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2009-10-01

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Recommended Citation
Mac Con Iomaire, Máirtín and Gallagher, Pádraic Óg, "The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture" (2009). *Articles.* Paper 3.
http://arrow.dit.ie/tfschafart/3

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The Potato in Irish Cuisine and Culture

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire and Pádraic Óg Gallagher

Introduction

Few plants have been as central to the destiny of the nation as the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) has been to Ireland. Ireland was the first European country to accept the potato as a serious food crop (Morineau 1999; Salaman 2000). In this year, 2008, designated by the United Nations as the international year of the potato (www.potato2008.org), we set about investigating the impact this vegetable has had on Irish cuisine and culture. From its introduction in the 16th Century, the potato has held a central place in the Irish diet, and by extension, in the culture of Ireland (Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008:3). Potato growing is very suited to the Irish climate and soils, although both excessive and insufficient rainfall at certain times of the growing season can pose disease risks, the biggest of which is potato blight *Phytophthora infestans* (Lafferty, Commins et al. 1999:77). The potato's influence is to be seen in diverse spheres ranging from place names (Ballyporeen – the town of the little potato), folklore, literature, and poetry to the paintings of Paul Henry.

This paper will discuss the introduction of the potato from its South American origin into Irish cuisine and culture. The authors will outline the stages of development from introduction to acceptance as a winter vegetable, to widespread acceptance, moving on to overdependence and leading to subsequent famine. The paper will discuss the varieties of potatoes used, the methods of production at different levels of society, and will discuss a number of quintessentially Irish potato dishes including boxty, champ, and colcannon which will be compared with similar potato dishes in other cultures. Also, this paper will combine secondary sources with primary sources including oral histories and data from the Irish Folklore Commission.

Ireland before the Potato

The native Irish diet of cereal and milk based products augmented with pig meat, survived relatively unchanged from prehistoric times to the introduction of the potato,

possibly in the late sixteenth century. By the fourteenth century there was a fusion of Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Norman food patterns (Sexton 2005:232). Cullen (1992:47) suggests that Irish diets prior to the introduction of the potato were retarded, reflecting a medieval backwardness rather than poverty in the modern sense. Fynes Moryson, the English travel writer, for example, writing in the early seventeenth century, states:

> 'They feede most on Whitemeates, and esteeme for a great daintie sower curds, vulgarly called by them Bonaclabbe. And for this cause they watchfully keepe their Cowes, and fight for them as for religion and life; and when they are almost starved, yet they will not kill a Cow, except it bee old, and yield no Milke.' (Moryson 1908:vol. 4, 200-201)

John Stevens, describing County Limerick in 1690, observes: 'The people generally being the greatest lovers of milk I ever saw which they eat and drink (in) about twenty several sorts of ways and, what is strangest love it best when sourest' (Murray 1912:139). Evidence of this fondness for *bánbidh*, 'white foods' is found in the twelfth century poem *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* where reference is made to a delectable drink 'of very thick milk, of milk not too thick, of milk of long thickness, of milk of medium thickness, of yellow bubbling milk, the swallowing of which needs chewing' (Lucas 1960:22; Jackson 1990).

Both Lucas (1960:30) referring to medieval times, and Cullen (1981:141) writing about the modern period, comment that the per capita consumption of butter in Ireland was the highest in the world. Meat consumption per capita was also relatively high and the range of meats eaten was uniquely wide, making the Irish diet and cooking, although relatively simple compared to the French, 'one of the most interesting culinary traditions in Europe' (Cullen 1981:141). Kelly (2000:272) points out that following the introduction of domestic animals and crops by the Neolithic colonists, hunting, fishing and gathering provided a decreasing proportion of the food eaten. The consumption of wild food did continue and would have been of particular importance in times of crop failure or cattle plague.

Research on specific components of Irish cuisine have been published, including papers on seafood (Wilkens 2004; Mac Con Iomaire 2006); the pig (Ní Chatháin 1980; Mac Con

Iomaire 2003; Fitzgerald 2005); milk and butter (Lysaght 1994; Sexton 2003; Downey, Synott et al. 2006); eggs (Lysaght 2000; Lysaght 2003; Mac Con Iomaire and Cully 2007); but most notably the potato (Connell 1962; Bourke 1993; Ó Gráda 1993; Dowley and O'Sullivan 1995; Salaman 2000; Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008). Lucas (1960:8-43) provides a detailed account of food eaten before the arrival of the potato in the seventeenth century. Among the vegetables, wild and cultivated, listed are watercress (*biolar*), sorrel (*samhadh*), nettles, celery, parsley, charlock (*praiseach*), kale and cabbage, shamrock, wild garlic, leek, onion, chives (*folt-chep*), peas and beans, carrot and parsnip (*meacan*), beet (*biatas*), dulse (*duileasc*) and sloke (*sleabhcán*). Fruits listed by Lucas include blackberry, sloe, wild cherry, raspberry, strawberry, rowan, crabapple, elderberry, whortleberry and cranberry. Native hazel nuts and imported walnuts are mentioned but the most frequently mentioned fruit in the early Irish documents is the apple. Orchards were widely distributed particularly in Leinster but also in the counties of Donegal, Mayo, Armagh and Fermanagh (Lucas 1960:37-40).

Arrival and Assimilation

The potato was introduced to Europe from South America (Salaman 2000). Whether the introduction of the potato to Ireland can be credited to a Drake, Raleigh or Southwell figure, or that they may have been washed ashore from wrecks of the Spanish Armada in 1588, it is clear that the potato had reached Ireland by the end of the sixteenth century (Sexton 1998:71; Salaman 2000:142-158). By providing a plentiful, cheap, nutritious food source, the potato helped transform Ireland from an under-populated island of 1 million in the 1590s to 8.2 million in 1840, making it the most densely populated country in Europe (Phillips and Rix 1995). Bourke (1993) mentions four phases of acceptance of the potato into the general Irish diet. Stage one (1590-1675) sees the potato used as a supplementary food and standby against famine. Montanari (1996:137) notes that the potato had the added benefit of being a crop that grew below the ground, and was far less exposed to the devastation of war, an 'artificial famine' to which the Irish population were periodically subjected during the seventeenth century; Stage two (1675-1750) the potato is viewed as a valuable winter food for the poorer classes; Stage three (1750-1810) the poorer classes become dangerously reliant on potato as staple for most of the year;

Stage four (1810-1845) sees mounting distress as localised famines and potato failures become commonplace.

The potato was enjoyed by rich and poor alike, and Cullen (1992:46) points out that potatoes were exported from Ireland to the colonies and also suggests that Irish brandy merchants, such as the Hennessy family, who settled in Cognac may have been the first to plant potatoes in the Charente region. Two centuries of genetic evolution resulted in yields growing from two tons per acre in 1670 to ten tons per acre in 1800 (Mac Con Iomaire 2003:209). Lyons (1982:35) notes that the potato was useful for cleaning, restoring and reclaiming the soil, and also for fattening pigs. This point is elaborated by Cullen (1992:47), who suggests that increased potato consumption may simply and paradoxically reflect the fact that cereal cultivation intensified in the 1750s and 1760s, resulting in a growing reliance on the potato as a cleaning restoring root crop. The potato provided nourishment for the growing labour force needed for the move from pasture to tillage that occurred at this time, but resulted in high levels of unemployment following the Battle of Waterloo when the demand for exports fell.

The Irish had a peculiar way of cooking potatoes 'with and without the bone or the moon' (Wilde 1854:131). This method of cooking the potato pertained to par boiling the potato leaving the core undercooked and was the preferred meal for a labourer with a day's work to do. The partially cooked potato lay in the stomach creating a second digestion period after the initial flowery mass was digested, that assisted in staving off hunger for longer periods for the worker (Wilde 1854:131; Sexton 1998:75). This is similar practice to the low G.I. diet that athletes use today based on brown or '*al dente'* pasta which releases energy gradually in the body. An urban rural divide was prevalent in the art of cooking and eating potatoes. Wilde (1854:130) suggests that the cottiers cabin potato 'wanted the flavour, the richness, the dryness, the fresh country look, and the dimple, the smile just bursting into a laugh' although rarely fully cooked, was superior to the town potato that 'had a sickly, cover dish flavour, and a would-be aristocratic air, which to those who knew better was quite disgusting'. Worse still, the town potato was peeled with a knife as opposed to that well groomed extra long thumb nail of the cottier who

would 'be eating one potato, peeling a second, have a third in his fist and an eye on the fourth' (Sexton 1998:74). The Irish have always favoured floury varieties of potatoes to waxy varieties. This author's (MMCI) grandfather liked a potato that smiled at him – referring to a slight crack in the skin – not one that burst its sides laughing at him. Floury potatoes take some skill in cooking to avoid ending up with a gluey potato soup. Steaming is a method that lends itself particularly well to floury potatoes.

All Irish diets during this period were not dull and centred on the potato, dairy produce and occasional bacon or pickled herrings. Although Ireland was the first European country to adopt the potato as a staple crop – a practice spread to the colonies and to mainland Europe – European fashions in food and beverages also percolated Irish culinary practice (Barnard 1999; Clarkson 1999; Robins 2001).

The Potato in the Irish Diet – Class Differences

Diet varied considerably with social status, the basic peasant staples of oats and dairy produce co-existing with the acquired traditions of the gentry. The introduction of the potato and other New World foods led to the narrowing of the diet of the poor and a broadening of the diet of the rich over the course of the eighteenth century. The Anglo-Irish ascendancy adopted some of the 'extraordinary hospitality' that had been part of the Gaelic tradition, but the conspicuous consumption was more sophisticated, emulating eating patterns in London and Paris. By the nineteenth century the potato had established itself as a staple of one third of the population, an overdependence that led to the devastation of the Famine in the 1840s when successive harvests failed. The custom of preparing potato puddings, both sweet and savoury, was particularly noticeable among the wealthy, where extra ingredients like saffron, sugar and spices differentiated this potato dish from the plain boiled potatoes of the cottiers (Sexton 1998:79). An article in *The Lady of the House* (May 1909) discusses antique potato rings that became fashionable in Georgian Ireland from around 1760-1790. The potato ring was made of silver and the bowl of potatoes, either wooden or other would be sat on it. An inventory of Lord Viscount Doneraille's home in Kildare Street, Dublin in 1762 includes a tin potato roaster among items such as pewter plates, knives and forks, tin oven for

beefsteaks, coffee pot, gravy dish and cover, flesh forks, salt boxes, marble mortar and wooden pestle (Griffin 1997:32-3).

Potatoes played a prominent role in public dining also. In 1823 a sign above one tent at Donnybrook Fair read 'sirloins, ribs, rounds, flanks, shins, brisket, six dozen boiled chickens, 28 Wicklow hams, kishes of potatoes, carts of bread and gallons of punch' (Ó Maitiú 1996:22). Probably the largest banquet to be staged in Ireland during the nineteenth century was the great 'Crimean Banquet'. This was held in 1856, in a Dublin warehouse to honour the troops stationed in Ireland who had served in the Crimea, and 3,628 invited guest attended (Meredith 1997:57). A statement of the viands supplied by Messrs Spadacini & Murphy reads '250 hams, 230 legs of mutton, 500 meat pies, 100 venison pasties, 100 rice puddings, 260 plum puddings, 200 turkeys, 200 geese, 250 pieces of beef, weighing in at 3,000 lbs, three tons of potatoes, 2,000 two pound loaves, 100 capons and chickens and 6 ox tongues' (Meredith 1997:59). The sight of four large vans of freshly cooked potatoes arriving enveloped with clouds of steam was reported in the newspapers the following day.

The misery of much of the Irish tenant farmers prior to the Famine, who having paid their rent had barely enough money or food to survive, is recorded in a conversation the French nobleman, Alex de Tocqueville had with Thomas Kelly, Secretary of the Board of Commissioners of National Education, in 1835, when he posed the question:

> 'According to what you tell me, although the agricultural population is poor, the land produces a great deal?'

And the answer he received was:

> 'The yields are immense. There is no country where the price of farms is higher. But none of this wealth remains in the hands of the people. The Irishman raises beautiful crops, carries his harvest to the nearest port, puts it on board an English vessel, and returns home to subsist on potatoes. He rears cattle, sends them to the London, and never eats meat' (Larkin 1990:29).

Pre Famine Potato Varieties

An Irish writer, Rye (1730) in his work *Considerations on Agriculture* was the first to describe the different potato varieties (Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008:4). Few of the pre Famine potato varieties grown exist today. These varieties included *The Black* (pre 1730); the *Yellow*; the *Cluster;* the *Irish Apple* (1768); the *Red Nose Kidney* (syn. Wicklow Banger); *Cork Red*; the *Lumper* (pre 1808) and *Cup* (Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008:5). Varieties that remained edible over a longer period of time, such as the *Black, Irish Apple*, and *Cup*, had been developed and grown in popularity during the latter half of the eighteenth century (Wilde 1854:130; Sexton 1998:71). The period 1810-1845 saw the adoption of new inferior varieties of potatoes, notably the *Lumper*, which promised excellent yields. However, the strain was not resistant to the potato blight, and this resulted in the dramatic potato failures of 1845, '46 and '47.

The Great Famine

The potato failures of 1845-1847 resulted in devastating famine which left the country socially and emotionally scarred for well over a century. Descriptions of the appalling conditions of the poor cottier class during the Famine years, along with economic analyses are found in the writings of Woodham-Smith (1991), McCabe (1999), Ó Cathaoir (1999), and Ó Gráda (2000). The Great Famine affected the poorer 'cottier' class who had developed an unhealthy dependence on the potato in their diet. Sustaining a family solely on a diet of potatoes required consuming vast quantities of the tuber. Bourke (1968:73-78) attempts to define the average daily amount and settles on 12lb per adult male (one over 15 years as defined by the 1841 census) as this takes into account spring scarcity of the crop. This monotonous diet was augmented by butter, buttermilk, salt, onions, occasional bacon and salted herrings. The result of the Great Famine was that by 1851, at least one million of the Irish poor had died and another million had emigrated (Sexton 1998:74). The inescapable link in folk memory between the Famine and the potato is illustrated in Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Restaurant Reverie':

O half potato on my plate
It is too soon to celebrate
The centenary of '48
Or even '47.
You're boasted to the centre, too,
There's something lonely far away
In what you symbolise today
For me - the half that went astray
Of life, the uncompleted.
But up brown drills new pink buds start

And wet, in soapy soil you grew,
But I am thankful still to you
For hints of history given.

With truer truth than truth of art,
Ignoring last crop's broken heart
And a generation defeated.
O here is life
Without a wife
A half potato. Eat it.
(Kavanagh 1972:137)

Bourke (1959) calculated that 829,875 hectares were under potato cultivation in 1845. He also calculated a pre-famine potato balance sheet from which he estimated that the three principal uses of the 15 million tons of potatoes were as human food (47%), animal feed (33%), and seed (13%), with a further 2% allocated for export and the remaining 5% attributed to loss or waste (C.S.O. 1997:18). The middle and upper classes, however, were relatively unaffected by famine and retained a varied diet before, during and after the famine, that would be 'hard to surpass in contemporary rural France or Britain' (Cullen 1981:162-3). The farming class also escaped the worst effects of the famine (Cullen 1981:171). For example, the diet of both family and fed labourers of a thirty acre north Dublin farm, on the eve of the Famine, seemed rich:

> 'The food was nearly all home made: wholemeal bread; oaten meal grown on the farm made into stirabout; potatoes, generally all floury; first quality butter; bacon, raised, killed and cured on the premises; milk unadulterated "*ad libitum*" for everyone and everything and honey bees in almost every garden. I often held the scales for my paternal grandmother to weigh a pound of bacon for each workman's dinner three days a week, with a quarter of fresh butter and four duck eggs on the other days. No tea, not much butcher's meat unless at Christmas or Easter, but plenty of pork steaks at the pig-killing periods, and the best of pig's pudding or sausages' (Kettle 1958:5-6).

Post Famine Potato Varieties

Despite the devastation of the Famine, it was not until 1880 that the *Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons* decided that research and breeding of new blight resistant varieties was of national importance (Dowley and O'Connor 2007:7). Thomas Carroll of the Albert College, Dublin, with the help of farm superintendents of the Department of the National Board of Education, organised a crossing programme, producing true seed which was distributed to schools with instructions for growing and selection that resulted in 255 new varieties being exhibited at the Royal Dublin Society's 1885 winter show and ultimately led to the popularising of the more blight resistant

varieties such as the *Champion, Skerry Champion* and the *Shamrock* (Dowley and O'Connor 2007:7). In 1847, the first year potato acreage was recorded, the *Rock* variety accounted for 40% of the crop and maintained a dominant position until the *Champion* proved remarkable resistance to the *Phythophthora infestans* outbreak of 1879 (Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008:5). Within four years the *Champion* became the dominant potato accounting for 80% of the total crop and remained popular until the 1900s when its resistance to blight began to diminish (Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008:7).

Potato breeding declined in Ireland during the first half of the 20th century with UK varieties *Kerr's Pink, Arran Banner, Majestic* and *King Edward* and the Dutch variety *Record* replacing the *Champion* (Dowley and O'Connor 2007:7). Potato breeding didn't recommence in Ireland until the middle of the 20th century when the Department of Agriculture started a breeding programme in Donegal that culminated in the release of the first early variety, the *Irish Peace* (Dowley and O'Connor 2007). The potato breeding programme in Oak Park, Co. Carlow commenced in the 1960s and at first was primarily concerned with producing a blight resistant replacement for *Kerr's Pink* for the domestic market (Dowley and O'Connor 2007:7). Oak Park then began to focus on breeding for the export market with emphasis placed on the UK and Mediterranean markets before moving into its present phase focusing on processing and the domestic and export markets. From the initial cross, the process of breeding, testing and multiplying to commercially growing a new potato variety can take up to 15 years (Dowley and O'Connor 2007:8).

Many of the varieties that have dominated the Irish market in recent history have their origins in late 19th and early 20th century varieties such as the *British Queen* (1894), *King Edward VII* (1902), *Golden Wonder* (1906) *Kerr's Pink* (1907) and *Record* (1925). The fact that they have prevailed is a testament to their breeders and to the progress in seed production (Choiseul, Doherty et al. 2008:6). One of Oak Park's most recent successes has been the launch of the *Rooster* variety. This potato accounts for 45% of the Irish market today while *Kerr's Pink* holds 25%. The total area of potatoes grown in 1991 was just over 20,000 hectares, with the highest concentration of commercial production

located in north Dublin, east Donegal, and parts of counties Meath and Louth. Seed potato growing is confined primarily to East Donegal since the lower temperatures curtail the transmission of viral disease (Lafferty, Commins et al. 1999:77). In the last thirty years the total area of potatoes declined in all regions, but most significantly in the western counties, midlands, and mid-west. Between 1980 and 1997, the area under potatoes declined by 56%, or some 23,400 hectares.

Competing Carbohydrates

Today's principal competition to the potato among carbohydrates comes from bread, pasta, and rice. At the turn of the twentieth century, Italian immigrants engaged in promoting a new method of potato cookery rather than spreading the use of pasta. An article in the *Evening Mail* in October 1927, discussing the previous thirty years of Dublin life, writes of a strong Italian community in Chancery Lane who sold chipped potatoes from mobile cooking shops at various points in the city. These open air chip shops along with the street coffee booths were extremely rare by the late 1920s (G.D. 1927). Ice cream parlours and later fish and chip shops were opened during the twentieth century by Italian immigrants such as the Cinelli, Borza, Forte, Fusciardi, Fusco, Morelli, Tosselli, and Cervi families (Power 1988; Reynolds 1993; Reinders 1999). Fried potatoes were offered along with mashed potatoes and sauté or Lyonaise potatoes on the *à la carte* menu of The Plaza Restaurant in Dublin in 1928. Boiled potatoes, potatoes with cream, *pommes fondants* and *pommes parmentier* were also offered as part of the *table d'hôte* menu in The Plaza (Geldof 2003). Most restaurants in Ireland during the twentieth century served potatoes either plainly boiled or prepared in one of the many methods of the French culinary canon. The rise of convenience foods such as instant mashed potato in the 1970s led to the ridiculous situation of country hotels, surrounded by fields of beautiful Irish potatoes, serving instant mash out of a packet to an uncritical public. Some culinary leaders such as Myrtle Allen in Ballymaloe House and Dick Fletcher in The Galley Restaurant served 'kishes' of new Irish potatoes with pride.

It has been argued that Irish pilgrims to Rome during the holy year of 1950 influenced the spread of pasta as an everyday food among certain sections of the Irish public (Conway

Piskorski 1998). Pasta was previously championed in print in Ireland during the first decade of the twentieth century (Berkley 1909). The spaghetti and cannelloni served by head chef Maurice O'Looney at the Shelbourne Hotel kitchen suppers were 'the last word in early sixties cosmopolitan chic' (O' Sullivan and O' Neill 1999:137). Indian and Chinese restaurants began to appear in Dublin in the 1940s and 1950s offering both rice and noodles (Burke 1941; Mac Con Iomaire 2006a; Lee 2008). Taste in food, according to Farmar (1991:180-182), became more adventurous following the growth of international package holidays and increased airline travel in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite a growing interest in pasta, rice and noodles, potatoes remained the dominant carbohydrate for Irish diners throughout the twentieth century.

Irish Potato Dishes

During the last twenty years there has been a trend to serve interpretations of traditional Irish dishes in up-market restaurants. Dishes such as champ, colcannon, bubble and squeak, boxty, potato cakes, clapshot, and potato rich dishes like Irish stew and Dublin coddle have increased in popularity. Traditionally, July was always known as 'hungry July' as the old crop had finished and the population waited to August 1st to pick the new crop. Sexton (1998:70) likens the excitement caused when Irish new potatoes go on sale in early summer to the arrival of the new year's Beaujolais crop in France. Nowadays in summertime, Wexford new potatoes and strawberries are sold from mobile units along main roads the length and breadth of Ireland. An unfortunate reality of trends in food retailing is that it is almost impossible to purchase new Irish potatoes in Irish supermarkets, where new potatoes from Cyprus, France, Italy and Israel are far more available.

Boxty

Although the kitchen skills of the peasant were basic, Wilde claimed that every peasant girl could tell when a potato or egg was cooked just by holding it (1854:131). Wilde further discusses Irish potato cuisine that he believes did not exist outside of Ireland and mentions two or three dishes not found in cookery books (1854:132). He describes the making of 'boxty' or 'boxtie' as popularly known in the west of Ireland (1854:133).

Wilde claims boxty was known as ‘scotchy’, ‘buck-bread’ or ‘stampy’ in the south of the country and was very popular with the children (1854:133).

Wilde describes how the children would make a grater out of old tin cans by punching holes in the side of the can using an awl (1854:133). A similar description of making a homemade grater is given by Uí Chomáin (1992:53) who recounts first seeing boxty made in her grandmother’s home and describes how the homemade grater was made:

> ‘An empty tin-can, of the type that holds peas or beans, had both circular ends removed. The remainder was flattened out and holes bored all over it. This was nailed to a piece of wood larger than the tin, with the rough side of the tin facing upwards. The peeled raw potatoes were then grated into a basin’ (Uí Chomáin 1992:53).

There are three types of boxty: boiled boxty also known as boxty dumplings, pan boxty and loaf boxty (Irwin 1937; Allen 1995). Recipes differ from parish to parish but the main ingredients are equal amounts raw and cooked potatoes with the addition of varying amounts of flour (Uí Chomáin 1992:53; Kavanagh 2001:74). Sexton (1998:82) describes stampy as a deluxe version of boxty bread containing cream, sugar and caraway seeds.

Boiled Boxty

Boiled boxty is the most time-consuming to produce. It necessitates peeling and grating raw potatoes, squeezing excess liquid from the pulp, adding the pulp to an equal amount of mashed cooked potatoes, binding with some flour, seasoning with salt, kneading and rolling into large balls about 12cm in diameter. These are then placed in a pot of boiling salted water, returned to the boil and when the dumplings rise to the top let simmer for up to 45 minutes. The boiled boxty is then let cool. It is then sliced and refried in some butter in a pan.

Boxty Loaf or Baked Boxty

Proceed as for boiled boxty, after kneading, place in a greased loaf tin and bake in a moderate oven for one hour.

Boxty Pancakes

Mix equal amounts of grated raw potatoes with excess water squeezed out, and mashed cooked potatoes to an equal amount of flour seasoned with salt. Enough milk is then mixed in to make a batter of dropping consistency. This batter is then fried as pancakes in a pan over a medium heat, turning once. Some recipes call for the addition of egg, although the more traditional recipe would not. Other recipes call for a teaspoon of bread soda (Irwin 1937; Fitzgibbon 1983). As with boiled boxty, pan boxty tastes better if allowed to cool, and then reheated.

The key to making boxty is to remove excess liquid from the potato. First the raw potatoes are grated into bowl, then placed in a muslin cloth and the excess liquid squeezed out and gathered in another bowl. This liquid is allowed settle and the starch will separate and sit on the bottom of the bowl. The liquid can then be poured off leaving potato starch in the bottom of the bowl. Some recipes require the starch to be added back to the boxty mix (Allen 1995:152); others report this starch was used to stiffen the collar of a shirt (Ní Coistealbhaigh 1937). The National Folklore Commission collected several recipes and descriptions of how boxty was made at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century throughout the Republic in the late 1930s.

Champ and Colcannon

Recipes for champ, a potato dish made with mashed potatoes and scallions softened in butter and milk, and colcannon, mashed potatoes with curly kale or green cabbage were also collected by the National Folklore Commission and can be accessed in the folklore department in University College Dublin. Patrick Byrne, born in 1918, recalls eating colcannon three times a week as a child, but his description of it – mashed potatoes, butter, and chopped onions – sounds more like champ. It is said that the Irish brought colcannon to England with them and that left over colcannon that was fried up on the pan for breakfast became known as bubble and squeak. Another dish called 'Kala' popular in West Galway was made from mashed potato, butter, chopped onions topped with a boiled egg (Mac Con Iomaire and Cully 2007:146). Another popular potato dish is potato cakes which are made from mashed potatoes and flour, with some recipes adding a little baking

powder to make them lighter. They are fried either dry or with butter on a pan and eaten with butter. Sexton (1998:78) notes that both boxty and potato cakes were portable and could be carried as a snack to ward off hunger.

Potato bread, first mentioned by Sir Robert Boyle in 1662, is not unique to Ireland and most countries where the potato was adopted have their own peculiar fashion of processing the humble tuber. *Lompe* and *Lefse* are popular in Norway, *Roesti* in Switzerland *Reibekuechen* in Germany and *Kartoffelpuffer* in Bavaria, *Latkes* in Jewish cuisine, all of which are potato breads or pancakes.

Conclusions

Ireland was the first European country to adopt the potato as a serious food crop. From its introduction from South America the potato went through four stages of growth up until the devastation of the Famine (1845-1849). The varieties of potatoes eaten ranged over the centuries from the *Irish Apple, Cup, Lumper, Rock, Champion, Kerr's Pink*, to the *Rooster* which today holds the dominant market position. Potatoes were eaten at all levels of society, but in different guises. Irish people have traditionally preferred floury potatoes to waxy varieties. Whilst silversmiths in Georgian Ireland made potato rings for the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, the poor cottiers cooked in a cauldron and ate their potatoes 'with and without the moon', using a long thumb nail to peel the skin. Potato production has declined dramatically in Ireland from 829,875 hectares in 1945 to 20,000 hectares in 1991. Despite the decline, we still look forward to new potatoes each summer as the French anticipate their Beaujolais. Traditional potato dishes such as colcannon, champ and potato cakes remain popular. Boxty seems to have been more popular in the North Western counties of Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon and Longford than in other counties. Boiled boxty could be considered a unique Irish product, or as one individual called it 'the caviar of North Longford' (Gallagher 2008).

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