

Fairs and Assemblies in Ireland

By John Lennon

My own experience of Irish fairs began when my family lived in Church Street, Poyntzpass. The first Saturday of every month was then the 'Pass fair day and that meant that from early morning, farmers from miles around would be on the streets. Indeed Poyntzpass fair attracted dealers from far and near and there were regular visitors from overseas. Traffic was not then a major problem and the streets and pavements were packed with bunches of cattle, pens of sheep and lambs, and carts full of bonhams, to the furthest ends of the village and beyond. The village housewives tried in vain to protect the fronts of their dwellings from the liberal 'splashing' of cattle being driven down the streets and from those kept waiting all day.

The fair day was a day out for the community and the village's shops did a good trade, thronged with customers all day. Neighbours got all the latest news and gossip; small boys earned an odd "tanner" keeping restless cattle together; dealers stood around spitting on their hands to seal a bargain or "splitting the difference" aided and abetted by "tangles" who earned a pound if a deal was made and nothing if the parties couldn't agree.

There was a special atmosphere in the village on a Fair Day. There was bustle and business, banter and bargaining, giving opportunity for shrewd judgment and great entertainment for the non-involved.

Such was Poyntzpass Fair for many years until it gradually dwindled and was finally removed to the pens and rings of the local saleyard. Not only did the cattle and sheep disappear from the streets, so to did the various charactes who went from fair to fair. The sellers of agricultural equipment and necessities — binder twine, ropes, disinfectants, sheep dyes, galvanised buckets, harness, waterproof coats and leggings. The 'quacks' sold cures for every ailment in man and beast or in earlier days pulled teeth and cured warts.

The fair has gone from the village streets and while the inhabitants may not have regretted its passing, one of our oldest social gatherings has come to an end. For a saleyard is not a fair. It lacks the atmosphere, the cut and thrust of the real thing that had its beginnings

at the dawn of our history.

Fairs like those of Poyntzpass were the last remnants of truly great gatherings which had their beginnings in the pre-history of Ireland. They were the last vestiges of the great 'Aonachs' of ancient Ireland founded by kings. These were the assemblies at which the business of the whole district, province, country was transacted in the legal, social, business and political fields.

The aonach — loosely translated as 'fair' — was often a magnificent event which lasted for anything from a few days, to three weeks or more as in the case of the 'Aonach Tailteann' held in Co. Meath.

Annual, biennial or triennial, these gatherings ranged from local to provincial and national events.

Another of our oldest customs, and strangely related to fairs, is that of wakes. Wakes as such have not died out but the games and entertainment associated with wakes in former times have gone almost completely. Associated with the wake was the funeral, and in Ireland a funeral is a very public occasion. A person's standing in the community can fairly accurately be judged by the crowd following the coffin to its last resting place. People who have no great affinity with the deceased will still show respect by turning up at the funeral — not out of sympathy, I presume, but more out of a sense of duty or obligation. Funerals are to be attended. People meet people at funerals — people are missed if they don't attend. It is nearly as if there's something suspect about the man who isn't seen at the funeral of an acquaintance, in almost the same way as the farmer who missed going to the fair.

As a race or a nation we would seem to be pre-occupied with the dead and with death and funerals and fairs. At least a person could be forgiven for thinking so and it would not be without some good foundation.

Our earliest and greatest fairs originated in connection with funerals — all of them funerals of women!

The earliest and greatest of our 'Aonachs' was "Aonach Tailte". This aonach was held in honour of Tailte, a Spanish princess, the daughter of Magh Mor. She had the reputation of being "the most learned Druidess of the Western World". She married Eochaidh Mac Airt around 2000 B.C. Eochaidh was

killed in the Battle of Moytura. A custom in those days and later, was that of 'fosterage.' *Taillte* brought with her, a foster son from Spain whose name was "Lugh Nosa Mac Eitlinn." Lugh gave his name to the month of August, to the Lughnasa Festivals and to Lammastide and the famous aonach at Ballycastle. Lugh became High King, and on the death of *Taillte* he held a great aonach to honour his foster mother. By tradition the family of the High King was buried at Telltown — now Lough Crew — between Oldcastle and Ardee about five miles from the confluence of the Blackwater and the Boyne.

An 11th century manuscript (*Leabhar na h-Urdhre*) relates:—

"The three cemeteries of the **Idolaters** are the cemetery of **Taillteann The Select**, the cemetery of the Ever Fair Cruacha and the cemetery of Brugh (New Grange).

The host of the Great Meath was buried in the middle of the Lordly Brugh. The Great Ultonians (Ulster Kings) used to bury at Telltown with pomp. Fifty mounds I certify are at Oenach na Cruacha." — Roscommon.

Lugh's assembly or fair was so successful that he ordained that it should be an annual event. He saw great possibilities in the assembly. Anybody who was anybody in the country — lesser Kings, chiefs and the people in general — attended. Without media, no better opportunities arose to let the High King's wishes be known widely.

These assemblies took on a ritualised or formalised procedure and function:—

- (a) To honour the glorious dead.
- (b) To promulgate laws, taxes and tribute etc.
- (c) To entertain the people.

These began with a pagan ritual involving the raising of a tomb or cairn or dolmen. Next followed the lighting of a fire accompanied by dirges and chants and a long drawn-out panegyric praising the deceased, recounting the family history, great deeds and exploits of the individual, and involving the worship of the sun, fire and other gods. This could take up to two days to complete. Following this the Chief Druid, with the assistance of the lesser druids, spaced throughout the gathering, announced the latest new laws, bye-laws and amendments so that everyone was aware of his rights, duties and responsibilities.

This was followed by the final part of the proceedings — "the *Curteach Fuaith*" — funeral

games. These were athletic, gymnastic, and equestrian competitions for men, and not just physical competitions. Intellectual activities took place as well. Oratory, storytelling, music and poetry, as well as crafts such as metalwork, jewellery, making of armour and weapons, spinning, weaving, and dyeing occupied and entertained the crowd for days. The spinning and weaving were primarily for women who were not only encouraged to attend but were an important part of the assembly. A marriage market became a feature in "Lag an Aonagh" — especially at "Telltown" as the site became known.

To ensure a successful gathering, strict regulations were laid down regarding these Aonachs. It was known as the "Royal Truce." No one could be interfered with while going to, attending or returning from the games. All feuds were set aside. Disputes of ownership and rivalries were settled by the *Ollamhs* or lawyers at the fair. Women were not carried off against their will! Three things were 'taboo' during the fair:—

- (a) Making casts at random.
- (b) Riding through the assembly without dismounting.
- (c) Looking over the left shoulder at the assembly when leaving for food!

Three crimes strictly forbidden!—

1. Theft of yoke oxen.
2. Slaughter of Milch cows.
3. Burning of Byres.

During the fair or Aonach the people lived in tents or in the open air around the site. These sites (Aonagh) were all at graveyards or adjacent to them. The gatherings all took place away from any of the settlements of the time. There being no towns as such in ancient Ireland the sites were chosen for some other reason than that of being in a metropolis or centre of dense population (Pagan religious magical connections). Most of the great Aonachs were held in the month of August — the time of year named after Lugh. Cruacha in Roscommon was different being held at Samhain — or Hallowe'en and Uisneach on the Hill of Ward in Westmeath at Bealtaine (Maytime).

Because of the great numbers of people gathered together, barter or trade was inevitable and so a market also became a feature of these gatherings. Livestock and horses, chattels, clothes and jewellery were displayed and sold, as well as food and drink. There was even a marriage market especially at *Taillteann* (guaranteed to bring in the crowds of men and women),

where couples paired off in a most curious arrangements — which if it worked out became a recognised wedding — and if it did not please the parties it was dissolved at the next assembly. Thus the term “A Telltown or Tailltean wedding” — a trial marriage and a quick divorce!

An ancient manuscript referring to one of these assemblies notes:—

“Three busy markets on the ground,
 a market of food,
 a market of livestock,
 a great market of Greek strangers where there is gold and fine clothes”

Three slopes

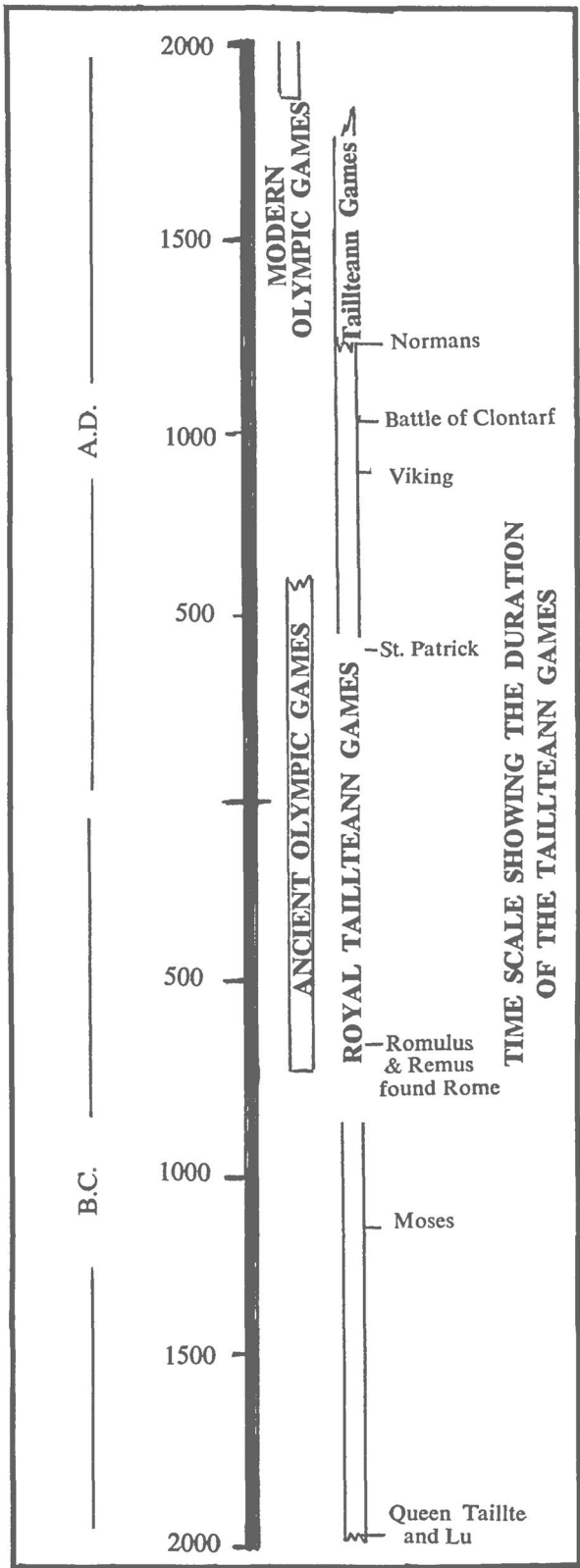
“The slope of the horse,
 The slope of the cooking,
 The slope of the women met for embroidery”

Ireland was then undrained with swampy hollows. The country was densely forested apart from clearings. Aonachs took place on hilltops or hillsides, which were naturally drained sites.

Aonach Tailltean goes back almost five centuries before the first Olympic games. Yet the Greek traders attended. Did they bring the idea of the games back to Greece to bolster trade, under the guise of worshipping or honouring their mythological gods? Did they merely adapt the social rules, especially regarding women, to their own culture, ways and customs, even to the Royal Truce? Was the Olympic torch or flame the fire or pyre which was lighted at the opening ceremony of the Aonachs?

Of all our ancient Aonachs, the Aonach Taillte was by far the most important and the oldest. It was held annually, with few interruptions until the end of the 12th century (1168). This assembly is mentioned most often in our ancient manuscripts — which date only from Christian period. These manuscripts however, are very often copied from earlier manuscripts recording traditions of much earlier times. However, some are quite factual e.g., 873 AD “Annals of Ulster” records “Aonach Taillteann is not held without just and worthy cause: a thing we have not heard to have happened since the most ancient times....” This happened again 876, 878, 888, 889, the reason being that the country in those years was suffering greatly from the ravages of the Viking invasions.

Tirechan’s Breviary, a 7th century manuscript contains the earliest reference still in existence. Some of the great poems composed for the opening ceremonies have even survived. One of 1007 AD by



Cuan O'Loughlin ran to 59 verses.

Another for the year 885 AD ran to some seventy verses or stanzas.

Although the last official (Royal) Aonach Tailltean was held in 1168, the gatherings continued — but without a royal presence. They continued as popular or peasant assemblies.

In 1168 the last royal occasion must have been a wonderful spectacle. Under the auspices of the last High King of Ireland, Roderick O'Connor a contemporary report says "Aonach Tailltean was celebrated by the King of Ireland and the people of Leath Ceann (Northern half of Ireland — Ulster) and their horse chariots and cavalry were spread out on the space extending from Mullach Aidi to Mullach Taillteann — a span of about seven miles. This was the extent of the assembly. Horses, chariots, armour, emblems, chiefs, Kings and people of every class, with booths, tents, etc., etc....

Aonach Tailltean continued to be held on the old site - as a peasant assembly until 1770. Then for decades after that date it was held on the other side of the River Blackwater.

In 1836 John O'Donovan (OS Ms) plotted the still remembered sites and features and collected surviving traditions associated with the Aonach. Others like Sir Willie Wilde, Sir Samuel Ferguson (1872) wrote about Aonach Taillte, Eugene Conswell (1864) wrote brief reports on the peasant gathering.

Other Aonachs in Ireland — no doubt modelled on Aonach Taillte — were held in provincial sites. "Aonach Carmen" in Wexford was the site of the Leinster Aonach and presided over the King of Leinster.

Carmen was a lady warrior of Greek nationality. A poem of the Aonach Carmen in 1040 relates in 81 stanzas the history of Carmen and the Aonach. Her two sons were banished but she was allowed to stay and on her death and in her honour Aonach Carmen was instituted.

'Aonach Teite' in Limerick has little known history. Its site is even debated — Knockaney was the Munster Aonach.

Teite again was a lady.

'Aonach Cruachan' in county Roscommon was in honour of another lady. Again the site has been lost,



Fair Day in Poyntzpass c. 1906

the least remembered of all the provincial Aonagh.
In Ulster there was 'Aonach Macha.'



Rathfriland Fair 1905

Macha was one of a trio of war goddesses of that name. Annual assemblies were held in honour of one or all of these ladies. Some of these assemblies in Armagh were warlike in character and most were associated with some form of violence or duress.

Macha I was wife of Nemhedh. She died on one of the twelve plains cleared by her husband.

Macha II ruled Ireland alone for a time and repelled by force any who contested her sovereignty. She married one of her rivals and like Maeve in Connaught she dominated the poor man. When five sons of another claimant to her throne continued to oppose her she enticed them each in turn into the forest from the hunting ground, there she bound them one by one. After reducing them to servitude she forced them to build the Royal Fort of Emhain Macha.

Macha III was a lady of the other world who married a mortal husband. He, poor man, when he saw the Kings horses racing was so unimpressed that he claimed his wife could outrun them. The King took up his challenge and Macha was summoned to appear before the King.

Despite her protestations that she was pregnant and her time had almost come, she was compelled to race the horses. She ran and won but only just and having crossed the line cried out in pain and gave birth to twins on the spot. Hence, Emhain Macha. Before dying she cursed the men of Ulster "that until nine generations in time of their greatest peril they should be as weak as a woman in childbirth."

Important Aonachs were held in many other places all over Ireland.

Tuathail, a King in Leinster, in 150 BC according to Keatings history "erected a palace at Uisneach (a hill in West Meath) where was held a general meeting of the men of Erin called the "Aonach Uisneach." This fair or assembly was held on the first day of May and they were wont to barter cattle, jewels and other property.

They also made offerings to their chief god "Beal." They lit two fires in honour of Beal in every part of Erin and drove cattle through as protection against disease.

Again John O'Donovan wrote "the fair or Aonagh in Tlachtga (Co. Meath) was celebrated by the youths of Munster. A great fire lighted from which all the fires in Erin were kindled ... which purchased from them (the youths of Munster) and a screpall of gold was paid out of every territory in Erin for this fire, and a sack of wheat, and a hog from every chief's hearth was given to the comharta of Meath."

Some Irish place names indicating Aonach sites:—
Bailineanigh Co. Kerry — Place of the Aonach.
Duineny (Ballycastle) Co. Antrim — Fort of the Aonach.

Ballyanny Co. Tipperary — Place of the Aonach.

Aonach Cuite Co. Limerick — Cuili's Aonach.

Nenagh Co. Tipperary — the Aonach.

Cloc'n aonaigh Co. Donegal — the fair stone

Mullaghaneany Co. Derry — Hilltop of the Aonach.

Aonach Life Co. Meath — the Liffey Aonach.

Aonach Aine Co. Limerick — Anne's Aonach.

Telltown (Tailteann) Co. Meath — Tailte's Aonach.

Hill of Ward near Athboy — *Samhain 3 days before and after Hallowe'en.

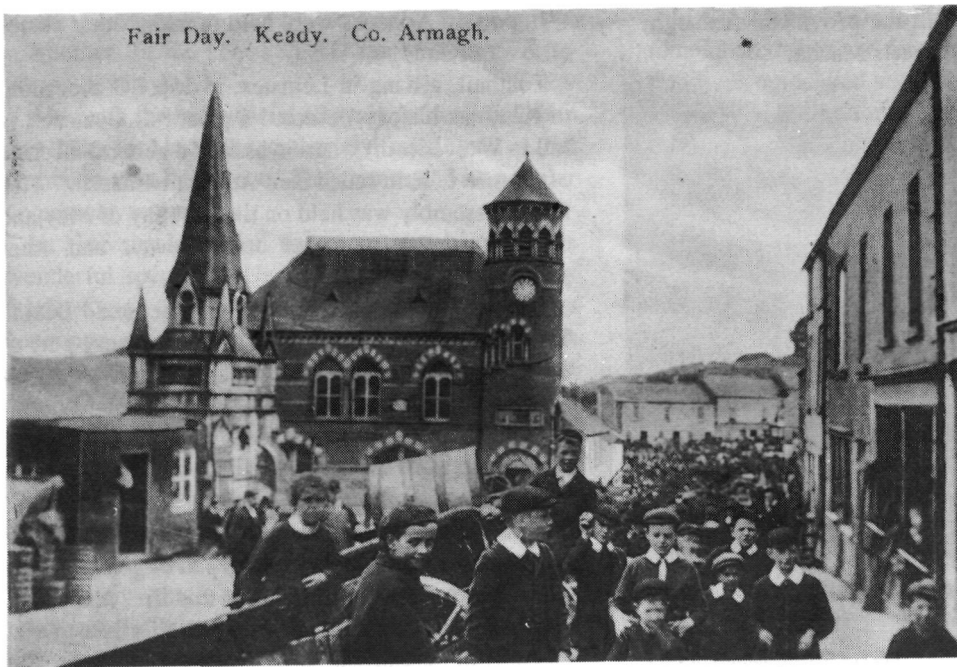
Aonach Colman — Curragh of Kildare — Colman's Aonach.

All Lugnasa — August Aonach sites.

Lisnabrague — fort of the Games.

Although essentially pagan in origin the advent of Christianity did not diminish the practice and the fair were given ecclesiastical sanction. Strangely, however, no Christian links in the line of churches or Monasteries or traditions have ever been traced to the sites of the fairs. They remained pagan sites but were attended by the new Christians.

Columcille even allowed his monks to celebrate a feast and equated it with the festival of Lugnasa. He called it the Feast of Ploughman.



Keady Fair 1906



The 'Big' Bann Fair, Banbridge

A quatrain on Lughnasa runs:
 “Lughnasa makes known its dues
 In each distant year
 Tasting every famous fruit
 Food of herbs at Lughnasa.”

In a margin to this quatrain another scribe had entered a marginal note ‘tomorrow is Lughnasa day, the day all fruits ripen.’

Well what happened after 1168 you may ask? Up to that time the Irish did not have many towns but still were a mainly rural population living in ringforts etc. Then in 1169 on the first of May, — the Feast of Bealtaine, the Norman vanguard arrived in Bannockburn in Wexford and the turmoil for High Kingship in Ireland virtually came to an end with the coming of the Normans.

The Normans did not forbid these aonachs. In fact they were very much in favour of fairs — but for another reason than that of keeping up Irish traditions no matter how historical. King Henry who called himself ‘Lord of Ireland’ — though controlling only part of it — had the habit of granting the tolls of fairs to various officers, courtiers and even occasionally to a Church or Abbey and gave permission for fairs to be held at traditional dates.

e.g. 8 day fair Dublin granted 1204 — Bealtaine
 8 day fair Limerick at Martinmas (Nov 11) 1204
 8 day fair Waterford at Lughnasa 1204
 8 day fair Swords Feast of St. Colmcille 9th June (patron of town) 1213
 Clonmel All Hallows Feast 1225
 Ferns May Eve 1226

However, these fairs with their tolls were not traditional even if held at traditional fair dates. They were not on fair — Aonach sites — which were always “out in the country” and were not connected with pagan burial sites — and not sacred. In 1431 parliament noted that “Divers Irish enemies of his Lord the King did raise and hold among themselves certain fairs and markets and certain of his majesties subjects did resort therto, did sell and buy divers merchandises whereout the said enemies did take profits, customs and benefits to the great injury to the Burghs and market towns”. These were “out in the country,” on traditional sites, where they paid no tolls and no taxes!

Then in 1750 an act accepting the Gregorian Calendar was passed. This ordered that fairs be held on the ‘natural day’ and not on the festival days in the old

calendar observance. This was a deliberate attempt to separate the fair from the festival — thus reducing further the importance of such gatherings — specifically by prohibiting buying and selling on these days and ordering these fairs to be held eleven days later.

Some of the country fairs survived, probably because they were too important to suppress. The fair in old Kilcullen, Co. Limerick and the horse fair in Cahirmee. But others like Ballinasloe horse fair, ‘Puck’ and Lamma fairs were moved to the new dates and survived.

Gradually however, the fair became an urban feature, less of a festival and more of a market, until we have come full circle and made them not even welcomed in towns and villages throughout the country but have banished them off the streets behind walls and railings and out of sight of the people they once entertained.

These Lughnasa assemblies — the great Aonachs — were very prestigious events. Before the Norman Invasion they had become the highest politico-social expression of the old Irish culture.

In 1942 a national questionnaire documented and identified 195 fair sites in Ireland. The O.S. Memoirs was also a rich source for identifying sites which had ceased to be remembered by 1942.

Some of the old practices had been christianised like the Croagh Patrick Pilgrimage in July.

With the urbanisation the fairs were diminished in stature and became monthly markets — yet with a Lughnasa or August flavour. So we had the monthly fairs but a big fair e.g. Banbridge — “the Big Bann Fair” in August.

Other sites are identified in our townland names. Locally we have:— Lisnabrague — Fort of the Games (Brague - a toy or a game); Dromorebrague — Ridge of the Games; Armaghebrague.

Christianity tried to supersede these deeply held and deeply rooted convictions of the people, even to the extent of superimposing Christian feast on the pagan festival All Hallows Eve at Samhain and the Feast of SS Philip and James on May 1st, but to little avail. The deeply held beliefs of the people in the fairies and spirits was most difficult to dislodge and persists to this day. Standish O’Grady writes: “So firm was the hold which the ethnic gods of Ireland had taken on the imagination and spiritual sensitives of our ancestors that even the monks and christianised bards never

thought of denying them. They doubtless forbade the people to worship them, but to root out the belief in their existence was so impossible that they could not disposses their own minds of the conviction that the gods were real supernatural beings....”



The Hiring Fair, Ballycastle

