Seed Savers in Co. Clare is an organisation home to Ireland’s national seed bank. Through the organic cultivation of a variety of rare and native plants, including over 165 types of native apple tree, Seed Savers protect an invaluable part of Irish heritage. An excerpt directly taken from my MA thesis, ‘Roots’ tells of my journey to Seed Savers, of the people who work there, and of the plants that are grown by them. Exploring connections between land, language and food, this excerpt is not a theory laden piece, but an account rich with ethnographic detail. I wish to bring the reader along with me through the story that is woven from the lowly seeds residing in the seed bank to the grand rows of apple trees that populate the orchards and those who would protect them. After all, what is ethnography if not a story of the people we meet and the stories they tell?

Keywords: Food, Horticulture, Heritage, Identity.

For all the fields I have traversed, and loved and lost
- John Fitzgerald

I was standing in a graveyard, facing north-west.

In front of me was a grey stone mausoleum. A plaque told me that it is occupied by An tAthair (Fr.) Eoghan O’ Gramhnaigh (1863 – 1899) who was a ‘Priest, scholar, writer, professor and major figure in the revival of the Irish language’. According to the plaque from 1891 to 1894 he was Professor of Irish at Maynooth University, co-founder of the Gaelic League, promoter of the Irish language revival, and wrote Simple Lessons in Irish. I already had Irish on my mind as I had been attending classes since the previous September, such is the way with these things I was beginning to take more notice of it around me. A few weeks previously I had sent an email to a grower about potentially doing research on the farm he works on. This fell through, but we had a lengthy email conversation. What intrigued me about the very first email he sent back is that it was signed off ‘Beir Bua’ (along the lines of ‘may the victory be yours’). When talking to organic grower Jeremy he mentioned a couple he knew in Mayo who had set up a self-sufficient farm they called ‘glasraí’(vegetables). I asked him about the name and he suggested it was to do with ‘using the local soil and using the language of that soil’. At the Festival of Food Security and Sovereignty in Maynooth University (April 2018) I kept an eye out for more parts of this picture I felt I wasn’t seeing clearly enough. In one room a woman sang traditional ballads between each talk. ‘Stór Síolta’ (seed store/bank) was embroidered into a white table cloth laden down with bottles of apple juice. Certainly, it
was to do with a sense of place and identity, an emphasis on food being grown in Ireland and consumed locally. But that didn’t feel like the entire story, and it wasn’t nationalism either. There was something I was missing, what was it?

Figure 1: Fr. Eugene O’Growney’s Plaque. Photo by the author.

Saving Seeds

It’s a long, long way from here to Clare. It takes three hours to get from Killarney to the Irish Seed Savers Association’s 20-acre site outside the village of Scariff, East Clare. It would be much shorter as the crow flies, but they do not have such narrow roads to contend with. I arrived on a gloriously hot day in early July and was greeted by General Manager Jennifer McConnell, a Maynooth Anthropology Alumnus. She introduced me to Deirdre who was my main point of call during my stay in Seed Savers. She showed me to the caravan I would be staying in for the week and then brought me to the break room part of the Seed Bank building where the other staff and volunteers were having tea and coffee. I was introduced and shown how to get some tea for myself by a woman named Felice, ‘We have to look after you’, she said. After the break I helped Deirdre package some wildflower seeds for the on-site shop and she began to explain to me about the work done in Seed Savers. Seed Savers was founded in 1991 by American woman Anita Hayes who was surprised that nothing like it existed in Ireland already, so she set about creating it herself, initially in Carlow. Seed Savers moved to Clare in 1996. Seed Savers is home to a variety of vegetables, flowers, bushes, and trees which are considered native, heritage, or heirloom. Seed Savers also boasts an orchard comprised of over 165 varieties of native apple trees (Úllard na hÉireann). All the plants are grown organically and there is a strong emphasis on ‘open pollination’ which it took me a while to understand as a recovering biologist. The ‘enemy’ of open pollination is ‘F1 hybrids’. F1 had meant to me the first generation after a genetic cross is carried out, as in the diagram below. I had never heard it said with a negative connotation before. ‘Hybrid’ I also incorrectly took to mean genetically modified when this is not necessarily the case.
An ‘F1 hybrid’ is the offspring of an unstable genetic cross, seeds cannot be saved from it so if one wants to grow it again it must be re-bred or bought from a plant breeder. The animal equivalent would be a mule which is the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse and is infertile. However, sterility is not the only issue with F1 hybrids. An additional problem seems to be that even if F1 hybrids are fertile they and their offspring are not ‘true to type’ i.e. they are not like the parent plants (F0), and thus not the same variety. This genetic ‘purism’ makes sense when we take into account that Seed Savers is about conservation, not plant breeding. They wish to conserve specific varieties, thus hybridisation is undesirable. But even closely related varieties can cross pollinate through open pollination. Thus, closely related varieties are grown ‘off-site’ in various locations around the country by affiliated plant growers called ‘seed guardians’. There is an interesting interplay between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ here. Open pollination means plants are pollinated outside by pollinators (bees, insects etc.) rather than in carefully controlled crosses. This reflects an organic ethos of less human intervention being more. This is done to propagate and maintain named varieties that people will recognise or remember. Organic growing is in some respects more dependent on humans than other forms, as weeding, sowing, and harvesting seeds is done by hand. However, the emphasis is on stewardship rather than control. One staff member told me that they feel growing and tending is in us, innate, and that before they took up horticulture, they felt they were failing as a human.

Producing seeds is the last thing a plant does before it dies, hence the term ‘gone to seed’. Seeds are harvested in July and dried out and stored in the seed bank. In the seed bank there are two fridges: one to store seeds that will be sold in the shop or through the ISSA website, the other is for seed conservation, and is therefore much cooler in temperature. When showing me the fridges, Deirdre enthusiastically pointed out how aesthetically varied and intricate the seeds are. It also struck me how un-clinical the seed bank building was. It was a warm, welcoming building, with large windows letting in sunlight. The fact it
had a kitchenette showed how much it was designed with people in mind, as much as the plants. Seed Savers is the national seedbank and has the national list, i.e. if someone asks for a list of all the native species in Ireland it is Seed Savers responsibility to provide it. The Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine (DAFM) provides Seed Savers with some funding. The DAFM also keeps a seed bank of its own. I asked Deirdre about it and she said that they focus more on cereals. Seed Savers are involved in both *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation i.e. they plant the seeds as well as store them. This is so that they can harvest more seeds to sell but also so that the plants can keep adapting to the environmental conditions. This is another reason for ‘seed guardians’. Plants that do not grow well in Clare might grow better elsewhere.
Deirdre gave me a tour of the grounds and we completed a number of tasks along the way. In a greenhouse at the brow of ‘Anita’s Garden’ we weeded a plant bed and sowed (by ‘broadcasting’) some seeds. The seeds were of a ‘green manure’. Green manures are plants which are cut down before they go to seed and become a natural compost. Another plant is then sown. There are a number of different green manures with different root depths and nutrient fixing qualities. Choice of green manure will depend on what the soil needs. In a field called ‘Inis Glas’ Deirdre explained to me the provenance of the Oak tree in the centre. In Tuamgraney there is an old Oak tree called the ‘Brian Boru’ tree. In *The Sacred Trees of County Clare* Michael Houlihan states ‘There is no doubt that the tree is sacred by its age and association’ (2016: 44). The Oak tree in Seed Savers was grown from an acorn from the Brian Boru tree and is sacred by descent. According to Deirdre the head gardener is very spiritual and at the Summer solstice they sat around the tree and had a ceremony to mark it.
At lunchtime Seed Savers staff and volunteers often go to the co-op in Scariff for food. Deirdre told me the co-op was set up by people who moved to the area from Germany and England who got to know each other through sending their kids to the same Steiner school and wanted somewhere they could get good local food. As well as the café the co-op houses a second-hand bookshop and clothes-shop, its own garden and an ‘up to spec’ kitchen which can be rented by people who want to make their own products e.g. jam but cannot afford the (FSA approved) equipment. Local people can organise and hold events in the co-op, for instance Deirdre, inspired by The Moneyless Man held an event where people bring unwanted stuff from their houses and give it away for free. I was amazed by how busy the co-op was every day we went, but really it was no wonder. The food is good quality and good value. The daily special (e.g. coconut dahl, jacket potato, Thai green curry) cost only 5 euro. Having lunch was a great way to get to know the staff and other volunteers, but it was also genuinely enjoyable. There was no predicting where the conversation might turn next. For example, on that first day I learned that a colleague of theirs was away in the Wicklow Mountains on a vision quest and when it was complete, he could become a Shaman. A discussion then ensued as to whether you could bring experiences like that back with you into your daily life.

In the evenings I had the place to myself. The first evening I wandered around taking photographs. The place felt alive. A more ‘rational’ voice in my head told me that was ridiculous. But it was true. The huge variety of plants had attracted a variety of insects which had attracted a variety of birds, and no doubt mammals small and big that I could not see. It also attracted a variety of people, hence the conversations I couldn’t predict and wouldn’t want to. That evening I was particularly captivated with the woodland area and I was surprised when an apprentice gardener named Colm told me that it was only planted 20 years ago. I spent almost an entire day helping him weed a glasshouse and two green houses in Inis Glas. According to Colm the definition of a weed is ‘a plant growing in the wrong place’, which calls to mind Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966). While in one of the greenhouses a visitor to Seed Savers, who I
believe was American but living in Ireland, asked Colm a number of questions about the plants. When
leaving he said ‘go raibh maith agat’ (thank you). There it was again, the signing off ‘as gaeilge’.

It was in Anita’s garden that it clicked into place. In between harvesting seeds and telling Colm and me our
tasks for the day Deirdre pointed to the plants around us and told me their names. The plant just in front
of where I was standing was called skirret. ‘It’s from the Middle Ages, no-one uses it now so we don’t sell
the seeds or anything, but it’s nice to have it’. The significance of this might not have registered with me
except I had recently had a conversation with my sister in which I said I liked donkeys. ‘Of course you do’,
she replied, ‘because they’re not used for anything. You like that they exist’. And so it is, with donkeys,
medieval root vegetables, and a language often pronounced ‘dead’ or ‘of little use in today’s modern
world’. Valuing these things indicates a rejection of ‘usefulness’ as necessary to justify existence, but it is
also a call for what constitutes ‘useful’ to be re-evaluated. In Seed Savers growing skirret is also part of the
ethos of biodiversity. It is clear that it is not only a case of growing a wide range of plants but very much a
case of ‘no plant left behind’. This inclusivity applies to the people too, either in Seed Savers or affiliated
places. According to one staff member who lives in the eco-village of Cloughjordan Co. Tipperary, the
primary school there is very accommodating to children with autism. Thus ‘biodiversity’ might also
encompass ‘neurodiversity’. As a naturally introverted person, it made sense why I felt so at ease here.
Plants and people alike may be as they are. Of course, I’m not suggesting my reason for liking a particular
language or animal is the exact same as someone else’s, but there was a certain ‘ethos’ I was picking up on during my research, one that was not related solely to issues of identity.

One must usually come from a place of socioeconomic privilege to be in a position to value the ‘useless’, however it is also usually accompanied by a rejection of aspects of that background. One staff member told me that he is the ‘black sheep’ of his family. While content with his job, it does not pay very well and he works in a café at weekends. I noticed on trips to Scarriff and back that the cars tended to be relatively old. While this might indicate that tending plants in Clare for a living does not pay well, it is entirely possible that even if the staff had more money, they wouldn’t spend it on new cars. Here we also see a re-valuing of ‘useful’, if the car goes it’ll do. Heather Paxson refers to the ‘cultural, emotional, ethical, and political dispositions that motivate people’, in her case to take the risk of turning to producing artisanal cheese in America, as ‘Economies of Sentiment’ (2013: 51). She profiles the cohorts of people who go ‘back to the land’ in this way. One group, who took up cheese-making in the 80s, were prompted by the counterculture of the 60s and 70s. A later group who began cheese-making in the 90s and 2000s were spurred by other events such as the ‘the dot-com bust, 9/11, the Wall Street crash, a general disillusionment with the fractured promise of easy money’ (2013: 52).

Based on my research I would like to propose some similarities in the current generation of Irish ‘back to the landers’. This is general of course, not everyone I met had the exact same set of attributes, and this list is by no means exhaustive: firstly, given Ireland’s history as a predominantly agrarian society they might only be one generation removed from an agricultural background; secondly, they are ‘native’ but may have been influenced by ‘back to the landers’ who came to Ireland from other countries in the last few decades; thirdly, they may have affluent parents; fourthly, they have lived in urban areas, if only temporarily and/or have travelled abroad and had contact with ‘cosmopolitan’ values; fifthly, they have never known hunger and poverty (though there is still a cultural memory of it in Ireland, it is fading); sixthly, they have distrust of ‘money’ due to the crash of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ and can just about remember a ‘simpler time’ before the Celtic Tiger started up at all; seventhly, access to the internet provides the opportunity to learn skills that are no longer handed down inter-generationally, and finally, they have a sense of possibility. This might simply go with being young. There is a sense, however, that far from being a ‘backwater’ Ireland is actually now a pretty good place to be.

Of Cows and Men

The Cow Book (2018), in which John Connell details everyday life on a family farm in Longford, is an excellent example and illustration of the Irish post Celtic Tiger reappraisal of the land. Connell grew up on the farm but spent a number of years away from it working as a journalist in Canada and Australia. He returns to the farm to help his father with the work, but also to work on his writing and recover from depression. There is more to it than this, however, and Connell muses on his relationship with the farm and the land throughout the book. Of himself he writes:

to be reunited with nature and trees and calm and birds was a sustenance that I needed...whilst living my condo life, part of me missed these cows and this way of being...it is now I think that life was meant to be shared with animals, not just other people (2018: 111).
While Paxson’s ‘economy of sentiment’ is a very useful term, semantically there is more here than ‘sentiment’, colloquially I would say Connell has a grá (love) for the land and that it is ‘in him’. Connell reflects not only on himself but on farming, in Ireland and abroad, more generally. The idea that farmers are stewards of the land and all on it is very prominent in his writing:

*even for the businessman-farmer, I do not believe it is solely about the money, nor that he sees the animals solely as future beef. If it were, I do not think he should get up so instinctively in the middle of the night to deliver a new calf, or tend to a sick lamb. There must be nature in the man for the beast, nurturing in the human for the non-human (2018: 110).*

The very ground itself and one’s place on it is a part of this draw ‘perhaps as a result of colonialism or the Great Famine’ (2018: 182). This draw can outweigh the lure of money. Connell remarks that during the Celtic Tiger ‘some saw us farmers as backward...for working our land was far less profitable than selling it’ (2018: 202). No doubt seeing boom turn to bust served only to strengthen this tenacity.

Throughout the book Connell often draws on Ireland’s mythical past and the spiritual links he feels with the landscape in the present. However, Connell is not seeking to idealise the Irish rural agrarian life, he is fully aware of the hardship it entails. For instance, animals get sick and die, and Connell writes about calves and lambs he tried to save but could not. His desire to work with nature, while also acknowledging that it will not always be a bed of roses, fits what Paxson calls the ‘post-pastoral’. In the ‘pastoral’ genre the countryside is a pristine idyll into which one can escape ‘civilisation’. The ‘post-pastoral’ acknowledges that to live on the land takes work. In Ireland at this present time it seems we have become urbanised enough that the countryside holds a certain intrigue (when speaking to Eoin, Seed Savers Orchard coordinator, he told me it is his friends that don’t live on farms that often take the most interest in his work) but this has happened in such a short space of time (due in some measure to economic and social changes wrought by joining the EEC in 1973, and the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s/2000s) that many Irish people haven’t left the land at all, but are looking for new ways to stay on it.

For Connell, the answer might lie in converting the farm to Organics. Connell is not trying to go ‘back’ to anything when he says this, but is looking to the future ‘If I must provide food for an urban world, then let me provide the best’ (2018: 198). Another element of the ‘post-pastoral’ is the acceptance of technology or ‘the machine in the garden’, a term Paxson adapts from Leo Marx:

*the ‘machine’ of artisanal cheese production is integrated into a post-pastoral landscape, meant not to displace nature but to work in collaboration with organic agencies in a productive fashion (2013: 10).*

Connell is adamant that there is no desire in Europe for scaled up ‘American-style or corporate farming’. He is under no illusion as to the purity of ‘European’ agriculture either and gives up eating pork because of the way industrialised way pigs are farmed. ‘Corporate’ agriculture does come knocking from time to time, at one point in the guise of the inspector:
We must be up to date on the paperwork. The buzzword now is ‘agribusiness’...we the farmers, the custodians of the land, are now manufacturers...we have become a cog in the wheel of industry (2018: 181).

While Connell is evidently wary of the industrialisation of farming, this is not to say technology does not feature in his day to day farm life. In one instance he uses his smartphone to google the symptoms of a sick lamb, and thereby finds a remedy. This also shows a change in the transmission of farming knowledge. While his father or another farmer might've known what to do, they were not around at the time. Luckily for the lamb a solution was quite literally to hand.

While The Cow Book is only one man’s experience of returning to farming, the fact that it made the Irish bestsellers chart is an indication of how Connell’s portrait of living on the land resonated with people here.

The Place of Apples

In the field outside my caravan, lines of young apple trees stretched out before me until the land dips down again out of sight. A plaque informs me that this is a ‘Hedge system’. Three rows of the same tree are planted, the outer two ‘guard’ the inner row from the influence of the neighbouring trees. The inner row is then used for any analysis or comparison with the same variety grown elsewhere that might be done, as this is a commonly used system. An adjacent plaque tells me that this orchard is dedicated to the memory of University College Dublin (UCD) pomologist Dr. Micheal Hennerty (1941 – 2014) who was instrumental in the setting up of the Native Irish apple tree collection. It was a collaborative effort, with Hennerty continuing the work of collecting, identifying, and documenting apple trees started by Dr. Clark and Dr. Lamb, also of UCD. The orchard contains over 165 varieties of apple tree. The criteria appears to be that the variety has been grown in Ireland for a long time and is unlikely to be found anywhere else. Varieties are identified through genetic profiling. Grafting is used to keep apple trees ‘true to type’. A branch (scion) is cut from an existing tree and grafted on to a rootstock (also an apple tree). It is the role of the rootstock to provide nutrients from the soil to the young tree. The apple tree (rootstock and all) is then sold ‘bare-root’. Seed Savers does also have a self-rooting orchard where new trees grow from the seeds of the existing trees.
Far from being a museum of forgotten trees, interest in the orchard is growing, and selling apple trees is an important source of revenue for Seed Savers. And it is expanding. On my last day at Seed Savers, standing in the orchard with Eoin, our conversation was interrupted briefly when a local man arrived to plough an un-used part of the field so more trees could be planted there. The increase in interest is coming not only from individuals but also commercial apple growers whose orchards are struggling. Eoin has visited commercial orchards in Ireland and was surprised how unhealthy some of the trees are. Growers appear to be caught in a spiral of using more and more ‘sprays’ to combat disease. But microbes adapt. Eoin reckons that the (microbial) diseases which affect apple trees have adapted to commercial varieties (no doubt under selection pressure from chemicals used to try and combat them) and are morphologically
no longer able to infect the older, less widely grown varieties. This is not to say organically grown trees never get sick. Combating disease here is a cut-throat business. I arrived at the top of the hill on which my caravan sits to find Eoin and Pat taking trees from the orchard and putting them into a trailer. ‘What are ye doing?’ I asked Pat. He told me that the trees had scab (an infection caused by fungus) and had to be removed before it spread to the rest of the trees. While it may seem harsh on individual trees, the future health of the entire orchard is at stake.

There is another reason commercial growers are taking an interest in Irish apple tree varieties. According to Eoin they are thinking of taking a leaf out of the craft beer book. Currently many Irish orchards are selling to a large cider company, but aren’t being paid very high rates. However, if they went into making ‘craft cider’ (or selling to a microbrewery which does so) they might make more of a return. Marketing cider as not only being made in Ireland from apples grown in Ireland but from Irish varieties of apple makes a good story. One that can sell. Even beer brewers are looking at the potential of Irish varieties of barley. Thus the ‘cultural biography’ of a bottle of beer or cider can be traced right back to its genetic provenance, as well as being associated with the ‘social history’ of that particular barley or apple variety. There a number of reasons why cider might need a good ‘origin’ story in today’s food scene but the avenue I would like to explore here more closely is its links to the concept of Terroir.

**Terroir** is a French term which is difficult to translate. According to Amy Trubek this is because ‘the word’s meaning is embedded in French culture’ but ‘when it is attempted…it is translated alternatively as soil, locality, or part of the country’ (2008: 19). Trubek glosses *Goût de Terroir* into ‘taste of place’. While ‘natural’ considerations such as the location, climate and soil are ‘central characters’ in creating a ‘taste of place’, it also has a strong cultural dimension, as it is people who place a value on Terroir. In France it is an important part of Trubek calls the ‘foodview’. The wine industry was the first to ‘institutionalise’ the link between ‘quality’ and place of origin with the 1855 Bordeaux classifications (2008: 30). The link between place and taste grew in momentum and led to the creation of the *appellations d’origine contrôlées* in the 1930s. The concept of Terroir is not, or is no longer, unique to France. According to Trubek ‘Placing or localizing food and drink is our bulwark against the incredible (and increasingly menacing) unknowns of our interdependent global food system’ (2008: 22). In her ethnography of artisanal cheese-makers in Vermont and Wisconsin, Paxson discusses what Terroir might be in an American context. She notes that cheese-makers often draw attention to the terroir of their individual farmstead when selling their produce. However, Wisconsin is beginning to look at Terroir as a possible way to increase the market appeal of cheese made in the state, partly as a response to competition from the California dairy industry (2013: 152). Terroir has spread to Irish shores also. Not long after first learning the word I came across a Twitter account called ‘Tourroir’. Tourroir was a food tourism conference held in Galway in April 2018. What caught my eye was the obvious allusion to Terroir. I do not know what Terroir will come to mean here. I would proffer that it be glossed as Blas, which means taste, but can also be used to refer to accent. Let us think briefly about Irish brands. Long established drinks companies are all named after a family (e.g. Guinness, Murphys, Beamish, Jameson, Powers). Craft beers on the other hand are quite heterogeneous in their naming patterns, though of course that’s part of the point. Some foods are named after the place they came from e.g. Clonakilty black pudding, Kilmeadan cheese. Looking at a market stall in Dingle I noticed it was selling ‘Kerry Chorizo’. Where does that fall within the concept of Blas? It is certainly an area of further enquiry.
‘Taste of place’ can mean eating locally. Weiss (2012) writes about ‘locavores’ in North Carolina, many of whom has recently moved to the area to work in tech or pharmaceuticals. Eating local (including local heirloom varieties) appears to be a way for the new arrivals to connect with and place themselves in the area. ‘Taste of place’ can also be bottled and sold, for instance olive oil can create associations with the Mediterranean for those that live elsewhere (Meneley 2007). In contrast, GMOs, or even varieties conventionally bred for ‘industrial’ agriculture, are haunted by a kind of placeless-ness; they have no ‘heritage’ as per say. A laboratory does not have the same symbolic value the Mediterranean or Champagne does. Or else they are associated with ‘la malbouffe’ and ‘McDonaldisation’ (Heller 2007). Trubek warns that in the case of the French, to accuse them of ‘knee-jerk anti-Americanism and antiglobalization’ is to miss some important nuances. She looks at the case of Mondavi, an American company that wanted to start a vineyard in the town of Aniane. The plan was so opposed by locals that it had to be abandoned. Trubek concludes that in choosing for their new vineyard a wooded area that Aniane inhabitants use for recreational purposes, Mondavi messed with the wrong soil. There is perhaps something about apple trees in particular that can root people to a place. Chapman and Brown (2013) discuss the place of apple trees in particular that can root people to a place. Chapman and Brown (2013) discuss the place of apple trees in particular that can root people to a place. Chapman and Brown (2013) discuss the place of apple trees in particular that can root people to a place.

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…the layers of memories and meanings instilled in apples, along with the rootedness of the tree itself, make apple trees places in their own right, and the ability of a particular variety to spark memories of the past fosters the construction of senses of place (2013: 55).

Similarly, in her discussion of heirloom fruits and vegetables in the US Jordan refers to an orchard as a ‘three-dimensional space of edible memory, settled in over decades’ (2015: 86).
In Vogue

The growing interest in the apple trees is part of a burgeoning Irish food scene more generally. So much so it made Vogue. Zachary Schwartz writes ‘Irish chefs are reclaiming their food and heritage, cooking with organic ingredients and creating a new style of terroir-based fare’, he attributes this ‘culinary renaissance’ to Ireland’s ‘geographic centrality, recent economic boom, shifting perceptions towards food, and new generation of eager chefs’. Margaret Hickey author of Ireland’s Green Larder (2018) picks up on the turning tide, noting that for a long time people’s main concern was that they had food, while in more recent times ‘we in Ireland are starting to really relax about food, to relish it and play with new flavours and textures’. While what people eat in restaurants, prepared by trained chefs, and what they eat at home might be completely different, they are not entirely unrelated. According to Trubek ‘Scholars have linked cafés and restaurants to the increased importance since the eighteenth century of the public sphere in the West, as a new space for promoting dialogue and marking distinction’(2018: 97). People spend so much time in restaurants that chefs can have a huge influence on what foods and flavours people are exposed to.

The impetus for this Irish culinary renaissance is attributed to Myrtle Allen of Ballymaloe, Co. Cork. Ballymaloe features in my one of my own ‘taste of place’ memories. Whilst living in Vancouver, anytime someone we knew was visiting home my Corkonian roommate would put in an order for Ballymaloe Relish. Myrtle Allen died on the 13th June 2018 and was given a Quaker funeral service. Without being reductionist, I would like to comment on this for a moment, and not on doctrine as per say but history. The cultural memory of being a Quaker in Ireland might differ from that of being a Catholic in Ireland, but also that of being Church of Ireland. The Quakers were not ‘ascendency’ or gentry. Ruth, a long-time Seed Savers volunteer told us more about their history. To paraphrase from her, they were not allowed into the professions like law so they went into trade and business. They prospered in this area because they were honest. Examples of well-known businesses that are Quaker in origin are Jacobs and Bewleys. The Quakers then have a heritage of ‘going into business’. Hunger, either caused by the Famine or just everyday poverty would also leave a mark on the relationship between Irish Catholics and food, which the Quakers would not share. Indeed, during the Famine, the Quakers tried to help by setting up soup kitchens, distributing clothes and seeds, among other works. I do not mean to over-write Myrtle Allen’s personal motivations for setting up her own restaurant, but this brief discussion might add another layer of context.

Ruth knew Myrtle personally. ‘She was beautiful’, she said, our 11 o’ clock tea break coming to an end, ‘she was beautiful’.

References


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