

Fiction For Tourists

*Highways and Byways in Donegal and Antrim*

Stephen Lucius Gwynn

1903

•

CHAPTER I

THE country of which I have to write is the coast and coast-ward parts of Ireland from Donegal Bay to Larne Harbour ; and the line which I have to trace will take you from the wildest corners of the west, where Irish is still the language even of trade, business, and the schools, into the very neighbourhood of prosperous, commercial, up-to-date Belfast. Yet even at Larne, with all its kirk-going associations and its memories of outlawed Covenanters, you will still be conscious of the Celtic fringe ; and even in Donegal and the Rosses you will meet not only civility—that has never been to seek in Ireland—but growing evidence of modern comfort and civilisation. And everywhere, whether the folk about you be Celt or Saxon—though you will scarcely find either unmixed always you will be among the same brown and purple mountains, always in sight and seldom out of hearing of the sea, always you will be crossing swift, peaty streams and rivers, every one of them the home of trout and salmon, and harbouring no coarser fish : always there will be, on the one hand, the home of snipe, grouse and woodcock, and the haunt of cormorant and seagull on the other ; in short, you will be in the ideal country for a holiday, always somewhere between the heather and the sea.

It is a country for the most part remote, lonely, and storm-beaten ; in many districts so wild and barren that to this day no industry of man (even in places where the land hunger makes the main fact of existence) has attempted to reclaim it. But, inhospitable though it looks, welcome is ready enough where there are human faces ; and desolate as the place seems, it is not so in reality. You may stand where the road winds over the shoulder of Errigal, and look back and forward for twenty miles, and never see a house ; yet ten miles off, on the stony sea coast of the Rosses, cottages cluster like the suburb of a great town. And stormbeaten though the land is, the fiercest winds there blow fresh and soft from off the Atlantic ; they have no cruel edge to them. Bleak it may seem to a stranger—a wilderness among lands ; but, wilderness or not, it is a country much beloved, a country to which men return from over seas gladly, and where many hearts in America, New Zealand, and Australia still hold fast to their rocky anchorage.

For strangers, of course, it will never have this irresistible magic ; yet those who come there need not be afraid of going home shocked and haunted by the nakedness of the land. Donegal can never be a thriving county, but it may cease to be clouded by the shadow of famine ; and it is in the meantime no worthless appanage of the Empire. While human beings in these islands increase and multiply as they are doing, every year will give an added value to these lonely regions which become the breathing spaces and playgrounds of our laborious race. And for a playground, I do not believe, that as things stand, there is a better to be had in Great Britain or the Continent, for the ordinary man with the ordinary purse, who seeks his pleasure most willingly in some form of open air exertion.

Till a few years ago, the country was difficult of access, and ill found with places to stay in ; but now railways bring you into the heart of it, roads are plenty, inns are always available and decent, while there is a considerable sprinkling of really good hotels.

For the other charm of travel, that depends not on the mere beauty of glen, moor, and mountain side, river, lake, and sea, but is woven from a web of clinging memories and traditions, this country cannot vie with a land like Devon and Cornwall, where every town and harbour evokes the richest historic associations. It is impossible for me not to envy Mr. Norway, of whose *Highways and Byways in Devon and Cornwall* I am a humble imitator. The birthplace of Arthur and all the other legendary sites that cluster in Cornwall awaken endless memories of beauty in every mind ; in Devon the names of Drake, Hawkins and Grenville are like trumpet-calls to the imagination. Donegal and Antrim are counties certainly not devoid of legend and history, but it is a history cherished only in the vague popular tradition of a defeated race, and a legend lore which has never been wrought into famous poetry. Patrick and Columba are great saints, yet the English-speaking world knows and cares little for them—scarcely troubles to distinguish truth from legend in their histories. The O’Neills and O’Donnells were great warriors, but even in Ireland Red Hugh and Owen Roe are ill remembered, and at best they lack the nimbus of victory. Ireland has never had her Bannockburn to reconcile her to many Flodden Fields. Yet it was in the mountains of the north that the Gael made his fiercest and longest stand against the conquerors, and the name of Tyrconnell was dreaded long after the Armada had battered its last remnants to pieces on these northward jutting shores, and to this day, in sign that the conquest was never crushing, Donegal is the only part of Ireland, they say, where those who “ have the Irish” will own to their knowledge if a stranger questions them. At least there is this in my favour when I try to string together some of the old legends, some of the old histories ; that there is little fear in writing for English readers, or indeed for Irish either, of appearing to recite needlessly what is already familiar.

What has to be done then is to endeavour to stimulate a desire to go to this playground of northern Ireland and to furnish out some sort of running comment by the way. But the best comment really is what any civil-spoken friendly traveller can collect for himself. This book is planned on the assumption that the tourist wants to make a tour. For my own part I had far sooner pitch my tent at one, two, or three of the places by the way where one can fish, play golf, boat, or climb mountains according to one’s inclination, and above all, where one can make friends. For there are two things in this part of Ireland that never disappoint—the scenery and the people.

Innumerable pleasant talks, by the roadside or in the fields, with carmen or with boatmen are among the best things to look back on in one’s memories of holiday making there. Everywhere the people are friendly and willing to talk. But there is one point which every Irishman writing a book for Englishmen in his country would wish to impress, and that is to beg that tourists will not spoil the country side by indiscriminate generosity. Killarney with its swarming beggars is an awful example. Even on the Antrim Coast small boys pursue the car or bicycle, clamouring for pennies, and expect, on the beaten line of travel, to be paid for telling you the way. In Donegal happily none of these things exist. If you go into a cottage and ask for a drink of milk, it is often hard to get payment accepted ; and to propose payment for what is freely offered is,—just as it should be—taken for an offence. If the tourist finds money burn in his pocket at the sight of much poverty, he can always consult the clergy of either church at any village and learn where help is needed, but bare feet and even tattered clothing are no mark of destitution in many parts where boots are chiefly worn on high days and festivals as a somewhat cumbersome mark of respectability. Any one who talks to the people will find them for the most part very cheerful company, old and young, and for the

student of queer forms of speech their talk is delightful merely for the dialect. Everywhere in Ulster they speak a kind of lowland Scotch. I have heard it said that in the old times when you addressed a person in Donegal who had only the Irish he would answer you, "I have no Scotch." But there are many curious words and turns of phrase peculiar to them, and the Antrim talk, scholars tell one, retains more than any dialect in the kingdom phrases that were current in Elizabethan English but are now obsolete. This dialect you will only meet in the more settled parts, for it is a relic of the "plantation." In Glen Columbkil or Gweedore the men will speak to you in a deliberate stately English almost like the speech of foreigners ; sometimes indeed with a strong foreign accent, the accent of the Gael ; for English is to them an acquired language, not the speech of their first years.

In addition to the national peculiarities of their speech is the almost invariable liking of Irish peasants for a certain picturesqueness in diction. Sometimes this results in a real choice of the word which any artist in style would commend ; sometimes in an equally delightful perversion. "Are there any fish in the pool to-day ?" you would say to the old Keeper on the Lackagh river. "Fish is it ? It's fair polluted with them." The choicest example I ever heard related to a turnip cutter which had been working stiff and was handed over to the local mechanic who explained his operation upon it. "You see, your reverence, she was a wee thing proud in the pitch, but I hae alleviated her bottom." That meant that the knife had been cutting too perpendicularly, but he had eased the slope of the cutter.

Another instance was the phrase used by a man relating the outrageous conduct of a mother, who, being incensed with her son had pursued him with a spade.

"An' it was telling the boy he got awa' : if she'd caught him she wad hae persevered on him."

Both these, of course, are misuses of words, though the word as used bears an odd relation to the right meaning. "Persevere," for instance, is used as a kind of verb superlative. But for what may be called legitimate examples of Ulster speech, and also of Ulster ways of thought, I refer my reader to the following collection which has been jotted down for me by one long familiar with the people.

The first four belong to an Antrim man an old ploughman and farm steward.

Speaking of a field overgrown with rushes, he said, "It'll be a quare tragedy gettin' them rushes out o' thon field."

Of barn doors gnawn away near the ground by rats, he remarked, "Th'are quare ventilation for vermin under them doores."

His description of a paddock in early spring was, "It's just fit for an outspurt for them young beasts."

In answer to the objection that it was bare of herbage, he replied, "It's not for what they wud get off it, but they'll just peruse over it." (pronounced "peruse").

There is a regular idiom in this admission made by a young man about to marry : "A'm no that rough o' cash." It recurs in this sentence : "There's them that wudna' see me at a disshort for a pound or twa." A variant on this idiom would be "wudna' see me disshorted."

A Donegal man's description of a well-to-do house, whose prosperity was in kind though not in coin, was : " They're short o' cash maybe, but there wud be aye a roughness about the hoose, meal and potatoes and the like."

Some of their phrases are epigrammatic in their brevity. A daughter petitioned on behalf of her father : " Wud yer honer do something for a poor ould man that can nayther work nor want" (want = do without) and she summarised his needs, outside and inside, by saying, " He's just needin' whatever your honer's plased to give him, back or belly."

A married woman's reply when asked her name was, " A'm Mc'Adoo by my feyther, but A'm Gallagher by my man."

Another who counted herself as well " fathered and husbanded" as Portia, observed, " It's the hoighth o' dacency my childer's come of on a' sides."

She was franker than an old man who declined to boast of his pedigree. " My people, it's from Strabane they come ; an' A'm not goin' for to brag till yer honer, but their cara'kter was just noble, that's what it was."

A grumbling old woman, asked whether her daughter was not attentive to her, replied, " Ay, she's kind eneuch by lumps ; she's lumpy, Sally is." (the metaphor is from carelessly made stirabout).

Harvesters from West Donegal apologised for their imperfect English by saying, " It's the Irish we speak among wursel's, but we hae eneuch Scotch to speak till yer honer."

A R.C. native of Gartan expressed " liberal spirit of church-manship" (the water in the hollow of a stone on the altar in Columbkille chapel, used with prayer, is sought as a cure for many ailments) : " There's many comes here for the watter, Scotch and Irish ; an' for a' that A see, a Scotch prayer goes as far as an Irish prayer." Here " Scotch" stands for Protestant ; " Irish" for Roman Catholic.

An old man tells how he has walked all night with his wife, to see his daughter in hospital. " My wumman an' me, we niver stretched side a' nicht, we wur thinkin' that long to see the cutty."

Vote by ballot for representatives in Parliament first came into effect at the bye-election for the City of Derry in 1872.

A few days after (November, 1872), on my way to Derry, I heard the following conversation between a Derry pig-jobber and some small farmers who were going into Derry with pigs to sell.

*1st Farmer* (to pig-jobber) . " Now sir, you're one that knows, an' we're just ignorant men, an' we'd like that you'd tell us about this Derry election that they're talkin' about, for we dinna richtly understand this ballot."

*P.-J.* : " Oh, I'll tell you all about it. You just go in, and they hand you a paper with the candidates' names, and you go into a booth and make your mark against the one you vote for, and that's the whole of it."

*2nd Farmer* : “ Well now, A wud just like you’d tell me if this is the way o’ it. A have a vote maybe, and we’ll say this gentleman” (pointing to man on right) “ axes me for it, an’ maybe A promise it till him. An’ then *that* gentleman, we’ll say” (pointing to man on left), “ he’s the other candidate, and *he* axes me for it, an’ maybe A promise it till him too. An’ maybe A vote for the wan, or maybe A vote for the tither, or maybe A vote for nayther o’ them. An’ nobody kens what way A voted.”

*P.-J.* : “ That’s just it ; that’s just the way it is.”

(Chorus of Small Farmers, with fervour) : “ Agh, that’s dacency, so it is.”

*3rd Farmer* (following up the success scored by No. 2) .

“ Well, now, if it wudn’t be troublin’ ye too much, maybe ye’d tell us this. We’ll say A promised my vote till this gentleman” (to right), “ an’ A tuk money maybe frae him ; an’ then, we’ll say, A promised it to *that* gentleman” (on left), “ an’ A tuk money maybe from him ; an’ then A gang intil the booth, an’ maybe putt my X” (pronounce Ax) “ to this man’s name, or maybe A put it till that man’s name, or maybe A dinna put X till ayther of them, an’ A’ve tuk their money frae the baith o’ them. Is that the way it is ?”

*P.-J.* : “ Ay, that’s just the way.”

(Chorus as before, with redoubled fervour, rising into enthusiasm) : “ Agh, that’s dacency, that’s just the hoight o’ dacency, that’s what it is.”

There is a delightful idiom as well as an odd shot at a medical term in this remark made by the daughter of a sick woman to a visitor.

*D.* : “ The ould wumman’s far through ; A’m thinkin’ she’ll not be long troublesome to me.”

*V.* : “ And what is it that’s ailin’ her ?”

*D.* : “ Just the brown cats” [*bronchitis*].

Medical details were often wonderful. An invalid goes insane ; her friends explain : “ You see, yer honer, she had aye a narvish wun’ that wrount her [a nervous wind that worked her] ; an’ it just wrount up an’ up to it got till her heed” (ghguttural).

There is a capital story of a parson introducing his newly married wife to a parishioner, who remarks : “ Ay, A was just thinkin’ that was yer missis, when A seen ye comin’ up the hill hookit wi’ a strange wumman.”

The parishioner proceeded to criticise the lady’s personal appearance. After she had gone on, the parson remained.

“ Well, yer reverence, it’s yersel’ was aisy content wi’ a wife,” said the parishioner.

*His Reverence* : “ What makes you say so ?”

*Parishioner* : “ A’m just meanin’ this : she’s as or’nary luckin’ a wumman as iver A set eyes on.”

The same parishioner described the effect of her criticism on the parson to a third person :—

“ He sat, an’ he lauched, an’ he better lauched, till ye cud hae tied him wi’ a strae.”

Sometimes dialect leads to confusion, as in this dialogue :—

*Visitor* : “ I hear the new rector is a very clever man.”

*Rustic* : “ Cliver ? not him ; he is just a small, wee man. But he’s a gran’ preacher.” (Cliver, in Donegal, means stout and comely.)

Here is a description of a preacher’s impressive manner :—

“ He just pits his twa hands thegither, an’ he looks over them down on the congregation as if they were the dirt under his feet.”

The following Scriptural illustration of *faith* was overheard in the waiting-room of a country railway station, where sundry country folk (Presbyterians) were waiting for a train :—

*1st Farmer* (black coated and stiff cravated) . “ Ou ay, man, faeth’s a wunderfull thing. There’s quare examples o’ faeth in the Scruptures. The grandest example maybe is Jonah.”

*2nd Farmer* : “ Is it Jonah ? A don’t richtly mind aboot him. Maybe ye’d just axplain till us how it was.”

*1st F.* (didactically).- “ Well, the way o’ it was just this. Jonah was sent for to prache till the men o’ Ninnyvay, an’ he went aboard o’ a ship, an’ a storm come on them, an’ the sailors they throwed him overboard ; an’ a big whale swallowed him down, an’ he was three days an’ three nights in its bally ; an’ after three days it throwed him up on the dry Lan’. An’ what did Jonah do ? He just went on till Ninnyvay, just the way he was, an’ he prached till a’ the great men that was in that big fine city. Think o’ that ; an’ him that had been three days an’ three nights in the whale’s bally, so yez may judge the condashion his clothes was in. Oh man, Jonah had great faeth.”

*2nd Farmer, and all the audience* : “ Ay, that was great faeth, so it was.”

This is how an elderly young maiden accounted for her single state :—

“ Ye see, mem, the way o’ it was this. Them that wad hae me, A wadna hae ; an’ them that A wad hae, wadna hae me.”

I keep the prettiest for the last. A poor woman’s answer to a charitable lady, who asked whether she was a widow, was—

“ ’Deed, mem, A’m the worst soort o’ a wudda ; A’m an ould maid.”

It is just as well to warn the tourist not to take quite literally all that is told him. Cardrivers particularly and people of the class that comes most into touch with the English travellers have observed that the Saxon is for the most part willing to believe anything that is told him

in Ireland : the more palpably ridiculous the better ; and they get a good deal of amusement to themselves out of circulating the wildest statements.

One lady, whom a friend of mine met, began to talk to him of the north of Ireland, which she said was a delightful country in the early summer, but that it usually became usupportable to a stranger as soon as the shamrocks came into flower. This was naturally quite news to my friend and he inquired further. It appeared that she had been driving somewhere in the neighbourhood of Lifford and was struck by the universal prevalence of a most intolerable stench. After a while she made bold to mention it, but her driver promptly told her, “ Sure, ma’am, that’s just the shamrocks coming into flower.” My friend recognised at once that this had happened when the flax was being steeped and dried on the fields, a process which used to make a good deal of Donegal and Derry unsavoury enough, but it was no use for him to explain ; the lady had her explanation given her on the spot by a native and she bore a grudge against the shamrocks that nothing could obliterate. The flax crop is nearly a thing of the past now, and nobody who goes to Donegal in August will find this particular kind of shamrock fragrant on the breeze.

Another tourist was driving along Donegal Bay and from both shores along the whole length of it columns of smoke went up from the piles of wrack that was burning to make kelp. He inquired naturally enough what the smoke was. “ Sure, sir,” said the driver, “ them’s the stills working” “ And do the police never interfere ?” asked the horrified Saxon. “ Oh ! sir,” said the driver with the utmost gravity, “ it wouldn’t be telling them boys if the polis saw them.” The tourist said no more but was eloquent when he got back to his native land on the incompetence of a constabulary that could not see smoke that was visible every mile or so over ten leagues of coast.

Folklore of course abounds, but it is not easy to come by ; the peasantry are shy of telling stories about the good folk and others, because they believe themselves and see that you do not. The botanist will find Donegal at least, a happy hunting ground ; the oddest things grow in the oddest places. On the face of Slieve League, the huge cliff that looks out straight towards America, maidenhair fern grows freely, and in the savage Poisoned Glen under Errigal, the wildest of all these wild places, an enterprising land commissioner discovered the Killarney fern, a plant so delicate that it is hard to keep even in a specially arranged fernery. But these are matters for specialists whom I do not profess to enlighten or direct.

The object of study which will attract most people in Donegal is that of social conditions. Here you have to begin with, in many of the wildest parts from Inishowen to the Rosses, a population living in houses set closely together upon a soil manifestly incapable of supporting them, yet willing to pay exorbitant prices for the right to occupy these holdings.

For the men of the families it is merely a home, not a place of subsistence a sort of roosting-place for the winters. In the springtime they till their tiny patches of soil, set in among rock and heather, often too small and stony for a plough to work in ; when summer comes, away they go many of them to Scotland, and in the harvest time there is a general exodus to England while the women get in whatever scanty produce there may be at home. St. John’s Eve is the signal for this migration : that is the day on which they like to enter on an engagement ; and about June 18th the quays in Dublin are a strange sight with these wild-looking folk crowding to their boat. It is a strange economic problem that is presented by these habitations on a land apparently unfit for anything but a sheep-run, yet where men will not be deterred from living. This has been permanently the case ; but within the last twenty years has come the great change since England turned Ireland into a laboratory for political experiment, and you may study in Donegal the attempts to fix an economic rental for land

that in other countries would probably find no occupants. You may see also, what is more encouraging, the results produced by many essays in paternal legislation. The “congested districts board” has been so busy in the west of Donegal that it has generated an adjective : there is a “congested” bridge over the Gweebarra river, “congested” roads carry you over much of the country, and you may meet “congested” fish being hawked all the way from the Bloody Foreland down into Cavan.

Donegal used to be expensive to travel in, except for a very strong walker, as inns are far apart and posting costs nearly a shilling a mile ; but the cycle solves that difficulty. Antrim is fully organised for tourist traffic, and a long car or van runs daily in summer from Portrush to Larne by which you may travel if you are weary of the machine. But the coast road there is so good that you will have less temptation to laziness ; and in Donegal, though one would not pick it out as a cyclist’s Paradise, yet the roads along the coast are on the whole very fair and in parts excellent. Inland they vary from passable to traversable. But everywhere the country is hilly, distances are reckoned by Irish miles, and for the ordinary mortal twenty miles, especially with a knapsack, is quite enough for a day’s stage, if you are to come in fit and fresh and willing to look about you at your destination. It is in short a country where bicycling is a means rather than an end in itself. For my own part I would sooner go through it on a car, taking walks wherever it suited me ; but your machine will save you if you travel alone nearly a pound a day, which is a consideration, and will be the means of conveying, you to places where some of the best links in existence are readily available to golfers, and to the only country in Great Britain, so far as my knowledge goes, where fishing worth having is to be had for the asking or even without that ceremony.

Assuming then that you want to go round the coast of Donegal and Antrim, why go from Ballyshannon to Larne rather than from Larne to Ballyshannon ? The excellent reason which I discovered by bitter experience between Gweedore and Glenties, is that six days in the week in that country the wind blows from the west and oftenest from the south-west. Therefore, for whatever distance you make your tours, go from west to east. That is the first main point, the guiding principle. As to details, my experience points to the fact that if you ride your bicycle to Euston and label it, it will arrive safely enough, but if you pack it in a case or take any trouble of that sort you will probably have to disinter the fragments. So long as a bicycle has a will of its own and can swerve and hit people in the legs, it makes itself respected ; when it is reduced to the condition of helpless luggage, porters, who hate bicycles, take advantage of it. The Irish railways are very moderate in their charge for bicycle tickets and in many cases have a special arrangement of slings in the vans for carrying them, an excellent institution,

Secondly, as to your outfit. Of course you will take a Gladstone bag or portmanteau—the smaller the better—which can be sent by rail or mail car from point to point. But the facilities for doing this in the west of Donegal are not great, and it is desirable to have the means of carrying what will keep you going for three or four days. That means a knapsack as well as the bag between one’s knees. I found the two no great encumbrance on a ride of over thirty miles. But I was exceedingly glad to accept a good offer, and for two days following to get them taken on by car by a traveller who had the same destination. This piece of luck would probably fall into the way of any one in the tourist season who has the taste for scraping acquaintance with fellow guests in the various stages of his travel, and even failing that, your landlord can generally find out if there is any car going in the desired direction and arrange on your behalf.

Thirdly, as to kit. If you sleep in pyjamas it simplifies matters as, in the event of coming in drenched—the case arises in Ireland—you can put them on and present, if not a decent, at



least a clad appearance. I prefer to travel with a spare suit of flannels. Ladies will no doubt find instructions in one of their own journals. But both to ladies and mere men I would say, “Remember that you have a lot of walking to do.” An old servant, whose sayings were treasured in the family for which he did such work as he saw fit to do, used to declare that the best way to get up a mountain was to “keep sitting down constant.” My opinion is that the way to bicycle in Donegal is to keep getting off constant. Most of the hills can be ridden—unless with a headwind ; but it seems to me pleasanter to walk them especially as the fatigue that comes from bicycling is the most disagreeable sort of severe fatigue which one can experience. Walking and rowing distribute the exertion over the entire body ; cycling concentrates it on a few muscles and it is far easier in consequence to overdo the thing. Therefore be prepared to walk. Bring cycling shoes if you like and use them for slippers in the evening, but have at least one pair of some good stout foot-gear for use on a bad day or a hilly road. Fourthly, do not cycle in a cap, as it gets wet through and lets the rain down the back of your neck. A soft hat is the best thing both for fishing and cycling. Lastly, if you take a macintosh at all take a strong one. The flimsy things are no good in heavy rain and they give the same disagreeable kind of heat as a heavy cape. For my own part, I should always take a good long waterproof coat for lake fishing, when it is necessary to keep dry as one is not walking, but this is not for the bicycle. I should send it by post or rail to whatever place I meant to fish, and on the machine get as wet as heaven chose to make me, knowing that I had a change of clothes in my knapsack, to put on at whatever place I happened to stay. For the cycle a repairing outfit is of course indispensable, though happily thorns are scarce along the coast roads. Rods can be carried on the machine conveniently enough.

Golfing gear can be sent by public conveyance everywhere except from Port Salon to Rosapenna, and that is only a short distance. But for further remarks upon fishing and golfing the reader is referred to the chapters devoted to these subjects. As a general remark, however, this is the place to say that a tourist who does not care to go in seriously for fishing, but is tempted by a good-looking day to try for brown trout (which require no license), may as a rule easily borrow a rod and net from the hotel proprietor or gillie. It is well to bring a fly book along to meet such occasions : two or three sound casts or a couple of dozen flies suffice.

Highways and byways in Donegal and Antrim (1903)

Author : Gwynn, Stephen Lucius, 1864-1950

Subject : Antrim (Northern Ireland : County) ; Donegal (Ireland : County)

Publisher : London Macmillan

Language: English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : Robarts — University of Toronto

Collection: robarts; toronto

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/highwaysbywaysin00gwynuoft>

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

July 26 2013