

The Great Worm of the Shannon

Preface

This curious conception of the greatest river in Ireland owing its origin to the struggles of a great worm or serpent is new to me. I got it from Pronisias O'Connor, who was in the workhouse in Athlone at the time, and he got it himself from a man called George Curtin from near Urlaur on the borders of Mayo and Roscommon, who had also been in the workhouse. Unfortunately, after writing it down, I lost the first half of the story, which was the most interesting, and I have had to supply a brief summary of it in brackets, so far as my very imperfect recollection of it goes. I have quite forgotten the incidents which led up to the druids' prophecy and the Worm's hearing about it. — Douglas Hyde (1915)

The Story.

[THE druid foretold that a man was coming to Ireland who would banish all the snakes, dragons and serpents. The great Ollpheist, or worm, or serpent, was at this time in the pool near the Arigna mountains, from which the Shannon partly takes its rise. It heard of this prophecy and was greatly concerned about its future. It determined to leave Ireland and make his way to the sea before the man came who should have the power to kill or banish serpents. The man the druid had prophesied about was Saint Patrick.

The story describes the desperate efforts of the great worm to make a waterway for itself by cutting away the hole in which it was enclosed. It was its efforts to escape which made the river Shannon. At every prominent part of the Shannon its adventures are related. As it went on its way, working a channel for itself by which to swim out to the sea, it used to commit the most terrible depredations on cattle and sheep, and destroy the country wherever it happened to be. The adventures of the worm at Jamestown, Athleague, Lanesborough and other places are described. Near Athleague the people, led by a drunken piper called O'Rourke, made head against it, but it swallowed the piper at one gulp. The noise of the pipes was too much for it and it threw him up again, after a time, but it lost several days work at the river. After getting rid of the piper who had so troubled its inside it began to work hard to make up for the time it had lost [1] for it was greatly afraid of the good and powerful man who was to come.

After a week or so O'Rourke was blind drunk again, and he faced for the place where the Great Worm had been before, but by this time it had worked its passage far away from that place. The piper, however, walked into the river, and everyone thought that he was drowned, but one of the enchanted eels was left in the hole and the eel put O'Rourke under enchantment too, and it was not long until they heard him playing music in the hole. But he never came up on land since. Only every morning and evening they used to be listening to him playing music in the hole, and from that day to this there is no other name on that same spot but the Piper's Hole. And everybody in Athlone knows the Piper's Hole as well to-day as the people who were alive a thousand years ago knew it.

The Great Worm went on very well until it came to the place which is now Lough Ree. There was a great tribe of venomous serpents there and they attacked it. Some went in front of it, others came behind it, others came on each side of it. They fought for seven nights [2] and seven days ; they made the hard ground soft and the soft ground hard. They sent stones and great rocks flying more than half a mile up in the air. Floods of blood were running as plentiful as the water itself, and indeed people thought that it was the end of the world

that was in it. The battle went on for a month without any signs of victory on one side or the other, and the people of the villages round about were in great fear ; but as the old saying puts it, every battle has an end. When the most of the serpents were dead they asked the Great Worm for peace. He granted that and both sides were rejoiced. The Great Worm was wounded and bruised and in much pain.

After that great battle the Worm had to take a rest, and that gave great ease to the people of the villages, because it ate neither cow nor sheep nor pig for the space of three months, but it ate up all the serpents that it had killed in the fighting. It never left so much as a bit of bone behind it, and the people began to think that it would never claim its food off them any more. But so soon as it set to work again they had to supply it with cows, sheep, and pigs once more, because it thought that this was its [lawful] wages for cutting out the river for them. And everyone knows that the river did much good for the country on each side of it ; and only for the Great Worm there would have been no river.

The Worm worked hard and went on well until it came to the place which is now Lough Derg. The venomous serpents were collected before it in that place and they gave it battle. If hundreds attacked it in Lough Ree thousands attacked it in Lough Derg, and the first battle was only sport in comparison to this one. They attacked before, behind, and on every side, and some of them made holes under its belly so that they might be able to thrust it through in that place, and such a cutting and scalping and tearing and killing there had never been in the world before, and it's likely that there won't be again. They made the dry earth wet, the wet earth dry, and they sent stones and great rocks flying into the air quick as lightning, and God help the man one of them would fall on, it was a warrant of death for him. They fought for a month without appearance of victory on either side, and during all that time the lake was red (dearg) with blood, and the old people say that this is the reason it was called Loch Dearg or Derg. After a month of fighting the Worm gained the battle. It rose of one leap in the air, and came down on top of the serpents, making a mash of them, and those that were not killed went off over the country.

The Worm was torn and wounded and in great pain after this hard battle, and had to take a long rest. But it never went in pursuit of food from the people of the villages, because it ate its enough of the serpents every day until the last of them was eaten by it

As soon as its wounds were closed and it had rested, it began working again, and nothing wonderful happened to it until it came to the place where the city of Limerick is to-day. In that place there was a great troop of enchanted heroes near the spot where the Treaty Stone is now. The warriors threatened it and told it not to come any further, but it challenged them to battle. They attacked it with battle-axes and great clubs, and they were cutting it and beating it throughout the day until they thought it was dead. Then they went away. But as soon as the sun went down it came to itself again and it was as strong as it was at the commencement of the battle. It came up on land and went to the castle of the enchanted warriors. They were asleep, and it threw down the castle on top of them and killed every mother's son of them. Then it returned to go in face of its work.

It went on well after leaving Limerick, for there was nothing to hinder it. For that reason it made the river wider in that place than in any other. But as soon as it got out into the sea a great whale met it and it had to fight a hard battle, and was nearly beaten, when a sea-maiden came and helped it and they killed the whale.

The sea-maiden and the Great Worm went on side by side until they came to a village on the coast, where there were about three score of men in boats fishing. The Great Worm was

very hungry and began swallowing them down greedily, men and boats and all, until the sea-maiden spoke and said that it was a shame. That angered it and it attacked her, but she was too clever for it. She drew out a golden comb with venom in it, and thrust it into the Worm's eye and blinded it out and out. Then said the Worm to her, "I would sooner be dead than alive ; put a hole in my stomach with your scissors." She did that and it died in a moment.

The water was ebbing, and when it had gone out the Great Worm was left dead on the sand. The people of the villages round about came ; they opened the worm, and every mother's son that he had swallowed they found alive and in a heavy sleep at the bottom of their boats. The bones of the Great Worm remained on the shore of Bantry Bay until the fishermen made oars out of them. If my story is not true, there is no water in the sea and no river Shannon in Ireland.

[1] Here begins the half which I did not lose.

[2] The night is usually put before the day in Irish.

Legends of saints & sinners ([1915])

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The Shannon

Arthur Shadwell Martin

THE greatest body of running water in the British Isles has long claimed and received the love, admiration and praise of natives and foreigners. Its banks are fringed with ruins of castles, round towers, abbeys and churches, and its islands and hills reek with historical associations, pagan folklore and mediæval tradition. Steamers now run practically from its mouth to its source, and to the tourist all its beauties are now displayed. The enthusiasm of foreigners over the beautiful stream equals that of Erin's own sons. Writing in 1844, Johann Georg Kohl said :

“ Well may the Irish speak of the ‘ *Royal Shannon*,’ for he *is* the king of all their rivers. A foreigner, when he thinks of some of our large continental streams, may at first consider the epithet somewhat of an exaggeration, but let him go down this glorious river and its lakes, and he will be at no loss to understand that royal majesty, in the matter of rivers, may be quite independent of length or extent.

“ The British Islands certainly can boast of no second stream, the beauties of whose banks could for a moment be compared to those of the Shannon.

“ At his very birth he is broad and mighty, for he starts on his course strong with the tribute of a lake (Lough Allen), and traverses the middle of Ireland, in a direction from north-

east to south-west. Thrice again he widens out into a lake ; first into the little Lough Boffin, then into the larger Lough Ree, and lastly, when he has got more than half way to the ocean, into the yet longer Lough Derg. Below Limerick he opens into a noble estuary, and when at length he falls into the sea between Loop Head and Kerry Head, the glorious river has completed a course of two hundred and fourteen English miles. The greater part of the Shannon runs through the central plain which separates the mountainous north from the mountainous south.

“ It was on a beautiful day that I embarked to descend the Shannon. Flowing out of a lake, and forming several other lakes in its progress, the water is extremely clear and beautiful. The movement is in general equable, excepting a few rapids which are avoided by means of canals. The banks, too, are pleasing to the eye. Large green meadows stretch along the sides of the river, and villages alternate with handsome country seats, surrounded by their parks. Herons abound along the margin, and many of these beautiful birds were continually wheeling over us in the air, their plumage glittering again in the rays of the sun.

“ We arrived at Banagher. Then gliding along by Redwood Castle and the beautiful meadows of Portumna, we left the town of Portumna to our right, and entered the waters of Lough Derg. The steamer in which we had hitherto travelled was of small dimensions, with a wheel under the stern, to allow of its passing through some canals of no great breadth ; but on the broad lake a new and larger vessel prepared to receive us. The two steamers came close to one another, to exchange their respective passengers, and their manoeuvre, as they swept round on the wide water, pleased me much.

“ Of the lakes that like so many rich pearls are strung upon the silver thread of the Shannon, Lough Ree and Lough Bodarrig, lying in a level country, and in a great measure surrounded by bogs, present little that is pleasing to the eye. Lough Allen is situated almost wholly within the mountainous districts of the north, and a large portion of Lough Derg is made picturesque by the mountains of the south. Like all Irish lakes, Lough Derg contains a number of small green islands, of which the most renowned is Inniscaltra, an ancient holy place, containing the ruins of seven venerable churches of great antiquity, and the remains of one of those remarkable columnal erections known in Ireland under the name of “ round towers.” We passed the sacred isle at the distance of a mile and a half, but we could very distinctly make out all its monuments by the aid of a telescope.”

It is not every visitor to Shannon’s shores that has unqualified praise for the scenery. Thus speaking of the sites selected by the saints of old for their retreats, Cæsar Otway exclaims : “ What a dreary place is Glendalough ! what a lonely isle is Inniscaltra ! what a hideous place is Patrick’s Purgatory ! what a desolate spot is Clonmacnoise ! From the hill of Bentullagh on which we now stood, the numerous churches, the two round towers, the curiously overhanging bastion of O’Melaghlin’s Castle, all before us to the south, and rising in relief from the dreary sameness of the surrounding red bogs, presented such a picture of tottering ruins and encompassing desolation as I am sure few places in Europe could parallel.”

The traveller who wants to see the most accessible beauties of the Shannon usually starts at Limerick and leaves the river at Athlone, though some go as far as Carrick on Shannon. The chief loughs traversed are Derg and Ree ; and the only towns of any importance are Killaloe, Portumna and Athlone.

About eight miles above Limerick are the Rapids or Falls of Doonass, where the Shannon pours an immense body of water, which above the rapids is forty feet deep and 300 yards wide, through and above a congregation of huge rocks and stones that extend nearly half a

mile, and offers not only an unusual scene, but a spectacle approaching much nearer to the sublime than any moderate-sized stream can offer even in the highest cascade.

Castleconnell is beautifully situated on the east bank. It has a popular Spa, and is a famous centre for salmon fishing. The castle, from which the town is named, stands on an isolated rock in the middle of the town. It was anciently the seat of the O'Briens. When Ginkell, William the Third's General, took the castle, he caused it to be dismantled. Castleconnell is famous for its salmon fishing and eel weirs. The Castleconnell fishing rods are famed all over the world.

Eight miles above Castleconnell near the entrance to Lough Derg is Killaloe.

The navigation from Limerick to Killaloe is carried on by canal so as to avoid the rapids of Killaloe and Castleconnell. Killaloe is a charmingly placed village, but it is probably best known as the place above all others in Ireland dear to the heart of the angler. The fine old cathedral, on the site of a much older church, dates from the Twelfth Century. The Choir is used as the parish church. Commencing at Killaloe is Lough Derg, an expansion of the Shannon to the proportions of a lake. The Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York made a trip up Lough Derg to Banagher in the summer of 1897, and the route is now known as the "Duke of York" route.

As every one knows, the Shannon is much the largest river in the United Kingdom. Its breadth, where it expands into the long narrow lakes that mark so much of its course, stretches to as much as thirteen miles. Lough Derg, the first of these expanded stretches, is twenty-three miles long, and exceedingly picturesque. Its shining surface, overshadowed by blue hills, is broken here and there by woody islands famous in history and song. Killaloe itself takes its name from the ruined church on the island below the twelve-arched bridge ("the church on the water"). The salmon fisheries here are very important and profitable, and which is probably more interesting to the traveller the river is free to every one who possesses a rod and line.

It was here, at the lower end of Lough Derg, that Brian Boru's palace of Kincora once stood, in the Ninth Century. The mound on which it was built is all that remains of a place that displayed, 1,200 years ago, the utmost glory of the fierce, proud Irish kings. The ruined castle of Derry crowns another small islet; and Holy Island, thirty acres in extent, is a spot full of interest. Like Glendalough, it was chosen out, early in the Christian era, for a retreat of piety and learning. One cannot but observe the excellent taste in scenery displayed by the monks of ancient days, in selecting these peaceful refuges from a stormy world. What can be more lovely than the vale of the seven churches, or than Innisfallen Island? and Holy Island compares not at all ill with these still more famous places. St. Caimin, in the early part of the Seventh Century, settled here, and built a monastery, which soon became famous for its learning. Seven different churches afterwards grew up on the island, and one of the most beautiful round towers in Ireland still raises its head seventy feet above the waters of the lake, among the ruins of these sacred places. This part of the lake is crowded with islands, and the ruined castles and monasteries are very numerous. At the town of Portumna, some miles further on, another stop is made, as the castle and abbey are particularly well worth seeing. This was another spot celebrated for its learning. The monastery of Tirdaglass, whence many manuscripts issued, was founded by St. Columba in the Sixth Century. At Clonmacnoise, further on, the traveller may see the cradle of the ancient art and learning of Ireland, and the most important seat of religion in early days. St. Cearan (early Sixth Century) is especially associated with the spot; the great cathedral was built in his honour, and the holy well,

dedicated to the Saint, is still the object of constant pilgrimage. Round towers, ancient Irish crosses, ruined churches and monasteries, are here in abundance. The ancient city of Clonmacnoise has disappeared altogether. This is a place of the greatest possible interest to antiquarians, and even ordinary travellers will find much pleasure in the beauty of the picturesque ruins.

At Banagher is the fortified bridge of seven arches, protected by two towers and a battery. This is all the more interesting, for, not being an antiquity in any sense, it was finished in 1843, as a matter of fact.

Above Lough Derg, the country is fertile, but not especially striking until Lough Ree is reached. This second great expansion of the river fairly rivals the first in beauty. Of its twenty-seven islands, the most attractive is Inis Clothran, on which the famous Queen Maeve of Connaught spent her declining years. She is said to have built a splendid stone house for herself here, and lived on the island until she died, at the age of a hundred and two. Some ruins still remain to mark the spot, although the date of Queen Maeve goes back nearly two thousand years. Antiquarians consider that Shakespeare's fairy Queen Mab was a development of the many legends told about this powerful, wicked, and fascinating Queen of far-off days.

Portumna, at the head of the lake, commands fine views of Lough Derg, and the hilly land to the west. After leaving this town the scenery becomes dull and monotonous till we reach Meelick, where the river is so devious that a canal rejoins the Shannon at the mouth of the Little Brosna. Immediately above, the stream begins to divide and becomes very tortuous till Banagher is reached.

At the upper end of Lough Ree is Lanesborough, a small town with a fine bridge of six arches and a swivel arch. From this point the sail to Tarmonbarry presents little beauty or interest. The country is generally a wide extent of bog, abounding in remains of trees and the extinct Irish elk. Opposite Tarmonbarry, the Royal Canal, communicating with Dublin, joins the Shannon. When the river again widens into Lough Forbes, the Seven Churches of Kilbarry come into view : only three and part of a round tower are now standing. Lough Forbes is triangular in shape, and the shores are low boggy land not destitute of a certain quiet beauty. Lough Boderg shaped like a T is the only remaining sheet of water before reaching Carrick on Shannon where the tourist's voyage generally ends.

Great rivers of the world, as seen and described by famous writers (1908)

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