



The ‘Collops’ of the Rundale: their evolving ecological and communal forms.

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Introduction

In this article, I want to outline the crucial role that the administrative device of the collop played in the Rundale system of farming. Although it was essentially a measurement of agricultural productivity, it was unique in way it assessed ecological output and allowed that output to be communally shared among the residents of a Rundale clachan. And in this latter respect it provides us with an invaluable insight into not only the inner workings of this communal system of production but also into how production from ‘commons’ lands can be assessed ecologically. Accordingly, by comparing the collop method of measurement with the imperial system of spatial measurement – acreage – we can begin to understand how the ‘acre’ system was an imposition onto the local ecosystems while the collop emerged organically from the naturally occurring ecological soil base. Finally, I unfold how the acre unit system was used to impose a rent on the Rundale lands, while the collop was used to proportion that rent among the members of the commune.

In the following quotation Gibbs locates the significance of the collop as a measurement of land among the native Irish and how it was integrated under the newly introduced rental system in the seventeenth century:

Four men of the village, he (Sir Henry Piers) says, called Heads of Quarter, obtained the lease of a farm consisting of arable and grazing land, and then took in a number of others as co-partners. The farm was valued according to the number of cows for which there was grazing ground, the grazing of cow being called a collop. Each partner paid rent in proportion to the number of collops he held; but their cattle fed in common. The arable land was divided into as many portions as there were collops, and each had as many portions as he held collops. The land was re-divided every two years, and in such a manner that it consisted of various qualities of good, of middling, and of bad, in different parts of the field. The four adjusted the collops, and the shares of the arable land among the other partners; they collected the rents, and paid the landlord (Gibbs 1870: 20).

What is interesting about Gibbs' succinct synopsis of the concept of the collop is how he suggests that it originated from the grazing activities of cattle but later was applied to tillage land as 'the arable land was divided into as many portions as there were collops, and each had as many portions as he held collops'. These tillage portions were subsequently known as tillage collops. This article is an attempt to develop these insights of Gibbs and to suggest that the collop was the essential organizational apparatus that was the crucial to maintaining communal aspects of the Rundale system. And like the Rundale system itself, the collop evolved through time and took on a number of diverse forms. But all of these forms of collops that were instrumental in maintaining productive communality had also to operate under a rental system. In this relationship they functioned as a means of proportioning the rent payments among the communal members of the Rundale system. And in doing so the collop became the pivotal point where the rental system of landlordism attempted to subsume the customary relationships of the communal form of production. Gibbs' account in the above quotation thus begins to explicate how the collop is crucial in our attempt to understand not only the inner workings of this particular system of agricultural production but also how the Rundale members organised their payment of the rent.

Integrating the Rundale system as a townland within the landed estate framework

The setting up of a leasehold agreement *de nova* was rarely done on land that was not already populated by the native Irish. The Plantations of the seventeenth century and the colonial strategy of clearing the Irish natives from the land and replacing them with British tenants was an abject failure except for the Ulster Plantation. As a consequence, the commoners of the dismantled tribal system had to be readmitted back onto the land – not as tribal members but as rent paying tenants. This process of re-admittance was in fact a legal fiction as the native Irish never actually left their ancestral lands but legally they became tenants of a newly established land-owning Anglo-Irish elite. The consequence of this legal imposition is that the native Irish were now required to pay a monetary rent but their traditional customary practices of production continued although they were now formally part of the newly established landed estate. It is within these landed estate property restrictions that booleying and its specific form of valuation – the collop emerged within the Rundale system of farming. Thus the synthesis of these formal legal strictures associated with the colonial landed estate and customary productive practices of the Rundale commune provided a particular dynamic trajectory for this system of agricultural production. Accordingly, the Rundale system had to 'survive' within the spatial confines of the landed estate and the increasing antagonism between these two opposing forces, which can be best encapsulated in the conflict between acre and collop as opposing units of land measurement was in fact a struggle between the customary rights and practices of a communal system of agriculture and a feudal legal system based on private property relationship (Slater and McDonough, 1994).

Accordingly, the 'farm' was rented from a landlord through a lease agreement, specifying spatial co-ordinates of the holding to be occupied. These boundaries of the farm were legally identified on the lease map. The amount of rent to be charged and the actual duration of the lease was also part of this leasehold agreement. As has been suggested by Piers in the above, the rent relationship and its accompanying spatial reconfiguration of the landscape in a grid-field system was imposed on the customary productive practices of cattle herding and tillage cultivation of the Rundale system. However, this form of integration was a two-way process, while the Rundale system was incorporated into the landed estate tenure system, which was itself part of a legal system which continually attempted to undermine the customary communal rights of the Rundale, the Rundale system itself gave rise to the townland as a spatial unit which the landed estate was subdivided into as Danachair suggests in the following:

The choice of location was by no means haphazard for, apart from environmental conditions, there were long-standing and clearly recognized conventions of pasture rights. Generally, the townland was the unit; the people of a townland had the right of pasture in common in a certain area. This was usually within the boundaries of the townland, for typically a townland in a hilly district runs from seacoast or riverbank to mountain crest and so includes land of all kinds, from lush and fertile to bare and barren (O' Danachair 1983:36/7).

Therefore, in spatial terms the Rundale system and its diverse productive activities that spanned across a diverse range of ecological enclaves manifested itself as a townland within a landed estate¹. A townland therefore was a way of not just amalgamating the Rundale system into the landed estate but also of confining it and its productive activities to a particular spatial location within the landed estate.

The Livestock Collop as a measurement of pasture productivity

Unlike the determinate spatial configuration of the landed estate, the Rundale' customs and practices of production were determined by the differing productive capabilities of the soil within the specified confines of townland. The diverse productive enclaves were determined by how the soil could provide the necessary fertility and subsequent vegetative growth that could sustain a cow or grow a crop. With regard to the pasture collop because the Rundale cattle were 'cattle fed in common' (Gibbs, 1870: 20) there was no way to assess the actual spatial extent that each individual cow required to sustain itself. A collop is therefore a proportion of the overall pasture productivity which is assessed by the total number of cattle sustainable on the townland commonage. Therefore, the number of cows grazed determined the number of collops available to be portioned out among the Rundale land holders. The amount of collops within a Rundale townland is not determined by the spatial extent of the townland but by the natural productiveness of the soil on the commonage. And the difference in the soil fertility throughout the townland determined where the particular productive activities were located. For example, grazing tended to be restricted to rough mountain pasture especially during the grass-growing season of spring and summer, while tillage was generally carried out on the more fertile low-lying terrain of the townland.

The original form of the collop cannot be spatially located on the commonage as it is essentially a livestock stocking ratio where 'cattle [were] fed in common' and such pasture commonages could only support a number of livestock. This stocking capacity was conceptualized in collops. Therefore, a collop is a ratio of livestock sustainably on a quantifiable amount of land. And ironically you need to be able to identify the amount of land grazed before one could assess the number of collops within. Accordingly, with regard to

booleying on commonage, the spatial aspect of private property as a consequence of colonial landlordism and its essential manifestation of a boundary perimeter has metabolized with the communal accessibility of the Rundale system to produce a collop as a measure of ecological output.

However, the collop was not just a mere assessment of vegetative input into livestock in general, but was in fact identified with a particular species – the cow and a cow of a specified age as the following suggests from Clare Island:

The unit of measurement was based not on acreage but on the grazing capacity of the mountain pasture, that is, by 'collop' or latterly, 'sum', meaning the grazing needs of a cow or other beast over three years old. On Clare Island in the nineteenth century eight dry sheep were deemed equivalent to cow in grazing terms (Mac Carthaigh 1999: 43)

Thus the three-year old grazing cow became the standardized collop unit by which other grazing animals were assessed and their stocking rate reckoned as Evans suggests in the following:

Hill pastures ... are still held in common and reckoned in sums, lumps or collops, the unit of mountain grazing which fixes the relative grazing capacity of different kinds of stock. Thus a cow may be reckoned equal to four yearlings, five goats or sheep or say twenty geese (Evans 1967:53).

As the pasture collop is essentially associated with commonage and booleying, the feeding capacity with regard to the collop is only for the duration of the booleying season – the summer. A collop consequently is ecologically determined by the vegetative growing ability of grass and heather on mountain pasture that can sustain a milking cow over the grass growing season. And since the cow grazing on these booley pastures is generally a milking one, the collop has now to be perceived as specifically orientated not just towards physically sustaining the cow but also towards producing milk from that cow. Thus the collop when it is assessed at the level of production it takes on the form of being a 'milk' collop – the amount of mountain pasture that is required to produce a seasonal quota of milk per cow. The amount of milk collops on a particular commonage was the maximum quantity of milk produced within the ecological limits as determined by the amount and quality of grazing vegetation available on the commonage.

The Tillage Collop within and beyond the Infield

It appears that the 'pasture' collop was initially the determination of the land holding practices while the 'tillage' collop was a later evolution from the original livestock collop. This probably occurred under population pressure and the subsequent increasing need to feed a growing population rather than just be cattle herders and the inability the Rundale communes to colonize new areas, as the colonial estate system impinged on such movement beyond their respective townlands. Knight perceives this collop development from pasture to tillage:

The holdings are by sums and collops, which originally meant the number of heads of cattle the farm could raise by *pasture*, but as some tillage became afterwards necessary, they divided the crop-land into collops also as well as the pasture, and each farm (individual holding es) had its number of tillage collops and pasture collops (Knight 1836: 46).

In this scenario, tillage production as expressed in the concept of the tillage collop - is an example of the production becoming less nomadic and more sedentary as the foodgetting balance swung away from being dominated by milk and meat (herding) and towards tillage crops and even later to potatoes (as in spade cultivation)ⁱ.

Within the infield, a similar portioning out of the ecological resources as occurred in the pasture collop was observed by William Tighe:

‘The custom of these partners, when the ground is broken for tillage, is to divide it into shares or what they call ‘lochs’ and they are so desirous of making divisions equal in value, that each portion though small, does not always lie together but in scattered fragments according to the quality of the soil, so that a man having two acres of tillage may have two roods in coarse ground, two in deep, two in stony and two in wet, if these varieties happen to occur, when the division is made out ...’ (Tighe 1802:18).

Therefore, the amount of arable land held by an individual member was never quantified by a determinate or definitive measurement system such as acres, roods etc but was determined by the potential ecological output (or value) of the land area and the sharing out of its ecological output equally among the communal members. The tillage collop by necessity of having to plant crops in the ground was inherently ‘spatialized’ in that it had to manifest itself in particular physical enclaves within the infield unlike the pasture collop on the commonage. So accessing soil fertility in a communal way meant the necessary parcellization of individual plot holdings as the differing enclaves of soil fertility had to be physically divided among the communal members. This process of dividing out the portions of the equal ecological value was organized through a lottery, generally known as Changedale, as Otway identified among the Rundale communities in Co. Mayo in 1841:

‘... in the land appropriate to tillage, each head of the family casts lots every year for a number of ridges he is entitled to...and moreover the ridges change ownership (temporary possession es) every third year, a new division taking place, requiring each tenant to cast lots for the ridge, one in a good field, another in an inferior, and another in a worse’ (Otway 1841:35).

It is interesting to note how Otway interchanges the rundale concepts with the acreage concepts in his description of the changing locations of the tillage collops within the infield.

Michael Corduff in this volume shines light on what considerations were taken into account in allotting the portions of the tillage collop within the infield:

The distribution of plots within the infield was determined by the objective of allotting plots in an equitable manner, primarily reflecting each family’s needs, and consequently determining the quality, size and location of plots for each family unit. Each family could expect to have an adequate share of plots in terms of quality and productive capacity. At a given level of productivity, plots of high quality would be smaller in size relative to plots of low quality and *vice versa* (Corduff 2015).

Corduff’s insights here are significant on three counts. Firstly, the collop was not just held by individual persons of the commune but by individual family households. So the collop whether it was a pasture or tillage one was supporting a family unit rather than just a particular individual. Secondly and consequently, the size of the tillage collop can vary ‘reflecting each family’s needs’ rather than just proportioning the tillage infield out evenly. And finally, the overall point of Corduff’s insights is to warn us to be careful in not confusing the two forms of land assessment – acreage and collop – because the collop’s attempt to achieve ecological equality of the infield plots will not be reflected as equal spatial amounts under acreage system of measurement as Corduff continues:

Where plots allotted to individual families were inadequate or restricted in size, plots were made available elsewhere as recompense. A further complication in the distribution of plots was the stage in the cycle of crop rotation of individual households. Their requirements changed as their crops changed and this factor had to be considered. For example, if a plot was left fallow, then additional land would have to be available (Corduff 2015).

All of this effort to maintain an equal ecological output among an increasing population of Rundale's members would logically lead to an increasing parcellization of individual collop holdings across a range of soil types even within the same infield. However, Corduff also suggests that this process of parcellization may in certain circumstances go beyond the physical confines of the infield and consequently tillage plots can appear on pasture lands of the outfield and even onto the commonage itself. This extreme form of parcellization outside the original infield usually occurred because of excessive population growth. And according to Buchanan this involved the reclamation of pasture lands and crucially a reduction in cattle manure:

But reclamation of land for cropping led to curtailment of grazing, and a reduction in the number of livestock meant less manure for the infield when animals grazed on the stubble. Livestock numbers could be maintained if alternative winter fodder was available and root crops were an obvious solution, used in combination with a green fallow, which in turn would help maintain the fertility of the infield. If this was adopted, however, livestock would have to be denied access to the infield in winter. There were two possibilities; to provide enclosed pasture for the livestock or to enclose the infield strips. The former was often achieved by enclosing individually owned plots on the outfield; but the latter required common agreement since it denied rights of common grazing. This was impossible to achieve where changedale was practiced, and it became increasingly difficult as subdivision progressed (Buchanan 1973: 595–596).

Decreasing the amount of manure available was particularly problematic where the infield was constantly cropped and relied on that manure input to maintain its productiveness. So it is not surprising to discover that there were in certain instances an attempt was made to balance the pasture collop with the tillage collop (sum) as a way of maintaining manure supply for tillage production as Des McCourt suggests in the following:

Grazing was in common, but a rigorous stint was often imposed by 'souming', by which each tenant had the right to put on stock (or sums) in proportion to his arable acreage. The 'sum' had no uniform value, for the pasture conditions varied from district to district and even from time to time within the same townland (Mc Court, 1955, 375).

Here the dominance of pasture collop in determining the productive practices of the Rundale system has been superseded by the tillage collop as the tillage collop now dictates the allocation of pasture collops among the Clachan families, which is a reversal of the original relationship between these two contrasting forms of collops. This particular devolved form of the inter-collop relationship is an attempt to balance the potential manure output of the pasture collop with the necessary input of that manure into the tillage collop as a means of maintaining soil sustainability. In Mayo the same corresponding relationship was evident between the collop and the portions of tillage plots allocated to individuals:

As in other parts of west Mayo, the amount of stock a tenant was allowed graze on the mountain was linked to the size of his tillage area. Thus, people spoke of 'tillage' collops in the same breath as 'pasture' collops (Mac Carthaigh 1999: 42/3).

The 'rigorous stint' of collops allowed on commonage meant that the amount of collops never went beyond ecological capacity of the mountain to graze a certain quantity of livestock. However, what could change is the proportion of collops held by individuals. On the machaire commonage of Magheragallan, the 'stinting' control over the amount of collop allocated was necessary to prevent overgrazing and the subsequent 'desertification' of this type of coastal commonage:

In Magheragallan there were about sixty acres of commonage, and depending how much land you had in the three arable fields you were given grazing. If you had two acres, you could have anything up to

three cows on the commonage, but if you had only half an acre, you could only have two cows. The common ground could not support a large number of cows. This is why they had their own sort of divides. At Magheragallan there were divides know as *ait bo*, a cow's grass and *ait leath bo*, half a cow's grass. Really this meant was that you could keep two cows on an *ait leath bo*, and three cows on an *ait bo*. If someone who was only entitled to an *ait leath bo* bought an extra calf or cow, he would not be allowed to put that cow or calf on Magheragallan. He would have to find grass for it elsewhere, or else sell it again. That happened time and again. They had this way of controlling the grazing, because they knew it could be stripped and become a *siobain*, as they call it, that's where the sand would blow with the wind. (Coll 1990: 82).

So the process of parcellization with regard to the tillage collop is caused by many and diverse factors which could in certain circumstances lead to extreme fragmentation of holdings throughout the Rundale townland as Doran suggests:

Few could divide money as they had it not, but anyone having land could divide it and following up this old system, field after field, piece after piece, was divided and subdivided, until at last one man might have fifty or more pieces in a townland (Doran. 2000: 234).

However, this particular form of parcellization of land holdings was not a consequence of family subdivision as the result of such a generational reduction of the size of the holdings and the shape of these tillage plots would likely be uniform in extent while in reality the individual plots were extremely haphazard in their extent and shape as Doran continues:

Those plots varied in size and every shape possible, and to point out or define property large stones or other marks were set up here and there to mark a boundary. This was the Rundale System (Doran. 2000: 234–5).

Consequently, the 'fifty or more pieces' of an individual holding can only be determined by a form of division of the ecological capability of a particular spatial enclave portioned out among the collop retainers of the Rundale commune. Thus these enclaves were initially identified by their potential ecological productiveness and then subsequently divided among the recognized collop holders of the community.

The colliding 'worlds' of the rented acre and the communal collop

Doran in the following suggests that the residents of the Rundale had little understanding of the acreage system of measurement although it was constantly present in their lives in how the landed estate management dealt with them.

As to calculations of land in acres, roods and perches, most of the people hardly knew what such terms in value meant, as all calculations were made by them in what was called "sums (collops es) (Doran 2000:).

So although the Rundale residents did not calculate their holdings in acres but in collops (and sums), their rent was applied to a unit that was estimated in acreage – the townland.

Accordingly, '... the amount of rent was fixed for the townland as a whole' (Corduff, 2000: p.7). And as Gibbs has suggested a number of men from the clachan were named on the lease and thus were made legally liable for the rent payment:

Four men of the village, he (Sir Henry Piers) says, called Heads of Quarter, obtained the lease of a farm consisting of arable and grazing land, and then took in a number of others as co-partners (Gibbs,)

This type of lease was entitled a partnership lease which manifested itself in a rent form as a townland rent. But the proportion of this townland rent paid by the legal partners and their co-partners was estimated in collops rather than in acres:

The farm was valued according to the number of cows for which there was grazing ground, the grazing of cow being called a collop. Each partner paid rent in proportion to the number of collops he held (Gibbs,)

And the legally recognized partners collected the rent from the other Rundale families who held collops within the townland and presented that rental money to the landlord's agent:

If all who were connected in a joint receipt came to an agreement to meet the demands of the landlord, they met at a certain time and put their respective sums of money into one purse, but if one held back, the rest were forced to do the same for that day anyhow, but it made no great difference until by consent they collected themselves again. (Doran: 2000.234–5)

The difference and subsequent tension between acreage and collop forms of land configuration is that the collop is determined by the diverse ecological productiveness of the soil and how that fertility manifests itself over diverse spatial locations. Land reconfigured along the lines of acreage is a formal type structure within a determinate grid scheme where definite physical boundaries enclose soils of differing fertilities. In essence the difference can be expressed as a contrast between form and content. The former is an imposition of a grid form upon the land and on its indigenous ecosystems while the latter – the collop - is a natural occurring enclave of vegetative growth 'springing forth' from the land itself, whose spatial extent gives rise to natural boundaries that distinguish it from other ecological enclaves. Thus in the Rundale system the organically occurring collops are bounded within their respective townland of the landed estate. The Rundale townland is a manifestation of this tension. Up to the point of physical enclosure these two forces that operated within the Rundale system formed an uneasy but constantly evolving union to be finally broken by the real subsumption of acreage system over the collop resource allocation scheme. In the process of enclosure, the formal aspect of the acreage system came to the fore as the landlord's agents were, according to McCourt:

'... doctrinaire and in keeping with contemporary intellectual fashion, mathematical order became the ideal and 'corrected' or 're-modelled' farms of prescribed size and shape the end product (Mccourt 1981:134).

The formal subsumption of the collop productive activities under the spatial restrictions of the landed estate also gave rise to the particular rental form that was also imposed upon the Rundale producers. The townland rent was thus in essence a formal way of extracting a rent from this communal system of production without an explicit individual contract between the landlord and his tenant.

When the Rundale members were producing according to the collop principles they followed the natural and diverse rhythms of the local and indigenous ecosystems. In spatial terms this meant not only a diverse range of ecologically differing enclaves but also these 'located' enclaves had to be portioned out among the communal producers. In a sense, these ecological enclaves were initially sited by the commune and then subsequently divided among its members. However, these communal cultivators were not merely responding to the natural fertility of the soil but they also attempted to enhance the naturally endowed fertility capacity by cultivating those enclaves as in tillage collops. But even the pasture collop could be improved on the commonage by burning the mountain vegetation and releasing its nutrients for grass growth:

During the frosts of late winter and early spring, when vegetation on the hills and mountains was withered and dry, it was set alight. By the late spring and early summer, fresh green grass would grow and was suitable for grazing animals (Corduff 2015).

The burning of this mountain vegetation created the possibility of an increase in the stocking rate of livestock on the commonage and a consequential increase in the number of collops available to be shared among the families of the Rundale commune. Thus the collops of the Rundale system that were so crucial to the inner workings of that system and like the system itself were in a constant state of evolution right down to their demise in enclosure, reaching a point where the acre finally 'buried' the collop in a grid-like field system and in doing so the communality of land holding of the Rundale system was replaced by an individualised tenurial agreement between the tenant and the landlord.

Endnotes:

¹ Buchanan stated that:

Their land lay mainly within a single townland, a territorial unit whose mean size for the country is about 325 acres. If the townland was large, it was sometimes divided among several Rundale groups, each holding its land in lots separate from the other (Buchanan 1973: 586)

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