



Creaght and Creat

The “Creaght” (*Caoraigheacht*) was a herd of cattle with its attendant men, women and children. The word surfaces around 1260, and these herds and their attendants appear to have occasionally been engaged in true nomadry, as opposed to transhumance, i.e., the summer migration to upland pastures (the “booley” or *buaile*). The herds of noble but landless men, as well as itinerant professionals such as bards and some military leaders, could be found roaming the thinly populated country, sometimes aggressively grazing the lands of others. During the Elizabethan wars, the creaghts would rendezvous with the Gaelic forces to provide the “white meats” (*bánbídih*—dairy products) that were their staple, and became targets of the English military. Speaking of Munster during the Desmond Revolt, Churchyard says: “The men of war could not be maintained without their churls and ‘Calliackes’ (*cailleacha*, old women) or women who milked their ‘Creates’ and provided their victuals and other necessaries. So that the killing of them by the sword was the way to kill the men of war by famine.” By 1600, it was said all of Ulster was organized in creaghts, leading a wild and nomadic life under their “Heads of Creaghts.” These head men collected the twice annual “rents,” based on the number of cows, for Tyrone and other lords, whose stewards permitted the Heads of Creaghts to keep a quarter of the total as payment. The Ulster creaghts feature largely in the wars of the 1640s. Government correspondence of 1656 speaks of “Creaghts that have removed out of Ulster who, according to an ancient but barbarous manner of life, have no fixt place of habitation, but wander up and down with their families...” They speak of “Unheading the Creaghts”—imprisoning the chief men to coerce their followers to submit to re-settlement west of the Shannon.

The “Creat” was “A cabin made of the boughs of trees and covered with turf...such are the dwellings of the very lords among them.” as Fynes Moryson described them in 1617, and Luke Gernon in 1620 says, “The baser cottages are built of underwood, called wattle, and covered some with thatch and some with green sedge, of a round forme and without chimneys, and to my imagination resemble so many hives of bees, about a country farme. In the end of harvest the villages seem as bigg agayne as in the spring, theyre corne being brought into theyr haggards, and layed up in round cockes, in forme of theyr houses.”

The Creaght folk sheltered in these huts of interwoven branches known in English as “creats,”—conflating the word Creaght with the English “crate,” or hurdle. Called a bothy by the Irish (*both*—from *bo*, cow?), these simple beehive structures appear on several maps dated c. 1560—1603. Too flimsy to have survived in the archaeological record, they have occasionally been deemed a figment of English propaganda. And some Irish historians doubted that circular plan structures survived the era of the Norman invasion, much less the 17th century. But this is no longer questioned, and the existence of a kind of situational nomadry is also largely accepted now. Several grades of more substantial structures existed in Gaelic Ireland, from tower houses to thatched cabins. Still, the creat was widespread, and not limited to Creaght folk.

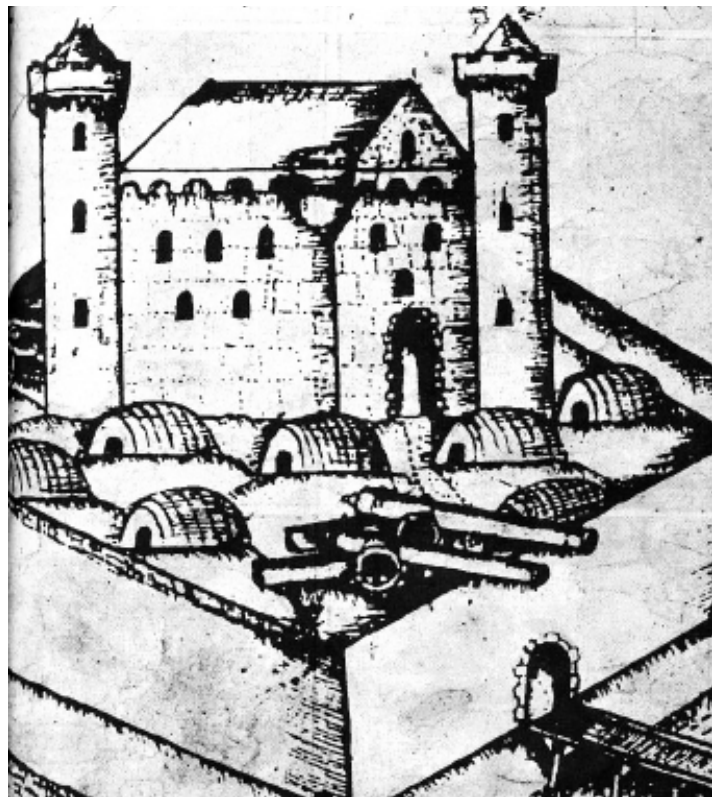
Provided the materials had been gathered, it was said in Tyrone that they could be “built completely in an hour or so.” In 1693 these “little huts” were noted as being built “so conveniently with hurdles and long turf, that they can remove them in summer towards the mountains...” The frame was of wicker either

covered with long sods of grass (*sgreathachai*) earthy side inwards, or thatched with rushes or straw. The sod is an archaic element, paralleled in other sub-arctic regions and coming down from a culture in which straw was not available. The long sods made a portable roof which could be slung on a pole between two pack-horses. The sods were cut from selected spots where close grazing created a thick grass root mass. They measured about two feet wide and about one and a half inches thick and twelve feet in length, and as they were cut they were rolled onto a stick like a carpet. Thomas Campbell in 1778 said “their roofing sods they call scraws (they are rolled up like scrolls) but they would better be called hides, for they are flayed off the earth.”

With many of the same men involved in the Irish and American plantations, comparisons with the Indian wigwam were inevitable. “The natives of New England are accustomed to build them houses much like the Wild Irish. They gather poles in the woods and put the great end of them in the ground, placing them in form of a circle or circumference and, bending the tops of them in form of an arch, they bind them together...” (Thomas Morton, Massachusetts, 1632). This agrees with a piece of Mayo *seanachus*, collected in the 19th century but referring to the 1700’s, which says “The bothy was made of long rods stuck into the ground opposite one another and then bent over and the tops tied together, these forming the walls and roof of the hut.” (*Bealodeas* 10, 1940). (In a late surviving Halloween divination game called “building the house” 12 couples of holly twigs, named for the boys and girls present, were arranged in a circle, pushed into the ground, and tied together at the apex. A turf was placed in the center, representing the fire, and the first pair that caught fire were destined for marriage.)

Indeed, English settlers in Ireland adapted to this form of housing, and carried it across the sea to the American colonies. In 1613 Cavan, the planter Lieutenant Russel, reported having “timber and wattles in readiness for an Irish house.” And one Plowden wrote in 1650 (speaking of Virginia) that a common structure was “an Irish house of posts wattled and divided with close wattle hedges, and thin turfed above, and thick turfs without below.”

There seems to have been a single low door, and no windows. The hearth was centrally located, and that in the Mayo *seanachus* cited above consisted of two



Ulster: Irish Creats at Burt Castle, Donegal, in 1602. These show indications of the “long turfs” or “scraws of grass” that cover them.



Munster: Irish Creats near Dunboy, in 1601. That same year, a Spanish captain reconnoitering near Castlehaven reported “All I can see are straw huts and these are small.”



Irish Creats at Carrickfergus, in 1560.

semi-circular flags. Fynes Moryson said, “The chief men in their houses make fires in the midst of the room, the smoke whereof goeth out at a hole in the top thereof”—the hole called “*farlés*” in Gaelic. Virginian William Beverly remembered this, and in describing the wigwam, said: “The chimney, as in the true born Irish, is a little hole in the top of the roof to let the smoak out.”

Moryson continued, “They make a fire in the midst of the room, and round about it they sleep upon the ground, without straw or other thing under them, lying all in a circle about the fire with their feet toward it. And their bodies being naked, they cover their heads and upper parts with their mantles, which they

first make very wet, steeping them in water of purpose, for they find that when their bodies have once warmed the wet mantles the smoke of them keeps their bodies in temperate heat all the night following.”

It was reported (i.e. George Buchanan, 1581) that in very bad weather—high winds, frost or snow—the Scots Highlander would dip his plaid in water and then lie down in it. Wetting it made the wool swell so that the plaid would give better protection against the wind and cold air. Wrapped up like this with his head under the blanket, the Highlander’s breath would create a warm and moist atmosphere around him, keeping him cozy during the night. The truth of these accounts is frequently questioned, but one who has tried it reports

“Wet wool blankets and plaids WILL keep you warm on a cold night, as I’ve discovered at reenactment events when all of my kit has been caught in torrential downpours. But, you must wring them out so that they’re not dripping wet. The moisture causes the wool to “swell,” or increase its loft (rather like when a knit bonnet is felted), and it retains more body heat. But, you have to wrap up in it naked, or your other non-woolen clothes will get wet, thus defeating the purpose.”

Contra Moryson, bedding was often used. The late Elizabethan Poem Book of Fiach MacHugh O’Byrne says “As tested warriors lie on a layer of fresh foliage...” and the Armada survivor, Captain Cuellar, said in 1588, “They sleep upon the ground, on rushes, newly cut and full of water and ice.”

In 1683 John Dunton stayed at O’Flaherty’s booley house in Iar Connaught. His hosts brought in “back-burdens of rushes, green and fresh cut, with which they made a long thing like a bed to repose myself on... The landlord reached down a greate and long bagg which was hanging at one of the rafters of the house, out of which the wife tooke two verie large and white

and soft bundles of wollen, called by them Breadeen, (*bréidín*—homespun cloth) thinner than their friezes, and thicker than our flannel. These were layed upon my rushes...I put off my cloaths...and lapt myself in my wollen blankets...We lay in the same room on green rushes. I had sheets and soft white blankets which they emulate one another in verie much (I mean the housewives among them), and they assured me that no man ever gott cold by lyeing on green rushes, which are indeed sweet and clane, being changed every day if raine hinders not; but though they have no lice among them, they are verie full of white snayles which I found upon my cloaths. I wondered mightily to heare people walking to the fire place in the middle of the night to piss in the ashes, but I was soone after forced to doe soe.”

FINIS



The sod “Boley Hut” at the Hilltown “Boley Fair” in 2008 commemorating the days of boolyeing in the Mourne Mountains of County Down.



Straw huts of present day Greek nomads (Sarakatsanides). The Armada survivor, Cuellar, described the village of Strand in Mayo as “consisting of some huts of straw/coarse grass.” but sod was frequently used rather than straw. Inset is a traditional beehive for comparison.



The somewhat minaturized Boley Hut at Hilltown, 2010.