

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION
5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Mesolithic Fish Trap c.5000BC



It does not look like much: some small, smooth interwoven sticks embedded in the turf from a bog at Clowanstown, in Co. Meath. The bog, however, was once a lake, and the woven sticks are an astonishing survival: part of a conical trap used by early Irish people to scoop fish from the lake or catch them in a weir. Radiocarbon tests date it to between 5210 and 4970 BC. The delicacy of the work has survived the millennia. Nimble hands interlaced young twigs of alder and birch, gathered from the edge of dense woods that covered the land at the time. The warp-andweft technique is similar to the way of weaving cloth that developed much later in human history. The Irish trap could be called a classic design: similar items continue to be used around the world.

The people who made this trap were adept at using what was around them. They made circular, tent-like huts using saplings; they turned flint and chert stones into knives and other tools, but, as the trap suggests, this was as much an age of wood as of stone. They foraged, hunted and fished, gradually making a human mark on what had been an outpost of untouched nature. In human terms Ireland is a very new country. Recent finds suggest

the movement of our species out of Africa may have begun more than 125,000 years ago. There is evidence of settlement in Britain by people like ourselves as far back as 40,000 years ago, but there is no evidence of human settlement in Ireland before 8000 BC.

When hunter-gatherers did arrive from Britain, they found a densely forested landscape, a temperate climate and an abundance of animals, including wild pigs, wolves and bears (though not yet deer). Brown trout, salmon and eel were abundant in rivers and lakes. It is not accidental that the earliest settlements yet identified in Ireland, at Mount Sandel, in Co. Derry, and Lough Boora, in Co. Offaly, were close to water.

The people who made the Clowanstown trap may have moved with the seasons, following their best sources of food. They would probably not have seen themselves as belonging to a single, large, overarching group. Yet the flint tools they made were gradually becoming distinctive and different from those in Britain. Slowly and unconsciously, Ireland was emerging as a particular human space.