

CAN IT BE SAVED?

The last remnant of a way of life which was prevalent in Kerry for several hundred years is likely to be completely wiped out in a very short period unless very urgent action is taken. Riasc, near Ballyferriter, is the last intact example of a Clachán in which, according to the census of population of 1841, 67% of the population of Kerry lived.

Clacháns like Riasc were groupings of anything from five to fifty thatched cottages. The groupings normally did not have village status and did not have a church or pub. Riasc itself had about eight families and this would have been a fairly average size.

But that is not all. Donncha O'Conchuir of Baile an Fhírtéaraigh sees a far deeper and more significant loss if Riasc is allowed to go: "The Irish tradition is an oral and not a written one since about the time of our defeat at Kinsale. Prior to that you had both, with of course one influencing the other. Peig Sayers and Tomas Criomhthainn did not write in the accepted sense. Their work is a thinly disguised product of the oral tradition". It is much easier

explains, Gerald Murphy emphasises and expands on this in his book "Glimpses of Gaelic Ireland".

The difference between the written and the spoken word is clear. An example of this is the difference between the style that is used in spoken day-to-day communication and the same contact by letter—particularly business letter. Again the form used on radio has difference to the article in the papers.

"Gan amhras beidh cosúlacht mhór agus gaol ana ghairid idir an dá shaothar go fóil", Donncha O'Conchuir says explaining the oral and written traditions "ach le himeacht aimsire is féidir a bheith a súil go ndruidfidh an gaol amach, agus a oideas, no a thraidisiúin neasplách á shaothrú i leith gach cinn acu".

The Cottages at Riasc



to interpret and appreciate their writing seeing the kind of environment it was written or spoken in.

The Clachán was described as a cluster of farm houses and associated outbuildings usually grouped without any formal plan. The inhabitants were normally related to one another. There was great emphasis on communal activity — common rights of grazing and peat cutting on the unfenced mountain land were held. The cultivated lowland area was held in an open field arrangement with each farmer having a strip of land which included some of the good and some of the bad area.

SYSTEM BREAKS DOWN

While this form of open field system may have been the natural way of co-operating unfortunately it had one major disadvantage. The practice of dividing the property between all male heirs eventually meant the land was completely unable to support the number of people living on it. This was something that was partly carried on because of tradition and partly imposed by the law of the time. It resulted in tremendous poverty and the eventual disintegration of the Clachán mode of life. (Studies of Irish Rural Settlement — James H. Johnson — The Geographical Review Vol XLV111, No. 4, 1958).

"Tá idirdhealú nach foláir a dhéanamh i gcúrsaí teangan, idir an teanga mar a labhartar agus mar a scríobhtar í". Donncha O'Conchuir

The importance of this association is emphasised again and again among linguistic scholars and folklorists. This added to the new opportunities for recording and preserving the oral tradition afforded by Radio na Gaeltachta and the continually emphasised need to have a focal point within the Gaeltacht would all seem to point to the preservation and development of Riasc.

A little over a year ago the Hannons were the last family to move out of the settlement. At the present time it would be relatively easy to preserve the eight houses in Riasc. While they might be restored easily enough at this stage they will deteriorate very quickly if they are not given some attention immediately.

NO INTEREST

The whole question of preservation and development of Riasc appears to be a rather invidious one. The amount of interest shown by state bodies has been slight and even where it was shown, it nearly always ended in "Money will have to be raised locally in the Dingle peninsula first". In west Kerry there is very little concern for Riasc or what it means. As they see it there are far more practical and useful ways of spending any money that might be raised.

In Ballyferriter this has been a pipe dream of Donncha O'Conchuir for many years: "While I would like to see local people involved in beginning this, I feel that the scheme is of national impor-

tance and should receive initial backing from an enlightened national source".

SEANACHAI

The Irish literary oral tradition has come down to the present day through an unbroken line of seannachai going back to ancient times, down from literary legends like Cath Fionn Trá, through the expertise of literati like Eoghan Rua O Suilleabháin, and Aodhán O Rathaille to Peig Sayers and An tOileánach.

Each seannachai had to know 450 types of tale and be able to recite them. Very often the best narrator would combine pieces from three or four tales and interweave these with contemporary events and on top of that have a particular twist or form of expression of his own. "The great disadvantage of that form of tradition", Donncha O'Conchuir explains, "is that when a story teller dies much of the wealth of his literature dies with him — the brief bones of his stories are kept but the meat is all lost".

So the West Kerry Gaeltacht's need for a focal point is linked with need for the Irish language and the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht to pass on the culture we have been given particularly in this time of loss of language and general change. Like any time of change it must also be a time of opportunity.

USES

Donncha O'Conchuir feels that a restored Riasc could be used for many things particularly:

- (1) A place for studies of literature by scholars.
- (2) A place for continuing of the oral tradition and for researching and examining what we have.
- (3) A place to preserve and develop the crafts of the area — also providing a market outlet for these.

- (4) A kind of folk centre where items of interest in the area could be displayed.

- (5) A location for study sessions or seminars, that would be most sympathetic and conducive to a study of the Gaeltacht.

- (6) A focal point within the Gaeltacht that will have a symbolic as well as a practical effect on the lives of the people — the saving of the old and continuing it into the future. This will give the people of the Gaeltacht a pride in their own area that is so important if it is to continue and develop.

- (7) An attraction for tourists — information on the area would be available here. Also more and more people are now coming here as a result of "Ryan's Daughter" — they expect to find the village where the film was made. If the area is to capitalise effectively on this possible source of revenue some alternative must be provided. Riasc would be far more effective than KIRRARY could ever have been.

PLAN OF ACTION

All of this can be done if Donncha O'Conchuir's suggested plan of action is put into being:

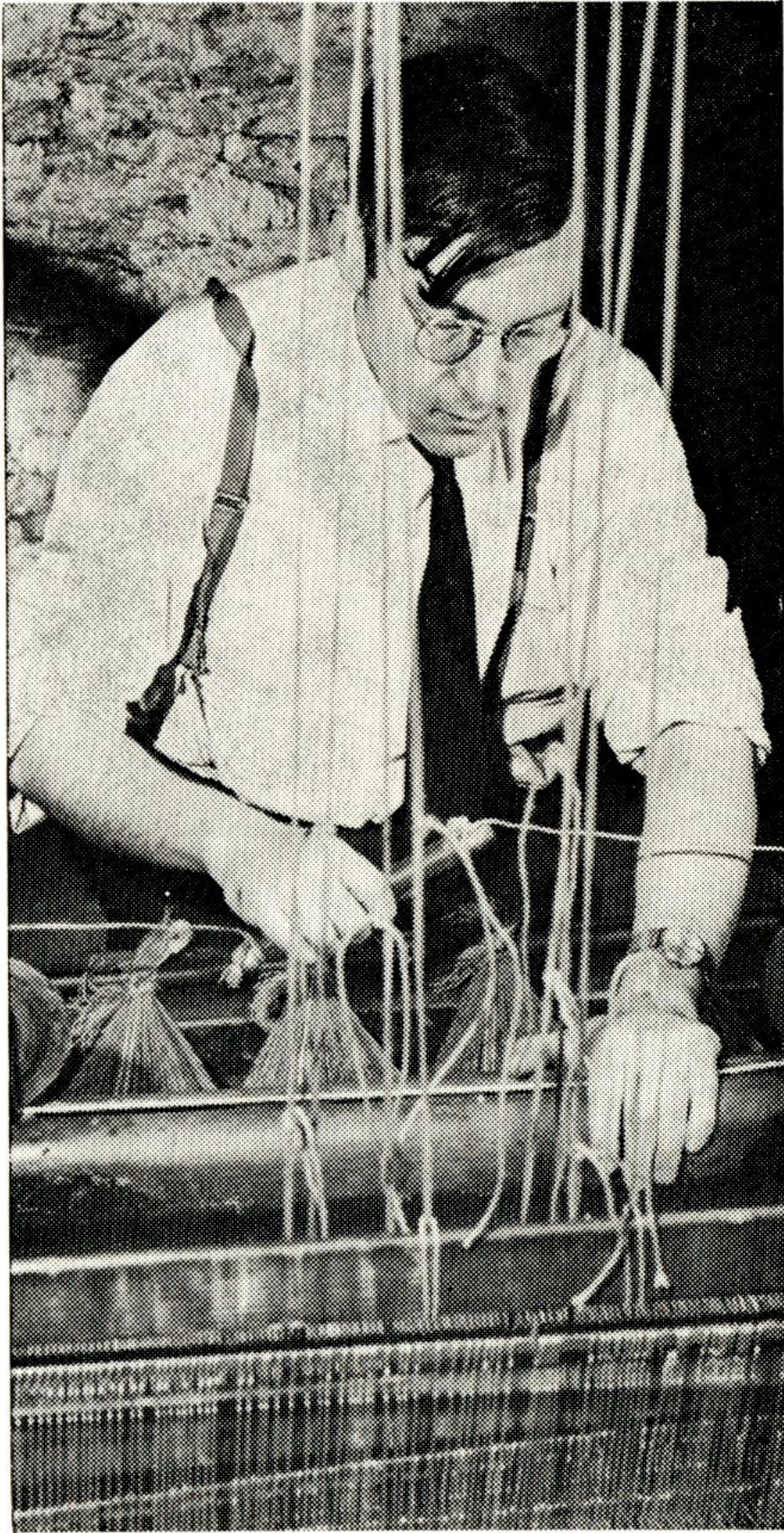
- (a) Acquire the present buildings from their owners.
- (b) Prepare a detailed development plan — and stage this as finances allow.
- (c) Begin basic preservation and restoration as soon as possible.

Riasc is a vital link in Kerry's folk culture. It has associations going back to the middle ages. It has very important linguistic overtones. Economically it can have a vital role to play in the west Kerry Gaeltacht. It should be looked into — now.

One of the individual cottages in the Clachán at Riasc



James Quinlan is the Weaver in Muckross House and 17-year-old John Murphy is his apprentice.



JAMES QUINLAN of Araglen (near Mitchelstown, Co. Cork) comes from a family with a long history in weaving. His grandfather started a family weaving business at Araglen in 1883 — before that he had worked at hand weaving in Fermoy.

THE WORK OF THE WEAVER

In 1951 James began working in the family business. For three years he trained in all aspects of the textile trade in the Scottish College of Textiles in Galashiels. This is considered to be the best training centre for weaving and design and is used as training headquarters for Harris Tweed.

Having finished training, Mr. Quinlan continued to work in Araglen until 1969 when along with many other weaving businesses, free trade, obsolete machines, increased rates of competitive production and a seeming decreased demand forced him to close.

FROM SHEEP TO PRODUCT

In their home business the Quinlans handled all aspects of the weaving trade. They bought wool from the farmers, then handled the dyeing, spinning—the making of the thread from the wool—carding, weaving finishing, washing and shrinking, and raising the pile on blankets.

"I was always interested in hand weaving myself but beyond the time I spent in Galashiels I didn't get much chance to take part because our weaving in Araglen was mechanical", James explained. "Since I came to Muckross at the end of 1970 I have been doing a great deal of this and am very happy with it".

"In Muckross we handle most of the processes in weaving beginning at winding — transferring the thread from the big packages in which it arrives from the manufacturers on to the smaller bobbins; warping — winding hundreds of threads, each as long as the cloth required, to the intricate mounting on the frame for weaving; then the actual weaving process and finishing". James pointed out the different processes in the weaving room in the old stables at Muckross and showed

me that 90 yards of each thread is normally warped and that this will turn out 84 yards of cloth.

17th CENTURY SPINNING WHEELS

Although there are little spinning wheels (Túirnín Lin) at Muckross (these wheels are a special local Kerry type basically similar to those used generally in Ireland before the linen or threadle wheel was introduced in the North about 1640) they don't handle their own spinning as this would be inordinately expensive.

Watching the speed with which the shuttle carrying the thread backwards and forwards on the loom is shot across and the co-ordination between hand and foot it is still hard to imagine that the intense activity and skill of James Quinlan can turn out 21 yards of cloth or ten rugs a day.

"I see Muckross being a centre for turning out highly trained technicians for industry with a local craft basis, concentrating more on quality than quantity". This is James Quinlan's Muckross of the future.

MORE WEAVING

JOHN MURPHY of Glebe Place, Killarney is a 17-year-old with a very unusual job. John is the only apprentice weaver in Kerry. He is a new link with a craft that had almost died out in the county.

For the last three years John has been in the Technical school in Killarney. At the end of last year he answered an advertisement from Muckross House and Kerry Vocational Education Committee for apprentice craft workers at Muckross. Out of twenty-two applicants he was one of the two who were successful and on January 31st last started to work as an apprentice weaver in the Folk Museum.

This is a new scheme through which the Kerry V.E.C. and the Trustees of Muckross House hope to preserve and develop the traditional crafts. As well as working with the craft workers the apprentices will get the best modern training in their trade — thus giving them the understanding and familiarity with their raw material and product that comes with hand working, and the expertise and qualification that comes with the best modern training.

"GREAT OPPORTUNITY"

"This is something completely different" John Murphy says, "It is the first time this has been done. When we were starting off I didn't know it would be so good. Now I am very interested and I see a great opportunity for myself".

During the next five years John will go on a block release course for two periods of four weeks each year to the Scottish College of Textiles where he will specialise in woollen and worsted weaving and designing but will also learn about all processes in man-made fibres.

At the smaller, picture postcard, hand loom John turns out chair backs, scarves, criosanna and table mats, etc. He is already winding and warping and on the small loom can turn out eight yards of cloth in a day or up to eight scarves "but", he explains "that is using heavy bouclé thread".

"It is great to be able to stay at home — and I don't think you can get a better training". John is an enthusiastic happy person.

OPENING HOURS

Derrynane House and Muckross House are the only two full time museums in Kerry. Derrynane was the home of Irish Liberator Daniel O'Connell and is now a memorial museum in his honour — we will devote a full article to Derrynane in a later edition.

Muckross House opening:

June, July, August: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily
September: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

Derrynane House opening:

June, July, August: Weekdays 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Sundays 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.

September: Weekdays 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.
September: Sundays: 1 p.m. to 6 p.m.

LETTERS

AN SIUINEIR, AN GABHA, AN FIDOIR AGUS AN FEIRMEOIR

*Ni chuala riamh ceol ba bhinne
Ná Cearthrar saor ag dul chun coille,
A thua féin i láimh gach duine
Is iad ag leagadh na darach doinne.*

*Ni chuala riamh ceol ba bhinne
Ná ceathrar gaibhne ag déanamh cruite,
A cheap órd féin i láimh gach duine
Is iad ag bualadh buille ar bhuille.*

*Ni chuala riamh ceol ba bhinne
Ná ceol an spóil an ughaim is naslinne,
Pota na feola ag fiuchaigh ar an dtine
Is torann an fhiteáin ag dul le buille.*

*Ni chuala riamh ceol ba bhinne
Ná seisreach sheolla i ngleantán coille,
An cionnaire dá rá leis an bhfear deire
An chréafóg a thogaint is gan a
mhilleadh.*

This poem on four trades was sent in by Caomhín O Cinnéide, Baile na nGall.

This column will be a regular feature of ROS, in each edition we will devote space to readers' re-actions, and queries on informative points.

"Congratulations on the publication of ROS — it is a great credit to you and will mark a major step in the development of Muckross as a really important folk museum".

Tim O'Neill, Dublin.

". . . your publication was most interesting"

Fr. Tom Lucey, Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow.

"Congratulations on the recent publication of ROS".

Michael Moynihan, Killarney.

"The Christmas edition of ROS is a significant example of a community in action. Communication and preservation are important factors in the life of any community. In this respect ROS is a positive contribution and deserves warmest congratulations".

Tom Coffey, Conference Officer, Dublin Tourism.

We are very pleased with the 100% favourable reaction we had to the first edition of ROS. We would like to remind readers that if they have anything they would like to say by way of information, enquiry or suggestion either privately to us or through ROS please write to: Editor, ROS, Muckross House, Killarney.

MOST ANCIENT CRAFT



Mary McCullough busy in her Studio at Muckross

ALL PROCESSES

All of the pottery processes are handled in the workshop. Beginning with the design, the item is shaped from the soft, wet clay, and fired in the kiln (a kind of oven) to 1,000° Centigrade. The item is then decorated — this is a painting process — and glazed. The glazing may be simply a sealing-in of pot and colouring, but it can be a colouring in itself, depending on the glaze used. It is finally fired to 1,280° Centigrade, and this melts the glaze and binds it to the pot.

"In Muckross we do what is called studio pottery" Mary told me, "we make mugs, decorative bowls, vases — and when there is time we experiment now and again". One of the results of these experiments is a most attractive rich brown glaze which Mary has developed from the local rhododendron ash.

ANCIENT CRAFT

"Pottery is one of the most ancient crafts in the world. Many thousands of years ago the Chinese had developed a highly sophisticated decorative and everyday stoneware". In a very effective answer to anybody who thinks pottery started recently she adds, "pots are found in the ancient burial places all over the world".

"The average tourist is just looking for something small to take home". Mary told me "sometimes we get people — not necessarily the tourist — looking for something special and if possible I will make it".

The rigid attention of the eye, the strict co-ordination of the hand on the pot and the quick kick of the foot turning the wheel, the expertise on heat, colour and glazing combine to make up a highly skilled craft.

MARY McCULLOUGH from Gormans-town Co. Meath is the potter in Muckross. In contrast with the work of the weaver or the blacksmith, pottery is a spectacularly fast craft turning out pieces in minutes. At the moment Mary is working on an order for 1,000 pieces that include mugs, plates and bowls for a banquet in a Killarney hotel.

Pottery is a highly skilled craft and demands a long period of training. Mary McCullough spent four years in the Ulster College of Art & Design in Belfast. The first year of training was a general art course and for the remaining three years she specialised in the study of industrial and craft pottery.

After finishing her training Miss McCullough spent six months teaching in Enniscorthy and a year in Killorglin. In June 1971 she joined the staff of Muckross House to set up the pottery workshop. The last twelve months have been spent getting things in order — fitting out the workshop with water, a wheel on which to make the pottery and a kiln to fire.

EDITORIAL

The Kerry Tradition

"The last remnant . . ." is the kind of phrase that switches many people off. Their immediate re-action is "They're at it again. Couldn't they leave the past take care of itself and get on with the future?" If those first words put you off our lead article go back and read it — go back and read Donncha O Conchuir's seven suggestions of what could be done in Riasc and read his three point plan of action.

Far from being a sterile or totally academic approach to what might be done this is very much a developing and preserving of the past that can have very real effect on the present and the future. This appears to be one of the most exciting and comprehensive suggestions to come from a Gaeltacht area — not only would Riasc have a cultural, academic and folklore significance but would also have very substantial social and economic implications.

The Kerry tradition is obviously based in the Gaeltacht in a very special way and in making this recommendation we are prepared to back our words by helping and advising any interested parties in any way we can.

The articles by Dan Cronin and on the craft workers also help to highlight what could and should be done in the Gaeltacht. The difference, and importance and wealth of the oral tradition is very clearly shown by Dan Cronin's words on Sliabh Luachra.

Again the example of the viability and desirability of preserving the old crafts has been shown in the Muckross experiment — if it can work here why should it not work in Riasc? The initiative of the Kerry Vocational Education Committee and the Kerry County Development Team in supporting the Trustees of Muckross House in this venture is most commendable and encouraging.

The re-action and support of the general public and of the communications media to the first edition of ROS was most encouraging. We hope it will continue.

KERRY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The following are the details of the Summer programme for 1972 for the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society.

23rd July
BARROW (on coast between Fenit and Ardfer) Meet 3.00 p.m. at Churchill Church. Speaker: Mr. E. Roe.

20th August
KILLELTON near Camp. Meet at Camp cross (Fitzgerald's Pub). Speaker: Mr. Walter McGrath.

20th September
IVERAGH. Meet 3.00 p.m. at Mountain Stage. Speaker: Dr. Michael Herity.

11th October
CASTLEISLAND. Meet 3.00 p.m. at Presentation Convent. Speaker: Mr. Maurice Kelleher.

This society was established in 1967 for the collection, recording, study and preservation of the history and antiquities of Kerry. Membership is open to everybody at an individual annual subscription of £2.00, 50p for a student or a family membership of £3.00.

During the Winter months the society has a programme of lectures and during the Summer a series of outings. Members can bring along visitors to the lectures, outings and ordinary meetings of the Society. An annual journal is also published by the society. Members get a free copy and can buy additional copies at £1 each.

Anybody who would like to have more information on the Society can get in touch with the Honorary Secretary, Kerry Archaeological & Historical Society at the County Library, Tralee, County Kerry.

WHAT THE MEDIA SAID

Ian Blake, Arts & Studies Column, IRISH TIMES.

"My imagination in the matter of museum publications has been fired by ROS, the Journal of Kerry Folk Life, put out by the Muckross House Museum. Vol. 1. No. 1 is a most enterprising effort. Its format is simple — a four-sided tabloid on glossy paper, with four columns of type, and thus it gives ample scope for attractive layout. The pictures reproduce well, and the title stands out boldly against a coloured panel.

To my mind it achieves everything an information sheet aimed at the public should set out to achieve. Its appearance is bright and unfussy. The articles are, subsequently, given a crispness, and lose none of their attractiveness for being brief. I think that ROS will be of enormous interest to local societies who find that the publication of a journal is so slow that it is useless for keeping members in touch with matters of the moment.

. . . to my mind ROS is one of the most encouraging museum-based publications to have appeared in the last few years".

LEESIDER'S DIARY, EVENING ECHO (from 24 column inch article on ROS content):

"My warmest congratulations to all concerned with the first edition of ROS — the first of four of a publication on Kerry life . . ."

"All in all the first edition of ROS augurs well for the future".

LIAM NOLAN on RTE's most popular programme "Here & Now" when he interviewed Ned Myers as a result of an article in ROS.

" . . . ROS the Journal of Kerry Folk Life, a most impressive publication . . ."

THE BLACKSMITH

The Forge at Muckross is under the care of Martin Cussen who is assisted by his apprentice Jerry Cronin



MARTIN CUSSEN of Killala, Broadford, Co. Limerick has been a blacksmith for 40 years. In the early 1930's he was apprenticed to his second cousin Jack Lynch. During the early years his work had plenty of variety — making wheel bands, laying axles, making gates and socks for ploughs and shoeing horses.

And they were not the only products turned out in the Lynch forge. Pikes of the kind associated with the 1798 Rising had been made there for the 1916 Rising. On one occasion when these were in production Mr. Lynch unexpectedly saw an R.I.C. constable approaching. The only thing to do was to pull the red hot pike into the cooler filled with dirty water in front of the fire. The officer came in to talk and leaned on his short walking stick which he placed in the water trough. Luckily everything went off quietly.

Within two years the ageing Jack Lynch had handed over the horse-shoeing part of his business to the young Martin Cussen. A few years later the young apprentice started his own business and from then until 1956 he worked his own forge. From 1956 until 1971 he divided his time between farming and smith work. Now his son has taken over the farming end of the business and Martin has decided to come back to the forge full time at Muckross House.

THE OLD DAYS

"When I was young, carpentry and smith work were the only crafts" Martin Cussen says. "We worked the whole time over the open fire — at times for very long hours and for very little pay — for the first three years of training you weren't paid at all and even after that the pay was only a few shillings but things were cheap—a pint was only 9d.

At that time a set of horse's shoes was four shillings. A set of removes was three shillings and involved taking off the old set and touching them up and then replacing. Martin remembers the oddities of the local landlords — "some would want their horses' shoes polished, although after an hour on the road they would be as polished as you could wish".

In the true blacksmith tradition Martin Cussen interlaces his conversation with stories — "That's like the story about the fellow who was sent down to the blacksmith with an old set of shoes and was told to ask the blacksmith to make a new set of shoes with the old set and to bring the old set home in his hands. The poor fellow was mystified but went off to do what he was told. But the smith wasn't caught out. What did he do but melt down the old shoes and make a hammer out of

them. Then he made the new shoes with the hammer and gave the messenger the hammer to take home with the new set of shoes".

INDIVIDUAL ORDERS

As we talked an American professor came in to see how Martin was getting on with his decorative hinges. These were being specially made at Muckross for his home in the States. Individual order work is something that the forge, and all of the other craft workers at Muckross, are getting more and more of. Because of their adaptable kind of operation they are particularly suited to cater for individual orders.

"I suppose our kind of work has a sort of antique value". Martin explains. "As well, people are attracted to the hand-made product — especially when they see it being made".

In the forge at Muckross, as well as shoeing about twenty jaunting car horses a week during the Summer time, Martin Cussen and his apprentice Jerry Cronin make fire-side sets, candle holders, tea pot stands and a good deal of individually commissioned work.

APPRENTICE

16-year-old JERRY CRONIN from Knocknaskeha, Killarney is the second apprentice at Muckross. He works in the forge under Martin Cussen.

"I have always been interested in metal work" Jerry told me "I have a particular interest in metal design and mechanical drawing".

"Iron is much trickier today than it was when I was starting off whatever they do with it" Martin Cussen says. "Having to work metal by hand gives a far wider and deeper appreciation of what metal is all about and what it is capable of doing".

Realising the hardness or softness of different metals, knowing how hot it has to be to work it and being aware of the conditions that will break it gives the apprentice a really good basic foundation in metal.

"I go to the technical school in Killarney every Wednesday and get trained in the best modern equipment there — so my training is not neglected in any way by being out here" Jerry told me.

TRAINING CONTINUES

Although Jerry comes from a country area the nearest forge to him is several miles away and he had no real contact with this kind of work until he came to Muckross. He has spent the last three years in the Technical school in Killarney and will spend the next five as an apprentice in Muckross.

"During my time here I will go away on block release to some of the Anco (the Industrial Training Authority) training courses and when I finish my time I will have a full City and Guilds technological certificate".

The tall gangling youth is a half forward with the Spa minors. He shrewdly answers every question and doesn't allow himself to be sweeping about anything—"the work at Muckross is interesting enough".

Pulling into the car park at Muckross if you hear a reverberating laugh — Jerry is re-acting to another Martin Cussen story and the work of the forge is proceeding as it should !

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Traditions - Customs and History

— by Dan Cronin

About ten miles due east of Killarney town is located one of the most ancient and interesting historical and religious sites, not only in Ireland, but in Western Europe. This may seem to be a sweeping statement but to anybody who has had the patience, and the interest to delve into the past, the facts are there and bear themselves out.

The spot in question is known as Cromlech Cathair Craobh Dearg or "The City". Towering overhead are the beautiful twin peaks Dá Chích Danánn, or to use the anglicised name, The Paps. At the foothills of these mountains is the site of perhaps the oldest uninterrupted religious ceremony in Europe (almost 3800 years).

Each May, beginning with May 1st, cattle and people from far and near were and are wont to assemble here before the summer pilgrimage to the mountain pastures. Blessings for health and fertility of man and beast were performed first by the Druids and then, without interruption, by their successors, the Christian Church.

THE DANANNS

The Holy Well, originally used for immersion both in Druid and early Christian times, was filled in by an English landlord about two centuries ago. The Circle of Stones, with the central megalithic monument partially broken, was erected by the Dananns, who came here from Beotia — or the land of cattle — in Greece round about 1900 B.C. The wife of the first King of ancient Mychenae was called Dana — in after times she was so respected that all Greeks were called Dananns until or up to the days of Cadmus — around 2000 B.C. These Boetian settlers who arrived here were also known as Danánn.

THE PAPS

The Paps Mountains were supposed to represent the breasts of Dana, who lies buried beneath and is the reason for the annual ceremony at The City. Looking East, the mountain ridge embracing the twin mountains gives the appearance of a child-bearing woman lying on her back.

Old chroniclers in this southern end of far-famed Sliabh Luachra have satisfied themselves that Cathair Craobh Dearg was one of the first places in Eirinn to be peopled in the days of the Tuatha De Danánn. The magnificent slope of the beautiful twin peaks was certain to attract "prospectors" to this elevated, barren and wideswept site. Here they pitched their camp and established themselves. Here, too they performed their ritual and set their magic spells. "When", according to an old seanachai, "they were eventually forced to 'withdraw' they just vanished beneath the crust of the soil, where they remain peeping out at us, and enshrouding us in their beautiful mists, which sometimes adorn our hills".

FESTIVAL OF MAY

But to Cathair Craobh Dearg they left a legacy of a religious nature, which remains to this day. Down through the ages, through Paganism, through Druidism through what have you, religious ceremonies have been enacted here. This chain of events has, tradition tells us, remained intact and unbroken — one of our cherished last remaining links with those far-off days. The Festival of the May, the Gaelic Bealtaine, is still observed at Cathair Craobh Dearg, where on May Day pilgrims from near and far come to pray to and honour Mary, the Mother of God.

In the area around the "City" in the not too distant past, many old pishogues, mostly relative to cattle, were practised at Maytime:

On May Day, no householder would give away milk gríosach (which

where they played chess, had music or rested on soft couches.

Tradition tells us that chess was a very popular game here, with some of the chess boards of great elegance — made of silver with little gold birds for ornamentation.

GREATEST FLIRT IN EIRINN

One such king who resided here was Cairbre. He had a daughter named Crede, a rare beauty and very rich. Many young princes came to win her hand in marriage, but one and all she pushed them aside. She became renowned as the greatest flirt in all Eirinn — accepting beautiful presents from many princes and then . . . ? Finally there was one condition on which she would receive anyone who wanted to marry her. It was that he must have a poem, describing her mansion and beautiful furniture. Whoever penned the most excellent poem would win her hand.

Then along came Finn MacCool and a young warrior from Brú na Bóine whose name was Cael. Arriving at the mansion at the foothills of Dá Chích Danánn, Crede asked what they wanted. "It is Cael" said Finn, "who has come to seek your hand in marriage" and

DAN CRONIN of Rathmore is surely in the true mould of the Seanachai — the Story Teller. In the following snatches on the traditions and customs of Sliabh Luachra, his native area, one can get a clear idea of the building and importance of the oral, folk literary culture. In future issues we hope from time to time to document more of this oral tradition.

Blessing of the Waters at Shrone Lake is one of the customs carried on from ancient times.



would be a red coal to kindle a fire), water, or peculiarly enough, salt.

Of course there was a mad rush to be first to the "spring well" on May morning! The first bucket of water to leave the well on this morn assured the bearer of full and plenty! All this at the crack of dawn.

Cattle, especially pining cattle, were driven into a lios or fort and left overnight in the hope of a cure.

Milk was poured on the doorstep on May morning — a preventative to evil spirits crossing the threshold.

Flowers, especially golden cups, buttercups, and whitethorn were collected at sunrise and brought into the house, thus ensuring a bounteous supply of golden butter and an abundance of milk from the charms associated with the blossoms.

Flowers too, were placed in a ring around the spring well, to prevent the casting of spells — "stealing" butter and cream via the "skimming" of the well water.

CIARRAI LUACHRA

Apart from the religious aspect, many beautiful traditional stories remain with us regarding Cathair Craobh Dearg. Here, in another age and in a beautiful mansion resided the Kings of Kerry — Ciarraí Luachra. Their "palace" had everything, down to a "Grianán" or sunny chamber incorporated in the enclosure. Herein resided the wives and daughters of the great chiefs and kings. The Grianán was so called because it was always located in the sunniest part of the enclosure, high up and as bright and pretty as possible. The chiefs were wont to visit the ladies in the Grianán,

then, "he has a poem for you". Cael then recited a long poem — we have it to this day — describing her abode.

MOST EXCELLENT POEM

The poem begins "Happy is the house of Crede, there are men and women and children, there are druids and players on instruments; cupbearers and keepers of the door". Then he describes the house as being of great size, with a wide door with green doorposts and a lintel of carved silver. The thatch was brown and crimson, the porch was thatched in birds' feathers, beautifully arranged in stripes of yellow and blue. Over the entrance hung an apple tree, and in it the cuckoo sang; a lawn and well in front of the house and the servants went in and out, giving food and ale and beautiful red apples to all. Inside the couches were adorned with gold and silver and precious stones, the cushions were of silk and the musicians made sweet music. The poem also praised Crede herself — she was so delighted that she promised to marry Cael; marry him she did and loved him dearly. (See O'Curry's MS Mat. pp 308 to 311).

CATH FIONN TRA

You will like to know the end of this famous old love story. Alas, they had not long been married when a war broke out and Cael was ordered to meet invaders at Fionntráigh, or the White Strand of Ventry Harbour, where invaders were trying to come ashore. There was a long and fierce battle, and Cael was mortally wounded on the beach. The spot as to this day known as Trá Cael or the Strand of Cael; here he lies buried. Crede, we are told, composed an elegy for him. It is interesting and contains some curious references.

MUCKROSS NEEDS . . .

In the first edition of ROS it was mentioned that each edition would carry a column on particular needs of the folk museum at Muckross. Our first column caused some interesting reactions — we produce a piece from the current affairs magazine THIS WEEK underneath.

Our needs are divided into three categories — our main emphasis this time is on local poems, songs and ballads.

Craft Workers:

- A cooper to work in Muckross.
- A wood carver to work at Muckross.
- A harness maker to work at Muckross.
- A basket maker to work at Muckross

Information:

Any poems, rhymes, ballads or songs in Irish or English.

- with a local flavour;
- used by local craftsmen, etc.
- associated with yearly feast or festival;
- connected with an annual pattern day;
- associated with any happening in the area.

Exhibits:

- In connection with the above
 - sheet music and words;
 - ballad sheets;
 - old books with any of the above.

Even if you are not prepared to hand over some of these items we would very much appreciate your contacting us if you have any information that you feel might be helpful.

"THIS WEEK" — ON ROS

The first Poachers' Museum in Ireland will be in Muckross House in Kerry, if Frank Lewis has his way. Muckross, as you know, is Kerry's folk life centre and the Kerry people being the way they are, would not be complete without a Poachers' Museum.

Frank Lewis, in the first issue of ROS, "the journal of Kerry folk life" is appealing to people, people "in the know", so to speak, about how salmon were poached (a) in summer and (b) in winter. And with what? ("nets, gaffs, tailers, stroke-hauls, spears; any other method?"). And though it is couched in nice terms retired poachers are asked to forward their unused implements for display at Muckross. "Source confidential if wished," says ROS.

Has poaching declined, asks ROS, because of stricter supervision of the waters because of lack of interest among the young, or because there are no young people left?

(Our Kerry Correspondent writes: "Wisha there's three times as many poachers in Kerry now as ever there was. Decline is it? Tell Mr. Lewis the reason for the "decline" is because modern poachers don't get caught. Lord, the new generation have the grace of angels at the water's edge. And is it stroke-hauls he's still talking about? Sure nobody uses those anymore. They're using the electric Rugadoob in Kerry nowadays. Infallible. Tell him that".)

There, Frank, for what it's worth.

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