

The Galway Plains.

W. B. Yeats

1903

Lady Gregory has just given me her beautiful *Poets and Dreamers*, and it has brought to mind a day two or three years ago when I stood on the side of Slieve Echtge, looking out over Galway. The Burren Hills were to my left, and though I forget whether I could see the cairn over Bald Conan of the Fianna, I could certainly see many places there that are in poems and stories. In front of me, over many miles of level Galway plains, I saw a low blue hill flooded with evening light. I asked a countryman who was with me what hill that was, and he told me it was Cruachmaa of the Sidhe. I had often heard of Cruachmaa of the Sidhe even as far north as Sligo, for the country people have told me a great many stories of the great host of the Sidhe who live there, still fighting and holding festivals.

I asked the old countryman about it, and he told me of strange women who had come from it, and who would come into a house having the appearance of countrywomen, but would know all that had happened in that house ; and how they would always pay back with increase, though not by their own hands, whatever was given to them. And he had heard, too, of people who had been carried away into the hill, and how one man went to look for his wife there, and dug into the hill and all but got his wife again, but at the very moment she was coming out to him, the pick he was digging with struck her upon the head and killed her. I asked him if he had himself seen any of its enchantments, and he said, ‘ Sometimes when I look over to the hill, I see a mist lying on the top of it, that goes away after a while.’

A great part of the poems and stories in Lady Gregory’s book were made or gathered between Burren and Cruachmaa. It was here that Raftery, the wandering country poet of ninety years ago, praised and blamed, chanting fine verses and playing badly on his fiddle. It is here the ballads of meeting and parting have been sung, and some whose lamentations for defeat are still remembered may have passed through this plain flying from the battle of Aughrim.

‘ I will go up on the mountain alone ; and I will come hither from it again. It is there I saw the camp of the Gael, the poor troop thinned, not keeping with one another ; Och Ochone !’ And here, if one can believe many devout people whose stories are in the book, Christ has walked upon the roads, bringing the needy to some warm fireside, and sending one of His Saints to anoint the dying.

I do not think these country imaginations have changed much for centuries, for they are still busy with those two themes of the ancient Irish poets, the sternness of battle and the sadness of parting and death. The emotion that in other countries has made many love songs has here been given, in a long wooing, to danger that ghostly bride. It is not a difference in the substance of things that the lamentations that were sung after battles are now sung for men who have died upon the gallows.

The emotion has become not less, but more noble, by the change, for the man who goes to his death with the thought —

‘ It is with the people I was,
It is not with the law I was,’

has behind him generations of poetry and poetical life.

The poets of to-day speak with the voice of the unknown priest who wrote, some two hundred years ago, that *Sorrowful Lament for Ireland*, Lady Gregory has put into passionate and rhythmical prose —

‘ I do not know of anything under the sky
That is friendly or favourable to the Gael,
But only the sea that our need brings us to,
Or the wind that blows to the harbour

The ship that is bearing us away from Ireland ;
And there is reason that these are reconciled
with us,
For we increase the sea with our tears,
And the wandering wind with our sighs.’

There is still in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action. One could still, if one had the genius, and had been born to Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece. Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it. ? England or any other country which takes its tune from the great cities and gets its taste from schools and not from old custom, may have a mob, but it cannot have a people. In England there are a few groups of men and women who have good taste, whether in cookery or in books ; and the great multitudes but copy them or their copiers. The poet must always prefer the community where the perfected minds express the people, to a community that is vainly seeking to copy the perfected minds. To have even perfectly the thoughts that can be weighed, the knowledge that can be got from books, the precision that can be learned at school, to belong to any aristocracy, is to be a little pool that will soon dry up. A people alone are a great river ; and that is why I am persuaded that where a people has died, a nation is about to die.

1903.

Ideas of good and evil (1903)

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Mountain Theology

Lady Augusta Gregory

Mary Glyn lives under Slieve-nan-Or, the Golden Mountain, where the last battle will be fought in the last great war of the world ; so that the sides of Gortaveha, a lesser mountain, will stream with blood. But she and her friends are not afraid of this ; for an old weaver from the north, who knew all things, told them long ago that there is a place near Turloughmore where war will never come, because St. Columcill used to live there. So they will make use of this knowledge, and seek a refuge there, if, indeed, there is room enough for them all. There is a river by her house that marks the boundary between Galway and Clare ; and there are stepping-stones in the river, so that she can cross from Connaught to Munster when she has a mind. But she cannot do her marketing when she has a mind ; for the nearest town, Gort, is ten miles away. The roof of her little cabin is thatched with rushes, and a garden of weeds grows on it, and the rain comes through. But she is soon to have a new thatch ; for she thinks she won't live long, and she wouldn't like the rain to be coming down on her when she is dead and laid out. There is heather in blow on the hills about her home, and foxglove reddens the clay-banks, and loosetrife the marshy hollows ; and rush-cotton waves its little

white flags over the bogs. Mary Glyn's neighbours come to see her sometimes, when the sun is going down, and the hurry of the day is over. Old Mr. Saggarton is one of them; he had his learning from a hedge-schoolmaster in the old times ; and he looks down on the narrow teaching of the National Schools ; and he was once in jail for nine months, having been taken in the very act of making *poteen*. And Mrs. Casey comes and looks at the stepping-stones now and again, for she is a Clare woman ; and though she has lived fifty years in Connaught, she is not yet quite reconciled to it, and would never have made it her home if she could have seen it before she came. And some who do not live among the bogs and the heather, but among the green pastures and the grey stones of Aidne, come to Slieve Echtge and learn un-written truths from the lips of Mary and her friends.

The duty of giving is taught as well as practised by these poor hill-people. ' For,' says Mary Glyn, ' the best road to heaven is to be charitable to the poor.' And old Mrs. Casey agrees, and says : ' There was a poor girl walking the road one night with no place to stop ; and the Saviour met her on the road, and He said : " Go up to the house you see a light in ; there's a woman dead there, and they'll let you in." So she went and she found the woman laid out, and the husband and other people ; but she worked harder than they all, and she stopped in the house after ; and after two quarters the man married her. And one day she was sitting outside the door, picking over a bag of wheat, and the Saviour came again, with the appearance of a poor man, and He asked her for a few grains of the wheat. And she said : " Wouldn't potatoes be good enough for you ?" and she called to the girl within to bring out a few potatoes. But He took nine grains of the wheat in His hand and went away ; and there wasn't a grain of wheat left in the bag, but all gone. So she ran after Him then to ask Him to forgive her ; and she overtook Him on the road, and she asked forgiveness. And He said : " Don't you remember the time you had no house to go to, and I met you on the road, and sent you to a house where you'd live in plenty ? and now you wouldn't give Me a few grains of wheat." And she said : " But why didn't You give me a heart that would like to divide it ?" That is how she came round on Him. And He said : " From this out, whenever you have plenty in your hands, divide it freely for My sake." '

And this is a marvel that might occur again at any time ; for Mary Glyn says further : —

' There was a woman I knew was very charitable to the poor ; and she'd give them the full of her apron of bread, or of potatoes or anything she had. And she was only lately married ; and one day, a poor woman came to the door with her children and she brought them to the fire, and warmed them, and gave them a drink of milk ; and she sent out to the barn for a bag of potatoes for them. And the husband came in, and he said : " Kitty, if you go on this way, you won't leave much for ourselves." And she said : " He that gave us what we have, can give us more." And the next day when they went out to the barn, it was full of potatoes—more than were ever in it before. And when she was dying, and her children about her, the priest said to her : " Mrs. Gallagher, it's in heaven you'll be at 12 o'clock to-morrow."

But when death comes, it is not enough to have been charitable ; and it is not right to touch the body or lay it out for a couple of hours ; for the soul should be given time to fight for itself, and to go up to judgment. And sometimes it is not willing to go ; for Mrs. Casey says : —

' The Saviour, one time, told St. Patrick to go and prepare a man that was going to die. And St. Patrick said : " I'd sooner not go ; for I never yet saw the soul depart from the body." But then he went, and he prepared the man. And when he was lying there dead, he saw the soul go from the body; and three times it went to the door, and three times it came back and kissed the body. And St. Patrick asked the Saviour why it did that ; and He said : " That soul was sorry to part from the body, because it had held it so clean and so honest."

When the hill-people talk of ‘ the time of the war,’ it is the war that once took place in heaven that is understood. And when ‘ *Those*’ are spoken of, the fallen angels are understood, the cloud of witnesses, the whirling invisible host ; and it is only to a stranger that an explanation need be given.

‘ They were in heaven once,’ Mary Glyn says, ‘ and heaven is the first place there was war ; and they were all to be done away with ; and it was St. Peter asked the Saviour to help them, when he saw Him going to empty the heavens. So He turned His hand like this ; and the earth and the sky and the sea were full of them, and they are in every place, and you know that better than I do, because you read books. Resting they do be in the daytime, and going about at night. And their music is the finest you ever heard, like all the fifers, and all the instruments, and all the tunes of the world. I heard it sometimes myself, and there is no music in the world like it ; but not all can hear it. Round the hill it comes, and you going in at the door. And they are quiet neighbours if you treat them well. God bless them, and bring them all to heaven.’

And then, having mentioned Monday (a spell against unseen listeners), and said, ‘ God bless the hearers, and the place it is told in’—and her niece, Mary Irwin, having said, ‘ God bless all we see, and those we don’t see,’ they tell—first one speaking and then the other—that : ‘ One night there were *banabhs* in the house ; and there was a man coming to dig the potato-garden in the morning—and so late at night, Mary Glyn was making stirabout, and a cake to have ready for the breakfast of the *banabhs* and the man ; and Mary’s brother Micky was asleep within on the bed. And there came the sound of the grandest music you ever heard from beyond the stream, and it stopped there. And Micky awoke in the bed, and was afraid, and said : “ Shut up the door and quench the light,” and so we did.’ ‘ It’s likely,’ Mary says, ‘ they wanted to come into the house, and they wouldn’t when they saw me up and the lights about.’ But one time when there were potatoes in the loft, Mary and her brothers were pelted with the potatoes when they sat down to supper. And Mary Irwin got a blow on the side of the face, from one of them, one night in the bed. ‘ And they have the hope of heaven, and God grant it to them.’ ‘ And one day, there was a priest and his servant riding along the road, and there was a hurling of them going on in the field. And a man of them came out and stood in the road, and said to the priest : “ Tell me this, for you know it, have we a chance of heaven?” “ You have not,” said the priest. (“ God forgive him,” says Mary Irwin, “ a priest to say that !”) And the man that was of them said : “ Put your fingers in your ears, till you have travelled two miles of the road ; for when I go back and tell what you are after telling me to the rest, the crying and the bawling and the roaring will be so great that, if you hear it, you’ll never hear a noise again in this world.” So they put their fingers then in their ears ; but after a while the servant said to the priest : “ Let me take out my fingers now.” And the priest said : “ Do not.” And then the servant said again : “ I think I might take one finger out.” And the priest said : “ Since you are so persevering, you may take it out.” So he did, and the noise of the crying and the roaring and the bawling was so great, that he never had the use of that ear again.’

Old Mr. Saggarton confirms the story of the fall of the angels and their presence about us, but goes deeper into theology. ‘ The soul,’ he says, ‘ was the breath of God, breathed into Adam, and it is the possession of God ever since. And I could never have believed there was so much power in the shadow of a soul, till I saw *them* one night hurling. They tempt us sometimes in dreams—may God forgive me for saying He would allow power to any to tempt to evil. And they would destroy the world but for the hope they have of being saved. Every Monday morning they think the day of judgment may be coming, and that they will see heaven.

‘ Half the world is with them. And when you see a blast of wind, and it comes sudden and carries the dust with it, you should say, “ God bless them,” and throw something after them. For how do you know but one of our own may be in it ?

‘ There never was a funeral they were not at, walking after the other people. And you can see them if you know the way—that is, to take a green rush and to twist it into a ring, and to look through it. But if you do, you’ll never have a stim of sight in the eye again.’

(III)

Herb-Healing

September 28th, 1899.

‘ Honourable Lady Gregory,

‘ I, Bridget Ruane, wish to inform you that there is in the Oratory in London one of the Fathers, a Saint. I do not know his name ; but there was a young woman of the name of Meara ; she got two falls and could get no cure. She went to London and found this holy man ; and he sent her back to Gort, here to me, and I cured her. If your honourable Ladyship could make him out, it would be a wonderful thing, and a great happiness to many a weary heart, and the great God would have it in store for you and your son. May you enjoy many happy days together is the prayer of your humble servant,

‘ Bridget Ruane.’

This letter was brought to me one morning ; and I went down to see the writer, a respectable-looking old woman, dressed in the red petticoat and blue cloak of the country-people. She repeated what she had said in her note, and added : ‘ Now if you could find out the name of that Saint through the press, he’d tell me his remedies ; and between us, all the world would be cured. For I can’t do all cures, though there are a great many I can do. I cured Michael Miscall when the doctor couldn’t do it, and a woman in Gort that was paralyzed, and her two sons that were stretched. For I can bring back the dead with some of the herbs our Lord was brought back with, the *Garalus* and the *Slanus*. But there are some things I can’t do. I can’t help anyone that has got a stroke from the Queen or the Fool of the Forth.

‘ It was my brother got the knowledge of cures from a book that was thrown down before him on the road. What language was it written in ? What language would it be but Irish ? May be it was God gave it to him, and may be it was the *other people*. He was a fine strong man ; and he weighed fifteen stone ; and he went to England, and there he cured all the world, so that the doctors had no way of living. So one time he got in a ship to go to America ; and the doctors had bad men engaged to shipwreck him out of the ship ; he wasn’t drowned, but he was broken to pieces on the rocks, and the book was lost along with him. But he taught me a good deal out of it. So I know all herbs, and I do a good many cures ; and I have brought a good many children home to the world, and never lost one, or one of the women that bore them.’

I asked her to teach me some of her fragments of Druids’ wisdom, the healing power of herbs. So she came another day, and brought some herbs, and sorted them out on a table, and said : ‘ This is *Dwareen* (knapweed) ; and what you have to do with this, is to put it down with other herbs, and with a bit of threepenny sugar, and to boil it, and to drink it, for pains in the bones ; and don’t be afraid but it will cure you. Sure the Lord put it in the world for curing.

‘ And this is *Corn-corn* [tansy] ; it’s very good for the heart—boiled like the others.

‘ This is *Athair-talay*, the father of all herbs (wild camomile). This is very hard to pull ; and when you go for it, you must have a black-handled knife. And whatever way the wind is

when you begin to cut it, if it changes while you're cutting it, you'll lose your mind. And if you are paid for cutting it, you can do it when you like ; but if not, *they* mightn't like it. I knew a woman was cutting at one time, and a voice, an enchanted voice, called out : " Don't cut that if you are not paid, or you'll be sorry." But if you put a bit of this with every other herb you drink, you'll live for ever. My grandmother used to put a bit with everything she took, and she lived to be over a hundred.

‘ And this is *Camal buidhe* (loose-strife), that will keep all bad things away.

‘ This is *Cuineal Muire* (mullein), the blessed candle of our Lady.

‘ This is the *Fearaban* (water-buttercup) ; and it's good for every bone of your body.

‘ This is *Dub-cosac* (trichomanes), that's good for the heart ; very good for a sore heart.

‘ Here are the *Slanlus* (plantain) and the *Garblus* (dandelion) ; and these would cure the wide world ; and it was these brought our Lord from the Cross, after the ruffians that were with the Jews did all the harm to Him. And not one could be got to pierce His heart till a dark man came ; and he said : " Give me the spear and I'll do it." And the blood that sprang out touched his eyes and they got their sight. And it was after that, His Mother and Mary and Joseph gathered these herbs and cured His wounds.

‘ These are the best of the herbs ; but they are all good, and there isn't one among them but would cure seven diseases. I'm all the days of my life gathering them, and I know them all ; but it isn't easy to make them out. Sunday afternoon is the best time to get them, and I was never interfered with. Seven Hail Marys I say when I'm gathering them ; and I pray to our Lord, and to St. Joseph and St. Colman. And there may be *some* watching me ; but they never meddled with me at all.’

A neighbour whom I asked about Bridget Ruane and her brother said :—‘ Some people call her " Biddy Early" (after a famous witch-doctor). She has done a good many cures. Her brother was *away* for a while, and it is from him she got her knowledge. I believe it's before sunrise she gathers the herbs ; any way no one ever saw her gathering them. She has saved many a woman from being brought away when her child was born by whatever she does ; and she told me herself that one night when she was going to the lodge gate to attend the woman there, three magpies came before her and began roaring into her mouth to try and drive her back.’

Another neighbour, who has herself some reputation as an herb-doctor, says :—‘ Monday is a good day for pulling herbs, or Tuesday—not Sunday : a Sunday cure is no cure. The *Cosac* is good for the heart. There was Mahon in Gort—one time his heart was wore to a silk thread, and it cured him. And the *Slanugad* (ribgrass) is very good : it will take away lumps. You must go down where it is growing on the scraws, and pull it with three pulls ; and mind would the wind change when you are pulling it, or your head will be gone. Warm it on the tongs when you bring it in, and put it on the lump. The *Lusmor* is the only one that's good to bring back children that are " *away*." ’

Another authority says :—‘ Dandelion is good for the heart ; and when Father Quinn was curate here, he had it rooted up in all the fields about to drink it ; and see what a fine man he is. The wild parsnip (*Meacan-buidhe*) is good for the gravel ; and for heart-beat there's nothing so good as dandelion. There was a woman I knew used to boil it down ; and she'd throw out what was left on the grass. And there was a fleet of turkeys about the house, and they used to be picking it up. At Christmas they killed one of them ; and when it was cut open, they found a new heart growing in it with the dint of the dandelion.’ But an old man says there are no such healers now as there were in his youth :—‘ The best herb-doctor I ever

knew was Connolly up at Kilbecanty. He knew every herb that grew in the earth. It is said he was away with the fairies one time ; and when I saw him he had the two thumbs turned in ; and it was said it was the sign they left on him. I had a lump on the thigh one time, and my father went to him, and he gave him an herb for it ; but he told him not to come into the house by the door the wind would be blowing in at. They thought it was the evil I had—that is given by *them* by a touch ; and that is why he said about the wind ; for if it was the evil there would be a worm in it, and if it smelled the herb that was brought in at the door, it might change to another place. I don't know what the herb was ; but I would have been dead if I had it on another hour—it burned so much—and I had to get the lump lanced after, for it wasn't the evil I had.

‘ Connolly cured many a one ; Jack Hall, that fell into a pot of water they were after boiling potatoes in, and had the skin scalded off him, and that Dr. Lynch could do nothing for, he cured. He boiled down herbs with a bit of lard, and after that was rubbed in three times, he was well.

‘ And Cahill that was deaf, he cured with the *Rivmar seala* that herb in the potatoes that milk comes out of.’

Farrell says :—‘ *The Baine bo blathan* (primrose) is good for the headache, if you put the leaves of it on your head. But as for the *Lus-mor*, it's best not to have anything to do with that.’ For the *Lus-mor* is good to bring back children that are ‘ away,’ and belongs to the class of herbs consecrated to the uses of magic, apart from any natural healing power. The Druids are said to have taken their knowledge of these properties from the magical teachers of the Chaldeans ; but anyhow the belief in them lives on in Ireland and in other Celtic countries to this day.

A man from East Galway says : ‘ To bring anyone back from being with the fairies, you should get the leaves of the *Lus-mor*, and give them to him to drink. And if he only got a little touch from them, and had some complaint in him at the same time, that makes him sick like, that will bring him back. But if he is altogether in the fairies, then it won't bring him back, for he'll know what it is, and he'll refuse to drink it.

‘ There was a man I know, Andy Hegarty, had a little chap—a little *summach* of four years—and one day Andy was away to sell a pig in the market at Mount Bellew, and the mother was away some place with the dinner for the men in the field ; and the little chap was in the house with the grandmother, and he sitting by the fire. And he said to the grandmother : “ Put down a skillet of potatoes for me, and an egg.” And she said : “ I will not ; for what do you want with them ? you're just after eating.” And he said : “ Take care but I'll throw you over the roof of that house.” And then he said : “ Andy”—that was his father—“ is after selling the pig to a jobber, and the jobber has given it back to him again ; and he'll be at no loss by that, for he'll get a half-a-crown more at the end.” So when the grandmother heard that, she wouldn't stop in the house with him, but ran out—and he only four years old. When the mother came back, and was told about it, she went out and got some of the leaves of the *Lus-mor*, and she brought them in and put them on the child ; and he went away, and their own child came back again. They didn't see him going, or the other coming ; but they knew it by him.’

And a Galway woman, who has been in England, says : ‘ I was delicate one time myself, and I lost my walk ; and one of the neighbours told my mother it wasn't myself that was there. But my mother said she'd soon find that out ; for she'd tell me she was going to get a herb that would cure me ; and if it was myself, I'd want it ; but if it was another, I'd be against it. So she came in and said she to me : “ I'm going to Dangan to look for the *Lus-mor*, that will soon cure you.” And from that day I gave her no peace till she'd go to Dangan and get it ; so she knew I was all right. She told me all this afterwards.’

The man from East Galway says : ‘ The herbs they cure with, there’s some that’s natural, and you could pick them at all times of the day.’

‘ Sea-grass’ is sometimes useful as a natural and sometimes as an occult cure. One who has tried it and other herbs, says : ‘ Indeed the porter did me good, and good that I’d hardly like to tell you, not to make a scandal. Did I drink too much of it ? Not at all. But this long time I am feeling a worm in my side that is as big as an eel, and there’s more of them in it than that. And I was told to put sea-grass to it; and I put it to the side the other day ; and whether it was that or the porter I don’t know, but there’s some of them gone out of it.

‘ *Garblus*—how did you hear of that ? That is the herb for things that have to do with the fairies. And when you drink it for anything of that sort, if it doesn’t cure you, it will kill you then and there. There was a fine young man I used to know, and he got his death on the head of a pig that came at himself and another man at the gate of Ramore, and that never left them, but was with them all the time, till they came to a stream of water. And when he got home, he took to his bed with a headache. And at last he was brought a drink of the *Garblus*, and no sooner did he drink it than he was dead. I remember him well.

‘ There is something in flax, for no priest would anoint you without a bit of tow. And if a woman that was carrying was to put a basket of green flax on her back, the child would go from her ; and if a mare that was in foal had a load of flax on her, the foal would go the same way.’

And a neighbour of hers confirms this, and says : ‘ There’s something in green flax, I know ; for my mother often told me about one night she was spinning flax before she was married, and she was up late. And a man of the fairies came in—she had no right to be sitting up so late : they don’t like that—and he told her it was time to go to bed ; for he wanted to kill her, and he couldn’t touch her while she was handling the flax. And every time he’d tell her to go to bed, she’d give him some answer, and she’d go on pulling a thread of the flax, or mending a broken one ; for she was wise, and she knew that at the crowing of the cock he’d have to go. So at last the cock crowed, and she was safe, for the cock is blessed.’

Old Bridget Ruane will not do any more cures by charms or by simples, or ‘ bring children home to the world’ any more. For she died last winter ; and we may be sure that among the green herbs that cover her grave, there are some that are ‘ good for every bone in the body,’ and that are ‘ very good for a sore heart.’

1900.

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