

The Far West & Frontier

Three months' tour in Ireland

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Translated and condensed by

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ACHILL.

In the eyes of the population of the north-west, the great merit of Clew Bay is the number of islands and islets it contains. I have allowed myself to say there are 365, the proper number, though I believe that, with the exception of the maps, no one knows exactly. One thing certain is that they are very numerous. But, apart from the interest of curiosity, the bay does not gain in picturesqueness from their number. The constant care of some persons to find something to count in the landscape, as if there were anything so captivating as the illusion of infinity, reminds me of a tourist I met on the top of Baume, to whom the most admirable thing in the glorious view of Lake Lemman unrolled at his feet was—that the steeples of Geneva could be made out, and several steamboats seen crossing between Evian and Ouchy. No ! I have no particular love for the 365 islands in Clew Bay ; rather its majestic girdle of mountains seems to me to justify its somewhat too highly-rated reputation.

To the north there is the wild chain of Nephin, whose highest peak reaches 2800 feet. In the south rises Croagh Patrick, a tremendous cone of bare quartzite, whose isolation makes it seem much higher than the 2510 feet measured by geographers. It is the holy mount, whither St. Patrick retired during Lent to fast and pray ; and in the fine season many pilgrims honour his memory. The ascent is easy enough for unbelievers, who do not climb barefoot. The view from the summit is said to be the finest in Ireland, and embraces an immense extent of coast, sea, mountains, and inland plains. I blush to confess that my laziness found great delight in viewing this noble peak from below,

Westport, with about 5000 inhabitants, is composed of two distinct parts, a mile asunder—the town and the port—which are joined by the gravelled paths of the well-wooded park, open to the public by the generosity of the Marquis of Sligo, the owner. A good deal of trade is done with Scotch ports—economists speak of its traffic in cereals. I think they must be an imported article, as this district has real need of food being brought to it. I do not know what is exported in return.

If it is true that the chronic destitution of Ireland is due solely to the rapacity of the landlords, the appearance of Westport does honour to Lord Sligo. In spite of the barrenness of the country, which is entirely without industries, one's feelings and eyesight are not wounded by that sordid misery which is displayed in so many other towns. The Mall, with its avenue of elms overshadowing a bright river which runs in its midst under two picturesque stone bridges, is so cleanly kept as to recall a vague thought of some old Flemish town built on the banks of a canal. The side streets, indeed, must not be inspected too closely, but the principal street, which rises sharply towards the railway-station—Westport is a terminus, and is in direct communication with Dublin by the Midland Great Western line—is lined with good houses.

But do not trust to the magnificent inscriptions in the shop-windows. I think it was at Westport that I went five times, between eight and ten in the morning, to the "Medical Hall" for some oiled silk. The two first times the door was shut, the third time no one answered my despairing shouts ; then a young child, half asleep, informed me that the master was in bed, the mistress having breakfast, and the assistant not yet there. The last attempt ended in a smiling woman telling me that she "was sorry they did not keep the article, which was unknown in the town."

But we had not travelled to the far west of Ireland in order to make purchases, but to visit Achill. This island is most undeservedly passed over in Cook's tours, and therefore by the majority of tourists, who are only too ready to let themselves be blindly led by the hand. The local time-tables pretend that a post chaise goes daily from Westport to Doogort, the capital of the island, in eight hours ; this must not be believed, and it is best to bargain for a private car. The idea of going to the island in a car need cause no surprise—Achill is joined to the mainland by a bridge, like Anglesey to Wales.

We start early, drawn by a sturdy little pony, across smiling valleys, wet with dew, shut in by hills with gentle slopes, reddened by the rising sun. After a dozen miles the road begins to wind along a bay, now hidden by sandhills, now allowing pretty glimpses of the sea and some of the 365 islands. On that side everything is blue—sea and sky. But wretched black clouds are forming on the hills to our right. The rain does not delay, we get out mackintoshes and umbrellas. A quarter of an hour later the sun smiles on us again, and the meadows flash with an intenser green. But the wind has veered round ; the next shower comes up from the sea. The waves seem as of molten lead, Croagh disappears in the humid mist. The great watering pot begins again to soak us, until the warm rays of the August sun come to dry us. This kind of thing goes on for days.

The country we are passing through might almost be called fertile in pastures, of which the inhabitants are not a little jealous ; they surround them with walls as high as those round the precious vineyards of the Bordelais. At Molhrany the wilderness begins again and with it picturesqueness. Perched above a pretty beach, this village belongs to the owner of the neighbouring castle of Rossturk, which, strangely built on a tongue of sand running out to sea, elevates its white turrets and elegant Gothic gables above the young trees of a recent plantation. The bay is so much the more beautiful because the harmony of its lines is not broken by the famous islets. The big island of Clare, which shuts the entry like a strong fort, stands out clear cut against the pale sky.

A little farther the peninsula of Curraun is reached by an isthmus scarcely wider than a bridge. The effect of this strange place in bright sunlight is surprising. The immense peat-moss, girt with mountains, its red hues deepened by the blooming heather, gives the impression of a burnt plain. The comparison sounds bad, but the burnt tracts of Estramadura recall this violent colour. No tree, no shrub, no living thing, not even a crow—it looks like a desert that has been blasted by heaven's fire.

The Island of Achill is roughly triangular in shape, much cut up by bays and creeks. The largest of the numerous islands, torn by the rage of the Atlantic from the Western coast, it has an area of about 50,000 acres, almost exclusively peat, sand, and mountain. Like Ireland itself, it is hollowed out in the middle, and the central depression has much the same appearance as that of Curraun. The scanty population, as can be well believed, is far from wealthy ; its isolation tends to keep it in a primitive state. Doogort, the chief village of the island, has scarcely changed at all since its foundation fifty years ago.

The population of Achill consists of a limited number of families who, from time immemorial, have always intermarried among themselves. Rude but not fierce, patient and without ambition, they scarcely ever leave their island. Westport is the limit of their journeys

upon “ the continent.” I saw one man who had only passed the strait once in his life, and another who, when obliged to take the train at Westport for a short distance, thought he would die of fright.

Both men and women are, as a rule, handsome and well-built, and have that delicacy of type, that ease of manner, and that nonchalance of attitude, gesture, and walk, to which the Irish peasant owes his freedom from vulgarity. The women are fond of red, of which they do not mind mixing various tints ; so you may see a garnet-coloured skirt, with a scarlet shawl, and a cherry handkerchief on the head. An old petticoat often does duty for shawl and mantle. It is a picturesque sight to see them thus dressed going to mass, mounted two or three together on one horse bareback ; or perhaps the father rides on horseback, with the wife behind him on a very primitive straw saddle, while the children follow on a donkey. To go on foot is a humiliating extremity that indicates the deepest distress.

It might be expected that this insular population would be essentially maritime, and find ample support in fishing, particularly as salmon are abundant, as well as huge shoals of herring and mackerel, not to mention lobsters, crabs, mussels, and oysters. And so an “ international commission” of many persons learned in fishes and fish culture, in 1883 elaborated a wonderful plan for the establishment of an “ imperial aquarium” and “ model fisheries” in the Bay of Keem. But in the meanwhile, the fish disport themselves at peace in their watery habitation. The only boats in the island are a few wretched half-rigged things, in which the boldest fishermen venture out a short distance to cast their nets ; the others catch crabs and shell-fish among the rocks at low water. When they have caught what is necessary to their subsistence they fold their arms.

They want very little to live on ; as in all the poor parts of Ireland, the peasantry subsist almost entirely upon potatoes and malted herrings, boiled in the same water so that the potatoes may taste of the herrings. Another national dish is the “ stirabout,” a paste of oat-meal, such as is seen in Brittany. Bacon is a luxury ; butcher’s meat only appears at weddings or entertainments. The only commodity they make any money from is butter ; buttermilk is the staple drink. It is needless to add that whisky enjoys their favour, when the state of their finances allows.

As they neglect fishing, do they give themselves up to agriculture ? Upon this poor soil there is little to be done. Potatoes are the only thing grown ; a few sheep find a living on the moors and fell-sides ; the cattle wander about unrestrained. In the evening the boys and girls may be seen coming home from milking, seated two and two on a horse or donkey, the pails of milk at the end of a long pole. Very picturesque are these caravans in the waning light of evening. Other files of horses and donkeys wind along the paths, bringing peats, which have been drying on the moss, where they were cut six weeks ago. Cattle are never used as beasts of burden : an Irish peasant would think it more natural to draw his cart himself than to harness a horned beast to it.

There are some ducks and geese ; fowls are rare, turkeys rarer, pigeons unknown. As to the pig, he alone has the luxury of a litter ; he shares Christians’ food, and fattens on it more than they ; he wanders in the fields “ at his own sweet will.” I must do him the justice to say that, grateful for such care and consideration, the animal shows rare qualities ; he is tame, affectionate, sociable, and respects the cleanness of his shining skin. I am sorry to say that the possession of so many virtues and graces does not save him from the common fate, or prevent him from being made into ham or bacon in the flower of his age. He is, in fact, the surest source of income his owner has ; the whole family goes into mourning at the premature death of the “ jintleman that pays the rint.”

It is in the Western counties, and, above all, in the islands of Achill and Aran, that the curious traveller can study the popular customs of Ireland with most advantage. Thus with the

ceremonies of a funeral : a good burial is the constant preoccupation of the Irish peasant, just as death, without the solace of religion, is his greatest terror : a family will submit to any sacrifice to do honour to a dead member.

The chief expense is the wake on the evening of the death. It lasts from twenty-four hours to four days, according to the temperature of the season and the fortune of the deceased. Ready to seize any opportunity for assembling to do nothing, relations, neighbours, and friends often gather in holiday-dress round the house, before the dying man has expired. The body, carefully washed and wrapped in a shroud, decorated with black ribbons in the case of a married person, with white ones in that of unmarried people, and with flowers for children, is laid, with face uncovered, upon a table, lightly sprinkled with salt, and surrounded by lighted candles. As soon as the prayers for the dead have been said by the priest the people come in and take their places, and the whisky begins to circulate.

Thanks to the efforts of the clergy, these evenings do not degenerate into such orgies as they used to ; decency is gaining ground to the detriment of local colour. However, in the out-of-the-way districts we are in, the old Bacchanalian dance may yet be found. While the women and family weep in a corner, the men smoke and drink round the fire, joking and laughing, discussing the fairs or the crops, talking politics, or indulging in rustic buffoonery. The youth of both sexes give themselves up in dark corners to diversions that might be in place at a dance. From time to time a band of revellers enter and give a rude dramatic representation of some fantastic or religious story, or else organize one of those games, noisy and violent, even to brutality, in which the coarse rustics take delight. There is singing and drinking : and these disgraceful performances take place oftener than Irishmen like to confess, for during my stay in Dublin, a wake in the neighbourhood ended by the unpremeditated cremation of the corpse, which was set on fire by the candles being upset in the excitement of the feast, in any case, the behaviour of the people who attend a funeral of the lower class is far from decent ; a fact explained by their copious libations. It is strange that so pious a race show so little external respect to their dead. I remember once meeting two processions in O'Connell Street in Dublin. They each went through without ceremony : no hats were taken off as they passed, as is the custom in our infidel Paris ; the hearse and cars went on merrily at a full trot.

But if everything were done in the same way all over the world, there would be no inducement to leave home. As can be well imagined, a good wake is nearly as much sought after by tourists as a dramatic eviction ; but chance is not always favourable. There are stories of people waiting several days in some deserted hole for the end of some man on his death-bed. Paddy, with his cunning, well knows how to work this morbid curiosity, to judge from the following anecdote, whose source I cannot vouch for, though I can assert its probability. A driver, hearing two Englishmen speak of their desire to witness one of these strange ceremonies, told them that unfortunately his cousin had just died, and if their honours would gratify the family with their presence, the preparations for the evening could be hurried on. In order not to be outdone in politeness the tourists naturally offered to pay for the whisky, and in the evening the whole village was getting drunk at the deceased man's house at their expense. But at the height of the revel, one of the tourists thought he saw the corpse move slightly, and became suspicious. He therefore approached the corpse in a careless manner, and quickly applied a burning cigar to its nose. In a moment the corpse had thrown off its shroud, and was off as hard as it could go, pursued by the angry Englishman : had not the dead man been a better runner than the living, the comedy would probably have ended in a real wake.

I am tired of talking about whisky ! yet it is necessary to do so, because it plays such an important part in all the business of the Irish peasant. If it is in request at funerals, it can be imagined what it is at weddings. In Achill the old customary marriage forms have remained unaltered. When a young man presents himself one evening with a bottle of potheen at some

house, everybody knows why he comes, though they pretend not to. Besides, Pat, Mike, or Dan takes care to give notice of the visit by some third party. Some old fortune-telling beggar or the country tailor is regularly entrusted with the message thanks to which, by happy chance, the parents are not yet in bed, while the girl is on a visit to some neighbour. Then, drinking a “ drop o’ the craythur,” they talk for a short hour on any subject. Little by little the youth gets around to speak of himself and his family, whose praises are acquiesced in with a prudent reserve ; at last he makes his request, and the debate begins. They calculate how many sheep and goats are equivalent to the twenty golden guineas which the girl has inherited from her uncle; if the suitor contributes a cow he requires its equivalent in pigs ; a feather bed is considered against a flock of geese. Sometimes a marriage falls through for a pair of ducks or a pillow. If the conference does not produce a satisfactory result, they separate without ill-feeling ; there has, at any rate, been a good bottle of drink.

But Pat has other strings to his bow. Armed with several bottles in his pockets, he sometimes asks for three or four girls in one night. By dawn his choice is made, and often the marriage is celebrated next day. Pat is careful to provide himself beforehand with a certificate (cost five shillings) from the priest, stating his freedom, and a license from the bishop, which costs 7s, 6d. As to the ceremony, the price is agreed upon with the priest, according to the supposed fortunes of the families, and is payable in advance. Together with funeral fees it forms the principal source of the priest’s income, and as he must get a living the sum is often considerable.

This interesting insular population has one quality very rare in Ireland—though poor they do not beg for money. The children offer you amethysts and bits of rock-crystal from the caves, but their pertinacity is so small that they can scarcely be accused of that hypocritical mendicity, far more irritating than the other kind, and far less moving. This does not mean that strangers are not “ worked.” As boatmen, drivers, guides and porters, huntsmen and fishers, they charge one as high as possible, and practise, with exceeding skill, the chase of the half-crown. An example will show how far their talents are developed. We returned from Westport in a very elegant car, harnessed to a fine black mare, driven by the proprietor himself—a real gentleman farmer, in knickerbockers and knitted stockings. He told us of the works he had undertaken in Pennsylvania, and of the nice little sum he had made ; on the way he showed us a splendid horse he had just bought for sixty guineas—a high price in Ireland—and he stopped at a hamlet to buy a donkey for his children’s amusement. At the end of our journey, when, with many bows, we slipped the fare agreed upon into his hand, he asked, without blushing, “ If there was nothing for himself ?”

The much-indented promontory, which prolongs the Isle of Achill to the west, faces the Atlantic, with a huge mass of rock, the highest points of which, Croghan and Slievemore, attain a height of 2192 and 2217 feet. At the foot of the latter peak, on its eastern side, is the village of Doogort, overlooking a pretty sandy beach, sheltered from the south-west. It is joined to the Croghan by a ridge of rock, some miles long, crowned with a high graceful watch-tower. The best way to climb it is to drive to Dooagh, a very singular collection of human habitations. Imagine a lot of huts, half buried in the sand, built of stones without mortar, and covered with fern and heather, which is kept fast by bands of straw with big stones at their ends. The smoke escapes by a hole in the roof. There is not a blade of grass. The only vegetation is the green or reddish seaweed that appears at low tide. No domestic animals roam round these primitive dwellings. For two months in summer the village is almost deserted. The able-bodied inhabitants of both sexes go to Scotland or England for the harvest ; only the old men remain behind, with the mothers and children and a few fishermen, whose wretched craft are moored in the sand at the very doors of the hovels. Everyone has leisure : the men smoke, seated on a heap of stones ; the women stand gaping at the door, which also does for a window, or crouch round the peat-fire that is never allowed to go out, combining their Vestal-like task with the giving of nourishment to their nurslings ; the elder children roll about half-naked in the sand. There is nothing surprising in this leisure ; in a

country where the sight of a peasant going to the fields with his tools is a rarity, it is only just that those who have no fields should do nothing !

Why should this unsailorlike population take up its abode almost in the sea ? At high tides, the waves lap the badly-built walls ; in a storm they sometimes carry off a part of the village. Last winter a man was carried away by a billow ; the next day his body was washed up by the tide. The evening of his wake the waves, baulked of their prey, invaded the house where the revel was going on and forced it to be transferred farther away from the sea. For all that, the village of Dooagh is continually being rebuilt upon the same spot, like Torre del Greco on the side of Vesuvius, which is periodically devoured by the lava.

Immediately behind the houses begins the peat-moss. Before practising the pedestrian exercise known as bog-trotting, it is impossible to imagine its character. In spite of its perpetual wetness the moss is not a marsh, nor does it exhale miasmatic odours. Rheumatism is common in Ireland, but not pernicious fever. The peat-bog is beautified by its reddish colour. To look at it, you might think it would be a pleasure to walk on the carpet of flowers ; try it, and you will soon change your opinion. The ground is not solid, but consists of tufts of heather separated by thick black mud. When, in stepping from one tuft to another you slip into this, it is no easy task to get out again. After a little of this treacherous exercise you are coated with mud up to the knee, and regret that decency does not allow you to go barefoot, like the Irish girls.

The ascent of the Croghan is all through bog. Detours have to be made continually to avoid the peat-cuttings, which are often full of black stagnant water ; or else you climb up the bed of some torrent, holding on to clumps of heather that give way under your weight. When the slope becomes sharper, you begin to hope you will be able to walk with dry feet. Not at all ; the slippery yielding peat is still there, and walking is made more difficult by the steepness of the hill. Higher up there is a carpet of dwarfed junipers, which crackle under your feet, and give out their strong aromatic smell ; but still the bog is with you. The mountain is a gigantic sponge. Still, when the narrow ridge between the two peaks is reached, the view (if you are not buried in a mist) amply compensates for the woes you have suffered in the ascent. On one side a wall of rock, 2000 feet high, descends sheer to the ocean. No figures or words can give any idea of the overwhelming grandeur of the scene. At a giddy depth below, the ocean is breaking madly against this mighty rock, justly called “ the great bastion of Europe ” and you shiver as you think that a single false step will precipitate you into the abyss. Close at hand, looking like a ship moored in the bay, is Clare Island—so near that, as the story runs, a golden eagle carried thence a child in its talons to its eyrie in the rocks beneath our feet. You can make out the ruins of the castle of Grannaile, the fortress, and one of the chief residences of the famous Grana or Grace O’Malley, Princess of Clare in the time of Queen Elizabeth.

The memory of this Princess of Clare is curiously bound up with that of the old Celtic family of the MacMahons, whose ivy-clad castle is seen on an eminence, on the side of the Bay of Tullaghan. An hereditary hatred reigned between their clan and that of the O’Malleys. One of them who started to fight against Princess Grana, was disarmed by love, and returned home with his claws clipped, and bound by a promise of marriage. Soon afterwards, the faithless fair married an O’Flaherty, Prince of Connemara. The injured suitor took his revenge by killing his rival in the chase, and the Princess appeased the ghost of her husband by having the MacMahons enticed into an ambush and massacred to a man, by a band of brigands. That was in the good old times of the independence of Ireland.

But let us not forget that we are on the top of the Croghan, with our eyes turned to the east. At our feet the Island of Achill spreads the dark humpy surface of its peaty soil, bordered by white coves cut out of the rock. At the end of Keel, the cliffs of Meenane appear quite insignificant. They have the trifling height of 1000 feet, and the surf which has dashed against

them for so many ages, has so eaten them away that they look like the entrance to some great Gothic cathedral. From this they have obtained their name ; upon these “ Cathedrals” and upon Achill Head, part of the vessels of the Armada were wrecked. In the distance, beyond the blue streak that separates Achill and the peninsula of Curraun, the wild chaos of the mountains of Nephin extends to the horizon. Farther north, at the foot of the peaks of Erris, the sand-hills of Mullet stretch into the sea in several long jagged promontories, at the ends of which are the little islands of Inishkea, Inishglora, and Devilaun. The first of these is inhabited by five families, practically independent of all law, protected as they are by the storms against sheriff and constables. The revenue officers cannot get there any more easily, a fact of which the islanders, cunning if primitive, avail themselves to illicitly distil potheen from the barley they grow in sheltered spots. On calm moonless nights they run their merchandise across to the mainland, where everybody is the smuggler’s accomplice.

The Croghan is riven in two places by deep clefts into which the sun never penetrates. They can be reached without much difficulty, and seem to extend to the interior of the world. A great variety of rare ferns grow in them. Indeed, the flora of the whole island is extremely rich ; but if I have one hint to give the tourist it is not to make the ascent in company with a botanist. Instead of allowing you to enjoy the landscape, he will pester you with barbarous names with Latin endings.

The Croghan is the property of an Englishman, who has the benevolent intention of establishing fisheries on this coast, which abounds in fish. The pasture on the mountains feeds a considerable number of cattle. On the southern side, overlooking a deep, wide ravine, with a lake at its bottom, in which are wild swans, is a very decent-looking farm, which lately belonged to a person who has become famous in Irish politics. I mean Captain Boycott, who, very much against his will, has given his name to that exclusive dealing which is such a powerful weapon in the Nationalist armoury. It will be remembered that he was the first who required police protection while getting in his hay and digging his potatoes with the help of his family, as not a single agricultural labourer would work on his land. That did not happen here (where he has left an excellent impression on the people who worked for him) but on the banks of Lough Mask, near Cong. He had soon to give up his farm there, for boycotting is a moral torture, and a material difficulty against which even the most energetic cannot hold out long.

Other Englishmen have become owners of parts of the island, which afford sport. Grouse, woodcock, and snipe are plentiful on the moss. After what I have said about bog-trotting, it will be understood that a man must be a wild devotee of sport to seek it here. The plateaux are big warrens of badgers and rabbits. Lovers of uncommon game find something in Achill to please them : the red deer roams on the slopes of the hills ; the wild goat makes a capital shot, though not one without danger, owing to the awful chasms over which it has to be pursued. Wild swans and ducks, bustards, and numerous species of sea-birds breed freely.

But seal-hunting is the most curious. These animals frequent the bottomless caverns, excavated by the action of the sea at the feet of the immense granite walls that line the coast. The hunter is taken in a boat to the mouth of the cave, which he enters by swimming. A lamp is attached to his head, and he is in communication with those in the boat by a cord round his middle. His business is to find the nests and carry off the young to the boat, where the rowers are on the watch. The parents soon come out to look for their offspring, when they are shot. Nothing is sacred for the hunter. Sometimes he waits at the mouth of the cave at low water ; but he must be careful of the rising tide, by which it would be terrible to be surprised in these abysses.

But strangers alone are so impious as to devote themselves to this reprehensible amusement, for the natives know that these amphibians are human souls, allowed by special grace to survive the deluge in this shape, in which they now await the last judgment. They are

therefore disinclined to molest the poor beasts. The hotel-keeper at Doogort, a Protestant of Scotch descent, who does the honours of his beloved island with considerable intelligence, told me that he could almost believe the legend, from the almost human sound of the groans of the seals in their caverns. The superstitious dread felt by the islanders at these lugubrious moans would suffice to keep them from the sport, even without their dislike of difficult and dangerous expeditious.

Shooters and fishers in quest of attractive and various sport ; intellectual travellers who seek internal and external peace, together with those grand views of sky and sea, which excite the imagination without heating the blood ; the weary of brain and of heart who yearn to relax and refresh themselves by contact with the invigorating calm of a healthy quiet retreat ; curious travellers with sensations as yet unstirred ; misanthropes tired of jostling with their fellows—should go and lounge in the forsaken districts of the far West of Ireland, and leave the big island of Connemara to the last, only if time presses, for a hurried visit is very unsatisfactory. As to lovers of landscapes, I will give them a notion of the joys Achill has in store for them by saying it is so full of light and colour that the absence of trees goes unnoticed.

Sligo and Enniskillen.

Geography tells us that Ireland is divided into four provinces—Leinster, Munster, Connaught, and Ulster, corresponding to the ancient kingdoms of the east, south, west, and north. The province of Ulster has a peculiar character, owing to the fact that it is more Scotch than Irish, and more Protestant than Catholic. At the close of the great rebellion of the O'Neills, the chiefs of this region, James I. carried out “plantation” upon a large scale, and the English point with pride to the appearance of comfort and cleanliness which, to the most careless eye, distinguishes it from the Celtic and Papist provinces. To this the Irish reply that as the Scotch Presbyterian and English Episcopalian colonists have always enjoyed the favour and protection of the Government, it is not to be wondered at that they have prospered at the expense of the oppressed and persecuted natives. Be the reason what it may, as soon as we approach Ulster the physiognomy of the country changes. The journey by road from Ballina to Sligo is performed within the bounds of Connaught, but you feel yourself to be in a frontier zone. Less bog, better kept farms, good crops of barley, oats and rye, great fields of beetroot instead of the everlasting potato, more numerous and fatter cattle—these are the signs of prosperity. There is still enough heather to tint the landscape, growing in great tufts upon the turf dykes that divide the fields, but there are fewer stones and the roads are bordered with trees and quickset hedges. The houses, for the most part roofed with slates, are higher and are embowered in flowers. Occasionally we find the sordid cabins we know so well, but they seem ashamed of themselves. There are less dirt, fewer rags, and more shoes. The children go barefoot, but that is a fixed custom in Ireland, and they seem none the worse for it. The country has become more tame, but that is rather a relief, for one wearies of rugged grandeur. There remains a softened and peaceful beauty which rejoices the eye without putting a strain upon the faculty of admiration. To the right are little stony ridges, gay with heather, to the left is the sea lying as tranquil as a lake.

We reach Sligo Bay, a safe anchorage, where, as usual, nothing is wanting but ships. It is trefoil-shaped, and the middle arm, on which is the town of Sligo, is sheltered by an island. The more southerly bay of Ballysadare is formed by the estuary of the Oranmore, which falls into the sea by a succession of cascades offering water power which, as usual, is not utilized. But if the economist regrets the absence of mills, the tourist may admire the salmon leaping under the ruins of the abbey and church of St. Fichan, ancient structures which overhang the stream. At a little distance rises a rocky hill of singular shape, on the summit of which a vast cairn encloses, according to tradition, the ashes of the mystic queen of the Banshees. The Gaelic name of this hill favours the supposition that in Druidic times it was the scene of sacrifices to the moon. But that it was used as a burial-place at a time when cremation was in

vogue is proved by the presence of numerous urns, among which may possibly be that of the “queen of lies, lighter than the treacherous wind.” There are people without imagination who decline to accept these stories, as if history were anything but depoetized legend.

Sligo is interesting only for the ruins of its Dominican abbey, situated in the centre of the town. Though the square tower has been disfigured by a clumsy restorer, the richly sculptured high altar remains intact, and the tomb of O’Connor Sligo and his wife is the finest of the cinerary monuments of Ireland. Another altar, half-buried, upon which is a barbarous Calvary, is decorated with sculptured shamrocks of rare elegance. The same plant, diversely treated, is found on the capitals of the cloister, of which three sides remain in perfect preservation.

The mountainous district which separates the Bay of Sligo from that of Donegal is extremely picturesque without being rugged, and as it has not yet been penetrated by a railway the tourist can visit every part of it at his ease. Following a path which runs along the top of the cliffs for miles, one sees many curious sights, natural “cathedrals” resembling in miniature those of Achill; great doorways, square or round, bored by the waves out of the limestone which, under their action, come to resemble grey marble; and triumphal arches, one of which—the Fairy Bridge—measures twenty-four feet. Malicious sprites are supposed to haunt it, whose amusement is to trip up adventurous strangers and send them head foremost from its slippery surface into the sea. There, however, they seem to be very well treated by the giants, korrigans, elves, pixies, and other interesting beings whom civilization has banished from the dry land.

The Island of Muireadhaigh—pronounced Murdhach, but now softened into Murray—takes its name from a holy man who at some undetermined period was the first bishop of Killala. The monastery, of which the ruins remain, sheltered the youth of Colomba, the apostle of the Scotch Picts, who, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, was banished for some unspecified sin. According to the same authority, the Scandinavian pirates ravaged the island in 802, hence we may suppose the ruins to date from that period. This assigns a venerable antiquity to these round cells, quadrangular oratories, subterranean chambers, and columns covered with inscriptions in *Ogham*, an ancient character supposed to be of Phœnician origin. Long after coming in contact with Roman civilization, Ireland adhered to this primitive alphabet. Murray Island is a rocky plateau, naked and desolate, sheltered partially by cliffs on the seaward coast. A hundred or so of inhabitants gather a precarious harvest from the less exposed patches of soil. A police station, recently established, has deprived them of what was their principal source of revenue, the illicit distillation of potheen.

Farther along the coast are found the remains of an ancient city of fish-eaters, whose cairns, tumuli, stone altars, and mortuary chambers are half-buried in the sand of a chain of dunes. Then, by way of piquant contrast, one suddenly comes upon the pretty beach of Bundoran—another “Irish Brighton,”—another “queen of watering places,” where pretentious hotels, a few shops, bathing machines, a post office, and a railway station, stretch along the side of a low bluff crowned by a grassy plateau. The wearied tourist may make an agreeable halt at Bundoran. On the other hand, those who suffer from the restlessness of the excursionist, will find it interesting to go over again by way of the mountains the journey he has just made by way of the coast. At last, when the most conscientious has been surfeited with scenery, ruined abbeys, Celtic crosses, and ruins of round towers, he can take the railway once more, either at Ballyshannon or at Manorhamilton. In a couple of hours a little panting locomotive will take him to Enniskillen, the chief town of County Fermanagh, in Ulster.

A short walk in the streets is enough to show the traveller that he is in Ulster, even if he did not otherwise know it. Enniskillen, indeed, presents no very-striking symptoms of prosperity. It is a fairly clean little town of 6000 inhabitants, very agreeably situated on an island

in the midst of the stream that joins the upper to the lower Lough Erne. Two forts command the bridges, and at one end of the long tortuous main street stands an old fortified gateway, which is all that remains of the castle of the MacGuires, on the site of which now stand large barracks. A large butter and corn market is held twice a week, and attracts all the farmers of the neighbourhood. These people have the air of bestirring themselves to some purpose, and while they lounge less than those of the south, they evidently live in far greater comfort. Ulster is the cradle and stronghold of the Orange Societies, founded in the last century to counteract the Nationalist and Catholic secret societies. It must not be concluded that all Ulster is either Protestant or loyal ; but the good people of Enniskillen have been very staunch in both respects ever since the regiment of Dragoons recruited among them performed prodigies of valour at the Battle of the Boyne, under the personal leadership of William III. Although extravagant praise has been lavished upon the two loughs, and the Ulster people hold them equal to the Lakes of Killarney, they are far from deserving that reputation. The tourist, nevertheless, will find delightful excursions in their vicinity. Were there nothing more than the mere pleasure of boating, it is delightful to glide, without shock, or dust, or fatigue, over the tranquil surface of lakes, that change their hues with every cloud that crosses the sky. The islands, I need hardly say, are 365 in number ; and the boatmen will tell you that in leap year an extra one appears. I have always suspected the good faith of Irishmen who narrate these absurd legends, but it is certain that they resent any signs of incredulity. After all, one cannot be angry when people who have a legendary past endeavour to preserve it. Progress spoils quite enough. For example, they have begun to disfigure the lower lake by works useful to the farmers but distasteful to lovers of the picturesque. Every year some 20,000 acres are laid under water by the overflow of the lakes. Mr. John Gray Porter, of Bellisle, has undertaken to put an end to this state of things by a system of reservoirs and sluices, combined with an enlargement of the bed of the river Erne, which carries off the overflow of the lower lake. To effect this, they have destroyed an enormous mass of rock that obstructed the channel, abolishing in the process a picturesque cataract. These works are close to the little town of Belleek, where they manufacture a curious porcelain with a mother-of-pearl surface, which recalls the majolica of Gubbio. Pettigoe, another station on the line, from Ballyshannon to Enniskillen, which skirts the northern shore of the lower lake, serves as a starting-point for a curious excursion to the little Lough Derg, and the famous purgatory of St. Patrick, frequented in the Middle Ages by pilgrims from all parts of Christendom, and still held in veneration by the Irish Catholics. The name is given to a rocky islet where the apostle of Erin had so fearful a vision of the sufferings of Purgatory, that he instituted a pilgrimage, conferring upon sinners indulgences, abridging considerably their time of penitence in the other world.

Of the chapels and cells that were erected, curious fragments remain. The modern buildings consist of a hospital kept by nuns, a clergy house, and two churches. The pious exercises practised are such as Saint Patrick ordained fourteen centuries ago—bare heads and bare feet. Nothing, as one sees, is more venerable than this isle, which is quite uninhabited except in the season of pilgrimages, from 15th of July to 15th of August. The sombre aspect of its bare, steep sides, whose dull reflection gives a black inky colour to the water, adds still more to its religious character. It is to be noted, that in the worst time of the religious persecution suffered by Ireland for nearly three centuries, the “ stations ” of Lough Derg were always respected and protected. Bishop Hugh MacMahon, who bore witness to the fact in 1714, attributes this blessing to the particular merits of Saint Patrick, and looks upon the island as a new ark of the testimony of the Lord, the Holy of Holies of the Catholic faith in Ireland.

At the opposite extremity of Lough Erne, near Enniskillen, is another of the religious retreats, so numerous in this Holy Island—the Isle of Devenish, all green with undulating pastures, without tree or bush. A vast “ cashel ” of dry stones encircles the ruins of the monastic establishment, founded in the sixth century by Saint Molaise. This monastery was still flourishing in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Of the oratory of the Saint only the four walls remain, crumbled down to a man’s height ; the thought that some of the old men of the

district have seen this standing intact, with its roof of flat stones, gives ground for deploring the indifference that has too long been shown to Celtic monuments.

Ruins of other churches are grouped about the round tower, which is 84 feet high and 49 in circumference at the base. The walls are three feet thick, built of stones about a foot square, and almost without cement, yet with such art that the inside is nearly as smooth as a gun barrel. It has one peculiarity ; the frieze which runs round the base of the conical roof, as well as the entablatures of the windows, are curiously decorated with wreaths and human heads, with curly beards, like those of the Assyrian kings. The tower had its top brought down by a singular accident in 1834. An alder, the seed of which, no doubt, had been dropped by some bird, grew for a century in the masonry at the top : torn down by a storm, it brought with it in its fall all the higher parts, which had been loosened by the slow working of the roots. It was rebuilt by public subscription.

Close to the side of the church, in the middle of the tombs that pave the enclosure where stands the cashel, is an old cross of very elegant and unusual shape. Its antiquity is attested by the curious barbaric carving, which represents Christ on the Cross. It was discovered three years ago, while a grave was being dug, and was erected in its present situation. No doubt the soil of Devenish conceals much more archæological wealth.

Of all the burying-places entrusted by Irish piety to the protection of the ashes of the saints, that of Devenish is one of the most sacred. The peasants come from far to bury their dead there, and it is very picturesque to see the funerals gliding across the waves to reach the holy place, while the mountains re-echo the wail of mourning. Hence the name Portora—port of lamentations—given to the landing-place on the arm of the river, in the middle of which is Enniskillen. Side by side with tombstones bearing inscriptions of recent date may be seen others covered with lichen, on which is the rudely-sculptured image of a Thanist, a bishop, a mitred abbot ; a very old stone sarcophagus is supposed to be that in which the remains of Saint Molaisse were enclosed. Empty to-day, it possesses miraculous healing powers for the rheumatic subject, who can stretch himself at his length in it, after having walked thrice round it.

The tombs, old and new, are absolutely neglected and invaded by nettles, which make the researches of the archæologist somewhat perilous. Still, we ought not to complain of this : anything is better than the sight of the pearl crowns and other offerings, more pious than artistic, by which we French show our love and respect to the dead. The Irish graveyards—gloomy, wild, forlorn—awaken more solemn thoughts than your chess-board cemeteries, carefully regulated by the public authorities.

Three months' tour in Ireland (1891)

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