Booleying in Ireland

Booleying in Ireland:

A Study of an Ancient Farming Tradition in Achill, County Mayo

By

Theresa McDonald

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Booleying in Ireland: A Study of an Ancient Farming Tradition in Achill, County Mayo

By Theresa McDonald

Edited by Jim McAdam

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-4744-1
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4745-8

For Kevin, Margo and Redmond McDonald, who each in their own unique way, supported me throughout the writing of this book and for my late uncle, John Moran, whose stories and insights first sparked my curiosity about the phenomenon of booleying/transhumance in Achill.

MAY-DAY

Summer cuts the stream small;
Swift horses seek water;
Tall heather spreads;
Delicate fair foliage flourishes…
Bees of small strength carry bundles of culled blossoms on their feet;
The mountains, supplying rich sufficiency, carry off the cattle.

Anonymous 9th century poem
Translated from Irish by Murphy, G., "Anonymous: May-day"
Early Irish lyrics (1956)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations

LIST OF TABLES

FOREWORD

Transhumance, as an integral part of particular farming systems, is still practised in many parts of Europe—especially poorer and less productive areas—from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, including several parts of central Europe. Seasonal migration of livestock and herders, usually to upland locations with a view to more effective utilisation of all available resources in a region, is an essential characteristic of the system. Ireland, in the past, also shared in this seasonal migration of livestock and herders, a practice usually referred to as booleying. Booleying was of importance mainly in parts of Ireland where uplands provided extensive and productive pastures in summer that complemented often scarce lowland resources that were insufficient to support high livestock numbers and local farming populations.

In this volume, Dr. Theresa McDonald presents a detailed and critical account of booleying as practised in Achill, on the mid-Atlantic coast of Ireland, in recent centuries. Nowadays, Achill conjures up images associated with surfing the Atlantic swell, and swimming in sandy beaches often located in sheltered bays. One thinks also of extensive and treeless upland landscapes—Croaghaun and Slievemore that form the backbone of the island reach 688 m and 671 a.s.l., respectively—,blanket bog that covers much of the lowlands and extends to the highest peaks, the completely abandoned, deserted village close to the base of Slievemore, and also modern developments catering for the needs of a tourist industry that has mushroomed since the 1950s, thanks in no small measure to the iconic landscape paintings of the west of Ireland, including several of Achill scenes, by Paul Henry (1876–1958), and later the writings of Heinrich Böll (author of *Irisches Tagebuch,* 1957), both of whom made Achill their home for considerable periods.

Theresa McDonald now adds another important chapter to the story of Achill and especially its farming communities that extend back to the beginning of the Neolithic in Ireland, almost 6000 years ago. In this volume, however, the emphasis is on recent centuries when booleying was, indeed, an integral part of the local farming economy. The author draws on her

extensive research on Achill, conducted over the course of several decades, and especially on the evidence for booleying on Achill and the nearby Corraun peninsula, i.e. the Civil Parish of Achill, that was originally presented in her PhD thesis (2014).

Various strands of evidence are described and critically evaluated in this volume. These include possible references to booleying in early Irish manuscripts, and accounts, maps, sketches and statistics in government-sponsored surveys, as well as many documents by antiquarians and map makers, and those concerned with relief works for the poverty-stricken population during the Great Famine (1845—1852) and the later part of the nineteenth century. The most important new elements of the story are, however, the first-hand accounts of the results of excavations of booley sites carried out by the author over the course of several years. Fortunately, many of the booley sites that have been identified and mapped are well preserved, and so excavations have provided the evidence for reliable reconstruction not only of individual shelters/huts but also their overall geographical and environmental contexts, and their relationships to the lowland communities for which they were an important extension and resource during summer months.

The book includes several maps, many photographs, including photographs of excavated structures, and graphics, all of which contribute to the picture of the economic, environmental, social and physical circumstances associated with booleying in Achill. They greatly add to the attractiveness and value of the volume and help make the reader aware of the amount of research, both in the field and in libraries, that underlies this important contribution to an aspect of Irish farming that, for too long, has not received the attention it rightly deserves.

Michael O'Connell, MRIA (Galway, 2025)

PREFACE

Transhumance, called booleying in Ireland, is and was a practice found in many parts of Europe that involves the movement of livestock and their keepers from lowland, permanent settlements to summer pastures, usually in the uplands, where they remain generally from May to October. It was once an important part of the Irish pastoral economy in both medieval and post-medieval times but lack of research means that it is still little understood.

Most of evidence that exists for booleying in Ireland dates to the post-1700 period. Research into this period across Europe was regarded for much of the twentieth century as being the preserve of historians and historical geographers – not archaeologists. The Archaeological Survey of Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s did not usually include monuments of post 1700 date in their publications because it was assumed, often wrongly, that historical sources would provide sufficient information about monuments dating to this late period. Consequently, it was not until the establishment the Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group (IPMAG) in 1999 that archaeologists in Ireland acknowledged the merit of studying the post-1700 period using archaeological methods of inquiry. There was a growing realisation from then onwards that archaeological evidence can substantially increase and, indeed, at times alter our knowledge about life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland.

Archaeological investigations, combined with evidence from other disciplines and methods of enquiry, such as the study of the post-medieval Deserted Village, Slievemore, Achill Island, can throw light on the lifestyle of past inhabitants who lived in the village, particularly their social and economic status and division of labour. It can also cast light on the commonly held theory that social hierarchy was not a component of such a society. Nevertheless, it has become clear to archaeologists in recent decades that a multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary approach, combining evidence from a number of discipline, including archaeology, is the best way to understand aspects of the medieval and post-medieval past, including the practice of booleying. For example, in my book, the housing associated with booley and permanent settlements is compared using evidence from architectural analysis, folklore and place-name evidence.

My own interest in booleying occurred at a very early age and increased substantially when I went on to study archaeology at university. My introduction to what was a modified form of booleying occurred on Achill Island when I was about nine or ten years of age. Arriving home from school one day and unnoticed by anybody, I overheard a conversation between my mother and grandmother. My mother, who sounded upset, was telling my grandmother how she was finding it difficult to cope with housework, look after children (three of us) and manage outdoor farming tasks as well. My father was away working as a building contractor in England – only coming home at Christmas and going back there in late spring by which time the crops had been sown and the turf cut by him. My mother's predicament must have struck a chord with me for my first reaction was to try to help her in some way, but why I choose to do what I did is still a mystery. I found a small (tin) milk pail and set off to Slievemore – specifically to where the now Deserted Village lies. I must have known our cows were grazing there. I think we had five or six cows at the time. Upon reaching the Mullagh close to the abandoned quartz quarry overlooking the Deserted Village, I found a herd of about twenty cows, mostly black in colour, grazing in an open field close to the old roadway leading into the village. Of course, being so young, I had no idea which cows belonged to my family, so I tried to milk the most docile looking cow who was grazing close to the road. She stood still for only a few minutes while I tried to milk her and then wandered off. The same thing happened with several other cows so after about an hour I ended up with only about a cupful of milk in my pail, not too surprising as I had never milked a cow before that day or indeed since. I must have observed others doing so as I had a fair idea of how to go about it. However, either the cows did not wish to be milked or there was something lacking in the technique I used, so I eventually gave up and decided to return home to Dooagh, a distance of less than a mile. Upon my return to Dooagh, my mother and grandmother were frantic with worry and were about to start a search for me. Although they were probably delighted to see me, nevertheless, I received a good telling off for causing them so much stress. I do not remember if anyone commented or thanked me for the milk, obtained at such great effort! Curiously, the one thing I remember about my experience in Slievemore that summer afternoon was the absolute stillness all around me – I do not recall meeting anyone on my journey to Slievemore or on my return to Dooagh – and felt as if I had the whole landscape to myself and accepted it as a natural phenomenon. Looking back at that day, I feel that I experienced then so much of what my forebears in the past must have felt when they went to the booley – lowing cattle, being in a place of natural beauty and a sense of freedom. Furthermore, although I was not

aware of it at the time, a bonding with Slievemore and the Deserted Village at its base seems to have taken place, which has lasted throughout my life. I will always remember Slievemore that summer day and trust this book on booleying will provide a window into the practice of transhumance in one part of Ireland, as well being as a timely reminder of a harder but simpler way of life.

Many years later in 1991 I returned to Slievemore this time to investigate the history and archaeology of the prehistoric and historic landscape of Slievemore and the Deserted Village that straddles the 200-foot contour on that mountain. I wanted to learn more about the settlement and the practice of booleying which had been carried out there in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Indeed, the present-day inhabitants of Dooagh and Pollagh still refer to this deserted settlement at the base of Slievemore as the 'Booley (pronounced boley locally) Village'. Seemingly there is no memory of its earlier permanent occupation or former status as the largest village on the island of Achill in the nineteenth century, prior to it being deserted as a permanent settlement and transitioning into a booley one at some stage in the second half of the latter century.

Prior to setting up the Deserted Village project in 1991, I did some background research on Slievemore and found an unpublished PhD thesis and two journal articles that provided some information on booleying in the Civil Parish of Achill in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The first was Jean Graham's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, entitled "Transhumance in Ireland with special reference to its bearing on the evolution of rural communities in the west", which was submitted to Queen's University, Belfast in 1954. Two earlier articles by Padraig Ó Moghrain published in *Bealoideas: Journal of the Folkore of Ireland Society in* 1943 and 1944 respectively, stimulated my growing interest in booleying. These papers were entitled *'*Some Mayo traditions of the *Buaile*' and 'More notes on the *Buaile*'. A fourth paper, which was never published, called 'Antiquities and folk culture on Achill Island', was compiled by the late Professor Michael J. O'Kelly during a visit to Achill in 1942 and this also partly discusses booleying on the island. This paper is now held in the Topographical Files of the National Museum of Ireland and it also further spurred my interest in booleying. All three writers witnessed the last vestiges of booleying in Achill which is notable as the last place in Ireland where transhumance was practised. These papers are important as all three scholars were able to converse with people who had actually participated in a modified and late form of booleying in the early years of the twentieth century. I very much welcome Eugene Costello's recently published book *Transhumance and the*

making of Ireland's uplands 1550-1900, which concentrated on booleying in Connemara, south-west Donegal and the Galtees and came out in 2020.

My book is wide-ranging in its coverage of transhumance in the Civil Parish of Achill and examines the practice of transhumance elsewhere in Ireland and further afield in Europe and Britain for comparison purposes. While much of the data discussed in the book deals with booleying in relatively modern times, I feel that this important and sensible pastoral practice has a longevity probably extending back to the prehistoric period.

The book is based on research carried out by the author in the Civil Parish of Achill, which includes Achill Island, Achillbeg Island and the Corraun Peninsula in Co. Mayo in the west of Ireland. Put simply, the principal aim of the research outlined in the book is to try to understand the phenomenon of booleying in the Civil Parish of Achill through time. As discussed briefly above, a multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary approach is taken in this work, using the combined evidence from fieldwork, excavation, architectural survey, the historical sources, antiquarian accounts, cartography, the pictorial evidence, place-name analysis and folklore to answer this question.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is derived from a thesis submitted in 2014 to the National University of Ireland, Galway, for the Degree of PhD in the School of Geography and Archaeology. I am grateful to the many people who supported, guided, and encouraged me throughout this project.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Kieran O'Conor, whose invaluable support, insight, and guidance were instrumental in the completion of both the thesis and this book. I am truly thankful to the friends, colleagues, peers, and fellow academics who made my time in academia not only productive but also enjoyable and rewarding.

I am grateful to Dr. Stefan Bergh (NUI Galway) and Professor Audrey Horning (Queen's University Belfast) for kindly reading drafts of my thesis and offering thoughtful comments and suggestions.

Thanks and gratitude are also due to Professor Michael O'Connell, Conor Newman, Dr. Paul Tempan, Professor Nollaig Ó Muráile, Professor Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, the late Dr. Fiachra Mac Gabhann, and Dr. Cormac McSparron for their valuable insights, contributions, and encouragement.

I would also like to thank Ivor Hamrock (Mayo County Library, Castlebar) for his generous help in providing useful references, and Joe Fenwick (NUI Galway) for his guidance and expertise in survey instruction.

I wish to acknowledge the staff and students of the Achill Archaeological Field School—especially Dr. Rory Sherlock, Dr. Stuart Rathbone, and Dolores Kilbane—whose dedication and assistance in the field, with students, and in the office were greatly appreciated.

Heartfelt thanks to Dr. Paul Naessens and Anja Goethals for their work in redrawing illustrations that brought clarity and professionalism to the final presentation.

I am also grateful to the many individuals whose support helped make this project possible, including Dr. Jeffrey Miller, Nick Brannon, Dr. Andrew Whitefield, Dr. Richard Clutterbuck, Sheila McHugh, Alexandra Van Tuyll, Gerard Mangan, Michael Gibbons, Alison Giles, Simon Marston, Rosie Dunne, Gabriel Harrison, Mary Joe O'Keefe, the late Anthony Kilbane,

James Kilbane, Nora Kilbane, Brid and Josie Heaney, Tom Johnston, Eneas Keane, Michael O'Connor, Michael Gielty, Anne Campbell, Jennifer McDonagh, Dr. Hugh Gallagher, Redmond McDonald, and Maire McKay.

Finally, special thanks to my editor, Professor Jim McAdam for his editorial experience, my daughter Margo McDonald, and Damien Nolan for their generous and invaluable assistance in the final stages of preparing this book for publication.

To all of you, my sincere thanks and appreciation.

CHAPTER ONE

TRANSHUMANCE

1-1 Introduction

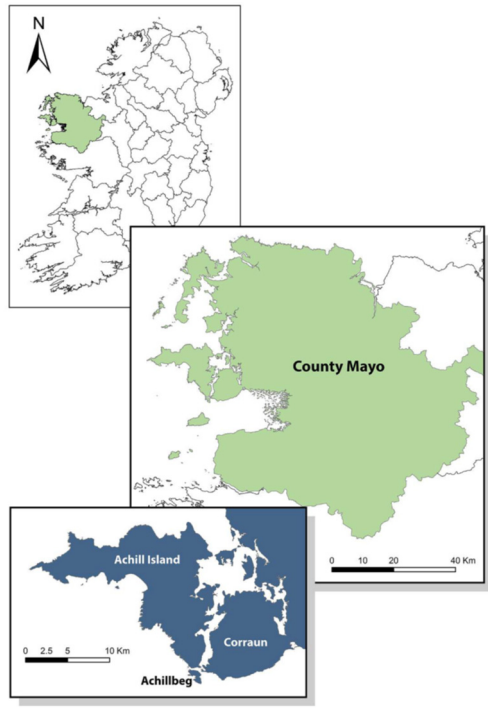

Fig. 1-1 Location map of Achill Island, Achillbeg and Corraun in the Civil Parish of Achill

Little attention has been paid to the practice of transhumance, called booleying in Ireland, despite its importance in the farming calendar through time. Some see it as a practice extending back into at least the early medieval

period, if not much earlier (Evans 1939b, 207-222, 1940, 172-180; Lucas 1989, 104; Kelly 1998, 44). Others see it purely as a post-medieval phenomenon, associated with the so-called clachan settlement form and the rundale system of agriculture, where unfenced tillage crops necessitated the removal of livestock during the growing season to upland summer pastures that were largely inaccessible at other times of the year (Ó Moghráin 1943, 1944; O'Kelly 1942; MacCarthaigh and Whelan 1999).

Jean Graham's unpublished doctoral thesis in 1954 at Queen's University, Belfast, was the first major study of transhumance practice in Ireland. Graham's thesis was written from the perspective of a historical geographer, with no fieldwork component included. Nevertheless, in a chapter devoted to transhumance in the Civil Parish of Achill, she was able to obtain from living people some first-hand accounts of the practice in the early years of the twentieth century when it was in decline, and which are included in her thesis. This is important, for while her informants were people who had not themselves participated in transhumance or booleying, they had knowledge about it handed down from a previous generation. Information on earlier transhumance in the Civil Parish of Achill was also derived from historical sources such as the Books of Survey and Distribution, Rent Rolls of the Medlycott, Sligo, O'Donel Estate and Achill Mission Estates, Griffith's Valuation, Ordnance Survey Letters, Ordnance Survey Field Name Books and The Tithe Applotment Books.

The aim of this book is to examine the practice of transhumance in the Civil Parish of Achill which comprises Achill Island, Achillbeg Island and the Corraun Peninsula (Fig. 1.1). The main goals of this chapter are to define what is meant by transhumance, outline the aims of the book and indicate the methods and sources used within it. Hopefully, it will also help to generate more interest in transhumance among Irish archaeologists. While there is some debate amongst scholars about exact time periods, for the purposes of this book, the early medieval period is defined as spanning the period from *c.* AD 400 to 1100. The high medieval period is seen as beginning around the latter year and ending sometime in the late fourteenth century. The late medieval period is seen as starting *c.* AD1380 and ending about AD 1600. However, the later medieval period is really the high and late periods combined and the term covers the years from *c.* AD 1100 to *c*. 1600. The post-medieval period is seen as beginning in the early seventeenth century and covers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Duffy *et.al.* 2001, 17; O'Conor 1998, xi).

1-2 What is transhumance?

There are several somewhat contrasting definitions of transhumance, partly because different types of this pastoral activity have been recognised across Europe. The main aim in this section is to define what I see as transhumance both in the context of Ireland and the field-study area. The English word 'transhumance' is derived from the Spanish word *Trashumar* and ultimately from the Latin words *trans* and *humus*— literally meaning "travelling over the ground". In the *Dictionary of Geography*, transhumance is defined as "the practice among pastoral farmers of moving their herds and flocks between two regions of different climate" (Moore 1969, 212). However, this definition is too vague, does not really apply to Ireland and is more applicable to horizontal movements in Mediterranean areas where farmers and herders moved their livestock over very long distances from one climatic zone to another. It could be argued that this is more like pastoral nomadism than true transhumance. Another more precise definition of transhumance is "a seasonal movement of men/women and animals between different grazing grounds. Shepherds leave their lowland winter quarters, and move to upland, summer pastures. A farmer practising transhumance is not a nomad, since he has two fixed abodes" (Oxford Dictionary of Geography; Moore 1969, 212). However, this too is rather vague, especially for Ireland, as it does not consider the fact that in many areas of Europe whole families moved to these summer pastures with their livestock. The best definition of transhumance is probably "the periodic movement with livestock of family groups or herders between summer and winter pasture, with no winter stalling of livestock and little or no provision of fodder", being made in the permanent home settlement (Matley 1968, 250-51).

A relatively recent definition of transhumance or booleying in Ireland states that this important economic practice saw the removal of livestock during the summer months from permanent settlements in low-lying areas to upland, or moorland, pastures (Briody 2003, 106). It will be shown that this definition is close to what was practised in the Civil Parish of Achill. Interestingly, in this definition, it is stated that only young women accompanied the herds to the mountains in Ireland (ibid.). The problem with this is that evidence does suggest that for much of the time that transhumance or booleying was practised in Ireland, whole families or large parts of them, including men, went with the herds to the booleys in the summer. A better and more generally held definition of transhumance across much of Europe and Ireland (or booleying as it is commonly called in Ireland) is that it involves the seasonal migration of livestock, mostly

cattle, and at least some of their owners from a permanent, usually lowland, settlement to summer pastures, which lie in the mountains or uplands. The relatively great distance and nature of the terrain from these permanent settlements to these grazing grounds meant that the people who took part in these movements could not return home at night. The distance involved meant that it would also be impractical to move dairy cattle from the lowlands to the uplands on a daily basis. This meant that the construction of huts was needed to house the people involved, and that these were occupied for the duration of the summer months, or until the pasture there has been eaten by the livestock (Aalen 1978; Bil 1990; Davies 1941; Lucas 1989). This is perhaps how most scholars across Ireland and indeed Britain today would define transhumance/booleying and I will use this definition.

There is, however, one caveat to this definition. Kenneth Nicholls (1987, 397-98; 1972, 137) has suggested, without much evidence, that in later medieval Ireland (i.e. *c.* AD 1100 to *c*. 1600), booleying also took place in lowland areas where there were no adjacent mountains or uplands. One of the problems about the modern academic study of the later medieval period in Ireland is that little in the way of detailed socio-economic sources—the equivalent of Anglo-Norman/English Manorial Extents or Inquisitions post-mortem exist for the Gaelic-dominated parts of Ireland at this time, such as Achill (Nicholls 1987, 398). It is only in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that surviving documents give a more detailed insight into the economy of Gaelic Ireland (Nicholls 1987, 398; O'Conor 1998, 73). This means that little is known about economic practices in earlier periods. Little evidence for lowland booleying has been archaeologically identified in Ireland (see 2-5; 3.2; 6-1). This makes it hard at present to prove or disprove Nicholls' belief in lowland booleying in this country during the whole later medieval period but see Chapter 9. In terms of date, booleying continued as an economic practice down to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, finally dying out around the late 1940s in the study area (McDonald 2006, 225).

1-3 This book

Apart from Graham (1954), Costello (2020) and myself relatively little detailed academic work has been carried out about transhumance/booleying in Ireland, despite its economic importance in the past and its potential to lead to better understanding of medieval and post-medieval Gaelic life (Horning 2004). It seems to be regarded as a post-medieval phenomenon outside the temporal bounds of traditional archaeological research, which stopped around AD 1700, or earlier but this could be regarded as a