

IRISH MEMORIES

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“THE natives leave the right arms of their infant males unchristened, as they call it, to the end that they may give a more ungracious and ungodly blow when they are carried away by traditious obscurities”—thus wrote an early chronicler of the customs of the Irish. The expression “traditious obscurities”, apart from its Elizabethan tang, has descriptive significance for a whole range of folk-lore and traditional custom, too often hidden from our eyes.

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There are so many Irelands. There is that of my Ulster boyhood. The school with its faded maps, its cardboard-mounted Ten Commandments and regulations of the National Commissioners of Education, De Vere Foster copy-books, Joyce's histories, Sullivan's geographies and grammars, long desks with the initials of past generations cut on both sides, clerical school management, teachers paid by results anxious under His Majesty's inspectors (too often unenlightened inquisitors). Discipline was severe. Literally we had to toe the line, circles painted on the floor for the use of classes! Eagerly we discussed whether a horse's hair across the palm of the hand would split the bamboo cane picked by the schoolmaster for its elastic swishing quality. Is it any wonder that, when the circus came to town, we “mitched”, as we called playing truant? Outside the schoolroom there was much to excite a boy—fair-days, the R.I.C., the donkey races, the pig-killing, the fights outside public houses, the “drumming” of Orange parades and the occasional riots.

There was much that was Puritan to offset these scenes,—catechism, religious instruction, Sunday School, long sermons, much revivalism, Band of Hope meetings. The treats of the year were Sunday School prize-givings, and what were called soirees, really tea parties with current loaves and penny “baps”.

At home there was plain living. Potatoes and bread were the staples of the diet. “Champ” (mashed potatoes), panada (bread and milk), slim bread (potato bread), porridge of various kinds, soda farls, oat-cakes, apple dumplings—all these were based on flour and potatoes. There were, of course, fresh

vegetables, some fruit, eggs, milk, buttermilk and meat. But it was a table with few delicacies. The salt box, the griddle, the turf-fire, the settle bed, oil lamps and candles, meant an inside round of household work added to the labour of garden, byre and barn and field, relieved by the excitement of weddings and wakes.

Plumbing, household science, theatres, picture-houses, urban amenities were still in the future. After nearly a century and a half, John Wesley's exhortation to his lay-preachers in 1769 could be understood, and might well have still been taken to heart by a few country houses;—

“Dear Brother,

I shall now tell you the things which have been, more or less, upon my mind ever since I was in the north of Ireland. If you forget them you will be a sufferer, and so will the people; if you observe them, it will be good for both. Be steadily serious. There is no country upon earth where this is more necessary than Ireland, as you are generally encompassed with those who, with a little encouragement, would laugh or trifle from morning till night. In every town visit all you can, from house to house; but on this, and every other, occasion avoid all familiarity with women, this is deadly poison both to them and to you. You cannot be too wary in this respect. Be active, be diligent; avoid all laziness, sloth, indolence; fly from every degree, every appearance of it, else you will never be more than half a Christian. Be cleanly; in this let the Methodists take pattern by the Quakers. Avoid all nastiness, dirt, slovenliness, both in your person, clothes, house and all about you. Do not stink above ground! Whatever clothes you have, let them be whole, no rents, no tatters, no rags; these are a scandal to either man or woman, being another fruit of vile laziness. Mend your clothes, or I shall never expect to see you mend your lives. Let none ever see a ragged Methodist. Clean yourselves of lice; take pains in this. Do not cut off your hair; but clean it and keep it clean. Cure yourself and your family of the itch; a spoonful of brimstone will cure you. To let this run from year to year proves both sloth and uncleanness; away with it at once; let not the North be any longer a proverb of reproach to all the nation. Use no snuff, unless prescribed by a physician. I suppose no other nation in Europe is in such vile bondage to this silly, nasty, dirty custom as the Irish are. Touch no dram; it is liquid fire; it is a sure though slow, poison; it saps the very springs of life. In Ireland, above all countries in the world, I would sacredly abstain from this, because the evil is so general; and to this and snuff and smoky cabins I impute the blindness, which is so exceeding common throughout the nation. I particularly desire, wherever you have preaching, that there may be a Little House. Let this be got without delay. Wherever it is not, let none expect to see me.”

The euphemism "Little House" stood for a convenience far below the standard of Chic Sale.

Here there was an Ireland shot through with superstitions, hatreds, feuds and generousities often inexplicable. We were not as hard-headed as the Scots, though the accent was sharper, and the life at times both more grim and more gay by turns. One of the "traditious obscurities" of those days was the Christmas rhyming—a practice shrouded in mystery. The fragments of the drama we as children enacted may have been cast for the original Druids.

The national schools ignored these lines that passed down from mouth to mouth. What energy we put into the parts of St. George, St. Patrick, Beelzebub and the Devil!

The prologue ran thus;

"Room, room, brave and gallant boys, come give us room to rhyme,
We come to show activity about these Christmas times,
Active youth and active age, the like was never acted on the stage,
And if you don't believe what I say, enter in St. George and he'll
clear the way."

Here is Dr. Scott,

St. Patrick: "What can you cure, Doctor?"

Doctor: "I can cure the plague within the plague, the palsy
or the gout."

St. Patrick: "What's your medicine, doctor?"

Doctor: "The rue, the rue,
Brock's dew,
Hog's lar',
Pitch and tar,
The sap of the poker, the juice of the tongs,
Three turkey-cock's eggs nine yards long.
Put these in a hen's bladder,
And stir up with a cat's feather,—
And if Jack's a living man, he'll get up and sing."

Beelzebub I can remember played by a nervous boy trying to appear fierce with a shillelagh in his hand:

"Here comes I, Beelzebub,
Over my shoulder I carry my club,
And in my a hand a dripping pan,
I think myself a jolly old man.
And if you don't believe what I say
Enter in Devil Doit and he'll clear the way."

Devil Doit rattles the money-box and bursts in with,

"Here comes I, wee Devil Doit,
If you don't give me money, I'll sweep you all out.
Money I want and money I crave,
If you don't give me money, I'll sweep you all to your grave."

So this form of drama lived in communities where the pulpit had won for a time a victory over the theatre. The stage was considered a thing of the devil. But the Christmas memories remained. Meantime there was the Celtic southern Ireland of which the North was suspicious, and yet whose manner of living had penetrated imperceptibly into the way of life in Ulster.

This Celtic Ireland had many aspects. There was the land of "Celtic twilight", the country of Synge and Yeats and Stephens. Literature has taught us to look for this land in the bogs and rugged rocks and hills of the West, in Connemara, in Kerry or Cork. Sagas and hero tales. Old men and women sitting by turf fires spun tales of banshees and "good people". Hedge schoolmasters had Horace at their finger-tips. Riders to the sea went down to death, to the keening of their women-folk.

Another Ireland is that of the "stage Irishman". It is a merry happy-go-lucky present. Charles Lever and George Birmingham give us that world with its boasting, race-meetings, the wit of the court-room and the political platform, the hard-spitting gay bargaining at the fair and the "luck penny" at the bar. Romantic, gallant, amusing gay.

Then comes a more sombre scene—the Ireland of small farms, rack rents, land wars, boycotts, and the bitter strife of the Trouble—a red page of struggle lasting seven hundred years, and the end is not yet.

But there is the contrast to all that—the Ireland of the Faith, Island of Saints and Scholars. Holy wells, pilgrimages and roadside shrines, well filled chapels and black frocked priests remind us of the paradox of a people with a fierce love of political liberty at the same time deeply devoted to the most authoritarian of Christian creeds. All these Irelands have turned the attention of the world away from studies of the real pattern of its life.

Now there are certain vital traditional customs that dominate Irish life. These customs, though obscure in origin, still wield an enormous influence over Irishmen at home. Ireland cannot be understood apart from some knowledge of these "traditious obscurities". First of all it is necessary to

realize that Ireland has a population which is sixty-three per cent rural, but even the non-rural population is dominated by the small-holder. Few farms are large, and the land and the family are the dominating factors. The close association of the family with the soil has implications and consequences that determine the whole pattern of Irish peasant life. Irish "familism" is a stubborn traditional growth. The match-making, the dowries, the power of the old, the distribution of duties in the family, the delayed marriage age, the "familistic" shop in town, the pride of blood—all spring from a framework of custom which has its roots in myth and folk legend—long submerged, but none the less effective. In the Irish Free State sixty-three per cent live in rural areas, i.e., outside cities and towns. Fifty-one per cent of all occupied persons, male and female, in southern Ireland work at agriculture. The majority of Irish farmers support themselves upon farms averaging from fifteen to thirty acres in area. Thus of those engaged in agriculture eight of every ten persons live by small-farm production. The farm is worked with the help of the whole family, with little mechanical aid, and the economy is that of the peasant.

So far, so good. But there are controls on labour other than that of self-interest. Economics must give place to anthropology. The farm has the name of its family inalienably associated with it. If one of the sons opens a shop in the neighbouring village or town, the shop carries the name just as proudly, and the whole army of cousins and relatives must be customers.

How difficult it is to apply economic concepts to the Irish farm enterprise is seen by reference to the physical inventory of one part of the farm—the "haggard". This is the farm yard. Here are the cattle byre and stable, the pig-sty, the hen-house, hayrick, turf-rick, the straw covered pit of turnip and mangels. The "haggard" and home is the sphere of the "woman of the house". The men look after the fields and garden, where the customs and rivalries of the community largely determine the tasks and their season. Immemorial folklore confirms the division of tasks, a woman being "unlucky" in the masculine enterprises.

The pattern remains unchanging through generations. The lack of land thus makes Ireland a land of bachelors and old maids. Grown men often are found working on the home farm, and are known as the "boys". Sixty-two per cent of all males between the ages of thirty and thirty-five are still unmarried;

forty-two per cent of all women who reach that age are single. Only in Ireland is a single man or woman of thirty the rule rather than the exception. One man out of four who reaches fifty is a bachelor in Ireland. Then there is the emigration of the young men for whom there is no land, making rural Ireland largely a country of the older people.

The male has a special precedence, and has the responsibility of marrying and carrying on the family. The "old people" in turning over the farm to the young married couple are treated with great respect and accorded special honour. The "west room" to which the "old couple" move, has special significance. This room contains the best furniture, all religious objects, and is a sort of a parlour. No outhouses, sheds or other buildings are built on this side of the house. In this room "marriage contracts" are signed, and to enter it the permission of the old must be secured. The origin of this custom of the "west room" is lost. Traditionally the West is the land of the dead. We speak even to-day of "going west". Legends of Celtic and Greek mythology saw the gardens of the after-life to the West in the setting sun. Of these the Irish peasant has little knowledge, but undoubtedly there is an authority and prestige conferring privilege on age. The "old man's curse" is another sample of this same occult power attaching to the old.

The familistic pattern, the rights of kinship, the responsibility of "keeping the name on the land", the care with which the daughter-in-law is chosen and brought into the family, these depend on social rather than economic considerations. Hunger, reproduction, love and anger, domination and submission—these satisfactions are carefully controlled and patterned.

The conditioning has been rigorous in a framework of customs and taboos. Transgression of convention is often punished by severe ostracism, if not worse. Those who have examined superficially the "match-making", with the sending of the speaker and the elaborate negotiation, tend to think of this as a crime against romance and an unpardonable infringement of the right to happiness associated in our minds with free choice of a partner. It all seems such cynical barter. But we should recognize how deeply involved all the members of both families are in a match-making. Here is a convention, and it is probable that a living convention may prove as joyous as bohemian revolt. The essential conservatism of the countryman and countrywoman certainly tends to re-inforce the convention. The power of the old men, the superstition of the "good

people", the rigidity of the customs relating to the dead—all these are obscure. The anthropologist has in Ireland a museum of folk-lore and a form of society whose very being is determined by other than purely economic or logical directives.

Recent outrages have underlined how meagre our knowledge of the Irish is. Synge's *Playboy* is a picture of another social organization with deep emotional content. Our modern world has attempted to divorce sentiment and logical self-interest. Rural Ireland still has a unity of spirit and a framework of society built on the unconscious rather than the conscious. Who knows which scheme of values is the better? "Man does not live by bread alone." Human sentiment behind the human family is not to be lightly regarded. The permanence of social obligations based on kinship and possible future expectancies of kinship and friendship, the control of the old, the rhythm of the seasonal work, the reciprocity between land and family through generations, and a whole network of conventions and customs establishing a familiar authoritarianism, indicate a range of "traditious obscurities" as yet seen only "through a glass darkly".

The world knows something of other Irelands—Ulster, romantic literary Ireland, the "brogue" and "blarney" Ireland of wit and comedy, the land of bitter conflict and violence, the country of parish priest and Catholic piety. But there are deeper roots to the Irish countryman than are obvious on the surface. It has been the purpose of this article to suggest the power of obscure forces. When we examine the history of Irish revolt, we tend to view it under the aspect of an nineteenth century liberal way of regarding revolution as a progressive "sluffing off" of old forms and a coming of new forms. The popular view of the fight for Irish freedom gives undue emphasis to the democratic elements in this long struggle. Recent revolutions have enabled us to avoid this categorization of all revolt as popular and progressive. (Revolutions may be reactionary.) There is little doubt that the liberal and advance views and policies of English political and social reformers, and their threat to old ways, stimulated the reaction of the Irish countrymen against urbanism and what were thought to be alien manners of doubtful morality. The fight for freedom was a fight to re-establish an old culture and language, build dykes against the waves of modern libertarianism, and re-establish the power of the small-holder.

It is worth noting that the policies of the De Valera administration reflect in part these conservative tendencies of the Irish small farmers, and fit the pattern and psychology of the rural communities, particularly in the West of Ireland.

Folk custom and folk belief, "survival" of an ancient day play an important *rôle* in the life of the Irish. These "non-logical" beliefs spring from a deep regard for the supernatural. The roots, therefore, of the structure of custom and habit lie very deep—rooted not only in the devotion to the Catholic faith, but also in devotion to those who have passed on from this earthly scene. Schopenhauer has said that all philosophy begins in speculation as to death. The Irish are much impressed by death; and the symbolism of the "pisherogues" recalls pagan mysteries.

In Gaelic, one and the same word does service for funeral and multitude. In fairy-lore "there is never a funeral but the other people are at it too, walking along behind". Every man in death commands a multitude. So the chief expression of traditional social life reminds all how big a place in Ireland is occupied by "traditious obscurities".