

much more successful. By 1850, over £3,500,000 in loans had been applied for under the terms of the Act, 20,000 labourers were employed in drainage, and 74,000 acres had been reclaimed.⁴² The trend towards large-scale organization increased during the later nineteenth century. The Famine and its aftermath had led to the removal, by starvation, emigration and eviction, of huge numbers of the poorest farmers, who had been the main agents of land improvement during the early part of the century.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Manures and Fertilizers

PARING AND BURNING

PROCESSES THAT ENRICH the fertility of soil could take place either before or after tillage. One practice frequently discussed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agricultural texts was paring and burning. There were many variations in the techniques used in this process, but the basic operations were stripping off the surface sod, allowing it to dry, burning it, and then spreading the ash on the soil as a fertilizer. In the early eighteenth century the practice was widely condemned by landlords, and in 1743 the Irish Parliament passed an act forbidding it.¹ The Act does not appear to have been very effective, however, and by the early nineteenth century condemnations had become a lot less sweeping. The change in attitude came with the recognition that, as with lazy-bed techniques, controlled paring and burning could considerably speed up the reclamation of marginal land. Arthur Young, though often critical of the practice, made use of it in the reclamation scheme he organized on the southern side of the Galtee mountains.² Burning some types of heath, along with the top sods containing their roots, could reduce previously rough, poor vegetation to productive ash. By 1802, Charles Coote, like some other observers, concluded that, 'The effects of burning land were not well understood when the legislature imposed the heavy penalty against this process'.³ It was argued by some agriculturalists that it was not paring and burning which ruined the land, but the over-cropping which often followed it. In 1807, Rawson, describing the practice in County Kildare, made this point clearly:

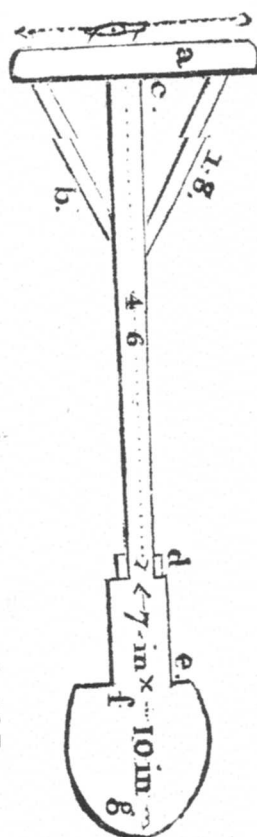
The common practice of burning the whole surface [of upland] and then applying the entire ashes on the remnant of the soil, taking three or four exhausting crops, cannot be too much reprobated; by it the land is completely exhausted, and men say how injurious paring and burning is, not considering, that the injury lies in making an improvident use of ashes.⁴

In 1810, Horatio Townsend argued that the unattractive appearance of the land after paring and burning was often the source of mistaken claims that the process was injurious:

Were [paring and burning] ... attended by the evil consequences so frequently deplored, the lands of Kinallea [County Cork] would by this time be reduced to a state of infertility. The contrary, however, is the fact ... It is very probable that the naked appearance of land, let out without grass seeds after burning, has been a principal cause of objection to the mode. But this barrenness is more apparent than real.⁵

The county statistical surveys published in the early years of the nineteenth century contain several descriptions of the use of paring and burning by landlords, some of whom had ploughs specially modified for the purpose.⁶ Modified forms of the process were also used in some of the most systematic schemes of land reclamation. In 1835, for example, one model project at Tullychar, County Tyrone, included the paring of sods, using the local type of breast-ploughs, known as *flachters* (fig. 30).⁷ Paring and burning continued throughout the later nineteenth century, but appears to have become increasingly confined to small farms in western counties such as Donegal⁸ and Mayo. In the latter case, an inch or 1½ inches of top sod or 'screw' was pared off, turned upside down until partially dry, and then 'foored' or built into small piles until the sods were completely dry, when they were burned. The land from which the sods had been removed was made into ridges, and the ashes of the sods were spread over these. Potatoes were planted on top of the ashes, and covered with mould from the furrows. The ashes were said to be 'powerful for the plants', but it was also agreed that burning had 'spoiled a lot of land'.⁹

Unburnt clay and earth, dug elsewhere, were also commonly spread on cultivated land to increase fertility. The soil was sometimes spread straight on to the ground, or might first be mixed with farmyard manure.¹⁰ Arthur Young recorded frequent instances of earth being taken from ditches to form composts, by both landlords and small farmers. In the Barony of Forth, County Wexford, for example, he found that, 'They are exceedingly attentive to getting mould out of the ditches and banks to mix a little dung with it, and spread it on their land.'¹¹ The large-scale removal of land from mountains and bogs was more controversial. The practice was widely reported, however. In Queen's County (Offaly) in the 1840s, it was reported that, 'In all parts [of the county] in which it can be obtained, even at a distance of several miles, bog soil, more commonly called "bog stuff" or manure, is extensively used by large and small farmers, rich and poor ... I know not what would have become of



30 A 'skrogoghe' or *flachter* from County Tyrone, from John McEvoy, *Statistical survey of the county of Tyrone* (Dublin, 1802), p. 51.

the population, or how they would have subsisted without its aid'. In some areas it was alleged that 'bog stuff' was used so much that the land on which it was spread had actually become moory.¹² Contemporaries were more generally worried by the detrimental effects on the land from which the soil had been removed, however. The removal of soil from marginal land was sometimes treated as theft:

On the ascent from Clogheen ... in the Knockmeleadow mountains, we [investigators for the Devon Commission] met several carriers who live by a traffic ... which they designate 'stealing mountain'. The stock in trade of this class is a donkey and cart. They derive their means of living from stripping the surface sod, where one can be found, from the unenclosed mountain, and thus accumulate compost, which they store at Clogheen as manure for potatoes for themselves, or to sell to the farmers. This system has been carried on in open day, in spite of the proprietors, for forty years. It is stated that 100 of these marauders have been summoned and fined at one session.¹³

Small-scale removal of soil from hilly areas continued within living memory. In Gaorth Dóbbhair, County Donegal, the sandy coastal lands of the *machair* were enriched in this way:

They would bring down what they called *abar*, that is boggy-stuff, from the hills, and they would mix that and cow dung with the raw sand, and over a period of years it became black and earthy.¹⁴