

Irish Travellers - Echoes of the Past'

"They are a police problem, a sanitary problem, a poor law problem....they are country folk unable, unwilling and unaccustomed to city life." These were the words of Dorothy Page, an historian, who was describing the Irish riots in London in 1736. The negative way she, and generations of people have thought and treated the Irish as a problem bears similarities to the way some people have treated Irish Travellers.

Mutual Fear. In 1983 The National Council for Travelling People reported that "Because of their deprivation and generations of isolation and poverty, the travellers have an inborn fear of the settled community. This is one of the reasons they band together in different areas, living illegally on the roadside with all their untidiness and litter. Conversely, the settled community fear the travellers for many reasons, mainly the fear of violence and thieving, but also because of the effect the encampments may have on the value of their houses and appearance of the neighbourhood.

Also, The fact that many of the travellers cannot read and write makes them feel insecure amongst the settled community. Imagine having to rely on someone else to read and write your letters, or to ask directions all the time when going to visit the doctor, a social worker etc..., only to be told that one is standing in the building which has the name displayed. These are a couple of examples of humiliation suffered by illiterates.

Concerned at conditions of travelling people - "The members of Newry and Mourne District Council, in a statement, have expressed concern at the conditions under which the Travelling People on Middlebank are living....We ask the District Council to take action to alleviate their hardship and the Youth Council will support any moves which the council takes to provide a permanent site in our area if it is acceptable to the Travellers" the response from the local residents was Move the Itinerants on NOW! "Itinerants, travelling people, gypsos or tinkers-call them what you will - they have all one thing in common and that is wherever they go they besmirch and spoil whatever they pull into, be it town or country".

The Irish Travelling People's conduct covers the same broad spectrum of social and moral behaviour of the general population, from the scrupulous and upright to the drunken vagabond. Sacks comments that 'One belief, more than any other is responsible for the slaughter of individuals ...it is the belief that those who do not share my faith - my race, [my Travelling culture] or my ideology - do not share my humanity. At best they are second-class citizens. At worst they forfeit the sanctity of life itself.

The Report of the Working Party with the Travelling people in 1979 states "their problems are compounded by their way of life and general ignorance and hostility of the settled community towards them".

Getting to Know the Strangers Living on the Edge' Glimpses of the Lives of Irish Travellers

Sacks reminds us that 'the problem of the stranger, the one who is not like us', has proved to be the most difficult in the history of human interaction and that 'most societies at times have been suspicious of,

and aggressive toward, strangers'. He reminds us that 'You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger - you yourself were strangers in the land of Egypt'.

Irish Travellers are not strangers in Ireland - their own land.

Traditionally itinerant craftsmen they travelled through areas of rural Ireland, performing a variety of trades and services - tinsmithing, peddling, horse dealing, chimney sweeping and seasonal farm labour etc. Most tinsmith families followed regular routes travelling within a small area seldom covering more than two or three counties connected with the old ways in which the settled and the travelling tinsmith family lived together as a vital part of Irish rural and urban life. Considering place means considering the ways in which particular locations are important in making of a cultural world. Our understanding of the world is tied closely to the ways in which we construct and context the meanings of particular often named places. Story telling, folklore and myths convert objects, people, places and particular times into real presences. Myths, histories and folklore are not just stories but are foundational stories that provide support and glimmers of understanding for the basic institutions of society.

Glimpses of Irish Travellers in Folklore

The Irish Tinsmith Craftsmen travelled their trade circuits in family and clan kinship groups. Women and children were an essential component of this family trade/business unit providing the traditional roles, functions and services required to maintain a family unit - food, education, religion, cultural norms etc.

Folklorist Artella Court in 'The Lives and Literature of Irish Tinsmiths' refers to Tinsmith wives. 'Just as the Travelling tinsmith's success in trade was wrought by his own aptness, so his wife's prosperity depended on her ability for the traditional enterprises of a Travelling woman. In work and in money matters her family responsibility, and her autonomy, often exceeded those of her settled counterpart'.

"...sometimes in comparative splendor on an ass or horse-drawn cart, they sallied forth with strings of tin vessels and baskets full of the requisites of rural work, play, and vanity. Women carted into the countryside and villages: an inventory comparable to that of Woolworth's. The craftsman's wife also managed his trade's peripheral business.

She and her children would carry a vessel needing repair or an order for new tins back to the camp. They would frequently deliver finished tins, collect payment for work done, and relay messages between smith and his customer. Some women too had talent, learning or earnings to develop substantial sales specialties of their own."

Now at the beginning of the 21st century Mary Moriarty, an Irish Traveller from County Galway and a Traveller liaison worker, has commented that "the history of the itinerant Irish Tinsmith community, their contribution to Irish society and the changing nature of itinerant Irish Tinsmiths like the Irish Traveller culture has to date been largely unrecorded. Much of this history remains in the memory of the older Travellers and is held in the stories passed on by them to their children and grandchildren". This is a void that has been the focus for one community project tracing the history, nomadism and economic activity of five Traveller families in the West of Ireland.