

A Field



Photo by Rob Durston (www.durstonphoto.com)

A lot has been written about place, the importance of it in our hearts and souls. We all come from somewhere. The places of our childhood are indelibly pressed into our psyche. Fields are particular places, defined by the boundary hedges around them. When we 'go into' a field that it gives us a strong sense of having left one space and entered into another. It gives off its own ambience; as with people, we relate to each field in a particular way.

Fields come in all shapes and sizes. There are flat ones, sloped ones, bumpy ones and every kind in between. There are small fields designed long ago to suit handiwork and the donkey and cart, and larger fields sculpted out of those smaller ones to make way for the mighty tractors and silerators of today. There are upland fields and low-lying bottom fields, water meadows and rough grazing fields. There are fields hidden away behind high hedges. There are open fields with their faces to the world. There are dark, shadowy fields with their backs to the sun. There are roadside fields and there are back fields that never see the hustle and bustle of life; pleasant, green and grassy fields and grim, grey-brown rushy fields. There are fields that draw you in and ones that discourage closer acquaintance.

There are fields you can approach suddenly and take by surprise. There are others you see long before you enter. Some can be read quickly and easily while others are tasted in a piecemeal fashion. Like people, they can take a lot of getting used to or that grow on you slowly over time. A familiar field may hold a special place in your heart because of its shape. It may be its aspect that attracts you or the way in which it is curtained with an abundant and varied hedge; its green sward or gentle slope or strange hump. It may be because of a story handed down the generations, or the poetry of its name.

Perhaps we relate most closely to those fields in which we played or worked as children: a hayfield, a cornfield, a potato field or a carrot *bottom*. Grazing fields were less familiar because they were for cattle rather than for children. A flat field near the house was a football pitch; a sloped field was for sleighs in the snow.

I think of the day a corncrake flew out as the mowing machine was finishing off the grass in the middle of a field. I remember the rows and rucks of hay and standing up the bales. I remember the exact spot in a field the day a whirlwind took a wisp of hay up into the sky. I remember the ruck that fell and where it was in the field and who was to blame. As children we knew the dry places in the hayfield where the bees had their nests in the fog (moss). We remember the field of rucks that flooded and recall the year. We remember the field of hay we had to ted again because of the rain. We cursed the rain and the field we had to lap, but the same field renewed itself as the after-grass rose from the bare roots and a meadow was born again.

The cornfield blended in with the other fields until its green turned yellow and then golden. Then it held itself apart like a wrong colour in a patchwork. The crow and the pigeon circled and the pheasant came jooking. The often ineffectual scarecrow was erected. The mice and rats assembled in the stooks and the stacks until the threshing swept it all up and the field was left bare with its stubble and its straggle of straws.

The potato bottom *down at the lanes* was an isolated field and the only mossy one on the farm. Today the potato half of the field is the site of an abandoned house foundation, a symbol of the folly of the boom that bust in 2008. When we were young it was ploughed, harrowed, drilled and sown over many months. In September, on a Saturday or a Sunday, the potatoes were gathered up into long pits covered with rushes and a thick layer of moss. The rats invaded and had to be trapped. We herded away the cattle grazing in the other half of the field. The tiny potatoes left lying on the moss were stuck onto sally rods and flung to Timbuctoo, or at least towards the island of trees a hundred yards away. A lot depended on the suppleness and length of the sally rod and the size of the potato. When these were just right it was like the perfect meeting of a hurley stick with the ball.

The meadow became a hayfield in July or August and renewed itself as an after-grass grazing field in September. The rest of the fields were simply grazing fields, rougher grazing than the meadow. In 1950's Derrylea most were low-lying bottoms covered with rushes. Older people will remember the long rows of mown rushes piled up for burning and the heavy clouds of smoke filling the sky. Today many have been drained and resown, but here and there

throughout the countryside we can still see those unredeemed nurseries of rushes.

The patch-work that is our fields is the product of many things; soil, use, weather, machinery, lie-of-the-land and even the whim of a farmer. Today the fields are bigger because of machinery, and greener because of drainage and the artificial fertilisers. The hedges are not so dense or sprawling. The cattle are in much better condition and sheep are seen grazing where they were never known before. Views have become vistas and green grass has mostly replaced the grey-brown of the heavy rush. But there is not the same connection that there used to be. A tractor and machinery can do the work of a whole family. Not even the lone driver of the tractor has to feel the grass, or the stubble or the moss under his feet. When people worked in a field they moved about it and got to know the character of its surface as well as a sense of each space. Standing in the middle of a field gives you a totally different feeling from that felt as you walk along its hedge or linger in a corner.

I am thinking now of the repetitive circling of the hayfield we used to do when turning the swathe with a fork or hand rake. You got to know every bump and hollow, the dry and the wet, the hard and the soft. It was an up-close tactile experience. There was the fresh smell of the new-cut grass and later the completely different smell of the won hay. We might come across a bee's nest or a squashed frog, or a big slimy snail and the different types of butterflies. The grass got cut, turned and maybe tedded, and then the won hay got rucked; all cleared in three or four days and only revisited a month or two later to bring home the rucks. It was was a short and seasonal relationship but an intense one, a liaison you did not easily forget.

Each year in the hayfield was a unique experience. Each hayfield was like no other, unique in both experience and memory. A favourite field is like a good friend; you meet with ease and you can commune without words. In a favourite field you feel at home.

Dermot Maguire