"Chalk Sunday"

By CAOIMHÍN Ó DANACHAIR

The traditional time for marrying, in rural Ireland, is Shrovetide. In the 19th century and on into the 20th it was taken for granted that those who wished to marry did so at that time and at no other; there was scarcely a parish church in the country which did not have at least one wedding on Shrove Tuesday, the most favoured day of all. When this custom began we do not know; clearly it seems to be connected with the canonical prohibition of the solemn celebration of the sacrament of matrimony during the penitential season of Lent—a regulation often misunderstood to prohibit any marriage whatever during that period. It is probable that the popular reasoning ran thus: we cannot marry during Lent, thus we must marry before Lent, therefore just before Lent is the proper time to marry. This was held firmly as far back as folk-memory goes, and has, probably, been part of the accepted pattern of belief for several centuries. The Catholic rule on marriage during Lent was formally set forth by the Council of Trent, but was widely practised for hundreds of years before Trent in many parts of the Christian world, and not least, we may be sure, in Ireland where a most rigorous observance of Lenten austerity was normal since Early Christian times.

Shrovetide, then, was the time to marry. From Little Christmas (Epiphany) onwards the matchmakers had been busy and many unions were planned and eagerly awaited not only by the parties principally concerned but also by the whole district which would share in the merrymaking, feasting and drinking. And as a converse to all this it was taken for granted that those who did not marry at this time did not intend to do so that year. This, in the popular mind, was a neglect of social duty. In rural Ireland the unmarried person never had the same status as those who were married. An unmarried man of fifty was still a "boy" while his married nephew of twenty-five was a man; the young wife of twenty had the full status of a matron while the spinster of forty-five was practically a nobody. The position of the unmarried was emphasised at Shrovetide by the good fortune or the courage of their coevals or juniors who were marrying, and popular disapproval was not wanting. The broken match, the jilted flirt, the unfaithful swain, the crusty old bachelor, the "boy" of fifty kept from wedlock by a doddering but still tyrannical parent, the vinegary old maid; all these were part of the rural comedy and matter for the rural wits and tricksters. In several parts of Ireland there were customarily accepted ways of showing this popular condemnation of the unmarried state.

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A visitor to almost any village or small town in Munster or south-west Leinster in the latter part of the 19th century might be surprised at seeing people being marked with chalk when on their way to or from the church on the first Sunday in Lent. This was "Chalk Sunday" when those who remained unmarried at Shrove had their clothes decorated with stripes and squiggles of chalk. Small boys rushed from door-
ways and made their mark; young men and girls whipped out concealed bits of white or coloured chalk and did the same. For the most part the victims took the chalking cheerfully if somewhat sheepishly. The younger men and women could afford to laugh it off with some remark about their chances in the following year, but a hardened old bachelor might round on his tormentors with vocal abuse and flourishing of a walking stick. And, naturally, the more disagreeable individuals were singled out for special attention, so that by the time they escaped from the village the backs of their coats were profusely ornamented. Some of the chalkers carried pieces of raddle, the colouring matter employed by shepherds to mark their sheep, which they used on selected victims, and this was particularly unwelcome as it was much more difficult to remove from the clothing than ordinary chalk. About the middle of the last century this custom was in full vigour all over the counties of Limerick, Clare, Tipperary and Kilkenny, as well as in north County Kerry and parts of Counties Cork, Waterford, south east Galway, Laois, Offaly and Westmeath. In a few places the chalking was done on the Sunday immediately before Shrove Tuesday, but this was exceptional. In the 1920s and 1930s the custom was still observed in a dwindling area, but it has now almost completely disappeared; where it does persist it consists only of children chalking each other in fun.

"Going to the Skelligs"

In much of the south-west of Munster there is a vague tradition that the festival of Easter was celebrated a week later on the island sanctuary of Sceilg Mhichil than on the mainland. Whether this tradition is a distant echo of the ancient controversy on the date of Easter is a matter of speculation, but it did give the occasion of another form of disapproval of the unmarried. These had lost their chance of marrying this year on the mainland, but they still could be married on the Skellig, and steps must be taken to send them there. All over County Kerry, in parts of west County Limerick, in much of County Cork, especially along the coast, and in west County Waterford the negligent were greeted, in the first days of Lent, with a barrage of chaff and banter. "You’re off to the Rock, I suppose?" "Don’t miss the boat!" "Is it Mary or Katie you’re taking on the excursion?" &c. &c. Here again the victims had to grin and bear it, for any objection brought only an increase of the annoyance. And threats of complaining to the parents of the more youthful tormenters, here as well as in the chalking, had little effect, nor would such complaints be welcomed by the parents, for were not the young people only carrying out a good old custom?

In many places the custom was carried further, and local poets were encouraged to compose verses on the occasions, verses which told of a grand sea excursion to the Skelligs, praised the splendid vessel which would take the party there and gave a long list of the participants, linking together the names of the bachelors and old maids as incongruously as possible. These verses—most of them mere doggerel—were written out and circulated about the parish so that all might enjoy them, and were sung to popular airs, often in the hearing of those lampooned in them. In Cork city, we are told, they were printed; in a note in JRSAI (then The Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland) XIX, 1889, 144-5, we read: "These were printed and sold in immense numbers on Shrove Tuesday. Many of them were rather witty productions, the poetasters endeavouring in the most absurd manner to join the most incongruous pairs together. The printers’ names were never appended to these
lists, and of course an opportunity was sometimes taken of venting personal spite, so that advertisements in the local papers are occasionally to be met with, threatening to indict persons who may be discovered to have taken liberties with the names of the advertiser or his lady friend. The lists of the "Pilgrims to the skelligs" were called by all manner of names, such as "The Paul Pry Skellig List," "The Corkscrew Skellig List," "The Simple Paddy Skellig List," "The Virgins of the Sun Skellig List," "The Shrove Tuesday or Spification List" &c. The custom reached its height about 1840, but has since gradually died away, so that at present no such lists are published."

The custom, in more recent times, has taken the form of large notices, giving details of the "Grand Excursion" with a list of the couples taking part in it. These notices were hung in prominent positions on the first Sunday of Lent, where they might be read by all on their way to church, often they were torn down by some indignant victim, but spare copies were at hand to be displayed without delay.

In south-east County Cork the Skellig joke appeared in its most extreme form. Here bands of young men went about on Shrove Tuesday evening, and if some inveterate bachelor ventured out and fell into their hands he was bound with ropes and had his head ducked under a pump or in a well, or was even thrown bodily into a pond; this drenching was called "going to the Skelligs."

"The Ash Bag"

The tradition in a few places is that ashes were sprinkled on the bachelors and old maids on Ash Wednesday; in the Moate and Mullingar districts we are told that small bags of ashes were surreptitiously pinned or tied to their clothing, and the saying "You'll have the ash-bag thrown at you" was the equivalent of "Nobody will propose marriage to you."

Sprinkling of Salt

In parts of north County Galway and south-east County Mayo salt was sprinkled on the bachelors and spinsters "to preserve them hale and hearty until next Shrove." At Dunmore this was done on the day after Ash Wednesday, this being market day. At Ballinrobe it was done on the first Monday in Lent, and this was known as "Salt Monday."

Domhnach na Smuíit; "Puss Sunday."

Those who remained unmarried after Shrove Tuesday were popularly supposed to be disappointed and filled with self-pity. In places as far apart as Donegal, North Mayo and Westmeath the first Sunday in Lent was called "Domhnach na Smuíit," "Puss Sunday" or similar names. Here Smuíit means a scowl, and "Puss" is, of course the Gaelic pus, with the same meaning. The first appearance in public of the bachelors and spinsters after their time of grace had expired was on the first Sunday in Lent, and they could not help their frustration appearing on their faces; hence the name, and, needless to say, their facial expressions were not rendered any sweeter by their neighbours' sallies of wit on their sad state.
Some other customs

In places Shrove Tuesday night was taken as a time when practical jokes on hardened bachelors were allowed by custom. These took many forms. Horns were blown about the house; the door was tied and the chimney blocked so that the house filled with smoke; cart-wheels and other pieces of farm equipment were tied to the chimney; cabbage heads were pulled from the victim’s garden and thrown at his door. In Tralee the delinquent bachelors were “serenaded” with shouting and “music” performed on buckets and tin-cans. In parts of County Waterford a frequent joke was the drawing on the whitewashed house wall of a grotesque caricature of the owner, while in places in County Donegal a “wife,” in the form of a scarecrow-like effigy, was provided for the bachelor and set up opposite his house for all to see.

Conclusions:

It appears, thus, that the belief that Shrovetide was the proper time to marry was held over the greater part of Ireland, and that few marriages were entered upon at any other time of the year. This belief was held and this custom observed well into the present century; the increase of urbanisation, the trend towards “fashionable June weddings,” the eclipse of the matchmaker, the lessened emphasis on the dowry and the settlement in rural marriage, these and other factors have made the old connection between Shrove and marriage obsolete in recent years. No longer, then, can it be said that those who do not marry at Shrove do not intend to marry this year. Again, the feeling that the unmarried person has not attained full status in the rural community is no longer the force that it was, and the trend in the last years of the 19th and the earlier part of this century was towards more and more unmarried people, as well as later marriages, in many Irish rural areas. The general weakening of all aspects of folk custom is also at work, and the cumulation of all these tendencies has led to the virtual disappearance of all the customs mentioned above, although they are all clearly remembered in folk tradition and many of them were practised widely within living memory.