

# LESSONS FROM OUR PEASANT PAST

At the end of a millennium of European peasantry, author and historian Patrick Joyce warns us that we might have to relearn an innate survivalism



Patrick Freyne

In the 1950s my mother's family moved from a subsistence farm in west Cork, where they cooked over an open fire and had no electricity, to the city of Cork, where there were lights and cinemas and pop music. Geographically it's a short journey from west Cork to Cork city but psychologically it felt like jumping a century. Most Irish people aren't far removed from what used to be called the peasantry – smallholding farmers or agricultural labourers. In Ireland in 1913 about half the population worked in agriculture. At the point of joining the EEC (now the EU) in 1973 it had dropped to a quarter. Now it's at less than 5 per cent. The peasant world has faded.

In *Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World*, Patrick Joyce, emeritus professor of history at the University of Manchester, excavates a way of life that dominated Europe for more than a millennium and yet is relatively unstudied. "I was struck very much by the way in which there was a kind of unwritten social history of Europe," he says. "[Peasants] have been here for a thousand years, but they don't really figure as 'actors'. Norman Davies, who writes about the Polish history, talks about Polish and Russian peasants as a 'civilisation'." He laughs. "But of course, Norman Davies is typical in spending only about 20 pages out of a 500-page book actually talking about peasants."

*Remembering Peasants* also draws on Joyce's own family's roots in rural Mayo and Wexford. It's a lyrical hybrid of social history and memoir, featuring striking photographs of peasant life by photographers such as Markéta Luskacová and Josef Koudelka (whose photograph *Irlande 1972* features Joyce's cousin, Seán Joyce). "It all grew out of a kind of autobiographical urge," he says. "It's ignominious to be forgotten entirely... It was a public paying of respect. I wrote another book, *Going to My Father's House*, about the Irish in Britain. This is about going to my grandfather's house, you might say, in a metaphorical sense and literal as well."

## The hill bachelor

Though born in England, Irishness shaped Joyce. "My mother was born in 1910. My father in 1907. The Ireland they brought with them was very old. I went back to Ireland continuously from the late 1940s, as a child, as an adolescent, as a young person. I've been back to Ireland almost every year since the 1950s. And I went always to those agrarian communities. I saw the changes in the people that I knew. I saw them come and go, and I saw the change. And I saw the hill bachelor, and I saw the prosperity and then the breakdown of that prosperity. I recall, with the penetration of the child's eyes, the world of Wexford in the 1950s and 60s. I recognised the value in it."

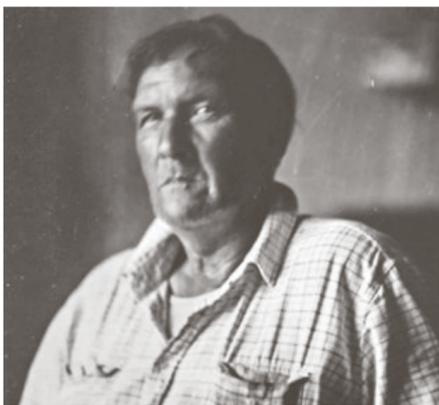
The book also roams through places such as Slovakia, Poland and Italy, where peasant culture hung on a little longer than elsewhere. He found the world views in each place remarkably similar. "In a way, I kind of loaded the dice because most of my peasants are Catholic but it's not just that. I tried to connect the Irish sense of in-betweenness, the parallel world of the 'good people' [the fairies], to the Polish. There's a kind of generic similarity, which is very striking. One of the things that marks it, is a fundamental belief, which I saw in Poland and many other places, that even though others may own the land, it's the peasant who really owns the land. The peasant is the one who makes it flourish. It belongs to them in some sense. And of



**“You weren't beholding nature, you were part of it, and nature wasn't this lovely thing that you admired. It wasn't necessarily benign; it could be evil, but you had to show some kind of solidarity with it, to make it work and to curb the evil forces**  
– Patrick Joyce



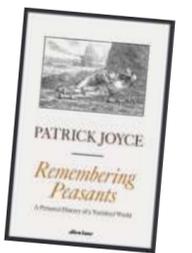
■ Main: 'Irlande 1972'. On the right at the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage is Patrick Joyce's cousin Seán Joyce; on the left is Paddy Kenny, who was married to Seán's sister, and in the centre is friend and neighbour Martin Mangan. Below left: Seán Joyce: "My Mayo cousin Seán would regularly say to me 'professor me arse'." says Patrick Joyce. Below centre: Patrick Joyce, his father and his cousin Seán (standing). Below right: Men praying at the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick, 1972.  
PHOTOGRAPHS: JOSEF KOUDELKA/MAGNUM PHOTOS; MARKĚTA LUSKACOVÁ; JON SUPER



something that you were *in*, in the same way as you were *in* nature. It was just part of the ongoing business of life."

What does he think people like his Mayo cousin Seán would make of the book? "Seán would regularly say to me 'professor me arse' or 'book my arse'." Of his living Irish relatives he says: "They're very proud of their area being shown to the world and I think they're proud of me. We've had a few little get-togethers in bookshops in wildest Mayo."

The book may not be the last time Joyce considers the lives of peasants. He is exploring the possibility of a documentary with the director Pat Collins. He thinks we should stop projecting simple stereotypes on to peasants or seeing them as a mirror of our lives today. He believes that if we try to understand them earnestly, there are important things we can learn from their world view. "If we are coming to the end of the European peasantry, that's over a thousand years of history," he says. "What do you do with a thousand years of history? This is a culture of people who fought for control over their lives, who often lived on the edge. We might have to live on the edge. We may have to learn to be survivors. There may be something in their outlook we can learn from. Peasants are people who cannot bend the world to their will. We recognise increasingly that we can't bend the world to our will and we have to work with the world."



Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World by Patrick Joyce is published by Allen Lane/Penguin on February 15th

course, it doesn't, so the resentments are powerful. And I have accounts of some really powerful revolts against their servitude in the book."

Writers and political thinkers have over the past few centuries alternatively "glorified" and "damned" the peasantry without properly understanding them, he says. "So many people put their faith in the peasants and the peasants chop their heads off as a thank you. The liberal intelligentsia have often been at a distance and have not been able to mobilise peasants because they don't really understand the limited sense to which nation and liberal individualism actually penetrate peasant cultures. John Berger [British essayist and cultural thinker] says, 'peasants know that mankind is ignorant.' And that's why I'm very much drawn to peasants. But of course, that is the outlook of conservatism. So, you've got to take the rough with the smooth." He laughs. "When they were allowed to do things on their own terms, they could be very effective politically. Peasants have dovetailed with certain kinds of ideologies. The anti-statism of syndicalism, in

the late-19th, early-20th century especially. In the Spanish civil war, there were a lot of peasants who supported the anarchists. [Antonio] Gramsci recognised that you have to go *with* the grain of peasant culture and then you might be able to enlist the peasant."

Joyce argues that there is a common peasant "cosmogony" that blends together concepts that are in opposition in the "modern" world. "The spiritual, the divine, labour, nature, work and culture were all part of the same thing," he says. "You weren't beholding nature, you were part of it, and nature wasn't this lovely thing that you admired. It wasn't necessarily benign; it could be evil, but you had to show some kind of solidarity with it, to make it work and to curb the evil forces. The nature they're in is just as much to do with people and with animals and with the farm as with trees or woods."

He refers to poet Seamus Heaney's notion of "religare", a way of "binding" opposites. "In the peasant culture I was looking at, there was this sense of, for want of a better word, 'religion' as binding – binding be-

tween people, humans and non-humans, humans and the natural world. So much of the literature – the environmental literature, the literature on nature – especially in the English tradition, is a landscape without figures, or those figures are stereotyped or are fanciful."

## 'Presentism'

One of the reasons he thinks it's useful to think about peasants right now is that our postmodern world is locked in a continuous present tense. He calls this "presentism" and he's planning to write a book on the subject. He thinks it contrasts with both the peasants' slow experience of time and the progressive narratives of the modern age. Of the latter, he says: "From the late 18th century, or post-the French revolution, there was a sense of forward movement. After the second World War, the world I grew up in in London, we were going some place. Now we are moving into an era when time has kind of fractured and splintered and the sense of forward progression doesn't seem to exist any more."

There are complex environmental, eco-

nomical and technological reasons for this. He mentions the ecological crisis, the precarity of contemporary jobs and the dominance of the internet. "The sense of the future becomes sort of foreboding," he says. "And that is accompanied by an increase in the velocity of time. More things happen in a shorter space of time. Things are changing all the time. You continuously have to reinvent yourself. There seems to be a big interest in the past at the same time [but] we're just looking for a kind of validation. We're looking in the past as if it's a mirror, not a telescope or magnifying glass."

Note that in Ireland there's been a revival of folk music and the Irish language among younger people. "You don't want to underestimate or not fully value the extent to which Ireland is holding on to the music, the language, the sport," he says. "But you don't want to be under the illusion that you're somehow mystically connecting the present to the past. Traditional music becomes folk music becomes world music. And as it does, it leaves the meaning of the original stuff, because music for peasants was not something you listened to, it was

## As the Israeli military intensifies operations, Jenin becomes a 'little Gaza'



Hannah McCarthy in Jenin

Since start of the war, the Jenin area has faced dozens of Israeli military raids that have killed over 70, including 23 children, according to the UN

prisoner exchange with the militant group Hamas three months earlier, was detained in the nearby village of Bir al Basha.

As the crackling of gunfire subsides and daylight breaks over Jenin, residents of the camp emerge to survey the now-recurring destruction that has given their neighbourhood the epithet "little Gaza". Since the start of Israel's war against Hamas on October 7th, the Jenin area has faced dozens of Israeli military raids that have killed over 70, including 23 children, according to the UN. "It feels like the raids never stop," says Mahmoud Abu Shari (55) beside a building on Al Karameh Street damaged by an Israeli drone attack. Nearby, a militant with a semi-automatic gun slung across his chest walks by a mechanic shop where a car has been crushed by a collapsed metal roof.

## Military bulldozers

Around a third of residents have not stayed in Jenin camp at night since the war began. Many of the elderly and young stay elsewhere in Jenin City or its suburbs, and are dropped off at the camp's entrance by taxis in the morning. Older residents – some propped up by walking sticks – navigate the upturned roads destroyed by Israeli military bulldozers during the most recent raid.

By a damaged roundabout, children carrying schoolbags walk lightly over piles of rubble and avoid pools of muddied brown water on their way to morning class. Mustafa Al-Saadi, a 64-year-old



■ A Palestinian child walks along a destroyed street at the Jenin refugee camp following an Israeli raid in the West Bank city of Jenin.  
PHOTOGRAPH: ALAA BADARNEH/SHUTTERSTOCK/EPA

driving instructor, surveys the scene of mud and rubble outside his school before making his morning coffee in his office, where the driving test applications of his students killed by Israeli forces are on display.

An Israeli military spokesperson says the destruction of the roads was a precaution against explosives that Palestinian militants could have lain under the road – a tactic that killed one Israeli soldier earlier this month. Workers clad in overalls from UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for Palestinian refugees, are already out clearing the debris and surveying manholes left exposed by the destruction of the camp's infrastructure has led to blackouts, flooding and openly flowing sewage. Shrines to slain fighters have also

been vandalised and the faces of leading Palestinian writers Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani in a mural at the entrance of The Freedom Theatre are smeared with white paint.

"The main road into the camp has been destroyed five times in the last year," says Diab Turkman (60), a retired teacher who now runs an electrical goods store.

"I'll just sit here today," he says in his shop. "No one's buying anything at the moment – there's no money."

Turkman's storefront still bears a gold Star of David spraypainted by Israeli forces who he says vandalised and occupied the store during a three-day raid on the camp in December.

Turkman says the soldiers stole €500 worth of goods including an electric heater and hot stove and deleted CCTV footage

from the cameras installed in his store. During an earlier military raid in November, Turkman says Israeli forces used his home, located outside of Jenin camp, as a staging post for snipers. Soldiers broke several doors and ordered his family into one room for eight hours. The Israeli military said it was not aware of these events but that it acts to identify and investigate "unusual cases" that deviate from what is expected of its soldiers and that "significant command measures will be taken against the soldiers involved."

## New volunteer team

In a bright red uniform, a young man conducts a walkaround of Jenin camp after the latest raid while carrying a large backpack filled with medical supplies. He's part of a new volunteer team of mobile first aid responders providing basic medical treatment during Israeli raids. Despite a hospital with a fleet of ambulances in the camp, residents are routinely denied access to medical assistance during military operations, while first aid stations have also been targeted by drones.

Israeli armoured vehicles and snipers are normally positioned around Khalil Suleiman Hospital during raids, says Samuel Johann, a co-ordinator for Doctors Without Borders, the medical NGO which began operating at the hospital in Jenin camp a year ago as injuries inflicted during Israeli raids soared. Johann says: "We have witnessed

episodes where the ambulances were trying to reach the hospital but didn't manage because they were denied access [by the Israeli military]."

The Israeli military says medical facilities in Jenin are being used "for planning terrorist activities." Now, even those who reach a hospital are not immune from attack.

**“The main road into the camp has been destroyed five times in the last year. I'll just sit here today. No one's buying anything at the moment – there's no money**  
– Store owner Diab Turkman

Last week, a team of Israeli special forces disguised in wigs and hijabs entered Ibn Sina Hospital and shot dead three sleeping Palestinian men in the rehabilitation unit. The primary target was Muhammad Jalanneh (27), a Hamas commander visiting a partially paralysed member of Islamic Jihad who was also killed in the operation. The Israeli military did not provide evidence of the attack it said Jalanneh was planning, while Ibn Sina Hospital's director Niji Nazzal said the hospital deserves protection from violence.