

# The Bog Man's Daughter

by Jon Lipsky

Written for The Boston Science Museum's Exhibit on Bogs

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Deidre enters. She is a young Irish woman, bare-footed in a peasant dress.

Behind her is a backdrop which represents a peat bog with eight feet of turf cut away.

Up right there is a piece of thatch suggesting a hut, and down left there is a fire place suggesting a hearth.

Deidre carries a basket of turf. As music fades she takes out a letter and recites:

"I'm nobody. Who are you? Are you nobody too?  
How dreary to be somebody. How public like a frog.  
To tell your name the live long day to an admiring bog."

That's a poem. By the great American poet Emily Dickinson. My brother put it in his letter, just to make fun of me. He thinks I'm wasting my life "telling me name the live long day to an admiring bog." "Why don't you come to America?" he writes. "Be a factory girl in the great cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts," he says. "Wake up, sister! This is the nineteenth century!"

she crumples up the letter

Well, he can take his nineteenth century and stick it! Along with his cotton mills. I say, I was born and raised here by the bogs, and by God I'll die here too. Just like my father before me. They called him, "Fear na Mona", the Bog Man. He could cut more clods of turf in a day than any man in Connemara.

She picks up a slaene and starts "digging turf"

This is a slaene. It's used to cut peat. This here is peat. It burns cleaner

than coal.

music: Only a day in the bog...

An this is how I first learned to love the bog, riding out with me Da to cut the turf.

She sings:

Only a day in the bog,  
Ringed round by brown heathery hills,  
With the blackbird's clear song overhead,  
Where the little brook ripples and thrills,  
With the peat thrown around on the bank,  
And a clamp lying black here and there,  
Where clusters of white canawan,  
Wave their heads in the pure balmy air.

When I heard me Da sing that tune, I'd slip into me old clothes, the kind that were fallin apart already, because you know, the water on the bog is so full of acid, it'll eat through your cotton like a moth.

She acts out the trip on the bog

Then dressed in our rags, we'd hitch up the jennet and clip clop down the road, bouncin our bones. Well, it wasn't a proper road at all, but just a cuttin a branches laid down on the bog, all rutted out. Sometimes, cutting into the bog you can find timbers of ancient roads, much grander than the one we were on, preserved in the bogs for hundreds and hundreds of years, like the drawing of the ancient road you're sittin on.

music starts to fade, sound of wind

Finally, we would feel a cold, cutting wind coming off the moors, telling us we'd arrived at the turf banks, and we had to walk afoot, the ground soft like a sponge, pocked with dirty pools of water, and full of gold bog lizards.

lights up on turf bank behind her

The turf bank itself was eight feet high from all the years we had been cutting away at it. Cut and thrust and lift with the knee -- cut and thrust and lift with the knee -- nicking and slicing, going down, and down for the good turf, digging -- and there he'd have a fine row of grand sods like firm chunks of jelly. The first cut would be nothing but white and brown fum, but the deeper he dug the finer and blacker it got. Poor turf on top, cooking turf in the middle, and rich black coal turf down below. You can tell the quality of the peat by squeezing it. If clean water runs off, it's poor. If you get a brown dirty runoff, it's good enough for cooking. But the real rich peat to heat your home, why that squeezes through you fingers like chocolate pudding.

she shows the three kinds of turf

The next job was to dry the turf, because when it first came out, it was so wet, it'd fall apart if you moved it. So I would haul it with a pike and build a great structure of turf called a clamp -- dry sod on the inside, wet sod on the outside -- where sun and air and wind could cure them into solid bricks. A clamp is a little like the structure that you see over there, only done in the Irish style. Oh, I thought me clamps were beautiful. Like the poet says:

"When the night came down upon the bogland  
With all enveloping wings  
The coal-black turf-stacks rose against the darkness  
Like the tombs of nameless kings"

pause

Like the tombs of nameless kings... now that's pretty. And if it was very wet, we'd have to build a smaller pile called a foote. Now who would like

to help me build this foote?

one or two audience members build a foote with her

Thank you very much. Now who can tell what peat is made of? Yes, moss. This is sphagnum moss, the main ingredient of peat, along with other vegetation, like cottongrass and heather.

She sings:

"I was the cottongrass and heather  
I was the moss that grew  
But time has molded us together  
Beneath the years of dew."

fiddle music, she begins to dance

And when the work was over and the peat all piled up for the winter, we'd have a houley. Everyone would dance. A houley is sort of a party for everyone in the village. Unfortunately, in our village, there are only ten families left -- most have gone to America with me brother. And they all agree with him -- that I should rush to Lowell, Massachusetts, the eighth wonder of the world with its red brick factories and modern spinning machines. Why even Charles Dickens, the famous writer, says that Lowell, Massachusetts is the future of the world.

music fades, she stops dancing

But it's not for me. Money isn't everything. Oh, I know you can't grow crops on the moors, and the cows get rickets if you graze them on the bogs, but to me this land is not just a dump of soggy soil, but sacred earth, very ancient and mysterious.

sound of thunder, change of lighting  
she acts out the story of the Bog Burst

I remember one stormy night -- it had been raining like the angels were

watering heaven with their tears. Me father and brother were out with the cattle, getting them to high ground in case the river flooded. When suddenly, our neighbor, Mrs. McConnell, banged at the door, shouting "Bog burst! Bog burst! Bog burst!"

We rushed out into the rain and when we got to her house -- well, it was gone. Vanished! Nothing but bog where it once stood. Foolishly, she'd built her house below the face of the peat bog we had been digging.

points to the peat bank behind her

Remember I told you, from all the digging, the peat made a cliff more than eight feet high? Well, it seems the bottom layer of that cliff has been so soaked with water that it slid right out in mud slide carrying the top of the bog with it. Carried away her house, fifteen chickens, three pigs and a cow!

A week later, when the bog had stopped shifting, we went looking for the remains of the McConnell's cooking pots and farm tools and what do you think we found? The body of a Great Irish Elk, almost perfectly preserved.

Well, no one had seen such a thing before. It took a man from the University in Dublin to tell us that the Great Irish Elk roamed these parts many hundreds of years ago. It seems the acid in the water -- the same acid that'll eat right through your cotton -- keeps the water free of any of the tiny bugs that would normally eat away at the Elk's body, and the water also tans its hide so well, you could probably make a leathern apron out of the poor beast.

Of course, that's not all they find, buried in the bogs. I haven't seen them myself, but I've heard tell. Sometimes, they find bodies.

lights up on Tollund Man, mournful music

Yes, human bodies. Long since dead, buried in the bog. Human bodies from ancient times preserved as well as that Great Elk, preserved like mummies. As the poet says:

"As if he had been poured  
in tar he lies  
on a pillow of turf  
and seems to weep,

The black river of himself  
The grain of his wrists  
is like bog oak,  
the ball of his heel

Like a basalt egg  
His instep has shrunk  
cold as a swan's foot  
Or a wet swamp root.

And now he lies  
Perfect in my memory  
-- his orange hair;  
The horn of his red nails."

Yes, those bodies look so life like I'm told that when turf cutters come across them, they sometimes call the police, thinking they've discovered evidence of a recent murder.

music fades out



Maybe that's why we get so many stories around here about the boggy man. You know -- boggy man, boogiemán, bogeyman -- it's all the same - Bog Monster.

Well, I don't believe in the boggy man, but me grandmother did.

chant "Beannacht dei agus Muire ar an teach seo"

Every Christmas, she would bake a special cake of black bread and on Twelfth Night she would shutter the house and lock it up tight and bang the bread against the doors and windows mumbling Gaelic incantations: "Beannacht dei agus Muire ar an teach seo" May God and Mary bless this house.

Said it was to keep the boggy man from souring the milk and making mischief. And I'd say, "Granny, there's no boggyman" and she'd say, "Oh no!? Then what about that stream by the old church yard?" See, there's this old broken down church, just down the road from here and Granny always said the holes in the church and the flowing stream nearby were made by the boggyman. And this is her story, the story of the Boggyman and the Tailor.

she sits to tell story, sounds change, lights change

Once there was a little tailor named Timothy. And he was known as a coward. So to prove he wasn't a coward, he bragged to the bully boys of the town that he would sleep the night in the old broken down church, which they say was built over the home of the boggyman.

Well, Timothy was sitting there around midnight, stitching up a pair of breeches, when... all of a sudden... up from the church floor rises... the

boggy man! with a head of coarse black hair, long arms and strong claws and eyes like torches!

Timothy took one look at him and ran to the church yard, jumped the wall and into the graveyard and thou and behold, on that sacred ground, the boggyman couldn't follow him. So the boggyman got so angry that he tore the roof off the church and then he tore his own head off his own shoulders and threw his head over the wall at Timothy. And where it fell, burst a stream of sweet water, which you can see to this very day.

story ends, lights up, sound down

Well, now, I still don't believe in the boggy man, but I'm grateful to me Granny, because she taught me many secrets of the bogs. Whenever I had a fever she'd feed me a tea made of willow leaves. And if we wanted to go night fishing, she'd make torches from resin rich bog oak to lure the fish. And if there was a wound, she would staunch it with bandages of bog moss. And it was she taught me how to "tread the bog" and to tell the difference between dry heaths, grassy moors, watery marshes and tussocky fens. You may think it's nothing to find your way through the moss on a summer's day, but come winter, after the rains, you can get lost in it. Cause some moss may look solid underfoot until you step in a "soak" and find yourself knee deep in much and mire. I remember one city boy wanted to tread the bogs with me and I spent me whole time saying: "step there, don't step there! step there, don't step there!" City boys! That's all they've got in Lowell, Massachusetts!

pause

I can't leave here. If I left, who would know to bang the bread on Twelfth

Night. chants the Gaelic May God and Mary bless this house. It's not the work that keeps me here, cause sure there's little of that. And it's not just the mystery, cause I'm sure there are mysteries in America. No...it's the beauty of the bog that keeps me here.

summer music

Imagine the bog on a summers day. The white veil of the cottongrass, like a June bride. The lavender of the blooming heather, like a royal bedspread for the Good People. And as you go, you flush a snipe or grouse or a pheasant out from under a bush. Chicka chicka says the snipe, Ur-ruk ruk ruk says the grouse, kor-kok, says the pheasant. And when you look down, a big old hare wrinkles up his nose and hops away, and you smell the fresh fragrance of the rosemary. On your way, you stop to watch a dragonfly caught in the curious sundew plants. The sundews have these sticky little hairs that lure and trap the insects -- a bug-eating plant, you can watch for hours.

When your hunger overcomes your laziness, you go in search of juicy frouhans [fro kans] and there -- under a fern -- you see a purple glint of berry -- hmmm! I love juicy frouhans -- sweet and ripe for the picking. Night falls and a group of swifts suddenly streak overhead, like black shadows. A bat squeaks, an owl shrieks, and you're drawn back to your thatched hut by the smell of burning peat. There's nothing like the smell of burning peat and no way to describe it. To me.... it smells like home.

song music begins

It makes me sad to think someday, all this could come to an end. People say someday the peat will all be used up, and maybe I'll have to join me

brother in America after all. But I can promise you one thing. My heart will still be here. For I'm a creature of the bog meself. And it's here I belong, daughter of Fear na Mona, daughter of the Bogman.

she sings:

Only a day in the bog,  
Yet it floats in through memory's stream  
And wakes up strange longings in me  
But these longings must e're be a dream  
For I'm far from my home on the moors,  
And the broad ocean rolls between  
Ah! My truant heart must find it's rest  
Far far from the Island of Green.

THE END

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play with the Mysteries of the Bog exhibition  
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