

A proud defence of the people who eat their dinner in the middle of the day

Uncouth, uneducated and unfit for polite society? That's not the case, argues Patrick Joyce, as he sets out to put the record straight for 'culchies' and the rural dwellers of Europe

Subscribe



Way of life on the brink: Workers harvesting flax at Killinchy, Co Down, in 1948. Photo: Merlyn Severn via Getty Images

Remembering Peasants by Patrick Joyce



Andrew Lynch

Sat 10 Feb 2024 at 02:30



'I represent the plain people of Ireland.' That was Jackie Healy-Rae's proud boast in 1997 when the RTÉ television presenter Brian Farrell asked who his supporters were. Pressed to be more specific, the newly elected independent TD for South Kerry explained: "The people who eat their dinner in the middle of the day."

Healy-Rae's answer gave plenty of amusement to the so-called Dublin 4 set. As Patrick Joyce shows in this passionate, intelligent but often gruelling book, however, anyone with a sense of history would have known exactly what he meant.

Up until a few generations ago, almost all our ancestors needed a substantial midday meal so that they had the energy to produce another one. Instead of being "a transition to leisure" or "an expression of wealth", Joyce writes, "to the peasant, all food represents work accomplished".

The author is a leading social historian and an emeritus professor at Manchester University. For him, however, the study of pre-industrial rural dwellers is not just an academic pursuit. Born in London to Irish parents 78 years ago, he has been regularly visiting his Galway and Wexford relatives from childhood onwards. His most recent book, *Going to My Father's House*, was a melancholy memoir that examined themes of emigration, community and Irish-British identity.

Remembering Peasants is a more scholarly work, but in its own way just as personal. Joyce sets out to reclaim a word that's often used as an insult, suggesting someone is uncouth, uneducated and unfit for polite society. Different countries have different equivalents: "hayseed" in the United States, "yokel" in England, "culchie" here.

For a striking example of urbane snobbery, Joyce quotes the aristocratic serial killer Hannibal Lecter talking to the West Virginia-raised FBI agent Clarice Starling in the film version of Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs*.

“You know what you look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube. A well-scrubbed, hustling rube with a little taste. Good nutrition’s given you some length of bone, but you’re not more than one generation from poor white trash, are you?”

The underlying message of Joyce’s book is that Hannibal Lecter and his ilk should cop themselves on. “Peasant” comes from the French word “pays” and simply means “person of the land”. These people instinctively understand that the world’s resources are finite, a lesson climate change may soon force us all to learn.

Peasants emerged in Europe with the creation of modern agriculture about 8,500 years ago. For most of that time, national economies, mighty armies and royal families could not have survived without peasants’ back-breaking toil. Since the end of World War II, however, technology has been steadily eroding their way of life.

Joyce illustrates this with a few telling statistics. In 1913, 47.5pc of the Irish workforce came from agriculture. Today it is less than 5pc and even they use machinery that their grandparents would have found completely alien. The equivalent figures for some other nations are even more dramatic.

Even if peasants are on the brink of extinction, though, Joyce argues strongly that their legacy deserves far more appreciation. “[My] book is an attempt to pay homage,” he writes, “to remember the goodness of peasants, to respect their dignity, to reflect on the delicacy and grace of those who have so often been called ignorant, boorish... theirs was a culture of richness and complexity, made all the more rich and complex in the teeth of the privations they so often had to endure.”

Read more

- [Édaein O’Connell: Embrace your culchie accent before it disappears for good \(/opinion/comment/edaoin-oconnell-embrace-your-culchie-accent-before-it-disappears-for-good/a1922374832.html\)](/opinion/comment/edaoin-oconnell-embrace-your-culchie-accent-before-it-disappears-for-good/a1922374832.html)
- [The enslaved Americans who helped Irish famine victims \(/irish-news/the-enslaved-americans-who-helped-irish-famine-victims/a653933185.html\)](/irish-news/the-enslaved-americans-who-helped-irish-famine-victims/a653933185.html)

This is obviously a vast subject, so Joyce sensibly narrows it down. He focuses heavily on the 18th and 19th centuries in particular regions, including Polish Galicia, Italy’s Mezzogiorno and the west of Ireland.

Analysing peasant culture is still no easy task, since by their nature they do not leave behind many written records. As a result, Joyce’s investigation often feels like trying to reconstruct a skeleton with just a few fragments of bone. He relies heavily on old songs, photographs and a handful of memoirs along with his own travels.

One of his running themes is that peasants experienced almost everything differently from their modern-day descendants. While we see land in terms of nature, for them it was useless “without their own work upon it”. While we think of time as linear, for them it was circular, with little real sense of progress. While we view ourselves primarily as individuals, “the sense of a personal self in peasant societies is always subject to collective constraint”.

Joyce provides plenty of striking details about how peasants choose life partners, mark deaths and lay out their houses. He is strong on the role of religion, pointing out that such an austere existence makes little sense unless you believe there is a better afterlife to come. Irish Catholics had the added ingredient of persecution, which explains why our countryside is dotted with outdoor worship sites rather than grand churches.

Peasants are suspicious of personal vanity or anyone trying to mark themselves out as superior. For them, life is a zero-sum game in which nobody can get ahead without hurting somebody else. When Ireland was under British rule, Joyce notes, “there were strong punishments for those taking over the holdings of evicted persons. The Irish term for the English, a Sasanach (Saxon) implied this lack of generosity”.

Joyce is at pains to warn against the danger of romanticising peasants, a trap that has snared many Irish nationalists such as Patrick Pearse. He cites a Flann O’Brien story called *The Tale of Black Peter* about a man who dresses in woollen rags, eats nettles for breakfast and eventually asks a priest, “Who created me and this miserable country?” When told that a Dublin author and poet are responsible, Peter “grabs his double-barrelled shotgun and heads for the city”.

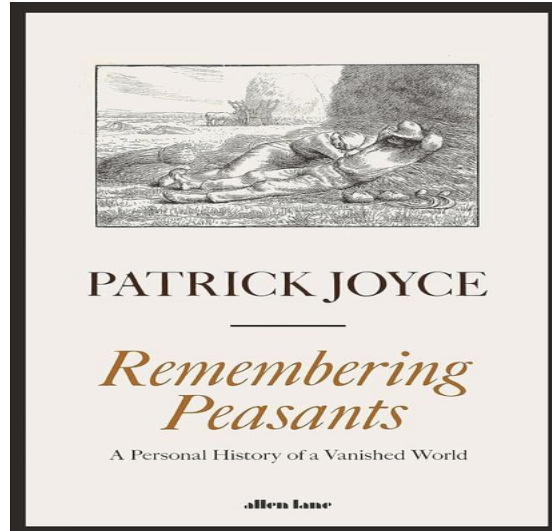
In fact, Joyce accepts that violence is also an integral part of peasant society. He highlights some grisly episodes such as the Maamtrasna murders of 1882, when a family of five on the Galway-Mayo border was slaughtered over a sheep-rustling feud. This prompted *The Spectator* magazine to tell its readers about “the existence in particular districts of Ireland of a class of peasants who are scarcely civilised beings, and approach far nearer to savages than any other white men”.

Not surprisingly, Joyce calls such dismissals of peasants “a deeply insulting stereotype”. On the contrary, he insists, these communities have their own etiquette with strict rules based on notions of grace and honour. It is, for example, “bad manners to show hunger or eagerness for food, and one must eat slowly, occasionally putting down the spoon to show one is the master of appetite”.

Remembering Peasants is an impressive achievement but not a particularly easy read, since Joyce's prose style can be rambling and overwrought.

He moves freely between hard facts and philosophical reflections, at one point berating the "heritage industry" that sanitises history so it can be more easily sold to tourists. Visiting the museum of Irish Country Life just outside Castlebar, his "heart sinks" at the sight of white plaster models representing an Aran Islands family. "Perhaps museums must fail anyway," he concedes, "fail to convey the blistered lips, the chapped hands, the bitten fingernails, the worn body..."

When it comes to revisiting the past, Joyce concludes, powerful people command most attention while peasants must usually "live off scraps". This heavyweight and compassionate book gives them the equivalent of a hearty dinner — no matter what time of day it is consumed.



Remembering Peasants by Patrick Joyce

History: Remembering Peasants by Patrick Joyce

Allen, 400 pages, hardcover €35; e-book £10.99

Read more

- [Édaein O'Connell: Embrace your culchie accent before it disappears for good \(/opinion/comment/edaoin-oconnell-embrace-your-culchie-accent-before-it-disappears-for-good/a1922374832.html\)](/opinion/comment/edaoin-oconnell-embrace-your-culchie-accent-before-it-disappears-for-good/a1922374832.html)
- [The enslaved Americans who helped Irish famine victims \(/irish-news/the-enslaved-americans-who-helped-irish-famine-victims/a653933185.html\)](/irish-news/the-enslaved-americans-who-helped-irish-famine-victims/a653933185.html)

Join the Irish Independent WhatsApp channel

Stay up to date with all the latest news

(<https://www.whatsapp.com/channel/0029VaEoLtFit5rzvz2Vd22Q>)



Promoted Links

Recommended by [Outbrain](#)