

# ACHILL ISLAND, MAYO: A REMINISCENCE\*

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TO summon up the giddy ghosts of memory, one cannot set a date (as, say, June 30, 1939). For the Past is so inextricably entwined with the Present, and that again with the Future, in our sentient being—our waking thoughts, most of all our dreams—that it just can't be done.

When I ask my grocer for my war ration of tea, or my banker for a loan, it is not just to a salesman or a financier that I am speaking. With neither of them, in such relation, can there be a throb of understanding. They are rather two human beings, actuated—or, should I say, mesmerized?—each by the tentacles of his past, the accretions within his person of a long line of ancestors, some good, some bad, some ignoble, some honourable. A lineage precisely as ancient as that of any "blue-blood" in the realm: it is derived, if we are to believe tradition, from an identical source; they are barred from self-perfectibility by the same flaming sword: sojourners alike in the Vale of Tears.

Even if it is only buying a postage stamp, I must get to the bottom of the family of the salesman at the corner store. When he is at leisure, of course, and as quickly as is decently possible, I ask him where he was born, who were his parents, Irish or Scottish or English. This is the first sword-thrust at the joint in his armour that always—from fear or foolish pride (as in the English)—people carry burdensomely through the years. If, as is common enough, my friend at the corner store says he is Canadian-born, but of one of the above-mentioned strains, *then I have him*. A relation is established, one knows where one is going and can proceed to other things that lead perhaps to a blind alley or dull incomprehension. But should it develop that he was born on the farm, or is a war veteran, an intimate relation is immediately established, and one can go on from one thing to another—to the state of the crops, Hitler's dilemma, the neighbor's children and dogs, and so on. Before I have been talking to the man long, we are back in County Down, Ireland, or in a little peasant hut under the Carpathians. We meet but once and not again for perhaps a year, but then we take up where we left off.

\*An unfinished article found in the papers of the late J. F. B. Livesay.  
EDITOR.

Yes—these two things, where born and how, are for me the outer porteullis of the inner man. The lock may be rusty, the hinges stiff, but in them lies the splendor of the human soul. The armour is pierced. It is a kind of vanity, no doubt, this dragging of the truth to light. But if I can't get a smile out of the harassed woman who sells me a bun, I count the day ill-found.

So I am going to contribute a reminiscence of my own boyhood on a west of Ireland shore.

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Memory, obscured rather than lit by the dark lantern rays groping back into the past, is a tricky business of things remembered and things imagined; things that happened, and others that grew out of repeated play-acting until they achieved the solidity of the real.

There is no better example than the round tower of Rosturk Castle in County Mayo where I spent a year of my boyhood, teaching myself to read, at seven. It remained a romantic illusion for so many years in certain details, until exposed to the flash of the camera sixty-one years later. I suppose the truth was that the ancient staircase had been taken down, and the one I photographed was of wood; that stone staircase was associated in my mind with something of the ages and could never really vanish . . . But the old butler who remembered me as a child, when I visited Rosturk so many years later, was real.

My aunt, Emily Bligh, who married Vesey Stoney of Rosturk, was unable to bear children, and my uncle-by-marriage, set on founding an Anglo-Irish dynasty, constantly upbraided her for it. What more natural, then, than that the more engaging child of the huge Livesay family on the Isle of Wight, Emily's sister's son, myself, should be picked out of the ruck and at seven be brought over on a year's trial to Rosturk Castle? But then my aunt one day threw herself from a window, driven into the action by her unbearable melancholy. Robert Vesey Stoney married again and produced two sons. So where would the adopted lad, with his engaging English ways, have fitted in?

While Aunt Emily was a Protestant, like her husband, she was beloved by the peasants whom she visited constantly, all of another faith. On the other hand, Vesey Stoney, a bit peppery in his dealing, had fallen into disfavor with the priest and had been boycotted. He was a good landlord, and did his best to

improve the lot of his tenantry. Nevertheless, as High Sheriff, driving through his scattered estates, he heard pot-shots nicking his coach-and-four with its outriders. During the 1916 rising in Dublin he and his second wife went to England. Twice the Castle was taken by the rebels, but it was never damaged. Edward, the butler, was on hand throughout, and when danger threatened, he would bicycle eighteen miles to Westport to summon the military.

But for the stolen jam, discovered and reported to my uncle and the childish lie I told about it, I might have been brought up there, heir to innumerable acres of bog and island on Clare Bay, across from the sacred mountain of Croagh Patrick, where the fairies played—to the tune of “Plaze yer little Honor”, “God grant ye a pallet of straw in a corner of Hivin”. How vivid they are to me, those Irish on Achill Island, the poor peasants of my uncle’s estate!

There was real famine in this lovely land, famine—and evictions. Often I saw the mounted constabulary come clattering up to a cabin and turn out the poor folk, seal up the door, pull off the thatch—and maybe (in the strange freedom accorded me in my aunt’s home) I might have been eating potato-cake there half-an-hour before. I remember the crowd at the great market of Mulranny and the Father with his blackthorn, breaking the heads of the “disortherly”.

For a lad, never was such a scene. I was running barefoot half the time. The fine sea out over Clew Bay and Clare Island, where the old Pirate Queen (of whom I shall speak later) had her chief fortress hundreds of years ago! The tide runs out for miles, with the colleens digging up cockles with their great-toes. It’s no trick to find them when you know how:—they’ve a bit of sea-weed they drag along behind them, sometimes a hook of the finger will do it.

I could see, miles away to the West, the blue mountains of Mayo, pre-eminent being Croagh Patrick—St. Patrick’s Stack—which stood up like a pyramid against the pale sky; a path on it worn hollow by the thousands of pilgrims who have ascended its height of roughly three miles. Facing the north, the whole of Clew Bay rippled, with its 365 islands, one for every day in the year, and, beyond, the mountains of Achill and Ballycroy.

On Achill Island, where there were no forests and not much difference between summer and winter, I watched the peasants plant potatoes in spring in their “lazy-beds”, cutting turf on the mountains, seizing the broken summer days to sow and reap their hay sodden from much rainfall, putting on every scrap

of clothing they possessed as they went to mass on Sunday, clinging to their cabins as a snail to its shell.

Rosturk Castle, when seen now, as in the past, looks very lonely, built on the bleakest point of land that it was possible to find, connected with the mainland only by a long narrow stretch of sand which is just wide enough to admit of a carriage drive. There it stands alone, like a sentinel guarding the coast. Well enough for the Pirate Queen who so long ago held it against all comers! But in 1939 surely a Robinson Crusoe might have lived in that wild spot unenvied, even though he owned everything in sight—a magnificent sea, a few green islands, a stretch of wild mountain and heather, and another of bog.

Fine salmon were caught under my uncle's windows, as a good mountain stream ran into the sea there; turbot and trout, mackerel and herring abounded—one could see seals at times. The castle was curiously planned, with the famous staircase in one of the towers. (I was not misled; it now appears I *did* see it as a child) the rooms small but comfortable and the views on every side very memorable in their wild beauty. A charming lodge, let in the shooting season—a short distance from Mullranny, on the high neck of land where the roads to Ballyeroy and Achill part company, was typical of lush growth in Achill Island, with its tree fuchsias and rhododendrons flourishing as in native soil.

In an Italian map of the sixteenth century these islets are called "The Fortunate Islands", situated as they are in the inner sweep of the beautiful Clew Bay. The famous Pirate Queen, Grace of the Isles, had many castles, one of them called now Rockfleet—in memory of the ships which sailed the deep under this castle—all on the very edge of the waves; some of them towered into four storeys; in each she had a circular staircase of stone. Rosturk was one of these.

Grace of the Isles, according to tradition, put Elizabeth, Queen of England, in her place. When Grace visited the English coast, Elizabeth greeted her courteously and offered to make her a Countess. She replied brusquely that Elizabeth might as well receive such a distinction from herself. On her way home she called at Howth Castle, expecting to be treated in a style suitable to her dignity.

Told that she might not enter because the family was at dinner, she determined to take her revenge, and kidnapped the young heir, carrying him off to Connaught. She refused to deliver him up until she had exacted a promise that the Castle Gates should never be closed at the dinner hour, a practice observed for centuries.