

Love Songs of Congested Connacht

My Irish Year

Padraig Colum

1912

A district is said to be congested when the land available is not sufficient in area nor productive enough in quality to provide economic holdings for the families settled in the district. What area constitutes an economic holding in Ireland ? According to the leaflet issued by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, [1] the area should not be less than fifty acres. The Department's expert notes that an economic holding should be such as to enable a farmer to bring up his family in a spirit of independence, to supply them with a sufficient amount of wholesome food and serviceable clothing ; to provide them with a fair general education ; to apprentice one or more children to a business or a trade ; to find constant employment for himself and the son who is to succeed him, as well as to occupy profitably the spare time of other members of the family until they leave the home, and finally, to save enough to prevent his being a burden on the son who succeeds him. The minimum size of the holding that will meet these conditions is determined by which instrument of tillage can be used with economy the spade or the plough. Now the spade can only be used economically under a system of intensive cultivation, and this style of culture is impossible in Ireland except in a few favoured localities. Under existing conditions Irish farmers have to make use of a system that aims at the production of roots, potatoes, corn, hay, and grass, to be sold or converted into beef, mutton, pork, butter, eggs and poultry. They must use, not the spade but the plough. The efficient working of the plough, says the Department's expert, necessitates the use of two horses : a holding, therefore, to be economic, should be of a size sufficient, to keep two horses at work about fifty statute acres of average quality, exclusive of bog and land that cannot be cultivated or reclaimed. There are 590,000 holdings in Ireland. Out of these 350,000 (exclusive of 75,000 not exceeding an acre) do not exceed thirty statute acres in area. In the Congested Districts, the holdings are generally from four to six acres. The parts of Ireland said to be congested are now under the administration of the Congested Districts Board. The immediate policy of the Board is to secure the productive lands in the vicinity of the uneconomic holdings and divide them amongst the tenants that are pinched.

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The new settlers are destitute of capital, stock and implements, and they are often without the training and discipline necessary for larger agriculture. Under these circumstances the Congested Districts Board has often to adopt an attitude of paternalism towards them. This paternalism must often be injurious to the enterprise of the new settlers. Voluntary co-operation seems to offer the best solution of the material and moral problems involved in the new settlement co-operation applied to rural credit, to butter-production, to cottage industries and perhaps to grazing.

The district around Foxford looks like a very Thebaid. Here Nature seems to have tried every form of infertility possible in a moist climate. There are bogs in every part of Ireland, but here the bogs run into barren hills. Elsewhere the hills are treeless and bare, but here they have a special desolation : they are mere ridges of sullen infertility not high enough to lift the mind. Everywhere there are rocks. Stones lie in the fields, and the fences of the little clearings are of stone. Where there is cultivation the ridges of black earth are interrupted by rocks. These patches of tillage add to the desolation of the country, for they give the impression of painful effort. Then there are stretches of water and water-logged fields. In the fields there is not a beast. But the human habitations are signs of hope on these bleak landscapes. They are

out of harmony with the surrounding bog, but they are tidy, well-built and comfortable. The houses are new : none of the old hovels are to be seen. These new cottages are the most conspicuous result of the Congested Districts Board's Administration.

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We have suggested that on these tiny holdings the plough cannot be used. All the labour must be done with the spade or the loy. As a consequence of this the owner of the little holding cannot take employment as an agricultural labourer, for the tilled acre demands all his sweat. The land cannot support the people, and the income derived from the cottage industries that the Board has set up is hardly perceptible. Men and women go as agricultural labourers to England and Scotland at certain seasons, and the earnings of these migratory labourers go to make up the living of the families in the Congested Districts. But the biggest contribution to the income of the families comes from America. Into eight poor districts, thousands of pounds are sent every year mainly the earnings of girls in domestic service. With the contribution received, each household pays the shop debts and buys the year's stock a few sheep and a cow perhaps. Naturally the emigration from these districts is large. Out of a family of six four go to America.

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In Connemara one cannot help but notice the industry of the men and women, but of the women especially. The people are constant workers in their fields and in their houses. They continue cottage industries which have died out in other parts of Ireland. They make beautiful lace. Emigration has reduced the people in numbers, but as yet it has caused no visible deterioration in the type. The people are noticeably handsome and remarkably intelligent, and they have a vitality that lets them work all day and dance half the night. Emigration is not such a menace to racial fitness as the late and ill-assorted marriages which are common in more prosperous parts of the country. About Connemara, the people, having nothing to lose, marry young the women under twenty generally. The Connacht woman is a fine type and must impress the observer.

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There are few books of which it may be said that in them is the secret of a race. Amongst such books is "The Love-Songs of Connacht," a volume in Dr Douglas Hyde's collection "The Songs of Connacht." "On the verge of inarticulateness" Mr W. B. Yeats said of some of these songs. Made by peasant men and women, the songs have an indeliberate simplicity that we can never find in cultured poetry. They have the simplicity of nature, but they have also the subtlety of passion. A girl says :

"A hundred farewells to last night ;
It's my grief that to-night was not first."

And there is another poem that gives a passion the barest, the least sophisticated expression. It is called "The Brow of the Red Mountain." A girl speaks :

"I am sitting up,
Since the moon rose last night,
And putting down a fire
And ever kindling it diligently ;
The people of the house are lying down,
And I am by myself ;

The cocks are crowing,
 And the land is asleep but me.
 That I may never leave the world
 Till I loose from me the ill-luck,
 Till I have cows and sheep,
 And my one desire of a boy.
 I would not think the night long,
 That I would be stretched by his smooth white breast,
 And sure I would allow the race of Eve after that
 To say their choice thing of me. . . . The curse of the Son of God
 Upon that one who took from me my love,
 And left me by myself
 Every single long night in misery.
 And, O young boy,
 I am no material for mockery for you ;
 You have nothing to say
 Except that I am without dowry. You are not my love
 And my destruction if I am sorry for it ;
 And if I am without cattle I am able to lie alone. ”

And here is an exquisite poem which Dr Hyde took down from the mouth of an old woman who lived in a hut in the middle of a Roscommon bog. Dr Hyde’s English rendering of the Gaelic is always admirable. His knowledge of the dialect used by English-speaking peasants enables him to give a translation that is close to idiomatic. And he is an ingenious metrical artist. But inevitably this translation lacks the exquisite variety of sound that is in the original :

“ My grief on the sea,
 How the waves of it roll !
 They come between me
 And the love of my soul !

Abandoned, forsaken
 To trouble and care—
 Will the sea never waken,
 Relief from despair.

My grief and my trouble—
 Would that he and I were
 In the province of Leinster
 Or the County of Clare.

Were I and my darling
 O heart-bitter wound—
 On board of a ship
 For America bound.
 On a green bed of rushes
 All last night I lay,
 And I flung it abroad
 With the heat of the day.

And my love came behind me—
 He came from the south ;
 His breast to my bosom,
 His mouth to my mouth.”

West of the Shannon one can still find life as primitive as at the beginning of social organisation. The people have been hindered from producing a material civilisation, but they are free of their emotion and their imagination. The hard conditions of Connacht life have helped the Connacht women to development and personality. The size of the holding does not permit the man to develop his constructive and organising faculty. The woman becomes the personality amongst the Connacht peasantry, and the civilisation is of her creating. It is the civilisation of the hearth. One cannot fail to note the number of words for “child” in constant use ; there is a word for the child in the cradle, the child creeping on the floor, the child going to school, the growing child “naoidhean,” “lanabh,” “malrach,” “piaste,”—words as soft and as intimate as a caress. The tragedies of Connacht life come closest to the woman. As a child she sees the sister who reared her leave home for America ; as a wife she lives alone while her husband works abroad, and often her child is born while its father is labouring the fields of England or Scotland. As a mother she sees her rearing go from her as they grow up. In the book of love-songs we find that in the world of passion the woman is supreme. Two songs placed at the beginning of the collection make us realise the difference between the man’s way of loving and the woman’s way of loving.

This is from the man’s song :

“ How well for the birds in all weather ;
They rise up on high in the air,
And then sleep upon one bough together,
Without sorrow, or trouble, or care ;
But so it is not in this world
With myself and my thousand-times fair,
Far away, far apart from each other,
Each day rises barren and bare.”

Contrast this charming sentiment with the truth and power of the woman’s song :

“ My heart is bruised and broken
Like the ice-flag on the top of the water,
As it were a cluster of nuts after their breaking,
Or a young maiden after her marrying.
I denounce love, woe for her who gave it
To the son of yon woman, who never understood it.
My heart in my middle, sure he has left it black,
And I do not see him in the street nor in any place.”

The contrast between the man’s way of loving and the woman’s way of loving goes through the whole collection. Here is the prose of a man’s song. It has exquisite music in Irish :

In Ballinahinch, in the West, my love is for a year ; she is more exquisite than the sun of autumn, and sure honey grows after her on the track of her foot on the mountain, no matter how cold the time after November-day. If I were to get my desire I would take her in my net, and I would put away from me this grief and trouble. But for the counsel of all ever born, I shall only marry my desire ; she is the Moorneen of the fair hair.

We have charming desire beside vehement passion when we put beside this a woman’s song :

And farewell henceforth to yon town westward among the trees ; it is there that I am drawn early and late. Many is the wet, dirty morass and crooked road going between me and

the town where my treasure is. ... Paddy, are you sorry that I am ill, and do you think bad of it that I am going to the churchyard ?

Paddy of the bound black hair it is your mouth that is sweet, and until I go under the ground my affection will be on you for your converse with me. . . . And dear Virgin what shall I do if you go from me ? I have no knowledge of your house, your haggard, or your stacks. Ah, faithful was the counsel that my people gave me not to elope with you, for you had the hundred twists in your heart and the thousand tricks.

These poems have natural subtlety, some of them have intellectual subtlety also. Some of the peasant poems show exquisite perception. In one of them the lover speaks of his sweetheart as having " the little hands of Mary" (the virgin), and he says,

" The sun loses its heat when my swan goes abroad, and the moon makes obeisance to her." And in another peasant poem there is the phrase " Her rose-ember mouth."

I cannot help contrasting " The Love Songs of Connacht" with a collection of Roumanian folk-poetry. Ours is slighter in volume, but when we have added to the love songs our religious songs, our keens or lamentations for the dead, our political songs and our drinking songs, we will be able to show a collection of folk-poetry as bulky as " the Bard of the Dimbovitza." In the poetry of the two countries the external life presented offers the first contrast. The people move in gold, in sunshine, in the Roumanian songs, and there are glowing harvests and blossoming fruit trees. Girls dance under acacia trees. Outside on the walls of the houses flowers are painted. The hero of a girl's dream rides by and the lute-player comes to the door. Grief itself moves amongst gracious things. And this world is sufficient. There is no burthen of an invisible world. Ghosts come but they are from the grave only. The grave is a pitiful fact, but meantime the living are free, brave and joyous. Not-being to these people is the tragic idea. " Barren," " No Son," " Stillborn," is the most piercing of their songs.

Different indeed is the world of the Connacht song. Here external life is bare, and he who would put beauty around his love must bring it from afar. " The cuckoo cries in the winter over the village where she is living." " Honey grows behind the track of her feet on the mountain, and it seven weeks after November day. ' ' External life is harsh. ' ' Many is the wet dirty morass and crooked road going between me and the town where my treasure is."

The most powerful expressions are in terms of this harshness as in the song where the girl says that her heart is bruised and broken like the ice-flag on the top of water, and as black as the coal that would be burnt in the forge. The invisible world is constantly obtruding. The makers of these songs have religion in the blood, and passion itself must speak the language of religion.

" Úna, maiden, friend, and golden tooth !
little mouth that never uttered an injustice,
I had rather be beside her on a couch, ever kissing her,
Than to be sitting in Heaven on the chair of the Trinity."

says the maker of one of the poems, but he is well aware of his blasphemy :

" O fair Úna, it is you that set astray my senses ;
O Úna it was you who went close in between me and God ;
O Úna, fragrant branch, twisted little curl of the ringlets,
Was it not better for me to be without eyes than ever to have seen you."

After the Roumanian songs with their agreeable and abundant life and their tinge of pantheism, the world of the Connacht songs seems primitive. And yet the love expressed in these songs is a subtle and complex emotion. There are many generations of refinement below the flowering of such a mood as this :

“ Ringleted youth of my love,
With thy locks bound loosely behind thee,
You passed by the road above,
But you never came in to find me ;
Where were the harm for you,
If you came for a little to see me ?
Your kiss is a wakening dew,
Were I ever so ill or so dreamy.

I thought, my love ! you were so
As the moon is, or sun, on the fountain,
And I thought after that you were snow,
The cold snow on the top of the mountain ;
And I thought after that you were more
Like God's lamp shining to find me,
Or the bright star of knowledge before,
And the star of knowledge behind me.

You promised me high-heeled shoes,
And satin and silk, my storeen,
And to follow me, never to lose
Though the ocean were round us roaring ;
Like a bush in a gap in a wall
I am left now lonely without thee,
And this house I grow dead of, is all
That I see around or about me.”

The Roumanian folk-songs have a quality that is not in the Gaelic—profound reflection. They have masculine power and masculine construction, while the Connacht songs have feminine intensity. The end of the Roumanian poem, “ No Son,” is full of grave consideration :

“ Silent was she, for she knew not how to answer ;
Silent were both our hearts, for they were empty.
Then of all loneliness, and pain and sorrow,
I felt myself the father—
The son of the graves I felt myself, and the husband
Of yon dumb woman, whose womb would be silent ever
As were our hearts.
Then, that we might forget we looked at the furrows
All full of seed, and some shoots already were breaking
Forth from the furrows, and said, ‘ We, we are born,’
Nor did one of us ask the other ‘ wherever art thou looking,’
We only looked at the growing seeds together.”

Under this I write twelve lines that are alive with a moment's intensity. I found them in a manuscript collection of Connacht songs. A man whose name is Bourke has been killed. Those who killed him, evidently, are his sisters' husbands. Bourke's wife asks the sisters to come to the table :

“ Draw near to the table, ye that wear the cloaks ;
Here ye have flesh, but it is not roast flesh,
Nor boiled in pots, nor cooked for feasting,
But my dear Bourke—och, och, after been slain.

You, young woman, who are drinking the wine there,
Let my sharp screeches pierce your heart.
If I am wise I may get whatever is my lot,
But you will never—och, och, och—get another brother !

O young woman, don't you pity my sorrow ?
My mourning over the bier of my spouse ?
A lock of his hair is locked within my purse,
And his offspring—och, och hidden within me !”

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The Ballad Singer

Market-day in the little Connacht town ; it is afternoon, and business is spasmodic. A man, standing in the wide street, is singing a ballad in a voice trained for distance and the open air. He is in descent from the wandering minstrels, and his class has been kept alive by the excitements in rural Ireland. He belongs to a fraternity still very numerous. Their palmy days are over, however, for things have become more settled, and the ha'penny newspaper has arrived. Generally the minstrels carry with them a sheaf of ballads which they retail. Who writes these ballads that circulate from Donegal to Cork and from Dublin to Galway ? Sometimes the authors are known. The ballads, in the main, are written by anonymous people, by shopkeepers, by schoolmasters, by policemen. Their place of publication has a curious proximity. It is in Kilmainham, a place notable for the detention of political prisoners. The man in the street is without scripts. He is singing a ballad that has been on the road for over a hundred years :

“ And what colour will they wear ?
Says the Shan Van Vocht. [1]
And what colour will they wear ?
Says the Shan Van Vocht.
What colour will be seen
Where their fathers' homes have been
But their own immortal green ?
Says the Shan Van Vocht.
What colour will be seen
Where their fathers' homes have been
But their own immortal green
Says the Shan Van Vocht.”

The singer is a lame man. He is heavily built, wears a cap, and holds a stick in his hand. A roll of scarlet round his neck expresses something in the man a certain rawness of life and crudeness of artistry. The song finished, he crosses the street and makes his way into the public-house. With its crowd, the interior is a replica of the market. The people talking and drinking have been the ballad-singer's audience. He goes to the counter that crosses the upper end of the shop, and stands waiting on their attention.

The ballad-singer takes off his cap. His big head is bald and his face is clean shaven. The big face has many protuberances on it. The nose looks like copper, and the face looks as if it had been burnished. The small knowledgable eyes watch the crowd attentively, but without

any flash or eagerness. A tumbler of porter is given him, and the minstrel sits down on the end of a barrel. He salutes each person in the shop, drinks a little porter, and having gained some attention, begins a song. The ballad is adapted to the audience. It relates the adventures of a band of Connacht labourers in England. The ballad begins :

“ Then we sailed away across the bay, and we never received a shock,
Till we landed safe and fairly reached the noble Clarence Dock.
Then away we went with one intent, and we drank strong ale and wine,
And we toasted then out’ Irelan’ and the girls we left behin’.”

He sings with great liveliness, using the short end of his stick like a conductor’s baton, as though the song were the score and the crowd the orchestra. The song is a success, and a good many coppers are contributed. He says “ Three cheers for Connemara, three cheers for Westport, three cheers for the place where we are.” A man who has been drinking cries out in Irish, “ And a health to Mayo, the county that’s best in Eirinn.” Facing the countryman, the ballad-singer begins the popular Gaelic song “ Condae Mhuig-eo.” The countryman sings the words aggressively and for the sake of order the publican intervenes. The ballad-singer discreetly withdraws.

Towards evening he presents himself at Mrs Jordan’s, where non-stimulating commodities such as draperies and groceries are sold. Some women and one or two quiet men are in the shop. The minstrel enters as rather on a visit than a professional call. Mrs Jordan is showing girls some ribbons, and the ballad-singer permits himself to speak of her. “ She’s of a good family,” he says ; “ she’s a woman of the Lacys. My mother belonged to the Lacys, and I’m proud of it.” He has had refreshments since he came into the town, but the various treats have left him mellow of spirit and easy of manner. He sits down on a chair and addresses himself to each person in turn.

“ Mrs Coyne, you’re looking well ; may God preserve you, ma’am.” “ And how is your good man, Mrs MacGowan ? ”

The chance customer in the shop is not left outside his interest.

“ How is your friend, your companion, your noble friend, Mr Jennings ?”

He asks Mrs Jordan’s permission to entertain the company. She signifies her approbation by leaning her elbows on the counter. His song is suited to the gentility of the company

“ As I rowed out one morning all in the month of May,
Down by the Sally Gardens I carelessly did stray.
I overheard a fair maid as she in sorrow did complain,
‘ It was on the Banks of Clady my darling did remain.

‘ This is the Banks of Clady, fair maid, whereon you stan’,
Do not depend on Johnny for he’s a false young man.
This is the Banks of Clady, but he’ll not meet you here,
But tarry with me in yon green wood where no danger you need fear.’

‘ If my Johnny was with me here this night he’d keep me from all harm,
But he’s in the field of battle all in his uniform.
But he’s in the field of battle, his foes he does destroy
Like a roaring King of Armies going to the wars of Troy.’

‘ And it’s six months now and better since your Johnny left the shore,
He was crossing the main Ocean where the flowing billows roar.

He was crossing the main Ocean for honour and for fame,
As I've been told his ship was wrecked all off the coast of Spain.'

And when she heard the bitter news she flew into despair
With the wringing of her hands and the tearing of her hair,
Saying ' If Johnny he be drowned no man on earth I'll take,
Through lonesome groves and valleys I'll wander for his sake.'

And it's when he saw her loyalty he could no longer stan',
But falling in her arms he said ' Betsy, I'm the man.
I'm that inconstant young man that caused you all the pain,
And I'm now come back to Clady, and we'll never part again.' ”

The song is received with favour, and the singer adds some coppers to his stock. He goes out to the festivity of the town.

It is evening, and the people from the market are dribbling along the road. A barefoot child drives a donkey that has a sack of meal across its back. A cart crowded with people comes along. Then three or four women gossiping together. The mountain horses pass on, on the back of each a man, with a woman seated on the pillion behind him. With his cap off and his red muffler hanging across his coat, the ballad-singer is seated on a grassy ditch. He is in a happy frame of mind. He tells us that he is as correct a man as he knows how. We assure him of our regard, and he drinks to us, repeating the Connacht toast, which we will set down here :

Slan agus seaghal agat ;
Bean ar do mhein agat ;
Talamh gon chios agat,
Agus bas in Eirinn.

*Health and life to you ;
The woman of your choice to you ;
Land without rent to you,
And death in Erinn.*

[1] Leaflet No. 34 “ The Revival of Tillage in Ireland”

[2] “ The Poor Old Woman,” a “ secret” name for Ireland.

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