

Between Galway & Clare - Walk 1817

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*Walks Through Ireland*

*1812, 1814, and 1817.*

*Third Walk,*

*Through Munster And Connaught, in 1817*

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*Killaloe, Banks of the Shannon, Oct, 24, 1817*

MY DEAR L.

We left Athenree exceedingly early, and had the good fortune to find a delightful path through the still verdant fields, which carried us half-way to Lough-rea. The sun glistened on the wet grass, and illumined the ruined buildings and walls of Athenree, as we left it far behind. Perhaps we walked over the silent spot where the warlike and unfortunate young King of Connaught lay ; we delayed little ; but, benefiting by the path and fineness of the morning, rapidly passed on, and reached Lough-rea to breakfast. This is a large town, of about five thousand inhabitants and beautifully situated on a fine lake. I grieve very much to say, that fever raged in it.

We stayed one day, and were entertained with hospitality and kindness by several genteel families. I feel bound to say, that in no instance, among many which have come within our knowledge, have they neglected the cause of humanity and the sick poor, when things were properly laid before them. Government, I am sure, will assist this unfortunate town. The many afflicting cases we heard of would fill this letter, if I recited them. Sudden deaths,—some snatched in the bloom of life,—some in middle age,—have filled Lough-rea with melancholy and alarm.

Staying one night, we left it very early the following morning. Twilight scarcely glimmered enough to let us discern the road ; and the quantities of water-fowl on the shore of the lake, as we passed, rising, with sudden noise and confusion, seemed to reproach us for so prematurely coming abroad. They were afraid of no Insurrection-bill, but springing up before sun-rise, scattered themselves over the adjoining country. As we walked on, the morning gradually dawned, and the smiling face of a fine agricultural country opened before us.

Ascending a hill, some miles from Lough-rea, we had a noble prospect. Our plan had been at first to go to Portumna ; but we resolved to take the opportunity of calling at Marble Hill, the seat of Sir John Burke. This is an exceedingly fine place, situated amongst noble woods, and commanding extensive prospects. Sir John and Lady Burke, and some very amiable relations, received us with much politeness, and entered into all the spirit of our tour.

It is impossible, my dear L., until I see you, to do full justice to the hospitality and polished manners of the gentlemen of Connaught and their families. At Marble-hill we spent two most pleasing days. Within two or three miles of it, we visited a remarkable spot. It is a kind of labyrinth, or rural improvement, made with a great deal of taste, adorned with some

fine old trees, and planted with young ones. A delightful spring has been formed into two wells, arched with old stones, in the grotto style. Some ponds enclose one side of this place, prettily shaped. Various walks and seats are curiously designed and made in every part, and a small stone tomb, yet empty, and with inscriptions of a melancholy and religious nature, is in the centre of this tasteful and romantic little improvement, whose space is not more than a quarter of an acre. Venerable ash-trees overshadow it. All this is the work of a maniac ! It affords a singular instance of the power of melancholy madness.

The author of this extraordinary and really beautiful work, is a farmer's son, whose family reside near Marble-hill. From some difference with part of his family, he became suddenly deranged, and betook himself to forming this rural labyrinth, and his own burial-place. For several years he worked indefatigably at it,—chiefly in summer ; and as he had some small property, employed labourers to assist him. The spot of ground he had from a neighbouring gentleman, and was probably attracted to it by the clear spring, and old ash-trees. His madness was very inoffensive, and to this solitude he devoted most of his time. He placed trout, and other fish, in his ponds and wells, which became familiar, and came to him to be fed.

This maniac has the last year or two become much better ; but he still frequents his favourite haunt, and its improvements do honour to his taste. From the inscriptions, I think religious melancholy must have preyed on him a long time ; and, if so, I can never sufficiently pity him. It is the most dreadful and deplorable of all maladies !

Favoured by Sir John Burke's protecting care, we visited the castle of Portumna on the following day. The Countess of Clanrickarde, his sister, a lady, whose virtues claim universal respect, was, unfortunately for us, not at home. The castle is very grand, and highly interesting. The great hall, stair-case, and the state drawing-room, are very handsome ; and a long room, in the highest story, is calculated for a fine library. It is in an unfinished state. There is an exceedingly fine prospect from the leads of the castle. The Shannon spreads into a great body of water, as it passes beneath, and the country is seen to a vast extent in every direction. There are several family-pictures, and a great deal of ancient furniture, which give a venerable air to many of the rooms. The castle stands in the midst of woods, and the village of Portumna adjoins it.

From the time of Elizabeth, the De Burghs' family became peaceable and faithful subjects to the crown, which they had often defied ; and Sir William De Burghs, having very meritoriously damped an invasion, led on by one of the house of Desmond, received much approbation, and a title from Elizabeth. When Lord Stafford acted so tyrannically in Galway, even in Portumna-castle, the Earl of Clanrickarde resided in England, and was esteemed and beloved by all. Vexation is said to have shortened his days. His successor, the Marquis of Clanrickarde, was one of the most exalted characters of his time. The family remained Catholic, but their sentiments of loyalty to the English government were of the purest kind. Lord Clanrickarde made every effort a good subject could and ought, in the reign of Charles the First, to assist the sovereign, and to restrain violence in Ireland ; but the despotism of Charles was too inveterate to allow itself to be assisted ; and the turbulent passions of the Irish, inflamed by the furious and bigotted Rinuncini, were too high to permit this excellent nobleman to have his just weight among them.

The Marquis of Clanrickarde, however, never swerved from the best-principled conduct ; never submitted, as Ormond did, to the parliament and fanatic leaders ; and untainted by the prejudice against Catholics, which narrowed Lord Ormond's mind, he laboured strongly to save them from the effects of their own imprudence, and to secure to them, in good time, advantageous terms.

Lord Clanrickarde refused a high command from the confederate Catholics, when they first concentrated their power in Charles the First's reign, because he would not stoop to be the instrument of their passions. He was their friend, but disdained to be the tool and football of their party. He finally accepted the office of lord-deputy ; and, though disapproving of the monarch's conduct in many things, he endeavoured to the last to struggle for the English crown, and to hold Connaught in obedience to it For these services, I believe, he never experienced any royal gratitude ; or, at least, was only suffered by Charles the Second, who received every service, and rewarded none, to live at Portumna-castle in dignified retirement.

How difficult was it, my dear L., in such times in Ireland, to pursue the rare line of conduct followed by the Marquis of Clanrickarde ! To sustain, with proud fortitude, his name, honour, and principles, he opposed the fury of the Catholic party, which he saw led to the discomfiture of all their just hopes ! He could not but displease the fanatic party, to whom himself, as a Catholic, and zealous friend to the crown, was obnoxious. He had the misfortune to serve two monarchs incapable of valuing so worthy a subject, and who were but too easily disposed to abandon, to all the fury of party, their most faithful adherents. What remained for so dignified a character, but tranquil retirement in Portumna-castle, when he had in the hour of danger done all that a subject and citizen ought to do ? If, however, he had experienced the persecution of parties, and the ungrateful neglect of kings, he had done his part to the empire, and he had conscious rectitude to bless the evening of his days !

How different has been the conduct of his present revered majesty, George the Third, to that of Charles the Second ! Through his majesty's long and glorious career, what firmness,—what sincerity has he not displayed ! Above all, he never abandoned a friend ! Literature has been encouraged by him,—faithful service rewarded ; and the love and respect of friends and subjects attend him in the evening of life ! Had the Marquis of Clanrickarde served such a monarch, he would have promoted the advantage of his throne, and the lasting welfare of Ireland ; he would have been cherished and rewarded as his friend !

Portumna-castle, as the residence of so great and good a man, filled us with sentiments of melancholy respect. Clanrickarde seemed to walk in its shades, musing on the follies of man,—reflecting on the past, and preparing for a nobler scene ! The ancient hall, the stair-case, and noble rooms, were full of his presence ! It added to my feelings, that an only and beloved brother had served under General De Burghs, the last possessor, and fallen in the cause of his country in a distant land !

We crossed the Shannon into Tipperary, to see a Mr. Monsell's beautiful house on its opposite banks. Sir John Burke had given us an introductory and we were greatly gratified by his reception, and by seeing one of the most charming spots on this noble river. Mr. Monsell farms extremely well, and has excellent gardens. He shewed us several fine views of the Shannon from different parts of his grounds, and fully understood the picturesque beauty of his place. Mingling agriculture, gardening, the delightful converse of books, and the society of friendship, this gentleman, in the bosom of a happy and amiable family, afforded, the pleasing spectacle of rural life, well and most usefully enjoyed. On the banks of the Shannon, his charming villa commanded the most pleasing prospect, and sat in the midst of rural elegance near its smooth and majestic stream. On the opposite side, Portumna-castle rose above its woods, and recalled to mind the history of other times.

Mr. Monsell shewed us some good experiments in farming, and one in particular deserving notice, where he had reclaimed a great deal of red bog (in a dry season), which now produced corn and potatoes. This place had formerly belonged to Lord Avonmore, a name dear to law and literature.

Mr. Monsell's conversation was enlightened and instructive. Hospitality and politeness made time pass quickly at his mansion ; and, though Mrs. Monsell's absence made us lose the strains of the harp, which stood in one of the rooms, yet Mr. M. made our day most pleasing, and sending his own boat with us to the Portumna-side, this gentleman omitted nothing to make the close of our excursion as agreeable as possible. At a late hour we returned to Marble-hill to dinner, and the following morning left its hospitable roof to renew the toils of the pedestrian.

The morning was cold, and threatened rain, but we had no time to lose, and hastily pursued our way. Our walk to this town was not interesting. We heard of dreadful ravage by fever on the way, and of entire hamlets infected by it. A mountainous district, called Feikle, between Galway and Clare, was said to labour dreadfully under this malady. From Portumna to Banagher, in the King's county,—from thence to Roscommon, and again downwards to Limerick, and on both sides the Shannon, the awful pestilence is spreading ! As we walk, death stalks around us, climbs the wild mountain-side, and desolates the plain ! The humble cottage is everywhere assailed by him ; and the proud mansions of the great no longer escape. The professions most exposed are the pious ecclesiastic, and skilful physician, who fall daily beneath his stroke ! In these, and many similar situations, we never feel one moment safe, but rely on Providence and quietly proceed !

Can an individual think of self, when a whole island presents before him so afflicting a scene ? Shall not a benevolent government take precautions against present and future horrors ? How often does history shew us Ireland afflicted in the same way ? And is not the misery of her people the grand exciting cause of fever ? We left Marble-hill with some concern, lest its very worthy and enlightened possessor should suffer from this general pestilence, as he had complained of illness, and was confined to his bed.

In short, my dear L., it has been difficult to avert melancholy, and pursue this walk with the same cheerfulness and vigour as former ones. I am far from holding gloomy and presumptuous ideas, which lead men to pronounce that the universal calamity which pervades Ireland this season is the work of an angry Deity. I see, plainly, that we have no occasion to impute vengeance to the exalted Creator of those smiling scenes of natural beauty at this moment bursting on the view, and whose benevolence has provided every thing for the happiness of man ; the wretchedness of this community, through whom we have wandered so much, may well be traced to definite causes on earth, without making Heaven a party to it.

I have the sweet hope that our ministers may lend their serious attention to the several letters I have troubled them with, pourtraying the unexampled miseries we have witnessed. I have hope that they may go further, and probe with undaunted hand the fundamental grievances of centuries, which have oft times ended in famine and pestilence ! I have placed before their eyes, in as strong a view as possible, the sorrows of this afflicted and depressed people ! I have painted, without aggravation, but with the pencil of truth, mournful and appalling scenes, which the pedestrian alone could explore, and which no government could fully know. They have not neglected my representations ; but, in one letter, the medical board of Dublin, appointed by the secretary and lord-lieutenant, rely upon a plentiful-harvest as likely to remove pestilence !

Alas ! my dear L., great as are the bounties of Heaven, they cannot remedy the long-standing errors of man, and their heart-rending consequences ! I have laid before the British minister himself the unhappy state of Ireland from present sufferings and my fears that money bestowed on public works might aggravate disorder, and not much relieve the people. I have drawn his attention, as well as the Irish secretary's, to the want of towns, hospitals, and

dispensaries, in remote parts of Ireland, which increases public wretchedness, and manifests a long disregard, in various succeeding ministries, to the people of this noble and valuable island. Pestilence and foreign invasion form the two great tests of a well-governed population. If they spread and succeed in inflaming the mass, I should say—"there has been great unhappiness here, and of old standing." The material is easily lighted up which has been allowed to ferment for centuries, and the conflagration often consumes those who have too inertly looked on. If I could indulge the expectation that the attention of government may be aroused by the testimony of an eye-witness beholding this nation writhing under pestilence, poverty, and famine, I should feel happy. Life is short, and the idea of the perpetuation of so many horrors is too dreadful to bear without one great effort to prevent it.

The Irish secretary has already done more to ameliorate the condition of this island than a long list of predecessors. Much yet remains ; and I, among others, sincerely wish he may continue to preside here till much more be achieved. No party-feeling has presided in my breast. I have neither wished to manifest acrimony against, nor servility to, ministers. It is their duty to attend minutely to this unhappy and long-suffering island, and provide a powerful remedy instead of a temporizing palliative. The volumes of history, and the mournful scenes of this day, ought not to speak in vain. If they neglect the noble opportunity which peace affords, their names will go down, as those of innumerable governors of Ireland, marked by the stigma of unjustly, impolitely, and cruelly neglecting the fairest portion of the empire, and of leaving the pledges, charters, and treaties of English monarchs unfulfilled ! The general welfare of the community alone has influenced me in the representations I have made. It is time to do some great act of benevolence and justice to Ireland. Her present misery is a cogent argument that a bad system has reigned too long, and that no feeble palliatives can remove mighty and overwhelming causes of evils. In the existing pestilence, . I trace an effect. In many other grievances, I observe others. But causes cannot be remedied by removing effects. A distinguished and learned Protestant prelate, now no more, said to me one day in his palace—"Our people are lazy and filthy ; and dislike every species of industry." His lordship pronounced on the effect, but mounted not up to the cause. A nation kept in a state of vassalage, can never have the vigorous independence or the virtues of industry. Its idleness and vices are fruits of its system, not its nature, in this country ; for well does the Bard of Greece sing with immortal truth, -

"Slavery takes away half man's virtues."

On our way here, we passed through the small villages of Woodfort, Mount Shannon, and Shariff ; and repaired to the house of the Rev. Mr. Martin, rector of a small parish in these remote parts. He received us with great kindness and true hospitality, and invited us to breakfast, at which his amiable lady gave us excellent tea and cakes. To pedestrians, having walked many miles in a cold uncomfortable morning, this was a circumstance too agreeable to pass over. Mr. Martin, sensible, well-informed, and educated, is placed here on a very small living ; I believe, not much exceeding £100 per annum. Surely, this kind of thing is injurious and disgraceful to the Protestant church in Ireland. Ought not the very large livings to afford something to such scanty provision for a gentleman and scholar of fine feelings and talent, spending his life in a sequestered scene, and unable to perform all the offices of hospitality and charity he would wish ? The Protestant clergy in Ireland do a great deal of good. They blend and harmonize things into social and animated union, and spread education, talents, and learning through this island. Their tithes make them rationally independent, and are deducted from landlords more than tenants. Their glebe is their freehold ; and they help to form a counterpoise to a great and powerful aristocracy. But I should rejoice to see no living so low as Mr. Martin's, and think £300 per annum quite little enough for any Protestant rector or vicar ; and the provision of £100 not more than sufficient for all curates in the Protestant church. To many excellent men of it we are indebted in our walks for hospitality, when we

called on them. You, my dear L., I hope, may agree with me in these sentiments. However, I write not to you as of any profession, but as an English gentleman of enlarged mind, finished education, and favourably disposed towards Ireland.

Within some miles of this, the views of the Shannon grew magnificently fine. We seemed to walk along the side of a long-spreading lake, rather than of a river. Lough-dring is, indeed, to be considered as such, with the Shannon flowing into it. An island, with some ruins, and a venerable round tower, offered itself to our view in one part, as we walked along. In another, wooded hills, or small mountains, formed amphitheatres round the circling bays of this noble body of water. The eye dwelt on it with surprize and delight, and the Shannon, so much admired by us at Limerick and its environs, as well as near Portumna-castle, seemed now to surpass itself,—to expand, and assume grander beauties,—to delight in mountain-scenery, and run into creeks and inlets, whilst his waves, agitated by winds, which had arisen since early morning, dashing and foaming on the shores, almost confirmed the illusion that the sea itself was before us ! We saw several beautiful places contributing to adorn these romantic and wonderfully fine scenes ; but the general appearance of the country bespeaks poverty. Few smiling cottages or good farm-houses enriched them. Nature had done every thing,—man little,—to make them all the eye could desire. Scenes, which are not excelled by those of Wales or Switzerland, here sadden the mind, when it reflects on the destitute situation of the poor mountain-cottager, and cannot repress a sigh in the midst of all their beauty.

The rain began to pour in torrents on us, as we got near Killaloe. The mountains were overcast with dark mists, and the river looked gloomy, as the storm swept over its surface. As we proposed reaching this last night, we continued our way, heavily drenched with rain, and almost petrified with cold. But we considered our labours drawing to a close, and bore our inevitable inconvenience and suffering patiently. Is it not well, my dear L., to experience, from time to time, what the people have to endure ? When they go to market, or to chapel, or to church, must they not often shiver under the storm, and drop with rain ? When business compels them,—when the sickness of friends call them abroad in the worst weather, they must endure all that weather can inflict ! Feeble age may bend beneath it, and tender youth shrink under its severity. It is good, surely, my dear L., to know what our fellow-creatures suffer on such occasions ; and if we recollect how badly they are often clad in Ireland, even a tear may start ! We arrived late in the evening at Killaloe.

Believe me, yours, Ac.

Walks through Ireland in the years 1812,1814, and 1817 : described in a series of letters to an English gentleman (1819)

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