An Old Woman’s Reflections

Pieg Sayers

The day’s dusty duty has been done, the last boat drawn up on the strand, and the mountainsides and sea-lochs that fringe the western coast of Ireland are dark. But in a white-washed kitchen in the glen the peat-fire glows like a berry, and the cricket—‘The cock of the ashes’—sings. And the tangle of Gaelic voices singles out as the Story-teller spreads his fingers for attention and begins his tale. It could well be a wonder-tale that crossed the roads of Europe from the East a thousand years ago; passing from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation till at last it comes to rest in this lamp-lit room at the edge of the Atlantic. For an hour or two the listening farmers and fishermen will forget their bleak existence; the intoxicating talk turns them into kings and playboys of the western world. ‘And tell me,’ said a Kerryman, ‘if you had no picture-house, no playhouse, no cunning radio or television at the tips of your fingers, no amusement whatever from head to head of the week except what was painted on the square above a cottage half-door (the highest excitement being the coming and going of cloud-caps on a mountain) wouldn’t you too be hungry for the lovely dovetailed talk?’ The Gaelic story-tellers are the caretakers of a peasant tradition, the carriers of an oral culture, that once covered the Atlantic fringe of Europe. They belong to antiquity, to a Europe that had no books, no radio, no cinema or television, a Europe whose only entertainment was the parish lore or the winter-night’s tale told by a passing traveller. Unlettered but not unlearned, they are the inheritors of a considerable art. Usually they are old men, for it is the old who think long and sleep lightly and have the fabulous memories. But the story-tellers are a vanishing race for they have lost their audience and the flow of words comes thin and seldom now. The radio has taken away their voices just as the printed page has taken over their memories, and the pictures that once were seen in a glowing peat-fire are seen more readily on the picture-screen today. The world has widened and the imagination of man has dwindled. For it is good communications, not evil ones, that corrupt good manners and local mores, and the better the roads that lead into the glen the quicker the old language, the old customs, the old stories and poetry, run out of it. I recall going to visit a Gaelic story-teller who was reputed to be the only man left in his district who could tell in the traditional manner The King of Ireland’s Son, a tale that took him two weeks of nights in the telling. He was not at home; I found him in his enemy’s house, the local cinema, watching a Wild Western picture.

‘Those old story-tellers had extraordinary memories,’ said an elderly schoolmaster to me. ‘They could remember a story, even if it were as long as a book, after hearing it once. That was the important thing, for they could neither read nor write. There was one particular house for story-telling in our district and my father went every second night and myself along with him. We had a great respect for emulation then. I was fifteen at the time, and whether in Gaelic or English I’d be delighted with the fairy-stories. Going home at night I’d be thinking of them, and if a widowed leaf dropped from a holly-bush I’d leap a foot with the fright. But the young people are not interested now.’ Fairy tales, ghost stories, and similar short narrative pieces (seanchas) are recounted by both men and women. But the telling of the great Finn-tales (fíanalocht) or hero-stories is traditionally restricted to men; ‘A woman fiana or a crowing hen!’ runs the proverb. And the long and popular folk-tales (sean-sgéalta) are also mainly preserved by men. There have been notable exceptions to this rule. From Peig Sayers, ‘the Queen of Gaelic story-tellers’, one collector, Seosamh Ó Dálaigh, obtained 375 tales, of which forty were long folk-tales: forty folk-songs were also taken down from her dictation.

Peig Sayers (1873–1958), was born in the parish of Dunquin at the western end of the Dingle peninsula in the county of Kerry. In Kerry they say that the gift of poetry passes from father to daughter, the gift of story from father to son. But Peig, like her brothers, Pádraig and Seán, had the stories from her father, ‘and I don’t think’, she said to me, ‘that his master in story-telling was in Kerry at the time. It was a great pity that these gadgets and horns and machines weren’t there then to take down his speech and conversation, but alas! they weren’t. I
remem-ber well the night he was telling the story of The Red Ox. He was ninety-eight years old that night but was very lively and healthy. While he was at the story, telling it to us at the fire-side, he stopped in the middle of it and wasn’t able to say another word for a while.

‘You’re near death, father,’ said I.

‘I’m not,’ said he.

‘Indeed you are,’ I replied. ‘Death is coming for you. You never went astray in a story, as long as there’s memory in my head, until tonight. You’re finished!’

‘Death hasn’t left Cork yet to come for me, my girl!’ said he. But it had. For he wasn’t able to finish out the end of the story, and he lived only nine days after that. He had done a good deal to entertain the young boys–and the old too who gathered round him to hear him. That was the chief pastime then, story-telling and talking about old times. But that’s not the way now. They no longer care for stories, and the stories would have died out altogether, for the young people weren’t ready to pick them up. But now, thank God, there’s a gadget for taking them down, if there were any story-tellers left, but there aren’t. For the old Gaels are dead and the new generations rising up don’t know Irish well. That’s a great pity because Irish is a noble and a precious language. But it is coming to life and regaining strength. And it is short, with God’s help, until it will be blossoming again as it was in olden times by the old people who have left us. May God give eternal life to their souls and to our own souls when we seek it, Amen!’

Peig married into a neighbouring island, the Great Blasket, where she spent the greater part of her life. ‘I never met my husband till the day I married him,’ she told me, ‘but it was a love-match till the day he died. And why shouldn’t it, for he was a fine big man.’ Peig herself was a fine big woman. Peig Mhór (Big Peg) she was commonly called. ‘Big Peig’, wrote Robin Flower in his devoted book, The Western Island, ‘is one of the finest speakers in the Island; she has so clean and finished a style of speech that you can follow all the nicest articulations of the language on her lips without any effort; she is a natural orator, with so keen a sense of the turn of phrase and the lifting rhythm appropriate to Irish that her words could be written down as they leave her lips, and they would have the effect of literature with no savour of the artificiality of composition.’

Students and scholars of the Irish language came from far and wide to visit her and she received them with natural country dignity. ‘I saw her being presented with a mushroom one day,’ a neighbour told me, ‘and she accepted it as if she had been presented with a gold cup.’ Where life in general is limited and monotonous its least detail is exalted into drama; islanders who live in the shapeless shadow of poverty will always put a pattern of dignity and ceremony on it in order to endure and redeem their existence.

The Great Blasket Island lies three stormy miles from the mainland of Kerry. On this seabirds’ ledge of Europe, where the Atlantic waves rise up like swallows into the lofts of air, a hardy community of people kept a bare foothold for centuries. It was a slackening hold when I saw it fifteen years ago, for the island was plainly exhausted and the girls from the mainland would no longer marry into it; only fifty people were left on it. The few green fields ring-worming the rough hairy hillside, the old man holding on to the tail of his donkey as it climbed the mountainy path, the old woman hunkered at her cottage door, her face sunk in her hands, the absence of children playing, gave the place an air of approaching dereliction. Yet this small island had been a crowded nest of Gaelic life and story-telling, and had contributed several minor classics to the world of books: The Islandman, by Tomás Ó Crohan; Twenty Tears A growing, by Maurice O’Sullivan; and now Peig’s own Reflections. Seen on a summer’s day from the cliff at Dunquin no prospect could be more pleasing: the sudden eye-
openers of sunlight on the vast face of the Atlantic; the gannets flashing like far-off bits of mirror; the islands shading off as shy of being seen; a perpetual flutter of wind, like paper tearing at one's ears. But in winter the Great Blasket is a bleak black place, and the islanders were often marooned by storm for three weeks at a time. The only access to the island at any time is by curragh, a fifteen-foot canoe (naomhóg) of lath and tarred canvas made for three rowers, with the ubiquitous sacred medal and bottle of holy water tied to the prow. Buoyant and biddable, it is the only boat that can live in these waters and land on this wild coast. But it is seldom that anyone lands on the Great Blasket now, for the island is quite deserted. Remote in time as in space, these Gaelic-speaking regions of the West have a medieval simplicity. The people are close to earth and to each other. Every field-stone has been hand-turned a thousand times and every turn of a man's mind is known. And Heaven, too, is close to earth here. It lies, explained an old Kerrywoman, in the south-west, 'a foot-and-a-half above the height of a man', as homely and intimate today as it was to the Gaelic poet of the Middle Ages:

I would like to have the men of Heaven
In my own house;
With vats of good cheer
Laid out for them.

I would like to have the three Marys,
Their fame is so great.
I would like people
From every corner of Heaven.

I would like them to be cheerful
In their drinking,
I would like to have Jesus, too,
Here amongst them.

I would like a great lake of beer
For the King of Kings.
I would like to be watching Heaven's family
Drinking it through all eternity.

'I wish I had the ability to describe the scene in Peig Sayers's home in Dunquin on a winter's night when the stage was set for the seanachá'; [1] writes Seosamh Ó Dálaigh to me. 'The evening meal was over, the day's work done, the family rosary finished. On the hearth glowed a small peat-fire and on the side-wall an oil-lamp gave a dim light. Peig dominated the scene, seated on a low chair right in front of the fire (this was most unusual in the locality); bean a' ti, the woman of the house, usually seated herself at the side) and smoking her pipe. Micheál her brother-in-law sat with his vamps [2] to the fire at one side of her and Mike her son at the other. When the visitors arrived (for all gathered to the Sayers house when Peig was there, to listen to her from supper-time till midnight) the chairs were moved back and the circle increased. News was swopped, and the news often gave the lead for the night's subject, death, fairies, weather, crops.' All was grist to the mill, the sayings of the dead and the doings of the living, and Peig, as she warmed to her subject, would illustrate it richly from her repertoire of verse, proverb, and story. Often her thoughts would turn to sad topics; she might tell, for instance, of the bitter day when the body of her son Tom was brought home, his head so battered by the cruel rocks he had fallen on from the cliff that his corpse was not presentable to the public. So Peig, with breaking heart, had gathered her courage together and with motherly hands had stroked and coaxed the damaged skull into shape. 'It was difficult,' she would say; and then, with a flick of the shawl she wore, she would invoke the name of the Blessed Virgin, saying 'Let everyone carry his cross.' 'I never
heard anything so moving in my life,’ a Kerryman confessed to me, ‘as Peig Sayers reciting a lament of the Virgin Mary for her Son, her face and voice getting more and more sorrowful. I came out of the house and I didn’t know where I was.’ Great artist and wise woman that she was, Peig would at once switch from gravity to gaiety, for she was a light-hearted woman, and her changes of mood and face were like the changes of running water. As she talked her hands would be working too; a little clap of the palms to cap a phrase, a flash of the thumb over her shoulder to mark a mystery, a hand hushed to mouth for mischief or whispered secrecy. ‘When the fun is at its height it is time to go’, runs the Irish proverb; and when visitors went each night Peig would draw the ashes over the peat-embers to preserve the fire till morning, reciting her customary prayer: ‘I preserve the fire as Christ preserves all. Brigid at the two ends of the house, and Mary in the centre. The three angels and the three apostles who are highest in the Kingdom of Grace, guarding this house and its contents until day.’

‘It’s hard to be growing old,’ said Peig when I said good-bye to her in Dingle, ‘but,’ she added with a grin, ‘I’ll be talking after my death, my good gentleman.’ So she will, for as the proverb says,

Is buaine port ná glór na n-éan
Is buaine focal ná toice an tsáel

‘A tune is more lasting than the song of the birds,
and a word more lasting than the wealth of the world.’

W. R. RODGERS

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**I am Seeking the Widows’ Pension;**

**I am in a Motor-Car**

Everyone’s story is his own story and Martin’s story is the money! I was often listening to a rumour that was going from mouth to mouth, that there was a pension for widows. I often asked people about it but they had no information to give me. My heart was grieved but when would I hear anything worthwhile. But long as day is, night comes and news of the pensions came, too. That’s when the old widows had the confusion and believe me about it, there were no cramps on them. As for myself, I was excited, no wonder. But it’s very hard for the old women of the Island to go to Dunquin because of not having the dry road and it’s not always the sea is calm.

Myself and Mary John Michael decided to go to Ballyferriter to get our ages and our marriage ages as soon as we’d get a calm day. On the Tuesday morning I just had the morning meal on the table when a messenger came from Mary. There came such worldly fussing on me that I didn’t wait to eat a bite only to swallow my cup of tea as a drink. I threw off the old clothes and put on clean whole ones; and to tell the truth, they weren’t half tightened on to me, because going down the path I was tightening them. But good as was the hurry I made the canoe was afloat before me and Mary settled in it.

‘God with my soul,’ said she, ‘aren’t you a long time! Or what delayed you?’

‘Ah, let me be, woman, I didn’t eat a bite with power of anxiety! Don’t you see my boots and I haven’t fastened them yet. But I can do them here. I have the nice chance at them now. Here, let’s move, in God’s name.’
Because of the weather being so fine, we were not long going to Dunquin. As soon as I stood on the quay I looked up at the cliff. I thought it had the height of a mountain. I drew a sigh from my heart:

‘God of Power, Mary, is it reluctant I am to tackle the way up, or where did my strength and agility go? And worse than that, I’ve lost my breath, and I’ll never manage to get to the top of the cliff.’

‘Is it joking you are?’ said Mary, ‘anyone who would look at you and the flush that’s in your cheek he’d swear there wasn’t a thing in the world wrong with you.’

‘Don’t take the book by the cover, Mary,’ said I, ‘because I’m well used to it, the slippery side of me is turned outwards and the crooked side in.’

‘Is it to talk we came here?’ said Mary. ‘When will we be moving?’

‘Here it’s with you!’ said I, and we moved on. You’d think Mary was a hare, making her way up and I crawling after her and indeed I wouldn’t carry a spoonful of wine after coming to Cliff Top. I had to sit and rest.

‘We can never walk to Ballyferriter, Mary, if we don’t get any jaunt,’ said I. ‘But see, there’s a motor-car coming from the west. Maybe he’ll go north.’

‘There is, indeed,’ said Mary, but before the word was out of her mouth the motor-car had stopped at the top of the cliff, a little way from us. I stood up to go and talk to the driver, but with that there was another motor-car coming up from the Field of the Wrinkle, putting road-dust in the sky. I raised my hand because I had a sort of acquaintance with the driver. He stopped the motor-car, and beckoned to us to come, and as we know it’s on us the joy was that he came to us so opportunely. While you’d be clapping your two hands together he had swept us on the road north. When I got the ease I had plenty of talk with the driver.

‘Yes,’ said I to him, ‘what we hadn’t in the beginning of our lives we have it at the end of our lives. Isn’t it little we thought we’d ever be going like this in a motor-car! But what would I be talking for? Isn’t there many a change in the world in the forty-two years since last I went this road? At that time I hadn’t to be seen but little thatched houses. But look, today, there are fine new houses, good enough for the palace of the King long ago. The fields themselves that were full of boulders and stones, they are smooth level ground today with fine fences.’

‘They are, indeed,’ said the driver. ‘Do you see that white house in front of us on the hill?’

‘I do,’ said I. ‘Isn’t it the fine, airy place it is! Who are they who live in that fine house?’

‘That’s a Summer house for Nuns, O daughter!’

‘Musha, glory to God on high in Heaven!’ said I. ‘That itself is a twist in life! A Nun’s house where I remembered a miserable little thatched hut to be, and nobody living in it but an old Protestant woman called Lizzie Cox. I think she was the last of that family to live in the place. She had a small pension from the Stranger people and she kept a good grip on it until death choked her. But look who’s living in it today but the godly Christian women — isn’t it a lovely life we have now compared with that time?’

The driver stopped the car suddenly.
‘Here, out with ye now!’ said he, and he opened the door.
‘Will you come out?’ said I.

‘I will, without doubt,’ said he.

‘What will you be charging us?’ said I.

‘I’ll take nothing from ye this time, because I was coming here, too.’

‘Musha, good never went wrong on anyone,’ said I, ‘but all the same, have a drink.’

‘I’ll drink a little drop, but I don’t usually drink much.’

‘Yes, this much won’t kill you, with God’s help!’ said I. and we went into Mr. Long’s house. I called a drink then for him. When he had drunk it he bade us farewell and went away, because his business was elsewhere and he had to be moving.

‘I suppose it’s this pension that’s going on that brought ye?’ said Mrs. Long, who was standing in the shop.

‘It is, musha,’ said Mary, ‘and I suppose it’s the idle journey for us.’

‘Oh! it’s not indeed. Isn’t it as right for ye to have it as anyone? But I think you’ll be delayed, because the priest is in Dingle, and it will be two o’clock before he comes.’

‘Oh! God with my soul!’ said Mary, ‘We’ll have the night, so, and the crew of the canoe will be waiting for us.’

‘It’s ever said that going to the King’s house is not the same as coming from it,’ said I, answering her.

‘I suppose it’s a long time since ye were here,’ said Mrs. Long.

‘There are forty-two years since I was here,’ said I. ‘I wasn’t here since I married.’

She laughed.

‘It’s an unbelievable story,’ she said.

‘Yes, but it’s true,’ said I. ‘On my soul I don’t know where the chapel is at all, because there’s a great change on this place since last I was here. I am like Rip since I came into this town. I don’t recognize anybody and nobody recognizes me. But talk won’t do us,’ said I to Mary, ‘come on and we’ll look for the clerk. If he had everything ready we’d have no delay when the priest would come.’

‘That’s exactly what ye had better do,’ said Mrs. Long, and we went out.

East with us to the chapel and as the luck of life would have it, the clerk was standing before us at the gate.

‘God to ye, women of the island,’ said he. ‘I suppose it was the pension that brought ye this way?’

‘It is, indeed,’ said I.
‘The devil, but I’m nearly out of my mind with the same pension since it was started. I don’t like them, the old women, running in to me at all times,’ said he.

‘Musha, may God have mercy on us!’ said I. ‘Many a place there was one of them in hiding unknown to anybody until now. May God put no shake in the hand that invented it for them, because they are a long time burdened unknown to the world.’

‘You are right in that much,’ said the clerk. ‘Come on into the chapel.’

We sat in on the seat and it wasn’t long until he came with his armful of books and sat on the seat nearest to us.

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘can ye give me any help? This is slow work. Let one of ye be praying while the other is answering me.’

‘On my oath, I can’t do any praying because I’m anxious, but maybe Mary could while I’d be answering. If the work were done first we would have plenty of time to pray then,’ said I.

‘Here’s ye to it, then,’ said he, and it took a good while of the day for him to do his job. When he had everything settled he left us there.

‘Ye’ll have to wait now until the priest comes,’ said he.

Mary and I spent a nice short while in the chapel, but the priest came at last and it was a great relief to us.

When we came back to Mrs. Long she had a cup of tea ready before us, and to tell the truth I had need of it, because I didn’t wait to eat anything in the morning.

‘Ye’ll be going home now, I suppose,’ said she.

‘We will,’ said I, ‘but we have decided to go to Harbour Town first to visit the sick woman. We’d have no business going home without paying her a visit.’

‘Musha, you are right,’ said she. ‘Wasn’t it fatal the way it happened to the poor woman? She is badly hurt.’

‘Didn’t you ever hear,’ said I, ‘that providence doesn’t stop, and since the evening is fine, if we had the motor-car we’d pay a little visit down across.’

‘On my soul, musha,’ said she, ‘it won’t be that fine. The sky has the appearance of rain.’

I put my head out the door and the fine wide drops were falling down.

‘It’s raining already,’ said I, ‘and we have to go into Patrick Bowler’s house yet. Farewell and bless you, woman of the house.’

We went out and the rain was falling heavily. Patrick was standing in the door before us and he chuckled.

‘I think ye’ll have Ballyferriter until morning, women of the island,’ said he. ‘It looks like it will do a good drenching of rain.’
‘Yah! if we have itself:’ said I, ‘haven’t you a long roomy house to give us lodging until morning?’

The weather lightened a little at last and we went to where the motor-car was, but we weren’t a dozen yards from the house when the rain came, and the drop was in to the bone on us before we reached Mannion’s house. A person would think we were two ducks with broken backs.

The Mannion had the motor-car ready to go to Dingle and he couldn’t make much delay. He said he would bring us to Harbour Town, but that we’d have to stay there until morning. We had to put our minds at ease; we had no second choice.

When we got to the house the bright welcomes were before us. There was no thirst, hunger or cold left on us there or lack of entertainment either. At ten o’clock in the morning the man of the motor-car was before us and while you’d be drinking a cup of tea we were at Cliff Top and the canoe had just come to meet us. The weather was not altogether too gentle and what with a fine blast of wind and sea-swells we were not too easy in our minds until we reached the Island.

But God of Power! After all the hardship and the length I had looked forward to the pension, I got no tale or tidings of it and I suppose it was the barren hope for me. It’s hard on poor people to have anything, but as the man said long ago:

A person without store, at a wedding he’s not recognized;
A person without store, his voice is not weighed in sense;
A person without store, he has no business spending or ordering;
And a person without store, is the butt of life’s misfortune.

That’s the same way with me and the pension. But I suppose Tim of Dingle is in the first place!

[1] Seanchair is applied as a rule to a person, man or woman, who makes a speciality of local tales, family sagas or genealogies, social-historical tradition and the like, and can recount many tales of a short realistic type about fairies, ghosts, and other supernatural beings (J. H. Delargy).

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