bundles.

They'd stick the raeper hooks in the thatch, under the aeves, when they'd come in to their mael. They were superior to the Leinster people. That was how they worked in my grand-father's house, said Thomas.

Wan man - a spokesman - med the bargain for the rest - wages an' conditions at the gate of Raheen Chapel - not at Ballinagar; Ballinagar is only a new village. My grandfather, said Thomas, had to send word to his nephews to get them for him at Raheen.

It was Annaharvey was the old hiren place, and they would not go to the new village in Ballinagar. Therefore, it was necessary to go to Raheen to get them.

They wer' more attached to the farm they worked on than the people that lived 'in it. Their knowledge of the district was better than that of the people themselves. There were certain persons - curmudgeons - that wouldn't go to work for them.

They were all speakers of Irish up to 1850, without/^{speaking}any English. They not even know English, except maybe one of them, who would do the talking for them.

'They were fully satisfied with butter and good flowry potatoes, and oat meal. They we' first class men.

Grogans uv Crahan, a very big family under Bewleys of Charleville, it is descentants of one of the Connachtmen they are. There came a very wet year. One of the Connachtmen, called Grogan, wouldn't let them tie the sheaves, but he made the sheaves small and he would open them up with the sickle, in such away they would dry, and he saved the corn - he let the air through the sheaves that way. Berry the middleman was interested in the event, seeing the skill which Grogan showed, and he kept on Grogan and he made him steward. They Bekem a very extensive family an' married with the best families uv the country.

There were other Connachtmen too who stayed and settled in the district.

There are stone fences in Crahan, like in the West of Ireland. There are no old fences at all in Crahan - all recent fences. You would know they weren't old fences, because it is in straight lines and right-angled to one another they all are. (Thomas is of the opinion, that the reason for that is, that Crahan was a commonage long ago. There are two standen stones in Crahan. The people wont touch them. but plow round them. There is an Irish name - "Cloch Stoca" - on one of them. There is no name on the other.

2. The people looked on it as a visitation from God. It was to be seen at first in the year of '45 and in the year of '46. It was to be seen in some places more than in other places. Some potatoes resisted the blight more than other varieties. The big, soft potatoes rotted out o' face. The champions were the first variety that was brought in after the cups an' lumpers failen.

As well as the stems failen, the potatoes rotted in the ground. The old varieties, the stalks wer' very luxuriant, an' so gathered all the more blight.

They did not do anything to stop the blight. They had no knowledge of the stuff for spraying.

As was said above, the blight was to be seen at first in the year of '45 and '46. '47 and '48 were the two black years.

3. The horror o' the famine was there as much fur the big person as fur the little - big farmers with established cattle an' sheep. There were people that wouldn't let ther' circumstances be known - they would not take relief, not to mind talking about going out to steal ..ther' was a great old spirit long ago - that has died in Ireland too.

John Murphy of the Clais, Big John Murphy, he died of the hunger in the midst of his family, and they all round him crying. They had the meal, but when he saw the childher crowden round, he hadn't the heart to take it himself, and he left them the portion that was goin' to him, and he tried to do work without being fed.

The typhus was very bad here. My mother said, says Thomas, it kum frum Scræpen the black potatoes.

The Sisters of Mercy came to serve the people that had typhus in Tullamore.

My mother, says Thomas, remembered the sickness - the black faève "The sickness, God bless us", they would say - they would not name the sickness. Me mother sed 'twould go from house to house in balls of fir

At Cappencur, beside Tullamore, many people died and they are burried there.

My mother said, Thomas says, that a poor man was found on the side of the road at Springfield, and all his mouth was green, where he was eating grass.

5. There was widespread emigration. The Digbys gev assisted emigration. They would pay the passage out of the country to clear the surplus off the estate. You would get your passage in the rent office in Geisill.

A lot of people from here took part in the Civil War in America.

It was a certain Captain Dunne, who was cleared out of the Barony of Geisill, who organised the atteck of the Barrack of Killmallock in the year of '66 - it was Captain Mackey who carried it out, in the year of '67.

They went to America, to Canada, to Australia. Two companions of my father, said Thomas, Purcell and Byrne, went to Dearaera.

Father O Kelly, who was killed in Manila in the present war, he had two uncles - Flanagans - two brothers. They met each other, by accident, in the North American Army. Said one of them to the other: "Are you frum Geisill?", and they recognised each other then. It was Trench who drove them out.

When a family ud go away - the'd go in families - the whole neighbourhood ud cooperate in maken oaten bread. They would take a lot of oaten bread with them, because that time, with the sailing ships, maybe they would be a long time at sea. Ther' used to be terrible weepen an' cryen at the parten for ever.

Ned Dunne, the Governor of Illinois, when he came to the Fine Gaedheil Conference in the year 1922, he was back here looking for his father's place at Killan in the Barony of Geisill.

One household went - the Quinns - and they left the wheat the wheat standen behind them. They were people uv high standin'. The whole household had to walk to Portarlinton, the nearest place to them there was a train coming to at that time. My father remembered it, said Thomas, and it stood out.

The case of the '52 clearances was a big one in the Barony of Geishill. The landlords consolidated the small farms into big farms. Mick Reddy said here: "The clearances of the Barony of Geisill rang all over Ireland".

Reginald Digby, of Geishill, was made Chairman of the association of landed gentry, and Turnbull, of Geishill, of the Geishill rent office - was made chairman or secretary of the association of land clerks.

I, myself, says Thomas, got six months in Mountjoy for fighting against Digby - during the cattle-drives of 1914 and 1915.

Digby got biscuits during the Famine. As far as he could help, no one died of the hunger. Maybe, you could say, the case of John Murphy is against Gayfield (..the name of the Digby big house). But if they knew, they wouldn't let it happen.

They didn't proselytize, but Trench did, after.

The Goodbodys in Tullamore were proselytizers.

6. Pignuts (You could make arrowroot from them still, says Thomas). They understood using watercress too. There's a tart taste to the watercress.

Digby got biscuits .. (for which see above).

Meal was sold at half a crown a stone - out of the reach o' the poor. It was sold in small quantities to the poor. Some houses made a lot of money that way, and got a bad name because of it, gaimbin men.

There was Indian mael gruel. It used to be given to those who were working on the river. It wouldn't firm, it wouldn't solidify. The men used to go down on the grass, and they used pour it out on the grass so that it would solidify. They couldn't use it out o' the can. They used to go down on their knees to eat it, about a mile an' a half from here, in Ballymooney. (Beala' Muna).

My father, says Thomas saw "baer buad". Baer, that was a kind of oats that had four rows o' grain on the head uv it.

3. (Animals) My father said, Thomas says, that they : lost . . eighty cattle, with diseases of the lung.

They used to let foot and mouth disease carry on to kill or cure at that time.

The Famine, says Thomas, killed the Christian spirit, helpen was another. It substituted a spirit of greed - of the grabber kind. After that, the Barony of Geishill was always watchen the fallen man. That was the direct outcome o' the blight o' the Famine - like a crowd stampeden in a fire.

7. Ballymooney River (See over .. p.244)

They were doin' it a relief work - maken a regular bed for it.
It is a tributary of the Brosna.

A lot of relief works were begun - cutten down hills.

Ballymooney River flows through wet ground. It was District Work under Digby. I couldn't say, said Thomas, if the work was by the Government. It is bailifs who were over it,^{an'} they laughen at the people aeten the sturabout off uv the grass.

A Connachtman named Pat Cloony - "Bealach Muna" ... "the pass o' the blackthorn brake" - is how he used to describe Ballymooney. Pat Clooney was an Irish speaker. He had no English when he came. He was here, said Thomas, with my mother.

"A muirse face", says Thomas, is how my mother used to describe "a characterless face".

She had "Cait" for "Kate".

Another word she had was "ráille"

"Rannells" she used to say for "Reynolds".

When you'd want to hit at them you'd use the Irish name!,
said Thomas.

"Cill Buaille" is a place-name still in the neighbourhood.

There is a field here, said Thomas, which was called "Cathaoir na capall" (exactly as he spoke it)

There are other fields here which have Irish names:-

Tula' buidhe
New roilig
Little roilig

"The bán field" is how a field of Thomas himself is described. Another of his fields, "The foord field" - he found the steppen stones inside the bushes.

Ballinagar is the same as "the foord's mouth o' the cars" - carts without wheels is what were used here long ago. They used to be made out of poles.- Long ago, he heard tell.. that people went into the wood and cut poles - in the wood of the landlord - and that they used to have the poles made into a cart by evening. At this ford, those old carts were drawn over the small river in the soft place.

"Island" is a word in a good deal of place-names around here - "Walsh Island", for instance. In such a case, what is involved is ground surrounded by bog. That is not always clear, now, because pieces of the bog have been cut and worked on.

In the direct descent from that yeoman captain was Captain Jack Tarlton, who came back from the war in France with a woman who was not his own wife, who was afraid to go out again, who killed himself - he blew off his own head.

"The 'mills o' God grind slowly,
But the grist is very fine".

(See above concerning Digbys, during Famine, and before)

Trench was brought in to improve Digby's district moneywise, and succeeded in raising the rent roll. There is a book available in print which William Stewart Trench and Thomas Trench wrote, "The Realities of Irish Life", which is poisonous against Ireland. Trench rough-rode the people. Father Nolan was in Killeigh.

Down to 1870, you had to get permission from the landlord before you could marry, in Geishill district - to keep the population down.

Mary Gumley, Widow, married a man called Boat, without permission from the landlord's agent. He flung her out on the street, where she sat all night on the chair - if you let them in, you were put out too. She went to America.

Father Nolan interfered at this stage. He bearded Trench in the rent office and he asked him why he cleared her out. "Trench", says he, "you'll see May Eve, but you wont see May Day" - and he didn't. Trench did not do a day's good from that out. He went overseas for health reasons.

Father Kinshella was ordained in the year 1819. He went up to Killeigh in the year 1825. He died, God rest him, in the year 1859 (I saw, on 25th August 1945, a chalice in Ballinagar Chapel with superscription, having Fr. kinshella's name in it, and date 1844.) The Widow Gumley used to call him "Mr. Kinshella". He stook among the people. He was wan that wouldn't let it be known what he was doen.

Killeigh is a big Parish. There are three Churches, and seven schools there.

There is a Mass Rock in the parish. That is mentioned in the History of the Diocese by Dr Commerford. It lies in a field of Thomas's.

There used to be a pattern on the fifteenth of August at "Tobar Leithin" (that is exactly as he spoke it). A man was killed at a faction fight there, and the Parish Priest put a stop to the pattern then. It is more than a hundred years gone.

8. Father Kinshella was parish priest in the years of the Famine. He kept "the Book of Cilli", and he entered short accounts there. Fr. Kinchella said: The time will come and the Tarltons will be no trouble to Cilli - they'll go and no man will even know it" - and that is how it happened; their baggage was taken out and they were gone during the night. In their time, they gave terrible trouble to the priests, demoralised every servant girl that was ever with them.

It is easy to understand what kind were the Tarltons from the following account, which Thomas heard from the Widow Gumley, who was mentioned previously:-

The mother of the Widow Gumley went to a wake in the year '98. This was the wake:- General Dunne - a Protestant - was receiving surrender after the Rising. Young Mooney of Annaharvey it was who was leader of the United Men - Lord Edward's Men, as they called themselves, and he gave up his arms and took the oath of allegiance, thinking he was safe, and went home. He was given a "pass", as was given to those who had surrendered, so that they might be safe. Captain Tarlton came from Killeigh with his yeomen on their horses, and went down to his house and demanded his pass - when you surrendered, you had your "pass". The mother stood behind her son - she was worried. Tarlton took the pass. "This is the pass we have for you", said Tarlton, drawing his pistol and he shot him straight through the body. His mother took hold of him in her arms. Her apron was all full of blood from his heart. She became demented, and she stood there at the wake with the apron on her covered with her son's blood - she wouldn't let them take it off.

9. There was not a rising here at that time. But in the year o' '98 there were seven thousand men in this county under oath in the United Irishmen, a fact that was to be seen in the account of Lord Edward. My grandfather, old Joe Brien, was in it, said Thomas.

And the Fenians were in very good order here in the year '67. They med no more, tho'. The great snow put a stop to it. The snow was 15 foot high - 'twas providential - 'twould have been wholesale slaughter.

The grand-uncle, Pat Dunne, knocked a soldier's brains out in '98. Picket was the soldier's name. In Daingean - Philipstown as they used to call it - the garrison was in '98. They used come - the soldiers - in pickets - that is, soldiers on their own. He killed the soldier with one blow. He put the body up on the horse and sent it off at a gallop, and he was never found out.

(Thomas has more lore about the Year of the French).

8. (Tarlton) Seven Blest Wells that are in Killeigh. The place is all soft ground.

On the night of the Big Wind, 1839, the wind knocked the tree that was over the well. Mr John Tarlton sent men down to cut the branches whatever was the reason, when the branches were cut from it, the tree itself rose and it stood up again. Tarlton was frightened, and he said to the men to get stones and clay and to build up a hillock in order to keep the tree in its place.

People wash in those wells for scurvy, and for sore eyes. The water comes up in the tree.

The tombs of the Offaly Princes are in Killeigh. It was there that Maximilian O Dempsey was burried in the year 1641. The Tarltons took over the tombs and burried their own people there.

The Abbe Mageoghagan was reared in Clindygowan.

* (I hear, on 2 Oct. 1945, from the sisters in the Presentation Convent that same thing happened to a tree in Galway after storm last month.)
(Dunne) In Clonaslee Francis Dunne turned Protestant, in order to keep the land. The priest spoke to him, and God gave him a chance to turn back. But the Devil was too strong for

him, and he shot himself after that. He shot himself sooner than he would turn back.

The Dunnes that were Catholics thought to get some favour from him, but he turned them all adrift. He said: "I have sold my soul for what you see" - looking on the lovely panorama - "an' none of you will ever benefit by my sacrifice".

(Miscellaneous) Rhymes of school children in the district:

- (1) "The head uv a herren on the tail uv a leak
Ud do the Ballicummins the round uv a week"
- (2) "The clippens o' the furze
Fur the Cappyro curs".
- (3) "Eggs an' rashers
Fur the Ballinagar dashers;
Hay an' oats
Fur the Clonmor goats".

(The last verse is in use in the Parish of Killimordaly in the diocese of Clonfert, except that "Attymon" is in place of "Ballinagar" and "Cluaincah" in place of "Clonmor".)
