

The Firbolgs

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1914

THE Boyne monuments, though of such antiquity that they seem coëval with the very rocks and hills, stand in reality for an end, not a beginning. They associate themselves with the culmination of pagan power, almost with the era which St. Patrick found existing in the fifth century. Beyond these associations rise dim shapes of legendary persons and battles, remote and vague, yet linked to certain definite places in Ireland. And nowhere are the vestiges of this prehistoric past more traceable than about the beautiful little village of Cong, and thence across the horse-breeding plain which skirts the east shore of Lough Corrib, back to the cathedral city of Tuam. The whole region is fairy haunted ; on Knockmagh (“ The Hill of the Plain”), which, rising some few hundred feet out of that level commands a strangely sweeping view, Finvarra, king of the fairies, keeps his court. No wonder ! For if, as some of my friends hold, what we call fairies are beings of a different and more ancient race who dwell about this earth, and of whom we humans are most easily aware in places where the ancient way of life has been little disturbed, and where old centres of fierce emotion still radiate something that can be felt, unobscured by the pressing in of new vitality, there is hardly a tract in Ireland more primitive in its manners and its beliefs, hardly a district more unaltered. [1] Or if, as the educated crowd believes, imagination readily invents shapes to people very ancient ruins, and is busy about dwelling-places of the forgotten dead, here we have cairns and tombs and dwellings that might well be tombs, which, standing almost as they were at first created, tempt the dullest fancy to bring back life into what is so unchanged and so little understood, so palpable yet so ghostly.

The whole country is dotted over with rath and liss, cahir and cairn. East of Tuam, where the soil is good, these early builders fenced themselves in with a roughly circular embankment, digging out a ditch and throwing up a mound. That was a rath. But where stone abounded to hand, they piled stones in a ring for a simple breastwork, and such forts are cahirs. These things are through all Ireland in thousands, protected partly by superstitious fears. But here, about the Corrib, there is frequently found what completes our picture of that old life, a place of refuge or shelter inside the rath or cahir itself, tunnelled far under the ground. Within a few miles of Tuam fifteen of these caves, or souterrains (as archaeologists call them), have been discovered. Somewhere in the enclosure or garth of the rath a small opening leads into a chamber perhaps twenty feet long, formed by walls of dry masonry with slabs laid transversely for a roofing. From this, at an angle, through a small opening, another passage leads into another chamber ; but the entrance is a trap. It is blocked to about half a man's height by a platform constructed in the inner chamber so that one entering must scramble up—his head coming first and his arms cramped in the hole. If a friend, he emerged on the platform and was helped by rude steps to descend into the inner apartment; if an enemy why, there was someone waiting on the platform to knock him handily on the head.

There is no reasonable doubt that these chambers which are found widely distributed in Ireland, but rarely so numerous as in this district were places of shelter for the living, just as it is certain that in Brugh na Boinne we have very similar structures, but on an ampler scale, erected for the abode of the dead. And it seems likely that the builders of those great monuments, living themselves in houses of some perishable material, timber or wattled osier, made for their dead glorified copies of the safest and strongest fastnesses they knew—adding a grandeur by the vast bulk of the stones they used. Dowth and New Grange are only the final development of a class of sepulchral monument of which conspicuous examples exist in the Corrib region.

The hill of Knockmagh, over the demesne of Castle Hacket, is crowned with a cairn—under which, legend says, lies Ceasair, one of the chieftainesses who accompanied the first colony to Ireland forty days before the flood ! If so she sleeps undisturbed, for the cairn is intact. But on a lower shoulder of the hill, near the road from Tuam to Cong, is another cairn, and here, not long ago, men were quarrying stone when suddenly they disclosed a grave. In the rough heap was a cist, formed by a level slab below and a level slab above it supported by upright stones. What they did, was to run away. Some time later a courageous man opened the cist and found it to contain a number of bones, and a small urn of earthenware, golden-brown in colour and delicately traced with patterns. Such an urn was in Ferguson’s mind when he wrote :

“ A cup of bodkin-pencilled clay
Holds Oscar ; mighty heart and limb,
One handful now of ashes grey.”

But my friend at Tuam, into whose possession this particular relic has come (by means which all antiquarians would appreciate and justify), believes that it contained not ashes but food for the dead warrior who earned so conspicuous a tomb. Labour was not spared, for the heavy slab covering the cist was of red sandstone, and must have been fetched a matter of fifty miles ; and here is a resemblance with New Grange, for one of the great stone basins there is of granite, and must have been fetched from Wicklow—or some place even more distant. But the point to which attention should be called is that here we have the first idea out of which sprang the Boyne monuments—and the others like them on the Lough Crew hills in Meath. The sepulchral chamber of large slabs of rock covered over by a pile of loose stones was doubtless familiar before men thought of building a house and gateway for the dead, and then heaping the cairn over this gigantic grave.

Who the hero was whose tomb stood over against Ceasair’s, and whose urn Dr. Costello has conveyed into safe keeping, no one can tell us. It is otherwise with the greater cairns at Cong : for near by there was fought the great battle of Moytura, which lasted four days, and surged across the whole neck of land which divides the northern shore of Corrib from the southern of Lough Mask. The story of that fight is recounted to us almost as precisely as any battle in the Iliad, and in the same vein. Giants and magicians took their part in it, and things were done beyond mortal power to do to-day. But, because marvels are told in the Iliad, does anyone doubt now that Troy stood and Troy fell ? The story of the battle of Moytura is perhaps the remotest thing in Irish history that comes down to us circumstantially described ; and there is no reason to doubt that it took place, or that it was, as it is represented to have been, a struggle between contending races for the mastery of Ireland.

Tradition tells of five invasions or colonisations of Eire, and traces them all back to an origin in the Mediterranean. Parthalon and Nemed, who led the first two colonies, are only shadowy names. Part of the Nemedian colony went back to the Mediterranean and served there as slaves set to carry earth in wallets from plains to enrich the hill-slopes with vineyards. So, we are told, they got their name of the ‘ Firbolgs’—men of the leathern sack.

Wearying of their task, the Firbolgs came back to Ireland and they possessed the land : a low-statured, dark-skinned, dark-eyed people. Forty years later, according to the annals, came a new body of invaders, the Tuatha de Danann. They also were of Nemedian stock, but had settled in Attica (whereas the Firbolgs went to Thrace), and had learnt magic from the Greeks till they eclipsed their teachers. When Syria overran Greece they fled, and settled in Scandinavia. Here possibly is some track of historic truth, some echo of the Persian wars ; and the Tuatha de Danann should be allied to Homer’s Danai. But to Ireland they came from the north : a tall, fair, blue-eyed race of magicians, whom the wind wafted over the seas by enchantment, till they settled on the Connaught mountains in the likeness of a blue mist. They demanded from the Firbolgs a share of Ireland, and when it was refused, they fought.

Sir William Wilde (who built for himself Moytura House on that part of the battlefield which looks over Corrib) holds that Nuad, leader of the de Danann army, pitched his camp on Ben Levi (vulgarly called Mount Gable), the flat-topped mountain which pushes in between Mask and Corrib, and that Eochy, King of the Firbolgs, rested with his power on Knockmagh.

It is not for me to contend either with or for an archæologist. Wilde's identification of places in the battle rested on his own interpretation of the story. Tradition appears in his day to have been as vague as now—relating the monuments merely to some great fight. But about the existence of the monuments there is no question. One stands a mile or two from Cong on the high road to Cross : another five miles further west rears up its bulk above the old road leading to Ballinrobe. This latter cairn, from which we looked across Lough Mask and saw all the hollows of the threatening hills in the Joyce country filled with streaming vapour, phantasmally sunlit, as if cloudy hosts of the de Dananns were still resting there, embattled, to descend on the plain, marks the final defeat of the Firbolgs. Here, they say, Eochy fell, slaying his three slayers : and victory rested with the de Dananns. Yet the cairn is unexplored, though much pulled about by rabbit-hunters. In the great cairn near Moytura House, some of these sportsmen told me, a rabbit will often disappear absolutely, having found a pass through the loose-piled stones into the recesses of the still unopened cave. One only of these cairns was opened, and of that I leave Wilde to tell the story.

The fight lasted five days in all, and on the first day victory lay with the Firbolgs : the cairn of Ballymagibbon is identified by Wilde with that which was erected under King Eochy's eyes for a memorial of that triumph, each man of his bringing a stone and the head of an enemy.

“ Next morning before the second day's fight began, King Eochy, unattended, went down into a certain well to perform his ablutions, and while there observed three of the enemy overhead. Eochy was saved by one of his own men who slew the three, but died immediately from his wounds on an adjoining hillock. The Firbolgs, coming up to look after their king, then and there interred the hero who so bravely defended him ; and each taking a stone in his hand, erected over him a monumental cairn. The well is not named in the ancient account of the battle ; but the little hill on which the conflict took place is called *Tulach an Triúr*, the Hill of the Three, and the monument, *Carn an Aonfhir*, the Cairn of the One Man. And there” (continues Wilde in the true spirit of Jonathan Oldbuck) “ they both remain to the present day—the deep well, now called *Meeneen Uisge*, in a chasm of the limestone rock through which the floods of Mask percolate into Lough Corrib—the only drop of water that is to be found in the neighbourhood, and so deep under the surface that the king must have looked upwards to see his enemies ‘ overhead.’ Immediately adjoining it on the south-east stands the hillock, crowned with a circle of standing stones, 176 feet in circumference, in the centre of which are the remains of the cairn : and the monument is still called *Carn Meeneen Uisge*.”

This cairn was opened under Wilde's directions ; the enthusiastic antiquary (father of a famous and most unlucky son) standing over the workers and exhorting them with recitals of the story, not in vain. For at last there was disclosed a small cist containing an urn in which were the incinerated remains of human bones, which had once, as Wilde believed, perhaps not without warrant, supported the bones of King Eochy's brave defender.

I must be candid about this cairn. The name of *Meeneen Uisge* did not survive in the memory of those whom I spoke with about the cairn of Ballymagibbon. But I am assured since that some of the older people still give this name to one of the underground rivers ; and if so, the cairn with its ring of stones should be easily identified by some one who is more willing to spare time from his fishing than was the unworthy topographer who hereby makes his confession. I did explore another cairn, at some expense of trouble, but it was the wrong one. It is easy to go wrong in the multitude of these monuments of that great battle.

The De Dananns conquered, but the Firbolgs were by no means blotted out : they are by far more traceable in history than their conquerors, who passed vaguely into legend, a race of the demigods. To Firbolg builders is attributed the great cahir of Dun Angus which crowns a cliff in Aran with its double ring of Cyclopean walls and its *chevaux de frise* of pointed stones. Clare was possessed by them, until, in the end of the fourth century, Milesians of the Dalcassian stock—the great Thomond clan—conquered and subdued these Firbolgs, but probably did not drive them off the rocky lands of Burren. Even after Christianity came, they were well recognised as a distinct people ; for it is related that the O’Kellys came up under the leadership of St. Brellan from the shores of Lough Neagh to take land from the Firbolgs, and, having defeated them, occupied Hy Many, the region between Galway Bay and the Shannon.

Mr. MacNeill indeed points out that Dugald Mac-Firbis, last of the hereditary professional historians, wrote in the seventeenth century a list of Firbolg tribes occupying land, at the time of Patrick’s coming, and of these there were forty-seven. Admitting that MacFirbis used the term Firbolg loosely to cover all the vassal peoples who were under Milesian rule, it seems probable that when St. Patrick came all the mountainous regions of Connaught and Clare—that is, the far West—were occupied by this earlier race, and as yet unconquered by the Milesian kings. In later days sovereignty changed frequently, but probably the race has altered very little. Dr. Costello thinks that in the district north of Tuam, called in Irish *Conmaicne Cinel Dubhán*, the folk still keep the short stature, the dark eyes and hair of the primitive stock, whose vanquished king rests under the cairn on the shore of Lough Mask behind Captain Boycott’s famous residence. So the two ends of Irish history meet—at least locally.

This earliest stratum of historical deposit in the region east and north of Lough Corrib is the special concern of this chapter. Yet there are other fields of interest, only too ample, to be explored and indicated. Once across the Shannon, you are in a different Ireland from any that exists to the east of that great natural dividing line ; for in Connaught neither Dane nor Norman nor Englishman (except, perhaps, about Sligo) has left a distinctive trace. They have come, indeed, they have drawn money out of the country ; but if they have stayed, they have been fused into the Irishry. Recalcitrant Connaught has received from alien civilisation only the railway, the workhouse, and the gaol. What her own civilisation was able to do for her own people may be better judged, perhaps, at Cong than any other place ; for Cong, now an obscure village visited by a few tourists and fishermen, was once a great school of learning, the resort of many students—and not less famous for the skill of artificers, whose priceless work in metal rivals that of any age or country. This is not too bold a brag to make concerning the Cross of Cong, that marvellous shrine which was fashioned in the twelfth century by the orders of Turlough O’Conor, the High King. What the monkish illuminator did with pencil and colours in the Book of Kells, another monk here in the West did with infinitely fine tracery of drawn metal and with inlay of precious stones. And just as the cross at Monasterboice makes a kind of complement to the Book of Kells, so that both must be considered together by whoever wishes to judge the degree to which purely Irish craftsmanship attained in the Boyne valley ; so here the Cross of Cong should be studied in connection with that other different yet very similar masterpiece, the chancel arch at Tuam. And since Tuam is on the way to Cong, let us first write of Tuam. [2]

Not many visitors from the outside world come to Tuam, I think, and the loss is theirs ; for nowhere in all my journeyings did I see and hear so much of interest. Yet this means, in part, that nowhere else was I under the guidance of an antiquarian who was also an Irish scholar and a sportsman—and, above all, one to whom nothing seemed alien that was a part of Irish life or Irish history. My task is only to put down a few siftings from the rich mine of his discourse.

East of Tuam, on the road to Miltown, we went to see souterrains, but saw also *Muilionn an Leipreacháin*, a fairy mill, such as are not uncommon in this porous limestone country, among the turloughs in which it abounds. The turlough is a boggy hollow, always flooded in winter, but in the summer drained off into underground rivers by *slugga*, or swallow-holes. Here on the Miltown road was a turlough on our right, from which a small watercourse ran trickling till it was carried by a culvert under the road and emerged on the left, where a wide rocky bed showed how considerable a stream it must be in winter. But a little distance off, under a clump of thorn trees, the watercourse ended ; and standing there, by the chasm where the limpid water sank out of sight, one seemed to hear the humming and whirling of busy wheels at work in the recesses below. Myth-making fancy could have no more obvious suggestion ; and legend tells how in the old times people left their corn overnight by the mouth of these mills and came to find it ready ground for them in the morning, till, one evil night, some covetous thief stole a poor widow's corn, and the fairies, in disgust with humanity, ceased their good offices for ever.

For this occurrence history gives no date. But a little further on the same road, at Kilbannon Church, we came on the track of St. Patrick ; the print of his two knees is shown near the shattered round tower, erected where the Apostle left his disciple St. Benen whose disciple again was St. Jarlath, Tuam's founder. In this direction also are the ruins of an ancient nunnery standing near the Clare-Galway river ; it was founded by a daughter of King Turlough O'Conor, who became its abbess ; and I should know nothing about it but that I went to fish an excellent pool in the river just below, and noticed the road hedged with crab-apple trees—very beautiful in the late autumn. My antiquarian's theory was that these apples were degenerates, escaped from the trim orchard [3] which had once surrounded the nunnery in days when there was tillage and gardening where now bullocks roam in undisputed possession of the rich pasture.

Yet the bullocks' reign is challenged, for about Tuam land is being bought by small tenants, and where these make an oasis among the big graziers' holdings, crops are to be seen—perhaps the beginning of a new and much-desired economic era. Let us note also as a fact of modern history that the Clare River is one of the most singular rivers in Ireland, Once a slow stream meandering through bog, it now flows in many reaches straight as a canal, but rapid and swirling, along a deep-cut bed hewn to the very rock in the time of some relief works. Thus the land is better drained and less exposed to floods ; the salmon have a better spawning ground ; and for once the Board of Works seem to have done the right thing. But that was a long time ago.

Between the era of Boards of Works and that of royal Irish ladies founding convents, much history has to be filled in ; and a step backwards is afforded by the *leacht*, or monumental standing stone to be seen a mile and a half out on the Claremorris road. The inscription reads : “ Pray for the souls of James Lally and his family, 1673.” It is curious, first of all, to find this Gaelic custom of erecting such cenotaphs surviving into the seventeenth century—one more proof how little Connaught was altered, even when it began to use the English tongue. But my concern is rather with the family than with the tomb.

Lally is a corruption of the Irish name *ua Maollalaidh* (O'Mullaly), and the heads of this sept were once princes in Hy Many. In the sixteenth century they were still people of importance, for two of the name were Archbishops of Tuam. In 1673, after the Restoration, James Lally was a landed gentleman with estates about his place of Tullinadaly, not far from where his *leacht* is erected. But his grandson, Captain Lally, sat in James's Parliament, and when war came, fought on the losing side at Aughrim, and followed Sarsfield into exile—losing the family estate of Tullinadaly. This Lally died of a wound received at the siege of Montmélián, and so England was finally quit of one rebel. But his brother Gerald, who had accompanied his flight, married in France and transmitted the hereditary claim and the hereditary resentment to a son, who, ennobled for brilliant services at Fontenoy and elsewhere,

chose for his title Lally de Tollendal. Not one in a thousand of those who know that name recognise Tullinadaly in its French disguise ; and perhaps not one in ten readers of history know that the French general who came so near to wrest India from the English was the son of an Irish rebel, doubly an enemy of England, like those who turned the day at Fontenoy.

Lally's services to France were requited by the loss of his head. But his son repaired the family fortunes, and having defended the Bourbons in their days of adversity was rewarded after the Restoration with a marquissate. If you look for Ireland's glories in the eighteenth century, you will find them everywhere, except in Ireland.

At Tullinadaly there is only a farmhouse now ; but the fair after which the place is called *Tulach na Dáile* (the Hillock of the Assembly) still continues. It is a very curious instance of the force which tradition exercises in Ireland that, although the fair-green is three miles out of Tuam and remote from any shop or public-house, no persuasion has availed to remove this annual gathering into the town ; buyers and sellers still preferring to resort, even at some inconvenience, to the spot where their fathers and forefathers bought and sold before them.

I have followed the fortunes of a name from the days when the Lallys were kinglets in Hy Many to the Flight of the Wild Geese, and later. In like manner, many passages in the chequered centuries are called up by the famous Abbey Knockmoy, which lies also within easy reach of Tuam, but on the westward. In 1189 a party of Normans under Almeric St. Laurence pushed into Connaught. They were few but brave and mail-clad—the equivalent for some expedition of to-day which, armed with repeating rifles and machine guns, goes out to conquer a country of African spearmen. And like many such an expedition they met with disaster ; Cathal O'Connor, named *Cromh Dearg*, or The Red Hand, overwhelmed them in the bog which still borders the river, killing out all but two ; and here, as a thankoffering for his victory, he built an abbey for the Cistercians. [4] In the church antiquaries pore with interest over the trace of frescoes on the chancel walls. The design (still traceable, though the colour is all but clean gone) speaks of a later period than *Cromh Dearg's* ; but doubtless the beautiful building itself and the graceful east window was the work of Irish builders in the twelfth century—much defaced and spoilt four hundred years later when the banished monks returned for a while in some intermittency of persecution. They returned, but not in their old strength or splendour, and here, as elsewhere, there is a pathetic trace of failing state in the blocking up of aisles so as to form the whole church out of what was only the chancel in the pristine plan. Yet at Knockmoy, as elsewhere, so much of the structure survives that one inclines to ask why, in a country where so much ecclesiastical building is done, these ancient remains should not be again restored and revived. The answer is, unfortunately, that all have been used (and abused) as places of burial, and the soil is a charnel house. Here in Abbey Knockmoy the ground is paved with tombstones—many of which, by a custom still prevalent in Connaught, bear trademarks—the smith has his hammer, the wright his tools, and so on. Families have acquired prescriptive right, the place is defended against any cleansing by a strong sentiment—which I saw illustrated elsewhere.

Driving from Tuam to Headford we stopped at the ruined church of Donaghpatrick, where St. Patrick placed yet another disciple at a place which seems to have been the limit of his westward journeyings through the plain of Connaught. Here was a graveyard, with a new addition lately walled in. But, exploring round the old church, we came on an opened grave, by the side of which were lying five skulls and the fragments of several coffins, as well as the tombstone marking the family name. A little further on the road we met the funeral ; and I daresay the man would not have died easy without the knowledge that the bones of his kin would be rooted up and exposed, to make elbow room for his own remains among them.

That same drive brought me past many landmarks. Near Donaghpatrick itself is a *crannóg* on a small lake, where once the princely O'Flaherties had their fortress. Descendants survive

on the spot, though no longer as lake dwellers. But at Headford, a whole chapter could be written. Near by the town, standing amid swamps on the Black River, is the famous Franciscan monastery of Ross Errilly, built in 1351. In its spacious precinct all is ruin and desolation, where once were learning, religion, and hospitality ; but the building survives so completely as to render easily reconstructed in imagination the whole scheme of its monastic life. Not merely the ground plan, but every wall is left almost intact ; only the ornamentation was destroyed in 1651 when the Cromwellian soldiers rooted like boars through it. Misfortune had been constant with the Brothers since the first suppression in 1538 ; but the Earls of Clanricarde lent a constant protection, and again and again purchased back the confiscated lands. Under this shelter the friars, six times driven out, six times returned, till their last and final banishment in 1753—rendered inevitable when an Irish Catholic, in pursuit of a private feud, laid information against the Earl of that day for harbouring monks. The incident is only too characteristic of Irish history.

I noted as very typical of the present day and its changes that the big demesne of the St. Georges at Headford, which Caesar Otway some sixty years ago stopped to admire and praise, has recently passed into the hands of a successful merchant from Tuam, who, I fear, does not inherit the “ unshaken loyalty and Protestantism ” of the Colonel St. George whom Otway visited. In Headford itself a plantation of Protestants has withered away : yet the place has not resumed its ancient style, *Ath Cinn* ; the language of the plantation has rooted itself, though not the religion.

Facts like these meet one all over Connaught. The whole body of the people is Catholic : and though the land is mostly owned by Protestants, no Protestant family seems to thrive on the soil. In all of Connemara hardly a single mansion is in the hands of “ the old stock ”—that is to say, of landlords dating back for a few generations. East of the Corrib, things have not gone so far : but when land purchase begins to operate, it is likely that the country will pass altogether to the Catholics—who already control its whole administration. Even now the cathedral of Tuam is roomy on a Sunday, and very soon it may be able to hold the entire Church of Ireland population in Connaught.

I hope, however, that no one will tax the Church of Ireland with vain expense for the very excellent work that was done naturally with meagre means on this illustrious building. Some centuries ago—probably in Jacobean times—the ancient pre-Norman structure had fallen into ruin and was restored in such fashion that the short chancel became a vestibule, and the glorious chancel arch was made into a western doorway. In 1878 a more intelligent remodeling was effected ; the more recent body of the church was turned into a chapter house, a new nave was built to the west, and the chancel is now restored to its true position. Over the access to it springs the great arch, wrought in red sandstone ; for early in the twelfth century Irish builders could not carve with ease in hard stone. Yet in all other points they had attained mastery ; and this semi-circular arch, which is, in truth, six concentric orders of arches, narrowing as they recede, displays a bewildering intricacy of design and ornament. Wind and weather through centuries of exposure have blurred the exquisite work, in which figures, animal and human, blend into the conventional pattern ; cobblers have, in careless generations, chipped pieces off to sharpen their tools ; yet still, there it stands as a monument of what Irish civilisation had attained before any Norman set foot in Ireland.

The arch was made by unnamed workmen when O-h-Oisin was mitred abbot in Tuam, and Turlough O’Conor ruled as king in Connaught. Their names are inscribed on the stone cross which now stands in the market-place where Lake drew rein in 1798 from the races of Castlebar—but I spare my English readers that story. The cross shows as a cross of the Irish pattern (with a wrought circle embracing the arms), but it is not as it was designed by the artist. Eight slabs of sculptured stone completed it, and of the six which made the tall slender shaft three are missing ; and those which now are in place were only recently brought together—one from its place in the chimney of a house in the town. Another is to be seen, detached, in the

cathedral : and it is hard to understand why this stone is not with the others—or rather, why the cathedral authorities refuse to give it up—and why the original design is not restored at least in its proportions by letting in new uncarved sections of stone. At present what was once a work worthy of the artist who wrought the arch—a tall slender structure thirty-two feet high—now stands disfigured and dumpy, interesting only for its minute interlacing of carved scroll-work. [5]

The art of stone carving has not wholly left this western country, or at least it lived till within recent memory. At Cong, the cloister was restored by Sir Benjamin Guinness, with a great deal of tact, and the modern pillars there were executed by a local artisan, of a family who had followed the craft from generation to generation. Still, no more than good craftsmanship is there to be seen. At Tuam the case is different. The Catholic Cathedral well deserves a visit, though in truth it is seen to most advantage as one fishes down the broad valley of the Clare river, where its tower, solid and dignified, yet removed from the commonplace by a decoration of pinnacles, makes a noble object in the landscape. The whole structure is very wonderful considering that it was begun before even the days of emancipation. The old Archbishop who projected the building, and lived to see its completion, was a man of high courage ; and a story (which I heard from a bishop who was not a Protestant) tells how the Protestant bishop of that day came to survey the broad foundations, and after a glance at their scope, asked, “ Who is the fool that has done this ? ” That was what he said : but a day or two later an envelope enclosing simply a hundred pound note reached the sanguine builder ; and though the sender never revealed himself, he was shrewdly guessed at. But whether a bishop of the Church of Ireland did this or no, Catholics will tell you that a deal of Protestant money is in that huge fabric. The fact adds interest to the building, which unlike Sir Thomas Deane’s academic restoration of St. Jarlath’s, the older cathedral, really expresses the life and ideas of an Irish community at a given date. That expression is due chiefly to the work of one man, not an artisan, but an artist.

All round the exterior are heads in stone ; all along the groining of the nave’s roof are heads in plaster—heads treated for the most part in a spirit of grotesque, yet even where the caricature is strongest, unmistakably the heads of Irish country-folk. The work is of Cruickshank’s date, and some of the modellings instantly reveal his influence, transferred to work in stone ; but in the best of them there is more than Cruickshank ever put into a drawing. Especially in the east front there are two contrasted types, sculptured as terminals on either side of a window. One of them represents a man with large but receding forehead, prominent eyes, and long beard ill-disguising the almost disappearing chin—pure type of a religious enthusiast. This, tradition says, is the portrait of a devout peasant who secured the honour of drawing the first load of stones to the building. Opposite is a face still more boldly caricatured—almost the traditional Punch, with nut-cracker nose and chin. But look at your Punch, and you will see in him at once, more unmistakably than anywhere else, the Irishman. The shrewd, cynical, deep-recessed eyes, from under the brow with its heavy eyebrows and heavy bosses above them (how admirably modelled !), speak of a type that has always existed in Ireland, not always in harmony with the religious authorities. Such a man might have been the Clare schoolmaster who wrote the scandalous and most witty poem which he called *Mediæ Noctis Consilium* ; such a man was, if tradition does not lie, the carver of these grotesques, who set his own likeness here among the rest. He lacked training, doubtless ; and the heads on the roof in the interior show a lack of the technical tricks which are needed to produce the desired effect at that height. But when he died in Tuam, somewhere about the middle of last century, a true artist was lost to Ireland.

It is a pity that he did not carve the statue of MacHale, the Lion of St. Jarlath’s, which stands outside the western doorway. The great Archbishop was a recognised power in his own day ; but it is only now that we are beginning to understand how far-sighted was the old warrior, who would not allow a “ National ” school to be established in his diocese, and fought fiercely to keep alive in Ireland the language and the customs of the Irish.

Well, the language has perhaps a better chance in Tuam to-day than in any other town of its size ; and when you see the market thronged with men in the old-fashioned cutaway frieze coat with its square lappel (and even here and there one in the knee breeches), every man of them with “ a fine tongue of Irish” at command, you know at least that you are in a country about whose nationality there cannot be any possible mistake. That it may be so always, and more so !

I have been tempted to enlarge on Tuam, because a part of my purpose is to emphasise how much that is worth seeing in Ireland goes almost unnoticed. But the real centre of this chapter was meant to be Cong : Cong with Moytura close behind it, Cong with its beautiful abbey ; Cong endeared to me because on the first day of my fishing there I caught the biggest trout of many seasons. Seventeen pounds we called him, for brevity and elegance, though his real weight was sixteen and three quarters. My seven thousand blessings on Michael Lydon of Galway who sold me the “ wagtail” minnow which he took ; on Johnny Lydon who gaffed him for me, and his father, Tom Lydon, who handled the boat ; and on the little draper's shop in Cong where I bought the very slender trace, undesigned for such uses, which nevertheless brought him safely to the gaff.

I do not mean to say that the casual visitor can hope for such another fish—at least, that he is at all likely to get one. But beyond a doubt, with fair luck he may get in a few days' fishing brown trout quite heavy enough to content a reasonable man, and with exceptional luck may have something to brag of for the rest of his days. A brown trout over ten pounds is far rarer than a salmon over thirty, and fish of that weight are killed every year on Mask or Corrib.

In the same way, I do not suppose that any other traveller is likely to have quite the chance which befel the artist of this book “ my grief,” as the Irish song says, “ that I was not of his company”—when the steamer took him from Galway to Cong. I was driving from Headford at the same time, and even country people greeting my driver commented on that wonderful sky. Such a sunset does not come once in five years, and I waste no words in trying to convey its indescribable pageantry. But to see it as Mr. Thomson saw it, while the steamer ploughed northward up the long narrow lough, with all this gorgeous array of crimson and scarlet, gold and yellow, mauve and purple, hung behind and among the great mountains which close the upper end of the lake, beyond its innumerable “ inches ” and islands, was in all truth the chance of a lifetime. Such a chance could not come to many travellers. But by the very nature of that journey, which brings you to Cong about sunset all through summer and autumn, there is every chance of approaching a scene of rare beauty under the most beautiful conditions.

Those who live at Cong challenge comparison for this upper end and broad basin of the lake against Killarney. Not so lovely, I should say ; but perhaps bolder, more rugged, and, so far, more impressive. But I have no space to write of scenery. The essential point to note is that Cong stands on a neck of limestone country, about four miles broad, which divides Lough Corrib from the huge basin of Lough Mask : and under and through this neck Mask's great sheet of water sends a subterranean river that breaks out of the ground in a famous chasm a mile or so from Cong. The most curious comment on this physical fact is afforded by the great canal, cut to connect the lakes, which lies there now a dry bed of boulders. The porous limestone rock refused to hold the water as,—to us, wise after the event, it seems natural to expect. But, though the canal is dry, there flows past Cong, and out beside Lord Ardilaun's great house into Corrib, a river so white and pure as only a spring bursting from the rock can be. And beside that clear broad river, enclosed in the angle between it and a smaller stream not less limpid, stand the ruins of what was once perhaps the most famous abbey of the West.

Cong is said to have been founded in 624 by Domnall MacHugh for St. Fechin, its first abbot ; and in the year 1010 it was one of the five sees of the province of Connaught. In 1114

the abbey was burned, and at some time in that century it was rebuilt for the order of Augustinians. To this retreat Rory O'Connor, the last titular king of all Ireland, betook himself when he retired in 1183 from the kingship, leaving his son as regent. Here also he died in 1198, though his remains were carried to the Shannon, and laid in Clonmacnoise, to have the benefit of St. Ciaran's privilege. But his son, Maurice the Canon, "most illustrious of the Irish for learning psalm-singing and poetry," was buried at Cong : and so too was King Rory's daughter, Nuala, Queen of Uladh. No slab or memorial indicates their graves. But the chapel tomb of the Berminghams marks well a later stage in the history of Connaught. This Norman stock within a very short space became Hibernicised so completely that they dropped their ancestral name, and became MacFiorais (that is, son of Piers), from whom spring the Pearses innumerable in the West. But not, let it be noted, the Persses, one of Galway's "tribes" descendants from an English merchant settler, who lived inside the ring-fence of city walls, and prayed every Sunday : *From the ferocious O'Flaherties, Good Lord, deliver us !*

The most ancient memorial of the past to be found at Cong is the old stone cross, whose shaft lies in the abbey, but its base, with a plainly-cut modern shaft and cross, stands in the village street, and on this base are recorded the names of two abbots—Niahol and Gillibard O'Duffy. Concerning this inscription the custodian of the abbey told me a tale. There was a boy near Cong, and he was stupid and could learn nothing, but spent all his time in the fields : and in a certain field one day he fell asleep with his flannel jacket for a pillow. That evening he came home, and his father was reading the newspaper. The boy asked for it and read every word that was on the paper. They took him then to the Protestant rector of the parish, and there was not a book in the rector's house that the boy could not read. Then Cong they sent him down into Munster (where the famous teachers of the classics were) to learn the Greek and Latin, but there was no master that was able to teach him anything that he did not know before. And when Queen Victoria was making the college in Galway, who did she send for but the same boy to be the head of it ? O'Beirne Crowe, that was his name ; but in the latter end he died in want, for he did not take good care of himself ; and he was the first man that read the inscription on the cross that is in the street at Cong.

From the same authority (the abbey's custodian) I learned some interesting details concerning the chief glory of Cong in old days, which now is Cong's no longer the famous Processional Cross. But first let me quote from Wilde's description of this masterpiece.

"It consists of an oaken cross covered with plates of bronze and silver, washed in many places with a thick layer of gold, and having interspersed golden filigree work of most minute character around its front centre. All the front and back plates are elaborately carved with that intertwined pattern, or strap work, with grotesque animals, which is specially characteristic of Irish ornamentation. . . . The outer corners of each compartment were originally studded with precious stones, glass, or figured enamel paste in white and dark blue colours. Supported upon a raised boss decorated with niello in the centre, there is a large polished crystal, under which was placed originally the relique sent from Rome to King Turlough O'Connor in 1123. . . . Around its sides there are a series of Latin and Irish inscriptions, both in the Irish character ; the letters are punched into the silver plate, apparently by dyes or types. . . . The foot of the cross springs from a highly decorated dog's head, which rises out of a globe, the ornamentation of which in detail is a marvel of the workmanship of its own or any other period. Beneath that wall is a decorated socket, into which was inserted the staff, or pole, with which the cross was carried. The inscription affords unerringly the history of this magnificent relique."

The main inscription, twice repeated, is a Latin verse :

"Hac cruce crux tegitur qua passus conditor orbis."

“ In this cross is the cross enclosed on which the Founder of the World suffered.” But the chief interest lies in the Irish inscriptions, which bid us pray for Turlough O’Conor, king of Erin, for whom this shrine was made : to hold a remnant of the true cross which he had procured : and for Muiredach O’Duffy, the Senior of Erin (that is, for the Arch- bishop of Connaught), whom the Four Masters describe as “ Chief Senior of all Ireland in wisdom, in chastity, in the bestowal of jewels and food,” and who died at Cong on May 16th A.D. 1150. Thus we learn the patrons of the work and its purpose. But prayers are also asked for Flannacan O’Duffy, Coarb of Comman and Ciaran (that is, for the abbot who ruled both at Roscommon in St. Comman’s Abbey, and at Clonmacnoise in St. Ciaran’s), under whose superintendence the shrine was made. Lastly, and this is the most interesting of all, we are bidden to “ a prayer for Maelisu MacBraddan O’Echan, who made this shrine.” And since this O’Hechan was coarb of St. Finnen at Cloncruff in county Roscommon, we know the place of making as well as the artist’s name.

What became of this priceless relic from the twelfth century onwards we have no means of knowing. Wilde can only tell us that when he was a boy it used to be kept “ in a three-cornered cupboard in a little sitting-room” by the last Abbot of Cong ; for up till the year 1829, there survived the Reverend Patrick Prendergast, parish priest of Cong, and the last of the Augustinian Canons Regular. The order, expelled from its precinct, had clung on, as the friars did so often in Ireland’s history, hoping for restoration ; and according to my informant the last abbot might have named a successor, and was ready to do so. But his curate, to whom the offer was made, refused the honour ; then, having thought it over, returned to accept, but found a refusal in his turn. How the cross passed from the keeping of Abbot Prendergast into the Royal Irish Academy’s Museum is not clearly stated by Wilde. In point of fact, I am told, it was sold by the curate, through Wilde’s intermediacy, for a hundred pounds : and when the news leaked out there was red fury. On Christmas and Easter Day the cross used to be set on the altar ; and on that Christmas men talked fiercely of nailing up the door against the priest who had robbed the parish of its treasure. It must be said that the parish guarded it badly, for the central crystal containing the fragment of cross had been removed from the jewel, and, says Wilde, “ was usually carried by a lady in her pocket.” (It is now lost beyond hope of recovery.) However, the parish was none the less angry, and a lawsuit was threatened : but a priest who succeeded to the seller of the cross decided to take the law into his own hands. Dressed in a big overcoat, he visited the Museum where the cross was exposed, and stood lost in study before it. At last the policeman in charge heard a crash of glass ; the case was broken, and both cross and priest were gone. Rushing into the street, he followed and seized the raider ; whereupon a mob began to gather, and after some parley the priest was allowed to take the cross home to his lodging. Then followed anxious conferences : and at last the good father returned to Cong pacified by a promise of a minutely faithful picture of the precious relic, which he received and treasured till he died.

No doubt the cross is safe now and conveniently accessible for all and sundry ; and perhaps better so than in the manse of a parish priest. But suppose things had gone otherwise. Suppose the Augustinians had never been expelled : suppose their centre of learning and the arts had been allowed to glow and radiate continually : suppose Cong were still as fitting a home for such a treasure as it was in the twelfth century—what a different Ireland we should have ! However, the monastery was swept away like the rest, reformed off the face of the earth ; and the task of introducing a higher civilisation proceeded. Go to Cong now and ask for the signs of it. You will see, certainly, Lord Ardilaun’s great house and his famous woodcock covers. But what will be pointed out to you with special emphasis by your car-driver or boatman, is the scene of this or that bloody murder—horrible incidents in the suppressed civil war which raged during the ’eighties.

Still more significant in that neighbourhood is Lough Mask Castle, where history was made with a vengeance ; for here it was that the struggle with Captain Boycott added a sinister word to the language ; here it was that the weapon of the peasantry was forged and

named. The struggle is mainly over now, and victory rests with the peasants—with the race, long conquered but never submissive, that always held itself distinct from the new masters of the soil, and always cherished a memory of the rights that had been confiscated. They are fixed now on the soil as tenants, not to be disturbed at the will of any man ; and soon they will be the full owners. But who can count the ruin, moral and physical, that has resulted from this war ? Yet who is to blame the winners ? What Irish rule meant may be inferred from the Abbey and the Cross of Cong : what English rule has meant you may gather from the country as it is to-day, where among people naturally gentle, courteous, kindly and intelligent, ignorance and cruelty have gone hand in hand. For deeds like the killing of Lord Mountmorres and the Huddys, apart from their horror, throw back the cause of the Irish tenants and the Irish race past calculation.

Yet, as it chances, in this very region can be seen the springing up of what may well come to be a centre of intellectual life and civilisation, rivalling the old glories of Cong—though as yet, indeed, far enough from any splendours but those of enthusiasm. At Tourmaceady on the western shore of Lough Mask, under the Partry mountains, is the Connaught School of Irish study established by the Gaelic League—where during the summer months students can come and, in a district where Irish is the common tongue, make part of a community hard at work, not so much learning Irish (for few come there without full knowledge of the language) as studying Irish literature and learning how to teach Irish ; a community which is the germ indeed of a truly Irish university. That is a development later than the land war, and of far brighter augury.

I would close my chapter here, yet there is in Lough Corrib one place of so surpassing interest and beauty that I cannot leave it unmentioned—the lovely island of Inchagoill.

Corrib is the longest lake in these islands—twenty-eight miles straight from south to north, and then another twelve miles of narrow water shoots off west-ward at a right angle, piercing into the mountains of the Joyce country. This upper stretch should be the most picturesque of any, but I never explored it : and the first twenty miles of the journey from Galway are not particularly interesting, along a tract of water sometimes barely half a mile wide, filled with rocks, and reefs, and long spits of stones. To me Corrib means really the broad basin eight miles across, from Cong to Oughterard, in which islands big and little lift their tall groves of pine and larch. Inchagoill is one of the largest, and it lies midway in that beautiful expanse. I fished down to it in about two hours, but the little yacht which carried my picnicking friends made the run in less than half an hour, and a charming object her white sails were, flying now across a background of dark trees, now across an open gap of sky and sharply crested wavelets. We timed it neatly, and there was I landing a handsome two pound trout just as the yacht ran in to the little bay where she was to get her moorings. Skilful hands tacked her up a narrow channel with pine woods all about her ; and then we went off in a body to explore the graveyard and the two ruined churches. Of these one is absolutely primitive—a matter of ten yards long, built of huge stones with the roughest masonry, and having a narrow square-headed doorway, whose jambs incline towards the top. The second church, very little larger, is of more recent date, for the masonry is in courses and the stones are cut and dressed ; still more significant, the doorway is a noble example of Irish decorated architecture, skilfully restored by setting back the tumbled stones. Its heavy semi-circular arches, each recessed within the other as in the great chancel arch at Tuam—and wrought like that also in red sandstone—have the general features of all the early Christian art which derives from the Roman or Byzantine types. The heads which crown the capitals, with their plaited beards wrought into the scroll work so characteristic of the Celt, are indeed truly Byzantine.

Of the history of this church and its simpler pre-decessor we have no knowledge beyond what is given in the Irish name of the island *Inis an Ghoill Craoibhtheach*, the island of the devout foreigner and in the third and most remarkable monument of the place. This is a small

pillar stone standing now as a headstone over a grave. But on the stone are carved in bold relief two crosses, and an inscription in a very ancient Irish character. Petrie, who read this inscription—of which all the letters are plain as print, practically unaffected by the weather gave it as follows :

LIE LUGNEDON MAC LIMENUEH.

“ The Stone of Lugnath, son of Limenuh.”—And since Limenuh, or Liemania, was said to be' the sister of St. Patrick, and Lugnath her son was Patrick's pilot or navigator, the tomb was, in Petrie's judgment, not only of Patrick's date, but erected over his near kinsman. This view has been disputed, but is supported by the authority of Dr. Joyce ; and there is little doubt from the character of the lettering that the inscription dates back to the fifth or sixth century.

I was even more interested with a discovery or theory of my own. The name of the one householder who lives on the island is Kinneevy, that is *Mac an Naoimh*, or Saint's son. Whether he may claim descent from the Gall Craobhthach who gave the island his name, or whether it merely came to pass that every man inhabiting the island called himself “ of the Saint's family,” there is no doubt in my mind that the name has been there since surnames came into use under Brian Boru, and that it keeps the memory of the “ devout foreigner.” I present to the world with confidence this result of meditations, arrived at while the kettle sang over a crackling wood fire, and we who watched basked on a little beach of silvery lake sand, grown over with golden John's wort, and backed by a brake of hazel among which late honeysuckle still blossomed, and early blackberries were ripe for the picking.

- [1] Half way between Knockmagh and Galway lives Diarmuid ua h-Urnaighe (Dermod Hurney), famous among shanachies and reciters of verse in the West, not only for the mass of literature which his memory preserves, but for the beauty and dignity of his declamation.
- [2] I must not be taken as advising any one to go to Cong by rail who can get the steamer from Galway. But at least the rail journey gives a chance of visiting St. Jarlath's cathedral.
- [3] At Ross Errilly, near Headford, are hedges of wild plums—not sloes—probably a similar survival.
- [4] The abbey is derelict, but St. Bernard, the great saint of the Cistercians, is still honoured here, and on his festival, August 20th, people make pilgrimage to Knockmoy, more especially the fishermen from the Claddagh in Galway.
- [5] The cross could never stand unsupported to its full height. It was evidently pinned against the cathedral, for the mark of dowels is on its arras, and the side which should be next the wall is un-sculptured.

The fair hills of Ireland (1914)

Author : Gwynn, Stephen Lucius, 1864-1950; Thomson, Hugh, 1860-1920

Subject : Ireland — Description and travel ; Ireland — History

Publisher : Dublin : Maunsell

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : cdl ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/fairhillsofirela00gwyniala>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

August 15 2011