

Another World

Letters from The West of Ireland 1884

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BALLINA, MAYO, *September 3.*

FROM Sligo to Ballina, a distance of thirty-seven Irish miles, I tried the four-wheeled public car, and had no reason to regret it. The shaking was considerable, but the pace was good ; there was a moderate number of passengers, with no excess of luggage ; and the company were intelligent and conversable. Between the seats on the four-wheeled car is a closed " well," as it is called, or long wooden sarcophagus, in which any number of small articles may be stowed away, and which easily swallows a bundle of salmon-rods. Above it the heavier luggage is piled up—it is well to get to leeward of that when the day is wet — and the whole is covered with waterproof tarpaulin. The team was a " unicorn," the harness of the simplest—consisting merely of headstalls and collars, traces and reins—and the driver urged the horses along with his voice, playing an accompaniment in the air with the cracks of his whip-thong. We sorely needed the tarpaulin covering, for flying showers swept across us in water-spouts, and nothing is more astounding to a stranger than the matter of-fact way in which Irish travellers accept the rain. The gentleman sitting next me wore nothing but a light overcoat ; yet when the rain was splashing down under the close collar of my thick ulster of Irish frieze, he calmly continued his talk on philology, as if the skies had been still beaming down on us, as they were to beam again in another five minutes. The young lady on my other side, in a cloth jacket and straw hat, interposed a small umbrella between her and the storm ; while a youth of literary tastes, who made the fourth on our side, was immersed in the pages of a yellow novel, reluctantly thrusting it into his pocket for a few minutes when the down-pour threatened to obliterate the type. Those storm showers were disagreeable while they lasted, yet I scarcely regretted them when once they had gone by. The sun burst out, a steam rose from the passengers, and we had time to dry before we were drenched again ; while the lights on land, sea, and sky were wonderful, more marvellously beautiful than those I had enjoyed on the showery drive from Killybegs to Donegal. The clouds are never so white as near the sea, and never have I seen their white brilliancy so intense, if I may use the expression, as near the Atlantic off western Ireland ; while others that are rapidly rolling up in dark banks are of the deepest tints of violet and indigo. And from time to time the perfect arch of a rainbow spans sea and land for a dozen of leagues or so. There is a fantastic contrast, too, in the lights in the distance. There a hill-line is shrouded in grey, and the summits that had become familiar to me are blurred and undistinguishable ; while there again, and miles further away, some mountain is brought near to you as if it were focused in a telescope. Probably I was thirty miles as the crow flies from the precipitous sea-face of Slieve Liagh, near Carrick, yet I saw the cliffs as I should never have seen them had I boated round from Teelin on that rainy day when I was forced to seek a shelter at Killybegs. The green hills hanging over us were equally beautiful in their way, with the rain-drops sparkling and glancing from the grass-blades as if the showers had been scattering diamonds and emeralds.

Those storm effects made the drive singularly enjoyable, and I could only wonder that our English artists so seldom come hither for subjects and inspiration. We have any quantity of Scotch Highland landscapes at the Academy, *à la* Graham and Macculloch, but seldom or never a scene from the West of Ireland. Yet, after the first few miles, the road to Ballina becomes decidedly dull. There is little to redeem it but those magnificent Donegal cliffs and the round mountains near Westport, with the peak of Croagh Patrick rising in a fantastically

coloured cloudland before us. After threading the bright plantations of young larches on Colonel Cooper's estate, we enter on a long wearisome waste of moorland, stretching backward to a ridge of grim low hills. Hovels are dotted about the peat-bogs, though here and there is a little oasis of better land, with a decent dwelling upon it, or a church, with its "glebe-house," or the habitation of the priest, surrounded by a thicket of trees. One of these "glebes" was pointed out to me as the residence of the late Mr Nangle, a Protestant divine of great force of character, and an uncompromising assailant of "Romish error." I mention him as a proof that the Catholics and their clergy may have more than toleration for an honest foe. I was told that Mr Nangle was on excellent terms with the priests, and was liked and respected by his poor Catholic neighbours. We delivered newspapers along the road in most primitive fashion. They were flung down on the road or pitched over a gate into a garden, to be picked up sooner or later, according as the people heard the rattle of the mail-cart or no. One letter-box on the roadside struck me particularly. On a stone wall was about a wheelbarrowful of earth, thickly covered with sod, in which a hole had been excavated like the entrance to a rabbit-burrow. It is probable that the inmates of these hovels do not care to tamper with their neighbours' papers or correspondence. But it was a different thing when we pulled up to deliver some parcels at the handsome stone pillars of a lodgeless gate to a well-gravelled approach, leading for a mile or more through the desolate bog to a large and rather handsome cottage *ornée*. It puzzled me to surmise how so excellent a house came to be dropped in the midst of its depressing surroundings. Among the parcels were a couple of joints of meat ; and sirloins of beef and legs of mutton must be strong temptations in those parts, where sharp-set and sharp-eyed gossoons go stalking hungrily about like so many Hooded crows. "Put them on the pillar and lave them ; nobody will stale them here," suggested one of our fellow-passengers, anxious to arrive at the end of his journey. But the driver, perhaps with a sense of his responsibilities, took more cynical views of human nature. "They won't stale them if they don't get the chance," he said ; and it seemed that our drive might be delayed indefinitely, when, happily, a road-mender was descried in the distance, and he promised to have an eye on the parcels "till some one should happen to come from the house." By the way, the road-maker's patronymic was Morrison, which leads me to remark again on the number of "foreign" names I have met with everywhere in western Ireland—that is to say, with the exception of the wild corner of northern Donegal at the back of the Bloody Foreland, where everybody is apparently either a M'Sweeney or a M'Fadden ; and there no stranger could have felt tempted to settle, as he would surely and summarily have been disposed of if he had settled. The Scottish colonists of Ulster come down to Ballyshannon, and, so far, there is nothing surprising. At Sligo there are frequent Scotch names on the signboards, which may be explained by intermittent immigration from the Clyde, owing to the regular steam traffic. But all along the roads from Ballyshannon to Ballina I observed "Johnsons," "Walkers," "Robertsons," &c., constantly above doors, and generally above the doors of the most respectable houses ; while the long-established and long-descended landed proprietors round Sligo—the Wynnes, the Gethins, the Gores, the Ormsbys, &c.—must either be pure Welsh or else from the Welsh marches. It is notorious, too, that many of the settlers took Irish names with Irish habits ; but were Scotland, Wales, and England to claim their own, the genuine Milesians hereabouts might be found to be in an actual minority.

Some of the hills pretty thickly covered with heather looked as if they might be fair grouse-beats ; and a gentleman on the car informed me that twenty years ago thirty brace was no unusual bag for two guns. But he added that nothing like that was to be done nowadays ; and, in fact, everywhere I have heard a similar story. Nor does it seem very easy to assign a reason, unless that poaching was active during the land agitation, and that the peasants often destroyed the eggs to spite the landlords. It was a bleak and wet country we were passing through, and I was the more surprised to see for the first time considerable numbers of

turkeys. They were undersized, but the broods were numerous ; yet the turkey is notoriously a delicate bird to rear, even with everything in the way of climate and feeding in its favour. Yesterday, again, as on the occasion of my drive into Sligo, we fell in with strings of people returning from the market. The difference in their appearance was just what I should have expected, after a survey of the desolation around and behind. In fact, these home-comings from market are a kind of review, in which the peasantry is paraded before the eyes of the passenger. You cannot possibly be greatly deceived, for you see the people at their best, yet ingenuously betraying their condition. Here we hardly met a single car. Here no money had been expended in new painting the rickety carts, which were overpacked with poorly dressed people, who had evidently owed a lift to the good-nature of neighbours. Nevertheless, a great many had to trudge on foot—a certain sign of extremity of poverty, There were weary women dragging themselves along behind their husbands, stopping occasionally to rest on the stones or to bathe their feet in the rivulets. Many of the horses and donkeys were wellnigh past work ; almost all were miserably out of condition. In fact, as you travel round western Ireland, you find that it is quite impossible to generalise. In one district the people are more than fairly well-to-do ; in the next they are almost over the verge of destitution. In one parish the horses are well fed, in the next the ribs may be counted through the staring coat ; and you see them dragging at the weather-soaked thatch, or even sniffing hungrily at the rushes on the peat-stacks. It seems to me, so far, that it is fundamentally a question of soil, and that the character of the landlords must be at least a secondary consideration. And as it is with the crofts or the farms, so it is with the hotels. I found a landlord and a large house, lofty and handsomely furnished rooms that would do credit to a fashionable English watering-place, perfect cleanliness, smart attendance, comfortable fare with reasonable charges. To be sure, Ballina is a favourite fish-ing resort in the summer; and the stranger who comes to fish will certainly feel loath to leave it.

The well-known salmon fisheries are held in shares, of which the Misses Little own five-sevenths. The returns vary considerably from year to year, but the average value may be set down at £4000. The rod-fishing is free to all comers, but the anglers give up the fish they kill. The best of the season is from the third week of June to the end of July ; and this year the sport has been indifferent. The most fortunate of the fishers only killed six fish in one day, while in 1883 the largest number was fifteen. Ballina strikes me as being a prosperous little place, though there is the usual blending of the extremes of comfort and wretchedness. But there are some handsome houses ; there are great mills above the broad river-fall, which is something between a rush and a cataract, and three imposing banking establishments in the main street within a few doors of each other. It used to import large quantities of corn to be ground in these mills ; but the trade has declined during the last three years, and it is the same sad story one hears everywhere of the land agitation. Ballina, like almost all the seaports on this coast, is at a disadvantage, owing to the dangers of its bar. The steamers which touch at Sligo on their way to and from Glasgow are perpetually meeting with mishaps. And if a steamer comes off the port in a gale, there is nothing for it but to lie off and to be knocked about by the billows, or prudently to steam away from a lee shore so perilous. The bar might be improved, but then there are wheels within wheels. The owners of the salmon-fisheries oppose any harbour works, which must certainly impair the value of the fishings ; and a slight resistance is sufficient to check enterprise, when capital, whether public or private, is so very hard to unlock. Even the landward communications are slow, primitive, and circuitous, though there is a railway to Dublin by way of Manulla Junction, where, apparently, there are always indefinite delays. But on the road to the excellent harbour of Sligo there are nothing but those public cars, which can only carry small packages. They talk of a horse-tramway, and are likely to go on talking about it. But between the car and the railway or even the tramway, there are the covered coaches and the carriers' carts and the capacious goods waggons which still remain to be introduced. I am glad to say that considerable emigration has been

going on from among the congested paupers in the neighbourhood. A painful process it must be ; and to-day when the Westport train left the Ballina platform there were women wailing and shrieking and falling into hysterics, as they took leave of their relatives bound for America. But painful as the process is, it is the best thing for those people, since such desperate diseases demand painful remedies.

WESTPORT, MAYO, *September 6.*

WESTPORT is a Capua where the traveller may comfortably repose after the fatigues of long days of car-driving from the north before making a start for the wilds of Connemara. The Railway Hotel is a roomy establishment, with two regular *tables d'hôte*, a trim head-waiter in white necktie, good dinners, and satisfactory accommodation. Lying in a hollow among the woods at the head of Clew Bay, where Lever placed the seat of his Knight of Gwynne, the situation of Westport is simply enchanting. Of the town itself, perhaps the less said the better. Broad, roughly paved streets, with unprepossessing or ill-conditioned houses running up the sides of a steep hill, are crossed by other streets as broad but more dirty. But the hotel, the two banks, the Catholic Church, and other public buildings, look out on a wide boulevard that might have been borrowed from some quiet old Flemish city. Great poplars, ashes, and hornbeams almost interlace their boughs across a stream that flows between walls with high parapets over a channel paved with flagstones. And little more than a stone's-throw from the door of the hotel is the great gate of the Marquis of Sligo's noble park of Westport. The domain has always been open to the public ; drives and walks go winding under fine old trees, gradually converging towards either side of the narrowing sea-arm that flows up from Clew Bay almost to the terraces beneath the mansion. Westport House itself is an imposing residence, though somewhat cumbrous and Vanbrugh-like in its style of architecture, commanding from the western windows grand views down the bay. Within are good pictures and statues, with wonderful old oaken carvings. Strolling onwards under the shady avenues of the park, we emerge on Westport harbour, which is nearly a mile from the town. There are great blocks of warehouses, of which I shall have more to say ; there is a broad causeway flanked towards the sea channel by quays, where some small coasting craft were lying at their moorings, with H.M. gunboat Wasp. [1] And crossing the causeway, we turn the corner of a little hill on to a promontory, whence the eye ranges far and wide around one of the grandest of marine panoramas.

Grand as it is, here is nothing compared to what may be seen on a clear day from the summit of the sacred hill of Croagh Patrick, which towers up with its sharp-pointed cone above Clew Bay to the south. And as I should like to give a good idea of sea scenery that is almost unparalleled, we may as well climb Croagh Patrick at once. The base is some four miles from Westport, and of course you go to it by car. The hill rises to a height of 2500 feet. Extricating ourselves from a mob of beggars, who pertinaciously urge on the stranger the virtues of the sacrament of almsgiving, and beginning with benedictions end with curses, we scale the slopes, passing sundry " stations." The ascent, though steep, is sufficiently easy till we get among the loose stones near the summit, where the pilgrims lacerate their naked feet. But the prospect amply compensates anything that is to be overcome in double-soled boots. Immediately beneath is the Bay of Clew, with its archipelago of literally innumerable islands—they are said to be as many as the days of the year—flying under the landward shores. Bay and islands seem equally green from above, but when among them the water in the channels is of the deepest and most translucent sapphire. Seen at sunset, what between the changing colours of the clouds and the seas, I have no doubt that Thackeray's metaphor of the tints of the dying dolphin must be singularly appropriate. Closing Clew Bay, some eighteen miles from the shore, and full in view of the windows of Westport House, is the grand rocky mountain that soars skywards out of Clare Island. Still further to the north stretches the island

of Achill, with its mountains, that are loftier and more savagely precipitous. In the distance, to the north, under favourable circumstances, you may distinguish Slieve Liagh in Donegal ; while to the southward, beyond the rugged and deeply indented coastline, are the Twelve Pins and other heights of Connemara. Nor less impressive is the seaward expanse of the Atlantic, with scarcely a sail, and no smoke of passing steamers to give a sense of traffic or life. Not to speak now of more distant excursions, that sketch may give some idea of the views to be enjoyed around Westport. You cannot mount a hill without meeting with some fresh surprise ; the variety in the outlines of the landscapes is endless. The glens and dells are densely wooded ; and footpaths, with rude stone steps over the high stone walls, make Lord Sligo's woods everywhere accessible to the pedestrian. The sheltering mountains, the mild temperature, and the perpetual rains, clothe everything with the greenest and richest luxuriance. After driving along the wind-blown shores of Donegal and Sligo, it is like coming into another world—something like the descent from the snows of the Sierra Morena into the orange groves of Cordova and the valley of the Guadalquivir. One might suppose that so favoured a place should be actually swarming with visitors. So, I am told, it used to be five or six years ago. But, thanks to the land agitation and the general depression in Ireland, touring has terribly fallen off since then. One of the two hotels has been closed, and turned into a branch of the Bank of Ulster. This big Railway Hotel, with all its comforts, is scarcely half filled. Nor have I ever been in so accessible and so picturesque a spot where public communications and conveyances are so conspicuously wanting. The Midland Railway from Dublin drops you here ; then you have to shift for yourself. There are no public carriages of any kind. Six years ago there were four-wheeled cars to Clifden and Letterfrack ; six years ago they talked of organising regular steam trips round the Bay of Clew and to the Cliffs of Achill. They had really set those trips agoing. But strangers, very absurdly no doubt, shrunk from the idea of being shot in West Mayo ; the steamers were withdrawn, and the cars ceased to run. Yet, with fair facilities for getting about, I have no hesitation in saying that there could hardly be a more agreeable place of sojourn than Westport. The dripping climate is a drawback, no doubt, otherwise the environs of the little town would be an earthly paradise. A shower will plump down out of some treacherous fleecy cloud in the clearest sky. You stroll to the corner of the street while breakfast is getting ready, and you have to make a rush back to the shelter of the porch to escape a premature ducking. There are magnificent distant excursions, the worst of them being that they are long and fatiguing, though, with favourable weather, they richly repay one. Thus the going to the Island of Achill, with its precipices, which are among the grandest in the world, involves a drive of twenty-eight Irish miles, and you can only return by the road by which you went. At three-fourths of the distance you come on what good authorities have pronounced the noblest of all the sea-views of Ireland. You are ferried across the narrow sound which divides the island from the mainland, and are met on landing by another car, which takes you to the Irish mission settlement of Dougort. There, in Sheridan's snug little inn, you find very tolerable accommodation. The host is a naturalist, and an intelligent man to boot. He will tell you of young seals caught and tamed, which he has secured by swimming into the recesses of the caverns. He will show specimens of eagles and other birds of prey ; of sea-fowls, and especially of the rare northern diver. From the inn it is about a nine miles' drive to the mountain of the Croghan, and thence it is a two hours' climb to the top. From the Croghan you look down the sheer precipices to a depth of some 2000 feet. You will possibly have a sight of a troop of wild goats, and the gaide, who may probably be an ex-gamekeeper of the famous Captain Boycott, will point out the rifts in the rocks which are the eyries of the golden eagles ; for if the eagles have deserted the cliffs of North Donegal, they still breed in the wilder precipices of Achill. Captain Boycott, I may mention, rented a farm here for many years, before removing to the interior of the county, where he was to stand sponsor to the infamous practice of "boycotting." Now, however, I am assured, thanks to a revulsion of popular feeling, that he is one of the most popular characters in his neighbourhood. Of the districts to the southward I shall say nothing here, as I hope to

drive through Connemara on my way to Galway. But there is much wild and rugged scenery in the northern barony of Erris, and there is good fishing in the spring and autumn in some of the lovely lakes to the north-eastward, the shores of which are seldom trodden by a stranger's foot

I remarked in a former letter that Irish scenery has been sadly neglected, and here is scenery enough to be *exploité* in all conscience. But even more serious is the neglect of agricultural capabilities. I find in an old report of the Board of Public Works that in the half of the barony of Erris there were 34,000 acres under tillage or pasture, while 184,000 acres of bog and mountain were “capable of being highly improved.” Since that time, far from any reclamation having been undertaken, much arable land has been going out of cultivation, owing to distress, emigration, and other causes. As to Erris, I am informed by skilled agriculturists that there is seldom sufficient landfall to make drainage either cheap or easy. But that is by no means the case with waste lands to the southward in Connemara, where the drainage presents no sort of difficulty. Capital judiciously invested, under a settled state of things, might enrich speculators, landlords, tenants, and the county of Mayo. But capital is scarce and shy. There are few roads in the meantime, and, strange as it may appear, profitable markets have been made more inaccessible than before by the opening of the Midland Railway. That may appear to be a paradox, but it is a melancholy fact, and unmistakable proofs of it are all around us.

Walk out of Lord Sligo's park to the port of Westport, and you are struck by one of the most extraordinary of sights. There are some beggars on the wharves, some loungers at the corners, and a half-dozen of men who may pleasantly be called labourers, leisurely unloading a light cart or two. But there are great blocks of many-storeyed warehouses which might be creditable to the London docks ; and on the first of these is the date of 1783, with a venerable inscription of “Bonded Tea Warehouse.” These ghastly relics of a bustling past, which may probably be haunted by the ghosts of long departed booking-clerks and supercargoes, are memorials of the prosperity of Westport when Mayo was isolated from Dublin, Then Westport was the sole outlet for the county, as of great districts in the counties adjacent. Shippers of native produce had to wait patiently on time and weather, so that two or three wealthy capitalists monopolised the whole of the trade. They bought up grain all over the country, which they gathered into their storehouses ; while, like the man in the parable, they built those storehouses bigger and bigger. They laid in stocks of tea, and sugar, and tobacco, which they distributed to their customers over western Ireland. The initials on the oldest of these ware-houses are those of a certain Mr Macdonald ; but it was a Mr Patten who really created the prosperity of the place. As might be inferred from his name, he came from north-western Ulster. He bought up land and houses in Westport, and to this day his heirs are drawing the “head rents.” Mr Patten's chief profits came from the contracts for supplying the English troops in the Peninsula. He contracted for consignments of oats and fodder. He seems to have been a specially “cute” man, as the Americans say ; and a proof of that still lives in the popular memory. The Spaniards—for whom we professed to be making great sacrifices, though we were fighting our own battles all the time—declined to bate a *maravedo* of their duties in our favour. The cost of sending calicoes, &c., to the army was very great ; so Mr Patten did up his grain in shirtings, and sold each corn sack to the British Government for a soldier's shirt. But it was even in the memory of not very old living men that the last of these great magazines were erected. Then came the railway to tap the trade. It reached Athlone, it stopped long at Claremorris, it came on to Castlebar, finally it arrived at Westport ; and with each new stride in advance, the profits of Westport fell away. The fact is of no small significance, since it simply means that all the trade of Ireland is steadily drawn towards Dublin, either by the railways or by reliable lines of steam service. There is little steam traffic on the western coast, and what there is is most precarious. The harbour bars are dangerous ;

the roadsteads are unsafe ; the coasting steamers that ply along these routes may be indefinitely delayed by stress of weather. A small steamer bound for Westport lay up only last week for three days in Blacksod Bay, and a man expecting a cargo of coals may have to wait a month beyond the expected time for delivery. But notwithstanding the high railway charges, almost everything is sent eastward by rail or by steamers with deliveries that may be safely counted upon ;—so that not only is Westport dying of a slow decay, but Waterford has been killing Limerick, while Cork is only saved by the extraordinary advantages of its harbour. Yet Westport still does a certain amount of trade, since it has its own wants to supply. It imports everything. It gets its wheat from Australia and California, for the Black Sea shippers have been under-sold. It brings preserved meats from Australia—meat to West Ireland !—coals and groceries, woollens, even timber, from Glasgow. The Glasgow steamer, which is supposed to touch fortnightly, more often than not goes back in ballast. The few exports consist of some oats, some wool, some eggs, and a few head of cattle ; so that Mayo with timber, wool, and any amount of water-power, is actually importing woollens and wood.

As regards the condition of the people here. Since the hard times of 1846, the population has thinned greatly ; whole districts have been wellnigh depopulated. The deaths from distress must have been many ; the emigration of forty years ago must have been great ; for nowhere in Ireland do men marry so young or multiply so surely as in Mayo. It is nothing unusual for a youth to marry at nineteen, taking his bride home to his father's hovel. The old people grumble, but they give in, and the family of paupers increases annually. So far as I can learn, there is nothing quite so bad here in the way of destitution as I heard of at Gweedore ; yet the crofters depend almost as much on the English harvesting and the American remittances; while the inhabitants of the islands off the coast are barely removed from beggary. Take the life in Achill or in Clare Island as samples. In Achill many of the holdings are rented nearly as low as in Gweedore ; many are at least as low as 15s. In Clare, as I am informed, things are still worse. The people gathered together into a village have only their scanty potato patches, and a commonity of hill grazing. The winds are so violent, and the weather is so inclement, that the wretched store cattle, even had they better pasturage, could scarcely put on flesh. When an Atlantic gale is blowing and the harvest is being brought home, it is hard to hold the oat-sheaves on the backs of the donkeys. In an autumn storm in 1882 all the crops at one place were blown bodily into the sea, and the people were to be seen boating and wading after them, fishing out the floating sheaves as they best could. It is comparatively recent since both islands changed owners. Clare belonged to the late Sir Samuel O'Malley. With his large estates on the mainland it came by foreclosure into possession of the Law Life Insurance Company of London—the same association which foreclosed on the Ballynahinch estates of the Martins in Connemara. Sir Samuel's estates, like those of the Martins, were sold some fifteen years ago to Mr Berridge, a brewer of London, to be subdivided and resold in lots about 1877. That sale was effected at twenty-one years' purchase ; the purchasers were two gentlemen resident at Westport, and Mr Sines, an Englishman and wool merchant, I have forgotten which of the three became possessor of Clare, but I believe it was one of the Westport gentlemen. I know, at all events, that Mr Sines bears a high character as a landlord. As for Achill, it was owned by the late Sir Richard O'Donnell, whose son has still an extensive estate on the northern shore of Clew Bay. Sir Richard, who fell into difficulties, was an easy and kindly landlord of the old school. In his time, Achill, though far more populous than now—it contains 46,000 acres, and the population at present is upwards of 5000—was nominally rented at £700. Sir Richard sold, in 1848, to three sets of people, besides a small estate bought by Lord Cavan. Mr Pike, an Englishman, had the southern third of the island : like Mr Smith of the Scilly Isles, he seems to have prided himself on figuring in the character of king, and was fond of offering free hospitality to his countrymen. Mr Weldon, of London, had the central division ; while the northern fell to the Irish Church Missionary Society. That purchase was probably due to the influence of the Rev. Mr Nangle, to whom I alluded in a

former letter, *apropos* to passing his glebe at Skreen. Mr Nangle had been in the habit of passing his holidays as a young man in Achill, and had come to take an interest in the people. It was chiefly under his direction that the little Protestant colony at Dougort was founded, with its neat houses, its inn, and a newspaper. It might have been presumed that the poor people would have profited by the change of ownership ; and doubtless the new residents have done something to raise their condition. As a matter of fact, the paternally managed O'Donnell estate had been bought for investment ; and so great and general was the rise of rents that, after almost universal reductions of upwards of forty per cent in the courts, the rental, which was £700 before 1848, is still nearly £3000. How do the people manage to pay? Well, in the first place, the men go to the harvesting in southern England ; our train from Manulla was crowded the other day with a body of them returning, and hardly a man of them carried so much as a bundle. In the second place, here too, and especially at Christmas time, remittances from America come pouring in. In the third place—and it is the first time I have heard of such a thing—the very women go over to Scotland for some months to look for work in the fields or the factories. There is a general exodus after the sowing of the spring crops, which are left to the care of the old people and the children. Neither from the islands nor from Westport is there much fishing ; nor, though there are great quantities of cod and ling on the neighbouring banks, with occasional shoals of herring and mackerel in the bay, is that altogether the fault of the people. The boats are poor, and on this terribly exposed coast it is dangerous to venture far out to sea. And even an Englishman, who brought a steamer here fitted with nets and all other appliances, found that, notwithstanding his hauls, the venture did not pay, owing to the distance of the markets and the cost of the land carriage. But beyond the poverty-stricken natives of Achill is a lower depth still. Further to the north-east is an island, called, I think, Inishkea, where the people form an independent state of their own, and must be pretty nearly heathens. There is a precisely similar condition of society on one of the islands in Sligo Bay. They acknowledge no landlord, they pay no rates, they elect a monarch of their own, and though a priest does come at intervals to confess, to marry, and to christen them, they have an idol they regularly worship and propitiate before their boats put out to sea. I assert all this on the authority of a Government inspector, who had seen the idol, though the fetish was carefully shrouded in sail-cloth. Once the eloquence of an indignant priest prevailed upon them to bury it. Unhappily, while still near the shore, his reverence was driven back upon it by a storm. The idol was immediately dug up and reinstated in its former place of honour.

I may mention that there have been other sales of land to Englishmen. Mr Birch thirty years ago bought the Ballycroy property in the barony of Erris, and has since sold or sublet a portion of it to Mr Clive, who has built a shooting-lodge, and, I am told, made a charming place. Sir Adam Bellingham also bought land there. And though the Erris folk are said to be a rough set, it is notable that these English gentlemen have had no annoyances and been exposed to no risks, which seems to show that land may be safely bought in the wildest districts when it is bought for sport or scenery rather than for investment. And talking of risks and annoyances, I may refer here to Lord Sligo's dealings with the late Captain Houston, as to which, as my readers may remember, Mrs Houston published an exciting narrative. About 1853 a territory of some sixteen square miles was cleared on the Mayo side of Killary Bay, nearly fourteen miles to the south of Westport. A large number of crofters and squatters had been removed, and although many of these had been sent to America, others remained among their indignant neighbours and relations. These disturbances of previous tenants were, of course, no concern of Captain Houston, nor is Lord Sligo necessarily to be blamed, since probably the squatters were half starving. It may be conceived, however, that the venturesome Scotch stranger had really thrust his hands into a hornet's nest. Had he tried the venture after the Land League agitation, his life would not have been worth a day's purchase. It is significant of the changed feeling in the country that at that time neither he nor his Scotch

shepherds met with anything more serious than annoyances. It is little wonder, however, that he had a heart-breaking struggle. The rent was £1000, or about 4½d. per hill acre ; the lease was for ninety-nine years, with a break at thirty-three years, when the lessee had the option of withdrawing or of submitting to a rise of rental. When Captain Houston died two-thirds of the lands were left to his son, the remaining third to his widow. Mrs Houston sub-let to the brothers Mitchell; Mr Houston sub-let to a Mr Barber when six years were unexpired. Neither of those sub-tenants succeeded in making the grazings pay. I understand that Mr Houston has renewed the lease on modified terms ; that he is buying stock, and purposes to farm the whole. Nor does it at all follow that a stranger should not succeed in farming here. Lord Lucan has an estate marching with those of Lord Sligo, and I believe that the wealthiest of Lord Lucan's tenants is a Scotchman, who has remuneratively sunk nearly £20,000 in improvements on a twenty-two years' lease. To be sure, Lord Lucan is admitted to be one of the best landlords in the country, and it is said that the only men who abuse him are those who have had no dealings with him.

So much cannot be said for all his neighbours. It is neither my object nor intention to single out names of landlords for invidious remark ; and, moreover, as things are mending here, it may be as well to let bygones be bygones. But there are large estates near Westport on which, as I am told, no tenant cared or dared to make improvements. It is said that the landlord never visited them except occasionally at rent-time ; that the land agent only rode over the mountains to search out pretexts for raising the rents. On such estates, even more than on those that were merely highly rented, the Land Act has undoubtedly been of great benefit. The tenant values even a thirty per cent reduction less than the sense that his future improvements are secured to him. And on the mainland of Mayo, where the soil is good, he can generally live on the land if he have enough of it ; while, owing to the emigration and the depopulation, holdings are being increased and consolidated. But bad as things have been over great districts here till comparatively the other day, they have been brightening in Mayo since the famine of 1846. For the first time, with the famine, the excessive congestion was relieved, and the " squireens" or " shoneens," as they were locally named, were swept away, who, with exorbitant rents and arbitrary exactions, were the merciless taskmasters of their hapless dependants. There have been other changes since 1846, and strong prejudices have been overcome. Then the starving people refused to taste the " yallow meal," as they called it. They said it was poisonous, or, at the best, bred cholera. Now, as in Gweedore, the harvesters buy the Indian meal on credit to support their families during their absences. Then no crofter possessed a shilling of savings ; now, I am informed by the agent of the Bank of Ireland, that not a few of the islanders who are apparently the poorest, thanks to English wages and American remittances, have placed considerable sums on deposit receipt. We are accustomed to regard the Irish as thriftless. So they often are ; but this gentleman assures me that in his district, at least, Paddy is seldom tempted into extravagances by prosperity. He lives no better when he becomes relatively rich ; he is still content with his short commons, nor does he add to the comforts of his bare hovel ; and he is as slow to pay the rent as ever. He hoards up for marriage portions for his daughters, and, above all, to protect himself against the calamity of the poorhouse in old age, which suggests other remarkable facts as to altered views with regard to emigration. We fancy that the Irish, and the Irish women especially, are always loath to leave their country. I am informed, however—and the master of the Union is my informant—that there has been a positive rage for emigration. Many families have gone out at their own expense, or that of their friends ; and the guardians have been compelled to refuse many candidates who were pressing for Government passages. For five-and-thirty years before 1883 there had been no emigration of any kind. In 1883 there were 371 people sent out by Government, while twice as many went on their own account. Five pounds were given for each, but when the emigrants went to the far west of the United States that sum was found to be inadequate. In the autumn of 1883 it was raised to £6, £7, or £8, according to the

distances the emigrants had to travel ; and 411 Government passages have been taken this year already. But perhaps the most striking of the facts to which I referred is, that among the applicants for passages were labourers earning from 10s. to 15s. per week. The applications were so general that one of the largest employers of labour in Westport went to Dublin to protest against these well-paid men being helped. When asked why they were so ready to go, considering that they were so comfortably off at home, the reply was unanswerable : “ True, we are very well off at present, but if we wait the work-house is our certain doom.” So that here, as in southern Donegal, much of the best blood of the country seems in course of being drained away. Cultivation is certainly suffering in the meantime, yet the exodus of bone and sinew is far from being an unmixed evil ; for the drain is tending to that enlargement of holdings which must increase the prosperity of the families that remain. It is remarkable, too, that the emigration has gone on, and been growing, notwithstanding the opposition of the priests, who have been solemnly denouncing it from the altar, telling their flocks that it is better to save their souls in Holy Ireland than to hazard them for this world’s goods among American heretics. Yet the power of religion, not to say superstition, is strong as ever. In the sacred month of August 7000 pilgrims have passed through Westport, many of them coming from great distances, on their way to the stations on Croagh Patrick. Only the other day the clergy solemnly approved the ceremonies by performing a grand Mass on the summit So enthusiastic are the pilgrims that, coming ill provided with food, they apply to be taken in at the workhouse for a couple of days, where they must break stones for their meals, after going barefoot over the stones on the mountain. Strictly speaking, the guardians should refuse to receive them ; but popular feeling is too strong to be resisted, so the ratepayers bear their share of the expenses of the pilgrimages. St Patrick’s blessed well, some miles to the southward of his mountain, is another favourite resort, whither the peasants come by cart-loads all through the summer, camping out in the open in all weathers for twenty-four hours, praying and telling their beads at intervals. Yet some of these genuinely pious people in 1881 burned two great barns full of cattle close to the town of Westport, the minority of those cattle being cows in calf.

LEENANE, CONNEMARA, *September 7.*

TWO-THIRDS of the drive from Westport to Leenane are tame and uninteresting—at least after the backward views of Clew Bay have been blotted out by the range of Croagh Patrick. Then we enter upon a solitude which is pleasant to see, because man is not battling with impracticable nature. The cottages are few and far between ; on the long stretches of hills is no sign of human habitation. For some eight miles on the Leenane side of Westport, we have entered on the country that was cleared by Lord Sligo and occupied by Captain Houston. Unquestionably it has been turned to the most profitable use. Almost to their summits the hills are clothed with verdure, though the rock will crop out here and there : there are what would be called rich “ corries” in Scotland, and rivulets come trickling down the mountain-sides in little cascades, falling from shelf to shelf. We follow the swift course of the Errig river which flows down the strath ; and above a picturesque bridge flung across the stream at Ashleigh the banks are thickly wooded with alders and natural birches. The Ashleigh salmon-fishings on the Errig and at the head of the Killary estuary have been taken as a speculation by a Mr Leigh and another English gentleman. The river and the narrow estuary may be fished from the banks at a charge of 10s. a-day. The Ashleigh Hotel is prettily situated to the westward of a promontory covered with grass, and we only get a glimpse of the house by looking back after we have passed it. But to return to Mr Houston’s hill farm, the grazings of its 15,000 acres extend far and wide over some of the most picturesque of the Connemara scenery. They stretch along the road from Westport and on either side of it, following the northern shore of the Killary sea-arm as far as Mulrey, which is the highest mountain in

Connaught. Mr Houston's house lies up a valley to the north of the sound, near Delphi—the classically named hill residence of Lord Sligo, which the Sligo family bought from the Plunketts. Mr Houston, as I mentioned in my last letter, is busily employed in stocking his ground. He has been buying young beasts in the markets at £5 to £8, which ought to sell, should the markets rise again, after two years' feeding, at £15. But cattle have fallen greatly here as elsewhere ; and bullocks of the Durham breed fattened in the lowlands, that a couple of years ago fetched as much as £20, will now command scarcely £15. Mr Houston has been purchasing black-faced sheep too ; and surely nowhere can more delicately flavoured mutton be bred than on these Connemara hills. As there are no fences, I asked how he could guard against the sheep straying ; and I was informed that he will engage no fewer than sixty care-takers. The greater part of these men are Irish ; but they are superintended by skilled shepherds from Scotland, and they are held responsible for their charges. If they cannot show the sheep, they are bound to produce the skin, or give a satisfactory explanation as to how the animal came to its end.

The inn at Leenane, on a loop of the Killary estuary, is charmingly situated, and excessively comfortable. Indeed this centre of the solitudes of Connemara is singularly well provided with hostelries ; and anglers in search of sport and the picturesque will find an *emharras de richesse* in the way of accommodation. There is the inn at Ashleigh ; there is this inn at Leenane ; there is “ The Recess,” of no small renown, a few miles to the southward ; close to “ The Recess” is a good house at Glendalough ; there is the inn at the little port of Letterfrack ; and another most romantic old family mansion somewhat to the northward of the hill of Tullymore has been converted into a hotel by Mrs Blake of Rinvyle. All of these offer good fishing in the immediate neighbourhood ; for all along this western coast there are tempting streams linking lakelets and larger loughs, up which there is a steady run of salmon and sea-trout. The best of the fishing is over for this season, the most taking time being in June, in July, and in the earlier half of August. As for the salmon netting of the Killary, which closed the other day, the water appeared to me most seductive ; but during the present year the take has been poor everywhere, and many of the most profitable fishings have failed to pay their expenses. With regard to the very comfortable hotel at Leenane, the landlord, Mr M'Keown, lays himself out to tempt both fishermen and shooters. He has the right of fishing in many of the neighbouring streams and loughs, and he rents 10,000 acres of shooting, where fair mixed bags may be got by hard walking. Thus this year, on the second day of the grouse-shooting, two very indifferent shots brought home seven brace of birds, with some hares, wounding several others besides, some of which were picked up subsequently. Leenane is admirable headquarters for many excursions in what the Lord-Lieutenant described, in answer to a local address, as “ perhaps the most glorious scenery in all her Majesty's dominions.”

It is within eight miles of the far-famed Pass of Kylemore, which well deserves the praises it has received. I drove thither yesterday to pass the pleasantest and one of the most interesting days I have enjoyed in the course of my tour. The weather was glorious, so were the mountains. At first the road, carried along the steep sides of the hills, skirts the southern shore of the Killary water, at a considerable height above it. The great green hills, belted below by the purple seaweed on the rocks that had been left bare by the receding tide, rise sheer out of the lough. In some places the lough seems scarcely broader than the Thames at Blackwall, and each turn of the road winding its way round the banks opened up new effects in the enchanting landscape. In duller weather the change would have been a melancholy one, as, leaving the lough behind us, we struck south-westwards across great peat-bogs. But with the sunshine and glancing lights and flitting shadows, there were something like smiles even on the sullen face of the peat-bogs ; and after dragging up a rise, full in front of us towered the

glorious mass of the mountains of the Twelve Pins. Wonderfully picturesque in a savage variety of outline, the whole dozen of summits could be easily counted. Then we gradually lose sight of them, one by one, as the road sinks to the level of the long Lough of Kylemore. On the opposite bank is a shooting of Lord Ardilaun's, with a cheerful looking white shooting-box on the edge of the water. Hitherto we have hardly seen a tree, but at the bottom of the upper lough, where the hills close in, the heights to the right begin to be clothed with graceful natural woods, sloping down into some thriving artificial plantations. These plantations mark the beginning of Mr Mitchell Henry's estate of Kylemore. Another turn or two and his eastern approach strikes off from the Letterfrack road. Anything more romantic it is difficult to imagine. To the right is the precipitous mountain, where the trees not only hang on somehow, but contrive to flourish luxuriantly, among the huge boulders of grey dark rock and the blooming patches of the purple heather ; while to the left we soon look down upon the lower of the Kylemore loughs, the esplanade of the broad avenue being bordered by a magnificent fuchsia hedge in full flower. And before us, with its square towers and its battlements, seemingly buttressed by the precipices of the mountain behind, is the great Gothic edifice of Kylemore Castle. For superb views and commanding situation the site could not have been more happily chosen. It was the choice of the late Canon Wilberforce, who, after his conversion to the Church of Rome, settled down here in the wilds that he might labour for the good of the people. The cottage was let to Mr Henry, who, having fallen in love with the place, finally bought 13,000 acres of land from the Blakes of Rinyyle. Perhaps it was the opportunities for improvement that tempted him as much as the beauties of the place ; and I need not say that since then he has been an enormous benefactor to the neighbourhood. The castle alone must have cost immense sums ; and it was not only built but fitted up almost entirely by Irish workmen. The gentleman who prepared the plans and directed the works must have been at least as much an engineer as an architect. In spite of a vast amount of hewing and blasting, he had to lay his foundations and arrange the apartments according to the levels of the impracticable rocks. You walk up a flight of stairs to the dining-room, each step being literally of rock, boarded over. You pass from block to block of the buildings by corridors and stairs that sorely task a stranger's bump of topography. And while the views from the three sides are magnificent, each window at the back looks into the cliffs across deep black chasms of a few feet in width. The artistic effect of the castle is excellent, the front façade being built of white granite, dressed at the Kingstown quarries, near Dublin, which is set in a framework of the native grey limestone. But what is most worth noting from an economical point of view is the interior. The oak ceilings, panellings, and staircases, carved with the utmost care and fitted with extreme nicety ; the chimneypieces and the capitals of the hall columns of Connemara marble—all of them conceived with exquisite grace and fancy—were designed and executed, as I said, by native workmen, and by workmen from the neighbouring villages. Nor can anything show more conclusively of what the Irish are capable.

[1] Wrecked a few weeks afterwards on Tory Island.

Letters from the west of Ireland 1884

Author : Alexander Innes Shand

Language : English

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December 13 2013