

Dirge of Arthur O'Leary.

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Old Irish Life at Home and Abroad

1745-1833

by

Mrs Morgan John O'Connell

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[The greater part of Arthur O'Leary's pedigree will be found in the keen. I shall give the family arms here. I cannot be sure which coat he bore, but am inclined to think it was the ship.

Burke's "General Armoury" gives three sets of armorial bearings borne by the O'Learys. The McCarthy O'Leary's, of Coomlagane, bear the first mentioned.

O'LEARIE. Arms : a lion pass, in base, gu. ; in chief, a ship of three masts sa. ; sails set ppr. ; from the stern the flag of St. George flotant. Crest : out of a ducal coronet or, an arm in armour, embowed, holding a sword ppr., pommel and hilt gold.

Motto : "Ladir isé lear Righ" ("Strong is the King of the Sea," or "Leari is powerful"). Another motto : "Fortis undis et armis."

O'LEAEY (Drumcar, County Cork, Fun. Ent. Ulster's Office, 1637, Donogh O'Leary, gent.). Per fess ar. and vert. ; in chief a talbot pass, gu., and in base a boar pass, of the first. Crest : an arm erect, coupéd below the elbow, vested az., the hand holding an evet or lizard, all ppr.

O'LEIURY. Arms : a falcon, rising within an ivy branch, moile, all ppr. Crest : an arm in armour, coupéd below the elbow and erect, grasping a dagger, all ppr.]

I cannot resist the temptation of quoting my hero's sister's lament. Eileen Dhuv, in her wild and passionate outburst, seems to belong to an earlier age than any one called by so homely and prosaic a style and title as "Sister Nellie." But we must bear in mind that these old native Irish people, like Walter Scott's Highlanders, had a sort of dual existence. They spoke English, wore clothes of English fashion, and conformed more or less to English customs in everyday life ; but they hankered in their hearts after the lost lands, the old tribal rights and privileges, and in moments of excitement used the Irish speech they had first learned. The curious custom of fosterage, by which the children of the gentry were always suckled by peasant women, who remained about them during childhood, and by which their foster brothers or sisters constantly remained with them as personal attendants through life, made Irish as familiar to them as English. The far more flexible language lent itself to emotional improvisation. All that was poetical and picturesque, all that appealed to pride or fancy, was enshrined in musical Gaelic metre. Miss Evelina McCarthy tells me she remembers her venerable grand-uncle, Count O'Connell, in his old age in Paris, reciting and expounding to her long passages in Irish verse ; and surely he was one of the most prosaically sensible of men. Though I don't know ten words of Irish ("And more shame for Morgan John's wife," as blind old Tieve McMahon said to me), I confess to a certain sympathetic

stirring of the pulses when I have heard passionate Irish verses recited. I am indebted to Sergeant Michael O'Connor, an old follower of the extinct Falveys of Faha, for this poem, and to Michael Houlahan (since dead), an old follower of the O'Learys, a car-driver in Cork, for telling me the retired sergeant of the R.I.C. possessed the precious manuscript. I hope some time or other to publish my long account of the tragedies of Murty Oge O'Sullivan Beare and Arthur O'Leary, and meanwhile secure this opportunity of preserving the keen by a prose version.

It seems to me these wild verses and fireside stories, though often full of trivial details, are what really throw light on the life of the old native Irish gentry by no means a specially faultless set of people, but whose brave men and chaste women we gladly claim as the kinsfolk of our children.

This fierce and passionate poetess, and this stately and sensible veteran, were great-grand-aunt and great-grand-uncle to my own young son.

I visited Darrynane in the April of 1890, and, a hundred and seventeen years all but seven days from the date of Arthur O'Leary's death, recovered three of the missing verses. They were recited to me by Mary O'Sullivan Liah, a tenant's daughter, who had picked them up, with many verses already preserved, from the recitation of an old woman, now dead, named Kate Murphy. She was much helped by a tenant, John James Galavan, both in reciting and translating. The Rev. John Martin, C.C., wrote down the verses from the young girl's recitation, and translated them, J. J. Gallavan often making valuable suggestions.

The Dirge of Arthur O'Leary

Shot, May 4, 1773.

By his Widow, Eileen O'Connell, the Raven-haired.

[This keen was copied by Mr. O'Sullivan, Maylor Street, Cork, from a manuscript of Edward de Wall, a hedge schoolmaster, living in the beginning of this century, who took it down *circa* 1800 from the recitation of Norry Singleton, a famous keener. Dark Eileen improvised it over her husband's corpse. Portions are missing, and Mr. O'Sullivan states that verses have been interpolated. The Rev. Peter O'Leary, C.C., Doneraile, kindly made me a literal translation, which I have rendered into freer language. I retain more or less the form of the lines, but do not profess to have executed a metrical translation.]

I.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart ! loved with the fondest love from the
day I first beheld you ride past the gable of the market-house. [1]
Eagerly my glances sought you ; then I gave the deep love of my heart
to you.
I stole away from my kindred with you ; I fled from my home with you.
Yet never did I rue that day.
I found chambers gay with tinted hangings, parlours brightly decked
for me.
Beeves were slaughtered, spits revolving, loaves fresh kneaded, ovens
heated, red wine flowing from the cask for me.
I might sleep on downy pillows, past the morning till the noontide,
past the time the maids went milking, [2] did I will it so.

II.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart ! well your beaver did become you, with
the golden band around it ; well your silver-hilted sword.
Thus equipped for deeds of daring, on your dark-brown steed and
peerless, whose forehead bore the snow-white star,
You made the Saxons quail before you, bowing down to the very ground,
Not for any love they bore you, but for sheer dread of you
And yet it was through them you fell,
darling of my soul . . .
[The rest of this verse is lost.]

III.

“ O my snowy-handed rider ! well your jewelled brooch became you,
fastened in the cambric ruffle, and your beaver laced with gold.
When you returned from beyond the seas, all the street was cleared
before you, not through any love they bore you, for deadly was
their hate.
Beloved of my steadfast heart ! when little Connor and the younger
Fiach O’Leary, children of our love, shall ask me where I left their
father !
I must answer them with anguish
‘ ’Twas in Cil-na-martyr [3] that I left him.’
Loudly they will call their father, who will not now be there to answer
to their call.

IV.

“ My love and my darling ! kinsman of the mighty Earls, Barrys, Lords of
Barrymore !
Well your slender sword became you, and your beaver laced with gold ;
fine small shoe of foreign fashion, and broadcloth woven beyond
the seas !
Beloved of my steadfast heart ! No ! I could never credit that you lay
dead,
Not till your mare came back to me, the long reins trailing in the dust,
and your heart’s blood on her forehead.
Blood-splashed the splendid saddle, too, where you were wont to sit
and stand.
I made but one bound to the threshold ; I made but one bound to the
gate ; I gained the saddle in one bound more ;
With clapping hands and cries I urged her onward ; at utmost speed
the good mare flew,
Nor paused till where you lay, till where I found you dead before my
eyes.
There was neither pope nor bishop, there was neither priest nor cleric,
to chant the holy psalm above my dead ;
Only an aged crone, withered and lean and grey, who spread her
mantle’s ample folds above you, my love and my all !

V.

[Father Peter O'Leary says there was here a beautiful verse he heard recited by old people, describing the scenes through which dark Eileen sped. As she did not know where Arthur lay, she let the mare go on, trusting to the noble animal's sagacity to find her master, and merely urged her to her fullest speed.]

VI.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart ! arise and come with me, come back to
our home with me !
Then we shall gather a goodly company ;
Then beeves shall be slaughtered, music shall echo through our halls ;
Then I will spread our marriage-bed with sheets of linen wide and
fine, and coverings dark and warm ;
Then the deadly chill which numbs your every limb will pass away.

[The next verse is imperfect. Eileen seems to be indignantly repudiating a charge of having left her dead to seek sleep.]

VII.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart ! oh, do not hearken to the false, lying
words of hatred that have been said !
They said I left your side in search of slumber.
Alas ! there is no deep dreamless sleep for me evermore.
I left your side because our babes were weeping ; I left your side to
hush them to their rest . . .

VIII.

“ Good people, do not listen to the word of any woman in all Erin, nor
where'er the sun shines down.
Who is the woman, wedded to my Arthur, and mother of his children,
Who would not go forth maddened among the dark woods for
Arthur O'Leary's loss ?
He who now lies stretched out dead before me since the morn of
yesterday.
O fell Morris ! may every curse befall you ! May your heart's blood
curdle in death within your veins !
May the sight leave your eyes, your limbs be stricken powerless, you
slayer of my darling !
And there breathes no man in Erin to let a bullet fly at you !

IX.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart ! rise up, my Arthur, spring on your fleet
steed.
Go, ride through Macroom and far into Inshigeela [4] with the wine-cup
in your hand, as it flowed in the halls of your sires.
Endless my woe, and bitterest my sorrow, that I was not there beside
you when the fatal ball was fired ;
O rider of the smooth white hands !

X.

“ Keen, heart-piercing is my grieving that I was not close behind you [5]
when the fatal shot was fired.
Would I had been there to get it !
Would that it had struck my garments, or haply my right side !
Would it were I that was stricken, and that you went scatheless on,
O my blue-eyed rider, and lived to aim avenging shots again !

XI.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart I vile the treatment of my hero, of the
treasure of my heart.
Nought is left him but a coffin and a coffin lid ; nought else for my
knight of the generous heart
He who was wont to angle in crystal streams, and quaff the red wine
in halls, and toast me as the Lady of the snowy bosom.
Woe is me a thousand times, who am bereft of his sweet company !

XII.

“ Torture and destruction seize you, Morris, vile and treacherous wretch,
Who robbed me of the head of my household, slew the father of my
babes of tender age !
Two are just playing through my dwelling ; the third yet slumbers
beneath my breast.
Alas ! I fear I may not give it birth.

XIII.

“ My love you are, and the light of my heart !
When you passed out the gate, you turned quickly back, you kissed
your children once again, and, smiling, kissed your hand to me ;
You said, ‘ Arise, Eileen ; be quick, and set all gear in order with all
your care and skill !
I go from home this day ; perchance I shall never return.’
I thought he spoke the words in playful jesting, as he had often jested
thus with me before.

XIV.

“ My loved one and my treasure, my knight of the bright sword !
Arise, and don your garb of broadcloth fine and smooth ;
Throw on your beaver, draw on your gloves, take your whip from its
crook.
The mare stands saddled without the door ; go, hasten by yon narrow
track to the east ;
The very boughs will bend down low to greet you ; the streams will
narrow their waters to let you pass ;
The men and the women will greet you respectfully,
Unless, as I fear much, the old gentle manners are lost to them now.

XV.

“ O my beloved, sole treasure of my bosom ! I weep not for my kindred
dead and gone,
Nor were our children dead would I bewail them so.
I wail not Donal Mor O’Connell, nor young Connell drowned in the
raging sea,
Nor the lady of twenty-six summers who has crossed the wide ocean to
dwell in the courts of kings. [6]
No pangs such loss could cause would rend my bosom as the sight I
witness now.
I gaze upon my Arthur, my horseman of great prowess, the rider of the
dark-brown mare,
Who was stricken on the green plain of Carriganimma.
Accursed be the spot ! accursed be its name !

XVI.

“ Oh my dear one, my true love !
Still your wailing, O ye kindly women of the streaming eyes,
Till my Arthur quaffs to you ere he sets forth to school.
Not for verse or lore is it he goes there, but he goes where earth and
stones shall lie heavy on his dust.

XVII.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart !
Could my voice but reach the shores of Darrynane Mor or Carhen,
where the golden apples grow,
Many a horseman fleet and brave, many a stainless maiden veiled in
white, would hasten at my call ;
Would be here to wail above you,
O Arthur O’Leary, my brave one !

XVIII.

“ My heart’s love, O my darling !
Your heavy corn is garnered in ;
Your kine stand by the milking-maids ;
But my heart is full of anguish for your loss
Anguish that is bound within it as within a fast-locked casket,
Whose key is lost, whose rusty hinges will not yield to pressure.
Not all the might of Munster,
Not all the smiths within the confines of the Fenian Isle, [7] can loose it
till my Arthur comes again.
[The three foregoing verses are those recovered at Darrynane.]

XIX.

“ You are my true love, you are my darling !
Arthur, son of Connor O’Leary Connor, who was son of Cedach,
Who was son of Lewis O’Leary from the west, where lies the Gerah,
and from the east where the long narrow mountain ridges rise,

Where the wild berries grow and tawny nuts on waving boughs,
And apples weigh the branches down in autumn days.
Let them kindle fires of mourning through the country of Ive-Isary,
By the holy Gougane Barra, and the lands of Ballengeary,
For the snowy-handed rider,
For the hunter unsurpassed, who would speed from distant Grenagh,
While his fleet greyhounds Jagged outstripped behind.
What befell my blue-eyed rider ?
Clothed in the shirt of mail my love procured him, I thought him safe
from every harm.

XX.

“ O my beloved one ! you counted kindred with all the great and noble
in the land ;
Your kinsmen were the heads of great old houses, where in old times
eighteen fosterers would feast at one board.
Theirs the rich gifts, milch cows, brood mares, the sow and her litter,
the mill by the ford,
Bright silver and yellow gold, silken and velvet stuffs, and rentless lands.
All these were given in guerdon for the rich milk of their bosoms given
to the offspring of fair and noble dames.

XXI.

“ O my beloved, my white dove ! My love for you is living in the inner-
most depths of my heart.
Reproach me not that three mourners are absent this day.
They lie in close and darkened chambers in a dreamless torpid sleep
that wakens not.
Ah ! but for the small-pox and the fever and the Black Death, they and
their followers would be here, a goodly gathering.
They would be riding with slackened rein, and making the hillsides
quake
As the stillness is broken by the heavy thud of trampling steeds.
Thus would they have hastened to your funeral, O my Arthur of the
snowy breast.

XXII.

“ O my beloved, the light of my soul, kinsman of the brave and noble
company whose headlong charge at the hunt was wont to shake the
valleys and the hillsides !
Many a time you led them homewards, where a hearty welcome met
them.
Knives were whetted, joints dismembered, streaky fitches set before
them, and sides of mutton where 110 bones were seen.
Full-grained oats, meet food for hunters, filled the mangers to o'er-
flowing.
Crested steeds and grooms to tend them might tarry 'mid plenty while
their masters stayed.
These were as brothers among friends.

XXIII.

“ O my loved one! O my darling! an awesome vision came to me in
sleep as I slept alone in Cork, within the city’s bounds.
I thought I saw the Gerah wither, as though some raging fire had swept
across its trees.
The fair house where we dwelt beside it crumbled to the ground.
Your swift hound was struck dumb, the song-birds all turned voiceless,
and you lay dead on a dreary mountain-side.
I thought you lay there stiff and stark and lifeless.
There was neither priest nor cleric near you, only an aged crone who
flung her mantle’s ample folds across your breast.
Arthur O’Leary, then I saw you ; there was blood in heavy clotted
masses on your garments,
And it had flowed from out your breast.

XXIV.

“ My darling, my secret love, whose love is buried in the innermost
depths of my soul ! well your riding garb became you ;
The five ribbed stocking, the boot to the knee, the fine laced beaver
cocked in three,
Your free swinging whip, as you paced at ease on your ambling hack.
Many a modest and gentle maiden would gaze admiring as you rode by.

XXV.

“ Beloved of my steadfast heart ! when you entered wealthy cities,
The merchants’ wives would show you great respect.
[This verse is defaced. I suppose she must have described his buying costly
goods and bringing them to her.]

XXVI.

“ I swear before Christ, that if the need arise,
I will sell the coif from off my head,
The garment from my back, the shoe from my foot,
The gear within my house, ay, to the brown mare's very bridle,
And spend it all in law to seek justice for my dead.
If needs be, I will cross the seas and lay my wrongs before the king,
If he will not hearken to my tale, I will come back again to seek the
villain,
The black-blooded wretch, who tore my loved one from my side.

XXVII.

“ Thanks from my heart to ye, fair women of the mill,
Who poured the tide of mournful song above my dead,
Who mourned the brown mare’s rider. . . .

XXVIII.

“ May pangs of anguish rend your heart, O Shawn-a-Cuniagh ! [8]
When ’twas for a bribe you slew him, why came you not to me ?

The richer bribe would have been mine to spare his life.
A bawn of kine, or sheep and lambs, and a crested steed, who would
bear his rider scatheless through hostile ranks in days of peril.

XXIX.

“ O my snowy-handed rider, whose mighty arm hangs nerveless by your
side !
Go to Baldwin, [9] harsh of feature, mean of spirit, gaunt and long and
lean of limb,
Make him answer for his conduct, what he did about your mare ; and
how he treated your beloved.
May he never live to see the blooming of the six babes round his board ;
But, oh, let Mary be left scatheless !
Not that I love her much ; but that she, too,
For thrice three months,
Lay 'neath my mother's breast.”

- [1] She first saw him riding into the square of Macroom. She was visiting a lady whose house looked out towards the corner of the market-house, by which he rode in. His formal offer of marriage having been refused by her family. Dark Eileen eloped with him.
- [2] “ Milking-time” in Munster Irish is synonymous with 11 a.m. Dark Eileen does not mean that she was a sluggard, but that, in her rich young husband's house, she was not obliged to go and rouse the dairymaids herself.
- [3] The family burial-place of the O'Learys is in Kilcrea Abbey, but it was several years before Dark Eileen was suffered to bury her husband there, and the animosity of the Morrises forced her to bury him in an alien grave just outside the old churchyard of Kilnamartyr, near Raleigh.
- [4] Inse Gile, bright isles ; the old O'Leary territory and castle.
- [5] She means on the pillion, in which case her arm would be passed round his waist, and might have received the fire.
- [6] She refers to the death of her father, Donal Mor (Big Daniel) O'Connell, of Darrynane ; the drowning of her young brother Connell ; and the long absence of her sister, the wife of Major O'Sullivan, of the Austrian Service.
- [7] “ Fenian Isle” a poetical name for Ireland, meaning the isle of the Fenian heroes : the Fianna, or warriors of Finn-mac-Cumhal of famous memory, father of Ossian the bard.
- [8] This curse is on a peasant to whom Arthur O'Leary had been very kind, and who for a bribe betrayed him to the soldiers who shot him.
- [9] It is supposed that Mr. Baldwin had the mare given up, which in the then state of the laws was the wisest thing he could have done for the widow and children. Eileen's curses are also because he refused being a party to the Corsican vendetta she set on foot.

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