

Pelham, reporting to the queen in 1580 on his operations against the Munster rebels, describes how he has taken great preys of cattle from them and so has brought them to the verge of famine, since they are 'fed by their milch cows'.¹ Spenser, detailing in 1596 reasons for prosecuting war against the Irish enemy in the winter season, says:

. . . the kyne are barren and without milke, which useth to be his onely foode, neither if he kill them, will they yeeld him flesh, nor if he keepe them, will they give him food, besides being all with calfe (for the most part), they will, thorough much chasing and driving, cast all their calves, and loose their milke, which should releive him the next summer.²

Loftus and Jones, writing to Burghley in the same year, call for action against the Irish before Candlemas 'for, if they be permitted to hold this rebellious course without chastisement until the summer, they, having plenty of milk, which is their chiefest food . . . it will be a matter of great difficulty to annoy them without disadvantage to Her Majesty's forces'.³ In 1598 a great murrain is reported among the cattle in Ulster with 'the consequent famine through lack of milk and butter'.⁴ In 1600 the Lord Deputy's journey from Dublin to the north to establish a garrison at Lough Foyle is described, one result of it being to force 'all their cows to feed from the plains into the woods and so for want of grass to starve their cattle, and for want of milk, which was their food, distress his [O'Neill's] people'.⁵ From Munster in the same year Carew reports to the Privy Council on his conduct of the war there and states that the Irish are now 'living upon the milk and butter of their kine grazing on the mountains and in fastness, which holds this rebellion on foot longer than otherwise it would'.⁶ In 1601, Sir Arthur Chichester, referring to Ulster, says: 'Tyrone is in great need of men, and will gladly entertain any, but having no meat to give them before their cows yield more milk, I hope they will rather spoil him than continue in that misery.'⁷ Moryson, writing in the opening decades of the 17th century, states:

They feede most on Whitmeates, and esteeme for a great daintie sower curds, vulgarly called by them Bonaclabbe. And for this cause they watchfully keepe their Cowes, and fight for them as for religion and life; and when they are almost starved, yet they will not kill a Cow, except it bee old, and yeeld no Milke.⁸

Chichester, in 1615, explains to the Lords of the Council that he has made an order relieving the British undertakers of the escheated Ulster lands of

¹ *Cal. Carew MSS., 1575-1588*, p. 293.

² *View*, p. 161.

³ *Cal. S.P.I., 1596-1597*, p. 170.

⁴ *Cal. S.P.I., 1598-1599*, p. 428.

⁵ *Cal. S.P.I., 1600, March-October*, p. 220.

⁶ *Cal. S.P.I., 1600, March-October*, p. 244.

⁷ *Cal. S.P.I., 1600-1601*, p. 270.

⁸ *Itinerary*, vol. 4, pp. 200-201.

a tithe of milk and justifies his action by alleging that the ministers of the churches

intending their own profit most among the Irish . . . farmed their tithe-milk to certain kerne, bailiffs errant, and such like extortionate people, who took the same rudely, to the extreme displeasure of the poor people whose daily food and blood it is . . .¹

A document of the year 1623 states, when referring to the export of beef and pork from Ireland:

. . . besides that the common sort never kill any for their own use being contended to feed all the year upon milk, butter and the like, and do eat but little bread.²

Milk retained its primacy right up to the close of the 17th century, as the following quotations show. Gookin, in 1655, discussing the public revenue of Ireland says: "The Irish, who raise their Contribution out of Corn, live themselves on the roots and fruits of their Gardens, and on the milk of their Cows, Goats and Sheep . . ."³ An anonymous writer of 1673 tells us: "The Common sort of People in Ireland do feed generally upon Milk, Butter, Curds and Whey . . ."⁴ Stevens, describing Co. Limerick in 1690, observes: "The people generally being the greatest lovers of milk I ever saw which they eat and drink about twenty several sorts of ways and what is strangest love it best when sourest."⁵ In 1691 Petty states: "The diet of these people is Milk, sweet and sower, thick and thin, which also is their drink in Summertime."⁶

The cumulative effect of even this sketch of the existing evidence is to leave no doubt of the leading place which milk occupied in the national diet from early times to the threshold of the 18th century. Neither can there be any doubt that, were it not for the economic and social changes which the introduction of the potato facilitated and caused, this dietary pattern would have lasted to much later times among the population as a whole, as indeed it did among the better circumstanced classes in favoured localities.

CURDS

By no means all this milk was drunk, as it were, straight from the cow. Stevens, in the passage just quoted, says that the Irish of his day ate and drank it 'above twenty several sorts of ways and what is strangest for the

¹ *Cal. S.P.I., 1615-1625*, p. 23.

² *Advertisements*, pp. 8-9.

³ *Transplantation*, p. 15.

⁴ *Present State*, pp. 151-152.

⁵ *Journal*, p. 139.

⁶ *Anatomy*, p. 81.

most part love it best when sourest'. This sour milk represents the simplest of the many variations played upon milk as a food. It was referred to by writers in English as 'bonnyclabber', a phonetic rendering of the Irish *bainne clabair*, 'thick milk'. It was thought to be something characteristically Irish and, once popularized, the word became part of the stock-in-trade of persons writing about the country. Gernon, in 1620, says: 'I will not leade you to the baser cabbins, where you shall have no drink but Bonnyclabber, milk that is sowed to the condition of buttermilk.'¹ Wentworth, writing from Boyle in 1635, complains that all the comfort he has 'is a little Bonnyclabber . . . the bravest, freshest Drink you ever tasted'.² Dineley (1681),³ Dunton (1699),⁴ Moffett (1728)⁵ and Young (1776)⁶ all refer to it but it must not be supposed that its use was confined to the 17th and 18th centuries for in the *Vision of MacConglinne* (12th century) we read of a delectable drink 'of very thick milk, of milk not too thick, of milk of long thickness, of milk of medium thickness, of yellow bubbling milk, the swallowing of which needs chewing',⁷ while a text which belongs linguistically to the Old Irish period lays down that:

Anyone who gives another anything in which there has been a dead mouse or dead weasel, three fasts are laid on him who gives it. . . . If it is in any other dry food, in porridge or in thickened milk the part round it is thrown away, the rest is consumed.⁸

The various preparations made from milk, comprising, it seems, every possible gradation from simple curds to cheese, were collectively known as *bánbidh*, 'white foods', which was Englished by writers like Spenser as 'whitemeats'. When the scholar MacConglinne set out from Armagh to visit King Cathal Mac Finguine in Munster, we are told: 'The scholar had heard that he would get plenty and enough of whitemeats, for greedy and hungry for whitemeats was the scholar.'⁹ The basis of these 'whitemeats' was curds. These could, of course, be allowed to form naturally in the milk but there were various ways of hastening the process. One method is described by Dunton in his account of a breakfast prepared for him in Iar Chonnacht in 1698: 'The next morning a greate pott full of new milk was sett over the fire, and when it was hott they pour'd into it a pale full of butter milk, which made a mighty dish of tough curds in the middle of which they placed a pound weight of butter . . .'¹⁰ Another method was to

¹ *Discourse*, pp. 359-360.

² *Strafford's Letters*, vol. 1, p. 441.

³ *Observations*, p. 23.

⁴ *Scuffle*, p. 401.

⁵ *Hudibras*, p. 14.

⁶ *Tour*, vol. 1, p. 258.

⁷ *Aislinge*, p. 100.

⁸ *Eriu*, vol. 7 (1914), p. 149.

⁹ *Aislinge*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Letters*, p. 333.

add rennet (*binit*), the use of which was known from ancient times for *Cormac's Glossary* gives a fanciful derivation of it¹ and, equally fancifully, derives the name *Benntraighe* (Bantry, Co. Cork) from *binit-rige* or 'rennet kingdom', 'from the cheese-curds that the king of Cashel is entitled to from them . . .'² Rennet is also mentioned for making curds in the *Rule of the Culdees* which probably dates to the 9th century.³ Still another method is recorded by Stevens, who says that the milk was kept in sour vessels and that 'they order it so that it is impossible to boil it without curdling four hours after it comes from the cow'.⁴

However made, large amounts of these curds were eaten without further preparation. They were called *gruth* and their use can be traced back almost as far as our factual documentary sources go. They appear in the Laws in the food rents paid by the inferior grades of society to their superiors,⁵ as the 'summer food' of a man on sick maintenance⁶ and even in the fine for the trespass of dogs,⁷ a context which, even if it is an excursus into legal fantasy, is still illustrative of the commonplace thing curds were in contemporary life. In other early settings they are accepted as a normal article of tribute⁸ and as a normal item in monastic regimen.⁹ They are described as 'condiment' for bread in the Laws¹⁰ and in the lives of the saints¹¹ and a medieval poet saw nothing incongruous in supposing that the weary warriors who accompanied Muirheartach of the Leather Cloaks on his famous circuit of Ireland in A.D. 942 were refreshed on their homecoming with 'three score vats of curds, which banished the hungry look of the army'.¹² In the vision of the Land of Food which MacConglinne narrates to entice the demon of gluttony out of the stomach of the diabetic king, Cathal Mac Finguine, 'curds', 'real curds' and 'old curds' take their place among the choice morsels.¹³ It will be apparent, then, that curds were an everyday article of food in ancient and medieval Ireland. They continued to hold their place in the diet through later centuries, being, of course, one of the main constituents of the whitemeats which, Spenser says, were the summer food of the Irish.¹⁴ They appear in a description of the food of the 'common sort' of the Irish in 1673,¹⁵ again in Dineley's account of it in

¹ *Corm. Gloss*, p. 20.

² *Corm. Gloss*, p. 21.

³ *T.R.I.A.*, 24 (1873), p. 203.

⁴ *Journal*, p. 139.

⁵ *Laws 2*, p. 327.

⁶ *Eriu* 12 (1938), p. 23.

⁷ *Laws 4*, p. 123.

⁸ *Trip. Life*, vol. 2, p. 439; *Lismore Saints*, p. 152.

⁹ *T.R.I.A.*, 24 (1873), p. 203.

¹⁰ *Laws 5*, p. 41.

¹¹ Meyer, *Colman*, p. 61.

¹² *Tracts*, p. 55.

¹³ *Aislinge*, pp. 67, 84, 36, 98.

¹⁴ *View*, p. 82.

¹⁵ *Present State*, pp. 151-152.

1681¹ and among the summer food of the people in 1682.² Dunton's breakfast of them in 1698 has already been quoted but the passing of the 17th century did not mark their disappearance for Moffett introduces them into his description of an Irish feast,³ they are cited in a pamphlet of 1741⁴ and of the inhabitants of the Rosses, Co. Donegal, in 1753 it is said: 'Their usual summer diet consisted of milk, curds and butter, with most excellent fish of several kinds.'⁵

As a number of the texts indicate, curds must have been chiefly a summer food, the main article of diet when the cows were in full milk and winter stocks of corn had run low or become exhausted. In winter, due to lack of fodder—there being no forage root crops and, so far as we can judge, very little hay—and absence of housing for the livestock, milk supplies must have fallen off enormously.

CHEESE

The step from curds to cheese is an insensible one and, as we should have expected, cheese was a staple food throughout the whole of the long period with which we are dealing. Various terms for cheese are preserved in early Irish texts but it is difficult to discover the nature of the different kinds of cheese to which they were applied. The modern Irish word for cheese (*cáis*), although a loan-word, goes back to ancient times but it is not clear if it was a generic name or one reserved for a particular kind. Other names of cheese were: *fáiscire grotha*, *tanach* or *tanag*, *maethal*, *grús*, *táth*, *millsén* and *mulchán*.

The first element in the name *fáiscire grotha* probably means 'pressure'⁶ and, since *groth* is 'curd', it is very likely that the term means 'pressed curd'. There appears to be no evidence as to how, or to what consistency, it was pressed but, unless we visualize individual parcels of it as wrapped in a cloth or a bladder, it must have been pressed to a reasonably solid state since, in a number of contexts, *fáiscire grotha* is mentioned in the plural, as if separate entities were in question. Poison was put into them in an attempt to kill St. Patrick;⁷ on another occasion the saint was presented with three of them by a religious couple⁸ and in a third incident a youth is spoken of as carrying three of them on his back as a gift for Patrick.⁹

Tanach or *tanag* seems to have been another kind of pressed cheese. If

¹ *Observations*, p. 23.

² *Westmeath*, pp. 120-121.

³ *Hudibras*, pp. 9-10.

⁴ *Tillage*, p. 62.

⁵ Walker, J. C., *A Historical Essay on the Dress of the Ancient and Modern Irish*. Dublin, 1818, appendix 1, p. 199.

⁶ *R.I.A. Contrib.*

⁷ *Trip. Life*, vol. 1, p. 183.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁹ *Lismore Saints*, p. 163.

we can assume that the hearers of a version of the death of Queen Maeve saw nothing grossly improbable in the story, we can safely infer that *tanach* was a hard substance, for a tale relates that her nephew, Furbaide, killed her by striking her on the forehead with a piece of *tanach* which he happened to be eating and which he used in his sling instead of a stone.¹ At all events, it differed in some way from *fáiscre grotha* for the youth above who brought three *fáiscreí grotha* to Patrick also brought him a *tanag* in the same load on his back.² Since the word glosses the Latin *formellas*, it has been suggested that it was pressed in small moulds.³ *Tanach* is mentioned a number of times in the *Vision of MacConglinne*, where the word *torrach* (pregnant) is twice associated with it, a fact which may indicate that it had a large swelling shape.⁴ In a description of the Land of Food in the same text, the hero passes in his beef-fat coracle past 'strands of dry cheese' (*tar trachta tana[ch] tírmaide*), an expression which, although we must allow for the general extravagance of the context, may reflect the fact that the cheese was firm and comparatively dry.⁵

Maethal is derived from *maeth*, 'soft, tender, yielding', and the cheese so named must have been a soft one since its name prompted the derivation from *maeth* in *Cormac's Glossary* and an author who must have been familiar with the thing itself would hardly suggest such a derivation if the nature of the substance palpably contradicted it.⁶ The *Vision of MacConglinne* refers to *maethal* as 'soft sweet smooth cheese' (*do móethail buic mellaig mín*).⁷ The word survives in modern Irish as the name for biestings. On the other hand, there are indications that it was not a mere paste or soft mass of curds. As in the case of *fáiscre grotha*, the word is frequently used in the plural. *Maothla* (pl.) are specified, along with the yolk of eggs, butter and gruel, as the 'soft fare of fosterage' in the law tract *Bretha Crolige*.⁸ When the Hui Corra on their ocean voyage arrive at an island, a woman gives them food 'which seemed to them like soft cheeses (*amar mhaethla*)'.⁹ In the *Vision of MacConglinne* the walls of a house are built of them (*do maethluib*).¹⁰ The use of the plural number in these instances shows that *maethal* must have been of a consistency to retain a shape in individual portions, an interpretation strengthened by the fact that in an Irish life of St. Kevin a number of women are said to have carried cheeses

¹ Book of Leinster 125a, 19. Quoted by Joyce, *Soc. Hist.*, vol. 2, p. 140.

² *Lismore Saints*, p. 163.

³ Ó Sé, *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 53 (1948), p. 82.

⁴ *Aislinge*, pp. 69, 99.

⁵ *Aislinge*, p. 85.

⁶ *Corm. Gloss.*, p. 117.

⁷ *Aislinge*, p. 66.

⁸ *Ériu*, vol. 12 (1938), p. 43.

⁹ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 14 (1893), p. 47.

¹⁰ *Aislinge*, p. 36.

(*maothla*) in the corners of their cloaks.¹ A clue to the size of ancient Irish cheeses occurs in a curious simile which runs: 'His buttocks were like half a maethal (*a más mar lethmaethail*).'² In the tale of the *Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* a similar phrase occurs twice: '*Méit mullaig for gut cach mell do mellaib a droma*.'³ The exact meaning of *mulach* (gen. *mullaig*) is not known but it has, with great probability, been translated as 'cheese' and the whole phrase rendered as: 'Each of his buttocks was the size of a cheese on a withe.' Now, in the three instances above the phrase is used in reference to very formidable personages and is obviously intended to convey to hearers and readers of the tales, to whom a cheese was a familiar object, an impression of the heroic magnitude of their buttocks. The conclusion seems to be that some, at least, of these cheeses were round masses of very considerable size.

There do not appear not to be many contexts which would throw light on the nature of *grús*. It is equated with *tanach* in the *Lecan Glossary*⁴ and may, therefore, have been a hard cheese like it. *Auraicept na nÉces* also confirms the identification with *tanach*⁵ but in the official translation of the Laws it is generally erroneously rendered as 'stirabout'. It is included in the refectations due to certain ranks of society.⁶

There seems to be as little available to explain what exactly *táth* was. Fundamentally, the word means 'joining or sticking together' and an instance relevant to its connotation as cheese occurs in the expression '*ag tath an grotha*', which may be translated as 'kneading the curds'.⁷ O'Connell defines it as 'cheese, unpressed made of sour buttermilk' and equates it with *mulchán*.⁸ In the *Voyage of Mael Dúin* a woman brings the travellers 'food like unto cheese or *tath* (*cosmail do chássi nó tháth*).'⁹ There is no doubt, then, that *táth* was a cheese of some kind and the likelihood is that it was a soft variety.

The clue to the nature of *millsén* occurs in a passage in the Laws: 'And a milch cow's cauldron full of new milk to be boiled to *millsen* (*ocus cairé lulaice lan do lemnacht do bruith do millsen*).'¹⁰ The rule of the Culdees states:

No *millsen* then or *druchtan*, i.e. whey, is consumed with them, but cheese (*caisse*) is made of it. Curds (*gruthrach*) also are made for them, but no rennet goes into it;

¹ *Irish Saints*, vol. 1, p. 166.

² *Three Glossaries*, p. 36.

³ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 22 (1901), pp. 42, 56.

⁴ *Celt. Lex.*, vol. 1 (1900), p. 56.

⁵ *Auraicept*, p. 82.

⁶ *Laws*, vol. 4, pp. 301, 309.

⁷ *Z.C.P.*, vol. 1, p. 464.

⁸ *Dictionary*.

⁹ *Rev. Celt.*, vol. 9 (1888), p. 491.

¹⁰ *Laws*, vol. 2, p. 255.

and then it is not forbidden, and the reason that it is not prohibited is, because it is considered bread.¹

Ó Sé deduces from this that *millsen* was forbidden because rennet was used in making it, the prohibition arising from the fact that rennet was made from flesh.² On the other hand, *millsén* whey (*meadg millsen*) was not forbidden, provided that it was not drunk alone but was mixed with *grutin*, i.e. small curds,³ and at least one kind of cheese (i.e. *maethal*) was a permitted food.⁴ Unless we assume that *maethal* was made without the use of rennet and that it was held that the rennet was entirely absorbed by the *millsén* curds, leaving the whey free from the taint of flesh, it is difficult to accept that the text warrants the conclusion that *millsén* was forbidden because rennet was used to make it. It might be more prudent to abandon any hope of establishing a connection between *millsén* and rennet on the basis of this particular text and resign ourselves to the fact that the line of reasoning which made some foods permissible and others not may for ever elude us. O'Clery's *Glossary* equates *millsén* with *gruth caisi* or 'cheese curd'⁵ and two references to it in the *Vision of MacConglinne* suggest that it was left in a flocculent condition. In the first, MacConglinne describes how he rowed over New Milk Lake in his beef-fat coracle: 'Every oar we plied in New Milk Lake would send its sea-sand of cheese curds (*a murgrían millsén*) to the surface.'⁶ In the other, one of the characters whom he meets in the Land of Food addresses him with: 'Away now to the smooth panikins of cheese-curds, O MacConglinne.'⁷ This may imply that the *millsén* was kept in vessels on account of its semi-liquid nature.

Mulchán appears to have been a cheese of a firm consistency. In the Irish life of St. Kevin, mentioned above, the cheeses which the women carry in the corners of their cloaks are called '*maothla no molchain*' i.e. '*maothla* (pl.) or *molchain* (pl.)', from which it is a fair conclusion that either the writer was in doubt which of two different kinds of cheese was in question or that he regarded the two kinds as identical or virtually so. The versified life of the same saint, recounting the same incident, uses in one place the word *maothla* and the word *mulcain* in another.⁸ This seems to mean that the words were, to some extent at least, interchangeable, although it must be remembered that the apparent fluidity of terminology may have arisen from the exigencies of choice of words imposed by the rules of versification. At all events, this cheese, under its old name,

¹ T.R.I.A., 24 (1873), p. 203.

² J.C.H.A.S., vol. 53 (1948), p. 84.

³ T.R.I.A., 24 (1873), p. 203.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵ R.I.A. *Contrib.*, *millsén*.

⁶ *Aistinge*, p. 84.

⁷ *Aistinge*, p. 98.

⁸ *Irish Saints*, vol. 1, pp. 153-154.

remained popular until later centuries. Gernon, 1620, enumerating the foods to be found in 'the baser cabbins', includes 'mullagham, a kind of chokedaw cheese'.¹ Dunton, 1699, referring to Co. Kilkenny, says that 'Bonny Clabber and Mulahaan, alias sowre Milk and Choak-Cheese with a Dish of Potatoes boiled, is their general entertainment.'² Ryland, 1824, states:

Cheese, made from skimmed milk, and called *Mullahawn*, was formerly an article of commerce in Waterford, and was exported in large quantities, but it was of such a hard substance that it required a hatchet to cut it.³

From the earlier and later evidence cited above, it will be apparent that cheese of one kind or another formed a standard and substantial part of Irish diet from at least as far back as the Early Christian period down to the close of the 17th century. During the 18th century the consumption of it progressively declined and the making of it was practised less and less. Young (1776-1779) reports that it was then produced in certain districts in counties Offaly, Wexford and Cork but he is, apparently, referring to specialized dairies.⁴ By the early 19th century the decline in cheese-making had gone so far that agricultural writers of the time state that little or none was made,⁵ while in 1829 it was said: 'Cheese is not an article of Irish produce; it is brought to the tables of the affluent as an indulgence.'⁶ In 1835. Binns adds: 'The making of cheese nevers enters into the farmer's contemplation.'⁷ This extraordinary break in an age-old tradition in food has been difficult to bridge for to the present day cheese still remains an alien thing to the Irish countryman.

The whey, which was a product of the preparation of curds and cheese, was not allowed to go to waste. Its general name was *medg* (modern Irish *meadhg*). It was much used in the stricter monastic communities instead of milk and on fast days it was diluted with water, the mixture being known as 'whey-water' (*medgusci*).⁸ One of the directions in the Culdee rule runs: 'When there is thirst, let him get a bochtan [measure] of whey, or of buttermilk, and water mixed with it (*medg . . . acas usci fair*).'⁹ The same rule also says: 'There is a fast every month among the congregation of Moelruain, i.e. half a meal of bread, and half a meal of diluted whey

¹ *Discourse*, pp. 359-360.

² *Scuffle*, p. 401.

³ Ryland, Rev. R. H., *The History, Topography and Antiquities of the County and City of Waterford*. London, 1824, p. 204.

⁴ *Tour*, vol. 1, pp. 67, 91; vol. 2, pp. 298, 307.

⁵ M'Evoy, p. 81; Thompson, p. 233; Dutton (Clare), pp. 131-132; Dutton (Galway), p. 142.

⁶ Bicheno, p. 19.

⁷ Binns, vol. 1, p. 353.

⁸ *T.R.I.A.*, vol. 24 (1873), p. 206; *Hermathena*, vol. 44 (1927), pp. 2, 5, 9, 23, 27, 33, 45.

⁹ *T.R.I.A.*, vol. 24 (1873), p. 209.

(*lethfit de medgusce*).¹ A kind of whey called *druchtán* and *millsén* whey (*meadg millsen*) were forbidden to the Culdees but the latter might be taken if the small curds (*grutin*) were mixed with it.² Skimmed milk whey (*loimmedgusce*) was not allowed to the same community on the eves of certain festivals.³ A vessel of whey-water was sent by St. Patrick to the thirsty reapers of his household⁴ and when 'fifty bishops of the Britons' came to visit St. Moedoc of Ferns during Lent the dinner served to them consisted of 'fifty cakes and leeks and whey-water'.⁵ When the travel-weary MacConglinne arrived at the monastery guest house in Cork after his journey from Armagh, the niggardly monks offered him 'a small cup of the church whey-water (*cuachan do medgusci na heclaise*)' which he indignantly refused.⁶ Whey continued to be popular as long as curds and cheese were made. Goats' milk whey, especially, was believed to have considerable medicinal value. It was much used in the Mourne district, Co. Down,⁷ and in the early 19th century there was a ready sale for it in villages in the Dublin neighbourhood to invalids who came to drink it there.⁸ A species of whey 'made with buttermilk and sweet milk, which being two days old was wonderfull cold and pleaseing' was provided in a meal given to Dunton in Iar Chonnacht in 1698.⁹ He calls it 'troander', a phonetic rendering of its Irish name *treabhantar*.

There is some evidence for the use of sheeps' milk in ancient Ireland. In the Lebar Brecc homily on St. Patrick, it is related that when they were children Patrick and his sister Lupait were herding sheep and that when the lambs ran to their dams the children rushed to separate them.¹⁰ The only possible reason for keeping the lambs apart from the ewes was to allow the latter to accumulate milk which could be drawn for human use. In recent and, no doubt, in ancient times, kids were gagged for part of the day for the same reason.¹¹ When St. Brigid went on a visit to Cell Laisre there was one milking ewe there which was milked to provide a meal for her.¹² When St. Brendan, voyaging on the ocean, lands on an island where the sheep are as large as cows, a man appears who explains that one of the reasons for the gigantic size of the sheep is that no one ever milks them.¹³

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

² *Ibid.*, p. 203.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁴ *Trip. Life*, vol. 1, p. 237.

⁵ *Oengus*, p. 55.

⁶ *Aislinge*, p. 14.

⁷ Evans, E. Estyn. *Mourne Country*. Dundalk, 1951, p. 198.

⁸ *Post Chaise Companion*. 4th edition. Dublin (c. 1815), p. 421; Wright, G. N. *A Guide to the County of Wicklow*. London, 1827, p. 155; Archer, Joseph. *Statistical Survey of County Dublin*. Dublin, 1801, pp. 88, 96.

⁹ *Letters*, p. 338.

¹⁰ *Trip. Life*, vol. 2, p. 437.

¹¹ *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 56 (1951), pp. 123-125.

¹² *Lismore Saints*, p. 328.

¹³ *V.S.H.*, vol. 1, p. 112; *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, p. 56.

Porridge made on sheep's milk is mentioned in the 12th century *Vision of MacConglinne*,¹ while in the 18th and 19th centuries sheep's milk was extensively used in season, especially by the poorer cottiers and others who could not afford to keep a cow.² Sheep's milk cheese was not unknown: it is referred to in 1674³ and it was made on a considerable scale in Co. Kilkenny in 1800.⁴

BUTTER

Recent international statistics show that the consumption of butter per head of the population is higher in Ireland than almost anywhere else in the world and the writer believes that the history of butter in the country can be summed up by saying that, were comparable figures available, the position would be found to be the same in any year from at least as early as the beginning of the historic period down to 1700. Even allowing for the large amount of milk used in the production of curds and cheese, butter appears to have been made in great quantity and to have formed an essential part of the daily food. Only during the dark reign of the potato did it suffer a forced decline but all through that period it continued to be regarded as a symbol of the golden age of plenty and it resumed its ancient status when economic conditions allowed. Virtually every kind of source of every age, ancient, medieval and recent, substantiates the evidence for the importance of butter.

As will be seen later, there is information from the 12th and 17th centuries about a custom of flavouring butter with some kind of onion or garlic and it is very probable that the practice is much older than our earliest direct evidence for it. Another peculiar usage was to bury butter in bogs, where finds of it are still made all over the country in the course of peat cutting. The writer knows no reference to this custom in any source in the Irish language and none in English earlier than the 17th century. Whenever the custom began, it certainly was not a recent innovation in the 17th century for Piers, writing in 1682 and referring to the bogs about Lough Iron in Co. Westmeath, says: 'But not only trees and leaves have thus been found, some have found vessels of butter, very deep and overgrown with sound turf.'⁵ Ó Sé suggests it may have begun in the 6th century and that the prime motive was to impart a special flavour to the butter, although safety in storage may have been the chief reason in later disturbed times.⁶ The writer inclines to the view that it was buried in bogs merely on

¹ *Aislinge*, p. 32.

² *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 56 (1951), pp. 123-125.

³ *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 10 (1904), p. 95.

⁴ Tighe, William. *Statistical Observations relative to the County of Kilkenny*. Dublin, 1802, p. 319.

⁵ *Westmeath*, p. 52.

⁶ *J.C.H.A.S.*, vol. 54 (1949), pp. 65-67.

account of the cool antiseptic storage conditions which they afforded. If the butter obtained a peculiar taste in the bog, people who habitually ate it would soon acquire a palate for it and come to hold it in higher regard than ordinary fresh butter.

VEGETABLES

In regard to what, in culinary language, are called vegetables, we find that quite a number of plants, some wild, some, apparently, cultivated, were used as food from early times. Of the wild plants, one which is very frequently mentioned is watercress (*biolar*). It was especially associated with the slender meals of ascetics: '... it is dry bread, it is cress, which is pure food for sages.'¹ It appears among the 'curious salads' of the Irish enumerated by Moffet in 1728² but, although recognized as edible, it is no longer eaten as a regular article of food. Another favourite wild plant was the sorrel (*samhadh*) which is referred to in a number of the lives of the saints and later sources.³ Nettles were also eaten and an early story about St. Colmcille tells how he observed a poor woman picking them for food in the churchyard in Iona and resolved that he would live on nettle broth from then on.⁴ They were much resorted to in times of famine in the 18th and 19th centuries, while even at the present day they are occasionally eaten as a tonic or medicine.⁵ A plant called *imus* or *umus*, variously rendered by 'celery' or 'parsley', was also eaten but little appears to be known about it.⁶ Another plant which was very commonly used for food in times of scarcity in the 18th and 19th centuries was charlock (*praiseach*).⁷ It is closely related to the cabbage and it is possible that the widespread use of it in times of hunger in recent centuries points back to a period when it had the status of a regular item of diet. Some plant bearing the same name was in use in early times but the writer knows no evidence which would help in deciding whether it was the charlock or a cultivated variety of kale or cabbage. It is mentioned in various tracts connected with the monastery of Tallaght⁸ and in the *Vision of MacConglinne*.⁹ The earliest specific reference to cultivated cabbage known to the writer is from 1690, when Stevens encountered it growing in gardens in Co. Limerick.¹⁰ A three-leaved plant, known to writers in English as 'shamrock', was eaten as

¹ *Ériu*, vol. 3 (1907), p. 105.

² *Hudibras*, pp. 9-10.

³ *V.S.H.*, vol. 1, p. 78; *Irish Saints*, vol. 2, pp. 28-29; *Irish Saints*, vol. 1, pp. 126-127; Moffett, *Hudibras*, pp. 9-10; *Skelton*, p. 172.

⁴ *Oengus*, p. 147.

⁵ *Breifne*, vol. 1 (1959), pp. 142-144.

⁶ *Ériu*, vol. 12 (1938), pp. 23, 36. Apparently cultivated: *Laws*, vol. 5, pp. 89, 91.

⁷ *Breifne*, vol. 1, pp. 137-146.

⁸ *T.R.I.A.*, 24 (1873), pp. 202-203; *P.R.I.A.*, 29 C (1911-1912), p. 132; *Hermathena*, vol. 44 (1927), pp. 2, 37, 51.

⁹ *Aislinge*, pp. 68, 78, 98.

¹⁰ *Journal*, pp. 189, 190.