

How the Irish invented ... Croquet

by Christine Kinealy, June 2016,
after playing the game in Strokestown Park

Croquet, a game that involves using a mallet to hit a ball through a hoop, was traditionally thought to have originated in France, probably around the fifteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, playing croquet became a craze amongst the leisured classes of Britain and its colonies. Recent research suggests, however, the modern form of the game was first played in Ireland and, from there, it transferred to Britain.



From the early nineteenth century, there is clear evidence that croquet was being played in the Big Houses occupied by the Anglo-Irish gentry. From this base, it gained in popularity and, as early as 1834, the game was being played in Castlebellingham, in County Louth, in Tuam in Galway, and in Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire) near Dublin. An article in 'The Field of 1858' mentions '... meetings of the County Meath Croquet Cracks. They were mostly young and met at each other's houses ...'. It is around this time that the game was starting to be played extensively in England.

By 1900, there were croquet clubs in Athenry, Athlone, Belfast, Birr, Carrickmines, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Lismore, Malahide, Mallow, Mullingar, Muskerry, Newcastle (Co. Down), Rushbrooke, Tullamore and Youghal. That year also, croquet featured in the Summer Olympics. Seven men and three women participated - and all ten competitors were French.

For the Belfast-born poet, Louis MacNeice, croquet became a prism for recapturing his childhood memories, and a visit to the Big House when he was 8 years old, in 1915:

*This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big
House he visited when he was eight: the walls of the bathroom open
To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop
To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child.
And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea ...*



By the 1920s, following a decade of turmoil, upheaval and partition in Ireland, the game went into decline. Today, croquet is reviving and it is being played in a number of Irish locations, including the beautiful walled garden of Strokestown Park in Roscommon.

Dr. Christine Kinealy was lecturing at the Irish Famine Summer School where she enjoyed a game with the Strokestown Croquet Club in period costume.