

A wild mountain district 1847

•

*Narrative  
Of  
A Recent Journey  
Of  
Six Weeks In Ireland,  
In Connection with  
The subject of supplying small seed  
To some of  
The remoter districts :  
With  
Current observations on the depressed  
Circumstances of the people,  
And The  
Means presented for the Permanent improvement  
Of their social condition.*

“Nor will I give the slightest countenance to any consideration of Ireland as a thing separate and apart from ourselves.” — Old MS.

By

William Bennett.

LONDON :

CHARLES GILPIN, BISHOPSGATE WITHOUT.

JOHN HATCHARD & SON, PICCADILLY.

DUBLIN: J. CURRY, Jun. & CO.

M.DCCC.XLVII.

“In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand ; for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that.” — ECCLESIASTES xi. 6.

•

LETTER IV.

BELMULLET — ROSSPORT.

17th—18th of 3rd mo. 1847.

Having given Samuel Bourns—the name of the party I have before mentioned as residing in one of the extreme corners of Erris—an expectation of visiting him, we found him this morning at the breakfast table, having walked over a distance of twelve miles, to meet us. The scene about the minister’s house was the same as yesterday, only, I think, a larger number, but orderly and well-behaved. I cannot describe this gentleman’s house in any better terms than as the “metropolis” of the poor of the neighbourhood. There were more than two hundred waiting when we came away.

Some idea may be formed of the interest excited by the visit of a stranger to this remote district, when I say that we had scarcely started above a mile for the house of S. Bourns, on foot, when we were overtaken by his neighbour, the only other respectable resident for many miles round, who, with his son, had brought his car, and been to Belmullet in search of us, to give us a lift on the way. We took the north coast road for some miles, through a region dreary and brown, at this season, but affording ample pasturage for sheep and cattle in the summer time,—now, alas ! reported to be nearly swept from the face of the country. Behind, the bold cliffs and promontories of Achill formed a noble outline ; and distant views of the great Nephin were obtained on the right. We met many poor persons coming eight, ten, twelve, and we were assured sixteen Irish miles, for a quart or two of meal. This is a great hardship, and arises from the deficiency of stores in a country where the people have been accustomed to grow all they wanted beneath their feet. We met with cases of labourers who, after they had earned their pittance on the roads, had to be out two days and a night, before they could return, with the purchased necessaries, to their families.

A mountain road struck off to the left, which was the right direction for all of us, and brought us to the house of our new acquaintance. He has about 3000 acres under long lease, and is one of those, who, after residing here all his life-time, and bringing up a family, is now cast down by the impoverished state of his small tenantry, and of everything around him, and would be glad to sell out his property, and emigrate elsewhere. It is a wild mountain district ; but some fine land, handsomely sloping down to a navigable tide estuary. Just by was the old burying-ground at Kilcommon, where more than one funeral was going on at the time. Here we took boat for the opposite shore, the residence of our friend who had so kindly come to conduct us. There was no road, at present, of any kind to his house.

Rossport, the name of this truly isolated abode, is prettily situated in a nook of the eastern shore of the noble estuary of the Greyhound river, commanding from the house—between the bold promontories of Erris-head and the point of Runroe—a fine peep of the rolling white-crested Atlantic. The tide rises rapidly, and sweeps in with the strong current of a broad swift river. The property is bounded on the other side by an arm of the sea, so that it forms a peninsular, containing about 1300 acres, held from the lord of the soil, on a lease for lives renewable for ever, at a rent little more than nominal ; and is therefore nearly of the value of freehold, as a purchase or security. The soil is various and sufficiently good, with the most admirable facilities for manuring with sand and sea-wrack, all round. Samuel Bourns occupies a portion himself, and has besides a small tenantry of about seventy families upon the estate. His best tenants, however, as in other places, are gone away, some in arrear, and the remainder so reduced, from the common failure, as to be in the greatest distress ; and involving himself and his family in the universal calamity. Having been a shopkeeper before he purchased this property and removed here, he continued the shop for the general convenience, being the only one where any of the useful articles of daily life could be obtained for twelve miles in one direction, and upwards of twenty in any other. His is the only Protestant family residing anywhere near, and is almost a patriarchal one, consisting of himself and wife, a grown-up son, two daughters, and three younger children, his own mother, his wife's mother, his wife's sister, and an English lady visitor, who had been much over the world, but was so charmed with this locality that she had taken up her residence with them, and now gave her kind assistance to the soup-kitchen, &c., as occasion required.

We lost no time in visiting the cottier tenantry. We found them poor and destitute enough, and without any means of being able to maintain themselves, or raising any return from their little allotments of land,—the potato-plot and oat-field of last year lying equally unprepared for the future. This was St. Patrick's day ; the day on which it is considered agricultural labours—always late in the west—should commence in earnest, and the peasantry are usually

busy on their holdings. The present contrast was truly melancholy. There were also, among the cottagers we visited, decent tailors, carpenters, and shoemakers, all entirely out of work, and unable to purchase food, much less to pay any rent or arrears. They had hitherto been supported on the small stocks of last year, now nearly exhausted. We saw some cases of great distress ; but not so utterly beyond hope and remedy as the extreme and appalling scenes we had witnessed in the Inner Mullet,—yet what must soon come to it without timely help. Our friend, unable to stem the daily gathering flood of destitution, and his own resources being utterly extinguished, had written the previous day an emphatic appeal to a leading gentleman in the Methodist connexion in London,—to which he was himself attached,—for assistance in the purchase of seed oats, by way of loan, with security on his unencumbered property,—understanding that body had large funds at their disposal for this very purpose. He had previously applied to take £500 of the Government loan, to employ his own people, on his own land ; but found the Committee sitting at Belmullet would have the right of selecting the labourers, and of sending their own paupers to be so employed, with a great loss of time in getting it, and other limitations and encumbrances.

Among other persons who had left his vocation and emigrated was the schoolmaster, so that the school was now abandoned. From the assistance granted by Wm. Forster, on behalf of the Society of Friends, the school-house was fitted up into a soup-kitchen. We attended the giving out of the soup ; and it appeared under the excellent management of the lady before mentioned, and S. Bourns's son. Without this timely assistance, he declared, a large portion of his tenantry must have perished. The poor people came a very long way, from other districts, in hopes of partaking of the bounty, and were not sent empty away. While at the soup-kitchen, we received a visit from Lieutenant Carey, the coast-guard officer of these parts, whose station was at the point on the other side of the creek, and who, with our host and his opposite neighbour,—the only three residents of respectability within a radius of ten to fifteen miles,—formed the Relief Committee. With him an engagement was made for the morrow.

The sun set gloriously across the great Atlantic, and brought out the magnificent features of the coast in bold relief. The scenery wants foliage, but nothing else, to render it most attractive.

The forthcoming morning we had again the pleasure of witnessing a barrel of clothes, from the London Ladies' Committee, distributed to the numerous applicants. We had overtaken it the day before in a country cart, with the singular address of " S. Bourns, North Coast, Mayo," which somewhat indefinite direction had nevertheless found its destination quite correctly. The delight and admiration infused into the countenances of the poor people, at sight of some of the articles, was worth the journey to behold. I trust the Society will not be charged with underhand proselytism, from the droll figures occasionally cut by some of the poor natives, under the new set-out of a well-proportioned left off " Friend's" coat.

After breakfast, according to appointment, we started for Lieutenant Carey's, to visit, under his guidance, the magnificent scenery of the north coast of Erris. A little rising of the weather prevents much of it being accessible, and the day looked squally and doubtful. Samuel Bourns's boat carried us safely down the rapid estuary of the Greyhound river, to a point on the opposite shore, from which it was a walk of about a mile along the strand to Lieutenant Carey's. He had already decided that it was too uncertain and stormy to venture round the point of Runroe, and so by Kid Island, and the cliffs of Benwee. The great cave there, is only to be entered in very calm weather. We therefore walked across, about four miles, to Portacloy, a small fishing and coast-guard station on the north coast. There are new roads making throughout this district, under the Board of Works, which will be very useful if

ever the resources of the country are fairly developed. As a specimen of the great distress of the poor country people, and the want of a market, he told me he had just bought a very pretty cow and calf for £2. 5s., taking them as a favour. This gentleman gave it as his opinion that ten years of successive good harvest would not place the people where they were two years ago. We saw one poor fellow who had had a horse and four sheep “driven” for 25s. rent. They had been sold that morning for 20s.

The coast-guard galley was soon ordered out, under the lieutenant’s directions, manned by four of those sturdy and intrepid characters peculiar to this arduous service. Portacloy is a deep rift in these hostile cliffs, otherwise wholly inaccessible for many miles. There is scarcely any proper landing, the beach being high and rough with rocks ; and so great is the swell and turbulence of the ocean that accidents not unfrequently happen. A man had recently been swept off the rocks while catching crabs ; and two poor women, we afterwards heard, met with the same fate that very morning, while gathering sea-weed for food. With all their skill, our boat, while hastily getting us on board, was struck by a sea, thoroughly drenching two or three of those on that side, and obliging us to put out instantly, with one short of our complement of men, for fear of being beaten on the rocks ; seizing another opportunity, between the waves, for taking him on board. The rocks rise on each side of this opening as if riven asunder by some recent catastrophe, the fragments being strewed below. On approaching the mouth of the harbour the Stags of Broadhaven are distinguished on the left, apparently a promontory of the main land when first seen, but gradually break off from the coast, and then separate from each other, exhibiting their singular structure, and the deep fissures between them, as the boat makes way. On rounding a point eastward, the most fearful scenery bursts at once upon the astonished beholder. An amphitheatre of cliffs rises stupendous, rugged, black, perpendicular,—their summits sharply pinnacled against the sky, and with some remarkable twists in their structure, that give them a most impending appearance. These inaccessible strongholds are still the resort of eagles, several of which we saw, both soaring aloft and perched fearlessly on projections of the rock. The wild fowl are innumerable. Innismuck, or Pig Island, formed the extremity of this wonderful range, through which there is a natural archway, impassable at all times. The eddies are so uncertain, and the gusts so violent, on this terrific coast, that a sail is not allowed to the revenue boats. The spot was pointed out where, some time since, a coast-guard boat was lost, and all, including an inspecting officer, perished, save one man who escaped off the rocks most wonderfully. After making what appeared to us some dangerous passages between the surging boiling rocks, we appeared to be directly approaching the perpendicular cliff, in one of the highest parts. The seaman in command at the bow-oar inquired if we thought there was a passage *through*. Startled,—as we were now approaching the solid façade of impending cliffs, with a rapidity that seemed to bring them all about us, and were within a few boats’ length,—I replied, “Impossible.” “Steady boys,—keep your seats,—“pull !” and instantly an archway appeared, at the base of those adamantine barriers, of width just sufficient for the oars to play, and within which we caught sight of the sea, wreathing and roaring like some prostrate monster enchained. “Back in an instant !” shouted our commander. There were some stationary moments before the boat could be recovered, and the motion reversed, during which it seemed as if the suckage of the sea would gain the mastery, and draw us down irrevocably into its jaws ; and those who can enter into the rushing-by of the trees and hedges, from within a vehicle in motion,—or the shore, from a vessel rapidly propelled,—can easily imagine, that with the rising of the boat on the swell of the surge, the archway and overhanging cliffs—close under them as we were—seemed at the moment instinct with motion, and in the act of falling, as if in concert with the ocean to close in upon us, and seize their prey. It was altogether the most sublime and exciting combination of reality and imagination I have ever experienced. The superincumbent mass of nature’s masonry was at least 600 feet above the archway, and it was marked with a deep furrow or channel from the summit to the entrance of the orifice. There

was no real danger, and the experienced boatman would not have hesitated with his crew alone ; but from the state of the tide, the sea—chafed within that narrow gorge—was running higher than he expected, and one or two of the company had exhibited symptoms of timidity, from which there might have arisen danger, which he thought it safest not to risk.

We afterwards rowed round to the other opening of this natural tunnel. The sea seemed moderately placid, but there were some ugly rocks in case of a boat becoming unmanageable. The whole coast is truly wonderful. The loftiest cliffs are however westward, rising 900 feet at Benwee. There is a continuation of magnificent scenery, with the extraordinary passage of Moista Sound, eastward to Bealderrig. Our landing was curiously effected, through a wilderness of rocks, at Porturlin—another coast-guard station—from whence we walked back over the mountains to Rosspport, crossing a creek in a manner by no means unusual in this part of the country, by hailing a stout fellow at a distance, who voluntarily offers his back, and is more than satisfied by a few pence from the stranger.

•  
LETTER V.

ROSSPORT — SLIGO.

18th—20th of 3rd mo. 1847.

I HAD become so much interested about S. Bourns and his property, and so well acquainted, in this day's excursion, that we seemed to form quite part of the family in the evening. He believed a very large field to be open, in agriculture, in fisheries, and in some other channels, if only skill and capital could be attracted to the spot. He offered me forty acres,—not of mountain or moor, but of land that had been reclaimed,—for ten years, for nothing ; simply for the sake of getting it under improved cultivation, or any cultivation at all. This I could not undertake. But I did agree, before the evening was out, to supply the seed, and pay the labour *for five acres flax*, he finding the land, and his son the superintendence,—the produce to be divided ; and an agreement to this effect was regularly signed. A Friend at Belfast, a member of one of the first mercantile and manufacturing houses there, had particularly desired I would seize any opportunity that presented for the introduction or encouragement of flax, especially in new districts ; and though I did not feel it so much within my province as the endeavour to fill up, in some degree, the immense vacancy in human food, occasioned by the loss of the potato,—yet I was quite willing to undertake this little speculation, from the belief that flax is the crop which, on any given quantity of land, employs the greatest amount and variety of manual and mechanical labour, from first to last, of any crop whatever. My friend—of whose House I came to order the flax seed, when subsequently in Belfast—was so pleased with the experiment, and the circumstances of its being undertaken in a new locality, that he generously doubled the quantity, as a free gift, to the party in question,—to whom, also, I arranged to send a supply of turnip and carrot seeds, for the service of himself and his poor tenantry, and also some for his opposite neighbour ; to which was afterwards added some of the best varieties of the cabbage, and a small assortment of handy agricultural implements, from means supplied by a Friend. Five pounds from the Ladies' Committee of London was likewise left with Maria Bourns, for the institution of some employment she had in view for the poor women, in the way of providing coarse clothing material.

The excursion and walks above-mentioned gave ample opportunity for becoming acquainted with S. Bourns and his property, and for conversation with lieut Carey, an experienced officer, who had been stationed in various parts of the world. His opinion coincided with everything we had heard and met with, as to the orderly and peaceable disposition and

patient endurance of the people, under unheard-of privations and sufferings, and also of the rich, but neglected capabilities of the country. He had ocular demonstration, daily, of what might be done in the way of fisheries, from what was brought in by the poor fishermen with their miserable craft and tackle at the several stations under his command. He mentioned the sperm whale was occasionally seen off the north coast in numbers. We noticed all the estuaries abounding with seals.

I had previously remarked to a gentleman, that the peasantry we had met, especially the men, did not look so very miserably clad along the public road before reaching Belmullet. "You don't know how that is, I dare say," he replied; "they have often only one decent suit among a whole family, or among half a dozen, which he who wants to go out makes use of, the others remaining in bed, or at least at home. I won't vouch for the literal truth of it," said he, "but I was told, that there was but one hat in the whole island of Achill, some time ago, which was considered common property, and he who wished to visit the main land regularly borrowed!"

Having a long day's walk before us—for we were wholly out of the reach of conveyances—without any stopping place short of twenty miles, we were up betimes in the morning,—the tide also serving early, to take us the whole navigable distance up the Greyhound river. It is a fine broad estuary for some miles, narrowing rapidly into a mountain torrent, beyond the tide reach. Our friend would not do otherwise than accompany us as far as the boat could go, which was within about a mile of Glanamoy bridge,—a great saving of distance, but not so much in point of time, for it was a strong head-wind to work against, and a heavy boat. From the quantity of wild fowl on the bosom and banks of this river, it could be but rarely disturbed by the sound of sportman's gun. Duly provisioned by the kind forethought of the ladies, it was not without emotion that we took leave of our host at this solitary spot, and after having clambered the rough bank, watched the last mutual wave of the hand, till the lessening boat disappeared behind a bend of the stream.

At Glanamoy bridge we gained the north coast road from Belmullet to Ballycastle. The wind was very violent to contend against, and our distance great. The country was dreary on both sides, rising in monotonous masses, with nothing, but intervening bog and moor-land, yet thickly peopled in parts. As the road approached the coast it became much more interesting, revealing the magnificent promontories behind us, with the Stags far out at sea. It was a noble walk along the edge of the cliff, a considerable height above the whitening ocean. A deep glen drove us inland, until the road, by a great bend, could descend sufficiently to cross it; and after rising again, we looked straight down into one of the loveliest of bright emerald basins, shut in and sheltered by black mural precipices,—and forward to the long, singularly inclined, causeway-like headland of Downpatrick, with its end broken off. On this fragment are the remains of buildings of some extent, plainly visible from the verge of the main-land cliff, and evidently the handy-work of man, but now perfectly inaccessible, and have been so for ages. Of course the tutelar saint has many traditions here.

Ballycastle occupies a bleak, but fine position. Up a valley, opening southward, the eye is saluted by the appearance of a few trees; but we were now out of Erris. It was two miles to Mount Glen, an address we had the favour of; and the increased planting, the appearance of hedgerows and agriculture, the busy evidences around a mill on the property, bespoke the resident gentleman. While partaking of the lady's hospitality, and conversing about the distress of the neighbourhood, which she described as almost over-whelming in the rural districts around them, the gentleman and his son came in. They spoke in the highest terms of Wm. Forster's visit, and of the service it had been to them in the hour of need. The lady having mentioned that W. F. had signified to her his intention of endeavouring to obtain a

package of clothing for her destitute poor, than which she said there could be no greater boon, I had no hesitation in ratifying the same, by engaging to send her one of the bales placed at my disposal by the London Ladies' Committee. This gentleman being a justice of the peace, I conversed with him about the objection raised against doing anything for the poor peasantry in the way of providing them with seed, on the ground of its being likely to serve the landlord only, who would come down upon the crop. Whatever liability might apply to grain in this respect, he replied, there was none whatever to be apprehended in regard to green crops. They were not worth the landlord's while, and he had never known an instance of their being taken. He offered his guarantee, as a magistrate, against such being the case, where he had any influence or authority. His son was most earnest for a supply of small seeds, however limited, being difficult to obtain in their remote quarter; and undertook the charge of distribution, and to answer for the right use.

It was still ten miles to Killala, and dark some time before we reached it. The Presbyterian minister and his wife, residing near this town, are among those who are devoting their time and utmost energies to the help of the poor, and the mitigation of their severe sufferings, but are almost overwhelmed by the extent and magnitude of the calamity on every side. I believe we have no idea of the daily exertion, self-sacrifice and agony of spirit they have to go through, whose lot is cast, almost single-handed, in the midst of these fearful scenes of want and suffering, without the power to relieve. Some have been ready to fly their homes in terror and despair, but for the paramount sense of higher duty and kindred compassion. They do indeed require the warmest sympathy, and their hands to be effectively upheld. Unless such devoted instruments had been here and there raised up, the country must have become depopulated. We were much disappointed in not being able to call upon the pastor of. Mullaferry, but the lateness of the hour in an unknown locality, and being strangers, forbade. This did not present opening a correspondence, which resulted in the supply of a bale of clothing from the London Ladies. "Truly"—the wife of the minister, had previously written in a letter to Dr. Edgar, of Belfast—"they need clothes almost as much as food. Their rags are reduced to such a state, that nothing but a sense of duty could induce me to come in contact with them."

Finding nothing very attractive in the narrow streets and accommodation of Killala, — though an old place full of recollections, an ancient bishopric, and with a very interesting round tower,—and being but a short stage, we ordered out a car, and pushed forward to Ballina, receiving, though late, a most hearty welcome from one or two familiar faces at our former comfortable hotel, on our safe and happy return.

We took the mail, next morning, from Ballina to Sligo. The country appeared tolerably well cultivated after what we had left ; the cottages decent, and more live stock about them. There were several respectable homesteads, and even the novel and refreshing sight of a drove of pigs along the public road. The beggary about the coach, wherever it stopped, was very violent ; and we heard sad tales of the distress in the villages, particularly along the shore. It is a fine ride the whole distance. The Ox mountains are on the right ; the varied indentations of the sea, Knocknarea, and distant views of the Ben Bulbin range, on the left. A beautiful river with vast water power comes rushing down at Ballisadare, where the Sligo and Dublin mail meets the western mail from Castlebar.

Again, the tide of emigration—increasing on all the roads in proportion to the proximity and size of the port—is truly affecting. The obvious strength of the country is departing with those who go. They are in no case—except where assisted by the landlord, or other funds—the very paupers. These have not the means. But they are just those who have still a little left, able and calculated to do well with a fair chance and encouragement, and are going to enrich

other and better constituted lands, with the same materials beneath their feet. The expressions of despair at the state and prospects of the country, emanating from persons of respectability and reflection,—not the mere outbursts of excited or party feeling, but arising from their strong sense of the sad reality,—such as, “poor Ireland’s done,”—“the country’s gone for ever,”—“it can never again recover,”—“if Government won’t send us seed-corn, they’d better send soldiers at once to destroy the people ; it would be far more humane,”—were of constant occurrence. Of course, one meets with many short-sighted and bitter reflections from those who suffer.

We reached Sligo early in the afternoon, and our first enquiry was for Wm. Forster and his companions, who were to come here from Ballina. Learning they had not left, I went down immediately to their hotel, and just caught our dear friend W. F., and Joseph Harvey, already seated in a car, in the act of departing for Manor Hamilton. I took a seat for a short distance out of the town, for the privilege of company and conversation. It was the next day that Joseph Harvey was laid up with fever at Manor Hamilton, which seemed to come very close home to us.

Not feeling we had much to do with the large towns, the only call I made in Sligo—except needful arrangements with the shipping agent, for the transit of goods—was on a lady, well known for her energetic and devoted benevolence on behalf of the poor, with whom we spent the evening. She is a widow lady, and her health was then suffering, from being much overdone. She has long had a school for the most indigent, under her care and influence ; and now gives a dinner of bread and soup to upwards of 120 poor children every day. The unrivalled attendance at her school, in consequence of this attractive meal, has set the heads of other schools at work to distribute also,—the beneficial example having met with general approbation. She follows up many of these “forlorn little ones” to their cheerless homes, and extends the helping hand to endeavour to keep dying fathers, or sick and lonely widows, from an untimely grave. She is also much interested in the promotion of female industry, in the way of manufacturing cheap clothing ; and I left with her £5, on behalf of the Ladies’ Committee of London, for the encouragement of a work in which she is engaged,—which, she has since written, has gained more than other five pounds, for the same cause.

Narrative of a recent journey ... in Ireland, in connexion with the subject of supplying small ... (1847)

Author : William Bennett

Year : 1847

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

Book from the collections of : Oxford University

Collection : europeanlibraries

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/narrativearecen00benngoog>

Edited and uploaded to [www.aughty.org](http://www.aughty.org)

October 10 2011