

## Ourselves and our Island

from

Irish Ways

by

Jane Barlow.

1909

PREFACE

The contents of this volume may, I hope, justify the ambiguity of its title. For in “Irish Ways” the setting of the sketches and stories will be seen to have considerable importance as a kind of commentary on their incidents, often furnishing explanatory notes on traits of character displayed by the actors. Indeed the scenery through which we pass while travelling on Irish ways, in one sense, must never be left out of account when contemplating those other Irish ways found among the people with whom we meet. Thus, for example, to the loneliness of many a country-side, traversed by bog-road or boreen, may be traced peculiarities developed in the inhabitants, who are by nature sociable, pleasure-loving, keen-witted people, and, also by nature, prone to melancholy and mysticism. Their situation, scattered thinly over barren places, where the villages, few and far between, are all more or less deserted villages, cannot but influence both their lives and characters. It is for them a day of very small things. Scanty opportunities and resources constrain them to exercise their ingenuity on trifles, to plan and scheme, perhaps for gains most petty in the view of the more affluent, or perhaps simply for the sake of employing their idle brains ; while, on the other hand, they sometimes turn in a different direction, and grasp at things from beyond this tangible universe to fill up the deficiencies in their share of life. Hence its narrowly circumscribed circle is now and again intersected by one of indefinite vastness.

JANE BARLOW.

Raheny, 1900.

“It’s twenty pities,” an elderly Donegal peasant said to me one day—he was standing on a step-ladder to darn his thatched roof with strakes of straw—“that people can’t put up with other people’s notions.” The remark stated a broad general principle, which seems to become particularly applicable when things Irish are the subject of notions. Resentment is so easily, and sometimes so unaccountably, incurred. Often it proceeds from those who are dissatisfied unless Ireland is mentioned in much the same tone that kindly persons use when speaking of the departed, able no more to defend or retrieve their own characters.

“Bear, hear him along  
With his few faults shut up like dead flowerets.”

Certainly the feeling is in itself a generous one ; but then Ireland is not dead at all, nor, be they few or many, are Ireland’s faults. Other malcontents would insist that of Irish matters a predominantly humorous and pathetic view must always be taken. Rainbows may vanish, but the tear and the smile must never leave Erin’s eye. Failing humour and pathos, indeed, they show an unfortunate readiness to admit comic and sentimental substitutes. In one of his stories Thackeray asks, anent a preposterous Irishman, whether it is better to be laughing-mad

or crying-mad in this world, and they seem inclined to accept these suggested alternatives ; which is absurd. A third party, again, will have none of an Ireland that is not steeped in Celtic glamour, spell-bound by Druidical trances, murmurous with Gaelic incantations. Its inhabitants are exiles belonging to magical regions, far remote from this workaday world, and are more concerned about the exploits of ancient Heroes than the doings of their contemporary neighbours. To possess some sort of uncanny gift is a proof of nationality almost as indispensable as the proverbial “ O” or “ Mac” ; not to believe in, at least, fairies, argues you a west-Briton, if nothing worse. The existence of a shrewd, matter-of-fact Irishman, with a keen eye to the main chance, cannot be recognised as by any means possible.

These, and many more somewhat unreasonable requisitions, seem to be, in a great measure, the result of our attempts to imprison in definitely worded statements what is really an atmosphere, elusive, impalpable, with the property of lending aspects bewilderingly various to the same things seen from different points of view. No doubt every country breathes such an atmosphere of its own, and Ireland’s may perhaps merely seem to us peculiarly distinctive. But even its “ casing air,” one fancies, is unlike the air of any other land. Its wild west winds sweep into its vast-vaulted skies larger clouds and more fantastically piled up than are elsewhere adrift. They fling down portentously dark shadows over already scowling boglands ; they let fall on clear-brimmed lakes many a slanted gleam of silver fire ; the sunsets kindled among them are of an unsurpassable splendour. Hence all parts of Ireland, though especially the west and south, give much scope to the study of vapour in rapid motion, with its miracles of light and shade. This it is that so often transfigures, for instance, the lonely Connemarese plains and mountains. In the serenest weather they have a high beauty, albeit austere, and, as it were, half-reluctantly responsive to un-tempered sunshine. When the riftless grey curtains of the rain are gathered closely all round them, there is a sublime simplicity in their dreariness that fascinates and soothes. But only beneath changeful skies do their utmost charms appear. Then many a little glen may be seen as full of iridescent mist as if a whole rainbow had melted there, and through it the water of some pool or tarn will tremble like a fallen star drowning in dew. Far across the sombre floor of the bog a mountain range will hold stains of deepest pansy-purple in its hollows, and lift up peaks dipped in wild hyacinth blue ; on hills some-what nearer, the burning gold of gorse blossom, and dim pallor of ling, and smouldering ruddiness of heather, mingle themselves into one apricot-coloured glow under the sun. Close at hand, wide moss-green and apple-green slopes suddenly glitter all over with a network of crystal rivulets, flickering down as the last filmy strands of a shower trail off them. High up on its track, here and there, a foam-white banner seems to shake out ampler folds, so that the country people remark : “ There does be a powerful weight of water above in it to-day.” Everywhere, spread abroad in unstinted measure by the acre or even the mile, lie the pure and vivid hues that are prized when doled out thriftily in precious stones, and flower-petals, and fragile wings ; and everywhere their brightness is enhanced by quickly recurrent gleams and glooms as the clouds pass floating double.

Nevertheless it is partly to what must be considered a defect in Irish landscapes that they owe their capacity for receiving and recording skiey influences, making the most of the play of shine and shadow. For more scope is given thereto by the absence of woods and groves, those looms that weave a shadowy-shining fabric of their own, with some variations from the frowns and smiles on the face of the sky. Possibly the present destitution of Ireland in this respect has sometimes been exaggerated, though she undoubtedly is now among the most treeless of countries. Probably, likewise, the strongly contrasting descriptions of her former state are not to be taken quite as matters of fact. We can hardly accept as historical the accounts of how her earliest colonists found the “ Isle of the Yellow Woods”—the first of her score of names—all a dense forest from sea to sea, save one small bit of the north-eastern corner of what is now the county Dublin, which they called Moynalty, from the flocks of

birds there basking in the sun, everywhere else obscured by interwoven boughs ; and how a certain Nemedius, eleventh in descent from Noah, “ designing to improve the soil of the country, cut down twelve woods of very large extent, and laid the land open.” Still, the vast tree-cemeteries of our bogs furnish much corroborative evidence ; and in authentic Elizabethan days, there yet stood unravaged the great Desmond Forests, and Spenser the poet could speak of Eire’s “ goodly woods, fitt for building of howses and shippes, so commodiously as that yf some princes in the world had them, they would soone hope to be lordes of all the seas, and ere long of all the world.”

To-day it seems as if we might really be drawing near to the fulfilment of a hope less immoderately ambitious, but of no trivial importance : the hope that Ireland will cease to be a gap in the garment of tree-clad mother-earth, and once more will wave all over with branches in what we call our Big Winds. Because new plantations are not only in the air ; the roots of no despicable beginnings are already in the ground, so that the possessors of even rather short second-sight may well foresee the spreading woodlands, and fore-hear the rustling of their multitudinous leaves. Doubtless, if we expected to look upon their maturity with our bodily eyes, most of us would share the feelings of Horace Walpole when he remarked that the deliberation with which trees grow was extremely inconvenient to his natural impatience ; but to picture the improvements wrought by restoring something of our primitive sylvan scenery is a pleasant and not extravagant flight of the imagination. These modern forests will, of course, harbour a population differing in many respects from that of their predecessors. The wild red deer, and swine, and wolves, to say nothing of the giant elk and mammoth, will not return to associate with our tamer flocks and herds ; and the people are changed at least in their outward aspect. Discarded are not only the men’s saffron shirts and their great mantles, so dreaded and decried by Spenser, but after them have gone the swallow-tail coat, knee-breeches, and high-crowned caubeen, with a pipe stuck in the band for comic parts, which still form the conventional costume of the stage Irishman. In real life they are practically extinct, appearing rarely on the person of some very ancient, remotely dwelling farmer, who has qualified for his old age pension with a dozen years to spare. Grey homespun suits and caps to match are now the wear of father and son. Wives and daughters in their attire show a more conservative spirit, their woollen skirts and shawls having come down unaltered through indefinite generations. It is true that new-fangled finery makes an entrance among them, penetrating into unlikely places now and then, so that a picture hat of the largest size may be seen going to Mass beside a starched white-frilled cap. But this does not happen often enough to vulgarise the general appearance of a really country crowd. One fine summer day, not long since, in the far-western Isle of Achill, I met a troop of some twenty broad-backed, cream-coloured Connemara ponies, strong, sturdy little beasts, and was struck by the quaint medieval aspect of the cavalcade, as the peasant folk jogged on, nearly all of them riding double, the women and colleens in their many-folded, dark blue or white cloth, hooded cloaks, gay shawls and kerchiefs, and richly hued, home-dyed skirts. For a moment one might have imagined that a party of Canterbury pilgrims had suddenly ambled out of the misty past.

They were on their way to a fair, and fairs are fairs in Ireland. We can indeed hardly overestimate the blank that would be left in the people’s lives if from them were subtracted the fair-days and market-days which are so large a factor in the sum of their business and pleasure. Ruskin has suggested that the irrigation of the earth could be managed “ if once in three days, or thereabouts, a great, ugly, black rain-cloud were brought up over the blue, and everything well watered, and so all left blue again till next time ;” with no need for the ever-varied pageantry and pomp of drifting vapours, lights, and shadows. And in like manner we can imagine some future time when Irish peasants may adopt more strictly scientific methods of buying and selling, and dispose of their farm produce and purchase their household

requisites at fixed prices in a great co-operative store, without any of the haggling and chaffering which is now an indispensable part of such transactions, and a source of agreeable interest to many onlookers not at all personally concerned. But should this come to pass, it seems as if something must vanish from the gaiety of the nation, and a monotony settle down upon it, corresponding to that of an unrelieved blue overhead.

Nobody, however, can regret one cause of excitement, which within the last half-century or so has ceased to enliven our fairs : the faction-fights, namely, a highly uncivilised institution, finally suppressed by Dan O'Connell. An old Tipperary Fenian, to our grief no longer among us, told me that in his youth it was the custom on the afternoon of every fair-day, when business was over, for the shopkeepers to put up their shutters, and all the women, children, and non-combatants to retreat indoors, just as if the town were besieged ; whereupon the two hostile " factions," whose ostensible cause of quarrel would probably be the disputed age of a long-deceased heifer, or some such absurdity, would come and fight fiercely in the streets until nightfall ended the fray. Seeing that the weapons they used were the same as those wielded by their forefathers eighteen centuries earlier, huge sticks and clubs of blackthorn, oak, or ash, with iron or lead ferrules, it is not to be wondered at that these violent delights had violent endings, loss of life or limb commonly resulting from the encounters. Nowadays there is none of that deliberate disorder. War-like episodes do naturally occur from time to time, usually originating in some public-house ; for Father Mathew's crusade against intemperance has un-luckily had less permanent effects than O'Connell's against faction-fights. But, as a rule, friendliness prevails ; while herds of cattle poking their foolish horned heads into the most inconvenient places ; drovers shouting and flourishing sticks ; flocks of sheep trotting along in a compact formation enforced by sagacious collies ; pigs and calves plunging hither and thither, or mounted on carts behind the wooden bars of tall cage-like creels ; horses and ponies exhibiting their best paces before studiously disparaging critics ; small droves of dark turf-coloured donkeys, the property, most likely, of wandering tinker-people, acquired by means best known to themselves ; hand-barrows piled with crockery, boots, tin-ware, and vegetables ; market-women with baskets of fowl and eggs ; stalls hung with garments, chiefly second-hand ; tables covered with fruit and confectionery—all these things, accompanied by the strains of two or three fiddlers and pipers, make up a scene which has continually repeated itself time out of mind. And towards evening the crowd melts away along the roads which converge upon the fair-green, and which have through the day been lined with ranks of empty side-cars, their erected shafts bristling like some queer growth of thorny hedgerow.

It would be impossible to spend much time in rural Ireland without recognising the importance of " jaunting-cars," more especially in their humbler form, that most commonly seen. Though they are all built upon the same general lines, there is no kind of vehicle the individual specimens of which more widely differ from one another as to matters of detail ; none is more modifiable by cushions, springs, and tyres ; none responds more sensitively to the asperities and amenities of the surface over which it rolls, or to the peculiar paces of the beast by which it is drawn. A drive along deep-rutted boreens, perched on a high, ill-balanced, unpadded seat, with unequal, iron-shod wheels, and a lolling horse, prone to stumble, if not come down outright, is an experience that might well remind sporting people of a stiff run across country. If we wished to fix the opposite poles of travelling modes, we might set at one of them the sixty-horse-power, ninety-miles-an-hour projectile, the transits of which make every highroad a way to dusty death, and at the other the leisurely, jolting car, with its single jog-trotting nag, and its load of passengers, whose number may run into two figures.

Extreme elasticity in this respect is indeed very characteristic of our national conveyance. Not only do occasions such as funerals, weddings, and fairs tax its capacity to the uttermost,

but daily emergencies make incessant demands upon it. In fact what with “ the loan of a lift “ recurrent on the way, and the doing of commissions for stay-at-home neighbours, a car, however moderately laden at the outset, seldom reaches its journey’s end with an unoccupied cranny to spare. All sorts of things hitch themselves on to it as it proceeds. A firkin of butter and a spinning-wheel may be sitting waiting for it at some wild, heathery-bordered cross-roads ; and a bit farther on it may pick up under a hedge a rush-cased salmon and a couple of equally silent geese, or perhaps an old woman with some less fortunate fowl crawling and fluttering beneath her cloak. For along out-of-the-way country roads, where communications are as fitful as infrequent, persons and property are carried from place to place by extemporised systems of make-shifts, ever subject to unlucky delays and inconvenient breaking down of connections, so that their progress is chequered by as many unforeseen pauses as if they were sticks and straws travelling on the capricious current of a stream, which strands them here and there against some stone or jutting ledge ; or were winged seeds wafted at the wind’s haphazard will, crossed by intercepting briers.

In the homes at which they do ultimately arrive—I am supposing districts entirely rural, and therefore peopled mainly by farming folk, “ stronger” or “ weaker”—the ordinary course of life often has some analogy to the progress of such a conveyance, that is to say, if we understand by life anything beyond the mere fact of continuing to exist. Where neighbours are few and far between, and occupation is monotonous or scanty, the flow of interest becomes intermittent and all its breezes drop down “ as sad as sad can be.” Then time hangs heavily in and about the small whitewashed dwellings, slated farm-house or thatched cabin. Events seem to have ceased happening, nor are there any at all definitely in prospect. This is a state of things against which the young people in particular impatiently rebel, as forecasting a future which promises them little. They are always disposed to ask : “ And what good is one’s life without chances ?” In the endless, empty-handed winter evenings, when the last word has been con- nected in the borrowed newspaper—for the dearth of literature is inconceivable—and when the lamp screening the window, and the fire flushing the walls, seem no longer to light any purpose of profit or pleasure, the hours must lag leadenly indeed. It appears quite possible that we have herein one reason for the exodus of our youth so steadily proceeding from the country, if we may conjecture some of the emigrants to be scared from their father’s door, not so much by dread of the grinning wolf poverty, as by disgust at the crawling slug dulness. That same impulse, intolerance of tedium, which sends the inhabitants of English villages crowding into the great cities, drives Irish lads and lasses farther off across the Atlantic.

However, it must not by any means be imagined that amusements are wholly lacking in our rustic life. That were much to underestimate the capabilities of the will in dealing with the way. Certainly the will to seek diversion is strong enough here, and found it has been some- times in far from likely quarters. A “ burying,” for instance, with its accompanying “ wake,” is often for most of those who attend it an enjoyable social gathering, at which extremely lavish hospitality will be shown. This is a sign of the national propensity for laying an exaggerated and ghoulish emphasis on funereal affairs. Of late years matters have improved, what is called, rather pretentiously perhaps, the Irish Renaissance, appealing to a more commendable and really more characteristic taste. Just as the Gaelic word *socraid*, which originally signified any sort of procession, is now used to denote a funeral one, the word *feis* (pronounced “ fesh”), properly speaking any sort of festival, has come to be understood as short for a festival of music. These *feiseanna* have grown into a recognised institution and a prominent feature in country life, greatly to its enlivening, as well as to the safeguarding from oblivious neglect of many beautiful old songs and melodies. And there are dances for the soon-dark winter nights, when the fiddle quits its hook on the wall ; hurley and football matches ; patterns and stations ; hunting and horse-races, with, it must unluckily be added, not a little gambling and drinking, in response to the ever-effective demand for excitement by

any means good or bad. Still, in a country so thinly populated as Ireland is to-day, there will always be many scattered households living well-nigh beyond reach of such distractions, and consequently passing days “ remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow,” as did long since, in different circumstances, a roving compatriot of their own. No remedy, perhaps, could more effectually mend their case than the administration of a few samples from the works produced by him or his fellow-craftsmen. It is not easy for those who have lived among a superabundance of literature to realise what the possession of even one single volume may seem to the dweller in a parish where all the other books could be counted on his fingers. The number of such parishes is not small. Nay, there are fair-sized country towns, whose shops might be thoroughly ransacked without bringing to light any literary wares of more account than a dream-book or a couple of antiquated sixpenny novels. As this extreme dearth exists among a quick-witted people, who for more than a generation past have been practically free from illiteracy, we may safely assume that it is chargeable with much *tedium vitæ*, and much waste of time, for which, therefore, a cure should not appear so very far to seek. Extend a service of well-equipped travelling library vans, and relief will forthwith be at the door of many a lonesome abode, whose inmates will have reason to date from the arrival a marvellous increase of their store. It is pleasant to think that circumstances are smoothing the way for the passage of these vehicles. There is, for instance, the handily compact form of the innumerable cheap classical reprints, which would allow a few square inches of space, quite within the resources of the least commodious cabin, to contain a twelvemonth’s treasure of poetry and prose ; and there is the small price which puts them within reach of anybody who can command a few pence, certain not to be grudged here. Again, the present enthusiasm for the study of the Gaelic language has a like tendency, because it stirs up, through patriotic sentiment, some minds that would not spontaneously have turned to literary pursuits ; and, the reading habit once acquired, they will never restrict themselves to Gaelic lesson-books. In short, it is not an altogether extravagant conjecture that among these scattered dwellings, thus safely isolated from all the allurements of rubbish-laden stall and counter, bestrewn with worthless snippets and the newest brewage of fiction, “ a tun of bulk, a kilderkin of wit,” there may spring up and spread widely an unperverted taste for real literature. But at least it is in any case reasonable to predict with confidence that much lasting pleasure would be brought to individual house-holds. The art-loving Celt, put into possession of the only artistic work that circumstances make fully accessible to him, would experience something like a return of the good old days, when poets and minstrels roamed through the land, while the Shanachie sat by the hearth, weaving his romances in the light of the turf-fire.

Turf and the bog whence it came—they seem essential features in Irish country life, which failing them could hardly be carried on at all. Indeed, where would we be without our bit of good turf ? is a question common among the peasantry. Happily the speculation has no very practical bearings, since nearly three million acres of turf-beds, averaging twenty feet in thickness, may well be considered to leave little room for fear that supplies will run short, whether or no they have the power of growing, which is still a disputed point. Nature when sweeping away our coal-measures, decreed that we should yet have an ample provision of fuel. Not that this is the only, or even, it may be, the most important product of our bog-lands. In life on our flat-bottomed barge of an island, whose bulwarks of sea-fronting mountains perhaps suggested to Bishop Berkeley the lofty brazen wall behind which he thought the Irish could subsist so prosperously on their own resources, those vast level tracts, dim and dusky hued, where no beast grazes and no plough grooves, count for much besides merely peat. By their defiant infertility and obdurate unchangeableness they bring into the heart of the country something akin to the ocean. Living on the edge of a bog is in many ways like living on the shore of the sea, perpetually confronted with the “ great opposeless wills” of elements which we must never think to control. Also like the sea, bogs have their tales of perils and sorrows. Ever and anon, half a mile or so of one will begin to move, more tragically than Birnam

wood, amid shrieks and groans weirder than the sounds made by breaking ice-fields, and sliding along, a wave horribly crested, will blot out with oozy black mire all that lies in its path, green meadow, white cabin, its helpless prey, not sparing their ill-fated inhabitants, if taken by surprise or over-slow to flee. Though such catastrophes seldom happen, there are less obvious dangers, which, always lying in wait, probably entrap many more victims. Quagmires with innocently masked faces are ready to swallow piecemeal the owner of any unfortunate foot that unwarily approaches. More frankly open-mouthed bog-holes, murky and steep-walled, do not lack opportunities for gulping down bodily the benighted passer-by.

But despite all disasters and mischances, it must be admitted that bogs have a charm of their own. The air that travels over them grows singularly pure and wholesome, and is often fragrant with aromatic herbs. Their sad-coloured mantle is here and there resplendent with fiery gold of furze and paler gold of broom, silver white of tall ox-eye daisies, and crimson and purple of loosestrife and heather. On a closer view it is seen to be embroidered with diminutive blossoms and berries that glow like jewels. A border of emerald green osmunda fern sometimes marks the course of the clear brown streams that cross them. Even the grey boulders among the gorse-bushes are encrusted with scarlet-cupped lichen. They are haunted by flocks of wild birds, amongst which the snowy gulls shine conspicuously ; they make the home of many small, lowly-dwelling creatures, some of them quaint and unpersonable enough, but pleasant to the eye of those who have a turn for natural history, which like love can “ transpose to form and dignity” things base and vile ; and beneath their surface lie hidden relics of by-gone ages, dear to the antiquarian’s heart. And all these things, with many more, are over and above the long-shaped turf-sods, which play so indispensable a part in Irish rural life that we can hardly dissociate it from the odour of the transparent blue smoke.

Yet we must not confuse this with the distinctive Irish atmosphere of which mention has been made, and which is far less material, far more pervasive. It may be felt amid the broad grass-lands of “ Meath of the pastures,” or the rich grain fields of Tipperary’s Golden Vale ; in the hawthorn-scented Glens of Antrim, and the embowering woods that have lingered round Killarney. By virtue thereof, one imagines, though he were set down in the most solitary region, an exile from Erin, wafted hither on his wishing-carpet, would know that he had reached his Land of Heart’s Desire. And small blame to them, as our people say, if for him and his she seem “ the first flower of the earth and first gem of the sea.” Only to hold the belief sanely they must admit that the flower has not yet blossomed in perfection and that the gem is not absolutely without flaw.

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