

Turf

If green is the color of Ireland, and a soft day the touch, and poteen the taste, and harp music the sound, then a turf fire must be the scent of Ireland. Poets love the Irish bog for its metaphoric possibilities; archeologists, for its preservation of the past; the government, for its exploitable natural resources; and the rural Irishman, for its source of free fuel.

Turf, known also as peat, is partially decomposed vegetable matter, an early form of coal. Farmers who cut their own turf must devote about a week each spring to harvest enough sod to last a winter. A culture has arisen around turf cutting. **Sleans** (turf-spades) differ from area to area and a person's religion, we are told, can be determined according to whether he digs with the right foot or left. A turf cutter is expected to leave a "straight face" in the cutting bank for the next cutter, reinforcing a sense of community responsibility. The entire family takes part in turf cutting, the weaker members stacking the heavy sods on their ends to dry. A broken back, a girl from Kerry alleges, was preferable to a broken sod. After a summer of drying, the turf bricks are hauled on the back of a donkey to the east side of the home for protection from the elements. Before turf was made available commercially, a wet summer meant a cold winter, for 50 days of clear weather are needed to dry the turf harvest.

The peat bogs of Ireland have yielded some remarkable archeological discoveries. Since the bogs are cool, wet, dark and slightly acidic, they alter the effects of bacteria and fungi so that materials in bogs decay only slowly. One farmer found ten foot wide antlers from an Irish elk, estimated by experts to be 10,000 years old. Even butter stored in a wooden container was found amazingly intact, more useful to grease an axle, however, than to butter a scone. In Mayo, archeologists have studied plank roads built of trees that used to flourish in Ireland, oak, ash, alder, dating back to 148 B.C. The oldest plank road unearthed dates to 1450 B.C., the Middle Bronze Age. One of the most precious bog-preserved discoveries is the **Moylough Belt Shrine**, which dates to the 8th century. Uncovered during turf-cutting in Sligo in 1944, the belt is on exhibit at the National Museum, Dublin. Seamus Heaney's comment about peat is more than poetic metaphor: **"The peat is the dark casket where we have found many of the clues to our past and to our cultural identity."**

Like so many rich natural resources around the world, the peat bog is threatened. Today peat fuel accounts for 20% of Ireland's energy needs and it is used to produce 21% of its electrical needs. In the West, there is still much evidence of blanket bogs, stacks of peat, blue smoke from chimneys,

and the sweet smell of a slow, even-burning turf fire. But in the last 40 years, 200,000 acres of bogland have been drained away. What took 10,000 years to create, modern technology can eradicate in a lifetime. At the end of World War II, the Irish government formed **Bord na Mona** to industrialize the peat industry. Using machines to harvest and dry the turf, the project has succeeded in creating a market for bricks and pulverized turf and has provided fuel for electrical generating plants. **Bord na Mona** may have done its job too well. Mechanical harvesting is "no respecter of antiquity" and it harvests turf more efficiently than an Irish family, so efficiently that the **Midlands bogs** are expected to be depleted in a decade. Conservationists worry about the fact that only 5% of the original 3 million acres of bogland survive in their natural state.

Turf, so much a part of everyday life in Ireland, may in our lifetime be preserved only in song and story.

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