

Rabbiting on Bere Island in the 1940s and 50s

During the war, and for several years afterwards, rural Ireland had a lively rabbit industry. Millions of rabbits were exported to Britain every year. The market was there because at that time in Britain, *meat was rationed*, but *rabbit meat wasn't*. Also, there was a demand for *rabbit skins*.

There's a book called *The Rabbit Industry in Ireland*. It has a very interesting account of this industry. But, listeners might like to hear *first-hand* about the rabbit industry in ***Bere Island*** in the 1940s and 50s. So, Barry Hanley spoke by phone with the second oldest person living in the Island. That's John Sullivan (John Eugie) of Ardagh. John was born in 1935. The rabbits were plentiful when he was child, [1] *"they were thick around everywhere; merciful God, the meadows and all, there used to be nothing inside in them sometimes with the rabbits; the meadows were full of them, and nests of young rabbits and everything."*

When John and his brothers were old enough, they too went *rabbiting*, as it was called, to make a bit of money. [2] *"Sure there was no money for anything else. The last time they were buying them, they were 4 shillings a piece. That was great money that time. T was good as 4 pound now, or maybe more!"*

For comparison: islanders putting in the electricity poles in 1957 got 5 pounds a week.

The simplest way for anyone to catch a rabbit was with a *snare*. Lots of children had rabbit snares.

Many teams of young men used ferrets. You put the ferret in an entrance to a burrow, and then set nets at all the possible exits, and waited for the rabbit to be flushed out. The ferret had to be muzzled; otherwise, it would kill the rabbit and feed on it. And then it might fall asleep, and mightn't come out for hours. John remembers one time he was 'ferreting'. [3] *"I was with Brian K one time, that's a long time ago now. All Brian was interested in was girls. I was telling him to watch there now, the rabbit will come out, and he was looking at some girl, 'Oh there is a lovely girl,' and I was going 'O cripes, watch the ferret.'"*

If the ferret would not come out, they might have to knock down the fence to get it out. John remembers that a team of rabbiters from the west end [4] *"were down at my grandfathers and they knocked down some ditch, or they were trying to. He said, 'Knock it down; knock it down boys altogether.' So they did. Then he told them 'put it back up now.' He was a very witty kind of a man, like. You would destroy the fence, alright, like."*

The hi-tech method was called '*dazzling*.' John says that his brother Eoin was great at the dazzling. They did this at night using powerful battery-operated torches. In John's words, "The rabbits would run in to you once they saw the light."

When Eoin was going to the Tech, he used to stay in town during the week and come home at weekends. John told us how "Eoin would walk to the west end on Monday mornings with a strap of rabbits on his back. He would bring them out to the Sheehans, the buyers in Town."

In later years, [5] “there was a fellow outside, he would bring them up. And then there was a lorry coming as well; t’would come down to the Pontoon for them. Yerra, there was a bit of money in them alright. There was no other money there that time.”

[6] “They were putting them over to England as well you see. There was no meat in England that time like there is now.”

According to John, “they got so scarce because everyone was after them.”

[7] “They weren’t that dear first, like, but at the end, I think ‘twas during the war when the war was over they went down in price then again. “They were gone out of the island anyway; the last place we were was west of the Caupey’s place now where David Andrew is, we were west there, in the middle of the bloody night! If I went west there now, I would fall into a hole!”

John’s brother Eoin went off to Wales in 1956, when he was 20. At that point the industry was in free fall all over Ireland.

One of the reasons the market collapsed fell because some Irish farmers took matters into their own hands. Even with the hunting, the rabbits were increasing exponentially, and destroying the grazing and the crops. 40 rabbits ate as much as one cow. *And one doe* could produce 6 litters, or *60 young, in a year*. Then her female offspring will themselves start to breed when they reached 5-6 months. That’s a very big ‘R.O.’ number. Or, to quote John, [8] “They used breed desperate, you see”.

Also, their droppings were everywhere and made the grass so sour that cattle and sheep wouldn’t graze it. *The farmers wanted the rabbits wiped out.*

In in the 1930s already, the Australians found that **myxomatosis virus** was an efficient way to quickly kill off most of the rabbit population, without harming other animals or people. It was first used in France in 1952. In 1953, farmers brought it into England, against the wishes of their Ministry of Agriculture. In 1954, the Irish Minister of Agriculture, James Dillon, refused to grant an import licence. He was afraid it might spread to cattle or sheep. But by later that same month the ‘myxie’ was already in Carlow, Kildare and Wicklow.

In his 2016 book, the author of the book *The Rabbit Industry in Ireland* names the farmers who secretly brought it in. They had the skin of an infected rabbit sent to them in the post from the UK. It’s too bad the WHO didn’t sent this author to Wuhan able to investigate out where COVID-19 came from. Anyway, from these three counties, the *myxie* quickly spread (or rather, it was helped to spread!) to all corners of mainland Ireland. It quickly killed most of the rabbits – and put a big damper on the rabbit-meat industry.

Rabbits are poor swimmers, and so for a few more years Bere Island rabbits remained socially distanced and healthy. They had no natural predators, such as foxes. And the rabbit industry was tainted and in free fall. So the Bere Island rabbits continued to multiply exponentially. I myself remember that in Cloughland, one farmer had planted a cash crop. He was dreaming of a big return on his effort, only to have the rabbits wipe it out in a few days. John Sullivan has already mentioned the bare meadows. Barry Hanley vividly remembers how the rabbits destroyed a field of oats our father had planted.

At that point, several Bere Island farmers decided they wouldn't take it any more. They wouldn't let the rabbits eat them out of house and home. So, they took drastic action. In 1957 or so [as best we can tell], they brought in several myxie-infected rabbits. Those who were old enough at the time will never forget the 'myxie', or the strong feelings on both sides. The people against it said that it was cruel, and that it took away the livelihood of the 'rabbiters,' They also said that it wouldn't work longer term, just as it hadn't in Australia.

The '*myxie*' spread well on Bere Island and wiped out the lowland population; but it didn't reach the hill, so some survived. Charles Darwin would have predicted this *survival of the fittest*. This happened in the Australia experiments as well. So, indeed, the rabbits came back with a vengeance. By the 70s there was a very large population again. Then, probably in the late 80s or early 90s the myxie was reintroduced. And the population went way down again. But we can't credit *just* the myxie for this. There was a sizeable population of foxes in Bere Island in the 80s. Mink were introduced at some point as well, and are still there, and are probably keeping the numbers down. John isn't sure it's the mink, and has his own theory [9] **"Sure there's no rabbit now in places. They are below in Greene's alright. But where there is any dog, they wouldn't be around that much at all."**

But trying to balance nature, and to respect the natural order while making a living, continues to be a challenge. And, personally, John, with his love of animals, thinks back to those other times.

[10] **"We used to enjoy hunting the rabbits, But, do you know what it is, when I think of it now, if I caught a rabbit now, I'd feel awful to kill him. Or merciful God, I think we were cruel as well."**

At the beginning John's family didn't eat rabbits, but after that they did. [13] **"Some people would not eat them at all. One time, a young man was over on holidays from Wales/England, and he was saying something about rabbits, and he said 'Oh I couldn't eat them'. My mother cooked a rabbit. Whatever way she cooked it, she gave it to him. God, he said, that's the nicest chicken I ever ate. She said, sorry but 'twas a rabbit."**

[11] John's brother-in-law came over from Wales one time. He said to my mother, 'If I was around here, between fish and rabbits, you wouldn't want to buy any meat.' "If you said that to someone now, they would think you were daft. But no, I suppose we were daft that time I suppose as well. There was a lot of people after them that time. 'Twas the only way, sure you wouldn't get the dole or nothing that time."

On Bere Island in the tough 1940s and 50s, rabbiting provided financial help for many families. And as John fondly remembers, it provided a lot of fun for the young men. [12] **"That time we were only teenagers. We would never again see them days."**

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This piece was put together by Seamus Hanley. It is based on Barry Hanley's phone interview on February 12, 2021 with John (Eugie) Sullivan. John and his family have approved it. Additional information was provided by Barry Sullivan and Timmy Hanley.

The book I referred to is called *The Rabbit Industry in Ireland*, written by Michael Conry, and published in 2016.

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