

Litterateurs and the Land.

W. P. Ryan

“ I MOVED among men and places, and in living I learned the truth at last. I know I am a spirit, and that I went forth in old time from the Self-ancestral to labours yet unaccomplished ; but rilled ever and again with home-sickness I made these songs by the way.”

“ In day from some titanic past it seems
As if a thread divine of memory runs ;
Born ere the Mighty One began his dreams,
Or yet were stars and suns.

But here an iron will has fixed the bars ;
Forgetfulness falls on earth’s myriad races ;
No image of the proud and morning stars
Looks at us from their faces.

Yet yearning still to reach to those dim heights,
Each dream remembered is a burning-glass,
Where through to darkness from the Light of Lights
Its rays in splendour pass.”

“ If nationality is to justify itself ... it must be because the country which preserves its individuality does so with the profound conviction that its peculiar ideal is nobler than that which the cosmopolitan spirit suggests—that this ideal is so precious to it that its loss would be as the loss of the soul. . . . Nationality was never so strong in Ireland as at the present time. It is beginning to be felt less as a political movement than as a spiritual force. It seems to be gathering itself together, joining men who were hostile before in a new intellectual fellowship : and if all these could unite on fundamentals, it would be possible in a generation to create a national ideal in Ireland, or rather to let that spirit incarnate fully which began among the ancient peoples, which has haunted the hearts and whispered a dim revelation of itself through the lips of the bards and peasant story-tellers. . . . We can see, as the ideal of Ireland grows from mind to mind, it tends to assume the character of a sacred land. . . . The last Celtic poet who has appeared shows the spiritual qualities of the first, when he writes of the grey rivers in their ‘ enraptured’ wanderings, and when he sees in the jewelled bow which arches the heavens

“ The Lord’s seven spirits that shine through the rain.”

“ This mystical view of nature, peculiar to but one English poet, Wordsworth, is a national characteristic ; and much in the Creation of the Ireland in the mind is already done, and only needs retelling by the new writers.”

“ If we had not put our brains to sleep the sleep of the well-fatted and comfortable hog for the last quarter of a century, the Danes and others would never have had the courage to attack the Irish bacon-curing industry in the way they have done.”

These four quotations are from the writings of one man, whom we have met at earlier stages : Mr. George Russell (“ A.E.”). The first is the preface to his *Homeward : Songs by the Way*, the second is a poem from that volume, the third is from *Some Irish Essays*, the fourth is a note taken almost at random from the *Irish Homestead*, the organ of the agricultural co-operative movement, which Mr. Russell edits with unfailing zest and raciness he maintains that it is the most cheerful paper in Ireland, possibly even in the world. Some readers, impressed by the spirit and beauty of the first, second, and third quotations, may experience a little shock at the fourth, but it is not really out of harmony with the others, and anyhow it is very like Mr. Russell. He has a broad and bracing ideal of the Hero in Man, including Irish farm-

ing man, and he knows that no one can be much of a hero if he puts his brains to sleep. At the appropriate time he will discourse with enlightening felicity on the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path of the Buddhists ; but in the editorial chair of the *Homestead* he gives his mind, with a concentration which he finds stimulating and entertaining, to the plainer truths and the limited yet potentially delectable path pertaining to the co-operative farmers. In other spells he is an artist, appealing in divers ways to the wonder-sense and the sense of beauty. Even when he takes a wheel-barrow for his theme he is able to give it something of the mysterious setting and suggestion of his elf-mounds. He makes an old farmer in the country, with his mountain background, elemental and heroic. In his twilight and evening pictures he is a poet using colour as his medium. His seascapes are often alluring and lovely ; his bathers are romantic and his hills are mystery. He looks, not the poet, seer, and artist he is, but a genial viking. To live in Dublin and be a friend of "A. E." is to be in the way of finding Dublin and life and unless one is a hopeless case even one's self inexhaustibly interesting. Some time ago he and Mr. George Bernard Shaw met casually, neither knowing the other, before a picture in a Dublin art gallery and dropped into conversation about the picture, then about art, and eventually about life. Each was astonished and bewildered at the cleverness, originality, and humour of the other. When they parted the first desire of each was to be enlightened as to the identity of the "extraordinary man" with whom he had been talking. The story of the meeting and the quest created lively amusement amongst the friends of both.

At present we are concerned with "A.E." in one special capacity. He is the philosopher, the cheerful philosopher, of the Plunkett movement. He looks to the land and those who live on the land with enthusiasm and affection. Earth in his poetic vision is a goddess, a dark divinity ; he upbraids those who have made the irreverent mistake of "calling its holy substance common clay ;" when he thinks of its mystic significance, he tells us in one of his poems, "I look with sudden awe beneath my feet." He does not of course address farmers in that style, or anything nearly like it, but in a graphic and lively way he leads the man on the land to the knowledge of earth-powers and earth-goddesses he can appreciate. Sometimes in his *Homestead* visions he seems to set farmers engaged in the planting of potatoes on as high a plane as the creative spirits of mystic literature beginning the fashioning of a cosmos after a Night of Brahma, only the expression of the vision and appreciation is racy of the soil and homely. Indeed with his imagination, humour, and fine practical sense he makes the *Homestead* refreshing reading, and from year's end to year's end he keeps in divers ways the gospel of the vast potentialities of the soil and of natural life on the land before the people.

The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, the I.A.O.S., as it is familiarly called, now represents over a hundred thousand farmers, and is consequently one of the most important forces in the country. Built up steadily in the face of considerable opposition, most of it unreasoning, and with suspicions, inertia, antiquated notions, and other ills to live down, it is one of the great constructive developments of modern Ireland. Its success has not been uniform and unvarying, but in many places, from midland regions to the wild north-western coast of Donegal, it has developed great energy of character and business qualities. Numerous co-operators are fine individualities. Indirect results, like the effect of the association of farmers of different creeds in the societies and their work, and the opportunity often availed of by the clergy of acting and thinking with the people, are decidedly to the good. The purely agricultural co-operative societies have not yet made all the headway that might be expected ; the system of working in the co-operative creameries is far superior to what it was in the later years of the nineteenth century, though even here the Irish co-operator is still behind the Danish and others. However, the important point is that he is going ahead.

Mr. Russell maintains that the new movement for the organisation of agriculture opens up "infinitely more interesting and complex vistas" than have been generally sighted yet. The ideal and programme he keeps before the farmers are decidedly bold, but they can be briefly expressed ; If the farmers are ever to see in rural districts any of the comforts and luxuries of

the city and so counteract the influences of the city they must make it their fundamental and persistent policy to work towards complete control over the manufacture and sale of all the produce of the countryside, its live stock, its crops, its bye-products, and the manufacturing businesses connected with these. The practical working out of this policy would turn the co-operative societies, which are as a rule specialised for one purpose, into general purposes societies. Thus the dairy society would become an agricultural society, having its agricultural store, its credit or banking department, its poultry department, and other branches specialised for the sale of whatever other produce the district might cultivate. There would finally be one large and well-equipped business firm doing the business hitherto done by a dozen or two dozen small and inadequate concerns. It would make large profits for its members. It could promote village and home industries for the women, have its own carpenters and shoemakers, make its own harness and saddlery, and employ local labour permanently—in the summer in the fields, in the winter at other work. Out of the profits of such great rural co-operative societies many things could be done for the people without the members feeling the cost. Village halls and recreation rooms could be built, rural libraries started, and as the process went on, with something attempted and done year by year, our village and rural life would grow beautiful. The alliance of the local societies with large federations would make the farmer's position strong in the economic and political worlds, but not so strong as Mr. Russell is in the habit of assuming—labour, manufacturing, and other local and national claims will have to be reckoned with. If we get the farmers and the labourers in country districts into the same associations, and the associations into union with national federations, we have, says Mr. Russell, a united working Ireland. Eventually, to put the idea in another way, we would have a series of local industrial “states,” an aggregation of co-operative commonwealths. Naturally, if such associations or states are to grow and thrive to the utmost the labourers and the artisans must be genuinely co-operative units, or at any rate in a far higher position than they are at present. On this point Mr. Russell has not yet spoken clearly ; neither have the farmers. On the status, dignity, education, and destiny of labour, the farming, manufacturing, ecclesiastical, and other Irish worlds require a liberal education yet. Mr. Russell himself looks to the social and human results of this possible complete organisation of rural life and industry as the greatest outcome. He says finely and truly that we should aim at creating a social order in which the struggle for existence will give way to a brotherhood of workers, where men, dependent on the success of their united endeavours for their own prosperity, will instinctively think first of the community and secondly of themselves.

It is good at any rate that the progressive farmers have been given so large an idea, and that they have received it with interest and sympathy. We build up from the ideal, the mental model. Even the partial realisation of this ideal would go far, but by no means the whole way, to remove blots and blight in Irish village and rural life that trouble all thinking observers. Brotherhoods of workers with ideas are just what rural and urban Ireland needs.

Many have commented on what they deemed the incongruity of a man of “A. E.’s” poetic vision and artistic capacity devoting several hours of his day to issues bearing on bacon-curing, vegetables, grain-crops, poultry, and other things affecting farmers and housewives. It is a loss undoubtedly to art and poetry, but it is a good and bracing thing for the weekly farmer-audience, and “A. E.” himself apparently enjoys the intellectual association with this natural and striving world. And after all, to be a guide, philosopher, and friend to the potential hero and discoverer on the land is a noble role. Here, too, as in his poetic prose and poetry, though in a different way, he is helping to make Ireland interesting and heroic again.

Similarly, in latter years, another distinctive Irishman who had brooded much on Celtic dream and deed, and given memorable literary re-creation to old heroic life in his own way, turned his soul and his steps after many days to squalid or forlorn sides of our modern town-life and the problem of getting wasted clerks and other denizens back to humanising existence on the land. This was Mr. Standish O’Grady ; and one of my happiest experiences in

Dublin was to be able to give him the social press-pulpit he needed, and that Ireland needed, too. Almost from boyhood he had been heroic in my imagination. "Years ago in the adventurous youth of his mind," as "A. E." once said, "Mr. O'Grady found the Gaelic tradition like a neglected dun with the doors barred, and there was little or no egress. Listening, he heard from within the hum of an immense chivalry, and he opened the doors, and the wild riders went forth to work their will." This was in reference to Mr. O'Grady's fascinating *History of Ireland : The Heroic Period*. History in the ordinary sense it is not ; it is romance, vision, imaginative truth, rapture, prose poetry, a vivid re-kindling and re-telling of the old spirit and the old sagas. It was a wonderful book for its period of publication : it appeared in the desolate eighties, when only the few gave a thought to the bygone deeds and the bygone magic of Gaeldom. But Mr. O'Grady, on fire with his epic and romantic theme, wrote as if the souls of all men were kindled by the old names and attuned to the old music. At the time hardly anybody secured or knew of the book. Mr. O'Grady, glowing with the tale of Cuchulainn and his kindred, was as strange and solitary as a rhapsodist or prophet in a desert. But he was in the happy position of the man of vision and feeling writing for himself. He went on writing for himself, choosing highways or byways of Irish romance and history. He was duly discovered, and by the mid-nineties his presentation of heroic times and moods spelt riches for us all. Meanwhile Mr. W. B. Yeats had arisen, "A. E." had haunted and charmed a discerning circle—Katharine Tynan, Dora Sigerson, and others, had shown still earlier that Ireland was yet song-ful while on the Gaelic side Dr. Hyde and his new heroic company had forgathered, but had little hope or thought as yet of the adventures and the joyance to be. Of all who wrote in those years in English, O'Grady to the popular and general view seemed the greatest link with the older Gael, or at any rate with his civilisation. His prose suggested the colour, music, movement, many-sided character of a great Feis in the fulness of day. "A. E.'s" prose, at certain stages, though it did not reach the many, had great flashes of what could be deemed the reflective ancient Gael's inner mind ; his poetry in its subtle and cosmic intuitions made more difficult demands on his audience. Yeats was a more mysterious and preoccupied singer except in certain simple utterances who might have seemed isolated and individual not simply to Gaels old or new but to fairies or *dévas* themselves. In the succeeding ten or twelve years, while all these writers found further and wider appreciation, a world of new interests had arisen ; a different Ireland, or Irelands, came into manifestation. We often had a curious feeling that somehow Ireland had been suddenly re-peopled.

But there was always a dark side to the picture. When Mr. O'Grady came to see me in Dublin in 1908 we had already printed pages on pages of social pictures and criticism. We had tried to see Ireland steadily and see it whole, and while the new intellectual, artistic, and industrial developments were full of hope, and not seldom remarkable, it was impossible, and it would have been foolish and inhuman, to overlook the wide social stagnation, inertia, squalid poverty, pessimism, and decay. Through all the five years these things were as much in our minds as the brightening features. Slum horrors, country "housing" evils, the often despised and degraded condition of labour north and south, the social and moral blight in towns, poor law anomalies, problems of western fishers, weavers, and kelp-burners, and a score of other things, were tackled week in week out. Several of the pictures were grimly realistic, notably some in a series on Dublin slums by Seumas Ua Pice, and kindred ones in the same sphere which a poor law official was enabled to draw from his daily experiences. When we turned to alert, modern Belfast, or to remote, lowly Connacht there were still startling features. In one week in December 1910 we had Belfast and Connemara in grim conjunction. Miss Alice Milligan, a Protestant contributor, drew a realistic picture of doomed consumptive workers in the northern capital—she had known some to stay at work till within forty-eight hours of the end. A description of experiences which the new Catholic Bishop of Galway, Dr. O'Dea, and others, had just given a Congested Districts Board Committee at Recess showed the western way :

“ Dr. O’Dea said on a recent visit of his to several parishes in Connemara, in Rossavilla he asked to be taken by the parish priest into what he considered was a typical house. It was the house of a widow who had recently been ill, and contained six or seven children crouched around what was called a fire. As he spoke he heard the lowing of a beast, quite near, and turning round observed that it came from a little room off the kitchen. He saw people lying opposite the fire in the kitchen. He was informed that the house was better than many another in Connemara. His lordship mentioned a previous experience in another part of Connemara. When walking with a parish priest he asked to be taken into a house which the priest regarded as more miserable than the rest of the houses in the district. He ascertained that it contained only one room, and in that room were housed during the winter the father, the mother, and the children, with whatever cattle they had, the pigs, the poultry, and the rest. Those were the conditions. These instances were representative of the conditions that prevailed in Connemara. ‘ I confess I was shocked beyond measure.’ continued his lordship. ‘ I had no idea that the people were so wretched, and I asked myself what the Congested Districts Board had been doing for that district.’ Another point on which he might lay stress was the recent epidemic of fever in one of the islands off the coast. What was the cause of that fever except that the people had been left to live under conditions not fit for human beings?

“ Monsignor Mac Alpine said that in Clifden Union alone there were over 3000 tenancies under £4 valuation, while at the same time within the confines of the Union grazing and mountain farms 68,000 acres in extent were in possession of 184 non-residents.

“ Mr. P. J. O’Malley, chairman Oughterard Rural District Council, said the statements applied with equal relevance to the Union of Oughterard. There were 3800 holdings, and 3200 under £5 valuation. The holdings only barely merited to be called land. In Ross one-third of the parish was in the hands of one man—Lord Ardilaun—and outside his demesne nearly one-third of the parish was either grazed for himself or on the eleven months’ system. There were hundreds of people in Lettermore who had not an animal in the world. There were hundreds of families who never knew the taste of milk since they left their mothers’ breasts.”

To dwell at length on these sides and aspects of Ireland would be simply to pile up ills and horrors. But it is essential that they and the complicated problems they raise should be remembered, if our picture is to preserve any sense of proportion.

Mr. Standish O’Grady had been studying them and brooding deeply upon them, and to my great gratification he desired to deal with them as well as the rest of us. For two years, or more, in the *Peasant*, and then the *Irish Nation*, he grappled with the realities and problems in one way or another. He brought to them the energy and intensity he had given to the old heroic chivalry twenty years before, but this time an impassioned humanity, relieved by poetry, irony, and humour, moved his pen. He did not spare Mr. Russell’s idols—the farmers, long petted and coddled, he said, by politicians and parliaments, and still letting the richest reaches of Ireland go to grass and waste ; he did not spare the clergy, afraid or unwilling to apply their own gospel to life. He brought a gallant note into the discussion of outwardly miserable matters, and several series of his articles, like “ About Paradises,” “ Life and Liberty : Letters to a Dublin Clerk,” were often fascinating reading. They heartened and helped those who were working at the problems, or trying to grapple with them, in divers ways. He preached a new communism, and at one stage sketched in arresting detail a possible, and, he maintained, a practicable commune, or series of communes, for weary clerks and others who would go back to the land. He himself had taken a farm of some twenty acres in Wicklow, and he furnished engaging accounts of his labours and experiences in its working. Week by week he gave his “ clerks” incidental little lectures of a kind they had never heard before from pulpit or press or platform. Here is one out of scores :—

“ And, another thing. Don’t argue ; at least, don’t get into loggerheads with worldly-wise people. Think things out for yourselves. You have understanding ; your own interests are of

infinite concern to you, and I am addressing myself to your interests and understanding, and not much to your imagination, hardly touching at all upon the great things which lie ahead.

“ You will only fret and vex yourselves by arguing with conceited men and women of the world, who talk revilingly about human nature, as if, with their miserable little bit of experience, they understood it through and through. Of this unfathomable mystery they really know nothing at all.

“ The man of the world knows as little about human nature as the lobster does of the sea. Like the lobster he knows just as much as his pair of horny eyes permit him to know— no more. Human nature includes Sparta as well as Liverpool, and the Fianna Eireann as well as the Dublin Stock Exchange, and is by no means easy to understand. Indeed, those know it least who think they know it most.

“ You will observe that I use the word Nature where more than Nature seems to be meant. I do so, partly because I don't wish unnecessarily to introduce the most sacred word in the language ; partly because so much cant and insincerity, or worse, surrounds that word ; and partly because, since books like Haecke's *Riddle of the Universe*, and other materialistic literature have come into Ireland—mostly out of England—serious-minded young Irish people are growing dubious concerning the simple faith of the many. Then I would make this appeal to all, and would found it upon something which you can no more doubt than you do your own existence. For you are assured of the world of things that surrounds you, the objective and external world, as you are of yourself, of the solitary unitary I or me, which is in the midst of you. Now, all this world, which is not You and which keeps instantaneously unfolding and unrolling itself around you, and even every moment pulsing and surging through you, is what I call Nature.

“ Nature is a Latin word used first by some pre-historic Italian man, and has a very delicate and beautiful signification. The full form would be Res Natura. It means the Being which is always being born and about to be born, Natura being the future participle of its verb. For the Ancients Nature had a very large and sacred significance. It was thought of at the same time as the Mother of gods and men, and also as a Virgin. Nature was the Virgin-Mother of all those Mediterranean classic and pre-historic nations. As representing the fecundity of the earth, she was Ops ; and, as Queen of Heaven, Astræa. Curiously, our word cooperation, which is so important in this connection, is derived from Ops. Ops is a form of *opus, operis*, work ; the most primitive and most fundamental kind of work being that of tilling the earth (Ops) ; our Gaelic word *obair* is, of course, from the same root. The ancient name of the Virgin-Mother of all things is in this word which we so lightly use to-day.

“ In our time Nature is reassuming that large significance which she possessed for the Ancients. All the great modern poets have been impassioned Nature-lovers— Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth, Walt Whitman. Consider the significance of this ; no great literature in our age save that which expresses the love of Nature. For other great Nature-poetry we have to go back to the Psalms. Again, modern science has been extending and deepening this general feeling towards Nature by its revelation of the marvel and mystery of her processes, and the rediscovery not only of life but of something which we only faintly and feebly indicate by the words mind and wisdom. I say ‘ rediscovery’ for, when society was simpler and men less sophisticated, and more in touch with realities, there was an intuitive perception of an intelligence or intelligences pervading all Nature, and present in the very least of natural processes.

“ Recall our own Saint Columba's words :

“ ‘ Crowded thick with Heaven's angels
Is every leaf of the oaks of Derry.’

Angelic intelligences at work everywhere.

“ If you read St. Adamnan’s *Life of St. Columba* you will find that the latter possessed in a singular degree the faculty of second sight.

“ Modern science, delving and probing into Nature’s mysteries with a curiosity of which I don’t quite approve, has discovered the Atom of which all things material are composed, and has found it to be as marvellous and mysterious as the Universe itself, and a reservoir of the most tremendous potencies. Le Bon tells us that the mere mechanical power stored in the atoms of a teaspoonful of water is more than the equivalent of all the existing steampower of all France. Proud science has at last found her Atom, and stands aghast before it !

“ Now, while you have each a different religion or philosophy, you all believe in Nature. Res Natura does not permit you to be a sceptic, but, whether you like it or not, compels you to believe. In whatever else you believe—and I am no enemy to belief if it be not belief in evil—you must believe in Nature, which you hear, see, touch, taste, breathe ; which has formed you, atom by atom, in your mother’s womb, and reared you to the stature of a man, and will cause you to decline in age, and will take your life in the end, when you pay ‘Nature’s debt.’ And I want you, as a preliminary of action, to consider with me what is Nature’s meaning and intention with respect to us, the most highly gifted of her creatures on this planet—how she intends us to live, what are her commands—in order that we may learn them and understand and obey.”

A number of people volunteered for the new communal life, but Mr. O’Grady was not satisfied with the extent of the other element he deemed necessary : supporters in the background who would provide funds to a certain amount, to start the commune and keep it going till it could be self-supporting. Several indeed were willing, but not enough. The unfolding of the commune scheme was as interesting as a bracing, outdoor, delightfully-told story, though coming to an unsatisfactory end. “ A. E.” was interested, but sceptical, all the time. He thought that only the folk on the land from childhood could successfully deal with it, and that while they might or must grow co-operative, they would not become either socialistic or communistic, at least in our time. Mr. O’Grady maintained that the farmers, even co-operative farmers, would not see or solve one-half of Ireland’s problems. Which is doubtless true. [1]

However, the enthusiasm of two of our leading literary men for the soul in the soil and the souls and bodies above it has been entirely heartening, and has led to outcomes in agricultural prose if the term is pardonable not easy, or not possible, to match in the outer world. Of course other Irishmen, writers as different as Padraic Colum and Shan Bullock, have been incidentally interested, and have interested us, in the land and its appeal, while modern Irish prose takes us frequently to field and farm. But “ A. E.” and O’Grady are in a special sense agricultural heroes, with a certain fine essence of the soil even in their journalism.

Small Holdings an Great Hearts

THE mixed and often unexpected nature of social, industrial, educational, and even intellectual matters in rural Ireland may be better understood if we take a particularly poor region and study it closely for a little while. A trip due west from Galway city will serve the purpose admirably. Along the Cois Fhairrge, or seaside, road we find much that is forlorn, much to suggest that the toil of life on the bleak little holdings must be a grim ordeal. All the same it has certain pleasant and even romantic latterday associations. Some nine or ten miles from Galway is the village of An Spidéal (Spiddal) whose boys’ school in recent years has achieved distinction as a centre of bi-lingual education. In the neighbourhood one of the most successful of the Gaelic Training Colleges holds its session in the late summer and early autumn, attracting lay and clerical students from centres as remote as Dublin and even from

quarters outside Ireland. From a humble home in this neighbourhood came Micheál Breathnach, [2] a delightful writer and individuality, of whom more anon. Leaving An Spidéal and heading for An Gort Mór we come to a wonder-world of wildness, especially from Costello onward. In this chastening and impressive place of lakes and heathery hills we pass eight bi-lingual schools, where teachers of a new type work out new plans and methods, but often complain that official programmes have no sufficient relation to the needs and claims of the countryside. At Costello the sea comes up into the land in a long narrow creek that suggests a Norwegian fjord. It is pleasant to see the sails—especially the new white ones—pass round the houses by the water's edge, glide round little promontories, move off again, and gradually creep into the country. The boats come to load turf (or peat) for Galway, Aran, and Clare, and doubtless an odd keg of untaxed whisky is taken off with the turf. Gortmore is in its way a wonderful place. All round the Beanna Beola stand frowning and serrated, piled up like huge pillows, an epic of desolation. Here it is that Padraic MacPiarais—our boldest educational pioneer, described fully a little later finds his Tir na nOg, when he can spare a few days from St. Enda's College, Dublin. We can see his cottage across the lake. We are shown by the old folk where Sean Mhatias, the strange old man of his story and drama, *Iosagán*, used to live ; we are told indeed by some that he is really not dead yet.

Going onward from Gortmore to Rosmuc we come to know acute phases of the emigration problem—indeed it presses all the way from Galway. The social connection between Rosmuc and Boston is very much closer than that between Rosmuc and Dublin. To the local imagination Boston is a sort of exalted Rosmuc across the water. Returned emigrants will tell us of Boston shops where Connemara folk transact all their business in Irish ; at home in Irish-speaking Rosmuc there are English sermons, or were till a year or two ago at any rate. In Boston every Thursday Irish “servant” girls have a half-holiday, when they go to favourite halls and have Irish songs, *seanchus*, and dancing *go leór*. Every item of news from Rosmuc and kindred places is discussed at these gatherings. Some Gaels have been puzzled over the fact that it is difficult to induce Connemara boys and girls to take—or keep—situations in Dublin, &c., while they show no hesitation about faring as far away as America. It is forgotten that dozens of friends and acquaintances are before them in places like Boston, Portland, &c. Boston and Portland are very near in Connemara's imagination ; Dublin is very remote. Dublin indeed does not understand the west or the western emigration question at all. Dublin-dwelling folk do not realise the conditions of existence west of Galway. Take the case of a man with a holding valued at £3, most of it rocky land. He must work this with his spade, and his staple crop is potatoes, which feed himself and his family. The family, almost invariably a big one, grows up. What is to become of the ten or eleven children ? One boy gets the land, one or two of the girls may get married ; the rest go away to Portland or Boston or another. Many do well and send home a good deal of money. Not a few return, when they have saved what they think a fortune ; the boys obtain land, if possible, the girls marry, and all settle down to something like the old familiar life. This returning when there is any chance of a settlement in the old place is a notable fact in connection with Connemara. The crux of the whole question is land—with industries allied to agriculture. Young men have declared again and again that they would not emigrate if they could obtain pieces of land ; none of the girls would go if they had the choice of getting married at home. There are thousands of acres of wild moorland in Connemara which could be reclaimed and made happy home-haunts. Hundreds of young men would be heartily glad of the opportunity of taking part in the reclamation. The Connemara man's capacity for spade-work on his native soil, to which he is so intensely devoted, is astonishing. Given a fair sphere he would do wonders in the way of intensive culture.

From other parts of Connacht, men and women, boys and girls, are obliged to go away to spend months of the year in the gardens and harvest-fields of Britain. About November they return in hundreds ; they spend a night or two in Dublin, often on the pavements outside the North Wall or the Broadstone station, a pathetic medley indeed, and then crowd themselves

into their particular compartments of the early morning train to the West. On these occasions they seem sadly different from what they are in their own humble yet genial western homes. On the homeward journey they pass through great tracts of grass lands, more or less waste lands, and—extraordinary economic irony by or near farms whose tenants are complaining bit-terly of the scarcity, the dearness, and sometimes the inefficiency of labour. They also bring back shoddy and other cheap articles, and home manufacturers complain. Furthermore, they like others who do not go far afield bring back trivial or trashy publications, never a serious one within measurable distance of literature. From time to time certain bishops and priests preach fine-sounding sermons against the evils of vain and vicious reading, and often give no help, but sometimes positive hindrance, to the starting of free libraries or pleasant reading-rooms through which taste could be developed. So Ireland loses at every point.

As for Connemara, it has several further problems. The fishing, the hand-loom weaving and other industries are in sore need of development. These and other improvements, including technical and industrial training that would help young folk to find careers at home, would incidentally do much to stop the poteen, or whisky-stilling “industry,” one of the great curses of Connemara. It has done much to poison and destroy Connemara, the mainland and the islands. To a great extent the traffic is “winked at” by the “authorities”; there has been scarcely any attempt to interfere with the flow of poteen on the more or less social occasions: weddings, christenings, and so on. Very often the police are partakers; the “bottle for the sergeant” is a recognised feature in several places. Poteen has come to be associated in a strange degree with the expression of the social and even religious, or semi-religious, feelings of the people. Thus at “wakes” and funerals it is given *go leór*. “Wakes” have some touching and moving characteristics with a tradition of dateless generations behind them. The serving of poteen in later times is as regular a fact as the telling of stories of the Fianna by the elders, as they watch round the corpse, or the haunting *caoine* or *sgread na maidne* over the dead. The good and the bad are intertwined, and it is hard to break the evil spell. Young priests have found serious difficulties in the way of reform at wakes and funerals, and the old are not always sympathetic or helpful. On the occasions of weddings in parts of Connemara the poteen evil has been simply rampant. The wild and frenzied scenes that take place at various musters, as a consequence of poteen drinking, are startling. It is all going far to destroy a people with many fine and delightful traits; in fact, it is their social and hospitable spirit, their passion for life, expressed though it be in a crude way, that is largely responsible for this passage to destruction. The problem is the substitution of natural joys for unnatural ones in bleak and kindly Connemara, beginning with brighter education and opportunities for the young. Much the same may be said of some scores of other places in Ireland.

When these or other Connacht folk are moved out of congested districts, from patches of rock or bog to economic holdings, other acute and interesting problems arise. The congest has to be educated into a new system of working, and a certain transformation in himself is needed. Some of our co-operative pioneers have dwelt on the necessity of serious training of the congests on experimental farms, before each secured an allotment as his own property. It was urged in the *Irish Nation* that the better plan would be thorough social co-operative farming for the congests after the period of probation, and on lines akin to those illustrated by Kropotkin in his fascinating book, *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*. Such co-operative farms suggest delightful possibilities in the west. Lord Castletown, a practical pioneer of co-operation himself, was one of those who were attracted by the idea. Connacht teachers, keenly concerned about the future of their pupils, and troubled by the divorce of primary education from the life-conditions of the rural communities, saw happy possibilities in such farms. So, of course, did representatives of that Irish element which has no faith in peasant proprietorship. But it is all a matter of the future.

The Connemara whose conditions and problems I have sketched very briefly has given us two of our most notable modern Irish writers. In personality, outlook, and style there could

not well be greater contrasts. Padraic O'Conaire, who hails from the Rosmuc district, looks more keenly and grimly at what is called actual life, with its character and apparent irony, than any other Irish writer, old, mediæval, or modern, that I know. In the sphere of the short story he is, as a rule, unlike any Gaelic teller of tales ; there is no imagination, colour, or romance ; just the ground-going, essential, relentless story, presented with a placid detachment which some find serene and others cynical. The style is direct, restrained, artistically measured. The ground of his short stories is varied : bleak Connemara, lower London, Judea of the first century of the Christian Era, China, &c. His novel, *Deoraidheacht*, published in 1910, is a study at stages rather than a story, a study in large measure of warped and distorted humanity, of special Irish interest only on occasions, as in the chapters devoted to a travelling show in Galway and to an Irish colony in London.

The main character, who tells the story, has been maimed by a motor-car in London, and mental and moral as well as the physical havoc ensues. The process of spending the money received by way of compensation is comparatively rapid. Then comes a pitiful life, broken by wild, strange gleams, with a tragic ending. The telling is for the most part intense and grim, with certain pathetic and a few fanciful interludes, with bursts of wild humour, with flash-lights on crime and misery and sordidness. We see a warped mind in a nether world, yet with traits and traces of pity, charity, wistfulness, humour, and poetry surviving through hunger-crazes and morbid introspection. While the framework and development are not always entirely satisfying, a great deal in the tale has been intensely felt and seen. There is unsparing revelation of distorted character. There is also a share of lovable character in an unloving and unlovely environment. Padraic O'Conaire is also a playwright, though but one short play from his pen has so far been produced—its characters and atmosphere are like those of his Connemara stories—but he is the author of one of the long prize dramas to be rendered at the Oireachtas of 1912. While he knows a great deal of Continental literature, especially French, we feel that he has not been much affected, at least directly, by other authors. He has studied and brooded over life for himself. The realist, as the term is nowadays understood, has sheer and spacious opportunities in Connemara or nether London, both of which Padraic knows intimately, no less than in Russia or Scandinavia.

Micheál Breathnach, the second Connemara writer, is unhappily no longer with us in the flesh. He died in Dublin in October 1908, at the age of twenty-eight. His was not quite the sort of individuality one might expect from a lowly home in Connemara, for it suggested the fine flowering of a long and gracious civilisation. He received at first but the ordinary primary school education, though his mind from his youth was stored with the traditional herotales and songs of his native west. When little more than twenty he was appointed assistant-secretary and one of the Irish teachers in the London Gaelic League, where his varied gifts and rare charm of character impressed and attracted everybody. The cultured young Irish priest, the late Father Michael Moloney, to whom I referred in earlier pages, taught him Latin, while he subsequently acquired a command of French and a fair knowledge of German. With Irish, his native language, he played like an accomplished, light-hearted artist. His in sooth promised to be the richest, most musical, and freshest Irish style of our day. From his joyous, idealistic nature and his romantic pictures of the home and fireside life one might deem Connemara a Tir na nOg. Unhappily after a few years his health gave way, and he was compelled to spend his winters in the Alps, returning with the summer to take charge of the northern Connacht Training College at Mount Partry by the waters of Loch Mask. There the handsome, suave, high-hearted, boyish-looking Principal was idolised as much as he had been in London. Foreign students were just as charmed with his personality and his teaching methods as the Irish ones. Dr. Pokorny, of the Vienna University, paid him a glowing tribute, while a French visitor, M. Jean Malye, writing in the *Peasant* in September 1908, said :

“ The real soul of the college is Micheal Breathnach. I do not know anybody more attractive than Micheal. I found in him that true, exquisite Gaelic spirit—so kind, so agreeable, so

enthusiastic, and also so decided and so strong. His is the kindness that flows from a high and generous soul, from a heart full of truth and goodness ; and his fine, innate qualities of distinction and delicacy, while they attract affection and sympathy, command also respect and esteem. ... It would be a truism to say that Micheal is a wonderful teacher. For my own part I was delighted to attend some of his lectures. People who are really wanting in intellectual means make progress under him, so clear and simple he is. He knows also how to interest those who are already well educated ; he opens up new horizons to them.”

Unfortunately when this was written Micheál was within a couple of months of his early death. Fugitive sketches, a popular History of Ireland, and an Irish translation of Charles Kickham's homely and touching novel, *Knocknagow*, are left us along with sprightly and treasured private letters to show us his quality and suggest what he might have achieved in Irish literature. We who knew him, however, do not take the work as a thing apart, but as sparks and flashes from the finer fire which was himself. No young life in the Ireland of our generation has left more affectionate and more beautiful memories. [3] The charm and magic and blithe poise of his personality would suggest the fulness and the flower of long evolution. To have known such a character as he, coming from a remote and lowly corner of Connacht, may well inspire us with optimism regarding the possibilities and the future of the race.

[1] The allies of the co-operative movement, the United Irishwomen, organised in 1911 “ to unite Irishwomen for the social and economic advantage of Ireland,” promise already to prove exceedingly helpful and humanising. They co-operate also with the Gaelic League, feeling that Ireland can never be rebuilt without the Gaelic ideal, and the fostering of the best in the nation.

[2] Meé-haul Branoch, “ ch” sounded as in “ loch.”

[3] An Irish biography of him, by Tomas MacDomhnaill, of the Leinster Irish College, with numerous letters and sketches, is in the press.

The pope's green island ([1912])

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