

THE LAST OF THE CACKAGEES? CIDER MAKING IN LIMERICK AND CLARE

(Unpublished article)

By

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‘In (that) year he met Maise Ruttle, a gangly, fair haired woman who was a Methodist, born and bred in the Free State... The day before the marriage, he drove down to her home place... just outside Rathkeele... They arrived at Maise’s farm in the late evening. In the distance was another farm, just like Ruttle’s, and beyond that another, and another, each similar and each with an orchard. And from everywhere came the honk of geese as they roamed the orchards looking for fallen fruit.’¹

In this age of global conglomerates and multinationals, the fact that not long ago, the adjoining counties of Limerick and Clare both had acclaimed cider industries may come as somewhat a surprise to all. This indigenous industry appears to have been largely based on the fame of one very particular type of apple known prosaically as the Cackagee from the Irish ‘*cac a ghéidh*’ meaning goose excrement!

The name of the Cackagee apple has been linked with both the unique colour of the apple in question and the tradition of maintaining gaggles of geese in orchards to eat the autumnal windfalls and thus through a process of elimination of the residue to fertilise the growing apple trees. The name has entered the English language where there are more than a dozen different variations to be found in written sources. These include: *Cackagay*,² *Cakagee*,³ *Cakagee*,⁴ *Cagogee*,⁵ *Cockagee*,⁶ *Cockagee*,⁷ *Cockogee*,⁸ *Cockogee*,⁹ *Cackagee*,¹⁰ *Cockygee*,¹¹ *Kekagee*,¹² *Caccagee*,¹³ *Cacagee*¹⁴ and *Irish Cockagee*.¹⁵ The apple was sufficiently well known in the 1860s to merit its own entry in the *The Dialect of the West of England, Particularly Somersetshire* as meaning a rough sour type of apple.¹⁶

The evolution of the Cackagee apple variety appears to have been lost in the mists of time, however the variety has been recognised as being raised in Ireland and recorded as being widely cultivated in Ireland before 1750.¹⁷ The Cackagee was variously praised for producing the finest cider in Ireland^{18, 19} and indeed acclaimed even equal to the very best of the Devonshire ciders.²⁰ The apple itself is described as being of medium sized and oval with fine yellow, smooth skin, and marked with green specks. The flesh of the apple is soft, of a yellowish white colour, sharply acid and austere.²¹

The local geography of cider production would appear to have been centred in and around the counties of Limerick and Clare. In Limerick, the areas of Adare, Croom,

Rathkeale, Kilpeacon,²² Pallaskenry,²³ and Patrickswell²⁴ are identified as being locations of both orchards and cider production. In Clare similar claims are made for the areas Dromoland,²⁵ Sixmilebridge²⁶ and the Limerick to Ennis region.²⁷ Other regional references to this apple are Ballycanvan²⁸ and Black Water areas in County Waterford,²⁹ Dunkettle, County Cork³⁰ and County Kerry.³¹

In Limerick, the production of cider has been further linked to the Palatine settlement of the Southwell Estate in Rathkeale. Palatines from the Rhineland in Germany were settled in a number of areas including the townlands of Courtmatrix in Rathkeale parish, Killenhan in Kilsconnell and Ballingrane in Nantinan parish c.1709. Compared to the short term leases held by Irish tenants, the Palatine settlers were allocated land on preferential terms of a term of three lives or thirty-one years.³² It has been so stated that on the arrival of the Palatines, orchards were planted and as soon as suitable crops of apples were harvested, the brewing of cider commenced.³³ Evidence for this socio-centred cider production comes from various sources including Samuel Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* of the 1830s³⁴ and *Griffiths Primary Valuation* of the 1850s³⁵ listing various Palatine named landholders of orchards and the continuation of Palatine family tradition of orchard cultivation and cider production until relatively modern times.^{36,37} The survival of traditional stone, quern type cider presses in places such as Courtmatrix³⁸ and Killehan³⁹ also gives physical credence to the belief that the Palatines were among the main progenitors of the cider industry in County Limerick.

In the 1770s Arthur Young, the famous agriculturist and travel writer in his *Tour of Ireland*, focuses his description of cider production in the province of Munster and specifically mentions the Cackagee apple with reference to the counties of Clare,⁴⁰ Limerick⁴¹ and Waterford.⁴² Whilst Young does not mention a Palatine connection with cider production, he describes various gentlemen's estates where the proprietors paid special attention to the production of large quantities of cider, specifically of the Cackagee variety.^{43,44} In the 1830s Samuel Lewis reports that Counties Limerick and Clare are famous for their orchards, which produce the acclaimed 'Cackagay' cider, where the greatest varieties of apples are to be seen around the farmhouses of the Palatines.⁴⁵ From these sources it would appear therefore that in counties Limerick and Clare at least, cider production was an industry that transcended the division of the landlords personal demesne and Palatine tenant landholder.

It has been estimated that modern varieties of cider apple can produce a massive yield of up to 1000 lbs per tree.⁴⁶ In the late 1700s a similar fruitfulness of cider apple trees was noted by Arthur Young, when he states that on visiting Dromoland, County Clare that he had 'never beheld trees so loaden with apples as in Sir Lucius O'Brien's orchard; it amazed me that they did not break under the immense load which bowed down the branches. He expected a hogshead a tree from several'.⁴⁷ Details of holdings producing cider indicate that the cider orchards were on average between two⁴⁸ and fourteen⁴⁹ acres in size. From other figures provided by Young, it is stated that apple growers were producing on average six hogsheads of cider (54 gallons) per acre.⁵⁰ Young also gave figures that showed the actual return on a highly productive orchard in County Waterford was £25 per acre based on a production of 11.5 hogsheads of cider and ten barrels of wheat reaped from the same orchard!⁵¹ In 1808 County Clare cider was selling for 5 guineas per hogshead.⁵² A Rev. James Hall who wrote of his travels, in a *Tour through Ireland* in 1813 stated that Cackagee cider around Tralee

sold at ‘3 or 4 Guineas a hogshead when common cider does not fetch more than one Guinea.’⁵³ In County Limerick, cider made on Palatine farms may have been the cause of a strong rebuke from John Wesley the Methodist preacher, for drunkenness amongst some of the early Palatine settlers.⁵⁴ In County Clare, markets for the cider appear to have been local in nature with the beverage being purchased by ‘neighbouring gentlemen for their own use and as presents to their friends.’⁵⁵ It is clear from these accounts that Cackagee cider production was not only highly profitable but also palatably desirable.

A survey of occupations in Ireland dating from 1841 shows that the province of Munster was the only area that returned figures for the profession of ‘Cider Maker’,⁵⁶ yet even in Munster the figures must under report the actual numbers involved in this industry as cider production was an integral part of the cycle of the agricultural holding for both landlord and tenant alike and therefore would not have been classified as Cider Makers *per se*.

Figure 1.0 Number of declared Cider Makers in Munster -1841

	<i>Clare</i>	<i>Cork</i>	<i>Limerick</i>	<i>Kerry</i>	<i>Waterford</i>
No:	5	3	1	0	0

Source: Occupations of Ireland, 1841.

The former extent of the apple orchards in counties Limerick and Clare remains largely unknown, however the *Parliamentary Gazette* of 1845 may give us some indication as to the total amount of land devoted to all types of orchards in various Munster counties pre 1791 and pre 1841.⁵⁷ It is of note that no figures are listed for Co. Clare and that the acreages that are listed would not by definition be confined to cider apple orchards but would also include culinary and dessert apple, pear, plum etc.

Figure 2.0 Acres of Orchards Planted in Various Munster Counties -1845

	<i>Clare</i>	<i>Cork</i>	<i>Limerick</i>	<i>Kerry</i>	<i>Waterford</i>
Pre 1791	na	822 acres	509 acres	188 acres	581 acres
Pre 1841	na	3644 acres	1674 acres	935 acres	1376 acres

Source: Parliamentary Gazette of Ireland, 1845.

From these figures, it is of note that the greatest increases in the acreage of orchards between the years 1791 and 1841 occurs in the counties of Cork and Limerick. Using a simple calculation, it is possible to give an example of the production figures that could have been generated by the cider industry in County Limerick. Taking the yield of six hogsheads of cider per acre cited by Arthur Young as an average (see above), and a conservative figure of just 200 acres devoted to cider apple production, it is possible to calculate that approximately 65,000 gallons of cider¹ could be produced in County Limerick for consumption annually.⁵⁸

¹These measures are based on values for a standard UK Pint (ale) and UK Hogshead (beer and ale) measures for the years 1803 – 1824; which were equivalent to 432 pints (54 gallons) per hogshead.

The planting of orchards and the investment of infrastructure for cider production by necessity dictates a delayed financial return. Where this was possible due to direct land ownership or favourable lease agreements, as was the case with the Palatine settlements on the Southwell Estate,⁵⁹ it would appear that apple orchards thrived and cider production became a noted feature of the local economy. However for the majority of short term leaseholders the planting of apple trees and cider production would have been inconceivable. Theobald Wolfe Tone at the end of eighteenth century remarked that ‘he who can barely find potatoes for his family is little solicitous about apples; he whose constant beverage is water dreams neither of cider or meade.’⁶⁰

The production of Cackagee cider appears to have prospered in the counties of Limerick and Clare until at least the early 1830s. In 1837, Lewis in his *Topographical Dictionary*, reports on the general decline of once extensive orchards in County Clare, especially near Sixmilebridge.⁶¹ By 1845 the *Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland* stated that in County Clare ‘Cyder orchards, for the production of the beverage called ‘Cackagee’, were formerly of considerable note, but seem to have fallen into disrepute.’⁶² This apparent decline in the extent and reputation of the local cider industry may be attributed to a number of factors including the continued out-migration of Palatine families to the Americas⁶³ and the change in fortune of the Irish economy and specifically the fortunes of the large estates.⁶⁴ The catastrophe of the Irish Famine in 1847 and subsequent years meant that what was once a thriving local industry continued into decline.

Home cider production continued to be a feature of some Palatine farm households in the years up to the present century.⁶⁵ However records for the subsequent history of the Cackagee apple are scarce. It is of sad necessity to relate at this late point in the narrative that the whilst the Cackagee apple variety may still be in existence, a definitive sighting of the variety has not been reported in recent times.⁶⁶

Today there is hope in the resurgence of this local industry and the finding per chance of the Cackagee apple in an overlooked orchard of old apple trees. In 1991 Anita Hayes of the Irish Seed Savers Association began working with Peadar MacNeice of the Armagh Orchard Trust and Dr. Michael Hennerty of University College Dublin to gather together a collection of native Irish apples. In 1996 this Native Irish Apple Collection was opened by the former President Mary Robinson at University College Dublin. Now this collection of native apples is being replicated at the Irish Seed Savers Association in County Clare.⁶⁷ The final piece of this story is that the Cackagay is numbered amongst the last remaining varieties of native Irish apples yet to be rediscovered². And whilst an important Limerick industry may have been once forgotten, another limerick and cider will be always immemorially linked forever thus:

There was a young lady from Hyde⁶⁸

² Irish apple varieties awaiting identification include:

Ahern Beauty, Bitter Sweet, Frank's Seedling, Antrim Strawberry, Babe in the Wood, Bessham, Cavan Cabbage Stalk, Cavan Honeycomb, Cavan Wine, Chulium, Cocagee, Dick Davis, Green Sweet, Honey Bottle, Irish Molly, Richardson or Tomilin, Stringers, Turnip Apple, Unle John's Cooker and the Wooden Apple.⁶⁹

Who ate a green apple and died.
While her lover lamented
The apple fermented
And made cider inside her inside.

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