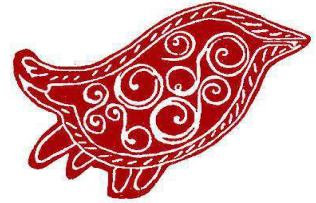


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Oats, Ash and Osiers: Christopher Sullivan (1926–98), *Súgán* Chair- and Basket-maker

By CLAUDIA KINMONTH

The following article is a tribute to the life and work of the late Christopher Sullivan, who died in November 1998, and was the last *súgán* chair-maker working with traditional materials known to the author. The information has been compiled with the help of his family, illustrated with photographs and objects from their collections, together with photographs taken by the author during visits to his workshop.

My attention was first drawn to Christy's chair-making through David Shaw Smith's book *Ireland's Traditional Crafts*.¹ As a furniture historian and woodworker, I realized that the chance to establish a link between the long continuum of *súgán* chair-making in Ireland, and a craftsman still working in that tradition, was rare and important. The history of *súgán* chairs has been discussed elsewhere, and the type and term 'súgán chair' (*súgán* is the Irish for 'twisted straw or hay rope') is known to date back to the eighteenth century.² More recently evidence has come to light indicating that 'rough wooden chairs with straw seats' were used in a Dublin Priory as early as 1337.³ My initial visit to Christy's tiny, earthen-floored workshop, in the late 1980s, was the first of several, and he not only provided *súgán* chairs for my friends and relatives, but also restored and resealed old and new examples whenever the need arose.

Christy was born into a farming family

from Droum, Lauragh, county Kerry, on 4 January 1926. His father, Daniel Sullivan (known as Dan Droum), farmed a holding of 72 acres, of which 12 acres were arable and the rest rough grazing for sheep and cattle. Christy's uncle, Patsy Riney, was a basket-maker and he must have been a strong influence, because from an early age he visited his uncle to learn his craft. At the age of 14, Christy finished school and had no further formal education, but instead worked occasionally alongside a local carpenter by the name of Burke, who taught him window-making. Christy in due course inherited his father's farm at Droum, and supplemented his farming income by working as a builder, including woodworking and making traditional sash windows. Subsequently, with the help of another local builder, Christy raised and renewed the roof of the old Droum farmhouse, and fitted new first-floor windows. Together with his wife, Noreen, they raised three children, Donal, Helen and Patrick, all of whom have since settled in county Cork.

Christy's son Pat recalls his father making tables and chairs for neighbours, as well as a settle and dresser for the Droum farmhouse. Typically resourceful, he also made the leather-clad wooden graining tools that gave the traditional painted grained effect to the settle. As well as adult- and child-sized *súgán* chairs (as in Ill. 1), he made traditional board-seated



Ill. 1. Inverted fireside log basket (unfinished) and *súgán* chair, both made by Christy Sullivan. He is shown here in 1975, at Droum, Lauragh, county Kerry, with his daughter, Helen Sullivan, and his wife, Noreen Sullivan, who made the rag rug which they are holding. (Photo: family collection)



Ill. 2. Round fireside log baskets, the larger with a grey hazel top and a willow base (17" high x 12" wide) and a *sciobóg* for straining potatoes (6" high, 19" long x 12" wide), all made by Christy Sullivan. (Photo: the author)

'carpenters' chairs' and slab-seated hedge chairs in a range of designs.

As well as wooden furniture-making, he turned his hand to basket-making. In his early days he would weave fireside log baskets (see Ills 1 & 2) and 'windowed'⁴ donkey creels for carrying turf home from the bog. He also made plaited straw mats and timber straddles, which held the pairs of creels comfortably on the donkey's back. He was commissioned to make a set of straddle and baskets, as well as some straw rope for binding a thatched roof, for the film 'Far and Away'. A popular design in his youth was the oval wicker 'skieog' or skib,⁵ which was primarily used for straining boiled potatoes (Ill. 2).⁶ As demands changed, he turned his hand

to flower pot holders, hanging baskets, and shallow, circular baskets for fruit or bread.

Materials for his basket-making were grown on the farm; young hazel and willow rods, which he harvested 'at the dark of the moon'.⁷ He combined these two materials with their contrasting colours, for aesthetic effect (Ill. 2). He stored them out of doors through the winter, or in a stream to keep them damp in sunny weather. In spring he would start weaving baskets, working outside near the stock of rods, where there was space and light. Rather than pushing the rods into the ground to begin the process, he would make his own special raised turf base, into which the vertical rods could be

pushed and held firm.⁸ Periodically the base became worn and needed replacing. A circular wire ring was laid onto the base to guide the positions of the largest, sharpened, vertical rods, which were evenly spaced, and then interwoven with more slender horizontal ones. Christy was accustomed to making his own tools, including timber awls for forming spaces between the rods, and a range of wire rings to suit different basket sizes. He used a cylindrical timber mallet to tamp down the interwoven rods between the uprights.⁹

With the advent of mass-produced, cheap string and fishing twine, the traditional straw or hay rope that gave the *súgán* chair its name began to be phased out by most chair-makers. Christy was an exception, and having learned the craft of twisting the rope, continued to seat his chairs in the time-honoured way. He would make the chair frames from locally grown and harvested ash, which was sawn in a nearby sawmill, then air dried by Christy under cover. His son Pat recalls 'I have many memories of taking my turn in the cutting, by rip saw, of the ash boards into the legs and cross members of the frames for these chairs, before the straw seating was fitted. The boards were marked up with a preformed outline of the chair legs and were cut by hand using timber wedges to keep the cuts open as they went further into the wood. These were smoothed by hand plane and spokeshave and bored by bit and brace or mortised by chisel, before being glued and clamped into position.'¹⁰ Christy was resourceful rather than a pure traditionalist, and in later years, by the time I met him, he had introduced some electric hand tools to his chair-making, which he enjoyed, as they made his work easier. These included a hand-held electric planer, an electric drill which he used for



III. 3. CHRISTY SULLIVAN
with scythe and oat stooks, c. 1990.

(Photo: family collection)

boring as well as with a disc sanding attachment for finishing, and in the late 1980s a jigsaw. The latter enabled him to produce curved, patterned back rests that became a hallmark of his later chairs.

To make the *súgán* seats, oats were planted in April and harvested in August. Christy cut them by scythe, and gathered them into stooks (Ill. 3). They were then flailed to separate the straw from the grain, which was fed to the cattle. Christy told me that the choice of oat straw gave the seats the best, most golden colour. Together with his wife, Noreen, he would twist the straw into *súgán*. They used a home-made croakeen (or thraw hook, *cruaichbín*), a cranked piece of wire resembling an old-fashioned car starter



Ill. 4. Christy Sullivan twisting *súgán* (straw rope) for chair seating, with his wife, Noreen Sullivan, at Droum, Lauragh, county Kerry.

handle, with two loose wooden hand grips and a hook at one end to which the rope was attached (Ill. 4). The resulting rope was then wound into a bundle the shape and size of a rugby ball, to prevent it untwisting, before being stored in barrels out of reach of vermin. The bundles were this shape and size so they could be passed through the ash framework of the chair when weaving the seat. *Súgán* made for other purposes, such as anchoring thatch or haystacks, could be made into much larger, round balls instead. The chair seat was formed by weaving around the ash frame, initially from side to side, then from front to rear, and each new bundle of *súgán* was bound onto the next with twine, and finally anchored beneath (Ill. 5).¹¹ This characteristically Irish

weave contrasts with the diagonally quartered pattern of English rush chair seats.

One of his first commercial influences was from a local craftshop in Kenmare, whose sales brought his products to the attention of a new and far wider market. Subsequently he sold his little children's *súgán* chairs through numerous craftshops mainly throughout county Cork, but also in Kerry, and as far afield as Galway.¹² Had it not been for this change in market, his production of traditional *súgán* chairs might well have ceased. In 1983 he spent about three months teaching basket-making for a Vocational Educational Committee Course in Castle-townbere. His wife Noreen also produced traditional hand-made crafts such as Aran sweaters and socks, rag rugs and circular



III. 5. Underside of child's *sūgān* chair, showing how the weave was finished off. (Photo: the author)



Ill. 6. Christy Sullivan's child's *súgán* chair, adult slab seated or hedge chair, with ash frame and elm seat, and child's hedge chair (the latter is aesthetically appealing, although in use, they have a tendency to fall over backwards, as the legs are close together). The adult chair is an essentially functional design; he used one in his own home (painted brown), and it is a particularly comfortable height for tending a low fire. The double stretchers beneath the seat are reminiscent of Irish factory-produced slab seated chairs, and make the legs more robust. He sold all these chairs unfinished, ready to be painted or sealed.

plaited floor mats (as in Ill. 1), which were sold through similar outlets.

Christy's attitude to his work was typical of a traditional old-school country craftsman: resourceful, almost holistic in the way he produced everything from his own tools and his own home-grown materials. He lacked the comparatively pretentious, meticulous approach of so many of today's designer furniture makers of the art and crafts revival schools, where aesthetics are too often placed before function. Christy's work could not be considered purist; it was unselfconscious to the point where some of his chairs contained nails rather than dowels, and the

finish was unsealed and sometimes rough around the edges. He was prolific, he used modern adhesives and seemed unconcerned about realising high prices¹³ or adding signatures, as a traditional craftsman from the past may have been. Throughout Christy's lifetime the demands of his craft evolved from things needed through functional necessity (Ill. 6), towards luxuries provided for Ireland's increasingly affluent society and the visitors who appreciated the scarce survival of hand skills. The course of Christy's work in chair and basket-making can be seen as a microcosm of Ireland's rapidly changing times and traditions, the like of

which is unlikely to be repeated in the twenty-first century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel privileged to have had the chance to get to know Christy and his work during the past decade. This information could not have been compiled without the research and consultation dedicated to it by his son, Pat, together with his widow, Noreen and other members of the family, to whom I am particularly grateful.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 D. Shaw-Smith ed., *Ireland's Traditional Crafts* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1986), pp. 141-3. This book accompanied the R.T.É. television series *Hands*.
- 2 C. Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993), pp. 52-9, 217-8.
- 3 'The Account Roll of the Augustine Priory of the Holy Trinity in Dublin from 1337 to 1339 reflects the comfortable lifestyle of Prior Simon de Ludgate and his officials . . . at Kilmainham', quoted in P. Somerville-Large, *The Irish Country House, a Social History* (Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1996), p. 19. The author is grateful to Victor Chinnery for drawing her attention to this reference.
- 4 J. Manners, *Irish Crafts and Craftsmen* (Belfast, 1982), p. 85: 'Usually the middle part of the basket is left with a good deal of openwork which keeps it light and speeds the work. This is quite satisfactory for turf and log baskets but for other produce, such as potatoes, the gaps must be kept small. The bottom is finished last by twisting and interweaving the sallies across the base.'
- 5 Presumably this term, as pronounced by Christy's family, derives from the Irish word *sciobóg* (a 'small skip or storage basket').
- 6 Christy Sullivan's potato basket is not round and flat, like some in for instance parts of Kerry, but has a curved convex base and is oval, similar to one shown as made by Alison Fitzgerald and described as an 'Ulster frame basket' in D. Shaw-Smith, *Basketmakers, May 5th-June 25th, 1994*, Crafts Council of Ireland Exhibition Catalogue, p. 7.
- 7 Presumably in accordance with biodynamic principles.
- 8 I have yet to discover this method described elsewhere, J. Manners, *Irish Crafts and Craftsmen*, 84, describes the conventional method, used in many parts of the world, as the craftsman sitting on the ground with a wooden board in front of him, on which he makes baskets; alternatively, for creel making, the long sallies are pushed into the ground to a depth of about six inches to hold them secure.
- 9 P. Smyth, *Osier Culture and Basket-Making, a Study of the Basket Making Craft in South West County Antrim* (The Universities Press, Belfast), p. 55, illustrates basketmaker's tools which include 'a slab of lead . . . used to beat the weave into shape.'
- 10 Quoted from interviews and notes kindly provided by Patrick Sullivan, compiled with the help of Noreen Sullivan, summer 1999.
- 11 This technique is also explained in K. Johnson, O. Elton Barratt, M. Butcher, *Chair Seating, Techniques in Cane, Rush, Willow and Cords* (Dryad, London, 1990), pp. 118-20.
- 12 These included initially Covenpton's in Kenmare, county Kerry; Anna Delaney's in Dingle, county Kerry; Judy Green's in Galway city; Liam Hurley's Old Pine Centre in Cork city; Eyeries Craft Shop in county Cork; Castletownbere Craft Shop, county Cork; and Kevin O'Farrell's craft shop in Skibbereen, county Cork.
- 13 When I first met Christy in the late 1980s he was charging only £8 each for his small children's *súgán* chairs.