FARTHER FIELDS

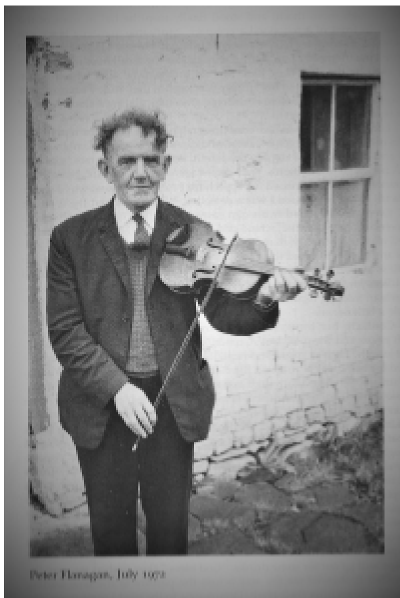
I reclined by the river in borrowed *chair*
and while the breeze off the meadow ruffled my hair,
Frankie amused and regaled us with tales of the hay
and how it used to be "won" way back in the day.
Anecdotes, amusing, informative, yet sometimes so sad:
how day-to-day life was lived in times that went bad.

My mind flew away south and miles to the west
where I too saved hay and felt I was blest.
His Auntie Tess and his Uncle Charlie
Could swap for my Uncle Frank and my Auntie Sadie.
My body was there but my mind wandered free
in tribute indeed to a great seanchaí.

John Monaghan

While Frankie's stories of how the hay used to be won in Tempo reminded John of his native Mayo, Pauraig, Dermot and I were inspired to think back to our childhoods in Cleenish, Rosslea and Balinamallard.

Philosopher in the Ditch



He pushed the empty dinner plate away
Knife and fork lay respectfully side by side
And picked up the child's blue stocking-filler flute
Huge hands gripped where small hands fit
Fingers swollen fat as cows teats at evening milking

Ooze blood from countless thorn and briar lacerations
Each knuckle bent; etched deep with wrinkles as a thinker's brow

Remembering each tiny muscle movement from which with each breath
Eighth and quarter notes rose in a flurry of sweet sound
Mingling with the aroma of boiled spuds and cabbage, fried bacon and egg

Children appeared from all directions and circled the music
Caught like moths in strong light
The baby, not walking, shuffled beneath the table in prime position
Between grass-cleaned wellingtons
Picks green to her mouth
My mother stands spellbound on the sandstone flag
Wide eyed*, smiling, her hands frozen in the lifted apron*
My father spooning semolina

Spit it out

The music stops, the baby cries, tiny hands rush to grab the disintegrating flageolet
P tips his mop of shaggy hair into his cloth cap and disappears out the door leaving
Imploding space in the melee
I follow awestruck behind
*Until he is astride the sheugh**
As more music flies to the hills from bill-hook and slash-hook
Echoing in time with each stroke
I pull at the thorny bush and briar
Proud my hands are scratched and bleeding.

Pauraig ***Ui Dhubhshláin***

* from the Irish siothlaigh The open drain by the roadside or between fields. In Fermanagh the ditch is only the raised bank.

Peter ('P') Flanagan (1906-1992) lived as a landless labourer in Drumbargey townland near Bellanaleck. He began playing the flute at the age of eight, and later the fiddle and tin whistle, on which he developed his own complex rhythmic style, influenced by recordings of the great Sligo fiddle player, Michael Coleman.

He played for himself and his neighbours, but only after the farm work was done. *If there weren't spuds in the ridges*, he would say, *I couldn't take down the flute or the fiddle. Until I know things* is goin *well, I don't feel well* atall*. So I don't. But when the spuds peep, I can take down the flute and play*.

He developed his art as a member of Kinawley band in his younger days and, like his father before him, in the local troop of mummers. By the Sixties, the time when this poem was set, his style of music was out of favour, but he still continued whenever he had the opportunity. A measure of recognition

came with the revival of the ’70s and the work of American anthropologist Henry Glassie. Cathal McConnell of the *Boys of the Lough* called P *my first teacher.*

Glassie wrote:

> *In a lifetime of study, I have been blessed to know three completely realized artists. The first was Peter Flanagan, the others Ahmet Şahin the Turkish master of Islamic ceramics, and Haripada Pal the great Bangladeshi sculptor of Hindu images. While their works remain Peter Flanagan’s art has gone into the air, though I am comforted that my writings gained him some belated local recognition before he died. All three of these masters brought benefit through art to their communities. All were gifted, and all devoted themselves, working to their own exalted standards before the prime witness of God.*

Tessie and Charlie

I wrote the following two short poems recalling memories of my Aunt Tessie and Uncle Charlie. A sister and brother of my father’s they lived in a thatched cottage at the end of Tempo Main Street in County Fermanagh. They were the last to live in the cottage where my grandmother and grandfather had raised fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls, born from the mid-1890’s to 1919.

The farm existed right up until the mid-1980’s and as children in the 1960’s and 1970’s we spent our summers in the hayfields in Edenmore, in the hills above Tempo village. The route to the hayfields from the cottage was in parts a steep uphill walk, Conolly’s lane, which ran for half a mile. It was hedged all the way with hawthorn, beech and at the top hazel and a stream with a waterfall crossed the lane about midway to the hayfields. This stream ran from the top of Edenmore and was crystal clear. We all drank from it, the cool water cupped in our hands, or carried in bottles to thirsty workers in the hayfields.

An old disused well sat near the bottom of the lane just opposite the

waterfall and above Nixon's small pig shed. It was hidden in the Summer behind long grass and when we peeped through this we could see it was the abode of many pond creatures like frogs, waterboatmen and pond skaters.

Aunt Tessie made the tea for the hayfield workers and carried it up the lane. It was a great relief to see her emerging over the brow of the hill, a basket in each hand and Lassie the sheepdog at her side. We knew that soon we would be sitting down, resting our tired limbs and enjoying slices of buttered fresh fadge bread and jam, washed down with cups of warm sweet tea.

Tessie McPhillips

Tessie,
I still see your smiling face,
hear your soft voice calling
"Hello Frank"
watch your light graceful step in a flowered dress
up Conolly's lane and lighter over Conolly's stream
past the deep glen, your arms straight with the weight of two baskets.
Through the gap now and a lilt *of a walk across hay felled meadows*
smelling of summer.
Teapot steady, tucked in with crushed newspaper
milk swishing in a bottle
newly baked and buttered fadge
and jam for "anyone who wants it"
and Lassie at your heels panting from the heat.
Seated under the big beech
we drape ourselves on humps of hay
and wait
and eat,
no talk,
we feed the hunger first
then the dog with dunked crusts.
You join us, bring laughter to the work
while Lassie sits in the beeches shade, moist tongue quivering.

Charlie McPhillips was Tessie's brother, and the last to work the farm. He had worked in the era of horses pulling "tumbling paddies," old metal hay turners and rakes. In the early 1970's he bought a Massey Ferguson tractor. Starting in his later years he was not the best of drivers and indeed his driving ability was probably well summed up in a comment from my father, *He never learned to drive until he wasn't able to*.

It did not stop him though and he took to it with great enthusiasm. His hand signals would be followed by an immediate turn in the pointed direction and God help any vehicle that was behind him trying to pass. He loved passengers, and as children sometimes three of us would join him, one on each mudguard and the other holding on to the back of his seat standing on the tow hitch. We did not think it then, but it was probably not the safest place to be – especially when Charlie let the clutch out like a rocket. We did not care, we loved the excitement of driving with him and he continually fooled us by saying hello to imaginary people in the ditches and fairies peeping out of

glens. He caught us time and time again. We loved him.

Charlie McPhillips

Charlie, the waterfall still flows but the well is gone
and diesel smells from phutting *pipes on Masseys no longer linger,*
caught under the beeches canopy.

I still feel our fingers,
tight to painted mudguards,
hold on for dear life,
waiting on the clutches slip,
Our knees tight, reddened,
peppered from tedding rucks
on brush bristled crew cut hay.

Through binder twine bound gates we go,
careful, slow,
squeezing rucks on ratchety hay shifters

Then screams of joy,
we rocket forwards with you, Charlie, in command,
past piles of twisted straw hay ropes
wound in balls like giant spikey wool
through clouds of grey/blue smoke,
our shoulders brushed with hazel leaves.

Then freewheel let her go
Yooooo!!!!
And make a breeze at last to cool our sweaty bodies.

Conolly's lane still exists and parts of it remain the same as in the 1960s. A walk through the dark tunnel of hazel at the top will bring you into the old hayfields. Anthony Mc Phillips (the youngest of the Mc Phillips family) is alive and well at 99 years of age and living in New York.

Frankie Mc Phillips

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 tedd 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

The Milk Run

Back when we first joined the Common Market as it was then, a change came to

the country. Concrete lanes snaked round hills to farmyards where once the track was so rutted they were more easily approached across fields and ditches.

Five-barred tubular galvanised gates began to replace alike the ancient wrought iron and the makeshifts of barbed wire, branches and binder twine.

It was the beginning of the end for the world I had known as a child. The new lanes bound people tighter to a new way of doing things, a way that they had previously kept at a distance.

My father, like many others, had only six cows, still milked by hand. A machine would have allowed him to milk more, but their output filled more churns than enough when each had to be manhandled onto a Scotch cart or the link box of a new-fangled tractor and driven down the old track. In my grandfather's day, there was a cooperative creamery in the village a mile away, and the milk run was an opportunity to see how the world was going while you waited for your milk to be weighed and to get skimmed milk for the pigs and maybe a little butter as well. Only a few people churned their own butter, like my aunt up the country, who lived at the end of a lane almost a mile long. I understood why when I had to lend a hand with the churning and eat the result.

By my father's time the town creameries had taken over, so he only had to take the churns to the milkstand at the end of the lane. Every farm had one – a platform built of stone or dug out of a ditch and topped with sheet iron or sleepers from the now-abandoned railway. The milk stands provided a welcome relief for weary legs on Sunday walks, a place to sit and swing your feet and watch the dragonflies. There, each week, the milk churns waited for a flat-bed lorry to take them any and return them empty, their milk drained by strangers. Sometimes, if you knew the driver, other goods might arrive or depart from the milk stand, or you might get a lift to town yourself.

For us children, this thought had all the romance of hopping a freight train in the Old West. Every child was a cowboy at heart. We had no horses by then, though they lived in our memories, like the redundant collars gathering mildew in the barn. My brother, aged two, had once rolled from one of the horses' back, slid down her hind legs and landed unharmed on the ground. The dividers in the milking parlour were about the same size, but we had enough sense not to repeat that experiment. Horses and cows were friendly and forgiving in a way that inanimate objects were not, no matter how our imaginations might try to bring them to life. We had a favourite cow, called Silver for the most unimaginative of reasons. The Lone Ranger had a horse, we had a cow. I don't know why we imagined Silver's milk tasted different, but it was always kept for the house. We drank it raw, cooled in a bucket of water, but it always tasted better with her warmth still in it. When the cows were sold, our neighbour made me a paintbrush out of hairs from her tail.

We knew even then the country was changing. There were few new houses yet – those had to wait for lanes fit for the cars of people who worked elsewhere. The land still emptying, as it had been for a hundred years. We were to visit houses where only old ones lived, and when they were gone, the houses too

began to return to the earth from which they came. Thatch grew green and full of nesting creatures, corrugated iron encrusted with ivy, bushes growing from chimney stacks. Sometimes they were used for stores or cattle sheds, but often they were simply left – rotten doors opening onto cold hearths, beds mouldering back into the soil. Sometimes the odd picture was left hanging on the wall, or a rusted tool on the mantel, but we knew we should never take anything from such a house.

The lanes to these houses were so overgrown as to be almost indistinguishable from the fields on either side or else choked with briars and nettles. Sometimes we would come across a house unknown, with, it seemed no lane to it at all. Many years later I found that these were marked on old maps as herd's houses, relics of a time when children were sent to watch over cattle on upland grazing all summer long, only to return at Halloween, when the gates were removed from the tilled fields to let the cattle back. We too had followed cattle, driving them from field to field, turning them out of gardens. When we saw a stray cow we said it was grazing the long acre of the roadside.

Of all the changes that the new lanes brought perhaps the greatest was the milk tanker. The milk stands have vanished, the milk run is no more; milk goes straight from tank to tanker. In the long-gone time when milk was thin on lean spring grazing and wouldn't churn, some poor old woman might have been accused of casting a spell to 'draw the butter'. In more scientific times there was always a temptation to add a little something to the churn to pass the creamery's tests. Now such things are more tightly controlled, they say; poor milk goes down the drain. Milk is pasteurised, homogenised, sold in plastic bottles and cartons ('paper bags' one old man called them.) All this is expensive – far too expensive for the man with only six cows.

The problems of the dairy industry are too well known to recite. The milk tanker led to the mass stock unit, the slurry pit, the automated parlour, strip grazing and zero grazing. Fermanagh fields that once were full of cows now feed only sheep. The creameries have closed; Fermanagh milk is bottled in Donegal and Cavan milk is sold in Fermanagh.

I have no land to keep a cow, nor could I if I had. These days I can drink organic milk again – from ASDA. It's good, but it's nothing like Silver's.

Jenny Brien