

“You watched what they did, and followed suit’, Memories of Farming Families in Duneane, Leslie Bell Oral History Interview

Analysis and Commentary by Interviewer and Heritage Project Assistant with TIDAL Toome, Michael McConway

Introduction

In a review of the volumes of *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* collected by William Carleton (1834) William Butler Yeats surmised that the “history of a nation is not in parliaments and battlefields, but in what the people say to each other on fair-days and high days and in how they farm, and quarrel and go on pilgrimage.”ⁱ This oral history interview was conducted with Leslie Bell to record the family history and tradition that might be lost otherwise, to make the connections between the Bell family and the Old Rectory at the Ulster Folk Museum, and to catalogue and contrast with secondary sources the changes that took place on the farmyard in the Duneane district during the 1950s and 1960s. The interview also opens up dialogues concerning figures in the district who made history and have been lost to time, such as Robert John Andrews, the ‘one armed ploughman of Toomebridge’, and his daughter Miss Alice Andrews, who live on only through oral testimony and old newspaper clippings. Through the course of an oral history interview the two parties, interviewee and interviewer, become the co-authors of the narrative and the dynamic of the conversation, and as the exchange of question and response evolves a ‘shared authority’ emerges.ⁱⁱ Thus the full audio interview is available to listen to alongside the transcript and secondary analysis so that this shared authority is in practice in every stage of the oral history methodology.

Family History

Leslie Bell was born on a 100-acre farm in the townland of Lismacloskey in the parish of Duneane on the 23rd of September 1947. His father, Alex Bell, was a potato merchant and farmer who was born in 1905 and his mother, Dorothy Bell (nee Leslie) was seventeen years younger than her spouse, born in 1922 on

a small farm at Mullaghboy, Bellaghy. Alex, or Alec as he was known locally, inherited a small farm of 30 acres from his uncle John, who had no family, and went on to expand and purchase a neighboring farmyard which included the Old Rectory building, which now stands in the Ulster Folk Park. Leslie explained that the farmyard was a simple affair, with a byre for milking cows and several small haysheds, and that fields were much smaller to complement the working capacity of smaller machinery, at an average of 3 acres. Most of the cultivation took place on the farmland inherited from the family, with the expansion of the farm into hilly grassland which suited livestock grazing. Leslie recalled that he was proud to be given the maternal surname as his forename and spent much of his childhood cycling to his grandfather's farm at Mullaghboy to assist his elderly relations. Jonathan Bell outlines that the family histories of Ulster farming families can be traced through the awareness of the current generation, whose life of work may have been influenced by the inheritance or business decisions of several generations in the past. The testimony collected from Malachy McSparran by Jonathan Bell is indicative of the tradition that inheritance was one of the few ways in which a farming son could expand his operation.ⁱⁱⁱ

On the 1901 census, brothers Alexander (32) and John (35) are single farmers who live in the townland of Aghacarnaghan with their widowed mother, Elizabeth Bell (69), and have small parcels of farmland in the neighboring townlands of Lisnacloskey, Aghacarnaghan and alongside Duneane Presbyterian churchyard. Elizabeth, as the head of the family, has responsibility for a 13-year-old farm labourer who is listed as an orphan, Edward McCullough. Alexander as the younger brother is described as a 'Butter and Egg Merchant,' and Leslie explained in our pre-interview chat that it was the tradition in the Bell family that the younger brother would work as a farm produce merchant to support himself, as the older brother was destined to inherit much of the farm. Alexander was married in 1904 and by the 1911 census would have three children with his wife Aggie; Alexander, the father of Leslie, in 1905; Lizzie, in 1908 and Minnie in 1910. The Ballymena Observer features a typical announcement from Alexander Bell, 'Butter, Egg, Livestock and Produce Merchant' in the Ulster Fairs, Markets and Auctions section of the back page on the 22nd of December 1922. At public auction on the 2nd of January 1923 at 1 o'clock, Alexander Bell sold by public auction "3 heifers and 2 bullocks, six stacks of oats suitable for seed and 6 tons of potatoes", with the auction held by Hill and Winter, auctioneers, and agents of Randalstown and Ballymena.^{iv}

Childhood and Growing Up

Leslie attended Duneane Primary school and began his schooling in the infant's class of Miss Wilson. The Headmaster, Mr. Giffin, made a marked impression on the pupils as a veteran gunner of the airforce in World War Two. Leslie suspects that, "veterans from the war were given privileged jobs, and he was trained up to be a teacher." Leslie remembered that Giffin departed during his time at Duneane, but could not recall the name of his successor. After six and a half years, Giffin departed from Duneane school in the summer of 1958, gleaned from an account of a Christmas party in 1957 where he was presented with the gift of a clock and dedicated in several speeches by the School Committee.^v His appointed successor was Lieutenant R.J. Johnston of the Boys Brigade in Rasharkin, who succeeded Giffin in September 1958 accompanied by his wife, Miss Evelyn Graham.^{vi} Though Leslie's account of school days and conditions are favorable and laced with nostalgia, an insight into the conditions in Duneane School when Leslie was in the infant's class with Miss Wilson is offered by an article in the Ballymena Observer, "Duneane School Committee Hold Protest Meeting." The school had been built in 1890 to accommodate thirty to forty children, but by December 1953 the Ballymena observer reported:

"A lack of modern equipment, including desks... an infestation of rats, flooding in wet weather and no drinking water inside, with water obtained by pump. "^{vii}

The school committee made a deputation to the Antrim County Education Committee and laid their grievances before the Member of Parliament, Captain Terence O'Neill, who would succeed Basil Brookeborough as the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in March 1953. This deputation was followed by a visit from the County Education Committee architect to assess improvements.^{viii}

Though Leslie took the 11 Plus, he failed the exam, and laughed about it during our interview. From his earliest days of childhood, he had been captivated by the activity on the family farm, "sailing in the lorries with the men employed by my father" and helping out with haymaking. One tradition that Leslie remembered from his schooldays was the potato gathering season, and the annual holidays that were afforded to the farming children to pick potatoes in the last week of September and the first week of October, "to earn a few pounds and help their mothers along." Elizabeth Shiels from Crewe House Farm near Maghera offers an insight into the wages a schoolchild might expect to bring home, "in October we had two or three weeks off school to help with the potato harvesting...I remember my grandmother giving

me six shillings for a day's gathering."^{ix} Robert McConnell from Doagh recalled that the money earned from gathering potatoes paid for a new pair of boots for winter and was important "so that you learned the value of things"^x whilst Derek Lorimer re-told a memory passed down from his father that his grandfather was so badly afflicted with arthritis, from an early age his "father was struck off the school roll in March when the ploughing started and was re-enrolled in October when the gathering season was over so that he could help on the family farm."^{xi} Master Joe Doran, a schoolmaster who wrote an account of his boyhood in Kilkeel in the early 1900s, wrote about the interruption of the potato gathering season and offers a vivid scene of the minimal award for heavy work,

"The potato picking season played even greater havoc with school-work and many boys did not put a foot over the school step for five or six weeks in the autumn. The picking of the crop was a long, laborious and cold job. To ensure that every single potato was recovered the method known as 'clatting' was used: after the drills had been opened, the pickers literally clawed, or clatted, the tubers from the soil. Many boys returned to school with hacked, teak-hard hands and wearing new heavy boots they had earned through their hard work and absence from school."^{xii}

In this account from Doran, we are given an insight into the impact of missing the school curriculum, and the change in the weary pupils who returned from the potato fields, juxtaposed with the reward for their work, a pair of new shoes. Leslie's oral testimony stresses that the potato gathering season, though tough, was a necessary community tradition to ensure that mothers could make their way through the autumn season economically with a small supplement to the family income.

Leslie's schooldays were also a time of social mixing between Catholic and Protestant children who went to separate schools within the small farming community,

"We were lucky that we had the McFall family beside us, they were a big family of - I think there was seven boys and a girl. I think we were all about the one age, and they were always about our house...They went to Moneynick school, and we went to Duneane school, and then we spent the evenings together."

Moneynick Primary school was the local Catholic primary school, whilst Duneane school was associated with Duneane Presbyterian Church. Many of the pupils who attended both schools recalled that much like Leslie Bell and the Catholic McFall family, they would be separated during the day, but reunited in the

evenings to assist with activity on each other's farms, with Roisin McLernon remembering that she enjoyed the company of other children because there was a big age difference between her and her next sister.^{xiii}

The Farmhouse and the Farm Labourer

Illustrating the relationship between farmer and farm labourer in the 1950s, Leslie evokes a nostalgic scene where equal treatment was promoted in the farmhouse, "In those days everyone who worked on the farm stayed in the house...there was a banquet every day...and farmers and workers were fed in the same house." In Leslie's account, we see a friendly working relationship on a medium sized arable farm, but on larger farms, the farmer might enforce traditions to mark the status difference between themselves and their servants, with workers sitting at a separate table or in a separate room.^{xiv} Farm worker Patrick McGill remembered just how harsh conditions could be,

"In the morning I was called at five o'clock and sent out to wash potatoes in a stream near the house. Afterwards they were boiled over the kitchen fire, and when cooked they were eaten by the pigs and me. I must say that I was allowed to pick the best potatoes for myself, and I got a bowl of buttermilk to wash them down with...I never got tea in the afternoon, though the family, the Bennets, took tea themselves. I suppose they thought that such a luxury was unnecessary for me."^{xv}

Attesting to this friendly atmosphere, Leslie insists that the Bell house was known in the area as a 'cayleying' house, "people came all times of the day and night...and they would stay if you had time to spare to talk to them." This rural tradition of cayleying or céilí was part of the wider rural tradition of neighboring with farm help, produce and resources, and implements during harvest season known as 'neighboring' or 'morrowing.' This tradition would soon die out toward the end of the twentieth century due to emigration and the introduction of television and radio to the domestic household. The regular cayleying house that Leslie describes was a regular open-door tradition that differed from the harvest céilí or churn as it was known regionally in the Ulster counties, for "cayleying was much more informal than a harvest meal or dance – it involved a number of local men meeting in a house for gossip, card-playing, storytelling and sometimes dancing, and drinking tea or alcohol."^{xvi} Rosemary Harris observed that casual visiting between neighbours in County Tyrone in the 1950s did not always fit into the prescribed intensive

socializing of the céilí, for, “in the small farming hill district if a man who was used to visiting another’s house it caused no comment for him to enter and sit down for an almost silent evening.”^{xvii} The open door tradition of the céilí house in Leslie’s testimony contributes to how social historians understand the agrarian nature of rural society and socialising which had survived into the mid twentieth century in the district.

Early Adulthood and Shifting Baseline Theory

Rosemary Harris recalled from her childhood that children were expected to behave like adults at early an age as possible to support the farm work and to learn the trade of their parents.

“All farmers wanted children because help was usually essential to the economic running of the farm...children on all farms began to help from the time they were about six. On the smaller farms particularly, children rarely went to play with anyone except their brothers and sisters...boys passed into their teens still anxious to learn more of adult farming techniques from their fathers.”^{xviii}

When I put this account to Leslie in our interview and asked if his own experiences aligned with this, he explained,

“there were chores to do from an early age, bringing in coal and bringing in turf, maybe help sweep the floor...that grew on to when you were bigger, you had to herd cattle..”

Leslie recounted one of those early experiences walking cattle to Shane’s Castle estate in Randalstown, where his father had rented some extra grazing ground. Leslie stated that this was a nerve-wracking process, for the cattle were driven down the main street by foot and the seven siblings from the neighbouring farm, the McFall family, were required alongside their own family to ensure the cattle did not escape into the thronging town,

“The cattle were held back all the time so the men at the back of them could get to the front and fill in the different gaps and gate posts...My father used a wee Volkswagen van to visit the grocery stores on the street such as Scotts, for they had a flower and fruit display on the street...our treat was an ice-cream on the way home...and it was possible because there was little traffic...the traffic was minimal.”

Daniel Pauly's shifting baseline theory argues that individuals understand natural environments against their personal baseline, a previous reference point established in early childhood.^{xix} Thus, the early memories of older people are important to signpost the environmental changes that have occurred in their lifetime. From Leslie's interview and his memories of the days when traffic on rural roads was sparse, we can apply this same shifting baseline theory, and the multiplication of vehicles on rural roads has caused much of the environmental changes that Pauly includes in his theory. If we compare Leslie's experiences with Joe Doran, we find a similar story which recounts the ease with which cattle could be driven through the streets of Killeel without any traffic to hinder their progress, and the tone of both of these accounts suggest that this period is looked back upon with nostalgia, and that for farming communities in particular, the decline of walking cows on foot and the advent of cattle trailer transportation took away their summertime tradition of recruiting help, warning traders, and eating ice-cream as told by Leslie,

"The parents of some of my friends had small fields near the town or took these at an annual rent for grazing...one of the boys with whom I spent a lot of time had to leave his father's cows out to graze each day and take them in again in the evening for milking. If Micky was not available for the work, I sometimes did it for him. It was no trouble, for the docile animals made their way down the street when the field gate was opened, took the right turns, and stood at the yard gate until admitted. Traffic problems did not crop up for what little horse and cart activity there was left ample room for the cattle."^{xx}

Gender Division of Labour on the Family Farm and Parental Relationships

Family farms in the mid twentieth century were male dominated and fitted into the patriarchal society, for the father was the head of the family who made the central decisions about planning, purchasing and carrying out farm work, whilst mothers were the domestic bedrocks, the nurturers, who brought up children, provided 'banquets' of food for the family and farm labourers and looked after food produce and small livestock.^{xxi} In an anthropological study of the family farm in County Clare, Arensberg and Kimball attempted to define the relationship between father and son on a traditional family farm, "a son working on the farm's day to day activity will be with his father...this fact colours greatly the relationship of father and son...there is none of the close companionship and intimate sympathy which characterizes the relationship in other groups...in its place there is developed...a marked respect."^{xxii} Leslie proffered that

though he had a good relationship with his father, that he was away a lot of the time dealing and on business. As a result, Leslie states that he formed closer relationships with the farm labourers working on the farm, who introduced him to new skills and chores, "you watched what they did, and followed suit."

Jonathan Bell contextualizes that in the 1950s gender labour divisions placed women very much in the domestic role on the farmyard in curing meat, making bread, churning butter, and caring for the small livestock and poultry.^{xxiii} Rosemary Harris offered first hand the female perspective of farming history, noting that the poultry could become a sideline business for the housewife independent of the farmer and his farm-hands, "Looking after the poultry and turkeys was women's work essentially, and neither the farmer nor his labourers would have dreamt of giving a hand in it."^{xxiv} Leslie described his mother as a very "independent women" who achieved this business independence on the farmyard by keeping hens in small henhouses in a field adjoining the farm, and later in the 1960s was able to expand the numbers of hens she could keep closer to the yard with the battery cage system. Thus, his mother Dorothy was able to bring her own income into the house to support the family as well as catering to the domestic cleaning and cooking for the family, and Leslie and his siblings were recruited to collect the eggs after school. Since his mother was confined by her work to the domestic and farmyard setting, Leslie explained that she collected her money by selling her eggs to a grocery van owned by George McClarnon. In this way the groceries for the home were bartered for and the extra money from the transaction was given to Dorothy for her housekeeping money. Though his mother did not take part in fieldwork other than supplying tea to the family and the farm labourers, Leslie recalled two women who lived on a neighbouring farm, Mrs Donnelly and Mrs McIlroy, who helped to plant potatoes in a small two-and-a-half-acre field on their farm.

"The potato drills were open, and the dung was scattered up the drills, and Mrs Donnelly and Mrs McIlroy used a basket or a crate and walked up the drills, planting the potato seeds, and then the tractor came along and covered in the drills."

Elizabeth Shiels was born in March 1925 and from the late 1940s was the farmer's wife on Crewe House Farm, Maghera. During an oral history interview in 2017 she outlined the working week, from feeding small livestock and making meals to socialising at the Young Farmer's Club on the weekends. From Elizabeth's perspective, it was the preparation of home produce in the dairy, "churning milk and butter making, which were the important part of my working week."^{xxv} Jonathan Bell collected oral testimonies from the Lyons family in Gannoway, County Down, where daughters Dolly and Isabel were skilled in all

sorts of horsework apart from ploughing, whilst the Adams sisters Grace and Lily helped in the hay harvest, drying out and lapping^{xxvi} wet hay, and Lily Adams stressed that they worked together best as a team,

“Sometimes Grace drove the horses and I turned the hay in the fields with the Tumbler Paddy. Sometimes she sowed the grain, and I used to harrow it in. We never tackled the ploughing.”^{xxvii}

The changing roles of men and women on farms in Ulster had become apparent by the end of the 1950s, when the National Ploughing Championships held a competition to find its own ‘Queen of the Plough’, won by Muriel Sutton, who in the terms of her award would be given a further £100 prize if she under 25 on her wedding day.^{xxviii} Though women had become skilled in cultivation, harvesting and fieldwork tasks due to economic conditions, lack of male labour in the family, and seasonal pressures, women were still subjected to traditional societal attitudes. Oral testimonies emphasize that there was more pressure on the wives of poorer hill farmers to contribute to skilled yardwork and cultivation because the more basic the tillage equipment, the more time and energy was needed to complete seasonal cultivation.^{xxix} However, farming families became enriched and, in some cases, passed down further generations due to the work of the young women, such as the Lyons or Adams sisters, who took up traditionally male occupations on the farm due to the lack of a male heir. In Leslie Bell’s oral testimony, both women he describes hard at work in the potato field were denoted Mrs. Donnelly and Mrs. McIroy, and though the testimony does not go into more detail, we can see that women could contribute to fieldwork within marriage.

Communications

The youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s saw cinema going become more affordable for young people who had disposable incomes to spend. For Leslie, he didn’t have the opportunity to attend the local cinema in Randalstown on his own disposable income until he was “about 16 or 17.” Leslie remembered that the usherette for the Supreme Cinemas branch in Randalstown was Maggie Berry from Moneynick, and advertisements from the period state that the cinema offered one house nightly at 7.30pm, with twice nightly screenings on Saturdays at 6.15 and 8.30.^{xxx} It was in the Randalstown Picture House that Leslie would see the Coronation on a school outing in 1953. Leslie heard from a friend of the family that in the early days of his father’s potato merchant trade, before the telephone was installed in the early 1950s, that his father regularly received telegrams from Thomas Leake, the postmaster in Toome. Leake

kept a blackboard outside the Post Office that frequently read, "Alec Bell, please call," so that Bell could call to collect messages from agents across Mid-Ulster and Belfast who would supply him with potatoes. The convenience and speed of communication with the new telephone was a "big change" that Leslie recalled from childhood days. Leslie vividly recalled a sequence of telephone numbers for farms and businesses in the Duneane area and on Toome main street, with the clarity of memory stemming from his childhood fascination with the installation of the telephone, and that "being in business with my father I was used to ringing up these places."

Introduction of Electricity

Leslie's unmarried uncle lived on the farm and milked the cows, "wheeling the milk out on 8-10 cans for Mickey Laverty's lorry to come and lift them." In the 1950s, a refrigeration unit which ran chilled water down the side of the milk churn was purchased so that the farm could keep a larger milking herd. When asked about the evolution of the dairy industry in the community, Leslie insists that he can remember the last days of hand milking, "any farm where hand milking went on, six cows would have been a big herd." It would require two or three members of a hand milking family to milk the cows, put the milk through a strainer and then run it into a can, and the capacity for cooling was minimal. In 1947, only 1738 farms in Northern Ireland had electric power; by 1960 23000 farms were connected, almost one third of the farms in Northern Ireland.^{xxxii} Leslie attributes the introduction of electricity to the Bell farm as one of the ways in which the family herd could expand.

"There was a big explosion of electricity on farms in the area in the early 1950s...I remember coming in from school to find the contractors, Getty's of Randalstown, who done all the electrical installations on the farm, finishing up. My brother John was very young, and I remember my mother lifting John up and saying, 'John is going to switch on the light for the first time.'"

Alex Bell followed up the installation of electricity with the construction of a new byre for 18 cows with an electrical milking machine.

Arrival of the Tractor

In January 1939, there were only 550 tractors in Northern Ireland. By 1945, this had risen to 7300.^{xxxii} Leslie recalled the arrival of the first tractor on his maternal grandfather's farm at Mullaghboy, Bellaghy, a Fordson Dexta, which was purchased from the Fordson dealership in Belfast, J.E. Coulter's and arrived in 1958. Coulter's was a tractor and farm implement dealership which distributed Ransomes ploughs and Fordsons tractors. The 27 horsepower Dexta was the first tractor driven by Leslie as a youngster assisting on the farm at the weekends, and it was his uncle who showed him the basics of driving in the farmyard, "my uncle was a very patient man and he took the time to show me how to drive." In a newspaper advertisement from the period, Coulter's attempted to sell the qualities of the Fordson for the small farmer – simplicity and versatility.

"Fordson Dexta for more hydraulic services with simpler control - Fordson Farming puts the Farmer First

You won't find any tractor equipment as versatile as the Fordson Dexta's hydraulics – nor anything simpler to operate. To find out just how versatile the hydraulics, just how simple the quadrant control, phone us today to arrange a demonstration.^{xxxiii}

The Leslie family were the last in the Bellaghy area to use horses, and during the interview Leslie Bell recalled the family using horses to cut corn and spray potatoes with a horse and cart – one man drove the horse and another pumped the sprayer which was bolted to a cart. During the Maghera Roots project, Raymond McNamee reflected on the loss of the farm horses and vividly recalled the first tractor to come to the farm, the dealership from which it was purchased and the numberplate. Both interviewees could give specific detail on these early vehicles, and often the brand identity of the first tractor could determine the loyalties of the family to the brand for generations.

"I remember two horses on the farm, Tommy and Johnny. It was sad to see them go when our first tractor arrived on the 11th February 1964. This was a Ferguson T20 Diesel and she was supplied by Chesney's of Portglenone, hence the Portglenone registration, K29928."^{xxxiv}

The Bell Farm purchased their first tractor, a David Brown TVO, from Moore's, a new and used vehicle dealership in Randalstown. In the 1960s a David Brown dealership would be established in Duneane by a farmer and businessman, Samuel Ewart, and this combined to cement the relationship between the Bell family and the David Brown brand. Leslie reported that the operation of the early tractors were fraught

with danger, despite the excitement of the young farm labourers who had been used to working at a slower pace with horses.

“There was a young fella Frankie Stewart who came to work with my father, and he came to drive this first David Brown tractor. I remember the tractor had to be swung with a handle to start, and if you didn’t get it right she could kick back. On this particular day it did and she broke his arm.”

The farms on which Leslie spent his childhood were not unusual in only investing in the tractor in the late 1950s. Though 49% of tractors in Northern Ireland were to be found in County Antrim and Down, it was only in 1957 that the number of tractors exceeded the number working horses in Ulster.^{xxxv} Leslie’s account is markedly objective for a youngster who must have been caught up in the excitement and emotion of the tractor as a new technology, in that he acknowledges the dangers the tractor posed for farm-hands. The labour saving and time efficiency of the tractor was soon to be seen on the Bell farm; oral testimonies from the period stress that a one furrow horse plough could manage one acre of land in a day, whilst the new tractor with its three point linkage could manage a two furrow plough which could cover six acres of ground in one day.^{xxxvi}

Neighbouring or Morrowing

The terms that describe the exchange of help between groups of neighbouring farmers varies with the tradition of different communities and the numbers of farm-hands involved in the exchange. In the South Antrim Living Memories project, Roddy Gribbin gave the local term for the exchange of resources and labour as morrowing, whilst Cathal Boyd offered that, “neighbouring was when you helped the man next door and then he helped you.”^{xxxvii} Though neighbouring often occurred to alleviate the tensions of harvest time, borrowing horses, implements and labour from neighbouring farms to ensure the crop was gathered in before unpredictable weather intervened, Leslie Bell recounts that morrowing took place regularly between family farms that were related by marriage.

“I was close to my uncles, who were bachelors in those days. I went out to them on my grandmother’s farm at Mullaghboy on Friday evenings after school. Of course those were the long evenings. I jumped on the bicycle and cycled about 7 or 8 miles...I was given a shilling to ring home from Graham’s shop to say that I got to Bellaghy safe....then my father lifted me in the car on a Sunday night.”

From this oral testimony, we can see that children on a large farm might be sent to elderly relatives with little help so that they might help with work on the farm. In return, they might form a bond with their extended family, learn from them by taking part in farmyard activity, and might form a relationship which would later support further morrowing at harvest time or increase the prospects of inheritance. The collective terms for the exchange of help between groups of neighbouring farms in a district, which could often amount to more than 12 farm labourers, were “meitheal, cruinniu, boon, banville, camp, gathering or fiddler.”^{xxxviii} The exchange of help between two neighbouring or family related farms, as described by Leslie’s childhood stays on his grandfather’s farm, were “comhar, morrowing, cosnet, joining, swapping, or working in means.”^{xxxix} An anthropological fieldwork account of the tradition of neighbouring from Luogh in County Clare emphasises the informal ‘friendliness’ of the relationships involved in helping each other out,

“This co-operation is woven deeply into the countryman’s habit and sentiment. The word is the Irish comhair (comhar) meaning aid, partnership and alliance. They explained their ‘cooring’ in terms of the ‘friendliness of the place’...they ‘had the right to help their friends’ or in a more general statement, ‘country people do be very friendly, they always help one another.’”^{xl}

Leslie remembered that his father had a great deal of respect for the older neighbouring farmers with whom he worked in a morrowing relationship, “there were two old farmers who lived near us, John McKeever, and James Chesney. They were like Gods to my father – great advisors; he helped them and they advised him.” When it came to sharing implements and labour during harvest time, the Bell family worked closely with the McFalls and the Andrews family. Leslie insisted that the local term for the exchange of hired help for a short window of seasonal activity was the boon,

“The men who worked on small farms for a few pounds came from the Moneymore, Draperstown and Tobermore area, and they formed a boon of twenty men who pulled the flax on the Bell farm one day, then went to the Andrews family tomorrow, and Stewart’s the day after. Each farmer helped out the other and followed his boon. “

Robert John Andrews lived on the family farm near Greenhill, Toomebridge. Renowned for his ploughing skills, he was known as the ‘one-armed ploughman’ due to the loss of the lower part of his left arm in World War One. Robert John was photographed at work in March 1937 and appeared in local newspapers

with the caption, “In spite of his disability, Mr. Andrews has won many competitions and is known as one of the best ploughmen in the district.”^{xii} In February 1939 he competed in the International Ploughing championships at Masserene Park, Antrim, and in the next decade was accompanied by his daughters at the annual Drammual ploughing competition, “a feature in the tractor section was the work of Miss Alice Andrews, the only lady competitor, whose skill in handling her tractor and plough came in for much favourable comment. She is a daughter of Mr. R.J. Andrews, the one-armed ploughman of Toome.”^{xliii} What we gain from Leslie’s account of morrowing is the indication that the neighbouring relationship between farmers was not merely borne out of convenience and economic necessity, but also out of respect. Alex Bell could offer the elderly Chesney and McKeever families the opportunity to avail of an extended, young family who could accompany the men of the boon and bring in the corn, flax or potato harvest. In return, the younger man in the morrowing relationship could consult the older farmer for advice, economic support and rely on his counsel when the inexperience of a young farmer led to an issue with a crop or livestock commodity. This depth to the relationship was conveyed by Leslie’s testimony about Robert John Andrews several days after we concluded our interview. I shared some of the articles that I had researched and Leslie recalled that Robert John Andrews was “a big strong man, that strong he could lift a one furrow plough onto a cart with one arm when he was transporting it to the ploughing matches.” Leslie was unsure of the accuracy of the hearsay account passed down by his father, but he stated that the young men of the district marvelled at his skill, particularly as it was passed by word of mouth that “during the 14-18 war in Belgium big Robert John was wounded and had his arm cut off in the field, tied to the wheel of a cart or a gun carriage.”

Potato Agents and Haymaking

Leslie recalled that his father began his career “as an agent for a merchant in Belfast, Hugh T. Barrie.” Barrie was a founding member of the ‘North of Ireland Potato Marketing Association’, which was established in October 1935 in conjunction with the Ulster Farmers Union to co-operate with the Northern Ireland Shippers of the crop and “to secure for the producer an economic price, and at the same time give merchants a reasonable reward for their service.”^{xliiii} Alex Bell branched out on his own as a potato merchant in the late 1940s, employing agents across Mid-Ulster and County Down to negotiate with the producers, the small farmer. Leslie emphasised that diversification of arable land was a mainstay of small farms in the areas in which his father was a buyer, “every farmer would have had a mixed crop...growing

a field of corn every year, maybe two or three acres of potatoes as well.” The diversification of the crops and livestock on small mixed farms in Ulster in the mid twentieth century was practised to engage the full capacity of family labour, so that different small industries might occupy the family throughout the year. This meant that incomes were evenly spread throughout the year, and that the uncertainty of one income would be unable to impact the financial stability of the family.^{xliv} One of these families which depended on a small but vital source of income from the potato crop was the MacNamees of Tamneymullan Farm on the outskirts of Moneymore. Raymond MacNamee, born in January 1946, recalled the rural trading system by which potato agents and merchants traded, *“In the early days the type of potato was mostly Arran Victory, they would have been marketed as a table potato...in later years we moved on to Consul...the potatoes would then have been sold to an agent in the town, Harry Canning, who bought the potatoes for another agent at Toomebridge by the name of Alec Bell...Alec’s name appeared on all the bags.”* This testimony prompted Leslie to describe the network of agents from which his father purchased his stock, from Dennis Kelly, who purchased potatoes on behalf of the Bell’s from Draperstown farmers, to Peter Fitzpatrick, an agent based in Hilltown, County Down. It has been argued that specialisation in arable farming was limited to a small number of districts in Northern Ireland^{xlv}, but Leslie recounted that Fitzpatrick was able to buy up the lucrative Arran Banner variety of potato, which was *“intensively grown in the Kilkeel and Newry area.”* At the age of 17, as Alec Bell attempted to expand his family farm as his business activities grew, Leslie was given the responsibility to begin growing potatoes on the farm to complement the supply bought from agents. Leslie argues that conditions for growing potatoes were always adverse, for in his early days, *“you needed intensive labour to collect potatoes in the field and by the time I started that labour wasn’t available”,* and when machinery came in to replace this labour shortage, *“it was too expensive and too big for the type of farms we have and really that’s how the potato business died a death.”*

During the South Antrim Living Memories project, the neighbouring farmer closest to the Bell farm (which was still a traditional working dairy farm with a herd of forty Friesians) was occupied by interviewee Frank Dale. Frank stated that haymaking was an anxiety inducing time on the farm, for, *“the worry saving hay long ago shortened people’s lives...people don’t understand the pressure farmers were under.”^{xlvi}* This piece of testimony, so close to home in the community and to the experiences of the Bell family, offered a unique opportunity to gain a personal perspective on the seasonal or economic challenges faced by

farmers in the past when saving their fodder crop for livestock. When questioned about these anxieties, Leslie contextualised the importance of haymaking for winter security.

“Hay was the only source of winter feed in those days, silage hadn’t come in yet, and you were dependant on the weather. It was an awful stressful time, everyone wanted to make the best hay, and you wouldn’t have had up to date weather forecasts as in today...people were tapping the barometer instead. And it was an awful stress – to maintain your winter milk supply you had to have good fodder. It was a gamble whether you got good stuff or bad.”

In the changeable weather during a wet haymaking season, there might only be a small window for farmers to cut and save their hay, thus the priorities of contractors for one farm over another and the concentration of farm labourers on one field or another might be the small action that would bring tension into the morning relationship.^{xlvii} The main haymaking machinery employed on the Bell farm when Leslie was growing up was the ‘Wuffler’ a hay turning implement which was linked to a tractor and which was mass produced by Bamford’s in the 1950s, and the ‘Centipede’ which the family purchased from manufacturers and distributors of farm implements, Waterson’s of Magherafelt, and was used to shake out the hay crop in rows in the field.

The Flax Crop and the Old Rectory

Alex Bell grew a field of flax on the farm each year, though this was not for the linen industry, but for the thatching of the Old Rectory at Gloverstown, which in Leslie’s childhood had been converted from a farmhouse into a small farmyard store. In 1972 the building was dismantled and reassembled at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. The flax grown by the Bell’s was dry-retted, not dam-retted for the linen industry, and Alex Bell supplied other thatched houses and buildings in the district with the dry retted flax for thatching. Leslie described how the flax was prepared,

“We owned the Old Rectory, and it had to be thatched periodically, so he (Alex Bell) grew flax on his own farm for the purpose of thatching the house. It had to be dried off as well and the seeds had to be taken off it. You had a wee small threshing machine that was driven by a pulley on a tractor, and then you put the beet into it and it took the seeds off. If you had have put the flax with the seeds on the roof, the seeds would have grown on the roof.”

Though the NMNI curatorial team have built an historical profile of the families who lived in the Old Rectory^{xlviii}, it was important to ask Leslie for his personal perspective, the memories he retained of his parents and grandparents generation reminiscing about the occupants and purpose of the building. He was told in childhood that the Old Rectory had been an important stopping off point on the throughfare between Belfast and Derry, as the Gloverstown road had once been the main road link between the two. After its use as a coaching inn, it was converted into a "courthouse with a whipping post for giving out punishment to wrongdoers." In his grandparents' generation, the house was respected in the community as the family home of the Church of Ireland clergy for the Duneane parish. Leslie recounted strong memories of the dismantling and transportation of the building, and stated that his father was approached by the Museum to buy the house in 1971.

"Whenever that house went to the Ulster Folk Museum, it went in 1972; my father supplied the new thatch for it. John McCorley, who lives down the road, and me transported that house to the Cultra Museum on a flat lorry. We didn't load the stones – the special masons from the Museum came and put the stones on the lorry and had them marked and labelled."

Leslie's earliest memories of the thatcher arriving at Lisnacloskey to thatch and patch the Old Rectory roof were of a thatcher called Bradley who worked on all the thatched roofs between Toome and Castledawson. He was succeeded by John Agnew of Cloney, who brought his son Gerry into the trade. Scollop thatching was used on the building, and Leslie described scollops as "a particular pointed stick like stake which pinned the thatch down." Evans elucidated the differences in the methods for securing the thatch down on farmhouse roofs; with scollop thatching, sally rods of hazel, briar or bog fir were used to pin down the thatch arranged in latticed patterns, whilst the pegged method saw the thatch tied down with ropes of sally, heather, or tough fibres of bog-fir roots. The ropes were secured to the walls by means of stone pegs hammered in below each eave, and pegged thatching was prominent along the Antrim coast. ^{xlix}

At his grandfather's farm at Mullaghboy, Bellaghy, Leslie experienced the dam-retting that was unnecessary on his home farm but vital to the income of the small farmer during this period, whose flax crop could offer a degree of economic independence as he negotiated for a price with the owner of the local scutching mill, Hamilton's of Bellaghy, at the Ballymena Linen Market. The flax crop was of such

importance that the elderly occupants of the Mullaghboy Leslie farm were willing to compromise on rural tradition and religious observance to ensure the crop could be saved.

“I remember one Sunday, I was there, just a wee boy looking on...the flax was a crop that was retted, and when it was ready it had to come out of the lint-hole. They were strict, god-fearing Presbyterian people and pulling the flax out of the lint dam on a Sunday was just out of the question. They had to dog on the clothes and get in and remove the stones, take out the flax, and throw it out. If they had left it another day, that was it finished.”

Leslie described with vivid detail the process of saving the flax crop in several stages.

“When you pulled the flax, it was spread out in the row behind you. The topside dried and then you turned it over and then the bottom side dried...this was all done by hand. Then it had to be lifted and tied in a beet, and it wasn’t tied with a string, it was tied with the stalk of the flax in a knot. Then it had to be put in a cart and taken to the dam. When it came to this retting stage, the farmers knew when it was ready to come out, and then it had to be spread again. Most farmers had their own lint dam, but a farmer who wasn’t in that privileged position, they would have neighbours who weren’t using theirs. If I was finished for the year with my lint dam, you were able to use it. Stones kept the flax down to make sure it was getting the full attention of the water.”

When the flax was fully dried out, it was taken on a cart to Hamilton’s Flax Mill in Bellaghy. Samuel Hamilton was a gentleman farmer, spirit merchant and funeral undertaker¹ from Bellaghy who Leslie recalls as a shrewd character who often employed farmers or farm-hands for seasonal scutching work so that they might pay for the scutching work on their crop, such as Sarah Mary McKeown or Willie Dobbin from Duneane, the latter of whom lost his brother in a mill accident. The scutch mill could either buy the crop outright or act as an agent for the farmer at the Ballymena linen market, and the scutching process saw the separation of the flax fibre from the retted woody stems. Des Glynn argued that the scutch mill was a “breeding ground for chest complaints, and bronchial trouble was the legacy inherited by those who were employed for any length of time in the dusty tow strewn air.”ⁱⁱ Robert McConnell recounted the dangers of the scutching process and the vulnerability of the scutcher’s hands from his memories of the mill at Fourmileburn,

“If you looked into a scutch mill, in through the door, there were two of them in there – yin of them roughing and the other finishing the flax. You couldnae have seen them. You talk about health and

safety. You couldnae have seen them for stour, nae masks or nothing. Whenever they came oot that was all clinging on to their beards, their clothes, their eyelashes and everything.”^{lii}

Four handfuls of flax were tied together in a band of between four and eight inches made from rushes, and when these were weighed down with stones between 14 and 28 pounds in weight, the woody stalks would begin to ret n the lit dam. Flax dams or ponds, known locally as ‘lint-holes’, were dug near a stream, a lake, or on wetlands near Lough Neagh, with bogland water avoided as it stained the fibres. Farmers were advised to allow the dam to empty slowly by seepage or to remove the water during heavy flooding as the water steeped in flax was highly odourous and poisonous to fish. ^{liii} At the height of the linen industry in the early 20th century in Ulster, scutching mills were in such demand with preparing the flax crop that the farmer might be forced to build the dried beets into stacks in the field tied down with ropes of grass and rushes called a bart, sleigh or hovel.^{liiv} Leslie concluded the interview by reminiscing over humorous tales of the relationship between the vet and the farmer, touching on the themes of excessive treatments for small animals so that the vet might earn some beer money and the fondness of the family vet for a small drink during his visits. These reminiscences contribute to the oral testimony of Ulster humour in farmyards which has been collected by folklorists, humourists, and oral historians. ^{lv}

This interview would be a valuable piece of oral testimony for a social historian studying the relationships between each member of the family farm, the intricacies of how rural communities socialised and shared labour, and the role of men and women on farms in the past and how this has changed. The introduction of electricity, mechnisation of farm machinery and the loss of rural crafts are all observed by the interviewee who offers a first hand account of how farmers became business owners In the mid twentieth century as mixed farming disappeared and farmers were forced to diversity into agenting and merchenting activities in supplying food produce.

-
- ⁱ McCourt, Malachy., (ed.) *Voices from Ireland*, Running Press publishing, Philadelphia, (2002) p. 101.
- ⁱⁱ Thomson, Alistair., 'Moving stories, women's lives: Sharing authority in oral history', in *Journal of the Oral History Society*, Volume 39 No. 2, (Autumn 2011), p. 74. On sharing authority in oral history, see also Frisch, Michael, A *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1990.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bell, Jonathan., *Ulster Farming Families 1930-1960*, Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, (2005) pp. 9-11.
- ^{iv} Ballymena Observer, Friday 22nd December 1922, p. 10.
- ^v Ballymena Weekly Telegraph, Tuesday 24th December 1957, p.6.
- ^{vi} Ballymena Weekly Telegraph, Thursday 20th November 1958, p. 1.
- ^{vii} Ballymena Observer, Friday 11th December 1953, p. 3.
- ^{viii} Ballymena Observer, Friday 25th December 1953, p.2.
- ^{ix} Armour, James Snr., *Maghera Roots: Memories of Farming Life and Practices in the mid-1900s*, Maghera Historical Society and Maghera Heritage and Cultural Centre, Maghera, (2017) page. 48.
- ^x Roulston, William., *South Antrim Living Memories Project Publication: Doagh, Toome, Whitehead*, (2015) p. 35.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ^{xii} Doran, J.S., *Turn Up the Lamp: Tales of a Mourne Childhood*, Apple Tree Press, Belfast, (1980) p. 29.
- ^{xiii} Roulston, William., *South Antrim Living Memories Project Publication: Doagh, Toome, Whitehead*, (2015) pp. 34-36.
- ^{xiv} Bell, Jonathan., Watson, Mervyn., *Irish Farming Life: History and Heritage*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, (2014) pp. 88-89.
- ^{xv} McGill, Patrick, *Children of the Dead End*, Caliban Books, Ascot, 1914 [1970], pp. 35-36.
- ^{xvi} Bell, Jonathan., Watson, Mervyn., *Irish Farming Life: History and Heritage*, Four Courts Press, Dublin (2014), p. 64.
- ^{xvii} Harris, Rosemary., *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, (1972) p.106.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, pp. 61-64.
- ^{xix} Nelson, Kathryn., Nelson, Roy., Ritchie, Kate., (eds.) *Wildlife Memories*, Think Ecos NI, (2021) pp. 1-10.
- ^{xx} Doran, J.S., *Turn up the Lamp: Tales from a Mourne Childhood*, Apple Tree Press, Belfast, (1980) pp. 88-89.
- ^{xxi} Bell, Jonathan., Watson, Mervyn., *Irish Farming Life: History and Heritage*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, (2014) p.14
- ^{xxii} Arensburg, Conrad., Kimball, Solon T., *Family and Community in Ireland*, 2nd ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1940 [1968], pp.56-58.
- ^{xxiii} Bell, Jonathan., *Ulster Farming Families 1930-1960*, Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, (2005), pp. 47-48.
- ^{xxiv} Harris, Rosemary., *Tolerance and Prejudice in Ulster*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, (1972) p. 53.
- ^{xxv} Armour, James Snr., *Maghera Roots: Memories of Farming Life and Practices in the mid-1900s*, Maghera Historical Society and Maghera Heritage and Cultural Centre, Maghera, (2017) p. 22.
- ^{xxvi} Lapping was a term used in the North for the process of drying hay. Each armful of hay was made into a hollow roll, the rain rolled off and the hollow created allowed air to circulate throughout the hay, speeding up drying. Estyn Evans instructs that in lapping the hay, the custom was to, "fold against the leg and over the forearm into small lapcocks...the hole permitting the wind to pass through and the smooth rounded top allowing the rain to run off." Evans, E. Estyn., *Irish Folk Ways*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, (1957) p. 153. .
- ^{xxvii} Bell, Jonathan., Watson, Mervyn., *Irish Farming Life: History and Heritage*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, (2014) pp.32-35.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, p.35.
- ^{xxix} Harris, Rosemary., *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, (1972) p. 32.
- ^{xxx} Ballymena Observer, Friday 16th March 1951, p.8.
- ^{xxxi} Symons, Leslie. 'The agricultural industry 1921-1962', In Symons, Leslie., *Land Use in Northern Ireland*, University of London Press, London, (1963) p. 54.
- ^{xxxii} Ministry of Agriculture of Northern Ireland, *Monthly Reports*, March 1945, p. 326.
- ^{xxxiii} Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner, Saturday 15th November 1958, p. 5.
- ^{xxxiv} Armour, James Snr., *Maghera Roots: Memories of Farming Life and Practices in the mid-1900s*, Maghera Historical Society and Maghera Heritage and Cultural Centre, Maghera, (2017) p.34.

-
- ^{xxxv} Symons, Leslie., 'The agricultural industry, 1921-1962', In Symons, Leslie., *Land Use in Northern Ireland*, University of London Press, London, 1963 pp. 51-52.
- ^{xxxvi} Oral testimonies taken from Beagh Farm, Maghera. Armour, James Snr., *Maghera Roots: Memories of Farming Life and Practices in the mid-1900s*, Maghera Historical Society and Maghera Heritage and Cultural Centre, Maghera, (2017) p. 37.
- ^{xxxvii} Roulston, William., *South Antrim Living Memories Project Publication: Doagh, Toome, Whitehead*, (2015) p. 58.
- ^{xxxviii} O'Dowd, Anne., *Meitheal: A Study of Co-operative Labour in Rural Ireland*, (Comhairle Bhéa Ioidas Éireann: Dublin, (1981).
- ^{xxxix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xl} Arensburg, Conrad., "*The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study*, Macmillan, London, (1937) pp. 68-69.
- ^{xli} Ballymena Observer, Friday 5th March 1937, p. 9.
- ^{xlii} Ballymena Weekly Telegraph, *Drummaul Ploughing: Lady Competitor Scores*, Friday 18th February 1944, p. 5.
- ^{xliiii} Northern Whig, Monday 21st October 1935, p. 2.
- ^{xliv} Bell, Jonathan., *Ulster Farming Families 1930-1960*, Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, (2005) p. 23.
- ^{xlv} Moge, John M., *Rural Life in Northern Ireland*, Oxford University Press, London, (1947) p. 23.
- ^{xlvi} Roulston, William., *South Antrim Living Memories Project Publication: Doagh, Toome, Whitehead*, (2015) p. 49.
- ^{xlvii} Bell, Jonathan., Watson, Mervyn., *Irish Farming Life: History and Heritage*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, (2014) p. 51.
- ^{xlviii} This oral testimony covers the memories of the interviewee and the passing of the Old Rectory at Gloverstown into the Bell family farm in the early 1930s. The building was used as a farmhouse in pre-war days and later was converted into a farmyard store by Alex Bell. For more historiography on the generations of occupants at the Old Rectory refer to Millar, Victoria., *The McCullagh Family of Gloverstown House*, (Accessed 10th May 2022), <https://www.nmni.com/story/gloverstown-house-story> and <https://www.nmni.com/our-museums/Ulster-Folk-Museum/Things-to-see/The-Old-Rectory.aspx>
- ^{xlix} Evans, Emyr Estyn., *Irish Folk Ways*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, (1957) p.52.
- ^l Ballymena Weekly Telegraph, Friday 10th June 1949, p. 3.
- ^{li} Ballymena Observer, Thursday 18th November 1976, p. 8.
- ^{lii} Roulston, William., *South Antrim Living Memories Project Publication: Doagh, Toome, Whitehead*, (2015) p.52.
- ^{liii} Bell, Jonathan., Watson, Mervyn., *A History of Irish Farming 1750-1950*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, (2008) pp. 174-177.
- ^{liv} Evans, Emyr Estyn., *Irish Folk Ways*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, (1957) p. 159.
- ^{lv} For more on humorous anecdotes from rural ulster and farming communities refer to Moore, W. 'Speedy', *A Feast of Ulster Humour*, Cuilrathain publishing, (2002). For more on the relationship between the vet and the farmer, and for an insight into the sheltering of the family from community secrets by masking them with humour or a traditional horror story to discourage the curious in childhood, consult Cunningham, P.J., (ed.) *Around the Farm Gate*, Ballpoint Press (2015).