

Sligo and Benbulbin

The Fair Hills of Ireland

Connaught

Stephen Lucius Gwynn

1912

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Beir beannacht ó mo chroí go tír na hÉireann
Bán-chnoic Éireann Ó
'S chum a maireann de shíolra Ír agus Éibhir
Ar bhánchnoic Éireann Ó
An áit úd 'narb' aoibhinn binn-ghuth éan
Mar shámh-chruit chaoín ag caoineadh Gael
Is é mo chás a bheith míle, míle i gcéin
Ó bhán-chnoic Éireann Ó

Donncha Rua Mac Conamara

Take a blessing from my heart to the land of my birth
And the fair Hills of Eire, !
And to all that yet survive of Eber's tribe on earth
On the fair Hills of Eire, O!
that land so delightful the wild thrush's lay
to pour a lament forth for Eire's decay —
Alas ! alas why pine I a thousand miles away
From the fair Hills of Eire, O !

James Clarence Mangan

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It has to be admitted that there is sometimes rain in Ireland. Two such times coincided with my visits to Sligo ; and perhaps it is as well, for this chapter can be somewhat less lengthy than others.

What rests in my mind is the impression of a prosperous but lazy-looking town, with solid well-built grey and white houses, and a broad river curving through it, so that the spacious streets are always leading to one bridge or other. The port, which must be a place of some traffic—for Sligo is one of the few Irish towns with an increasing population—I left unvisited : I saw only a far off view of the long estuary : but with the river I made pretty thorough acquaintance, for it is easily and pleasantly known. Trailing a minnow, you will paddle up to Lough Gill in about an hour, and in your progress may catch two or three small jack, possibly no doubt, a big one ; but anyhow pike are so plentiful that one of the most beautiful lakes in Ireland is negligible for the flyfisher. The river, so broad and placid between its sedgy banks and the rich wooding behind them, is a kind of prelude to Lough Gill : a gentle poetic access, broadening gradually, till almost without perceiving it you have reached the opening of long vistas, of wide island-studded expanses with mountains heaving up behind them. But the special beauty of river, lake, and islands lies in the wooding. Except at Killarney I have never seen it equalled. Ilex is everywhere, and down by the water's edge, when I was there last autumn, spindle and dogwood made patches, ruddy or crimson. Every

corner has been planted by owners who loved varied foliage, and who found here a soil and climate answerable to all hopes. Your boatman (it is scarcely possible that you can escape Mr. Roderic Gallagher), besides dilating copiously on the beauties of the lake, will point you on the north-western shore to the flat-capped hill of Breffny, which is called O'Rourke's table : will remind you how Dervorguilla fled from the O'Rourke with Dermot MacMurrrough ; and will, if you allow him, declaim " The valley lay smiling before me," with a fervour that should endear him to all who value the memory of Moore.

" There was a time, falsest of women,
When Breffni's good sword would have sought
That man through a million of foemen
Who dared but to wrong thee in thought."

So it goes. Yet I confess that in the large and stormswept landscapes of western Ireland—which Moore never saw—Moore's poetry seems strangely out of place. Breffny can be turned " to favour and to prettiness," but only by one who knows and loves the country. Here is a verse which might well tempt one to explore the many-folded bights and creeks and recesses that make up Sligo Bay.

" The great waves of the Atlantic sweep storming on their way.
Shining green and silver with the hidden herring shoal ;
But the little waves of Breffny have drenched my heart in spray,
And the little waves of Breffny go stumbling through my soul.

But at Sligo, thoughts of modern literature would naturally turn to a more important talent than Miss Eva Gore Booth's : for here Mr. W. B. Yeats was born and bred, and many a harmonious name from this countryside is woven into the shimmering fabric of his verses—Dromahair, Collooney, Lisadill, and a score of others. Little wonder that his imagination should be fairy-haunted and filled with the legendary past of Ireland ; for about Sligo are very cities of the ancient dead. At Carrowmore is found such a group of cairns, cromlechs, and stone circles as has no parallel in these islands : and in the Hazelwood deer park, trilithons like those of Stonehenge mark some place of august ceremonial or interment. Where such things are Ireland there is also great store of legend. But Sligo imagination has been busy chiefly with the two mountains, which from north and south overlook the town. Easily known is the southern, Knocknarea ; for on top, conspicuous wherever its summit can be seen against the sky, is a vast cairn with which men still link the name of Maeve. But the fierce Queen, who led the hosting of Connaught into Ulster in quest of the Brown Bull, is here no human personage but a ruler of the Sidhe ; and under no other leadership than Maeve's, I fancy.

" The host is riding from Knocknarea
And over the grave of Clooth-na-bare,
Caoilte tossing his flaming hair
And Niamh calling, ' Away, come away.' "

Mr. Yeats indeed knows, no one better, that Maeve belongs to an older cycle of story than Caoilte MacRonan, or the beautiful Niamh ; but he knows also that popular imagination has blended her into that group of heroic figures whose fame has encroached on the glories of the Red Branch, and who made the theme of his first published volume. *The Wanderings of Oisín* modernises an episode taken from the cluster of sagas which English readers since the day of Macpherson know as " Ossianic," but which in Irish are called Fenian tales. And there is no finer story in all this cluster than that which reaches its tragic close here on the northern mountain, Benbulbin.

It is with the Fenian cycle rather than with Sligo that this chapter is properly concerned, and the legend must first be set into its historic position. I have tried to show that the Red Branch stories belong to the first generations of the Christian era, and had their origin in an older race than that which ruled in Tara. But in the Fenian cycle, Tara is the centre round which legends group themselves, as did the Red Branch tales round Emain Macha. Moreover they are fixed to a definite time.

In the days of the great King Cormac MacArt—about the middle of the third century—there existed in Ireland a body of organised professional fighting men, the Fianna, under the leadership of Fionn MacCumhail—or, as the name is sounded in English, Finn MacCool. There were at other times, and in other places of Scotch and Irish Gaeldom, other bodies of *fianna*; the name means roughly, “braves”; and *fiannaidheacht* is the common word in Irish today for telling stories about the famous warriors and battles of ancient pagan Ireland. But the Fenian cycle of story *par excellence* is the group of legends dealing with Finn, his son Ossian, Ossian’s son Oscar, and their comrades and rivals, Caoilte MacRonan, Goll MacMorna, Conan Maol (the Bald), and a score of others; of whom the foremost for beauty and swiftness and the love of women was Diarmuid son of Duibhne, otherwise called Diarmuid Donn (the Brown-haired) and Diarmuid of the Love Spot. What historic reality lies behind the legends must be enquired later; for the present let us tell the story which links the names of Finn and Diarmuid for ever with Benbulbin, abridging it from Mr. Standish Hayes O’Grady’s translation of two manuscripts, one copied in 1780 by a county Waterford school-master, and the other in 1842 by a native of Kilrush in county Clare.

One morning, at Almuin (Knockaulin, in county Kildare), where was the fortified camp of the Fianna (an immense rath, existing to this day), Finn was up by daybreak, and Ossian, with Diorruing, another of Finn’s people, asked the cause of such early rising. “I am without a wife since Maighneis died,” said Finn, “and no man has slumber or sweet sleep who is without a fitting wife.” Then Diorruing said that he could name a fit mate for the chief, and that was Gráinne, the daughter of King Cormac. Finn answered that there was strife between him and Cormac (for the Fianna were allies rather than servants of Cormac or of any King), and that he would not ask to be refused. Then Ossian [1] and Diorruing undertook to make a journey on their own account, and bear the refusal themselves if it were to be borne; and so they came to Tara. Cormac welcomed them, but, when they told their errand, he answered that there was not a king’s son or battle-champion in Ireland to whom Gráinne had not given refusal, that the reproach all fell on him, and therefore, that they must get her tidings from herself. So he conducted them to Gráinne’s *grianan*, or windowed sunny chamber, in the rath at Tara which still bears her name, and told her of their purpose. And the Princess answered: “If he be a fitting son-in-law for thee, why should he not be a fitting husband for me?” After that, a tryst was made for a fortnight from that night.

The seven battalions of the Fianna were gathered from all quarters of Ireland to Tara for that great wedding, and they went into the banqueting hall whose seven hundred feet of length can be paced out, and whose doorways can be distinguished on the green hilltop to-day. Cormac sat at the head of the hall, and his wife at his left shoulder, and Gráinne at her left again; and Finn sat on the King’s right, and Ossian at Finn’s right, and the chiefs of the Fianna were ranged beyond Ossian, and over against them were Cairbre Liffechair, Cormac’s heir, and the other chiefs and princes of the royal house.

Then Gráinne, as she sat, held talk with a Druid-poet of the Fianna, and to him she said that it was a wonder Finn asked her for himself and not for Ossian; “for it were fitter to give me to such as he than to a man that is older than my father.” The poet told her it would be ill for her if such a saying were heard from her. So she said no more of that, but she questioned him of the names of the Fianna who sat before her, and he did not fail to answer. She asked

of this one and that, and lastly, “ Who,” she asked, “ was the freckled, sweet-worded man, who had the curling, dusky black hair and cheeks berry-red ?”

That, he said, was Diarmuid “ the white-toothed, of the lightsome countenance, the best lover of women and of maidens that was in the whole world.” Then Gráinne sent for a jewelled cup from her grianan, and she mixed a drink in it, and she sent it to Finn and to Cormac, and to the Queen Mother, and to Cairbre Liffechair, and the princes of the King’s house ; and upon each one, as they drank, there came “ a stupor of sleep and deep slumber.” When they were all sleeping she rose up from her chair, and came and laid bonds of obligation on Diarmuid that he should take her away with him. “ Why have you done this ?” said Diarmuid. Then she told them how from the window of her grianan she had seen a hurling match between the Fianna and the men of Tara, and Diarmuid winning the goal in it ; “ and” (she said) “ I turned the light of mine eyes and of my sight upon thee that day, and I never gave that love to any other from that time to this, and will not ever.” Then she went out, making a tryst with him to follow her ; and Diarmuid took counsel with his comrades. Ossian and Oscar told him that he must abide by the bonds she had laid on him, for he was bound to refuse no woman. “ I say,” said Caoilte, “ that I have a fitting wife, and yet I had rather than the wealth of the world it had been to me that Grainne gave that love.” “ Follow Gráinne,” said Diarmuid, “ though thy death will come of it, and I grieve for it.” “ Is that the counsel of you all to me.” said Diarmuid. “ It is,” said Ossian and all the others together. Then Diarmuid ; up and, weeping, took his farewell of the Fianna ; for from that day he must be a hunted man.

And now the story tells of his flight with Gráinne from Tara to Athlone on the Shannon, and his crossing into Clanricarde, and of the tracking by Finn’s trackers, and of many escapes when Angus of the Tuatha de Danann came out of his dwelling in Brugh na Boinne to shelter his foster son ; of their travellings from place to place through the length and reach of Ireland, and their restings, marked in popular imagination by the cromlechs or giants’ graves. Perhaps a score of these, from Ben Edair on Dublin Bay, north to Donegal, and south again Kerry, are called *leabaidh Diarmuid agus Gráinne*, “ the bed of Diarmuid and Grainne.” Men of Lochlann were sent by Finn to take the fugitives—since the Fianna were half-hearted in the pursuit—but Diarmuid defeated them, part by subtlety and part by sheer fighting. And at last Oscar sided with Diarmuid, and the two made such havoc of Finn’s people that Angus of Brugh easily made peace between chief and rebel : and Diarmuid was granted his own lands, as well as Keshcorran in Sligo for a dowry with the King’s daughter. And on the round hill of Keshcorran where bones of elk and bear are found in the caves of the Fenians, Diarmuid and Gráinne settled down and lived for a space rich and prosperous with house and herds and children.

But in the end Gráinne was not content with what she had, and she told Diarmuid it was a shame to be said that the two best men in Ireland had never set foot in their house—namely, Fionn, son of Cumhsull, and Cormac, son of Art.

“ They are enemies to me,” said Diarmuid. “ Give them a feast and win their love,” said Gráinne. “ I permit that,” said Diarmuid. And the chiefs of Eire, and the seven battalions of the Fianna, came and were feasting for a year at Rathgráinne in Keshcorran.

On the last night of that year Diarmuid was sleeping, when he heard the voice of a strange hound, and three times it woke him, and at last he went out to seek it. Gráinne bid him take his surest weapons, the Sword of Manannan the Sea God, and the *Ga Derg*, the spear that never missed its cast. But he took lighter weapons of the chase, and out with him till he reached the top of Benbulbin, and there he found Finn standing alone.

“ It is the wild boar of Benbulbin they are hunting,” said Finn, “ and he has slain thirty of the Fianna this morning. Let us leave the hill to him.” “ I will not do that,” said Diarmuid. Then Finn said that this was no hunt for Diarmuid ; for this boar was an enchanted beast, and the doom on it was, to have the same length of life as Diarmuid O’Duibhne. “I knew nothing of that spell,” said Diarmuid. Then Finn went away from Diarmuid and refused to leave with him the hound Bran.

“ By my word,” quoth Diarmuid, “ it is to slay me thou hast made this hunt, O Finn ; and if it be here I am fated to die, I have no power now to shun it.”

Then he remembered Gráinne’s counsel, and wished for the *Ga Derg* : and in truth when the boar came, weapons broke on him. Diarmuid, leaping to avoid his charge, lit on his back, and was carried down the mountain and up it again, and at last the boar threw him and ripped his bowels ; but with a last throw of the sword hilt Diarmuid dashed out the beast’s brains. There beside the carcase he lay bleeding, and Finn and the Fianna came up to him.

“ ‘ It likes me well to see thee in that plight, O Diarmuid,’ quoth Fionn ; ‘ and I grieve that the women of Erin are not gazing now upon thee ; for thy excellent beauty is turned to ugliness, and thy choice form to deformity.’ ‘ Nevertheless it is in thy power to heal me, O Fionn,’ said Diarmuid, ‘ if it were thine own pleasure to do so.’ ‘ How should I heal thee ?’ said Fionn. ‘ Easily,’ quoth Diarmuid, ‘ for when thou didst get the noble precious gift of divining at the Bóinn, it was given to thee that to whomsoever thou shouldst give a drink from the palms of thy hands he should after that be young and sound from any sickness.’ ‘ Thou hast not deserved it of me that I should give thee that drink,’ quoth Fionn. ‘ That is not true,’ said Diarmuid.

And as he lay, he called to mind how when Finn was beleaguered and his house in flames, he himself went out alone and routed the enemy.

“ ‘ And had it been that night that I asked thee for a drink thou wouldest have given it me, and thou wouldest not have done so more justly than now.’

“ ‘ That is not true,’ said Finn, ‘ thou hast ill deserved that I should give thee a drink or do thee any good thing ; for the night that thou wentest with me to Tara thou didst bear away Gráinne from me in presence of the men of Erin when thou wast thyself my guard over her in Tara that night.’ ”

Diarmuid said : “ Gráinne put bonds upon me, and the guilt was not mine.” And again he reminded Finn of how he had saved Finn himself, and the Fianna, when they were bound and under enchantment.

“ ‘ And had I asked a drink of thee that night, O Fionn, I would have gotten it ! Many is the strait, moreover, that hath overtaken thee and the Fenians of Erin from the first day in which I came among the Fenians, in which I have perilled my body and my life for thy sake ; and therefore thou shouldst not do me this foul treachery. Moreover, many a brave warrior and valiant hero of great prowess hath fallen by thee, nor is there an end of them yet ; and shortly there will come a dire discomfiture upon the Fenians, which will not leave them many descendants. Nor is it for thee I grieve, O Fionn, but for Oisín and for Oscar and the rest of my faithful fond comrades. And as for thee, O Oisín, thou shalt be left to lament after the Fenians, and thou shalt sorely lack me yet, O Fionn.’

“ Then said Oscar, ‘ O Fionn, though I am more nearly akin to thee than to Diarmuid O’Duibhne, I will not suffer thee but to give Diarmuid a drink ; and I swear, moreover, that

were there any other prince in the world to do Diarmuid O'Duibhne such treachery, there should only escape whichever of us should have the strongest hand ; and bring him a drink without delay.' ' I know no well whatever upon this mountain,' said Fionn. ' That is not true,' said Diarmuid, ' for but nine paces from thee is the best well of pure water in the world.'

“ After that Fionn went to the well and raised the full of his two hands of the water ; but he had not reached more than half way to Diarmuid when he let the water run down through his hands, and he said that he could not bring the water. ' I swear,' said Diarmuid, ' that it was of thine own will thou didst let it from thee.' Fionn went for the water the second time, and he had not come more than the same distance when he let it through his hands, having thought upon Gráinne. Then Diarmuid hove a piteous sigh of anguish when he saw that. ' I swear before my arms,' said Oscar, ' that if thou bring not the water speedily, O Fionn, there shall not leave the tulach but thou or I.' Fionn returned to the well the third time because of that speech which Oscar made to him, and brought the water to Diarmuid, and as he came up, the life parted from the body of Diarmuid. Then that company of the Fenians of Erin that were present raised three exceeding loud shouts, wailing for Diarmuid O'Duibhne, and Oscar looked fiercely and wrathfully upon Fionn, and what he said was, that it was a greater pity that Diarmuid should be dead than it would have been had Finn perished, and that the Fenians had lost their mainstay in battle by means of him.”

When Gráinne saw the Fianna coming into Rathgráinne and Finn leading Diarmuid's hound by the leash, she knew what had happened, and labour came on her, and she bore three dead sons. Great threatening she made then : and she went to her sons that were nearly grown men, and she urged upon them to take up the pursuit of vengeance for their father, and to train themselves in all the arts of valour till they could requite his death on Finn. When word of this came to Finn, he was for mustering the Fianna to cut off Diarmuid's children before they could rebel. But Ossian rose up and what he said was :

“ The guilt of that is no man's but thine, and we will not go to bear out the deed that we have not done, and foul is the treachery that thou didst show towards Diarmuid O'Duibhne though at peace with him. According as thou hast planted the oak, so bend it thyself.' ”

Finn seeing that even his own kindred among the Fianna had set their faces against him, despaired of securing his power by violence ; but, being a man of craft no less than of war, he turned to a better device,

“ He got him to Rathgráinne without the knowledge of the Fenians of Erin, and without bidding them farewell, and greeted Grainne craftily, cunningly, and with sweet words. Gráinne neither heeded nor hearkened to him, but told him to leave her sight, and straightway assailed him with her keen very sharp-pointed tongue. However Fionn left not plying her with sweet words and gentle loving discourse, until he had brought her to his own will ; and he had the desire of his heart and soul of her. After that Fionn and Gráinne went their ways, and no tidings are told of them until they reached the Fenians of Erin ; and when they saw Fionn and Gráinne coming towards them in that guise they gave one shout of derision and mockery at her, so that Gráinne bowed her head through shame. ' We trow, O Fionn,' quoth Oisín, ' that thou wilt keep Gráinne well from henceforth.' ”

And so Gráinne's name comes down with the echo of that mockery hanging about it : and Finn himself, who had to be guarded from the consequence of his own misdeed by a woman's entreaty, is no paladin of romance. The paladins of the story are the younger men, Ossian and Oscar, Diarmuid the foster-son of Angus, and Caoilte always faithful. These men are of the same type as Cuchulain, Fergus, and Conall Cearnach. Yet in truth the interest of the Fenian stories lies chiefly not in the recital of feats of valour : it is a much more complex literary

emotion that they evoke. If we fully understood the genesis of the Fenian literature a vast deal that is now hardly even guessed at in Irish history would become luminous.

In the older manuscript collections of poem and story—the Book of Leinster and the Book of the Dun Cow—which go back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Red Branch cycle dominates. Stories of Finn and his companions are few and unimportant. From the fifteenth century onwards the positions are reversed. Fenian legends are seen controlling the popular imagination ; the Fenian sagas ramify and develop; deeds that were originally told of Cúchulain and his comrades are now set down to Ossian or Oscar ; and not that only, but the romance literature of Europe becomes woven into the web. Arthur of Britain begins to figure in these tales, and even Charlemagne and Roland. The essential point, however, concerns rather the setting and the purpose of these legends than their personages and incidents. We have no longer a plain bardic tale simply narrated: the story is thrown into the form of dialogue between questioner and answerer, between Pagan and Christian—for the questioner is no less a person than St. Patrick himself.

Legendary history—at this point, perhaps, ceasing to be legendary—tells us that in the reign of Cairbre Liffechair, who succeeded Cormac MacArt in A.D. 266, the Fianna of Ireland grew so mutinous that Cairbre was forced to make war upon them, and finally annihilated their forces in the battle of Gowra (not far south of Tara), where he slew Oscar, but was himself slain. From that date to the coming of Patrick is nearly a hundred and fifty years, but legend assigned to the Fianna a span of life in proportion to their strength, and here is an early form of the Fenian legend, which I take from Mr.S. H. O’Grady’s translation of the *Colloquy of the Ancients* :

“ When the battle of Comar, the battle of Gowra, and the battle of Ollarba had been fought, and after that the Fianna for the most part were extinguished, the residue of them in small bands and in companies had dispersed throughout all Ireland, until at the point of time which concerns us there remained not any but two good warriors only of the last of the Fianna : Ossian, son of Finn, and Caoilte, son of Crunnchu, son of Ronan (whose lusty vigour and power of spear-throwing were now dwindled down), and so many fighting men as with themselves made twice nine. These twice nine came out of the flowery-soiled bosky borders of Slievefuad (the Fews mountain in county Armagh), and into the Lughbarta bána, at this present called Lughmadh (anglicé Louth), where, at the falling of the evening clouds, that night they were melancholy, dispirited.”

The story tells then how the “ remnant of that great and goodly fellowship” decided to part, and how their parting was “ a sundering of soul and body.” Ossian went to the fairy mound, where dwelt his mother’s people, for she was a woman of the *Sidhe* but Caoilte held on by the Boyne till he came to the rath of Drumderg, where Patrick was : —

“ Just then Patrick chanted the Lord’s order of the mass, and lauded the Creator and pronounced benediction on the rath in which Finn MacCumall had been—the rath of Drumderg. The clerics saw Caoilte and his band draw near them ; and fear fell on them before the tall men with their huge wolfdogs that accompanied them, for they were not people of one epoch or one time with the clergy.

“ Then Heaven’s distinguished one, that pillar of dignity and angel on earth, Calpurn’s son, Patrick, apostle of the Gael, rose and took the aspergillum to sprinkle holy water on the great men ; floating over whom until that day there had been (and were now) a thousand legions of demons. Into the hills and skalps, into the outer borders of the region and of the country, the demons forthwith departed in all directions ; after which the enormous men sat down.”

So Caoilte was made a Christian, and the colloquy tells how he accompanied Patrick in journeying through Ireland, and at each place told what he knew, and what great feat was done there by the Fianna. And at last, by Patrick's desire, he fetched Ossian also from the fairy mound, and the two old warriors came together to the assembly at Tara, and were telling of the great things that had been. But in this early version (written on vellum by three scribes for the pleasure of MacCarthy Riach, who died in 1505) Caoilte, and not Ossian, was the chief narrator ; and the element which gives its peculiar colour to the typical Fenian legend is still wanting. The old men deplore the glory that is gone, and the ebbing of their own strength ; but there is no hint of a conflict between their mind and the mind of Patrick, who welcomes and honours them as the depositories of a great tradition which he is eager to save and to record. Very different is the turn which later imagination gave to these dialogues. In this stage, Caoilte disappears altogether as interlocutor, and it is Ossian alone who is brought to Patrick.

Imagination shaped also a tale of the manner of his coming, which Mr. Yeats wove into modern verse, calling it " The Wanderings of Oisín." Here is the outline.

There was a great feast of the Fianna held in days before trouble came on them, and as the warriors sat over the ale, into the hall there walked a woman of the fairies, and she offered love and a kingdom to any that would go with her over the sea and under the sea to her own country, Tir-nan-og, the land of the ever-young. Ossian leapt to the challenge, and though comrades tried to hold him back, and prophets warned him, he went with her. But after a while, long or short, of dalliance in her deathless country, he began to long for human company. He would go, he said. She answered him with a question. How long are you here ? And he said that he knew only that he was there long enough. Then she told him that in the fairy life centuries of mortal time had gone over him, and that his own country would be changed out of all knowledge, and his comrades dusty and forgotten. But he answered that, right or wrong, he would go, and would come back. So she gave him a fairy horse, warning him not to set foot on the soil of Ireland, or he would never see Tir-nan-og again. It was a changed Ireland he came to ; nettles grew where the courts of Finn had been thronged, and there were little stone houses built through the open country, and a clanging of bells from the towers of them. And the people were small, feeble folk : Ossian saw six of them trying to raise a bag of sand, and he stooped from the saddle, with one hand he caught the bag, and he swung it forward disdainfully, showing his contempt for the degenerate race ; but with the strain his saddle girth broke, and, over-reached as he was, he fell and touched earth. In a moment his splendour was gone, the pains and infirmities of age seized on him and he stood up, tottering with palsied limbs, bleared eyes, and " spittle on beard never dry." Then they brought the stranger to Patrick, who laboured to convert him.

In these later colloquies Patrick is telling of the strength and severity of God, and of the torment that awaits the unbeliever. And Ossian in answer is telling of the greatness and generosity of the Fenians, and contrasting it with the mean, fettered life of the clerics.

" You tell me your God is strong. If your God and my son Oscar were at wrestle on Knockaulin, and if I saw Oscar down, it is then I would say your God was a strong man, O Patrick !"

That is one famous answer. But a few stanzas may be borrowed from the half grotesque " Lamentation of Oisín after the Fenians," again in Mr. S. H. O'Grady's rendering :

" Alas ! in place of the noise of hounds
Sweet and cheerful every morning,
The drowsy noise of bells, a music not sweet to me,

And the doleful sound of a joyless clergy.

“ Alas ! in place of battles and sore combat,
In which I was wont to stand and rejoice ;
The crosier of Patrick being carried,
And his chaunting clerics quarrelling.

“ Alas ! in place of banquets and of feasts,
Which I used habitually to enjoy ;
Long fasting from my meat,
Which the wind would waft beyond the walls.

“ Alas ! they tell me continually,
That it is not plenty of bread that God loves ;
But much prayer and fasting,
Two pursuits which I never have followed.

“ Alas ! were I as I was
At the time of the terrors of Knockanaur,
If I got not obedience and attendance
I would scatter thy wretched clerics.

“ Alas ! were I in strength and in vigour
As I was exultingly at the harbour of Fionntragh,
I should not be deafened in the church of the bells,
And I would put a stop to their droning.”

But the old man is too far changed from the hero who fought in the great Fenian battles of Knockanaur and Ventry ; he can only wail and cry out for food and drink, and the Fenians cannot hear him for all his crying. Patrick soothes him with food, and in the joy of relief after famine he is reconciled to God.—Is this written by a monk deliberately showing a warrior's degradation, or by one who hates clerics, showing the monkish tyranny ? It has a bitter flavour in any case, and the bitterness deepens. Ossian still pleads for the pleasures of memory ; it “ seems long and is a great woe to him ‘ not to speak of the ways of Fionn of the deeds.’ Patrick answers :

“ Speak not of Fionn nor of the Fenians,
Or the Son of God will be angry with thee for it :
He would never let thee into his fort.
And he would not send thee the bread of each day.”

We are a long way from primitive art in the half-humorous pathos of Ossian's reply :

“ Were I to speak of Fionn and the Fenians
Between us two, O Patrick the new,
But only not to speak loud,
He would never hear us mentioning him.”

Bitterest of all is the end of the poem. Ossian feels death approaching, and Patrick causes one of his clerics to strike the old warrior who cries out fiercely at the insult. “ Thou rememberest that thou art the mighty Oisín” ; says Patrick, sternly : “ I fear thy speech has earned God's anger.” Ossian dutifully repents and forgives his smiter ; all he asks is to be taken into God's fort, “ and let Fionn and the Fenians be with me without delay.” “ That is

another sin," answers Patrick. And (in this version) ' Oisín of the Fenians who had been but foolish,' forswears his company among the clouds of death, and prays to God for forgiveness of his loyalty to friendship.

A poem like this may be construed in more ways than one. But this much is literally certain : that the bards who wrote these Ossianic poems, in which the case for freedom against restraint, for spear and hound against bell and crozier, for the men of war against the men of genuflections, is stated with such gusto, wrote in times when they saw Ireland wrecked and ruined by armed strangers, and needing sorely some new Fenian battalions to protect her. And it is fair, I think, to say that just this piquancy of contrast between pagan and Christian is the determining circumstance which accounts for the replacement of the early and more epic sagas by these Ossianic or Fenian tales. A gulf clearly separated the Red Branch warriors from Irish Christianity in the popular mind ; and no less clearly, the popular notion of history made Fionn and his companions real persons in Ireland at a period not very far removed from the downfall of paganism. Links were forged to connect back the historic period which begins at Patrick's coming with what lay nearest in the half-legendary past ; and thus the latest of the great heathen fighting-men became a kind of symbol for what Ireland was in the days when she was not the attacked but the attacker. And this symbol was set out against an equally dramatic personification of the ages when Ireland became one hive of monastic learning, the home of the arts of peace, and the easy spoil of every Danish marauder.

This is a far cry from Benbulbin. And, in truth, although the Sligo mountain is so closely linked with one of the finest Fenian stories, it has to be said that the cycle belongs to Munster more than to Connaught ; and generally that Ossianic legends are of southern Ireland, as the Red Branch tales are of the northern province. Still, there is no better place in Ireland to study legendary history than about Sligo ; and if some of my friends can be trusted, those who have the gift of vision can see, even in these later days, strange shapes not of our element walking on Benbulbin and Knocknarea.

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After this long excursion into legend and the literature of pure legend, I shall make little attempt to gather up the definitely historic associations which cluster about Sligo town. Red Hugh came there in June 1595, when the stir that he had set on foot began to spread even in Connaught, which was so securely held. Here in Sligo, one of the Burkes, serving as a mercenary under George Oge Bingham, suddenly cut off Bingham's head and surrendered the town to O'Donnell, who garrisoned it, since it afforded just the starting-point that he desired for the conquest of Connaught. The English did not leave him long in undisturbed possession. In the autumn of that year, after he had raided and spoiled the country down to Tuam, Sir Richard Bingham, the Governor of Connaught, set out in pursuit. But the Cinel Conaill under Hugh Roe were the hardest people in Ireland to get near, and though the English rode hard from Ballymote, the raiders slipped between them and the sea, past the bridges of Collooney, Ballysadare and Sligo. Bingham followed as far as Sligo, and then halted, encamping in the monastery " as it was the custom of the English to dwell in the holy churches." A party of O'Donnell's scouts mounted on fine fleet horses came back to the north bank, " saw the English up and down through the town," and were themselves seen. Bingham's nephew, Captain Martin, mounted and set off in pursuit, and O'Donnell's scouts returning told how they had only escaped by the fleetness of their horses. Red Hugh scented such an occasion as he delighted in, and having arranged an ambush about a mile out of Sligo, sent out another party of horse to the north bank. As soon as they had come there, " Captain Martin jumped on his horse on seeing them as quick as a hound would go in pursuit of its favourite game" (says Lugaidh O'Clery, father of one of the Four Masters, in his contemporary Life of Hugh Roe). Martin's troopers followed, and O'Donnell's men retreated,

“proceeding at first to hold quietly the bridlebits in the mouth of the swift, galloping horses,” in order to decoy the pursuers on. But very soon it was necessary for them “to spur and whip the horses at once and together,” so hot was the pursuit, and one man, Phelim Reagh Mac Devitt, was ill-mounted, and finding himself in danger, was obliged to neglect his orders and turn on Captain Martin, who led the chase.

“The aforesaid Phelim had a sharp piercing spear to shoot when he wished. He put his finger to the string, and he drew the javelin boldly, and the shot of the dart struck Captain Martin with such force that it passed through the border of the foreign armour at the hollow of the armpit, and it pierced his heart in his breast, as his misdeeds deserved, for he who was wounded there was a merciless rogue, and his hatred of the Irish was very great.”

This checked pursuit and the ambush failed—rousing O’Donnell’s fury, which only subsided when a party of the scouts “came into the presence of their prince, though it was very hard for them on account of his great anger,” and testified on behalf of Mac Devitt. Bingham on his part was no less angry :

“He ordered his army to go to the monastery and pull down and destroy the roodscreen and the cells of the servants of God, and to bring him enough of the firmly-bound, well-jointed boards, and of the strong smooth-hewn beams to make a machine for pulling down walls.”

The engines thus constructed were advanced to the Castle, and assault was given, but O’Donnell’s garrison drove them off and Bingham retired in discomfiture to Roscommon. O’Donnell did not risk another siege. He pulled down the castle and “did not leave a stone of it on a stone,” and did the same by thirteen more castles of Connaught. Thus when Sligo figures again in the record of his incessant marchings, it is only as a stage on his usual route from Donegal into Connaught—across Saimer (the Erne), and Duff and Drowes and Sligeach.

Ballymote, some ten miles south of Sligo, near Gráinne’s portion, Keshcorran, became in reality O’Donnell’s headquarters after he captured it : and from here in the north of Connaught he waged war with unbroken success (sharply punishing the O’Briens of Thomond for their alliance with England) until Docwra, landing at Derry from the sea, made an assault in his rear, and the traitor Niall Garbh, Hugh’s near kinsman, struck at the very home of Cinel Conaill, Donegal itself.

In the Williamite wars Sligo had a chequered history. The surrounding country, being rich, was thickly settled with Protestant gentry, and at the first rumour of fighting these organised themselves, seized the town and repaired the forts. But presently orders from the traitor Lundy reached Lord Kingston who commanded in Sligo, bidding him evacuate the town and march to join the other forces in Derry. Kingston marched out and the town was at once occupied by the Irish. The Sligo contingent added itself to the Protestant force of Enniskilleners so brilliantly commanded by Lloyd, and took part in the famous victory of Newtown Butler. Sarsfield, who commanded for James in the West with such raw levies as he could muster, fell back from his post at Ballyshannon on Sligo, the most important town in North Connaught. But he had under him a demoralised and nerveless force, who, at the mere rumour of the Enniskilleners’ approach, fled in tumult, leaving their ordnance and stores to the enemy. Thus Sligo was again King William’s before Schomberg landed in Ireland.

Yet in the meantime Sarsfield was heartening a beaten side and raised altogether 2,000 horse in Connaught. The Enniskilleners, confident from repeated triumphs, laid a plan to cross the Shannon at Jamestown, join a detachment of Lloyd’s garrison from Sligo, and, by a

sudden movement, to capture Galway. Sarsfield learnt the plan, and with his Connaught levies and five regiments borrowed from the army which lay with James about Dundalk observing Schomberg, he marched to the attack. About three miles outside Sligo a battle was fought in which Sarsfield, according to a letter in the State Papers (dated November 30th, 1689), killed 800 foot and 125 horse. The town was defended against him for four days by Saint Sauvent, a Huguenot refugee, who, for lack of provisions, surrendered on good terms. Sligo, thus recaptured after two months, was held now steadily for King James—the key to all the country west of the Shannon. It is one of the two signal successes which crowned Sarsfield's glorious but unlucky name.

When Sarsfield departed to join the main army he left the charge of Sligo to a very singular old veteran. Sir Teigue O'Regan had held Charlemont in Tyrone very desperately against Schomberg and only marched out (with all the honours of war) when his men were chewing raw hide. He himself, hunchbacked, slovenly, ill-booted, ill-cravated, rode out on an old spavined charger, whose kicking and squealing interrupted the amenities between himself and Schomberg. In Sligo he was ready to surrender after the passage of the Shannon was forced at Athlone ; but the day of Aughrim followed and, cut off in the north of Connaught without means of communicating with those from whom he held his command, Sir Teigue determined to fight to the last. Nevertheless, forces were too many for him, and at last this tough old veteran—of whom Colonel Wood-Martin, the historian of Sligo, is a warm panegyrist—submitted to Mitchelburne after a correspondence honourable to both sides.

The spirit of the men who joined the Enniskilleners has survived. Sligo is still a strong centre of Protestantism in the West, and the Protestant gentry have there maintained themselves much better than in the rest of Connaught. The hard-drinking, hard riding, gambling squire and squireen have been less common here, and, signs by, the families of Cromwellian plantation are there still, many of them, in prosperity. Altogether Sligo is more like Ulster than Connaught, and its ties are with the northern province. Yet the religious bigotry which disgraces Ulster is not felt here : and it is pleasant to set down for a last impression that at Collooney a few miles out of the town a couple of progressive Protestant landlords have created one of the most active groups of co-operative industries to be found in all Ireland.

[1] This name in the north of Ireland is pronounced much as Macpherson spelt it ; but in the other provinces, according to the Irish spelling, *Oisin*, Usheen. In writing English I prefer to use the generally accepted form,—though the Irish has great charms for a rhymer, and Mr. Yeats employs it.

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