

A Common Country 1833

The angler in Ireland : or An Englishman's ramble through Connaught and Munster, during the summer of 1833.

William Bilton

1834

•

Clogheen—Cave lately discovered near it—Clonmel—Carrick on Suire—Curraghmore—Waterford—New Ross—Enniscorthy—Arklow—Vale of Avoca—General Character of the Wicklow Scenery—Arrival at Dublin and Conclusion of the Tour.

From Lismore my destination was Clonmel ; but I had read in the newspapers such wonderful accounts of a cavern lately discovered near Mitchelstown, that I determined to go round by Clogheen in order to visit it. The distance is less than fourteen miles ; but, great part of the road being rough and mountainous, it took me above three hours to accomplish it. The night had been very tempestuous, and was succeeded by that alternation of driving storm and brilliant sunshine so frequently productive of the most picturesque effects in a mountain country.

Almost directly after passing the bridge, we entered a lateral glen, cooped in between precipitous cliffs, clothed with wood from their base to their lofty summits. In parts, this valley is so contracted as to leave barely space sufficient for the road and the stream, which the last night's rains had converted into a thundering torrent. I have seldom seen a more romantic defile on the same scale. But, what pleased me the most of all were the views obtained upon looking back towards Lismore. The Bridge, the Cathedral, the Castle, with the adjoining woods, are alone seen from this point; but under the happiest circumstances and combinations possible. How very imposing must be the effect to one who views Lismore for the first time from this side !

The narrow Vale continues for three or four miles : upon emerging from it, the road passes over a wild bleak moor, sweeping gradually down from the Knockmeledown Hills, a shoulder of which we crossed. The descent on the side of Clogheen was long, steep, and difficult; but a new line is nearly completed, by which the distance will be increased but the declivity considerably diminished,

Clogheen is a poor town, and seemed to have nothing remarkable about it, except two very extensive flour-mills, belonging of course to Quakers, My object being to reach the Caves as expeditiously as I could, I only staid here till I could persuade Mrs. M'Graith to give me a car to take me to them. They are about five Irish miles from Clogheen, and the greater part of the road is tolerable. Almost the only object of interest it presented was Lord Lismore's extensive demesne, round which we coasted for some way ; but only from one spot could catch a view of the House, which is a splendid Gothic pile. I stopped at the cottage of a small farmer named Gorman, on whose land the Cave is situated ; and, accompanied by him and sundry guides, with torches, &c. immediately proceeded to explore the subterranean wonders of which so much has been said.

The entrance to the new Cave is near the summit of a low, rounded hill, rising out of an undulating plain, at the foot of the Galtee range. The rock is of the usual limestone formation, in which all the finest caverns in the world are situated. An inferior though extensive cave had long been known to exist, within a quarter of a mile of the present ; but it is now little visited,

from the superior attractions of its neighbour. The latter was discovered early this summer by a man quarrying lime. The opening, however, did not promise much, and, therefore, after trying it a short way, he gave up the attempt. Gorman himself soon afterwards resolved to explore it with a few enterprising companions ; and, after two or three unsuccessful essays, they were rewarded by ascertaining the real interest and importance of the cave.

Since that time very little has been done to render it at all more accessible, and the interior has not been half examined. The entrance is even now both filthy and difficult. You are obliged to slide down a steep and narrow fissure, between two ledges of slippery rock, for some distance, when you arrive at the top of a perpendicular ladder of about twenty steps. Having accomplished this descent, a hundred yards of level but rough walking conduct, through a vaulted passage, to what is called the " Grand Hall." This is a finely swelling cavern, of ample dimensions, containing a considerable number of stalactites, whose variety and beauty well prepare the visiter for the greater wonders in store for him.

From this Hall several passages branch off, in different directions, to other caves. I followed my guides, for between two and three hours, through what they considered the most interesting of these, and was infinitely gratified by my subterranean ramble. It is much the finest cavern in Great Britain ; incomparably superior to those in Derbyshire, or Somersetshire, or even to M'Alister's Cave, in the Isle of Skye ; and is the only one which conveys some faint conception of the magnificent Grotto of Adelsberg, which I believe to be unequalled in the world for extent and beauty. In the grandeur of its halls, the variety of its stalactites, and the perfection of its crystallizations, the Irish Cavern, no doubt, comes infinitely short of its Austrian rival ; but it approaches it more nearly, and gives a better idea of it than I had thought it possible for any cave in our islands to do.

It consists, like the Grotto of Adelsberg, of a number of distinct caverns, connected by passages of various width and height. To detail this succession of halls and galleries, with their respective stalactitic decorations, would be useless and endless, if it were practicable. These latter differ greatly in their configurations, but the theory of their formation is very simple. This secondary limestone, in which the Austrian, the Derbyshire, and the Irish carves are alike found, abounds universally in subterranean cavities. The water that percolates through the superincumbent mass comes to the roof charged with certain particles of lime. These, following the laws of affinity and crystallization, cling to the kindred limestone of the roof ; leaving the water to drop nearly pure on the floor. A continual repetition of this process through many ages produces the long, columnar cones pendent from the roof, which are called " Stalactites," while the more bulky and irregular mass, formed by the particles which collect below, has received the name of " Stalagmite."

These interesting processes may be observed in almost every one of their stages in this remarkable Cavern. Sometimes the stalactite is very short and thin ; at other times it has concreted to an immense length and thickness, the largest that I here saw being fifteen feet in length and about thirty-two feet in circumference. The stalagmites also present a similar diversity of form and size. Very often they seem to resemble an enormous cauliflower, or the top of a jet d'eau, or not unfrequently appear to Fancy's eye as it were a rushing torrent, suddenly fixed in eternal stone. But, besides these more usual shapes, the crystallizations occasionally form within winding crevices of the roof, and, gradually increasing, hang down in waving folds that perfectly imitate drapery.

Nor is this variety perceptible only in the shapes of these concretions. They all, whether stalagmite or stalactite, differ almost equally in their colours, according to the purity of the

lime, or the admixture of foreign substances, some being of brilliant whiteness, others of salmon, pink, or brown tints.

I was for some time much puzzled by observing, particularly in the lower parts of the Cave, an infinite number of slender cylinders ; from an inch to a foot in length hanging like icicles from the roof. Upon examination they proved to be hollow tubes of the purest lime, and nearly of the size and thickness of a goose-quill. They were evidently the nucleus round which the stalactite forms ; but I could not at first satisfy myself why they should be universally hollow, and of unvarying diameter, in all parts of the Cave. I imagine, however, the reason to be this :—the drops of water which collect on the roof are naturally much of the same size, before they are forced by their own weight to fall. They do not, however, fall immediately, and, in the mean time, the particles of lime with which each drop is charged crystallize round its rim, if I may so term it. By this means, in process of time, a more or less regular tube is formed, of necessarily invariable proportions ; and round this nucleus constant accessions of lime collecting, produce a stalactite which, if examined, will always be found to contain a quill-like tube in its centre.

It is seldom that this Cavern swells out into very lofty or vast halls ; in fact, the first I mentioned is almost the only one that can be called such. In general, it consists of a succession of irregular chambers and vaults, connected by narrow passages. To most of these my guides applied names that had been given them, not always very happily, by the comparatively few strangers who have as yet visited the Cave.

In all there was something to admire. Here it was the immense size, or the delicate forms, of the stalactites—there the fanciful configurations of the massive stalagmite. In one spot my attention was drawn to the elegant festoons and transparent hues of the pendent drapery above ; in another, to the brilliant reflections and snow-like purity of the crystals wherewith the solid floor was occasionally inlaid.

The very bizarreries of Nature are always replete with elegance : and in these her subterranean palaces she has ample scope to indulge her most freakish moods. In one hall she seems to have suspended Brobdignagian icicles from the lofty vaults or to have exposed the roots of some petrified forest. Here she has reared a sequestered chapel, and built an altar, at which a priest is seen officiating, with an alabaster lamp suspended above his head to light his devotions ; or there she has spread an ample dinner table, and near it placed various representations of eatables, joints of meat, hams, tongues, bunches of grapes, &c. In another chamber she has turned sculptor, and displays a half finished statue, while from the adjoining roof depends drapery whose graceful folds Canova would have been proud to hang round the limbs of a Roman senator. And, lastly, at the ball's further end, appears mighty cataract, as if about to burst forth and sweep away all these beauteous creations in its resistless flood.

But I will not longer attempt the bootless task of chronicling the thousand resemblances which the imagination may trace in the wondrous crystallizations exposed in this dark Laboratory of Nature. They are endless, and give an unwearied interest to each step through these fairy grottoes.

There is one cave which bears the title of “ Kingston Hall,” from the nobleman to whom the property belongs, but which would, in my opinion, be much more appropriately named “ the Marble Tent.” It perfectly resembles a tent, upon a large scale, and struck me as one of the most beautiful objects I saw. Another is called the “ Sand Cave,” from a quantity of very fine sand being found there, and there only. In answer to my inquiries, I could not learn that

any bones of bears or other animals had been discovered. An extensive branch of the lower part of the Cavern is covered with a coating of fine mud, that seems to show it has been, at no distant period, filled with a stream of water. This part is also traversed by singular fissures, which have never been penetrated. Indeed, there are numberless passages in this extensive Cavern which have not been half explored, and which may very probably lead to subterranean wonders superior to any yet disclosed.

How much I should have enjoyed devoting eight or ten hours to this voyage of discovery, with three or four active fellows, properly equipped !—when I think, through some little experience I have had in expeditions of this kind, it is not unlikely we might have been rewarded by the sight of beauties now lying in primeval darkness, “unrecked of, and unknown.” I was, however, obliged to be content with what I had seen during my three hours’ ramble through this picturesque Cave, with which I was so highly gratified, that I should strenuously advise any traveller who passes at all near it on no account to omit paying it a visit.

Returning to Clogheen, I posted to Clonmel, where I was most kindly welcomed by the excellent friends whose hospitality I had before experienced. Here I remained for three or four days, well pleased to be in such agreeable quarters, during the equinoctial gales, which blew with a violence that totally forbade touring, or even stirring, out of doors. As soon as they subsided, I was compelled again to bid adieu to this hospitable mansion, and early on a glorious morning started for Waterford, by way of Carrick-on-Suir.

The whole drive from Clonmel to Carrick is delicious, accompanying the course of the Suir, as it flows through a rich and wide vale, which gently undulates towards the range of Slieve Naman, on the one side ; and to the south is bounded by a continuous chain of beautiful hills, clothed with luxuriant wood to their very summit, and embellished with numerous gentlemen’s seats.

Carrick is a town of antique appearance, but little internal beauty. I merely stopped there to procure a fresh car, in which I immediately proceeded to Waterford, passing round by Curraghmore, the Marquess of Waterford’s splendid demesne. The landlord assured me that by this route the distance would be nineteen miles ; and that, as the road was very mountainous, he could not give me a car under thirteen shillings. I afterwards ascertained that the distance was barely fourteen miles, and the road, though hilly in some parts, was not so bad as many that I have travelled for six-pence a mile. I consider that mine host deceived me, and wilfully too, for which I was sorry, more on his account than my own, I know not his name, but his seemed to be the head inn, and he had over his door Lord Brougham’s Motto, “Vo rege^ lege, et grege”—he might, therefore, I think, have treated me with more equity.

We crossed the River by a singular old bridge, and then ascended a considerable hill, which afforded a fine prospect over the fertile Vale of the Suir. The country beyond was barren and ugly, giving little idea of the neighbouring magnificence of Curraghmore. I had some difficulty at first in obtaining permission, at the Lodge, to drive through the Park, not having brought the necessary order from the Agent. However, upon giving my name and not giving any money, I was allowed to pass on, and received the greatest civility from every one about the place.

The first thing that struck me on entering the Demesne was a large plot of Swedish turnips, with a watch-bo^ in the centre ! Turnips, alas ! are very little cultivated in Ireland, and I have heard farmers’ assign as the reason, the impossibility of protecting them, except by constant

watching. In many respects, the rights of private property are much invaded in this country, which I think is, in some measure, attributable to the want of fences ; but, in the particular case of turnips, I believe this useful root to be peculiarly exposed to depredations from its being as yet considered a garden vegetable, a luxury. If ever turnips become a common crop in the island, they will, I should hope, be at least as safe from theft as corn and potatoes.

The Demesne of Curraghmore is said to comprise nearly five thousand Irish acres, and is therefore one of the most extensive in Great Britain. It is beautifully undulated, and contains hills of no mean elevation within its own bounds, besides noble views of more distant mountains. The surface is covered with a profusion of stately oaks, sometimes collected in imposing masses, at others scattered along the hill-side, in the picturesque groups that Nature has chosen.

A river like the Suir, in short, or a lake like Lough Gilly, seems the only thing wanting to render this Demesne perfect.

The House, however, is by no means worthy of the magnificence which surrounds it. The exterior is nothing more than respectable ; and comfort, rather than splendour, appears to have been studied throughout the interior, with the exception of the saloon, dining, and drawing-rooms, which are fitted up in a particularly elegant manner. In the hall are two or three good pictures by Guido, and in what is called the Castle-Room is a very interesting Alto rilievo, cut in wood, of St. Paul preaching at Athens. Still the mansion is not worthy of the Demesne, or of the princely fortune of its owner ; and I was glad to hear that the young Lord intends building a more appropriate residence.

He seems to have retired in disgust from the unsatisfactory arena of Irish politics, which, under the guiding hand of Mr. O'Connell and the Priests, are believed to have occasioned his father's death. I heard this young nobleman universally spoken of in the highest and warmest terms ; and I therefore trust that, in better and not far distant days, he will regain that confidence and influence among his neighbours, to which surely a high-minded gentleman and a kind-hearted landlord is more entitled than an alien and mischievous demagogue.

After inspecting the House I walked to the gardens, by the side of an inviting trout-stream, through a lovely valley. This walk is in part shaded by Scotch firs, of extraordinary height, which are, as I learned, of the Swedish variety. The gardens are very extensive, containing ten Irish acres within the walls. I rambled leisurely through them, in company with the very intelligent gardener, Mr. Johnson ; and was much interested both by what I saw and by his observations.

I have nowhere seen a garden conducted on so liberal a scale. The hothouses are filled with all the choicest varieties of grapes, and there are large and numerous succession houses for pines. Of out-door fruit I was shown a very complete collection of apples, both of the many excellent kinds peculiar to Ireland and of those lately obtained by the Horticultural Society, &c. Among the flowers, I noticed above two hundred specimens of the best and rarest sorts of dahlias, each of them displaying a profusion of prize-flowers. There seems no limit, in point of expense, to this department ; and the whole management is left in the uncontrolled hands of Mr. Johnson, who generally has about fifty men and women employed in the gardens and adjoining pleasure-grounds, besides a score of carpenters and glaziers, all equally under his orders. I wonder what his Lordship's grapes cost him per pound !

I was next conducted to the famous shell-house, erected by a former Marchioness, whose statue stands in the centre of the temple, ornamented chiefly by her own hands. To those who admire such things, the interior of this grotto must be highly satisfactory, as it is covered all

over with an infinity of shells and spars, many of which are of great rarity and beauty. I can at least pronounce the exterior to be most decidedly ugly, and Mr. Johnson is therefore very properly endeavouring to hide it with shrubs and creepers. Round this grotto he has formed a very pretty flower-garden, which he intends connecting with the house by an American garden.

The interest of my walk through these grounds was much increased by the intelligence and information of my companion ; and I must say it is not in every great man's establishment that I have observed so much civility and disinterestedness as I met with from every individual with whom I came in contact at Curraghmore. Nothing contributes so effectually to give a favourable impression of the master.

The drive from the House through the Park towards Waterford is extremely pleasing, passing chiefly through a deep valley, clothed with the finest oaks, beneath whose shady glades numerous herds of deer are seen feeding or reposing. Immediately on passing the Park-gate, I came upon the extensive cotton-factory belonging to Mr. Malcomson of Clonmel. It is placed in a most lovely situation, and is one of the very few factories that I have seen, which increases instead of destroying the picturesque effect of the surrounding scenery—an advantage it mainly owes to the power employed being that of water instead of steam. Factories on this scale are so extremely rare in the south of Ireland, that I would strongly recommend any intelligent traveller who may follow my steps so to arrange his movements as to be able to examine at leisure this interesting establishment. I could but admire its exterior, the extent, and apparent appropriateness of the building. The cottages belonging to the work-people are neatly built and pleasingly arranged along the road.

For a long way beyond this, the Marquess of Waterford's woods deck the line of hills to the rights while to the left is seen the Suir at no great distance, flowing through a low and swampy plain. This part of the road was rather hilly, but we soon came upon the regular Cork road, and were not long in reaching the ancient and considerable City of Waterford. I drove to the Commercial Hotel, which affords as good accommodation I believe as the rest, and which is best in point of situation, being in the widest and handsomest street of Waterford, called the Mall, and close to the quay from which the steam-packets start.

The quays extend a great length, and are broad and well built ; but what most gratified me was to see a very considerable number of vessels of various sizes and descriptions lying alongside them. In no Irish port except Cork and Dublin, and perhaps Belfast, have I observed so much shipping. The trade with Bristol is very extensive, as also with Newfoundland ; and the constant intercourse carried on with Milford, &c. by the steam-packets, ^ves great activity to its commerce.

At the upper end of the town, the river is crossed by a long wooden bridge, which commands a fine view both up and down the stream. The banks are well-defined and adorned by handsome villas. The streets near the river contain many good houses, but some parts of the interior into which I penetrated consist of the dirtiest, most neglected, and most ruinous, lanes I ever beheld.

The day after my arrival, being the sabbath, I attended divine service at the Cathedral. The exterior of this building is not remarkably pre-possessing, but the interior is fitted up in a florid Grecian style, that gives it more the appearance of a ball-room than a Protestant Cathedral ; while the altar-piece seemed to me copied from some Italian or Viennese Catholic chapel. It is, however, a very spacious edifice, and was filled by the most numerous con-

gregation I have seen out of Dublin. The organ was bad and badly played ; and as I can scarcely speak in more favourable terms of the manner in which the singing or the rest of the service was conducted, I shall say nothing upon the subject.

After its conclusion, I walked in different directions until the evening. Not only the quays but the various roads leading from the town were crowded with pedestrians and equestrians, enjoying the lovely afternoon. Among these I mingled wherever the promenaders or line of hills seemed to promise a favourable opportunity for observation of manners or contemplation of prospect.

The favourite promenade appeared to be a road parallel to the river, leading, I believe, to Duncannon, and it was from some heights overlooking this road that I obtained the most pleasing and extensive views of the city and its environs. The country round Waterford has a very flourishing look, and the banks of the Suir, which I perfectly commanded unto its junction with the Barrow, are graced by numerous fine seats and plantations, which lend an appearance of great elegance and richness to the sloping hills that confine its stream.

The next morning I left Waterford for New Ross, taking a chaise instead of a car, as I was given to understand that the stage was both long and very bad. In this instance I was not deceived ; it is one of the worst roads in Ireland, and the beauty of the landscape was by no means such as to relieve the ennui of crawling over it.

The situation of New Ross is rather pretty, lying on the eastern shore of the River Barrow, over which is thrown a long wooden bridge, similar to that of Waterford. Here I was detained for some time before I could procure a car to Enniscorthy, another wearisome stage of sixteen miles. It was, consequently, so late when I arrived, that I gave up the idea of proceeding any further that night, and took up my quarters at the only inn, very curiously kept by an eccentric and rich old man.

Enniscorthy is built on both sides of the River Slaney, which is crossed by an ancient stone bridge. The tide just reaches it, and the river above ought to afford good salmon- fishing, if the fish were not so much destroyed by the innumerable nets and Scotch weirs below. After slightly satisfying my curiosity with the few objects of interest that Enniscorthy can boast, I proceeded on my journey in a car to Gorey. This stage is again sixteen miles, but of much better and more level road. About midway is the half-ruined town of Ferns, that was formerly a city of some consequence. A short distance from it stands the Bishop's residence, a rather large square house, enclosed in what G. Robins would call " park-like grounds." They are pretty, and appear to be neatly kept.

The country, as I advanced, displayed increasing symptoms of civilization and cultivation. It was in general flat, but before me rose the lofty ranges of the Wicklow Mountains, rapidly occupying more and more of the horizon. It was not, however, until I had driven through the mean-looking old town of Arklow that any part of the picturesque scenery for which Wicklow is so deservedly famous burst upon me. At Arklow the road turns directly at right angles from the coast up the Vale of Avoca, which needs not the charms of Moore's exquisite poetry to render it one of the sweetest valleys in Great Britain.

I will not attempt any detailed description of the County Wicklow, both because it has been my object in these sketches to confine myself to an account of my adventures in the south and west, and also because my tour through it on this occasion was necessarily very hurried. I had, in a previous year, made a completer survey of all its beauties during the early

spring ; and I was therefore anxious, before quitting the country, to take a glance at some of my favourite points, now that they were dressed in the rich hues of the waning year.

The improvement produced by the autumnal tints upon the luxuriant foliage was greater even than I had anticipated. I had now been for more than four months touring through some of the finest scenery in Ireland, and yet the beautiful, the picturesque, the romantic scenes, which the Wicklow Mountains hold within their rocky embrace, struck me with undiminished admiration. I do not, of course, mean to compare them with Killarney, or Glengarriffe, or Lough Gilly ; neither have they the magnificence of some portions of Cunnemarra.

But, with all these, and a thousand other glorious scenes fresh in memory, I hold him to be no true lover of Nature, who cannot still find room in his heart for the winding vale, the crystal waters, and splendid woods, of Avoca—the grand and singular Glen of the Downs, or the still finer and more romantic Devil’s Glen. The Seven Churches must excite the interest of every learned or unlearned antiquary ; and Luggielaw, though in my opinion, I confess, usually overrated, is in a high degree picturesque and lovely. Powerscourt, as I have always seen it with an abundance of water, is one of the finest cascades in our islands. It may be disappointing as a waterfall in dry weather, but at all times the noble amphitheatre of wood and rock by which it is surrounded must excite the warmest admiration, while the stroll along the banks of its stream through the Dargle into Bray will as certainly enchant every genuine admirer of the picturesque and beautiful.

I reached Dublin on October 3, having been absent twenty-one weeks on my tour. Here I rested for a few days, and paid a much shorter visit than I could have wished to some highly-valued friends in County Louth, after which a prosperous sea voyage and a short land journey brought me rapidly home.

•

Concluding Remarks on the present State and future Prospects of Ireland—Irish Scenery and Character—Effects of the Catholic Faith—Feelings of England towards Ireland—Advantages of a Tour through that Country.

I LEFT Ireland with a mixture of those contradictory feelings which, I think, must be impressed on every stranger who makes himself acquainted by personal inspection with this most extraordinary people and country, in which there is so much to admire, and, alas ! so much to regret. Amongst these my feelings, however, by far the most prominent were a grateful sense of much, very much kindness, experienced from almost all with whom I had had any intercourse ; and a warm recollection of many very happy hours spent in some of Nature’s most favoured scenes ; but, above all, a warm interest in the future fate of this most important member of our common country.

And what Briton does not feel this interest deeply seated in his heart ? — I firmly believe none !

It has been the habit of persons, unfortunately too influential in Ireland, to impress upon the lower orders that England careth not for Ireland. This misrepresentation may serve their purposes, but I am very sure that it is totally unjust and untrue. There is certainly no sympathy felt for Mr. O’Connell’s projects on this side of the water, as they are well seen to be calculated only for his personal aggrandizement, at the price of the eventual ruin of both countries.

But there is a sincere and increasing interest universally felt in England for the fate of Ireland, together with an anxious wish to raise her in every respect to an equal level with her sister, not Bivaly Island. This sympathy has been abundantly evidenced both by the great attention to Irish affairs paid by the United Legislature, notwithstanding the thankless manner in which these efforts have too often been received, as also by the generous answer that has been returned to every call upon the charitable feelings of individuals, though it is known that much of former subscriptions had been misapplied.

If this public and private sympathy have not yet produced still greater and happier effects, it is mainly attributable to a single party—indeed, I may almost say, to a single individual. He it is, who, by the continuance of his system of agitation, has led the people into resistance of the Law, and into crimes which have too frequently struck their most zealous defenders dumb, and at least delayed their physical and moral improvement. These crimes, I firmly believe, O’Connell detests, and would if he could prevent. But the spirit of combination and insubordin^{tipn} which he has ei^r∨2 couraged among the lowest and most ignorant classes, /or his purposes, naturally and inevitably led them to commit crimes /or their own objects. And he must, consequently, be looked upon as their original and responsible cause.

In forming any schemes for the benefit of Ireland, it is evident that first of all this system of agitation must be put down, or capital and employment will not be introduced into the country, neither will the people have any habitual respect for or recourse to the constitutional channels of relief. Next, the authority of the Law must be indisputably established, and confidence in the purity of its administration universally confirmed. In connexion with these valuable objects, the peasantry who are willing to labour must be insured against the possibility of destitution or starvation. And lastly, but principally, before Ireland can really assume and retain her proper rank as a great nation, the religious knowledge of the vast majority of the lower orders must be enlightened and reformed.

These are the main points in which Ireland at present most requires improvement, and I would hope that in all of them considerable advances towards a better state of things have been made.

I have before alluded to what I earnestly trust will be the effects of a legal provision for the poor, which, in some shape or other, must soon be resorted to. I think also, it is perceptible that the authority of the Law is gradually becoming more respected throughout the Island. The appointments to the Bench are very different from what they used to be in former times, and judicial partiality can now perhaps be as little charged against the dispensers of justice in Ireland as in England. The people perceive and feel this, and give the best evidence of their increasing confidence, by appealing much more than they used to the legal tribunals, instead of executing their own wild notions of law and equity themselves. There is yet ample room for further and much greater improvement upon this important point ; but still the confidence of the lower orders in the administration of the Laws has, I conceive, evidently commenced, notwithstanding the misrepresentations of their leaders, and will, I fervently trust, daily augment :- the welfare of Ireland is concerned in this result.

Besides the many other efficient causes of disorders in Ireland, it has always struck me as one powerful reason why disturbances are so difficult to be prevented, that the rural population is scattered over the whole face of the country, in very small hamlets or in detached houses. This not only gives audacity and impunity to the attacks of midnight ruffians, but,

by dividing, distracts the attention of the preventive authorities. Were the population more collected into towns and villages, they would be observed and repressed with greater ease by a much smaller body of Police.

The numbers of this latter force that one meets with every where in Ireland are any thing but pleasing in the eyes of the English tourist. I inquired and heard a great deal about them in every part that I visited, and the accounts I received were almost always in the highest degree satisfactory. In so large a body of men, invested with considerable power, occasional instances of oppression may probably occur ; but the Englishman may be well assured that the most is always made of such instances, by those who have no reason to wish for an efficient force to repress and punish crime. They are so often placed in most difficult and trying situations, that the wonder is there should not be more and better-founded accusations against them. They are, in general, a very respectable-looking body of men. In fact, the situation being considered very eligible, there is such competition for every vacancy that the authorities with whom the appointments rest have an almost unlimited opportunity of selection.

While upon this subject, I will also briefly allude to the practical evils which result from the universal want of fences in Ireland. This at first seems a trifling cause of disturbances, but I believe that the facility it affords for cattle to stray, or to be wilfully driven, upon their neighbour's richer lands, is not only a most fruitful source of quarrels and violence. but also tends to subvert the moral regard for the rights of property.

This absence of fences gives a very naked aspect to much of the interior of the country. How pleasing do the frequent hedges and hedge-row timber make the flat plains of England, even where no proprietor's grounds enter into the landscape ! But, such is not the case in Ireland, where the wide fields are divided by walls made of earth or stone, with very little timber, except round an occasional gentleman's residence, and not always then. The consequence is that, although Ireland can boast some as fine scenery as any in the British Isles, a very large portion of it is as destitute of beauty as can well be conceived.

Then, alas ! the cottages, instead of being an ornament to the view, are a positive disfigurement, and, until the eye becomes familiarized with the dress and appearance of their inhabitants, they also are too often calculated to spoil the effect of the most lovely prospect. I am well aware that happiness is in a great degree comparative, and that we ought not to estimate the condition of the Irish peasants by our ideas of comfort. The wife who has been accustomed to go bare-legged all her life may be very happy without shoes or stockings ; and the husband, who has been taught from his youth to think himself very well off if he can only have plenty of potatoes and buttermilk, with an occasional slice of his own pig, and a drop of whisky, whenever he can command the requisite money or credit—such persons may be sufficiently comfortable in their own ideas : but still, that they can so consider themselves implies a certain want of self-respect.

I must again repeat there are evident symptoms of improvement in all these points ; and I confidently trust that, as education and information extend among the lower orders, they will feel themselves raised in their own estimation, and desire to have comforts around them, which I also hope their own increasing diligence, and the opportunities of employment to be opened to them, will enable them to possess.

The Irishman is, like every thing in his country, a mixture of the strangest contradictions. He is proverbially acute, but has by no means the best head for logic or for business : he is naturally most good-humoured, yet too often proves quarrelsome and blood-thirsty : he is at

times the most laborious, at others the laziest mortal in the world. During part of the year, the Irish peasant is obliged to work hard, and does so ; but, when not so compelled, he prefers sleep or perfect idleness . to the slightest exertion, even to mend the roof of his cabin, or his gate, or his cart. All he does is by fits and starts : he has no relish for that steady, regular, every-day labour, by which alone uniform and great results are achieved.

Nothing can be more disgusting to an Englishman than the manner in which labour is usually conducted in Ireland. If the labourers are paid by the day, and not by the job, it is considered necessary for an overseer to stand by them like a slave-driver, to keep them to their work. Without such superintendence, I fear they would remain idle for the greater part of the day, as they seem to have no feeling of pride or conscience to do their duty to their employer.

In making these remarks, I do not by any means deny that many, perhaps most, of the defects observable in the Milesian are to be attributed, in a great measure, to the false position in which he has been placed, and the ill-treatment of those above him. I only record my impression of the present Irish character, and, at the same time will express my strong hope and belief that, as all abuses that can be removed by legislative interference, either have been, or are, or will be, redressed, as soon as they are convicted of being abuses, the national character will be gradually freed from these blemishes, without losing any of that gallantry, intelligence, kindness, patient endurance, and buoyancy, which now distinguish it.

The great obstacle—as every one knows, that is at all acquainted with Ireland—the great obstacle to all improvement, whether in the moral or physical condition of the people, is the unfortunate predominance of the Roman Catholic Religion among the lower classes. It is this, that more than any other, or than all other, causes put together, has retarded the advancement of Ireland.

I speak not now of Popery in a religious but solely in a political sense ; and, viewing it only in that light, I say, what I am sure no unprejudiced person really aware of the past arid present state of Ireland will deny, that its ever-to-be-lamented profession by the great majority of the lower ranks has been, and still is, the principal cause of their ignorance and consequent turbulence, of their estrangement from the rest of the Empire, and of a great proportion of their crimes. The country will never be permanently tranquil, nor will the people rise as high as they ought in the scale of civilization, neither will the great measure of the Union receive its full development, until the Roman religion cease to be the faith of the mass of the population.

And to this result I confidently look forward at no very distant period. Catholicism may continue to be outwardly professed for some time longer ; but its most erroneous and most mischievous doctrines will be, in reality, discarded. The Bible is in the land, and the means of reading and understanding it are daily acquired by the rising generation. To this I trust, under God's blessing, for the gradual and complete extinction of Popery in Ireland. Every one will readily appreciate what an epoch in her political improvement that single circumstance will be, who is at all aware how much its existence now thwarts the best intentions of Government, poisons the intercourse of society, and gives a pernicious bias to every the commonest act.

Then, and it is to be feared not till then, will that great bane of Ireland, party-feeling, and, worst of all, religious party-feeling, be banished from the Island. At present it there reigns triumphant ; it may not be quite so virulent as formerly ; but it still exists to an extent that

astonishes, while it afflicts, the English Protestant. Turn where you will, you find this malevolent spirit exerting its noxious influence. It destroys social intercourse among the upper classes, sets the lower orders at eternal variance with each other, corrupts the administration of justice, and too often defeats the best intentioned efforts of Government and individuals for the melioration of the people. Would that I could say this uncharitable feeling exists only on one side ! Alas ! I much fear that this same unhappy (may I not add unchristian ?) spirit appears in the most violent Orangemen almost as much as in the most bigoted Catholics.

But, independently of the mutual estrangement produced by the co-existence of two such opposite religions, it is impossible not to perceive that the Faith of Rome exercises a baneful influence over the physical condition of its professors. It is not necessary to go to Italy, or Spain, or even Switzerland, for a confirmation of this truth. Ireland itself affords a sufficient exemplification of the melancholy fact.

In travelling through the North of Ireland, where the two religions often inhabit distinct villages, very close to each other, the tourist will frequently be struck by the evident superiority in neatness and cleanliness of one village over the next ; and rarely will he be mistaken in guessing the former to be Protestant, the latter Catholic.

Or, to put it upon a broader and clearer basis, look at the North and South of Ireland ! In every respect of climate, soil, rivers, ports, population, the latter has greatly the superiority over the former. And yet in Connaught and Munster we find comparatively few manufactures, diabolical outrages against persons and property, endless disturbances, filth, and wretchedness ; while in Ulster are to be found extensive manufactures, great comparative tranquillity, freedom from crime, and cleanliness.

What is it that thus neutralizes all the advantages of the South, and turns the balance in favour of the North ?

There is one single but all-sufficient cause, that in the one the Protestants much predominate, in the other the lower orders are all Catholics. This is so strong and so clear a case that I cannot conceive how any well-informed Roman Catholic can shut his eyes to this illustration of the practical fruits of his Faith.

I make these remarks, I am sure, with no feeling of religious bigotry ; indeed, I do not wish to enter upon the religious part of the subject at all, but only to point out the evil physical effects that Popery has entailed upon the great body of the inferior ranks in Ireland. And I re-assert my conviction that there is little hope of her ever rising to the position she deserves to hold among the nations of the earth, or of being as cordially united to the rest of the Empire as both her own interest and the common good equally require, until the progress of education shall have made the majority of her SODS Protestants at least in heart, if not in name. Would to God that that time were already come, when not only Irishmen would universally look upon each other as brethren, but all Ireland would unite cordially and unreservedly with the rest of our Common Country !

Selfish agitators have but too successfully availed themselves of this unfortunate difference of religion to inspire a distrust of England in the minds of the lowest Irish. I think, however, that this feeling is fast wearing out. At least, if they feel not yet complete confidence in England generally, or in the British Government, they show a remarkable reliance on the integrity, veracity, and honour of individual Englishmen. They may not always like a Saxon ;

but it is very evident that they at least respect him for these and similar qualities, quite as much as their own countrymen.

The more the two people mix together, the more will they learn to appreciate each others good qualities, and to look on each other as fellow-subjects- and friends. Ireland has no doubt, in by-gone ages, suffered much from England, and some lingering mistrust was therefore to be expected. But surely, the present generation is not to be charged with their forefathers' oppressions, provided they show every disposition to redress the grievances inflicted by them, and to conciliate and benefit the Sister Island.

And let Ireland be assured that such is the disposition of England and Englishmen, both collectively and individually. Let Ireland be assured that there is not a single Englishman who does not feel a sincere and warm interest in her welfare, and that no one object is more desired by the country at large than to develop her vast resources, remove any evils under which she may labour, and elevate her sons, by the introduction of employment, instruction, and independence.

If such intentions be in any degree frustrated for the present, it is principally occasioned by the selfish opposition and misrepresentations of some of her own sons. I trust that Ireland is daily becoming more and more aware of such injurious machinations, and that she will not much longer suffer herself to be hoodwinked, to suit the purposes of a mischievous Agitator. I trust that the days of his extraordinary and most baneful influence are nearly at a close, and that we shall not much longer see such infatuated submission to interested dictation as has of late years been displayed by a most intelligent but too facile people.

Next to the atrocious crimes which have occasionally disgraced the Southern provinces, nothing has latterly done Ireland so much injury in the Judgment of the British Public as the sending to the United Parliament such representatives as have acquired the significant appellation of "The Tail."

To persons who have no better means of judging, a representative stamps, in some measure, the character of what it represents ; and, when men of talent, estimation, and property, who have proved themselves Ireland's public and private friends, as Legislators, and as Landlords, are rejected, in favour of men without abilities, without stake, or weight of any kind in their own country, and whose sole merit is that they will servilely obey Mr. O'Conneirs dictation, it is impossible but that the people which elect such representatives must suffer in the opinion of their fellow-citizens. Let us hope that Ireland will never again return such a sample of her sons, or confess such as the members of "The Tail," to represent either her intellect or her character.

It is from a sincere conviction that every trifling acquisition of knowledge respecting the condition and sentiments of each will be for the mutual benefit of both countries, that I have ventured to submit the result of my observations during the little tour here recorded. I cannot hope to have added much to the general stock of information regarding a country and people so little known, though so near to us and so interesting. But I shall consider myself amply repaid for the trouble I have taken, should I thereby be the means of inducing any of our many travellers, instead of spending their summer in France, to visit this portion of our own Empire, so well worth examining.

Every such intelligent tourist will not only impart a juster idea of the English character and feeling towards Ireland among those with whom he will mix in the course of his tour, but will

also himself acquire a more accurate knowledge of the evils, the wants, the condition, of his Irish fellow-countrymen, and be enabled to communicate such correcter information within the little circle, which even the humblest individuals have formed around them.

And I think I may venture to assure any who may be thus tempted to visit the wild districts I have essayed to describe, that they will derive great amusement and satisfaction from the tour. They will see much beautiful scenery, and will increase their acquaintance with a part of the Empire to which all eyes are turned, as the chief object of domestic interest. They will experience among the upper ranks a kindness and warmth of manner and treatment which, united, as they often are, with intelligence and wit, render the intercourse of society in Ireland highly delightful ; while among the lower orders they will meet with a richness of character, acuteness of intellect and observation, a readiness to oblige, and a fund of good humour, such as make the Milesian the pleasantest companion of a picturesque or sporting tour that I have ever encountered.

As for the fancied perils of such an expedition, there are none for a stranger in any part of Ireland. The country is, moreover, cheap, and if the accommodations and fare be not equal to the interior of England, they are at least superior to what are found in the Highlands of Scotland, and quite as good as any tourist ought to require.

Reader ! if you wish to indulge the best feelings of your heart, in eliciting and repaying good-will—if you wish to enjoy romantic scenery, or to study peculiar and most interesting manners—and particularly, if you are fond of fly-fishing—go to Ireland ! Take with you only a mind free from prejudice or party-spirit, and a soul capable of appreciating Nature and Men ; open your eyes to the scenes of loveliness that will greet you, and your heart to the kindness and goodness you will experience, and I doubt not that you will be highly gratified.

And thus, Erin, I bid thee farewell !—

Whether or not I be again permitted to wander amid thy Mountain Solitudes, or float over thine azure Lakes, the happy hours I have passed by thy streams and green fields will never fade from my memory; neither will the deep interest I feel in thy future welfare ever cease in my heart.

The angler in Ireland : or An Englishman's ramble through Connaught and Munster, during the summer of 1833 .. (1834)

Author : William Bilton

Subject : Fishing

Publisher : London, R. Bentley

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

Book from the collections of : Harvard University

Collection : americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/anglerinireland00unkngoog>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

February 26 2013