

Nomadic Irish Groups

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Nomadic Irish Groups

by *Seán Ó Súilleabháin*, Belfield, Dublin

Several thousand people of Irish extraction lead a nomadic life and have done so far at least some hundreds of years. They are usually referred to as tinkers or travelling people, and are quite distinct from gipsies, who are to be met with in Great Britain and some mainland countries of Europe. They are as Irish in blood and name as the settled population. In recent years some attempts have been made to help them by providing them with settled homes and more normal occupations than those which they have traditionally held, and the efforts towards this end have met with a good deal of success and are still continuing.

Since no authoritative study of the origins of these nomads has yet been undertaken, theories vary from their descent from the metal-workers of displaced Irish kings some hundreds of years ago to that from Irish families who, when starving during the Great Famine (1845–1847), took to the roads in search of food and shelter.

It is to be hoped that, in addition to research into the background of the Irish tinkers, what remains of their secret language will be further collected with a view to compiling a dictionary and grammar of this interesting linguistic entity.

I

In February, 1952, the following questionnaire was issued by the Irish Folklore Commission to its correspondents throughout Ireland:

Tinkers

Note. This questionnaire is not intended as a means of collecting information about individuals who travel the roads alone (tramps, beggarmen). It refers only to tinkers who move about in family or other groups and ply a trade or calling, such as tin-smithwork or horse-dealing.

Generic Names. By what general title(s) are these nomads referred to locally: tinkers, travellers, “gipsies”, tramps, beggars, *tincéirí*, *siúblóirí*, etc.?

Local Tinker Groups. Give the family-names of any tinker groups which visit your district. Are any of them known locally by special

by-names or nicknames? Have individual tinkers any unusual Christian names?

Areas Within Which Tinker Groups Operate. As a general rule, tinkers travel about only within certain areas. Can you find out which areas are included by the local tinkers in their "rounds"? Any stories of rivalry between groups in this regard?

Customs and Superstitions. Please write down an account of any customs or superstitions of tinkers regarding the following: birth, marriage, death, buying, selling or exchange, good luck or ill-luck, festivals, belief in the supernatural, or any other matter.

Religious and Social Practice. To which religious belief do the local tinkers belong? Are they married in church? If so, where? Do tinker marriages take place at particular times? Any accounts or stories of tinker marriages or weddings? Do the local people, or local individuals take part in these weddings? Are tinker children baptised by local priests? Any special lore about this? Do tinker children attend local schools for any period? Does a priest or other clergyman attend tinkers who are dying locally? Any special lore about the wakes, funerals, or burials of tinkers? Where are tinkers, who die locally, buried? Any other lore regarding these matters?

Visits and Local Encampments. Please give a general statement about the routine visits of tinkers to your district—their frequency, the periods at which they arrive and leave, the length of their stay. Where do they camp? Have these camp-sites changed from time to time for any reason? How do tinkers dispose of their waggons or cars, gear, and animals during their stay at the camp? Where do the animals graze—along the roads or in fields? Any friction with the local people or with the authorities regarding this? What do tinkers (men, women, and children) do during the camping period? Do they travel about locally or mix with the local people? Where do tinkers sleep while in camp? Where do they cook, and eat? Is there anything peculiar about their carts or waggons (style, colours, size)? Have these changed over a period of years? Where do tinkers spend the winter?

Crafts and Means of Livelihood. What trades or calling do the local tinkers follow? Do they make or repair tins and other vessels? Do they produce or sell locally any other articles? How do the prices of these articles compare with those bought in shops? Do they buy, sell, or barter animals casually or at fairs? Are tinkers regarded as being

poor or fairly well-to-do? Have they changed in this respect over the years? Are they regarded as being generous or the reverse?

Behaviour. Any accounts of the general behaviour of the tinkers would be welcome—their attitude to one another, to the local people, to the law, to the clergy, to women and children, to animals? Any information about their moral character—honesty, truth, charity, and so on? Do the Catholics among them attend Mass or other religious services when they are camped locally; do they frequent the Sacraments? Are there accounts of individual tinkers having settled down on the land locally, or having married outside their own social group?

Physical and other Characteristics. Do tinkers differ in any special way from the local community as regards the following: physical appearance, hair colour or skin pigmentation, facial structure, height, gait, hardiness, health, dexterity, manner of speech, ability to sing, dance, mimic, or tell stories? Any peculiarity in their dress?

Tinker Personalities. Any stories of individual tinkers, men or women, who were better known than the rest for some reason?

Tinker Society. Can you get any information about the structure of tinker society? Have the local groups a king or other lesser head to whom obedience is given, as distinct from parental authority? Are there classes within the tinker world? Do tinkers absorb individuals from outside their own class?

Languages. Have the local tinkers a language or languages of their own which they use for private conversation among themselves? By what name or names are these languages known? When are they used, as a rule? Can you obtain any words, or phrases of these languages? If so, please give the Irish or English translation also. Do you know of local tinkers who can speak Irish or any other well-known language as their native tongue?

Origins and History. Have the tinkers themselves, or any local persons, any traditions about how the tinkers originated? Apart from these, is anything known about who the tinkers really are in origin, or how it happened that they took up the nomadic life? Is anything known as to how long they have been visiting the district?

Sayings, Proverbs or Songs about Tinkers. Can you get any of these locally, e.g., “a tinker’s dam(n)”—what was that?; “the bray of a tinker’s ass”; “eyes like two burned holes in a tinker’s blanket”;

“*bean táilliúra agus bean tincéara, sin beirt ná réitiónn le chéile*” (the wife of a tailor does not get along with the wife of a tinker), etc.?

One hundred and thirty-one replies were received: forty-nine from Munster, twenty-nine from Ulster, twenty-eight from Leinster and twenty-five from Connaught. The only county from which no reply was received was Louth. The replies are bound in the following manuscript volumes in the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission: 1255 (pp. 1-478), 1256 (pp. 1-285), 1379 (pp. 49-67), 1540 (pp. 105-109), 1565 (pp. 64-71), and 1669 (pp. 21-49).

A perusal of the questionnaire shows that those who were asked to help by replying were not expected to interrogate the local itinerants regarding the points raised. Rather were they asked to describe the nomads as viewed by the settled community; in some cases, this view would be only that of the individual who answered the queries, but generally it may be taken as reflecting the local attitude to, and opinion of, the “travellers”.

The replies received comprised 819 pages of manuscript (rarely typescript) and the majority of them covered fully all sections of the questionnaire. Some correspondents gave information over and above what was required, as well as lists of words and phrases from the secret language of the itinerants. It may be well to add here that, apart altogether from the results of the questionnaire, the collections of the Commission contain a large body (*passim*) of information about tinkers.

The present article, however, is confined strictly to the questionnaire returns and makes no attempt to use extraneous material. In particular, the replies to three of the sectional queries have been summarised: Local Tinker Groups, Behaviour, and Physical and Other Characteristics. These summaries (and the replies on which they are based) do not claim to be fully correct or exhaustive. They are merely a contribution to some future study which, it is hoped, will one day be made of those interesting people.

II

Local Tinker Groups

Here follows a list of the surnames of itinerants in the various counties:

Kerry: Brien, Casey, Coffey, Driscoll, Flynn, Forde, Harrington, Herlihy, McCarthy, Quirke, Sheridan.

Cork: Brannigan, Brien, Butler, Callaghan, Carty, Coffey, Dillon, Driscoll, Flynn, Foley, Gammell, Grady, Harrington, Hogan, Hourigan, Leary, McCarthy, Purcell, Quilligan, Ryan, Sheridan, Sullivan.

Limerick: Blake, Brien, Carty (McCarthy), Casey, Coffey, Connors, Doherty, Donoghue (Soho), Faulkner, Flynn, Gammell, Griffin, Harty, Hegarty, Hogan, Hourigan, Luby, McDonagh, Quilligan, Reilly, Sheridan, Sullivan, Ward, Whelan.

Tipperary: Brien, Carty (McCarthy), Cawley, Connors, Delaney, Donoghue (Soho), Doyle, Leary, McInerney, Reilly, Sheridan.

Clare: Callinan, Carty, Casey, Cash, Coughlan, Delaney, Donoghue, Doyle, Faulkner (Fortner), Lawrence, McDonagh, McInerney, Molloy, O'Brien, Ryan, Sheridan, Sherlock, Slattery, Ward.

Waterford: Carty, Daly, Donovan, Hogan.

Meath: Cash, Connors, Cooney, Dolan, Donovan, Doran, Hand, Joyce, Kane, Murray, Power, Stokes, Teelin, Walsh.

Westmeath: Carney, Cash, Cawley, Deehan, Dinnegan, Donoghue, Doyle, Duke, Gavin, Hannafin, Joyce, Keena, King, Leary, McCann, McDonagh, McNeill, Murphy, Nevin, Power, Quinn, Rhatigan, Stokes, Sweeney, Ward, West.

Longford: Briody, Crowley, Donoghue, Doyle, Hanafin, Hanaford, Joyce, McDonagh, Nevin, O'Leary, Ward.

Dublin: Donovan, Hendrigan.

Kildare: Cash, Connor, Delaney, McCann, Power, Purcell, Ward.

Leix: Carthy, Delaney, Donoghue, Donovan, Doyle, Hutchison, McInerney (Kinerney), Reilly, Wall, Ward.

Offaly: Cash, Delaney, Gavin, Green, Joyce, Maloney, McDonagh, McDonnell, Nevin, Ward.

Carlow: Berry.

Wicklow: Brien, Cash, Connor, Donovan, Maloney, Murphy.

Wexford: Berry, Brien, Cash, Connor, Kelly, Murphy, Scott, Quilligan.

Kilkenny: Cash, Connors, Delaney, Donovan, Doran, Driscoll, Moran.

Galway: Birmingham, Cawley, Delaney, Donovan, Furey, Lynch, McDonagh, Mannion, Maughan, Mongan, Sheridan, Stokes, Ward.

Mayo: Casey, Cleary, Coffey, Collins, Commons, Delaney, Doherty, Lawrence, Maughan, McDonagh, Maguire, Mongan, Myers, Neville, Reilly, Sheridan, Stokes, Sweeney, Ward.

Sligo: Cawley, Coyle, Doyle, Gorman, McDonagh, McGinley, Maguire, Maughan (Mohan), Moloney, Stokes, Sweeney, Ward.

Leitrim: Caulderbanks, Cawley (McCauley), Coyle, Crumlish, Delaney, Doherty, Maughan, McDonagh, McGinley, McMurrrough, Mulrooney, Reilly, Somers, Stokes, Ward.

Roscommon: Maughan, Mc Donagh, Reilly, Stokes, Sweeney, Ward.

Donegal: Beirn (Byrne, O'Byrne), Delaney, Doherty, Doran, Gallagher, Hegarty, Long, McConnell, McDonagh, McGinley, McRory (McGrory), Moloney, O'Rourke, Quinn, Ward.

Antrim: Hunter.

Down: Connor, Crumlish, McDonagh, McMahan, Ward.

Monaghan: Cawley, Cooney, Curran, Doherty, Doyle, Joyce, McCann, O'Leary, Power, Rooney.

Tyrone: Carolan, Dowd, Hamilton, McDonagh, McQuigan, Mills, Sharkey, Stokes, Tague, Ward.

Fermanagh: Cawley, Clarke, Crumlish, Doherty, Doran, Gilheaney, Hannigan, Kesh (Cash?), Lackie, Mahon, Mangan, McDonagh, Prue, Reilly, Stewart, Stokes, Ward, White.

Cavan: Collins, Farrell, Gilheaney, Heaney, McCann, McDermott, McVitty, Murray.

This list of surnames shows, if proof were needed, that almost all of our itinerants are of common Irish stock and are in no way related by blood or derivation to the exotic gipsies of other lands. Their family names are a cross-section of those found all over Ireland: over 120 appear on the list, which, as has already been stated, is not to be regarded as complete. In keeping with normal practice throughout the country, most of the itinerants have dropped the O prefix to their surnames (on the change-over to the Anglicised form), while the Mac element has been more generally retained.

To judge by the widespread geographical distribution of the surnames, it would seem that comparatively few of the itinerant families restrict their wanderings to particular counties or provinces. Still, with detailed surveys it would be possible to draw an interesting distribution map of the itinerant families; whether any conclusions could be drawn from it is not relevant here.

III

Physical and Other Characteristics

It is evident from the replies to the questionnaire that, in general, "the tinkers are the same as everybody else". Descriptions are subjective in all cases, each correspondent relying on his own observation or memory of individual itinerants.

As regards height, they vary from tallish (tall and stately, tall and hearty, above average height, tall and strong, very fine physical build, tall and bony to medium build (medium to good height) and “on the small side—not fine men” or “rather small and weedy”. “When they spit”, according to one correspondent, “they can squirt it ten to twelve feet away”.

The hair-colour is described as ranging from fair or red (foxy) to brown or black. The hair is often long and wavy, and “the long forehead lock seems challenging”. It is also described as unkempt. Again, both men and women are described as having “lovely heads of curly hair, very fair and bleached by wind and sun”. “A streak of lighter-shaded hair often occurs among those who are dark or brown-haired”. A Mayo correspondent said “I never saw a fair-haired tinker—all had curly dark hair”. In Donegal, the hair was described as dishevelled, and it was said “most of the men tend to grow a moustache”. In parts of Leitrim, the McDonaghs and Dohertys had red hair; the Maughans and Wards were curled. In Antrim, the hair was long and unkempt—“the men seem to shave just now and then”. Some of the women wore their hair in plaits. A Westmeath account says that “nobody ever saw a bald-headed tinker”.

As may be expected, the complexions of the tinkers were described as varying from fair to “tanned by wind and weather” or deep brown to swarthy. The skin is often mentioned as being yellow or sallow, and freckles seem to be common among the light-haired individuals. Eyes are said to be either blue or dark, sometimes “sharp” and well-set; ears are sometimes large and the nose not too prominent. The faces are variously described as strong (“bold”, “brazen”), long, with high cheek-bones and broad forehead, the “jaws well-formed” and the skin “hard from the weather”.

Most of the replies noted the gait and carriage of the itinerants as something special to them. Descriptive adjectives range from brisk, peculiar, loose, swinging, swaggering, light, quick and lively to independent. Other correspondents, however, noted a shambling, “slinging lope” or a “shuffling along”, as contrasted with the also mentioned “walk of dancers with short steps”. Their carriage is said to be good, erect and straight; their build upright; their bodies lithe and supple, there being “some fine, athletic men among them”. They also “hold themselves well and have great muscular control”; “they are loose-limbed and light-limbed”. Another account spoke of them as being “light-framed and wary” and as “thin and lathy in build”.

While good health and physical hardiness are generally attributed to the itinerants, some accounts say that this impression derives from the fact that, under the conditions in which they live, only the fittest survive. They are described by some as being “impervious to cold and wet”, “hardy as nails”, “healthier than the locals”, “rarely delicate” and “healthy looking”. Other accounts speak of their great powers of endurance, though it is stated that they do not usually live to an old age: “‘Tis easy to count the number of them that live to get the pension”. Physically, it is said that they are “the last word in toughness” or “their health is good due to the practice, they say themselves, of giving youngsters generous doses of soot to swallow; I myself have seen soot being administered to a young child; the smoke too is beneficial, they claim”. A Roscommon account, however, states: “You’ll never see a really old tinker; to my mind, when in drink, they don’t attend to their health, sleep in wet clothes, contract pneumonia and die young”. “Some of them in the British army in World War I had no resistance; they had no strength in them” (County Wexford).

Most replies referred to the tinkers as dexterous (“handy at catching things”, “useful with their hands”, “quick and agile”, and “more dexterous than the locals”). A few accounts described the men as good hurlers, playing with the local team (County Cork). A County Galway reply said that they are not specially dexterous, however, and another Galway account described them as mostly left-handed and awkward at using implements such as a spade or saw. Generally, they are regarded as active and “good to run and fight”. The local people generally avoid involvement in their internal quarrels.

Apart altogether from their language (secret or otherwise), their manner of speaking is variously described as a drawl, or lilt and racy. They are said to be quick and dexterous in using their tongues: “all speak rapidly and confidently”; “they speak more fluently than the locals”; “they are free of speech and sometimes quick and witty in repartee”; “the children are very quick-witted when giving answers”. Some of them are said to be loud-spoken and rough in speech; others “speak a bit slurred and thickened and too fast”. “There is no doubt their brogue is all their own”, concludes a Cavan account.

Most correspondents agreed that many itinerants were “well able to sing, lilt, play the fiddle or accordeon, whistle and tell (tall) stories”. An account from Croom, County Limerick, stated, however: “They can dance and mimic, but I never knew or even heard of a good dancer among them; they attend the local dance-halls and acquit themselves splendidly there”. Those of us who have heard some of them singing

or playing music at fairs or on the streets of towns will agree that many of them have a good deal of talent in those fields.

While most of what has been summarised thus far refers to both men and women itinerants, some special returns concerning the latter deserve mention. A County Limerick reply stated that “the women don’t look as hardy as the men”. Similar statements come from County Longford (“Many of the girls die of T.B.”) and from Croom, County Limerick (“Some of the girls are handsome, but their looks deteriorate rapidly when older”). The women are wont to wear their hair in long plaits and wear ear-rings and rings: “they walk most gracefully and are fond of dressing in gaudy jewelry and head-bands” (County Tipperary); “they have lovely heads of curly hair” (Clonmel, same county). They generally wear shawls or scarves. In County Monaghan, it was said they “seldom wear footwear even in frost and snow; the children are barefoot even in winter”; “many of the women have lovely brown eyes and a nice gait” (County Cavan).

The following anecdote describes the stamina of an itinerant woman in Golden, County Tipperary: “I have been told of a woman of them giving birth to a baby at 2 or 2.30 a.m. and travelling three-quarters of a mile to the local public-house on the same morning; she was waiting at the door for the opening and she drank two pints of stout; she had the baby with her”.

IV

Behaviour

The majority of correspondents referred to the strong family ties that exist within the itinerant community. They are spoken of as being “very clannish”, “fond of family life”, “good to one another”, “generous and loyal to the clan” (“as loyal as the tinkers” is a saying in County Roscommon), and “gentle and kind to young and old”. The statement from a County Tipperary correspondent that “they behave like local people” seems to sum up the majority opinion of them. As against this, many replies spoke of a change of atmosphere when drink had been taken: wives and children may suffer, and “they have wicked fights among themselves”. When an itinerant husband was charged in Leix with beating his wife, she pleaded for leniency, saying: “Leave him alone; who has a better right to beat me than my husband?” They are described by a County Limerick correspondent as being “nearer to Nature than others”. According to a County Clare opinion, “they behave well in small numbers, but not in large; men,

women and children then vie with each other in toughness". They visit their sick in hospital (Limerick) and show great grief over illness or death (Galway).

While exclusive as regards their own community, the itinerants have a good deal of social and business contacts with the settled population all over the country. Some correspondents mentioned that "the local people never mix with them" and that "the tinkers never mix with the locals", but they are exceptions to the general picture. From parts of Clare, Carlow, Mayo, Leitrim, Cavan and Donegal accounts have been received which speak of the popularity of the itinerants, save when their animals trespass on local lands. Here are some excerpts from replies: (Clare): "They respect everybody and are well-liked"; "well-behaved towards the locals"; "speak kindly and mannerly"; "honest and truthful". (Tipperary): "very mannerly if they regard you as a friend"; "some very honest"; "some clans well-behaved, others not"; "polite, but not thought honest". (Meath): "inoffensive". (Leitrim): "honourable and decent". (Carlow): "very welcome and popular". (Galway): "harmless, honourable and charitable". (Mayo): "neither idle nor indolent". (Donegal): "very civil and courteous".

Comments on their honesty and truthfulness are sometimes critical: (Clare): "they are honest enough, but a lie wouldn't bother them"; (Mayo): "they are the greatest white liars in existence, but they enjoy being tripped up or caught out in their lies"; (Kerry): "not truthful when a lie would be profitable to them"; (Tipperary): "all they want is something for nothing".

In many replies, the itinerants are criticised for their truculence, their threatening attitude to lone women in houses, their quarrelsome attitude among themselves ("they are easily cowed in fights", says a County Sligo correspondent) and their bad sportsmanship (a Kerry return says that "if they entered a horse at a local horse-show, they would be truculent if they did not win a prize"). In regard to their internal quarrels, the general rule to be observed seems to be that, if a local intervenes, "they all turn on him". Reports on their morals vary from "free from indecent behaviour" (Galway) to "their morality is not above suspicion" (Clare). A Mayo reply states that they have no interest in politics or social questions. A Cavan statement that "they are anxious to lead good lives" seems to agree with the general opinion of them.

In general, itinerants are said to be law-abiding ("they fear the law very much"; "they very seldom get into trouble with the Guards"; "they are law-abiding and mainly harmless"; "they are afraid of the

law, and especially of jail”; “they give the Garda stations a wide berth”). They are generally criticised for their alleged cruelty to animals, for their “vile” language, their internal quarrels, and for their violence when drunk.

As regards the practice of religion (most of the itinerants are Catholics), the general picture seems to be that they show respect to the clergy. Most of them attend Mass on Sundays, and some attend Missions when convenient. Their reception of the Sacraments (Holy Communion) is average or somewhat less; the children are baptised and confirmed in church, marriages take place there, priests visit their dying and attend itinerant funerals.

Marriages between itinerants and members of the settled community occur very rarely, and are quite unknown in most areas. Where they did happen on a few occasions, the wife, from outside the group, was “looked down upon as a misfit, but shown sympathy” by the itinerant womenfolk (Kerry). Nor do itinerants often settle down on the land; sporadic instances do occur, however, and seem to have been successful. One family, named Cash, are said to have settled on a fine farm in Kildare; they are most industrious and take part in local social events.

The general picture revealed by this questionnaire is that itinerants are “much the same as the rest of us”. Their faults and failings are the normal ones of human nature, aggravated in their case by their way of life and the conditions under which they live. “They are very good for their class” (County Leitrim) seems to sum up the general opinion of them.