

SLIABH LUACHRA

"The Mountain of the Rushes"

Sliabh Luachra translates as "The Mountain of the Rushes". There is no agreement on the boundaries and perimeters of this legendary world. Some say it is the hill country around the villages of Gneevgullia, Knocknagree and Ballydesmond in that part of the Cork-Kerry borderland. This would be the view of the people of the area and few would deny but that this is the heart of Sliabh Luachra.

However, those who see it as more a cultural than a physical or geographical entity, would tend to extend the perimeters. They would see it as the land enclosed in a rough square on lines drawn from the towns of Newcastle West, Listowel, Killarney and Newmarket. This is mountain and moorland, hill farming country. There are three big mountain ranges — the Mullaghareirk, Glanaruddery and Stack's Mountains. The culture is dictated by the land.

Just as there were no substantial English settlements on the rocky extremities of some of the peninsulas (the Gaeltachts) so also with Sliabh Luachra. The land was poor and inhospitable and never really attracted colonists

by Pat Feeley

in any great numbers; as a consequence the anglicizing process that took place in the lowlands did not happen here. The Gaelic way of life continued to flourish.

It was not until the 1820's that a system of roads was laid down giving better access to the forces of law and order and facilitating the transport of dairy products to the Cork butter market. Up until then police and military found it difficult to enforce the rule of law: a general system of lawlessness pervaded the place and the mountains became a refuge for cattle thieves and outlaws. Whiteboys and moonlighters struck in acts of agrarian terrorism. Detection and conviction proved difficult.

Nor indeed is that spirit dead: there are still villages where the police tend to be tolerated rather than accepted, and gardai who fall into disfavour find it more to their advantage to transfer to another station. I have



Padraig O'Keefe, the Sliabh Luachra fiddler, c. 1950.



A Kerry Spalpeen, c. 1865.

heard the principal teacher in one of these hill villages remark on a garda sergeant who had been very strict on late night drinking: "If that fellow hadn't been transferred he'd have made criminals of us all."

Irish was spoken late into the nineteenth century. When working on a thesis I collected about two and a half thousand Irish words and phrases in three parishes all of which were in common use amongst the people.

The culture, therefore, was a Gaelic one with strong translations of hospitality, friendliness and co-operation. "Caring" (Irish: comhar) and "mihulls" (Irish: meitheal), communal work in the planting and harvesting of crops, were common up to recent times. Mechanization has supplanted manual work, making these practices unnecessary, but the spirit remains. There is an openness to strangers which contrasts with the reserve of the lowlands people.

The class division between farmer and labourer, so much of a feature of life in East Limerick, was not found in the mountain villages of the West. The same fundamental division was not there. The hill farmer was often not much better off than the labourer. He had good years and bad. In a bad year he fared even worse than the labourer who had some kind of permanent work and a fixed wage. The man trying to live off a small farm worked on the roads or did other labouring jobs in slack periods. The farmer and worker swapped yarns, drank together in the village pubs and played cards during the winter nights.

The prospect of a marriage between the classes could raise class feelings as the system of dowries prevailed. The farmer would expect anyone marrying into his farm to have money which would be passed on to another member of the family. These feelings, however, owed more to the economics of marriage than to any deep-seated class animosity.

The people were poor in the western pocket of County Limerick. (When you pass through Barna Gap you're into the hills.) It was from this part of the county that the

East Limerick farmers got servant boys and girls. They hired out on the eleven month system, returning to their cottages and mountain farms at Christmas. Others emigrated to England and America, some of them never to return.

The principal town of the Limerick Sliabh Luachra belt is Abbeyfeale, and there are two small villages Tour-nafula and Mountcollins.

The music and the set dances are the key to the unity of tradition. Music spans county boundaries and the musicians recognise that theirs is a common heritage. The polka set dances owe their popularity to the house dances which were a feature of life in this part of the world up to the early 'sixties. Other traditions survive: the wren boys on St. Stephen's Day, straw boys on the night of a marriage and other less remarkable customs.

On the negative side the work ethic is not strong. Pleasure and enjoyment often take priority. How much of this attitude stems from the hopelessness of working non-viable farms and how much to a general philosophy of apathy and indifference is a subject for debate.

The attitude leads to introversion, defeatism and a negative fatalism. The people have frequently been dominated by the clergy who, while they have been solicitous for their souls, have done little for their material welfare. The people are generally conservative in their politics, voting according to the family tradition for one or other of the two big parties.

There have been changes, however, in more recent times. Factories in towns such as Tralee, Killarney and Newcastle West have brought the young men and women into an industrial environment. They have joined trade unions and learned something about the labour movement. It is too early yet for any change in political thinking to manifest itself but this may come in time.

The forces of revitalisation and progress have already begun to be felt and there is no reason why the rich and vibrant culture of the region cannot be married to the bride of progress.