

The Boundary of the Ocean

A Frenchman's walk through Ireland, 1796-7

(Promenade d'un Français dans l'Irlande)

De Bougrenet de Latocnaye

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In some places near these lakes are to be found little woods, and some small patches of verdure which ameliorate the view. It is evident that, with a little care, it would be possible to increase these oases. It is not to be believed that the inhabitants of this country are more wicked or barbarous than elsewhere ; they seem indeed to be better clothed than those who live near the capital. It is very easy to call them savages and to make sport of their misery. Will you believe it, readers and good people, if I tell you where I have really found savage and barbarous men ? I tell you it was in Paris, in London, in Dublin, in Edinburgh—in fact in all the large cities. What animal in the universe is more ferocious and cruel than these men, who, proud of their riches, often badly acquired, treat with disdain all who are not like them covered with gold ; who insult indigent genius and merit ; who, far from attempting to help a friend more honest and honourable than they are themselves, will see him languish in prison for a debt, the repayment of which would not be of much advantage to them, a repayment which they know to be impossible.

I feel calmer. I get angry in writing as in speaking, but in both cases the anger soon passes. Yes, it is true, there are savage and barbarous members in every society of men, but there are also good souls who think of nothing more than the well-being of their fellows, and the pleasure of meeting one of these makes one forget entirely the detestable sight of these who, like the devils, are never happy except when they are doing evil. I have finished my reflections ; let us return to Connemara.

The safe and deep bays into which this coast is cut, as well as the freedom from fear of customs officials, accounts for the presence of a number of people who are here for what is called quite openly the ' smuggling business,' as if it were an ordinary trade. I have gone into different cabins and asked, straight away, for brandy or claret without finding any surprise to be expressed. One good woman, like many others, said to me, ' There is nothing at present in the house, but my husband is at sea, and if you come back in a month you can have all you want,'

Although the coasts are somewhat of the same character as the rest of the country, they are more populous by reason of the *commerce* ; they are also drier and commonly covered with large stones, the little places between these being carefully cultivated.

In every country men are found willing to make profit out of the misfortunes of their fellows. The shipwreck of vessels especially excites the avidity of the ordinary man. It is only with infinite trouble that the law is able to save vessels from being pillaged, and it has even happened that the crew have been put to death when they attempted to oppose the wreckers' will. To prevent such wrong, the Government gives to every proprietor who saves a vessel from pillage, certain rights by way of recompense for his expenses, this remuneration being called ' salvage.' While I was in Connemara a vessel was unfortunate enough to be wrecked on the estate of a proprietor who was absent : the people of the country proceeded at once to board and pillage the wreck. The captain of the vessel, who was on board, sent to

Colonel Martin begging for aid, which was readily given, the Colonel sending some of his tenants with fire-arms, who restored order and dispersed the pillagers.

This country may be called the boundary of the ocean on the eastern side ; there is only one small single island between these coasts and those of America. Below the sea, however, is traced a wide bank, or rather chain of mountains, in the same direction as those of this country, and this bank or range reaches to Newfoundland, and forms the cod-fishing grounds.

The ancient Greek authors, Plato particularly, record the old-world tradition of an immense island, or rather vast continent, which was swallowed up in the sea to the west of Europe. It is more than probable that the inhabitants of Connemara never heard of Plato, nor of the Greeks, nevertheless they also have this tradition. ‘ Our country will one day reappear,’ say the old men to the young, leading them on a certain day of the year up a mountain and pointing to the sea. The fishers of the coasts also believe in this vanished land, and pretend that they have seen towns and villages at the bottom of the sea. The descriptions which they give of this imaginary country are as bombastic and exaggerated as those of the Promised Land ; milk flows in some streams and wine in others. This appears to indicate that the tradition was not invented here, for, otherwise, they certainly would have made some of the streams to run with whisky or porter.

They cannot fix the time at which their country, as they call it, was engulfed in the waves, but they are convinced that this misfortune did happen in what they call the old times ; and they believe that the destruction was operated by wicked magicians, and that a time will come when the country shall come forth from the sea as flourishing as it was when submerged by the waves.

This singular opinion induces reflection on the situation of Ireland and the different things which are found in it, things of which there are no traces in the European Continent. Ireland seems to be a vast rock situated in the middle of the sea. Contrariwise to the state of other countries in which the ground rises gradually from the coast to the centre, the coasts here are, particularly to the west, always the highest point of the country. The great rivers do not take their sources in the interior of the island, but within a few miles from the sea ; thus the Shannon rises near Sligo, the river Derg near Ballyshannon, &c., &c. Everything seems to point to a vast territory on foundations less stable than those of the island, which has been detached and swallowed up in the sea.

This idea may appear to be ridiculous, but after the description which I have made of the country near Galway, who would be surprised to hear one day that the whole of that part of the counties of Clare and Galway had disappeared suddenly, and that where there were wild rocks supported on vaults the waves of the sea now roll ? I am indeed convinced that this misfortune would have happened to this territory long ago had it not been for the high mountains which rise on the coast side and defend it from the attacks of the sea. This chain of mountains which can be followed along the bottom of the sea to America, does it not make it appear that the island formed part of a large continent which may perhaps have been joined to the new world ?

No tradition whatever has concerned itself with the monstrous animal with enormous horns which is to be found so often in the bogs. Certainly it would be considered remarkable that such an animal should originate in a confined country, the whole length of which it could run over in two or three days without fatigue. Could anyone suppose that this gigantic species of deer would be placed by Nature, always wise and always uniform, in an island so small as to become for it a prison, while the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America show not

the slightest remains of it, and even Great Britain, which in the north is separated from Ireland by only a dozen of miles, shows no trace of it ?

This race, however, existed in the woods of North America, although it would seem to have been a much smaller beast than that of which the horns and bones are found in the bogs of Ireland. But it may have degenerated, as have done all the species of animals which have been found in the two worlds.

Anyone may propound a theory. Mine is that the globe has experienced, in its existence, many terrible revolutions and overturnings, that what was earth in many places is now water, that where the fishes once swam there are now flourishing towns, and that, according to observations I have actually made, Ireland was a rocky cape of an immense continent which has disappeared, and Ireland is the only part which has escaped, simply because the abyss which was under the continent did not extend below that part which is now the island.

Here, again, let me make another observation. The sudden submersion of such an extent of territory, which I would imagine joined Spitzbergen on the one side, and, forming a large gulf, to have joined Ireland, the Azores, and Newfoundland on the other, would naturally displace the waters of the abyss and cause them to mount suddenly over land which rested firmly on its foundations ; hence the Deluge, according exactly to the words of the Bible, which say ‘ les portes de l’abîme furent ouvertes et qu’elles se fermerent ensuite.’

In such a tremendous overturning all matter lighter than water would float on the surface at the mercy of the waves, and on the receding of the waters would be deposited in the valleys or against the sides of mountains opposed to the current. In the warm countries the heterogeneous matter by the constant alternations of drought and rain would soon be reduced to dust, which the wind would disperse and unite with the earth, so that it could not be distinguished from it, while matter of a more solid nature would keep its original form. In moist countries, on the contrary, the deposits of light matter would remain and would be increased in bulk by plants which could grow on them. Hence the morasses or bogs so frequent in Ireland, and which are also found in the north of Scotland, always to the east of mountains which have stopped them when the waters were retiring to the west, and deposited them on the eastern hill-sides. If their origin was entirely due to moisture they would be found more often on the western sides of hills, since that is the most exposed to rain, which comes from the west.

They say that bogs grow, and examples are given showing that where once were woods bogs are now found. This, however, is for the same reason which I have given. If these woods had been cut down or burned in a dry and warm climate, they would soon have been destroyed or made to disappear by the perpetual change from cold to heat, and from drought to humidity. But in a humid climate they are covered quickly by moss and other plants, forming a mass which becomes a bog on account of the continuity of condition which never changes from moist to dry. There can be no doubt that the plants which cover the top of these bogs increase its size in time, and it may even be that peat mosses which have been cut may grow again if the plants have not been entirely extirpated, and if the waters have not been drained away.

Oh what a noble thing is dreaming ! I am not astonished that there are so many fools who practise it—it is so easy to go back nearly to the creation of the world, and arrange things according to one’s ideas. Nothing is more amusing to me, the author, than such speculations ; but it may be that they do not please you, the reader, so let us put an end to them and get back to Connemara.

I plunged into the mountains without other guide than my horse, who did not seem to trouble himself much about the road. It is a wolfish country, although there are no wolves. From time to time the view is beautified by the magnificent large bays which are so common, and which may be said to ‘tooth’ the coast. They are all very deep, and their shores exhibit more verdure than the rest of the country. Here and there are seen one or two comfortable-looking houses and some villages.

I had to get down from my horse pretty often, in order to avoid quagmires—he had so much trouble in getting out of some of them by himself that I believe he never could have succeeded while carrying weight. Often I met women who, as they passed on their way, industriously knitted those thick woollen stockings by which alone, to so many people, and even to Irish people, it is known that Connemara exists. I found it very difficult to know my way—in some parts it dwindled to a mere track—and I saw very few cabins where I could go for direction. I met several men who, in passing, did me the honour to stop, take off their hats and make a lowly reverence, saying in their language, ‘God bless you. Sir, may you arrive safe and sound at the end of your journey.’ If I spoke to them they appeared very pleased; one of them, for the sake of the pleasure of talking to a stranger, and in English, followed me for quite a mile, his hat under his arm, and nothing I could say could induce him to put it on his head.

At one of the places where the road seemed to disappear altogether, I fell in with the guide of Colonel Martin, who, from the summit of a hill he was crossing, on seeing me in embarrassment, made the valley resound with the echo of his voice. He came to my aid, but just as he arrived my horse, putting his foot on a large round stone, fell on his nose and I on my side. While I lay in this position, my good friend, like his compatriots, cried out ‘God bless you. Sir, God bless you’; and when he saw me rise he added, ‘Please, your honour, you are hard to hurt.’

Following the line of a considerable bay which penetrates into the mountains, I arrived without further accident at the house of Mr. Anthony O’Flaherty of Renville, on the margin of the magnificent bay of Killery. This water stretches for quite nine miles into the interior of the country, but everywhere is very deep, and vessels, once entered, are in perfect shelter from every wind that blows. If this Connemara should ever become populous and industrial, these numerous, beautiful, and safe bays will be a great advantage for its commerce.

This country along the coast would seem to have been inhabited a long time ago. Often there are marks of furrows in places where the inhabitants have no recollection whatever of cultivation, and here, as elsewhere, where there is no knowledge or tradition, the work is attributed to the Danes. The ancient cultivation of this country has certainly been the work of an intelligent people; whoever they were, they have drained peat mosses of considerable size and cultivated them, and it would seem that their method was, after having effected drainage, to cover the peat with coarse sea sand and pebbles. This operation alone, without the use of lime, has been sufficient to firm the ground and make it fit for working.

On this side of the mountains of Connemara there is no limestone whatever to be found, but formerly there was here a large deposit of oyster shells, out of which was manufactured an extremely hard lime. It has been used in the building of an old castle at the edge of the sea, and in this the stones are so excellently joined and laid that the whole appears as if cut from a rock. Mr. O’Flaherty himself used it for building his house. Unfortunately, the supply is now exhausted.

The inhabitants burn the seaweed on the coasts, and out of it form a greyish hard matter which they call *kelp*, a material which is used in glass making, and this is the most considerable industry of the neighbourhood. Hardly a tree is to be seen, but the country at one time must have been covered with them, for they are frequently found in the mosses, and the way of discovering them on the surface is very simple. The inhabitants go over the ground in the morning while the dew is on the ground, carrying with them long spits or rods of iron. They observe places where the dew has disappeared, and there they pierce the ground, nearly always finding wood, and being able immediately to say, pretty accurately, its length, size, and quality by renewing the operation at different places. When they have located the wood they proceed to dig. These trees are generally pretty sound, and furnish the only wood which the inhabitants can use in the building of their cabins.

Westport—Sligo—The source of the Shannon

I CROSSED the beautiful bay of Killery, and following the shores of Clew Bay, I came easily to Westport House, to Lord Altamont. It was a real joy for me to offer my respects to the amiable daughter of the victorious Howe. The little town of Westport has been entirely built by the father and grandfather of the present lord, who, following the good examples set him, has commenced to lay the foundation of another town, to be called ‘Louisburg.’ Here he affords shelter to the unfortunates who are obliged to leave the north of Ireland.

Lady Altamont takes a great interest in the poor, who come to consult her about sickness. She listens to them, and afterwards gives them an order on an apothecary for any necessary medicines. Passing through the country I heard of a benevolent project of hers which may soon improve the state of affairs. This is to establish a manufacture in which children and women may be employed. I was also shown a hospital which she has founded, and which she maintains at her own charges.

Whenever, on my travels, I have had the good fortune to find virtues such as here exhibited, I felt it to be a duty to mention them, without the least intention of flattery, but simply that I may incite others to follow such a good example.

The country in the neighbourhood of Westport is very well cultivated, and the view from the house and park of Lord Altamont seemed to me very pleasing and satisfying after my journeys through the wild and black mountains. In this neighbourhood is situated the famous mountain on the summit of which Saint Patrick assembled all the devils and venomous beasts, in order that he might cast them into the hole which is still to be found on the mountain top.

The mountain is called Croagh-Patrick, and is a very celebrated place for the penitences of the faithful, who come from all parts on certain days of the year. They climb the mountain partly on their knees, or barefooted—I do not know which and I have been assured that on the *fête* day of the saint there may be as many as four or five thousand persons on the mountain. On the summit there is a little chapel at which mass is celebrated on this day, and in it is a black bell for which the inhabitants have a peculiar veneration. It is used as a thing to swear on in legal matters, and no one will dare to perjure himself on it. They have strange ideas on the subject of this bell, and believe that the devil will carry them off immediately if they dare to affirm on it anything that is not true.

Croagh-Patrick is cone-shaped, and looks as if it had been a volcano of which the hole, celebrated in St. Patrick’s story, may possibly have been the crater. The country round about

is covered with ruins of abbeys and buildings round holy wells. There has been specially pointed out to me a large stone on which there are two fairly deep holes, and the inhabitants venerate it as having been used by St. Patrick, the holes having been worn by his knees while he prayed.

Catholics and Protestants here made use of the same building for services while their churches were being built. King James established several cannon foundries in the valleys in the neighbourhood, and the ruins of these are also visible ; the intention was to profit by the neighbourhood of the sea and of the woods.

I had intended to make a tour in Erio, [i] a considerable country and almost as wild as Connemara, but the season was so advanced that I was obliged to give up the project, and to proceed to Castlebar, which I found to be a very pleasant little town. As I stayed there some time, I could not help noticing the form of the church tower, which is exactly shaped like a syringe. This will not appear surprising when I say that the architect was an apothecary. I was here well received by the Dean of Killala.

In the mountains I fell in with a man who had the air of being something of a *bon vivant*. He told me that his profession was that of inoculator, and that he was about to inoculate the children of the peasantry in this wild country. He assured me positively that of 361 children inoculated by him this year only one died. When it is understood that if he has been unfortunate enough to have a child die on his hands, not only is he not paid, but he must escape promptly in order to avoid a beating by the afflicted parents, it will be seen that the poor devil must take great pains with his patients. I have often thought that this practice of the peasantry would not be a bad one to introduce into towns, to encourage the doctors, to whom the death or cure of their patients is indifferent, for they are sure to be paid in either case, and are never beaten.

In travelling beside this decent creature, who appeared to be very light-hearted, he told me his whole story. He was born in this country, and had been brought up by his poor parents with the intention that he should enter the Church, the while depending for aid and protection on a rich man, who unfortunately died at Dublin. Finding himself then without friends, without promise of aid and without money, he thought for some time how he could employ himself. It was just the time when inoculation had begun to be put into practice, and the terrible effects often produced by smallpox on these mountain folk gave him the idea of visiting them and taking up the profession of inoculator, after he had taken some lessons in the hospitals. Now he has been practising with success for thirty or forty years, but all he makes by way of income is not more than thirty or forty pounds sterling per annum. It cannot be denied that this man is really useful to society, and I believe him to be worthy of the attention of the Government, who might give him a small pension by way of recompense for past efforts and for encouragement to continue them.

When he had told me his whole story he naturally wished to know mine. ‘ Pray, Sir,’ said he, ‘ what do you follow yourself?’ ‘ You perceive,’ I answered, ‘ I follow the road.’ Tapping me on the shoulder he said, ‘ You take me short.’ It was a new idea for him, perhaps, that a stranger’s affairs are his own affair.

After this little story, can people take for truth the tales which represent the common folk of Ireland as idle, stupid, and incapable of improvement, when people reputed more clever have refused up to the present to adopt the sanitary practice of inoculation ? On the Continent, not only would the peasants refuse to allow their children to be inoculated, but even people comfortably off would make a like refusal. In England well-meaning proprietors

are often obliged to beg the parents to submit ; in Scotland they have not yet succeeded in securing adoption of the method, and yet it is generally adopted in Ireland even in its wildest parts. The children are not in any way specially cared for ; they run about and amuse themselves, nearly naked, after inoculation as before. When the fever takes them, it is only then that the inoculator is called to see them, when he administers a few simple remedies, which, pardonably, he may make somewhat mysterious in order to increase his credit, and to prevent the parents from becoming accustomed to apply these remedies themselves—a procedure which would mean to him the loss of his daily bread.

Following the banks of Lough Conn, which is a very large piece of water, and which should have been drained and dried long ago, I came to Mr. Cuff's at Castle Gore. I was told that he had gone to see his uncle, but I was received with much kindness by his young wife and by an aged man in the house, who had been his tutor. I went to see the little town of Killala, where there is one of those round towers of which I have had so often occasion to speak. This one is situated at a little distance from the church, and does not seem to have been joined to it. It stands alone on an elevated portion of ground ; it seems rather to have been built as a sort of signal tower for ships at sea than as a bell-tower or building in connection with a church. It is the only one I have seen in Ireland in such a situation. I went also to see the palace of the bishop, which in these provinces is the subject of a proverb used in connection with anything of rather poor quality, ' It is as bad as the palace of the bishop of Killala,' and this proverb seems to be in common use all through the province of Connaught. Unfortunately the present bishop has repaired it, and added to it a considerable wing, so that the proverb is no longer justified. This bishopric is reputed to be the poorest in Ireland, the bishop having only an income of £3000 sterling per annum. Poor man ! The deanery also is reputed to be very poor and not worth more than £500 sterling yearly.

As I rode through the streets, a man, who from his appearance I took to be the school-master, stopped me, and with an air of importance said, ' Pray, Sir, what is your name ?' ' Pray, Sir,' said I quite as gravely, ' what is yours ?' He was a little surprised at my question and did not think fit to reply. I found this kind of curiosity to be very common, being questioned on the road as to my country, my name, my business, &c., &c.

I returned to Castle Gore by Ballina, which is a fairly well-built little town ; there is a salmon fishery in the river which flows out of Lough Conn and forms the bay of Killala. The situation of this bay shows at once that it is filled with sand. I stopped between Ballina and Killala to look at the considerable ruins of an abbey two miles from the latter town ; it seems that formerly there was here a college, and some other public establishments ; the bell-tower is perfectly preserved, and, like all others of the abbeys of this island, it is placed in the middle of the church between the nave and the choir. This building is still held in reverence, and is one of the places to which the inhabitants come to perform their devotions. There is also a holy well, but it is quite evident that it is not of nature's making like so many others ; indeed, begging pardon of the faithful, I would say that this is quite another thing. It is a little chamber four or five feet wide behind the buildings, and situated over a little stream. I have seen many such cabinets in which people do not go down on their knees. The banks of the river, which flows out of Lough Conn, are very picturesque, and there are many charming houses. On my way to Scramore, to Mr. Nisbet, I saw a large round fort such as I have described. The *souterrain* (which I imagine is to be found in all) was here large enough to admit cattle, who took shelter in it from the heat of the day. Several of them having broken their legs and given great trouble to the peasantry in searching for them, the entry has now been closed with stones and earth.

It had been devil's weather during the night, and all the roads were watercourses. On one of them I found a man riding a rather good horse. We talked on various subjects for a while, and, knowing that the horse which I had was not fit to carry me much farther, he offered me another, and in the end, without other recommendation than the passport of my face, he took me to his house near Sligo and presented me to his family. It is very pleasing to me to have this opportunity to offer my compliments to Mr. Holmes for the fine Irish hospitality which he accorded to me. He called my attention, on the way, to a cavern in which the waves of the sea were sounding while it is yet a distance of two or three hundred feet from the shore. At the village of Ballysedere I saw a waterfall of considerable height, falling directly into the sea, and near it was one of the thorn-covered holy wells to which the good folk go to say their prayers.

Sligo is an ancient city, and consequently a badly-built one and very irregular. The port, however, is not bad, although rather narrow. I only stayed in this town long enough to provide myself with a wrap against the bad weather now coming at the gallop, although I saw clearly that my walk could not be finished inside two months ; in other words, I made an addition to my wardrobe of a spencer. I went also to visit a cattle-fair at the entrance to the town, and I found the farmers every bit as big as our Bas-Bretons, and finishing up their dealings exactly in the same way as at home, giving and receiving their guineas four or five times before coming to an end of the transaction by drinking a bottle. I presented myself immediately at Hazelwood, where Mr. Wynne lives. This is one of the most beautiful places I have seen in my travels, and it is also one of the places where I had the best of treatment and experienced every kindness. I have had a great many troubles in my long pilgrimage of exile. I have been often, very often, vexed by narrow souls who sought pretexts to wound me. One wrote me down as a democrat, another an aristocrat, a third as an atheist, and a fourth as Popish bigot ; in fact there is no sort of ridiculous and cruel vexation which sordid interest has not made me feel, but the esteem of people of sense and the glad welcome of even one noble-minded family has made me glad to forget such annoyances.

I passed five or six charming days at Hazelwood. On the evening of my arrival here I was invited to a concert at Sligo It was given in the Hall of Sessions, and appeared like a complete revolution of the usual sittings. The big drum was on the Throne of Justice, the fifes and flutes in the barristers' quarters, and the audience in the place of the culprits.

Next day I committed the folly of going out in a boat on Lough Gill alone, a sudden tempest sprang up and proved nearly fatal to me and my poor boat. Like another Robinson Crusoe I was fortunate enough to find safety on an island, one of a number of others, all covered with wood, as are also the banks of the lough. There is not here the variety of foliage that one finds at Killarney, but there are, nevertheless, some very interesting and beautiful places. The lough is about eight miles in length, the river which flows into it passes through the mountains, from which, on the other side, the Shannon takes its source. I have been assured that a canal of seven or eight miles would very easily connect Lough Gill with a navigable part of the Shannon ; this would be a good work, and would open up valuable communications with the interior.

Setting out with Colonel Cole, I crossed the mountains to the house of his father. Lord Enniskillen at Florence Court. His lordship had to leave for Dublin, but I found shelter here for two days in a most beautiful castle. I passed here near two lakes of considerable size, which are joined by a little river ; their banks are wooded, and beautiful to the eyes of the traveller fatigued by the aridity of the mountain roads he had travelled.

I met here, on the way, a funeral, and I noted that the women did not cry as in the south or west of Ireland, from which it would seem that the south and north of this island are inhabited by people who have not the same origin. As a matter of fact, those of the north of Ireland are much more of a mixed race, their ancestors for the most part having been Scotch.

On the day I left Colonel Cole I brought into execution a project which I had formed some time previously, to go and visit the source of that venerable patriarch of Irish rivers, the Shannon, and offer to him my respects. I commenced my expedition by visiting that deep cavern which is called the Marble Arch. The stone is really of rather finely-veined marble. The caves are formed by a stream which sometimes is visible, and at other times runs like a torrent under enormous masses of rock. The whole mountain appears to be hollowed by the effect of this stream, and it would appear that at a former period it ran at a higher level—one indeed can see at several places the former bed of the river. On entering the Marble Cave my guides did not neglect to tell me all the horrible stories that ever were heard about the goblins, hobgoblins, witches, ghosts, &c., &c., who haunted these shades ; one of them certainly told his tales in a rather mocking manner, but the youngest seemed to believe in the stories. At the entrance to the cave the elder of the two stopped, saying that he knew all about the inside, and that the young man would be quite able to show me all that was to be seen. As it turned out, this was rather a fortunate arrangement, for, otherwise, I should have been compelled to remain unwillingly for a time in this dwelling of fairies and ghosts.

After walking for nearly an hour among the rocks and precipices and waterfalls without end, I took the candle from the hands of my guide in order to look over a precipice, at the bottom of which I thought I could hear water running. How it came about I cannot tell, but the candle went out. ‘ Now,’ said my guide, in a melancholy voice, ‘ we’re done for ever, I would not move my foot from this place for a guinea.’ After having, with a great deal of trouble and effort, made the man at the entrance to the cavern hear, I was certain that he would go for lights, and set myself down tranquilly to pass the time, being much amused at the fright of my companion. ‘ Have you ever seen him ?’ I said. ‘ Who ?’ he answered. ‘ The great devil who put out the candle with his cloven foot.’ ‘ Oh no. Sir !’ he said, ‘ it must have been the fairy. Oh, I am sure it was the fairy ; she is jealous, and does not like anyone to come and bother her.’ ‘ Oh,’ said I, ‘ was it the fairy ; then she is a d——d b——h to have played us such a trick.’ ‘ Oh, Sir, Sir !’ he cried, ‘ don’t speak in that way about the good folk. You are on the edge of a precipice, and they could push you into it. I have never offended them, I respect them, and I am sure they will not harm me.’ At this last statement I could not refrain from laughing, and I called his attention to a faint ray of light which appeared at the bottom of the precipice, and this seemed to reassure him a little. Patiently we waited for our guide with the lights, who came about an hour later, and released us from this disagreeable situation.

On leaving the cavern my guides tried to dissuade me from attempting to visit the source of the Shannon, by representing the great number of difficulties I should encounter. It would be six miles there and six miles back, they said. Six Irish miles there and six back would be equal to fifteen English miles, and this distance over peat-bogs simply to see the source of a river was, they thought, a great labour for nothing. But Mr. Bruce, said I to myself, spent seven or eight years in searching for the source of another river (the Nile), why should I not spend four or five hours on a similar search ! and off I started across the mosses to find the source of the Shannon.

As with all great personages, the approach to this one was very difficult. As with them, too, access gained did not reveal anything very remarkable. However, there are few rivers which, having such a beginning—a stream of four or five feet wide by two or three deep,

flowing out of a round basin about twenty feet in diameter, and, they say, without bottom—can show such result in such short space. Within a mile of westward course the Shannon forms Lough Clean, three miles long by one mile wide, and then, proceeding southward, it expands into an infinite number of lakes, of which the principal are Lough Allen, Lough Bofin, Lough Ree, and Lough Derg. The two last-mentioned are each about thirty miles long with a width of nine or ten, and are dotted with numerous islands.

The country near Lough Allen is full of coal and iron mines. Forges have been established, and will become very profitable enterprises when the river has been rendered navigable for the whole length of its course.

After satisfying my curiosity and drinking a deep draught of the spring from the crown of my hat, I took my leave of the Shannon, and wished him, sincerely, the happiness of seeing prosperous the hospitable banks of the waters. ‘It is very surprising,’ said I to my conductor, ‘that they have not made a holy well out of the source of the Shannon.’ ‘Only the saints can do that,’ said he. But why have the saints not thought of it?—that is what surprises me. My conductor was evidently a lover of good living, for he reproached me, often, for neglect to bring with us something to eat. ‘You are always talking of eating,’ I said; ‘I am sure you must be an Englishman.’ ‘Don’t call me names,’ was his response. ‘But,’ said I, ‘an Englishman is as good as an Irishman—is he not?’ Thereupon my friend shook his head in a very significant way, and muttered a proper G—d d——n which gave me understanding of held opinion he cared not otherwise to express. It is very strange that, so many centuries after the conquest of Ireland, the two peoples should not be united—probably they never will be. In France a Provençal is as proud to be French as the Breton or inhabitant of Old Gaul. They have no prejudices against each other, except such unimportant ones as are born of distance.

With the wish to satisfy the needs of my conductor I entered a cabin, and the good folk dwelling in it counted it a pleasure to offer to us such as they had, refusing absolutely any payment in return.

Quitting the castle of Florence Court, I crossed a fine stretch of country and came to Enniskillen, where I was very warmly received by the Rev. Dr. Stock.

[1] I have been unable to find ‘Erio’ on map or in gazetteer. The author cannot mean ‘Eyre,’ since he mentions his visit to Eyre—or Iar—Connaught (p. 155).—Tr.

A Frenchman’s walk through Ireland, 1796-7 (Promenade d’un Français dans l’Irlande); ([1917])

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