

The path to Cong

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THE second day of the races was in a sense a wasted day. It was a day on which we tried hard to get to Cong, and we did not succeed in getting to Cong. According to the railway-guides, a steamer left Galway for Cong every afternoon some time about three o'clock, so we dawdled away the morning looking over bridges and sauntering past the Claddagh, that ancient thatched village of fishermen about whose succession of kings all the world has heard, and revisiting the old streets of grey steep houses idling cheerfully, in fact, till three o'clock should come round. It was difficult to find any inhabitant of Galway who had ever been to Cong or who knew where the Cong boat started from. There was a small boy in the hotel, however, who knew all about it and who arranged to take our luggage to the boat on a wheelbarrow in good time. Consequently, we settled ourselves down to contentment, taking a long noon's enjoyment out of the dusty and deserted town.

Practically everybody else had gone to the races again. We did not dare. As I have said, it was our one purpose in life to catch that three-o'clock boat to Cong.

It was about half an hour before the boat was due to start that we set off from the hotel accompanied by a small boy wheeling a great load of bags on a barrow. It was only a step to the river. There was no sign of life when we came within view of it. It lay still as a deserted lake in the palace grounds of some sleeping beauty. Rather it moved stilly on its way to the weir, after which, no doubt, it plunged and gushed like a young thing towards the sea.

The only trace of man to be seen was a distant high-kneed figure lying back against the white wall of a house, smoking and enjoying the sun. As we passed on our way to the landing-stage for the Cong boat, this figure suddenly busied itself to its feet and hailed us across a little quadrangular inlet of water.

At first we could not hear what the man said : he was simply a vain shout and a pipe waved vigorously in the air. Then we caught the words—

“ Are yous for the boat ?”

We told him we were.

“ There'll be no boat to-day,” he told us. “ There's no boat leaves here till to-morrow.”

We refused to believe such a thing after all those hours of waiting and with the barrow of luggage beside us. What was the matter ? we asked him.

“ The captain's gone to the races,” he called back, “ and there'll be no boat leave here till to-morrow.”

We protested that no public announcement of this earth-shaking change had been made in the time-table of the Cong steamer.

“ Well,” declared the man, who had evidently no sympathy with our indignation, “ they always stop work for the races. You’ll see wonders if ever you see the Cong boat leaving and the races going on.”

In case the man with the pipe might be suffering from hallucination, we bade the boy wheel the barrow on as far as the landing-stage, where a sort of a tug was lying as if awaiting the last trump. One could go aboard her and walk up and down and shout down every hole or hatchway, but there was not even an echo of response. It was as eerie as examining a derelict. It was no occasion for artistic emotions, however. With the feelings that most people translate into oaths we turned and marched back with the small boy and the wheelbarrow to the hotel.

I felt in the mood for writing a pamphlet. It would have traced back the inertia of the Cong boat during the race-meeting to Strongbow’s invasion of Ireland. Here, I told myself, was the culminating incident of seven hundred years’ disorganisation of national habits and culture. For the successors of Strongbow were able almost to destroy a civilisation in Ireland, but they never were able to build a new one in its place. Event followed event in confirmation of the theory elucidated in that unwritten pamphlet. First, when we went to the railway station to make inquiries about other ways of reaching Cong, we were told that the only way we could get there even by the early part of the next day was to take a train away back into the heart of Ireland to Athlone, then to take another train up towards Roscommon, to change somewhere into yet another train for Ballinrobe, where we would arrive in time for bed, and from which we could take a car to Cong the next morning. It was an extravagant way of getting at Cong, but we were desperate. We had by now developed a passion for reaching Cong which would not be gainsaid. So we bade the girl at the booking-office write out our tickets. The guard examined them before the train left and at once informed us that we were going on an unnecessarily roundabout journey. Why hadn’t we booked *via* Athenry to Ballinrobe—which was very much shorter and cheaper ?

I felt that the girl in the booking-office, who had told us that the only way to Ballinrobe that evening was by Athlone, was a serpent. I dared not leave my seat to tell her so, however. If I had, the train would have gone on without me. When we were getting near Athenry, I suggested to a ticket collector that we might change at Athenry and go to Ballinrobe by the rational way, but he assured us that, if we did, we would have to get new tickets, and pay extra, for a different company owned that part of the line. I have always believed in the nationalisation of the Irish railways, but never quite so fiercely as at that moment. I sat in the train, indeed, and damned private property in railways till I began to feel quite cheerful again. “ Oh for one hour of Sidney Webb !” I cried to the stones in the fields.

But perhaps Sir Horace Plunkett is better still. He stands above all for organisation, whether it is organisation of business or organisation of social life. And it is exactly organisation that foreign influence has killed in the west of Ireland. Sentimental people are apt to become enthusiastic over this disorganisation when it appears in the life of peasants. It is regarded as peculiarly picturesque and Irish. When it expresses itself among the middle classes, however, as bad business and bad manners, we all lose our tolerance. . . . But it may be that the affair of the tickets made me unusually resentful of that young man with the little cap and the black pompom of hair falling over his lean face and the abounding black bow and the knickers and the yellow boots, who lit his race-meeting cigar without asking any of the women in the carriage (which was not a smoking carriage) if they objected.

There were chocolates at Athlone, and an old bright-eyed man with scanty white hair who could speak Irish was in the carriage on the way to Claremorris with his young wife and his amazingly young child. He was an old child himself to look at—not a patriarch at all, but a

happy child. Then there was a ruddy-faced conversational man in checks and a dust-coat who got into the train that took us from Claremorris to Ballinrobe. He had just got back from Galway races, and told us how much he had made at them. Not only this, but how reasonably, considering the crush, the hotel had charged him how much for supper, how much for bed, how much for breakfast. He brought out his bill to show us the details. He was more interesting when he began to talk about the industrial revival in that part of the country, and how many thousands of pounds' worth of Irish homespun and friezes went from factories in the neighbourhood—to Selfridge's, I think it was. . . .

Ballinrobe Station, when we arrived there, seemed to be the porch of the outer darkness. We had been given the name of a hotel, and, when we mentioned it, a lean giant fell out of the darkness upon our luggage and marched us off into a night that was without stars or peep of any lamp. He said the hotel wasn't far and that there was no horse at the station, so off we walked with him, stumbling in the ruts of an unseen road, until the sound of running water close to us and the murmur of trees stirring overhead made us wonder if we were not being conducted on some fearful errand to a castle in the heart of a bloody wood. Suddenly, however, a gate was dashed backwards, and we were passing through a dimly lit hall into a room adorned with huge imitation fishes in glass cases and all the other symbols of a hotel for anglers.

Here was quietness and even luxury after Galway. Here was the silence of comfort, not the silence of desolation. ... If I were a fisherman, I should certainly find my way back to Ballinrobe and the hotels for anglers in that part of the world. There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the discomforts and bad cooking of the hotels of Ireland. The worst Irish hotels, of course, are adventures in the unspeakable. But then the worst are very rare, and they are seldom to be found, so far as my experience can be trusted, in the fishing districts.

Ballinrobe, indeed, is a fine bright town, as we discovered the next morning when, having deliberately missed the early morning mail-car to Cong, we strolled out in its sunny streets with their pleasant house-fronts washed in many colours. Not that there are not banks and other worthy institutions to dignify the place, but the occasional house-fronts that, instead of being white-washed, are yellow-washed or blue-washed, seemed to me to give it its distinctive note. It looks prosperous enough, but, like most Irish towns, it is only a relic of its old self. I see from a guide-book that it has now 1544 inhabitants. Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, which was published in 1851, gave the population at that time as 2604. That is a measure of the way in which the towns of Ireland have managed to progress backwards under the Union.

It was a muscular man with cheeks as red as a lobster and hair cropped close to the skull who came to drive us to Cong. He was a dark man, and his Adam's apple hung like a dewlap under his blazing face. He wore a peaked cap down on his over-white eyes, and his wide mouth curved in obliging, if somewhat cynical, smiles. More than middle-aged, he had seen the world and could not help feeling discontented at the fate which had ended in making him a jarvey among these fields of slumber. As he drove, he kept spitting into his hands each time he gave a tug at the reins, and shaking his head over the condition of Ireland.

Out on the high road our car sailed along, a fly in the sun, and gave us every moment a larger view of the bluebell-coloured mountains piled up in beauty on the far side of Lough Mask. It was a country to evoke enthusiasm, but the driver, spitting vigorously into his hands, did not find it so.

“There's a heap of money going about,” he declared, with a wink which was half a grimace, as he offered his personal diagnosis of the condition of Ireland—“a heap of money that

nobody knows where it comes from. Did you ever read any Irish history, sir ? I've often heard them tell the story that seven or eight hundred years ago the English Queen Elizabeth sent over one of her biggest generals to this part of Ireland to bate the Irish. But the Irish were the best soldiers in the world then, and, good and all as he was, the Englishman could do nothing against them, and they slewed *him*. Well, that makes Elizabeth angry, and she sends over her next best general, and they slewed *him*. And the next best after that, and they slewed him, till in the end of the story the Queen says till herself, says she : ' It's no use. England's done,' says she. ' We may as well admit we're bet.' With that, the cleverest Englishman that was living at that time ups and says he can tell the Queen a most potent way for dealing with the Irish. ' I know Ireland well,' says he, ' and it's no use your trying to bate them at fair fighting. There's only one way,' says he. ' Let you send me over among them with an odd bag of gold,' says he, ' and I'll dash a bit of money about amongst them, and see if I don't have them fighting like a lot of gamecocks in less than no time !' Well, that was the first Englishman that ever knew how to bate the Irish, and he was made a Duke or an Earl for it. ' Dash a bit of money about amongst them,' says he, and be damned if they have been doing anything else ever since."

I suggested that it was robbery, not bribery, from which Ireland had suffered most.

" Well," said he, spitting rapidly into one hand after the other, " say what you like, but there's queer goings-on. I tell you there's men going about here and there all over the County Mayo, and some people gets money, and some gets none, and the money must come from somewhere. Oh, there'll be exposures one of these days, sir," said he, with a leer of satisfaction, " and don't forget I told you. There's money slipping from this hand to that, I tell you, this present day just the same as ever there was."

Even the bluebell-coloured hills which lured us from beyond the low-lying lake paled in comparison with this gorgeous version of Irish history. And yet, though it had the form of a fairy-tale, it had, like so many fairy-tales, an indubitable soul of fact. Was it not Bacon who commended the " princely policy" of Elizabeth in weakening the Irish by " dividing the heads" ? As for the modern corruption of which the driver spoke, I imagine he was thinking of some spending institution such as the Congested Districts Board—one of the Balfourian inventions for killing Home Rule with doles. If these were what his mind was in such jumbled revolt against, I agree with him. Much good as they have unquestionably done, they have done it in the way which least encourages the spirit of self-reliance and independence among the people. But then I think the whole system which makes the people turn their eyes to London instead of to themselves for help is an incitement to servility.

Most people would conclude from the driver's conversation that he must be something of an extreme Nationalist. But the truth is, he had no more politics than the horse, and his phantasmagoric beliefs and prejudices were quite independent of any logical creed. I found this out when I asked him about Captain Boycott, the land-agent whose name gave a new word to the English language thirty years ago owing to his bad relations with the tenantry in this neighbourhood. The circumstances of the Boycott affair are, perhaps, worth recalling. Parnell had advised the tenant-farmers at a great meeting in Ennis in the summer of 1880 to cease to pay rack-rents to the landlords, but to offer them what they thought was a just rent instead. Captain Boycott, who was agent for the Earl of Erne, got into some trouble with the labourers and tenants at the time, and took steps to evict the latter for their impudence. Parnell, however, in his speech of a month before, had suggested a new method for counteracting evictions. This was to put into Coventry, as the English say, any man who " grabbed" or took possession of an evicted tenant's farm. This system was now put in operation against Captain Boycott. His labourers fell away from him. His servants escaped from his house as though he had been a leper. Blacksmiths, shopkeepers, washerwomen—everybody suddenly

found some excuse for refusing to have any dealings with him, and he and the British Constitution were left like two little cockleshells in peril amid the tumultuous seas of agrarian war. The Orangemen of the north, who have so often been misled into believing that the Irish of the south and west are criminals of the rack and thumbscrew order, resolved to do battle for a land-agent who was at least a Protestant, and fifty of them boldly set off to Mayo to gather in the crops of Captain Boycott, and to raise the banner of the Lord against the idolators once more.

I confess I like to think of that little band of Orangemen. They were as wrong as anybody, Protestant or Catholic, who ever fought for sectarianism instead of liberty, but they had at least the courage of their wrongness. They were fighting in a lost cause, however, and though, with the help of an army of police and redcoats, who threatened the countryside with their field-pieces, they saved the Captain's crops to the value of £350, they did so at a cost of ten times that amount, and Captain Boycott, finding the game not worth the candle, at last packed his trunk for England. It is said to have been the local priest, Father John O'Malley, who invented the verb "to boycott" as a help to an American journalist who could think of no word but the pallid "ostracise" to describe what was being done in the neighbourhood of Lough Mask.

"That was a man was never treated fair," the carman assured us, when we asked him about Captain Boycott's Castle. "There was no justice in the way he was used at all."

But he could give no reasons for his opinion except in such vague phrases as that the Captain was "a nice gentleman."

Frankly, I think that boycotting is a very questionable weapon. It is so capable of abuse in the hands of men who have personal, not social, ends to serve. But, before we become self-righteous in condemning it, we must remember that Parnell proposed it, not as you propose a desirable law, but as the alternative to the horrors of crime which make land wars bloody like Imperial and religious and civil wars. Oppression breeds crime in a normal human society as surely as filth breeds pestilence. Parnell wished to reply to the crimes of oppression, not with other crimes of retaliation, but with a militant trade union of the Irish farmers. Looking at the whole business impartially as a piece of history, we can only say that his methods were successful and his ideals such as most men have come to think right. Both the English political parties have conceded as much—the Liberals in Mr. Gladstone's Land Act of 1881, and the Conservatives in Mr. Wyndham's Land Act of 1903. Both of these Acts were simply adaptations of the policy of the Land League.

"I'm surprised to hear you praising Captain Boycott so much," I said to the driver at the end of his tirade of praise. "Do you not think Michael Davitt was a finer character?"

"Ah, Davitt was a fine man, too," he replied. "If it wasn't for Davitt where would the poor farmer be? Will you tell me this—who has a better right to a farm than the man that farms it? And wasn't it Davitt that made it worth a farmer's while to be living at all? I tell you what it is, we need another Davitt badly."

And he proceeded indignantly to relate how some one had refused to sell him a small field that he wanted for his horse, and he seemed to think that, if Davitt were alive, he would bring in a law compelling the other man to make the sale.

"And I tell you who was another fine man," he went on, nodding dogmatically over his reins—"Sanders."

“ Who was he ?” I asked.

“ Sanders. He was a Member of Parliament. He was from the north.”

“ You don’t mean Colonel Saunderson, the Orangeman ?” said I.

“ That’s the man,” he declared. “ He was a fine man, that.”

Really, I could not hope to keep pace with politics so elusive and swift-footed, and I was relieved when he drew our attention to a curious stone structure—a thing like a grandstand of stone slabs with a sign or weathercock of some sort on the top—standing behind the wall of an estate.

“ Do you know what that is ?” he asked us.

I guessed it was some funeral monument.

“ Not at all,” he said contemptuously. “ That’s where they used to sit and watch the cock-fighting—ah, it would be seven hundred years ago, maybe.” He had a taste for good stiff numbers.

He then began to question us as to our visit to that part of the country, and lamented when he heard that we were the merest birds of passage. If we had been staying any length of time, either he could have put us up himself or could have introduced us into some nice country cottage in the district.

“ The mistake everybody makes,” he told us, “ is going to them robbing hotels. Sure, what attraction is it for visitors when, every time they go to bed and sit down to their breakfast it means maybe half a sovereign or more out of their pockets ? That’s a nice hotel you were staying in, but what’s the use of paying pounds when shillings would do. If ever you’re coming back this way, sir, let you send me a postcard and I’ll find you a nice clean room where you can have all you want for fifteen shillings a week—there or thereabouts—is that too much, ma’am ? Of course, it would be simple cooking—a chicken or a piece of roast-beef, or maybe a salmon out of the lough, and an apple pie or a rhubarb pie to follow. Plain, simple cooking, ma’am, and no dhrawin’-room dishes, but maybe you’d be better without them.”

And so he flowed on and on and on, shaking his head and jiggling the reins and spitting into his hands, as the car rattled us on down towards one of the very capitals of Irish history. As we came to a modern stone gateway just outside the entrance to the little town, he turned round and pointed his whip at the place.

“ Many’s the stone you and me helped to put into that wall, ma’am,” he said with a grin.

“ Oh ?” said my companion, rather puzzled.

“ That’s Lord Ardilaun’s place,” he explained, enjoying his joke—“ him that owns Guinness’s brewery. Everything you see there was once bottles of stout. Hupp, horse !”

And it was not very long now till we were mounting past the dumpy little stone cross that guards the middle of the main street of Cong, and alighting stiffly at the door of the something-or-other Arms.

Here in this grey and green land between the waters of Mask and Corrib is a scene of many significant memories for Ireland. It was on the great plain of Moytura outside Cong that, nineteen hundred years before Christ, and two hundred years before the Gaelic Irish had set foot in the country, the fair godlike race of the Tuatha Dé Danaan contested with the short dark Firbolg people for the sovereignty of Ireland. The Firbolg (or Bagmen, as their name has been translated) had been rulers of the country for less than half a century. They had come from Greece where the Greeks had used them as slaves and had, says the legend, compelled them to carry clay in leathern wallets on their backs up the terraces of the rocky hills to make them fertile and rich. Escaping to Ireland, they had but a short reign of triumph there, for they met with more than one conqueror.

But even to-day, it is said, it is the children of the Firbolg, not the children of the Gael, whom you see in the poorest stretches of the west, guarding their little fields of stones with a tenacity of affection which company-promoters and the other efficient children of civilisation do not understand. One hears it said, too, that it is among these small, swarthy, blue-eyed people, with the prominent Adam's apples, that the only really Celtic element in the population of Ireland is to be found. On questions like this I can speak with no authority, but I believe it is a growing opinion among students of race that the Gaelic Irish, though speaking a Celtic language, are not a Celtic people—that they are a northern people, indeed, akin to the Germanic races, and that they came from the shores of the Baltic and the region of the Elbe.

As for the Tuatha Dé Danaan (“the Hosts of the Gods whose mother was Dana”) who overthrew the Firbolg on the plain outside Cong, they were a tall, fair, and beautiful people, who are also said to have dwelt in Greece, where they were famous as magicians. Some say that they reached Ireland by way of Scandinavia, Scotland, and the north-east of Ulster, alighting “in the midst of dark clouds, so that the sun was hidden for the space of three days and for three nights also.” Others, however, have declared that the Danaan people came direct to Ireland from heaven. “They had no vessels. . . . No one really knows whether it was over the heavens, or out of the heavens, or out of the earth that they came. Were they demons of the devil . . . were they men?” Whatever they may have been by birth, they too, it seems, have survived on into modern Ireland. For, when they finally went down before the Gael at Teltown in County Meath, they betook themselves under the hills, where they dwell in palaces that the eye cannot see, and drink the ale of youth and feast upon immortal dishes, and men speak of them as the Good People, the Gentry, and the Fairies (or Sidhe). Their golden presences, moreover, have never ceased to flash out into the business of the world when Ireland has gone out to battle or been in straits. And their descendants are said to be among us also in the grosser human form. “Every one,” MacFirbis has declared, “who is fair-haired, vengeful, large, and every plunderer, professors of musical and entertaining performances who are adepts of Druidical and magical arts, they are the descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danaan.”

Naturally, those who like their history and legend moralised translate the ancient conflict between the two peoples on the stony fields of Cong as a battle between intellect and ignorance. This interpretation, however, hardly fits in with the fact that Eochaidh (Yohee), the Firbolg king (the place of whose fall and death was till recently marked by a cairn many miles to the north of the battlefield [1]), was the ruler who first introduced law into Ireland. “He reigned ten years,” says M. D’Arbois de Jubainville; “during his time there was no rain or tempestuous weather in Ireland, the land being watered by dew. In his reign law made its first appearance. No year passed without judgment being given; all war ceased, and spears, being no longer of any use, disappeared from the land.” It was the herald of a peaceful people, then, who went out from the camp of the Firbolg to demand of the Tuatha De Danaan the cause of their coming to Ireland, and we are told that his two spears were pointless, while the two spears of the Danaan herald were sharp-pointed and light as javelins. The heralds

talked together in Irish and exchanged spears, and, before they parted, the herald of the newcomers made a proposal that Ireland should be divided in two, and that the Firbolg should take one-half and the Tuatha Dé Danaan the other. Peace-loving though they were, the Firbolg refused, and the others, being alarmed at the sight of the heavy pointless (and, as they thought, superior) spears of the enemy, made a precipitate retreat, but were overtaken on the Plain of Moytura. Nuada of the Silver Hand, the Danaan king, again proposed the division of the island between the two races, but once more Eochaidh would not hear of such a thing. Consequently—for they were a gentlemanly people in those days—Nuada asked them when they would be ready for the battle which must follow.

“ We must have time,” replied the others, “ to make ready our spears, and burnish our helmets, and sharpen our swords ; then we should require spears like yours, and you, also, spears like those we have.”

So both sides agreed to an armistice of a hundred and five days, after which—another brave incident—they decided to settle the business, not by a stupid conflict between huge and impersonal armies, but by a series of daily combats between equal numbers of chosen warriors. They fought in this way for four days, beginning on the 5th of June, and each day the Danaan champions won. On the fifth day, the Firbolg proposed that three hundred warriors on each side should meet in a final engagement, and whichever side won should be accounted the victor. To this suggestion the Tuatha Dé Danaan replied by offering to leave the whole of Connacht to the Firbolg as their kingdom. The Firbolg wisely accepted this arrangement and gathered into the west out of the other provinces. It was the Firbolg, by the way, who first divided Ireland into provinces and gave them their names. It is also worth noting, before we pass on from the battle of Moytura, that it was on this occasion that Nuada of the Silver Hand earned his name. His hand having been cut off in the fight, one of the magical craftsmen who were so numerous in his camp made him a new hand of silver. He was to lead the Tuatha Dé Danaan some years later to another great victory on another Moytura—the victory over the Fomorian savages and pirates on Moytura of Sligo.

Those who are susceptible to fairy influences or imaginings will do well to wander by Lough Corrib. For myself, I confess I am too much of a sceptic, and perhaps too little adventurous, to have any traffic with this phantom population of the air. So, while I was in Cong, I sought the traces not of these warrior ghosts—ghosts for whose objective reality an enthusiastic American, Mr. Evans Wentz, has recently advanced some plausible arguments—but of kings and saints and such opaque creatures. One cannot go to that grey bleached ruin of the Abbey hidden so gently from the world down there by the quiet water without getting the reflection of a vision of the old scholarly and missionary Ireland which built its little cities in almost every beautiful nook of the four provinces. The Abbey has to some extent been restored in the last century ; honestly restored, however, and only sufficiently to keep its ruined fragments from falling in a heap.

Hither to this secret garden, still one of the greenest places in the world, as the ivy springs from it up over the face of the old church, and as its high trees give a shadow to the birds that sing victories over the ancient graves, Rory O’Connor, the last King of Ireland, came in search of pious forgetfulness, when the hosts of the Irish broke against the mailed fist of the Normans. There had been a church here for five hundred years before that, a church founded by St. Fechin, and as recently as a century and a half before Rory O’Connor, the penitential bed of the saint had been the scene of a miracle, for out of the earth beside it in the hour when Brian Boru died after his victory over the Danes on the shores of Dublin Bay a well of blood suddenly poured.

It was King Rory, according to some authorities, who brought to Cong Abbey the beautiful cross of many metals which has made the name of Cong famous wherever people care for the art of the Middle Ages. The Cross of Cong, which is now in the National Museum in Dublin, is said to enshrine a fragment of “the Cross on which the Founder of the World suffered,” but that is not the reason why people nowadays speak of it with enthusiasm. It is treasured chiefly because in its golden traceries, in its delicate beauty of silver and copper and enamel and bronze, is a challenge to all the world to consider the civilisation that Ireland had built up within herself before the Normans had ever set fire to a church within her shores. [2] It announces the culture of medieval Ireland to us as surely as a statue of Pheidias announces the culture of Periclean Athens. It is only a tiny instance, of course, of the many remains of the medieval arts and crafts that have come down to us, and to me, at least, who am no professor of jewellery, it means a good deal less than a story or even an illuminated manuscript. Still, even if the old civilisation had been wrecked to such an extent that nothing had survived out of it but the old processional Cross of Cong, we would still have a proof that it was no territory of barbarians that the Normans set out to loot in the twelfth century.

The present Abbey of Cong, I believe, goes back to that century. We know that an older Abbey was burned in 1114, and it was to the new monastery which was built after the fire that King Rory withdrew from his defeats. Though he died here, however, he does not lie in the Abbey graveyard, for his body was taken to Clonmacnoise, and a sadly inexact inscription written over it : “Rory O’Connor, King of all Ireland, both of the Irish and English.”

If the shadow of the old monkish king still paces these cloisters, muttering over the tale of his sins and weighing each of them in turn against the throne from which he was an exile, he does so under the eye of Lord Ardilaun, or, at least, of Lord Ardilaun’s attendant. For Lord Ardilaun has undertaken to look after the ruin which his father repaired with excellent national spirit, and a locked bridge now connects the Abbey and Lord Ardilaun’s grounds, while a paid attendant of his tracks you round the ruin as though he suspected you would be robbing the tombs. I do not resent unduly the presence of caretakers in churches and such places, but I hold that they should be something better than detectives, and should have some ornament of eloquence or humour or learning, however inaccurate, in keeping with the atmosphere of the place. Perhaps the silent and rather somnolent boy who guarded the Abbey when we visited it was only a temporary substitute. Whether this is so or not, he was utterly immune from the romance of the place : one might as well have tried to get sad stories of the death of kings from a stone. He was as unatmospheric as a guide-book, and he did not seem to know even bare guide-book facts. I would suggest to Lord Ardilaun, and to all others indeed who have charge of ancient monuments, that they should institute an examination in myth and history and natural raciness for would-be caretakers. Every caretaker who is not something of a talking book by nature ought to be locked up in a library for at least an hour a day till the resurrection of the dead world and the dead imagination becomes an accomplished fact in him.

Indeed, there is no reason that I can see—if this is not too much of a digression—why these caretakers should not develop into the librarians of the villages, and become much-needed centres of learning and imaginative revival.

It was a hospitable friend from the village and not the official caretaker who led us to the ivied tower of the Abbey, and to the chamber that is heaped high with bleached skulls and thigh-bones—I wonder why no one buries them—and who showed us the isolated and wired-off grave of some one who had, if I remember right, been wicked, but may really have only been unpopular. And it was he who took us to the little ruin of the Monks’ Fishing Lodge which runs out into the water, a tiny jetty, and where I lay and smoked and watched the trout jumping out of the smooth running water through the long sunny hours of an afternoon. I do

not think that I have ever seen a more beautiful solitude than this. The place breathed retreat. The robin in the high willow sang silence. The trout that leaped out of the water every now and then with a little silver flash seemed like a visitor to the very confines of the world's stillness. The water scarcely murmured as it flowed past the jetty—only an echo of a whisper against the stones. I tell you I almost envied King Rory brooding over his sins and defeats, as I lay there while the sun blazed down out of a blue sky and the trees hid us from the hills. Here, I felt, I too could have discovered holy and comforting thoughts as I caught my Friday's dinner. Here amid men who wrought a new beauty into the pages of the Gospels in gold and colour, and who praised the Lord with crafts and with learning between bell and bell, even a kingdom might come to seem but a little unstable eminence like a wave in the sea. But, all the same, Rory, I'm sure that you must often have wished that your prayers were swords, and that you might have borne your cross as Brian did at the head of an army, and have seen your enemies going down before you like the trees in a burning wood.

I pray I may survive to visit Cong again, and on a propitious day. I am afraid the Abbey proved too charming to us to allow us to see much else of the place. Of course, we could not avoid seeing the foolish, dry, boulder-strewn bed of the canal that was cut to connect Lough Mask and Lough Corrib more than half a century ago—the canal which, after it was made, was found to be unable to hold any water owing, as the guide-book says, to “the porous and per-meable character of the stone”—but monuments of ineptitude like this are one of the least inspiring features of modern Ireland. It was at the time of the Great Famine that this canal was begun, [3] and, though the scheme was such a failure, it was at least more sane in its intention than those other Manchesterised methods of relief, according to which starving peasants were told off to dig holes in the ground and fill them up again for fear more useful work might compete with the private enterprises of men of capital.

I have heard it said that good engineering might even yet make something of the canal, but I know nothing about that. At present, Lough Mask pours itself into Lough Corrib through a chain of underground caverns, where, to judge from the descriptions of others, there are some pleasant weird sensations to be had. But we could not tear ourselves away from the Abbey to visit them, and, when we did at last get back to the hotel, we were sun-surfeited, and, besides, there was a tipsy knickerbockered commercial traveller with an eye like a fish at the same table with us for tea, whose conversation would not come to an end.

In the evening, to make up for an hour of balderdash—— But I can give you no impression of the hospitable evening we spent in that pleasant house on the top of the hill, where we talked of the Fenians, and the Wildes, and the Dublin poets, and all things and persons between heaven and Ireland. It was strange out here in a little burning centre of Nationalism to meet those who had known Oscar Wilde in his Irish days and remembered his charm, and it was stranger still to think that Wilde could have lived among these enchanted lakes and hills—his father, Sir William Wilde, famous as an antiquary, had a house not far out of the village—and could have missed finding here the true Greece of a modern Irishman. It has been suggested that, if he had been born twenty years later, the Irish literary revival would have given his genius a foundation upon which to build imperishable things beyond anything he succeeded in fashioning in his idle exile. This seems to me to be scarcely disputable. But then I am a bigot on the matter of nationality and genius.

Next morning broke with a thin shivering sun, and it was a cold drive we had down to the pier where the Galway steamer—the steamer that should have brought us from Galway two days before—was waiting to take us down Lough Corrib with its long family of islands. We had heard strange rumours of the lake. It was said to be so shallow in parts that the steamer had a way of running its nose on banks of mud, whereupon all passengers would be ordered to the stern so as to seesaw the bow into the air while the boat was backed into safety. There

were tales of unknown rocks, too, that jagged black spires up towards the surface of the water. Certainly, the Lilliputian steamer looked an adventurous craft to trust to the chances of nearly forty-five thousand acres of islands and water. Out we beat, however, under a captain who seemed bigger than the boat he commanded, and I would not ask a pleasanter voyage than along the marked and winding channel of the lake on a golden day. It had turned grey now, unfortunately. Even with the islands and the distant hills and broken castles in lonely fields here and there guarding the memories of the shore, there was little beauty in the day. Cong itself might have seemed a mere affair for an antiquary on such a day as this. I was hoping—for I had studied my map badly—to see the famous Hen’s Castle, said to have been built by a cock and a hen in a single night, on our way out of Cong, but this old foundation, as we learned, lies in the water along another of the northern arms of the lake. Here are memories, not only of King Rory, but of Grace O’Malley—Granuaile, as we call her—the woman admiral of Clew Bay, who was ready to face the fleets of Queen Elizabeth, and who was damned as a pirate and a thief for her genius. Lady Wilde has left it on record that Hen’s Castle (or, in Irish, Caislean na Circe) is also a place of ghostly influences. “Strange lights are sometimes seen flitting through it, and on some particular midnight a crowd of boats gather round it, filled with men dressed in green with red sashes. And they row about till the cock crows, when they suddenly vanish, and the cries of children are heard in the air. Then the people know that there has been a death somewhere in the region, and that the Sidhe (fairies) have been stealing the young mortal children, and leaving some ill-favoured brat in the cradle in place of the true child.”

Inchagoill—Inis an Ghaill Chráibhtigh, or the Island of the Pious Foreigner—is another of the many islands that attracts at least by the romance of its name, and it lies not many miles out from Cong with its dismantled churches and its trees. But the steamer is a business, not a pleasure, venture, and did not offer to stop here. Inchagoill is said to contain the gravestone of Lugnath, who was Patrick’s sister’s son and a mariner. But whether the Lugnath who is buried there is the saint’s nephew or not seems to be a debated matter.

It began to rain before we had achieved many of the twenty-seven miles of the lake, and tail-coated farmers and grey and brown and black-shawled women with egg-baskets and umbrellas stood in huddled groups like the fowl in a farm-shed on a wet day on the several piers at which we stopped with groaning sides, and pushed their way aboard us till the captain would cry out to some distracted woman, who seemed to want to be ashore and on the steamer at the same time, “If you can’t behave yourself more quietly, I’ll not take you at all.”

And so we went through the islands—as in so many Irish lakes, there is said to be exactly an island here for every day in the year—and collected the countryside for the Galway market. Here from an island which was a tuft of pines a boat would push out with a man and a crooked stick for us, and there half a village of people would be waiting for us on the pier. One would wonder where so lively a population could come from on these deserted shores. Probably there were few people in the boat who did not speak Irish. There was a fashionably dressed priest talking volubly in it with a little group around him at the back of the boat. In obedience to one of the ten commandments of the Gaelic League “Dheamhan acht Gaedhilg ins an nGaedhealtacht,” which, being translated, is “Nothing but Irish in the Irish-speaking districts”—we too were dumb in any language but this—no small piece of self-denial to one who is so poor a linguist as I am.

On a box beside us an old farmer was sitting, his hands gathered on the top of his stick, a drip on the end of his nose, and, as the rain poured down upon him, overcoatless as he was, he gazed into emptiness with a twinkle in his eyes, and indeed all over his lean and ill-shaven whiskered face. He found great amusement in the way in which a red, shy, foxy-faced neigh-

bour kept ducking here and there behind boxes and people and trying to light his stump of a clay pipe out of the wind. And the scraps of Irish he heard from us served for his entertainment in the intervals during which the other man in exhaustion gave up his efforts. Then, borrowing the other's pipe and smoking it quite successfully for himself, he began to tell stories of how he once caught out a Gaelic League priest. He had asked the priest to tell him what was the Irish for Galway, his idea in doing so being that, as in some places it is pronounced "Galyiv" and in others "Galye," he would be able to tell the priest he was wrong, no matter which answer he gave, and to hold up the other pronunciation as the right one. He looked back on that victory over the priest with great satisfaction. Then he gave us another anecdote at the expense of the Irish revival. There was a man from his part of the country—a piper, I believe—who was taken to Dublin to play at an Irish concert there. And before it began the man of the concert said to him : " We want you to give us a keen." [4] " Well," replied the Mayo man, " let you bring a corpse and lay him down before me, and I'll keen him for you. What would be the sense of keening without a corpse ?" Thus the old man garrolled on, getting a deal of amusement out of the Irish revivalists, though, like most of the country- people nowadays, he agreed with their aims.

He was especially interested to know what they called various things like telegraph-poles, and even in Irish he knew no word but " steamer" for a steamer. I told him the word I had got out of a grammar—" galtán." " That is it," he said, nodding agreement ; " ' gal' is smoke or steam. ' Galtán'—I never heard that word before, but I know it's right."

And, careless of the rain and of the scenery that was blotted out of all colour and wonder, we talked on through the crooked straits that connect the two great spaces of the lake, and across the second great space till we made direct for what seemed an impenetrable forest of tall rushes, and found the mouth of the river Corrib, from which we steamed down past Menlough Castle, which had a short time before been burnt one disastrous night, and, a little weary of all the stoppages and the wet air and the crowded deck of the steamer, we were soon carting our bags down a grey street of Galway again in the end of a little procession of ambling women with egg-baskets and farmers in weather-beaten hats of grotesque shapes all making towards the settlement of carts and donkeys and pigs and noisy hens that to them for the day was Galway.

[1] Eochaidh fled northwards ; " but was overtaken and slain on the great strand of Trawshelly near Ballysodare in the County Sligo. . . . He was buried where he fell, and a cairn was raised over him on the strand. This cairn stood till the year 1858 ; and, though it did not rise high over the level of the strand, the tide never covered it, and never could, as the old records had it, and as the peasantry firmly believed till the last day of its existence." See Dr. P. W. Joyce's *Wonders of Ireland*.

[2] Not that the Gael always behaved like a twentieth-century Sunday-school teacher.

[3] According to one authority, but I have heard it contradicted on better.

[4] Lament.

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