

MINA MACPHERSON

Potato Planting with the "Dram"

THE spring was usually fairly well advanced before my uncle decided to plant the potatoes, because late frosts would have ruined the tender shoots. As is usual in small island communities, life was close-knit and things like potato planting were a communal affair.

To begin with, only one man in our village owned a horse, so he had to be approached first as, needless to say, he and his horse were in great demand. For some time before the actual planting my mother would have been busy in the back shed selecting likely seed potatoes and setting them to sprout. Any big potatoes were cut in half, but she always made sure that each half had an "eye", otherwise they would not grow.

On the day of the planting, the women came wearing sacking aprons and wellington boots, for it was not the sort of job that called for silk frocks and high heels. There was no glamour attached to it, only hard back-breaking work, but they were used to that and they all brought plenty of humour with them. My uncle and our neighbour took turns at the ploughing and the women followed behind with the potatoes.

It was a lovely sight. The big powerful horse plodding purposefully down the field, the men with hands skilled through long practice guiding the gleaming shaft of the plough so that the earth was cleaved in long straight furrows. The seagulls wheeled and screamed above the shining black earth intent on snatching anything worth scavenging, and the women laughing and calling to each other in their rich resonant Gaelic.

The dinner was usually prepared the night before, and my oldest sister was left with the task of laying the table and putting the finishing touches to things. It was no mahogany-table-with-roast-beef-and-two-vegs type of dinner. The table was of plain wood, scrubbed white, with a spotless white cloth on it. The silver was polished

and re-polished the previous night, and the knife blades bath-bricked till they shone. The dinner itself was usually a pot of broth made with a leg of mutton, rich and thick with vegetables, the mutton sliced pink and luscious as the second course, with potatoes boiled in their jackets and laughing out of their floury skins. The sweet course was probably tinned fruit—the only touch of luxury—and crackers and cheese.

We were banished from the kitchen while dinner was in progress, but the three of us sat on the stairs and took it in turns to watch through a peep-hole where a knot had been pushed out of the wooden partition between the kitchen and the lobby. The saliva always ran freely as we watched the food being eaten while we hoped there would be enough left for us, but the "dram" fascinated us more than anything.

From some secret place my mother would produce glasses and the bottle full of the lovely amber liquid. A kind of hush would fall as it was poured out with a beautiful "glugging" sound, and then glasses were raised almost reverently to lips and the magic words "Slainte mhath" intoned before even a drop was tasted. To us, it seemed that the dram was a kind of passport into the adult world. We'd watch wistfully as the result of the "dram" made itself manifest in heightened colour, sparkles in the eyes, loosened tongues and great gusts of laughter while the food was obviously enjoyed even more.

When they'd gone and the kitchen was free to us once more, we'd smell the glasses and with a finger tip tentatively and surreptitiously taste the drops that were left. Peculiar was the smell and fiery was the taste to young throats, sometimes bringing tears to the eyes if there was enough to swallow, but still we were left with the feeling that there was magic in the "dram", and without it potato planting might not have been such a merry affair. □