

## The Twenty-Five, Ireland's national card game



Eglantine Table c.1568, Hardwicke Hall, England, Game of Maw

For about half a millenia this game has been recognised as Ireland's national card game, and for much of it, Ireland's only truly national indoor game, yet it is also little known outside this country, or even, for many, within it.

### Basic Rules

Any number can play this game, from two to ten, but it is a pretty boring game for two people, seven is probably the ideal. After shuffling a deck of 52 cards, you deal in a clockwise direction five cards to each player in twos and threes, hence it will take two rounds to deal all the cards. The rest of the cards are placed face down in the centre of the table with the topmost card turned up. Then the person to the left of the dealer places one card face up beside them on the table and is followed by everyone else placing theirs also in turn in a clockwise direction, the idea being that the most powerful card now on the table wins that round or 'trick', which gives the winner five points. Twenty five points wins the game so you need to win five tricks (but this number changes according to the different variants obviously, so in fifteen or forty-five you need to win three or nine tricks, respectively).

How you decide what is the most powerful of these cards depends on two principles, essentially. Firstly it depends on the suit of the first card placed on the table, what was led. Ignoring the issue of trumps for a second, the point is that if a diamond, for example, is led then only a diamond can win the trick, and you must, if you have one, play a diamond, follow that lead in other words. The strength of each card, i.e. which of the diamonds will win the trick in our example, is reasonably simple to understand. It follows a natural order with the King on top, then the Queen, then the Jack, but after that it depends on whether the suit is red or black. The rule is that the lowest card number in black (and the Ace is counted as one) and the highest number in red, is the strongest. So hence the ten of diamonds is a reasonably strong card, and the Ace of spades, but the Ace of Diamonds, when it is not trumps, or the ten of spades say, are pretty useless cards and will virtually never win any trick. So again, in our example if say only four diamonds are on the table, one is the Queen and the others are the five, ten and nine or whatever, then the person laying the Queen wins the trick and gets five points. Then that winner gets to deal the next round etc, and obviously you will play five tricks in total for every deal, and will shuffle and deal again if nobody has won twenty five points yet.

The other principle is the issue of trumps. The suit of the card that was placed face up on top of the remaining pack of cards becomes trumps (so obviously if say the seven of clubs was turned up as that card, then clubs are now the trump suit). The rule is that a trump card always beats any other card, and you are always allowed to play a trump card if you have one, in other words you can break the rule on needing to follow the suit of the card that was led if you want to play a trump. So if we follow the example above, if on that trick somebody played a seven of clubs (playing that first trump when a different suit is led, is known as a 'prod'), and another person played a three of clubs, then the three of clubs wins (remember the lowest in black rule). When trumps are out, in calculating the winner of the trick you can ignore the other suits, they are going to win and its only a question of which is the most powerful trump.

But that gets a little more complicated, the rule for trumps is that the most powerful is the Five, then the Jack, then the Ace of Hearts (this special card is always a trump), then the Ace, then the King, then the Queen, and then you are back to lowest in black and highest in red to decide the most powerful of the remaining cards. Incidentally if you have the Ace of trumps, then you can 'rob' the card that was turned face up in the centre after the deal. You just place your worst card face down beside the deck and take that card and add it to your hand. If an Ace is turned up as that card after the deal, then the dealer gets the rob (again he just adds the Ace to his hand and puts his worst card face down onto the table).

The remaining rules relate to the exceptions about following suit when a trump is led (leading with a trump is known as 'hayving', 'heaving'). Normally if a trump is led, again by 'led' we mean the suit of the first card placed on the table, either, for the first trick, by the person to the left of the dealer, or by the winner of the last trick, say for example a club again, then everybody has to follow suit as always and play a trump if they have one. But the three strongest cards in the pack, the Five of trumps, Jack of trumps, and Ace of Hearts (again this card is always a trump), can be held over or 'renaeged', silently held over and not played when you were supposed to play a trump. (Only these cards can be held over of course, if you have another trump you need to play that.) If any of these three cards are played as the lead card, then they form a kind of hierarchy. Nothing can be held back if the Five is played, the Five can be held if the Jack or Ace of Hearts is played, and the Jack and Five can be held back if the Ace of Hearts is played.

### **Names of this game through history**

Its helpful when tracing the history of this game to be clear on the various names for it, which include, and correspond very roughly to the dates given,:

-1650 **Maw** (or "Mawe", in Irish "ṁáō" or "ṁáḡ", which is pronounced "Maw")

1650-1750 **Five-Cards**

1750-1920 **Spoil-Five** (or "Spoiled Five", "Spoilt Five")

1920- **Twenty-Five** (or "fifteen" ("five and ten"), or "forty-five" ("quarante-cinq" in French Canada))

There are of course some differences between these various games, but they are all very recognisable as the one family. For example it seems that Spoil-Five had a complicated pool system, which accumulated the stakes over the various rounds, and which is not now common anywhere (as far as I know) but using what seems to be the exact same rules as modern Twenty-Five. You can read some of the differences in these games by the game historian

David Parlett here: <https://www.parlettgames.uk/histocs/maw.html> .

Unfortunately its very difficult to ascertain exactly the etymology of that word *Máó* in the Irish language, although it clearly is an Irish word. It means 'trumps', or triumph in war, which may be the origin of the name of the game, or, going the other way, it could also just be the card game phrase spilling over into other meanings. It might also come from the Irish for hand, for example *Mám* means 'a handful', and so a 'hand' at cards could be the origin of the name (which could also tie in with the idea of calling the Five of trumps the 'five fingers'). At any rate its origin in Ireland (and where it came from before that, presumably Spain or France), falls into the dim mists of antiquity, but in all probability it would be pre-1500.

### **Noteworthy aspects of the game**

It strikes this observer that there are some interesting points to be made about this game, as it has survived from antiquity. Firstly that's the very point, how did it survive for that length of time? This game has virtually no profile in any media, it was almost never mentioned in any book, newspaper, or on radio TV or film, nor taught in any school nor having any national association, so hence the transmission of this game through history is truly an oral one. It was successfully passed on by father to son, or through a local community, down through history, and that for over half a millennia.

This is even more surprising when you consider that its quite a difficult game for beginners. This game is obviously related to say *whist* or *bridge*, but these two games are not all that common in Ireland, so the idea of tricks and trumps are quite foreign otherwise to most card players here. And while the rules are clear enough, and not all that many of them, they are enough to bamboozle the beginner quite a bit! But still it was always taught and played in a very widespread way all across Ireland, and through all ages, social classes and educational levels.

Another point is that its a very convivial game, there is no sense in which silence is insisted upon! Quite the opposite, a person on twenty points, and hence nearing the magic twenty five, might as well have a red flashing light on their head by the time the banter quietens down before what might be the last trick!

### **Tactics in forming de facto partnerships**

A related point then is that this is a very unusual game in that you are trying to win as an individual, and all through history this game was taken very seriously and played for for big stakes, but actually if you play it totally selfishly you will be severely criticised as not with the spirit of the game. In short it has the quality that while *whist* and *bridge* have formal partnerships, in twenty-five you form de facto informal partnerships, and like in those two games therefore you do not play completely selfishly, i.e. trying to maximise your points. The informal partnership you form in this game is against the rising player, especially a player on twenty points, everybody cooperates in stopping him.

A simple example might explain this: Say spades are trumps and you have the Five of spades but only useless other, non trump, cards apart from a King of hearts. You are guaranteed a trick then, because the Five cannot be beaten, but you would like to get ten points instead of five, so your best bet is the King of hearts. Most tricks will probably go to trumps (although

this depends, obviously) but of course sometimes that King can win, maybe for example he can win the last trick if all trumps had been exhausted by then. The problem of course is that there is a one in four chance that hearts will be led for that last trick, and clearly your King is totally useless if hearts are not led. So a simple tactic could be for you to aim to win the second last trick, and then, now that you have the lead because you won the previous trick, you can lead your King, so guaranteeing that hearts is the lead suit for the last trick, and hence maximising your chances of winning ten points instead of your guaranteed five.

That remains a perfectly good tactic, probably the best way for you to get ten points instead of five, and yet that is not at all how the experts play it. If you have an isolated good card like that Five, then you are expected to watch for any rising man in the game and hit him with the Five when the occasion serves, not to hold onto it in the hope of getting a stray other trick. Frequently the experts will hold onto that Five until the last trick – and so torpedoing their own chances of going to ten points – in order that nobody would get a ‘soft’ trick, in particular the person everybody is focused on.

The idea then is that you are cooperating with everybody else, except the perceived likely winner or winners, to keep the game going for another deal in the hope that you might get a good hand then when you can rightly play to win. Another way this partnership system works is that if anybody has twenty going into a trick, then the person playing the lead card will play a trump if they have one, because that can smoke out any good cards held by the twenty player (although not if he can ‘renaeg’ of course) and make it easier to defeat him, and that lead person will do this even if it destroys their own chance to get a trick.

That’s why it can be a subtly absorbing and deep game, as you sway between selfish and cooperative play, and why then it is also convivial, although this could just take the form of bitter recriminations from your fellow players if there was some way of stopping the twenty man and you messed it up!

This unusual feature has been a recognised characteristic in this Irish game for centuries. For example when two high up politicians were discussing who reclaimed their lands at the return of Charles II in mid 17th century Ireland, while noting the success of Lord Clancarty it was remarked that:

“...it is only such an help at mawe that can befriend Col. Richard Butler and Lord Fingal in the same nature...”

In other words you would only help them to stop somebody else, like the de facto partnership system in this game.

Finally if anybody wishes to explore further the origin and progress of this great game they can read the following footnotes, firstly Irish language references which might provide some clues, and secondly interesting references to this game throughout modern history.

by Brian Nugent

#### Footnotes

Irish language references:

1682

“**Σειρε να Σουδ**, written by Daithí O’Bruadair in 1682:

XLV

Σηρετλ ζαν τριμυροι δεχε τριμυρονλαι τρεδμετλ τυζ  
συριαιδ δε ζουζελαδλ ι ζουινζιοιβ σελετλ δε εριε

níor fionnadh i zúire zaoir bonnraoi a raorca a bhoio  
ácc inneall ir úrghaoi an gúirctir Céitinníó”

When wretches who held not a trump, who had nothing but rubbishy spades,  
Had forced in each province our chiefs to lie trembling in corners concealed,  
At court no man’s wisdom was found to release them from thraldom and woe  
But the talents and generous grace of the good Justice Keating alone.”  
(Rev John MacErlean SJ, *The Poems of David O Bruadair* (London, 1913) pt 2, p.282 and 283.)

### c.1730

In a poem by Turlough O’Carolan, *Máire an Chúil Fhinn*:  
“cíonairíe ban fáil: the foremost of the women of Ireland. Cíonairíe or cíonán means the ‘five-fingers’ at cards, hence ‘the best.’”  
(Tomas O’Maille, *Amhrain Chearabhallain, The Poems of Carolan* (London, 1916), p.282.)  
and another poem *Faoisdin uí Chasaide*:  
“ceilm: ‘I renege (at cards).’”  
(Tomas O’Maille, *Amhrain Chearabhallain, The Poems of Carolan* (London, 1916), p.332.)

### 1821

“Má, s.m. a paw.  
Má, s.m a trump; a plain, a field, level country.  
Má, a. of or belonging to the hand, s.m. a hare.  
Má, s.m. game, mocking, jeering, scoffing.  
...  
Mám, mam, s.f. a hand; Lan máimé, a handful.  
...  
Mán, s. a trump at cards.”  
(Edward O’Reilly, *An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin, 1821).)

### 1832

“Ceardach, a gamester at cards, dice, and such other games.  
...  
Cuiread, the knave in cards; cuiread zaoir cíonáí rreimio, rreio, muillio, zaoir harca, na má, ar féar  
fan iur, id est, the knave and five of spades, of clubs, of diamonds, and of hearts, are the best trumps in the  
game of cards.”  
...  
Má, a hand.  
...  
Máim, a battle, or skirmish.  
Máim, a breach, eruption, or sally; also flight; máim le záoíu air gáillibh, the defeat of the English by the  
Irish.  
Máim, to tear or burst.  
Máim, or máim, to be broke in battle, to be routed; zaoir to máimíe oirca, and they were routed.  
Máim, an affected attitude and disposition of the head and countenance, with a proud gait, &c.; thus it is said of a  
woman, ‘o chur ri máim uirce réim, or a cá máim uirce.’  
(John O’Brien, *An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin, 1832), p.90 and 141, 311, 312.)

### 1904

“Cíoná, -á, m., the five at cards, the best trump (Lat. quinarus?); used Fig[uratively] for a prince, a leader,  
and often in poetry for the Pretender (in Con[naught] somet[imes] cíonán).  
...  
Má, g. má, pl. máim, m., the trump at cards; fortune, fate; fig., a chief, a prince, often applied to the  
Pretender; díreardach má, a change of trumps, a political revolution; an má móim, the chief trump; cá an  
má móim aise, he is in luck; also g. -á, pl. -áirce.”  
(Fr Patrick Stephen Dinneen, *An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin 1904), p.139 and p.455.)

### 1904

“Trump (in cards), má.”  
(Timothy O’Neill Lane, *Lane’s English-Irish Dictionary* (Dublin, 1904), p.543.)

### 1907

“bonn = the “butt” of a game of twenty-five in cards.”  
(Douglas Hyde, *Naoi ndánta leis an Reachtabhach* (Dublin, 1907), p.55.)

## Historical References

A few early references to cards in Ireland, or to this specific game mostly in Ireland and some interesting English references:

### 1504, c.1645 and 1848

Footnote by Fr Charles Meehan:

“Card-playing appears to have been a favourite amusement with the Irish from a very early period. From the “Book of Howth,” we learn, that on the night preceding the battle of Knoctow (A.D. 1504,) the confederated Irish and English forces beguiled the tardy hours, “watching, drinking, and playing at cards, who should have this prisoner, or that prisoner, and thus they passed the night over.” Rinuccini, (p.112.) speaks of the same custom as prevalent in his time as though cards, beer, and dinner, were essentially necessary to an Irish merry-making. Happily, however, such sordid practice is going into desuetude, and people are beginning to learn that the interchange of thought is a more delectable way of passing an evening, than squabbling over Clubs, Knaves, and Trumps.”

(John Lynch, translated by Charles Meehan, *The Portrait of a Pious Bishop, or, The Life of Francis Kirwan, Bishop of Killala* (Dublin, 1848), p.182.)

### 1571

St Edmund Campion describing the “meere Irish”:

“There is among them a brother-hood of Carrowes [from Dineen: “Cearrúbach, a gambler, one who plays cards by profession”] that profess to play at Cards all the year long, and make it their only occupation. They play away Mantle and all to the bare skin, and then trusse themselves in straw or in leaves, they wait for passengers in the high way, invite them to a game upon the green, and ask no more but companions to hold them sport, for default of other stuff they pawn portions of their glib, the nails of their fingers and toes, their privie members; which they lose or redeem at the curtesie of the winner.”

(St Edmund Campion, *A Historie of Ireland written in the year 1571* (Dublin, 1809), p.27. This account is the same as in the Description of Ireland by Richard Stanihurst in *Holinshed’s Chronicles* of about the same date, as regards who is copying who I am not sure!)

### 1595

*A view of the state of Ireland*, written by Edmund Spenser in 1595-6:

“Next to this, there is another much like, but much more lewd and dishonest, and that is of their Carrows, which is a kind of people that wander up and down to gentlemen’s houses, living only upon cards and dice; the which, though they have little or nothing of their own, yet will they play for much money; which if they win, they waste most lightly; and if they lose, they pay as slenderly, but make recompense with one stealth or another; whose only hurt is not that they themselves are idle Lossels [sic], but that through gaming they draw others to like lewdness and idleness.”

(Stephen Barlow, *History of Ireland* (London 1814) vol i, p.8-9.)

### c.1595, London

A poem written by Sir John Harrington c.1590-1600 on the card games played at court:

“Then thirdly follow’d heaving of the maw,  
A game without civillitie, or law,  
An odious play and yet in courte oft seene,  
A sawcy knave to trump a king or queen:”

(*The Gentleman’s Magazine* (London, 1827), vol xcvi pt1, p.120.)

### 1611, London

George Chapman, *May day* (London, 1611):

“Lodovico: Methought Lucretia and I were at mawe, a game, uncle, that you can well skill of. Lorenzo: Well, sir, I can so.

Lodovico: ...The game stood, methought, upon my last two tricks, when I made sure of the set, and yet lost it, having the varlet [i.e. knave] and the five finger to make two tricks...

Lodovico: ....She had in her hand the ace of hearts, methought, and a coat-card [i.e. court-card], she led the board with her coat, I play’d the varlet, and took up her coat, and meaning to lay my five finger upon her ace of hearts, up start a quite contrary card,”

(Notes and Queries, April 1918, vol iv issue 79, p.117.)

**c.1609 and 1674**

“The following verses, which might have been written by Tom Tell-troath himself, form part of an inscription beneath a caricature [known as *The Revells of Christendom*] engraving of the same period, representing the Kings of England, Denmark, and Sweden, with Bethlem Gabor, engaged in playing at cards, dice, and tables with the Pope and his Monks.

“Denmarke, not sitting farr, and seeing what hand  
Great Brittain had, and how Rome’s loss did stand,  
Hopes to win something too: Maw is the game  
At which he playes, and challengeth at the same  
A Muncke, who stakes a chalice. Denmarke sets gold,  
And shuffles; the Muncke cuts: Denmarke being bold,  
Deales freely round; and the first card he shows  
Is the five finger, which, being turn’d up, goes  
Cold to the Muncke’s heart; the next Denmarke sees  
Is the ace of hearts: the Muncke cries out, I lees!  
Denmarke replies, Sir Muncke, shew what you have;  
The Muncke could shew him nothing but the Knave.”

[A better reading of the inscription from this 1609 cartoon:

“...Maw is the game  
at which hee playes, & Challengeth at the same  
A Monk, who stakes a Challice: France setts Gould,  
& shuffles: the Monk cutts: but France (being bould)  
Deales freely: Rubs [’robs’]: and the first card hee shows,  
is the Five Finger, which being tourn’d up, goes  
Cold to the Moncks hart: the next card, France sees  
in his owne hand, is the Ace of hartes, “I Leeze”  
Cries out the Monck; sayes France, “Show what you have,”  
the Monck could show France nothing but the Knave.”]

From the allusions to the five fingers and the ace of hearts, in the preceding extracts, it would appear that the game of Maw was the same as that which was subsequently called Five-Cards, for, in both games, the five of trumps—called the five fingers—was the best card, and next to that was the ace of hearts.(3)

3. “Five-Cards is an Irish game, and is as much played in that kingdom, and that for considerable sums of money, as All-Fours is played in Kent, but there is little analogy between them. There are but two can play at it; and there are dealt five cards a piece...The five-fingers (alias five of trumps) is the best card in the pack; the ace of hearts is next to that, and the next is the ace of trumps.”—*The Compleat Gamester*, p. 90. Edit. 1709. First printed in 1674.”

(William Andrew Chatto, *Facts and speculations on the origin and history of playing cards* (London, 1848), p.127-8.)

**1661**

Francis Aungier, 3rd Baron Aungier of Longford, to James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormond, 27th April 1661, referring to Lord Clancarty who was restored to all his estates on the instructions of the King, in contrast: “...it is only such an help at mawe that can befriend Col. Richard Butler and Lord Fingal in the same nature...” (Edward Edwards, *Calendar of the Carte Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library 1660-1687* (Oxford, 1877-1883) vol xxx-lxi, Carte 31 fol 151-2.)

**1683**

Richard Dobbs of Castle Dobs, writing in 1683:

“Lisburn, formerly called Lisnegarvey, from an old fort, where now Major Stroud’s house stands; which I have seen by the Irish called *Lysnecarvagh*, i.e., the Gamester’s Fort, for there they used to meet, and play the clothes of their back at five cards, as I have received it from old people 30 years since.”

(James O’Lavery, *An historical account of the diocese of Down and Connor, ancient and modern* (Dublin, 1880) vol ii, p.255.)

**1777**

Writing from Revd John Armstrong’s house as CofI Rector at Moyliffe Castle in Tipperary in 1777, and referring to his daughters and nieces, Thomas Campbell:

“As the events of chance were never important enough to engage my attention, I used to hate cards; I never could fee any amusement in being plundered by my adversary, brow-beat by my partner, and laughed at by the

standers-by. But now I am grown very fond of them; and such excellent lessons do the ladies give, that I flatter myself with becoming an adept.

Though Mr. Hoyle has laid down no rules for the game we play, it is worth all he ever taught put together. It is of so very social a kind, that the number of players is limited only by the number of cards in the pack. It does not impose silence like whist but affords a pleasant exercise for the tongue, and is more philosophical than even that Pythagorean game; for the initiated may see in it, as in a mirror, an exact image of the great play of life.

As in our game, one only can get the pool; so in the world one only can arrive at the pinnacle of fortune, in the same line of ambition, quia plures excellere nequeunt.

As at each deal one must lose, and another win, the utmost skill being sometimes useless, whilst a total want of it proves successful; so in life, some are born to large estates, or obtain them without diligence or address, whilst others toil on unsuccessfully, and are baffled at last, in spite of all the efforts of human wisdom.

Again, it often happens that a junto of young people who sit together, play into one another's hands, and of course one of them wins the pool; so in life, friends and relations, by mutual partialities, lead one another to fortune's goal, whilst the bestlaid schemes, of those who stand single and play fair, turn out abortive: something like an invincible necessity prevailing to determine, in all cases, the winnings and the losings, and to reprobate the maxim, quisque suae fortunae faber."

(Thomas Campbell, *A philosophical survey of the south of Ireland, in a series of letters to John Watkinson* (Dublin, 1778), p.163-4.)

#### c.1780

"No man in the country round could handle a 'dock of cards' with more dexterity than old Morgan [O'Connell, father of Daniel], and few persons, if any, could calculate with a nicer accuracy, not even Counsellor L\_\_k of gambling notoriety, and Morgan's countryman, the proper moment to lay down the ace of hearts, the five fingers, or jack of trumps. An instance of the height of perfection to which he attained in this accomplishment it may not be inopportune to give you, especially as to it, and the sound discretion he then used, his after accumulation of wealth, and consequent power of performing those experiments I have before alluded to, is mainly attributable.

Old Morgan held in early life a farm from the late Earl of G[la]n[dor]e, and on this gale-day went to that nobleman's residence at A[r]d[fe]rt abbey, in order to pay his rent. After its payment and getting a receipt, a ceremony he never overlooked, 'fast bind, fast find,' being his favourite aphorism, he was about proceeding homeward, when the day turning out extremely wet, his noble landlord, with his usual condescension, requested him to remain. Morgan hesitated, but at length Lord G being seconded by his fascinating countess, he succeeded in detaining him.

It is almost unnecessary to observe, that everything was done to make his visit comfortable, and render him quite at home. A difficult task you, sir, will admit, when there exists so great a disparity of rank, and a lively feeling of insignificance on the part of the guest; their endeavours, however, were crowned with success, and after dinner, his noble hostess, still anxious to add to the tenant's amusement, asked him if he played cards? Morgan then, in a hesitating manner, and as if afraid to refuse, replied, 'A little, my lady,' and a game was selected, such as was considered would best suit itself to the extent of his acquirements in that polite accomplishment.

The event, however, was not that which her ladyship anticipated, and the game terminated with Morgan having won the entire sum which he had paid that morning as rent. Lady G, like other losing gamblers, attributed her ill luck to an unfavourable run of the cards, and not to old Morgan's superior experience, and requested him, in expectation of retrieving her loss, to change the game. Morgan was all complaisance, at the same time prefacing each successive change with a profession of his 'knowing but little of any game, my lady.'

Not to detain you too long, suffice it to say, that almost every game, from one end of Hoyle to the other, was gone through, and old Morgan proving successful in all, won so large a sum of money as left him rent free on his lordship's property for many years afterwards.

But if he was successful, he was by no means importunate, and on the settlement of the night's accounts, he signified to her ladyship, that as in all probability the largeness of the sum he had won might make its immediate payment inconvenient, he would feel himself fully satisfied, and indeed thankful, by his lordship's giving him receipts in advance for the growing rent. Her ladyship thanked him for his kind consideration, the arrangement proposed was at once entered into, and old Morgan rode home the next day, chuckling in his sleeve, and exclaiming at the interval of every three or four miles, 'a little, my lady.'"



(Thomas Campbell Foster, *Letters on the condition of the people of Ireland* (London, 1847), p.726-7.)

### 1833

"It may here be necessary to explain that rustic gambling is conducted something on the plan of a lottery. The woman of the house has generally one or more of such articles as those above mentioned ["a good fat turkey, or a goose, or the herrings, or a piece iv the sheep.'], which are purchased by the party to play at a price far above their intrinsic value; each purchase is paid for in equal shares, and the winner of one or more games, at five and twenty, or first fifteen, as is previously agreed on, carries off the prize, which, in some cases, is sold again to the original proprietor, and again purchased by the gamblers.

...

'...I was near throwin' away the five fingers badly.' Amongst rustic gamblers the five of trumps is so called.

...

Bryan played a heart, (spades were trumps,) – Tim the king of clubs – Jem the ace of hearts.

'Not bad, faix,' said Denis.

Murray's turn came next, and he thundered down the knave of trumps, crying, 'That's yer sourt – that'll take the pearl off the piper's eye, I b'lieve.' He was gathering up the trick, which would have won the wager and the game, when Denis said, 'Asy a hegar, asy; I didn't play yet:' and laying down the five of trumps, quietly took up the trick."

(*The Dublin Penny Journal* (Dublin, 1833-4), p.109-110.)

### 1833

"...Hearts trumps! that stree! of a queen never brought me luck yet; whenever she turns up, I'm sure to be out for the rob, like the knave of clubs at "five and forty."

LORD DAMER, (laughing.) Is that an Irish game, Johnson, five and forty?

MR. JOHNSON, (playing with vehemence.) It is, my lord or was, in the good ould times! I believe your ladyship has renèagued!

LORD DAMER, (laughing.) Translate that, Johnson, for the benefit of the country gentlemen.

MR. JOHNSON, Is it *reneague* my Lord? Sure isn't it to refuse following the lade!"

(Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *Dramatic Scenes from Real Life* (New York, 1833) vol ii, p.68.)

### 1834

"...and ere he reached fourteen every one knew Phelim O'Toole as an adept at card playing.

Wherever a sheep, a leg of mutton, a dozen of bread, or a bottle of whisky was put up in a shebeen house, to be played for by the country gamblers at the five and ten, or spoiled five, Phelim always took a hand, and was generally successful."

(William Frederick Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (Dublin, 1834) 2nd series vol iii, p.235.)

### 1853

Doctor Patrick Keating speaking, with Rev Walton he was staying in the house of Mrs Keating's, in Callan Co. Kilkenny in 1853:

"...after the servant had removed the tea-things the whole party commenced playing a game of cards of "spoil five", at which we were engaged a long period..."

(House of Commons, *Callan Union Workhouse* (London, 1853), p.16.)

### 1882

Julian Marshall:

"There is no game called "Twenty-fives," so far as I can discover. The name is "twenty-five"; it is a variety of "spoil-five," not "spoil-fives." At "spoil-five" and its varieties ("twenty-five" and "forty-five") the turn-up is often called the "deck-head." The American "Hoyle," tenth edition (1875), says: "Forty-five. This game is evidently a modification of 'spoil Five.'"

The word renege can hardly be called obsolete, though so described in various dictionaries, since it still constantly used at "spoil-five." It does not signify to "revoke," but to "renounce,"—a very different thing. With certain cards you are allowed to renege, i.e., not to follow suit, though able to do so (cf. renegade). If you renege when not entitled to do so, you renege in error, or revoke. Chaucer's form reneyes recalls the French form, *renier*.

My belief is that "spoil-five" is not a variety of "twenty-five," but the reverse. "Spoil-five," also called "Spoiled Five," "Spoil Five," "Five and Ten," "Five Cards," and "Maw," is much played in Ireland, as Loo and Nap are in England. At the Cavendish Club in Dublin there is a "spoil-five" table in one of the rooms, very like a Loo-table, covered with green cloth."

(*Notes and Queries*, March 18th 1882, vol v issue 116, p.214.)

### 1909

“As for indoor games, the only distinctively national indoor game I know is spoil-five with its variants. This is a card game which is played in all parts of Ireland, and in which the value of the cards must seem extraordinarily topsy-turvy to players of games like nap and bridge.

...

There is a great deal of gambling over spoil-five and other games in some of the farm-houses, and, where money is rare, it is not unusual to play for the delf on the dresser, the geese in the field, and even bulkier stakes. Cards, indeed, are a passion in many Irish homes, and Mr Yeats's lines about “old men playing at cards with a twinkling of ancient hands” give us a picture of many a farm parlour and kitchen on a winter evening. I know a house in which regularly every winter evening at seven o'clock the game begins, and I think this is no exceptional instance of enthusiasm. Of course, the better-known card-games are common as well as spoil-five, but spoil-five may be regarded as essentially the national game, though I do not know whether it is Irish in origin or not.”

(Robert Lynd, *Home Life in Ireland* (London, 1909), p.201.)

### 1914

“We have forgotten how to play Spoil Five. Once the game was widely popular. You played it in presbyteries in Donegal. You played it in the shabby lodgings of medical students up for their terms in Dublin. You played it of an evening in the low-ceilinged parlours of Connaught

Squireens. You found its votaries in the Midlands, in Cork, in Kerry. Now it is played no more. Its rules are forgotten, or only survive confusedly in the memories of men who have long ago deserted it, becoming cosmopolitan in spirit and playing Bridge. I had some skill in the game once; but to-day, so long is it since I have met a player, I can only with an effort recollect the ways of it. Yet it was a great game, and, I think, truly national, a reflection of the

spirit of Ireland in the days of its popularity, a spirit waning now. No one except an Irishman could ever have played Spoil Five really well; for no one else lived the life which Spoil Five expressed as in a parable.

...

The game was always a fight to prevent other people winning. No wise player ever admitted by his style of play that he had any expectation of winning himself.”

(James Owen Hannay, *The Lighter side of Irish Life* (London, 1914), p.261, 266 et seq.)