

To Protect and Welcome: A fundamental Tenet of Environmental Health Sustainability

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When I arrived from Canada in Letterkenny, County Donegal, Ireland in 1975 to take up an appointment as Health Inspector with the Northwestern Health Board, I was most fortunate to share an office with my new found friend and mentor, the great Paddy Tunney. Recognised and much appreciated throughout the country as a traditional singer, poet, writer, raconteur, lilter and songwriter, Paddy was a dedicated, efficient and highly qualified health inspector fully committed to serving the community well to the best of his wonderful abilities and giving of his time and attention to all, without exception, to excellent effect. I learned from him the wonderful traditions, culture, history and rich ethos of the native people of Donegal and of their generosity in hard times and under repressive regimes; and also of their great sense of humour and positive outlook.

Now retired in Kilkee, County Clare and having spent a career in the environmental health field, I hold out great hope for the future in our youth and have alluded to this in some of my blogs at www.iceh.net . For now I share with you a story titled 'The Slasher's House', and record my thanks to the late Paddy Tunney for translating the story for me. I bought the house, re-roofed it and eventually sold it on. I am struck that a local landlord who unjustly evicted some 47 families at one time in the area is now memorialised with the creation of the Glenveagh National Park and there is not even a plaque to acknowledge the protection and welcome afforded to all in need by the Slasher and his son. We are fortunate to have the story by Máire.

The Slasher's House ([Original Irish Translation](#))

A Short Story by 'Máire' – Séamus Ó Grianna

I

I was sitting chatting with Red Mick on the parapet of the bridge one summers morning. A couple of cars passed, full of people. The people of the Glen of the Stags heading for Scotland they were.

"It's easy to go to Scotland now" said Red Mick. "Long ago when I was young if we had a train or a bus to leave in we thought we were in heaven. It seems that nobody is contented with what he has, but is ever seeking and watching for what he has not. Devil a one will go to Derry on a bus these days. No move until a car comes to lift him on the doorstep. The times have changed."

"Still in the old days we had neither bus, train nor any means of transport. There was only shanks

mare to carry us every step of the road from here to Derry. You walked to Letterkenny the first day. You slept on a shakedown of straw in the Hatters (as he was nicknamed) that night. On the second day you tramped to Derry. That night you were on the boat and arrived in Glasgow on the morning of the third day. There was nothing for it then but to footleg on again and spend that night sleeping on the hip of the Pentlands. It's greatly conditions have improved if you'll call it improvement."

"It's surely an improvement" I put in.

"I don't know says Mick, "but let it be. It was a hard life then. But the departure was nothing to the returning. That was the real hardship, when you had to walk the whole way in the dead of winter, maybe in black frost and blinding snow. There was a great nearcut for anyone who would come in the Windy Road. But the Windy Road was perilous. If there came a fall of snow you were in danger of being lost. Many a person was left in the same gap. The Meenadreen road was bad enough. But you had a firm footing and the Slasher's house was on the roadside if any kind of weakness overtook you. Many a man can attribute his length of days to the same house. The Slasher and his son lived there with their dog. And the same dog was well matched with them. A great brute of a black bristly animal with a white breast he was. Many a creature the same dog rescued on a snowy night."

II

Away out in Devlin, a couple of miles beyond the Sandy Lough on the road to Meenadreen, the Slasher lived. There wasn't a house within miles of him on either side, and only himself and his son lived there. What way of living had they away out in the fastness of the mountain? Well they had a countryside of mountain and a wealth of cattle and sheep.

Long before "these Brethern of Donegal" departed from our country, when they were in control, whoever would come that tiresome, hungry road could make for the monastery light and it would not be suspicion but welcome that would meet him. He could satisfy his hunger and take his rest. And no question as to whether or not he had money would be put to him. But the time came when the monks were forced to leave Donegal. But hospitality survived for two hundred years after them. You could say that the Slasher was their last descendant.

For thirty years the Slasher never bolted the door nor did he lock it. The light was never put out nor was the fire raked. You could drop in to him any time from midnight to morning. If you were hungry you were fed. If you were sleepy and fatigued you stretched out on the heather before the hearth and slept. Next morning if you left a small silver contribution when leaving you were thanked. But if you left without paying anything no one cast a cold eye on you. The same welcome would await you on your second visit. Maybe you think I am lying. But there's still a few old timers living in the Rosses who enjoyed the Slasher's hospitality.

III

"You wouldn't be believed now if you said there was such a house" said Red Mick. "The times

have changed, and not for the better. There is no greeting or welcome now only 'you there', 'me here'. When a man had a farthing he'd share it with you. But if he had a pound note he'd hate breaking it. Instead he'd save it to put another pound with it for company.

"But talking on the House of the Slasher we were. It's well I remember one night long ago I was there. I'll remember that night until I'm stretched in the grave. It was a wee while before Christmas. Nice calm weather we were having but the skies were very dark. I was coming back from Scotland. I left Letterkenny with the intention of travelling all night and reaching home with dawn next day. Night came down and I crossing the bog at Lossett. When I was coming in by the bends of Meenadreen it started to snow. Fine light snow it was. Thinks I to myself I'm as well to travel on and try to reach the Slashers. I was half way between Termon and Devlin. It was as easy to go forward as backward. But the snowfall got thicker and heavier. There was a cutting hard wind blowing in my face, and the night was so dark that I couldn't see to put a finger in your eye. I walked on 'til I reached the Black House. I recognised the wallsteads and I knew I was only a mile from the Slashers. I was getting tired and the snow was so deep that I was afraid that with every step I'd land in the road ditch. I would have liked to sit awhile to draw my breath but I didn't. I had often heard tell that if sleep came on you on a snowy night you were likely to waken in eternity.

"With that I heard the moaning. It startled me and I was scared, although I'm not easily frightened. At last I advanced a couple of steps. And then I saw a form lying on the roadside in the snow. I bent over him. He was alive and he could talk but he couldn't get up. I put him on his feet in the hope that with my support we could make that mile of road before us in some way. But he couldn't take one step. Finally I got him on my back. Yet I knew full well that I'd have it difficult enough to reach the Slashers without any burden or encumbrance. But it's hard to leave a man to die in the snow without doing all in your power to save him. In any case no one knows at any time what God has ordained or what way relief will come.

"I plodded on for about forty paces dejectedly, my head hung with the weight of my load. And then I found myself in the road ditch and the other man on top of me. Thought I this is the end. In the heel of the hunt I succeeded in rising and in pulling the other man in on the bank. "You'd better leave" said he. "It's bad enough for one person to die". "Have courage" says I, "there's help approaching. I hear the Slasher's dog barking." I put my fingers in my mouth and made a forked whistle.

"It was true. The dog was approaching. But we didn't see him until he was by our sides, the night was so dark. He ran round us a couple of times and then he raced back home. He hadn't time to be half way back when I heard a horn blowing and I knew that rescue was on its way. And it was. The Slasher and his son were coming and a light with them and the dog guiding them. They were just in time. For the injured man was sagging at the knees and he was falling from my grasp like an empty sack.

"We were brought to the house and the Slasher pulled out a bottle of poteen and gave each of us

a couple of glasses. Talking of poteen, it's not legal of course. But today and on that day God allowed that drop to be drunk. We proceeded the rest of the way to the Rosses next day. I never saw that man since. A lump of a lad from Altaneeduchan he was. It was his first year in Scotland and his last. He told me he'd never walk that dangerous road again. He kept his word. He went away to America that same summer, and who could blame him. That's the kind of life we had long ago.

IV

I didn't like the Yank who was staying at the hotel in Bunbeg. None of us liked him. We considered him too proud and stand-offish. If you bade him the time of day he replied in a couple of words, and that was that. You couldn't draw chat out of him. And of course this tended to hurt those who would like to befriend and get to know him properly. Was he brought up in the States? Where did his folks come from? What brought him over? Why did he come to Rinnafaoilin? Was he married? If not, was it in quest of a wife he came? We should have liked to get answers to these sensible questions. But we might as well wait for the Big Stone of Leimatinney to reveal its secret.

But in time he put chat on me and I discovered he was a civil enough creature. He told me he was thinking of making a tour round the area and he'd be glad if I accompanied him and gave him my knowledge of the places of interest. I told him I'd go with him in welcome and be his guide to the places of fame. To the Rock of Doon and to Gartan of the Saint, to the Port of the Three Enemies, and to Donegal Abbey. "That will be fine", he said, "and that old patriarch of yours, perhaps he'd like to come along."

"He invited me and you to come in the car with him tomorrow", said I to Red Mick, a little after that. "It is the right time of year and we'll have a pleasant day."

'Where would I be going and never a word of English to speak to him,' says Red Mick.

"And all the years you spent in Scotland?" says I.

"No matter, I have no English left. The thing one doesn't learn in youth he doesn't retain. It's only skin deep, you shed it with old age."

"What odds", says I. "unless I'm mistaken it won't be necessary for me or you to say a word. The Yank will do the talking." I persuaded Mick to come with us.

I said the Yank would be talkative, but I misjudged him. He made no conversation. He didn't say a word. He drove over Meenacuaing, up Dunlewey, out past the Sandy Lough and east as if he were making for Letterkenny. He wasn't needing any directions from me.

Going over Devlin we came as far as the old ruined house. The Yank stopped the car. He opened the door and out with him. 'I guess we ought to look in here', said he and he went into the old ruin

and we after him. 'We have no need for English in this hallowed floor' said he, taking off his hat and blessing himself. Then he took a bottle from his pocket.

"It's hard to get a drop of poteen now" said he, "but I got it. Here on this floor I tasted my first poteen ever. And here I'll taste it for the last time. Maybe it seems strange to you but I'd have been lost east of here long ago but for the Slasher, his son and his dog. And another man. A man God sent my way on his road."

"Did you ever see that man since?" said I.

[Now speaking Irish] "It's better to leave the mystery behind" said he, grabbing Red Mick by both hands. "Thank God I lived to see you again."

One morning at sunset we stood looking at Errigal far away from us. It changed colour three times in a few minutes. "I never saw a mountain peak so lovely", said the Yank, and his voice choking with emotion. "It's a great pity wheat doesn't grow on your ridges. If such were so I'd never leave you... But it can't be helped. It can't."

Translated by Paddy Tunney in 1975

Story is from the book: Fód an Bháis (Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair 1955)





Slasher's House and Site I bought in 1975. It backs onto the Glenveagh National Park and is very close to the new visitors centre.

Devlin, Kilmacrenan

Electoral District: Cross Roads

DL 17629

Now owned by Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland

Area 25.170 Hectares (when I bought it it was described as circa 62 acres).

[THE DERRYVEAGH EVICTIONS](#)