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The Communal Collection of Sand Eels in Ireland

by *A. T. Lucas*, Dublin

The sand eel belongs to the family *Ammodytidae*, the members of which are found along sandy shores in Europe and North America. They live in dense shoals, frequenting congenial littorals in spring and summer and retiring to deeper water in winter. Voracious feeders themselves, they are eagerly eaten by mackerel, pollack and cod and were widely used as bait for the long lines on which the last named fish was taken. They were also used to a limited extent as human food, the numbers in which they were available compensating in some degree for their diminutive size. Five species have been recognized off the Irish coast, the two commonest being *Ammodytes tobianus* Linn (*A. lancea* Cuvier) and *Hyperoplus lanceolatus* (Lesauvage) (*Ammodytes lanceolatus* Lesauvage)¹. Both of these are small slender fish, very long in proportion to their depth. *H. lanceolatus*, which is the larger, rarely exceeds 30 cm. in length, the other species being somewhat smaller. As both species have similar habits and are found together, they are not normally distinguished in popular nomenclature. Among English speakers in Ireland, the general name is "sand eel" but in Co. Down this term was reserved for the smaller species, the larger being known as "snedden"². The commonest Irish name is *corr* but in Co. Kerry this is replaced by *spiairlint*. The term *sgadán gainimbe* ('sand herring') was occasionally employed, having been recorded from Kerry³ and Galway⁴. Other Irish names are *corr ghobach*, *goibín* and *goibíneach*, all of which contain the element *gob*, meaning a pointed beak or snout⁵.

¹ Julie M. Fives, Sand-Eels (*Ammodytides*) and their Larvae off the Galway Coast. Scientific Proceedings of the Royal Dublin Society series B, vol. 2. Dublin 1967, 37-44.

The writer is indebted to Dr. Colm E. O'Riordan, Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, for references to the zoological literature.

² William Thompson, The Natural History of Ireland. vol. 4. London 1856, 235, 238-9.

³ Irish Folklore Commission, Manuscript 934, p. 568; subsequently abbreviated to I. F. C., MS. The writer is grateful to Professor J. H. Delargy, Honorary Director of the Commission, for access to the archives and to Mr. Sean O'Sullivan, Archivist, for assistance in consulting them.

⁴ I. F. C., MS. 470, 10; Séamus Mac Con Iomaire, Cladaigh Chonamara. Dublin 1938, 93. The writer is indebted to Mr. Sean O'Sullivan, Irish Folklore Commission, for the latter reference.

⁵ G. P. Farran, Local Names of Irish Fishes. The Irish Naturalists' Journal 8 (1946) 406.

The sites of the annual shoreward influx of the sand eels are often of very limited extent. As the tide recedes from these sandy habitats, they conceal themselves in the sand between the tide marks, burying themselves with extraordinary speed and agility, often to a considerable depth. Thompson, describing the fishing of sand eels at Newcastle, Co. Down, in 1851, states: "... I was surprised to see the *Ammodytes* shovelled out from the shelly and gravelly sand, to the depth of two feet, on the surface of which my weight hardly left a foot-mark"⁶. In some places in Europe, they were taken by orthodox fishing methods⁷ but the writer knows only one reference to the practice of netting the fish in Ireland: it was stated in 1810 that they were taken in the beginning of summer in small close-meshed nets at Ross Carbery, Co. Cork⁸. Elsewhere their capture was restricted to recovering them from the sand in which they had buried themselves at ebb tide and it is only by stretching the definition that the term "fishing" can be applied to this manner of collection. The operation was usually carried out on a communal basis, was regarded as something of a pastime and a social occasion and, in some cases, assumed the character of a local festival.

So far as the writer is aware, the information available about the collection of sand eels in Ireland does not date earlier than the eighteenth century. The first to mention it was Harris who, writing in 1744 about the abundance and variety of fish on the coast of Co. Down, stated that sand eels were taken in such quantities that: "the Poor carried them away in Sack Fulls."⁹ Fortunately, the naturalist William Thompson has left us very full data about the capture of the fish in this county. At Dundrum in 1836 he recorded:

From the loose sand covered with water to about the depth of 9 inches, the persons engaged in this occupation with great dexterity drew these fishes from their lurking-places, using for the purpose old reaping-hooks. These are run through the sands with the right hand drawn towards the left, by which the fish is seized and transferred to a basket strapped round the waist and carried

⁶ W. Thompson (see note 2 above) 237.

⁷ B. Fries, C. U. Ekström, and C. Sundevall, *A History of Scandinavian Fishes*, 2nd edition, revised and completed by F. A. Smitt. Stockholm and Berlin 1895, part II, 578.

⁸ Rev. Horatio Townsend, *Statistical Survey of the County of Cork*. Dublin 1810, 356-7.

⁹ Walter Harris, *The Ancient and Present State of the County of Down*. Dublin 1744, 80-1.

in front. It is in shape like the angler's but much larger and open at the top¹⁰.

At Newcastle, as previously quoted, he described how they were dug out with shovels. They were measured and sold by the quart, there being about a hundred fishes to that measure¹¹. The quantity taken by an individual during one ebb varied very considerably: one man had taken three bushels and on one occasion some skilful persons had taken up to seventy quarts each¹². By far the greater part of the catch was consumed by the fishers and their families but some was brought for sale to the neighbouring small towns¹³. Some were cured: "The poorer people dry them in the sun, and in bright days the tables and trays of the cottage are sure to be seen set out before the doors covered with sand eels."¹⁴

Thompson also draws attention to the popularity of the collection as a pastime, particularly among the young, stating that: "at Strangford Lough and other places in the North of Ireland it is likewise a favourite pastime of the young in the moonlight nights of summer. It is said from the silvery brilliancy of the fish being more striking by night than by day, it is at this time captured with greater facility; but is it not rather for the novelty of dry-land fishing, that the sport is at this time practised."¹⁵ In addition to these moonlight excursions to the sands, he also records the existence of an annual local festival centred on the sand eels at Dundrum:

... they tell me that down to the last twenty years a thousand people, including many from five or six miles' distance, would come once annually for three or four days and bivouack on the sand-hills, living on the sand eels and the potatoes that they would take from the nearest fields... a thousand persons are still occasionally engaged fishing at the two sides of the inner bay.¹⁶

Traditions of fishing sand eels were recorded in the Cushendall district, Co. Antrim, in 1953. These refer solely to their use as bait but the method of capture was identical with that described by Thompson. The best place for obtaining them was the strand at Waterfoot and an iron hook was used to extract them from the sand.

¹⁰ Thompson (see note 2 above), 235.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹² *Ibid.*, 238-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

Each person engaged in the task had a “can” suspended from his neck into which the catch was put¹⁷.

In 1752, Pococke described the practice in the Inishowen peninsula, Co. Donegal:

... where I saw people at work with wooden shovels, in turning up the sand, as the sea left the strand, and enquiring what they were about, they told me they were catching sand eels; I observ'd that the moment the wave leaves the sand, they run in the shovel, and turn up the sand and the fish are taken; they are about 4 or 5 inches long, very small for their length, are made like a whiteing and they say are very good¹⁸.

Four accounts of the custom were recorded in 1937 and 1938 from natives of the Rinnafarset district on the west coast of the same county. Three of the informants related that there were two particular spring tides, one about St. Brigid's Day (February 1) and the other “in the beginning of autumn”, when the fish came ashore in exceptional numbers¹⁹. They were, however, collected, at any suitable tide, the young people, especially, taking advantage of ebbs which occurred on moonlit nights to form parties up to sixty or eighty strong for expeditions to the strand to catch them²⁰. Such a tide was referred to as *rabbarta na gcorr* (“a sand eel spring tide”)²¹. The places favoured by the fish were well known. Some of them were named after the fish, one being called *oitir na gcorr* (“the sand eel bank”)²² and another *tráigh na gcorr* (“the sand eel strand”)²³. All the accounts state that either spades or hooks or both were used in searching for the fish. The hook was made from an old sickle or a piece of iron bent to shape and was called *sgian chorr* (“a sand eel knife”). The collectors provided themselves with sacks and buckets, the latter being for immediate use and emptied into the sacks when full. One informant stated that some of the fish were salted for winter use²⁴ but two others maintained that they were too small to be preserved by this method²⁵.

¹⁷ I. F. C., MS. 1362, 56.

¹⁸ Richard Pococke, D. D., *Tour in Ireland in 1752*, ed. George T. Stokes. Dublin 1891, 46.

¹⁹ I. F. C., MSS. 457, 166; 458, 124–5; 510, 222.

²⁰ I. F. C., MS. 371, 128–9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

²² I. F. C., MS. 457, 165.

²³ I. F. C., MS. 510, 222.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁵ I. F. C., MSS. 457, 166; 458, 124.

From farther south along the west coast, Maxwell, 1832, furnishes a description of the collection of sand eels by night in Tullaghan Bay, Co. Mayo, which illustrates its role as a social activity among the local adolescent population. Darkness had already set in on a summer evening when he had gone out of doors:

My musings were, however, speedily interrupted: voices came towards me from opposite directions, and the loud and frequent laugh replied to rustic badinage and youthful romping. My cousin joined me, and from him I ascertained that the jolly parties who seemed everywhere scattered over the sands beyond the river, were the village girls assembled to collect sand-eels, an employment they would pursue till the returning tide filled the estuary again. A little flat punt... was speedily placed upon the river, and we pushed over to the opposite strand, and found ourselves surrounded by several hundreds of the young villagers of both sexes, who were busily engaged in this curious species of night-fishing.

The sand-eels are generally from four to nine inches in length, and lie beneath the surface seldom deeper than a foot. The method of taking them is very simple; it is effected by passing a caseknife or sickle with a blunted edge, quickly through the sands; and by this means the fish is brought to the surface, and its phosphoric brilliancy betrays it instantly. At the particular times during the summer months when these eels run in upon the estuary, quantities sufficient to fill several barrels have been collected during a night. When dressed the fish is reckoned by the peasantry a great delicacy, but to my taste, it is much too strong²⁶.

Neither the social attitude to the pursuit nor the technique of taking the fish had changed in 1895 when Browne wrote about Ballycroy in the same area of the county:

One social function, going for the sand-eels, ought not to pass without mention: it is the cause of considerable gatherings of the young people on the sea-shore on moonlight nights, the object being as much the amusement as the sand-eels themselves. The mode of taking these latter is by passing a blunted reaping-hook or a knife through the sand²⁷.

By a fortunate coincidence, the writer has received an account of the collection of sand eels from Mr. Micheál Mac Énrí of Bangor

²⁶ W. Maxwell, *Wild Sports of the West*. vol. 1, London 1832, 274-6.

²⁷ Charles R. Browne, *The Ethnography of Ballycroy, Co. Mayo*. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin*, 20 (1896-1898) 101.

Erris, Co. Mayo, who was born and reared in the townland of Tullaghanbaun on the shore of Tullaghan Bay where Maxwell witnessed the operation in 1832. Mr. Mac Énrí was born in 1888 and frequently participated in the collection between the years 1898 and 1903. His description, which is the most comprehensive known to the writer, is as follows:

Sand eels were got in two different kinds of strands and a different technique was, generally speaking, employed in each kind. One type was that abutting on a deep wide channel where a swift current developed during the ebb and flow of the tide forming mounds and basins in the sand. As the tide receded, the mounds dried out and the basins held some water. The mounds were soft and consisted of "running" sand which sank under a person's footsteps. In these mounds the sand eels rested and to get them the people went equipped with a spade or shovel (usually the latter), a coarse sack and a bucket. Each digger usually had a young boy with him to pick the sand eels as they became exposed when shovelfuls of sand were turned over. Sometimes as many as five might appear in one shovelful and if there was not a picker to grab them quickly, they disappeared. Picking was made easier by the fact that the picker's hands were coated with sand, as were, likewise, the sand eels, and when both hands were worked together as a forceps and manipulated through the loose upturned sand, as many as four or five sand eels could be picked up at a time and dropped into the bucket which was set down nearby. A digger without a picker might be able to get one at a time but his catch was relatively poor compared with that of a person who had a picker to help him. When a bucket was nearly full, the contents were dropped into the sack. As the sack was being filled, it was held by the mouth and occasionally dipped and tossed in one of the pools and its open texture allowed the sand to run out with the water. The whole operation was very exciting and was an occasion of great merriment and fun.

The second type of strand was the hard, flat, firm one exposed to the open sea. The shovel could not be easily used in such a strand and here the person collecting worked almost knee deep in water where the sand was loose. A shovel would be next to useless in a submerged strand as the mixture of sand and water would flow off it and the sand eels be lost. A special knife made by a blacksmith was used instead. It was called a *sgian chorr*. It had a number of projections along its inner curve and as it was pulled through the sand

it brought with it any sand eel that came in its course. In many cases people used a discarded reaping hook. They cut a bit off the point to shorten it, blunted the original teeth and put a few deep notches in their place. It was just as effective as the *sgian chorr*. The operator stood in the water with the *sgian* in one hand. He extended it as far as possible, stuck it into the sand and pulled it towards his other hand which he held under the water or down in the loose sand. He could feel when a fish came in contact with the hook and pinned it between the palm of his free hand and the hook and dropped it into a small bag which he had tied to his waist. When this technique was employed the operator came equipped with a *sgian chorr* or hook, a shallow bag and a sack. The bag, which was specially made of open-textured material, had a band sewn half-way around its mouth, the ends of the band being sufficiently long to allow them to be tied around the waist. The loose side of the bag hung open in front to allow the sand eels to be dropped expeditiously into it. The sack was set down on the strand and the contents of the bag were emptied into it from time to time.

The operation was a community one in so far as groups met together to get the sand eels but they did not share the results: each person kept his own catch, except when, after arrival home, he might share with a neighbour who had been unable to take part. The gutting of the fish was usually done by the womenfolk who followed a standard traditional method. The sand eel was held between the thumb and the forefinger of one hand with the head protruding upwards and then with the other a blunt knife was pressed edgewise across the back of the head to cut the skin and backbone behind the gill covers. The head was then held firmly between the edge of the knife and the thumb and twisted to cut the skin all round the body, without going deep enough to sever the intestine. The head, still held between the knife and thumb, was pulled away gently and slowly and the intestines were drawn out attached to it. The fish were then washed and boiled and were regarded as a delicacy. If a large quantity had been collected, some of them were salted for future use, although, generally speaking, it was customary to eat them fresh. Salting was done in a tub. Alternate layers of salt and fish were placed in it and left there for five or six days. The fish were next rinsed in cold water and spread out in a basket or on a board to dry in the sun. When dry they were stored in a loose-textured bag or a receptacle made of plaited straw which was hung up in a cool airy place. All sand eels, whether fresh

or salted, were cooked by being boiled. The practice of collecting them for food lasted in the district until about the year 1940.

This account records details about equipment and methods which are lacking in more perfunctory earlier descriptions. It also establishes that in this district at least there was a clear distinction between the sand formations in which the shovel and the hook were used, although it is evident from the proceedings at Ross Port, Co. Mayo, and Castlefreke, Co. Cork, which are quoted later, that in other places both implements were in simultaneous use on the same strand. It is also interesting to note that Thompson, whose account of the practice at Dundrum, Co. Down, has been cited above and Townsend, whose description of the collection at Castlefreke is quoted subsequently, both record that the hook was employed in sand covered by water, as was the custom in Tullaghanbaun.

At Ross Port, in the extreme north-west of Co. Mayo, there was an annual festival centred on the sand eels, reminiscent of that which took place in the Dundrum sandhills, Co. Down. An account of it was recorded for the Irish Folklore Commission in 1941 by the late Michael Corduff, a native of the district who had an intimate knowledge of local traditions. It took place on a sandy peninsula called *Biorán na gCorr* ("Sand Eel Point") in connection with the spring tide which occurred on or about St. Brigid's Day (February 1). Thousands of persons of both sexes and all ages attended it, those from the north of the estuary remaining apart from those who came from the district to the south of it. The two groups assembled on the strand with an intervening space about fifty yards wide between them which formed an arena for games and athletic contests of various kinds, including running, jumping, weight throwing and wrestling. When the tide was at its lowest ebb, a signal was given and all present rushed to collect the sand eels. They were equipped with shovels and buckets and each digger was usually accompanied by a boy or girl who picked the fish when they were uncovered. Some persons used old reaping hooks to dislodge the fish²⁸.

An account from Mweenish Island on the northern shore of Galway Bay reveals the same local knowledge of the movements and habits of the fish as was current in the other districts from which information is forthcoming. They appeared in great abundance in the beginning of spring and again in the beginning of autumn but those of the spring migration were at the peak of condition, the females being

²⁸ I. F. C., MS. 1242, 551-4.

in roe. Numbers were, however, present in certain strands throughout the summer. They were captured by digging them out with shovels, especially on moonlit nights but it was possible to take them even on dark nights since their sheen was clearly visible. Their presence in the sand was indicated in the daytime by the gulls which congregated to hunt for them. They were regarded as excellent eating but, as in other places, their collection contained a strong pastime element and was a favourite occupation for boys and girls²⁹. Sand eels were similarly collected in Lettercalow on Lettermore Island to the east of Mweenish and in both places the fish was known as *sgadán gainimh* ("sand herring")³⁰.

The data from Kerry relate to the extreme west of the Dingle peninsula where the Irish name of the fish was *spairlint*. At Ballynagall on Smerwick Harbour they were obtained by digging in the sand with shovels³¹ and at Dunquin on the western tip of the peninsula reaping hooks were employed. At the latter place their capture was the occupation of boys, as many as forty of whom might be seen engaged in the work at low tide, each being accompanied by a smaller boy who picked the fish and put them into a bag which he carried³². In both places, the sand eels had, within living memory, been used solely as bait.

The only other description of the practice known to the writer dates to 1810 and relates to the Ross Carbery district of Co. Cork:

Before I conclude this section, I must introduce my reader to a set of fishermen, of whom, probably, none but those, who reside in their vicinage, have ever heard. Among the peculiarities attending this fishery are the implements employed, which are all agricultural. Ross strand, and the great sandy beach near Castlefreke, are the scene of these curious and uncommon operations. A species of small eel, from six to twelve inches in length, with a sharp snout, and almost transparent body, inhabits these sands in prodigious abundance. They are a very nice fish for the table, in flavour somewhat resembling the smelt. In the beginning of the summer they make their appearance on the coast, and are then taken with small nets of very close mesh. In the months of September and October, they come higher up upon the sand, for the purpose of spawning.

²⁹ Mac Con Iomaire (see note 4 above) 93-5.

³⁰ I. F. C., MS. 470, 10.

³¹ I. F. C., MS. 934, 568-9.

³² Seán Ó Dálaigh, *Clocha Sgáil*. Dublin 1930, 125-6. The writer is indebted to Mr. Kevin Danaher, Irish Folklore Commission, for this reference.

The velocity with which they pierce through the sand by means of their slender bodies and pointed noses, is surprising; for, unless immediately secured, they work down and are out of sight. When the tide has retired, the peasants collect in great numbers on the strand, with shovels and baskets, and seldom fail to return with a full load, the men turning up the sand, and the women and boys collecting the fish. Night as well as day is employed in this operation. I think I am within bounds in saying, that I have this season, in which they have appeared in unusual abundance, seen a thousand persons at one time engaged in this work, exhibiting a most curious and entertaining scene. Sometimes they stand up to the middle in water, and scraping through the sand, with an old reaping-hook fastened to the end of a stick, throw them on the shore. They are sold in the markets of Cloghnikilty [Clonakilty], and, while the season lasts, contribute materially to the subsistence of the poor. The Cloghnikilty and Courtmasherry strands also supply them, but in less plenty³³.

On account of the extremely local nature of this activity, records of it are understandably few. We owe most of the earlier accounts to the accidental presence of an interested observer when the operation was in progress. Its seasonal and, frequently, nocturnal character and the fact that many of the strands which were the scene of it were far removed from the routes followed by the ordinary tourist of former times and inaccessible by the modes of transport then available make it very probable that the number of the surviving descriptions gives little indication of the extent to which sand eels were collected around the Irish coast. Even the patently exiguous data at our disposal, however, show that their collection was pursued in the north-east, north, north-west, west and south of the country and this widespread distribution of the practice suggests that the fish were formerly collected everywhere the shore formation provided suitable habitats for them.

The information cited above shows that there was a remarkable uniformity in the method of retrieving the fish from the sand. The techniques and the implements were the same in all the widely dispersed localities: the fish were either dug out with shovels or extracted by drawing sickles or specially made curved blades through the sand. The sickles were invariably disused specimens which, being blunt, did not mutilate the fish. Moreover, in virtually every locality both

³³ Townsend (see note 8 above), 356–7.

techniques were employed simultaneously, although digging was generally considered the more productive. So far as can be ascertained, there was a similar uniformity in the views held about the habits of the sand eels. It was generally believed that there were two major influxes, one coinciding with the spring tide which occurred about the first of February, the other with that occurring about the first of August. Because the fish were, in some places, found to be in roe at the time of the shoreward migration, it was believed they came ashore to spawn in the sands.

The communal character of the activity, which was typical of it in all the localities from which it has been recorded, stemmed directly from the nature and habits of the fish. On account of their small size, they had to be collected in quantity if they were to form any substantial addition to the food of the local population. The myriads which embedded themselves in the sand made this possible but as each fish had to be captured individually, large numbers of people were needed to collect them in adequate quantities. The number of people required was further increased by the fact that the capture of a single fish usually necessitated the presence of two persons: one to bring it to the surface by digging or the use of the hook, the other to seize it before it had time to rebury itself in the sand. In addition, the time for collection was restricted to the interval between two tides and the maximum return could, therefore, only be achieved by mustering the greatest possible number of operators. This concentration of personnel was feasible since physical incapacity was the only bar to participation: the scene of operations, the sandy expanse between the tide marks, presented no dangers or difficulties; no specialized equipment was required and even small children could play their part as pickers.

Except to a limited extent in counties Down, Donegal and Mayo, where part of the catch was salted and dried, the fish do not appear to have been generally preserved for future use. As the large numbers of people required to capture the fish in reasonable quantities could not have been continually available for the task and as opportunities for their collection were rigidly controlled by the tides and the habits of the fish, sand eels obtained from the strand could never have been a regular and staple article of fresh food. They were regarded as a delicacy but, at best, they must have been only an occasional one. They did assume some importance for the inhabitants of coastal settlements in time of famine and during the scarcity which frequently prevailed in late spring and early summer in the interval between

the exhaustion of the domestic stores of corn and potatoes carried over from the previous year and the time when the new crops became available. Their value at such times has been noted by some observers³⁴. Generally speaking, therefore, their collection was not taken too seriously and people could afford to regard it as something of a pastime. This aspect is repeatedly emphasized in the surviving descriptions of the practice, with particular reference to the adolescent boys and girls of the community. These frequently took advantage of an ebb tide on moonlit nights to visit the sands in large parties: the unusualness of the hour, the novelty of detecting the fish by its phosphorescent gleam and the companionship of persons of the opposite sex all adding to the enjoyment.

The local festivals involving considerable numbers of the adult population which have been recorded from Dundrum, Co. Down, and Ross Port, Co. Mayo and which may well have been customary in other districts as well, probably came into existence as a result of the congregation of large numbers of people to collect the fish. As most of those present were known to each other with some degree of intimacy, the gathering provided an opportunity for the renewal of acquaintances and the exchange of gossip and news. There was, accordingly, every inducement to prolong the sojourn far beyond the time required for the actual collection of the fish and to turn it into a social occasion similar to the patrons at holy wells, the fairs and the other popular assemblies which formed such an important part of the social mechanism of the rural population.

³⁴ Harris (see note 9 above), 81; E. Estyn Evans, *Mourne Country*. Dundalk 1951, 182.