

MY PIPE OF IRISH CLAY

*When I wish to solve those problems, which perplex the wisest men,
And deduce abstruse conclusions, that transcend all human ken;*

*When I wish to know the secrets which the pyramids infold,
Or to understand the statecraft of Rameses Great of Old,*

*I just sit here quiet and easy, and all things seem clear as day,
When I see the smoke a-curling from my pipe of Irish clay.*

*But more dear to me than problems, or the Pharaohs and their kind,
Are the pictures which I then see of the land I left behind.*

*All the old haunts and the dear friends, all the things I used to do,
The hopes and dreams of boyhood days, they all pass me in review;*

*Sure I'm thinking I'm there again and beside sweet Dublin Bay,
When I see the smoke a-curling from my pipe of Irish clay.*

*I'm climbing up the Hill of Howth or I'm boating in the bay;
I'm strolling by the Liffey's banks or I'm bathing down at Bray;*

*I'm basking in the Phoenix Park, while the birds sing merrily.
The fresh winds waft the atmosphere of the mountains and the sea,*

*Or p'raps I'm on the Lucan Road, eating berries large and ripe,
When I send the smoke a-curling from my soft clay Dublin pipe.*

c. 1904

Note:

Clay pipes, or "Dúidíns" as they were known in Ireland were once found in almost every house in the country.

Their association with traditions, along with the pleasure of "taking a puff", led to their growth in popularity throughout the country but most particularly in the rural communities of Ireland.

They were often associated with storytellers who would keep an attentive crowd in suspense in the midst of a story while having a smoke from his dúidín.

Clay pipes were also particularly prominent at wakes, where trays of tobacco filled pipes, Guinness and whiskey would be provided for the mourners.

As soon as a person died, relatives or friends would buy a number of items for the funeral ceremony and these typically included a half barrel of porter, a gallon of whiskey, snuff, tobacco, and of course clay pipes.

The clay pipe was one of the most important parts of any wake and was considered improper to be without them. A gross or more was usually purchased and this would then be filled with a twist of cheap tobacco, and passed around to all the mourners in the room.

Traditionally, the shank of the clay pipe was dipped into some Guinness or whiskey, a process that scaled the mouthpiece and imparted a good flavour to the clay for the smoker. Upon receiving the pipe it was customary to say "Lord have mercy" and in time the pipe became known as a "Lord ha' mercy".

The village of Knockcroghery, County Roscommon, was for almost 300 years the dominant area for production of clay pipes in Ireland. Towards the end of the 19th century, seven different families were involved in the production of clay pipes in the village, but this local industry ceased abruptly on June 19, 1921, when a party of Black and Tans burned down the village during the War of Independence.

In Knockcroghery, where Curley's Claypipe factory once stood, this old raft has been revived. Using the original tools and techniques, clay pipes are painstakingly hand made using the same skills employed by the artisan's centuries ago.

It was the popularizing of tobacco by Sir Walter Raleigh at the end of the 16th Century that led to the growth of the clay pipes in Ireland. Initially, they were of small size, directly linked to the expense in obtaining the "better tobacco" from Spanish colonies in the New World. After relations between Spain and England improved, larger pipes began to be produced with the stem sometimes reaching a foot long.

Great effort was made to look after your clay pipe. Due to their fragile nature, tapping the pipe against a hard surface in order to dump tobacco or ashes out was ill advised. The pipe was cleaned by placing it on the coals of a fire where all the residue would burn to ashes. This process could actually result in making the pipe more durable.

Although clay pipes are relatively common artifacts of the past, to see someone slowly manipulate a piece of tobacco and a pipe into a smoldering extension of themselves while telling you about the old days is indeed a rare event, not least because of our changing attitudes to tobacco.

A clay pipe is currently in collection at the Clare Museum.
Stamped on the bowl is "Peter Maloney, Ennis".