

On The Pig's Back 1827

Sketches in Ireland : descriptive of interesting, and hitherto unnoticed districts, in the north and south

•

Caesar Otway

LETTER II.

TO THE REV. SIR F. L. B——SSE

THE Lake of Garton, to which I brought you in my last letter, is one of the finest of those numerous sheets of water which are interspersed through the vallies and mountains of this highland district ; either in the midst of the mountains, forming the sources of rivers, or in the lowland vallies, expanding as their receptacles or reservoirs. High or low, small or large, they form interesting objects for the tourist ; and I am not sure whether in this way our Irish lake may not be found as worthy of a visit as one in Cumberland, or Scotland, or even Switzerland.

The lake is of considerable extent, its shores are ornamented with some timber, and a few gentlemen's seats ; a very pretty parsonage reposes in a peninsula, and to the west and south the mountains extend in elevated ranges—beyond the lake I was shown an ancient ruin, said to be a church of St. Columkill ; and a stone was described to me as a spot of peculiar sanctity and a place of ancient veneration and worship, to which, in old times, thousands of pilgrims used to flock—but it has (fallen into disuse, and Doune Well has carried away almost all its votaries. The stone, the subject of veneration, is flat, and has four holes or cavities on its surface, which are said to be the marks of the hands and knees of Ethne, the mother of Columkill, who, large with child, was told by an old Druid, that she never would bring her son to the birth, till she came and knelt on this stone. So leaving the house of her princely father, the descendant of Nial of the Nine Hostages, she traversed the mountains of Tyrconnel until she came hither, and here taken in labour, was safely delivered of the pigeon of the Church—and certainly the founder of the Culdees could not be born in a spot more befitting the wild and solitary rule that he established ; the father of the Culdees could not come to the birth in a more appropriate place.

This country on every side presents memorials of Columkill, the peculiar Saint of Tyrconnell, and certainly he was, after all, a passionate pigeon of the Church, and very like a real Irishman—he was sometimes the best humoured and softest-hearted fellow in the world ; but vex him, and he would kick up such a row, set all about him fighting, and breaking heads like a Tipperary faction on a fair-green—to account for all this, his historians tell us, that at one time he was attended by a guardian angel called Axal—and then he was in sweet mood, and he might be heard two miles away singing hymns, and chaunting mass amongst the mountains—at other times, an evil genius, called Demal, used to infest him, inspire his mind with wicked thoughts, and still wickeder designs ; and therefore, poor Columkill, under the influence, no doubt, of this demon—was the cause of three bloody battles in Ireland ; and in consequence of these pugnacious propensities, he was banished out of the country and sent to Iona, and was never permitted to look on Ireland again ; and so strict was this religious penance enforced on him, that some years afterwards when his presence was necessary to compose a feud which his earlier passions had excited—he came over with an oiled cloth

before his eyes, and the poor fellow was not permitted to cast even a side look at the green hills he loved so well.

I was shown, not far from this, the place of one of Columkill's numerous feats—an old ruin near Garton, concerning which the tradition goes, that once upon a time, there was an old magician who had built himself a tower in an island on this lake, of great strength and beauty, and in this tower he had a magic glass, which told him all that was passing through the world ; and he had an altar made of an emerald on which were elevated the idols of the sun and moon which he adored. And here he lived, happy in his wisdom, and all the world feared him ; but so it befel, that on a certain day he was overtaken by a sore distemper, and fell into a death-like trance without sense or motion, and then the Devil watching his opportunity, determined to take of the man he hated, what was nothing better, than a dirty advantage—for seizing him in his talons, he was hurrying away through the air, and they were going you may guess where—at this critical moment, Columkill who was out upon the hills, looking out for a well to bless for the people, happened to cast his eyes upwards, and saw Satan like a kite with a lark in its claws, sailing under the sun with his prey in possession ; and just as he was directly over head, Collum made the sign of the cross in the air ; and this perfectly astonished the Devil, it made him let go his gripe of the poor magician, as you, my dear, would let go your hold of a too hot potato, and so down he dropt at Columkills feet ; and to make my story short, he at once turned a convert, embraced Christianity, became a monk, built this church, and died a Catholic and confessor of the faith.

I confess, I am sometimes inclined to think those old stories are allegorically prophetic of what has come to pass in modern times. This old magician with his tower, seems evidently intended as a mystification of a poteen distiller, with his tower of smoke rising from one of these islands ; and his magic glass evidently means the fiery liquor which can make a man see double, and then it is so natural for the Devil to fly away with a distiller ; therefore the matter is quite clear, that the indomitable rage of the people of Tyrconnel for illicit distillation, is a verification of one of Columkill's prophecies.

After leaving the valley in which Gortan Lake is embosomed ; we rose into a wide and wild moorland district, covered with immense blocks of red granite ; this district, composed of this granite formation, extends to the foot of Lough Salt, and blocks of any size, and pillars of any length could be procured of granite as compact in texture, as fine in colour, and capable of as perfect a polish as Pompey's pillar, and the sea at hand to carry away this beautiful material for ornamental architecture, to the Liffey or Thames. On the road to Lough Salt some days after, as we passed an immense block of this red granite ; my friend alighted, and putting his shoulder to the rock, it moved slowly to and fro. I was surprised, and alighting from my horse, moved it also with perfect ease, a child might have done the same ; but one hundred men could not have moved it out of its place. It was what is called a rocking-stone ; whether it was consecrated to the rites of Druidical worship, or whether it was ever admitted into the superstitious observances of the people, I could not ascertain.

We proceeded to Glen Veagh, and at length reached it after a very deep descent. We were delighted with the beautiful water, winding far between immense mountains, and apparently without end, losing itself in gloom and solitariness amidst the distant gorges and defiles of the hills. On the right hand side of the lake the mountain rises like a steep wall out of the water, lofty and precipitous, for a thousand feet ; and this cliff is the secure eyrie of the eagle and jer-falcon. On the other side the shore was lofty also, and mountainous ; but still there was room for the oak and the birch, the rowan and alder, to strike their roots amidst the rock, and clothe the ravines and hollows with ornamental copse wood. The lake was studded with wet woody islands, out of which rose perpendicular columns of smoke, which told full well that

in this solitary secluded spot the illicit distiller was at his tempting and hazardous work. I have never been in Switzerland or Scotland : it has not been my lot, at leizure to wander along the waters of Westmorland or Cumberland, but I have seen good drawings of these most frequented scenes ; and have thus admired Lough Catrine, the subject of the poet's pen and painter's pencil. But if *my glen* and *my lake* were not Irish ; if the curse of being out of fashion did not put every thing Irish under attainder, I would venture to shew Glen Veagh against any of these foreign fashionables, and would encourage my mountain nymph to hold herself as fair in varied beauty as any of them.

My pleasant and most companionable friend told me an anecdote in which this lake was concerned, which may be worth relating, as illustrative of the peculiar circumstances in which the whole north-west of Ireland was placed a few years ago by the operation of the Excise Laws. I shall relate it as nearly as possible in his own words, only premising that he has a peculiar unction in telling a story, which I have been unable to appropriate :

“ One morning in July, as I was dressing myself to walk out before breakfast, I heard a noise at my back door, and observed one of my people remonstrating with a man who was anxiously pressing into the house. I went down and met the man, whose demi-genteel dress and peculiar cut, marked him to be a gauger.—‘ O ! for mercy's sake,’ cried the man when he saw me, ‘ let me into your house ; lock me up somewhere ; hide me, save me, or my life is lost.’ So I brought him in, begged of him to sit down, and offering him some refreshment, requested him to recover his courage, and come to himself, for there was no danger.—While I was speaking, an immense crowd came up to the house, and surrounded it ; and one man more forward than the rest, came up to the door and demanded admission. On my speaking to him out of the window, and enquiring what his business was, he replied, ‘ We find you have got Mr. ——, the gauger, in your house : you must deliver him up to us, we want him.’ ‘ What do you want him for ?’ ‘ Oh, Doctor, that's no business for you to meddle in ; we want him, and must have him.’ ‘ Indeed that I cannot allow ; he is under my roof ; he has come, claiming my hospitality, and I must and will afford it to him.’ ‘ Doctor there are two words to that bargain : you ought to have consulted us before you promised ; but to be plain with you, we really respect you very much ; you are a quiet and a good man, and mind your own business ; and we would make the man sore and sorry that would touch the hair of your head. But you must give us the gauger ; to be at a word with you, Doctor, we must tear open, or tear down your house, or get him.’ What was I to do ? what could I do ?—nothing. I had not a gun or pistol in my house ; ‘ so,’ says I, ‘ boys, you must, it seems, do as you like, and mind I protest against what you are about ; but since you must have your own way, as you are Irishmen, I demand fair play at your hands. The man had ten minutes law of you when he came to my house : let him have the same law still : let him not be the worse of the shelter he has taken here : do you, therefore, return to the hill at the rere of the house, and I will let him out at the hall door, and let him have his ten minutes law.’ I thought that in those ten minutes, as he was young and healthy, that he would reach the river Lennan, about a quarter of a mile off, in front of the house, and swimming over it, escape. So they all agreed that the proposal was a fair one, at any rate, they promised to abide by it ; and the man seeing the necessity of the case, consented to leave the house ; I enlarged him at the hall door, the pursuers all true to their pledged honor, stood on a hill about two hundred yards in the rere of the house, a hanging lawn sloped down towards a small river that in all places at that season of the year was fordable—about a quarter of a mile farther off still, in front of the house, the larger river, Lennan, ran deep and broad between high and rocky banks. The gauger started off like a buck, and as a hunted deer he ran his best, for he ran for his life, he passed the little river in excellent style, and just as he had ascended its further bank and was rising the hilly ridge that divided the smaller from the broader stream, his pursuers, broke loose, all highland men, tall, loose, agile, young ; with breath and sinews strong to breast a mountain ; men, who many a

time and oft, over bog and brae, had run from the gauger, and now they were after him with fast foot and full cry. From the hall door the whole hunt could be seen—*they* helter skelter down the lawn rushing—*he* toiling up the opposite hill, and straining to crown its summit—at length he got out of sight, he passed the ridge and rushed down to the Lennan ; here, out of breath, without time to strip—without time to choose a convenient place he took the soil, in the hunting phrase, and made his plunge—at all times a bad swimmer—now out of breath, encumbered with his clothes, the water rushing dark, deep, and rapid, amidst surrounding rocks ; through whirls, and currents, and drowning holes, the poor man struggled for life ; in another minute he would have sunk for ever, when his pursuers came up, and two or three of the most active and best swimmers rushed in and saved him from a watery grave. The whole party immediately got about him, they rolled him about until they got the water out of his stomach, wiped him with their frize coats : twenty warm hands were employed rubbing him into warmth, they did every thing humanity could suggest to bring him to himself. Reader, please to recollect, that we are not describing the feats or fortunes, of Captain Rock or his myrmidons ; we are not about to detail the minutiae of a cold-blooded, long calculated murder ; we are not describing the actions of men who are more careful of the life of a pig than of a human creature. No, the Donegal mountaineers had a deed to do, but not of death ; they were about a deliberate work, but not of murder. The moment the gauger was restored to himself, and in order to contribute to it an ample dose of the *poteen* that he had persecuted was poured down his throat, they proceeded to tie a bandage over his eyes, and they mounted him on a rahery, or mountain pony, and off they set with their captive towards the mountains. For a whole day they paraded him up and down, through glens and defiles, and over mountain sides, and at length, towards the close of a summer's evening, they brought him to the solitary and secluded Glen Veagh ; here they embarked him in a curragh, or wicker boat, and after rowing him up and down for some hours in the lake, they landed him on a little island where was a hut that had often served as a shelter for the fowler, as he watched his aim at the wild water birds of the lake, and still oftener as the still-house for the manufacture of irrepresible unconquerable *poteen* ; and here under the care of two trusty men was he left, the bandage carefully kept on his eyes, and well fed on trout, grouse, hares and chickens ; plenty of *poteen* mixed with the pure water of the lake was his portion to drink, and for six weeks was he thus kept cooped in the dark like a fattening fowl, and at the expiration of that time his keepers one morning took him under the arm, and desired him to accompany them ; then brought him to a boat, rowed him up and down, wafted him from island to island, conveyed him to shore, mounted him on the pony, brought him as before for the length of a day here and there through glen and mountain, and towards the close of night, the liberated gauger finds himself alone on the high road to Letterkenny. The poor man returned that night to his family, who had given him over as either murdered, or gone to America. But he stood not as a grimly ghost at the door, but as fat and sleek, and as happy as ever.

Now wherefore all this trouble ; why all these pains to catch a gauger, fatten him, and let him loose ? Oh it was of much and important consequence to these poor mountaineers. A lawless act it surely was ; but taking into view that it was an act big with consequences affecting their future ruin or prosperity, it might almost be pardonable. Amidst the numerous parliamentary enactments that the revenue department of the country caused to be passed in order to repress the system of illicit distillation in Ireland, one was a law as contrary to the spirit of the British legislation as to the common principles of equity and conventional right—a law punishing the innocent in substitution for the guilty. This law made the townland in which the still was found, or any part of the process of distillation detected, liable to a heavy fine, to be levied indiscriminately on all its landholders. The consequence of this law was, that the whole North of Ireland was involved in one common confiscation. It was the fiscal triumph of gaugers and informers over the landlords and proprietors of the country. They were reaping their harvest of ruin, under a *bonus* offered for avarice, treachery and perjury.

Acting on this anti-social system, the gauger of the district in question had informations to the amount of £7000 against the respective townlands of which it was composed. These informations were to be passed or otherwise at the approaching Assizes, and there was no doubt but that the gauger could substantiate them according to the existing law—and thus effect the total ruin of the people.

Under those circumstances the plot for the seizure and abduction of the revenue-officer was laid. It was known that on a certain day about a month prior to the Assizes he was to pass through the district on his way to the coast—it was known that he kept those informations about his person, and therefore they waylaid him, and succeeded in keeping him out of sight until the Assizes were over, and shortly after this imprudent and unconstitutional law was repealed.

But to return to Glen Veagh—as we were rambling along its rocky strand, admiring the stillness of its waters—the sublime solitariness of its mountain shore—here a ravine, climbing up amongst the hills ; its chasms and its dancing waterfalls, fringed with birch and stunted oak—there a white silicious peak, protruding itself on high, over which the hawk cowered, as if priding itself on its inaccessible nest—before us the sleeping lake, extending itself—

“ Blue, dark, and deep, round many an Isle.”

and these isles set like precious gems, with just enough of trees for ornament—the birch, the rowan ashe, the service, the holly—and high from the central, largest and most distant island, arose a blue and wreathed smoke, that bespoke the manufacture of mountain dew—the smoke certainly added much to the picturesque accompaniment of the scene, and we could just discern a small cabin or sheeling in the island, half concealed amidst the copsewood in which it was enveloped.

I could not help expressing a wish to see the process whereby this admired liquor was compounded, that in the estimation of every Irishman—aye, and high-born Englishman too—is so superior in sweetness, salubrity, and gusto to all that machinery, science and capital can produce in the legalized way—and which verifies the observation of the wise man, “ that stolen waters are sweet”—Just as we were conversing in this way, a man turning the point of a rock, stood unexpectedly within a few yards of us. He was one of the largest men I have ever seen amongst the Irish commonalty. He was tall, that is not unusual ; but he was lusty, his bones and muscles were covered with flesh—there was a trunk-like swell in his chest, and a massiveness in his body—a pillar like formation of limbs bespeaking that he was a man moulded to be a giant, and was fed up to the full exercise and capability of his frame. He had a bull-like contour of head and neck, short and crisp curls appeared from under a small hat which seemed unable to settle itself over his ears, from the full development of the organ of combativeness that protruded itself in this region of his cranium.

The man stood before us with the assured look of one who was prepared saucily to say, what business have you here—two grey-hounds were at his heels, and a lurking grisly cur, half bull-dog, half terrier, shewed his white teeth and began to growl. ‘ Oh, how are you Teigue,’ cried my friend, (who, I believe, knows every one in Donegal) ‘ how are you my gay fellow, I am glad to see you, for you are just the man in all these mountains that I wanted to see ?—‘ Why, then, your honour, I am entirely obliged to you, and in troth when I just came upon you now, I did not know your honour—for as I was just walking over the mountain I saw some strange unco people, and I only slipt down to see the cut of their countenances.’ ‘ Ah, Teigue ; I know rightly you do not like unco people, for fear that a gauger might be amongst them ’—‘ Ah, then, now, is it I fear a ganger ?—Teigue O’Gallaghan, fear a gauger !

—no, nor a Commissioner from Dublin Custom-house, barring he had army and guns at his back— not I by my troth, for its little I'd matter just taking one of them by the waistband of the breeches and filluping him, do you see, into the middle of the lake, and there leave him to keep company with the trouts—no, no ; but the likes of you—no offence master, the likes of you I mean, not in the inside, but teeth outwards, might come and give information, and put *dacent* people to trouble, and be after bringing the army here to this quiet place and put us out of our way and all that.'

' Well, Teigue, you know me don't you ?'—' I do your honour, and am sartain sure that you are true and of the right sort, and every inch about you honest.'—' Well, Teigue ; I want to get this gentleman, who is a friend of mine, on the lake ; he desires to get into a boat to see its beauties more conteniently, besides he has a longing wish to see how the hearty drop is made, can you indulge him ?' ' That I will, and a thousand welcomes ; so away he went towards the point of the rock which jutted out into the water, and putting his finger to his mouth, he sent forth a whistle that sounded over the lake, and thus reverberating, echoed from bay to bay, and multiplied itself through the glens and gorges of the mountains ; at the same time he made some telegraphic signal, and in a minute we saw a boat push off from the island of Smoke. While Teigue was absent, I asked my friend who he was ?—why, says he, that is one of the most comfortable and independent fellows in all this mountain district—he exerts a muscular and moral influence over the people ; he has a great deal of sense, a great deal of determination ; a constant view to his own interest ; and luckily he considers that interest best promoted, by keeping the country in peace. Those that fall out he beats into good humour, and when the weight of his argument cannot prevail, the weight of his fist enforces compliance with his wishes. Then he is the patron of illicit distillation—he is co-partner in the venture, and is the watchful guardian over its process ; there is not a movment of a gauger that he does not make himself acquainted with ; there is not a detachment leaves a village or town that he has not under watch, and before a policeman, or a red coat, comes within three miles of these waters, all would be prepared for them ; still and worm sunk ; malt buried ; barrels and coolers disposed of, and the boat scuttled. There is not a man in Ireland lives better in his own way, than Teigue ; his chests are full of meal, the roof of his kitchen is festooned with bacon ; his byre is full of cows ; his sheep range on a hundred hills ; as a countryman said to me the other day, " Teigue O'Gallaher is the only man of his sort in Donegal that eats white bread, toasted, buttered, and washed down with tea for his breakfast."

In the mean time the boat came near, and Teigue joined us, and after some difficulty in getting aboard from the rocks, and adjusting ourselves in proper trim in the most frail bark that perhaps was ever launched on water, we rowed out into the lake ; and here really the apparent peril of our situation, deprived me of the pleasure that might otherwise be enjoyed in the picturesque scenery around ; the bottom of the boat was covered with water, which oozed in through a sod of turf, that served as a plug to a hole in its bottom, the size of my head ; and Teigue O'Grallagher who sat at the head of the boat surrounded by his drip-ping dogs, almost sunk it to the gunwale, and every now and then, the dogs uneasy at their confinement, tumbled about and disturbed our equilibrium ; if a gust of wind had come, as it often does on a sudden from the hills, we should have been in a perilous state. As it was, the two young men who rowed us, and who it is to be supposed could swim, enjoyed our nervous state, and out of fun told us stories of sudden hurricanes, and of the dangers and deaths that have happened to navigators on this lake ; we, therefore, declined a protracted expedition, and only desired to be landed on the island, where we arrived in a short time, and then had opportunity of witnessing the arcana of illicit distillation. The island that at a distance looked so pretty with its copsewood, its sheeling, and its wreathing smoke, when we reached it,

presented as ugly and disgusting a detail as possible ; and a Teniers or a Cruikshank, could only do justice to the scene, and present a lively picture of its uncouth accompaniments.

A half roofed cabin, in which was a raging fire, over which was suspended the pot with its connected head and worm ; two of the filthiest of human beings, half naked, squalid unhealthy looking creatures, with skins encrusted with filth, hair long, uncombed, and matted, where vermin of all sorts seemed to quarter themselves and nidificate ; and where (as Burns says,) “ horn or bone ne’er dare unsettle their thick plantations ;” these were the operatives of the filthy process which seemed in all its details, to be carried on in nastiness.

John Barlycorn, though hero bold,
Of noble enterprise ;
When Irishmen distil his blood,
They cleanliness despise.

The whole area of the Island was one dunghill composed of fermenting grains ; there were about twenty immense hogs either feeding or snoring on the food that lay beneath them ; and so alive with rats was the whole concern that one of the boatmen compared them in number and intrusiveness to flocks of sparrows on the side of a shelling-hill adjoining a corn-mill. I asked one of the boatman where the men who attended the still slept. “ Och, where should they sleep but on the grains with the pigs ; they have never been off the island these six months, they have never changed their clothes, and I believe, though they are convenient enough to the water, they have never washed themselves.” “ And are they not afraid ?” “ Why who would they be afraid of but the rats.” “ And do they never go to divine worship ?” “ Ah, that they don’t, it’s little they care about religion—one of them is a Protestant, and he curses so much that its enough to keep ghost, angel, or devil off the place—and in troth the Catholic is not much better, may be the Priest wont have work enough with *him* yet.”

I was truly disgusted with the whole scene, and anxious to quit it. [1] I was vexed and disappointed to find such a romantic or beautiful spot so defiled, so desecrated, I might say, by a manufacture, that has proved of incalculable mischief to the peaceful habits, the moral character, and religious duties of the people of the country—but we would not be allowed to depart before we partook of the produce of the pot. With all his faults, Pat is not deficient in generosity, and he is ever ready to share—yes, and often to waste the liquor which he has a peculiar delight in manufacturing ; because, perhaps, the undertaking is attended with risque, and gives birth to adventurous engagements, and escapes : and as the song says

An Irishman all in his glory is there.

I cannot take leaye of Glen Veagh, without calling to mind a visit we paid to a characteristic dweller of this singular and solitary scene. In a sunny nook where a dark deep ravine expanded itself into a little grassy valley, affording room for potato garden and a small meadow, and beside a small garrulous brook, rose a cabin, I dare not call it a cottage, for that supposes comfort, and associates cleanliness, neatness, the woodbine bower, the rose-covered lattice, with its idea,—and such a spot on Ulleswater or Windermere would have been blessed and beautified with such accompaniments ; but here we had no such amenities—the grunt of a starving sow, the growl of a gaunt greyhound, were the sounds that accosted us as we bent our heads to enter the narrow aperture that served almost as much for a chimney as an entrance. But when you entered, things bore somewhat a more satisfactory appearance ; there was better furniture than is generally to be seen in an Irish cabin ; some old-fashioned high backed chairs, some old carved, oaken, brass-mounted chests ; a decent dresser, on which were ranged some pewter dishes and plates ; implements of fishing were suspended along the

walls, and a long French musket, its barrel mounted with brass, hung right over the immense mantle-piece of the chimney that jutted out almost into the centre of the apartment ; above the gun was an old mezzotinto print of the Holy Family after Raphael, and over that again an old armorial bearing, on which you could observe a salmon, a lion passant and a bloody hand, all well smoked. Beneath the canopy of the immense chimney, and beside the hob, in a comfortable high backed chair, made of straw in the manner of a beehive, sat Jack M'Swine, the master of the mansion. He rose apparently with pain as we entered.—I thought he would never cease rising, so slowly did he unbend his extraordinary height, and with apparent difficulty, as suffering under rheumatic pains, he advanced to meet my friend, whom he accosted with all the ease of an old gentleman, and all the cordiality of an ancient Irishman. All the lower class of Irish are particularly civil and attentive to you when you enter their houses : I never in any of the provinces entered under a poor man's roof, that I was not received with the smile of pleasure and the language of benignity, the best seat wiped, and offered for my acceptance, the pig expelled, the dog punished if he dared to growl at my entering,—but here was even something better than this, for there was the Irish heartiness adorned with the urbanity of a gentleman ; if he were the lord of a palace he could not have received us with more kind and unembarrassed courtesy, than did this dweller of the lonely mountain hut ; and when I was introduced to him as one who had come from Dublin to see and admire the beauties of Glen Veagh, nothing could exceed the anxious kindness with which he expressed his desire to do every thing to further my views ; he lamented he had not a boat ; that his fowling convenience and fishing tackle were not in trim for our use ; in short he seemed to feel a double pang that he was a poor man.—But who was Jack M'Swine? The lineal descendant of the ancient sept of the M'Swines, who next and only inferior to the O'Donnells, possessed a large portion of Tyrconnel. Our friend of Glen Veagh maintained that he was the M'Swine na Doo—the Caunfinny or head of the family,—and surrounded by poverty as we saw him, the dweller of the wretched hut, without one shilling of income, with nothing to live on but the produce of his potato garden, and the milk of a few cows that ranged the mountains, yet Philip the Second of Spain ruling over dominions on which the sun never set, was not prouder in his bearing, nor richer in the recollections of his Austrian ancestry, than this fading shadow of an Irish Tanist : the man literally lived, moved and had his being as dependent on his family associations ; and still life was only supportable under the one hope which he cherished. Amidst chilling discouragements, insurmountable obstacles, and endless rebuffs, he had now come to the verge of the grave ; grey he stood and tempest worn, like one of the withering oaks on the side of Glen Veagh, and still he put forth the leaf and struggled for existence, hoping against hope. The M'Swines, as proprietors of a large portion of the mountain district of Donegal, had usually sided with the O'Neils against the O'Donnells ; and O'Neil's demand of sixty cows as tribute from O'Donnel, was often enforced by the assistance of M'Swine ; and when James I. conquered the O'Donnells, and escheated their lands, as a reward to M'Swine for his opposition to this chieftain, his mountains, perhaps because not worth confiscating, were left to him in peace, and in the following reign of Charles, when the execrable rebellion of 1641, broke out, the M'Swine for some reason did not join in it ; there was no proof of massacre or murder against him, and the Act of Settlement left him his property as an innocent Papist. Here then down to the present century the M'Swines lived, the lords paramount of these glens and mountains, in barbarous and profuse hospitality,—here surrounded by followers and retainers, amidst fosterers and cohershers, their hall full of horse boys, and dog boys, and cow boys,—all idlers, all gentlemen ; all disdaining any trade or occupation,—fishing, fowling, hunting or fighting by day ; feasting, quarrelling and carousing by night,—thus the M'Swines from father to son lived ; borrowing money, and mortgaging one mountain tract or line of sea after another. This is the common history of an Irish Castle-Rackrent family, and thus the common fate of the Sir Thadys and Sir Condys of Ireland attended the M'Swines, and our poor friend Jack came into

the world the inheritor of his forefathers' name, pride, recollections and imprudencies ; but alas ! his lands had all vanished and become under foreclosed mortgages, the properties of families who possessed the low-born English and Scotch propensity of foresight and frugality ; and still Jack M'Swine clung to the hope and expectation of recovering some of his alienated lands ; he told us how certain tracts were illegally conveyed away from him by his father, and he besought me with all the anxiety of a man who was catching at vague impossibilities, that I would search the records in Dublin Castle for him, and make out his title. No one could possibly have seen this fine old man, so tall, so meagre, and yet so decent, in his coarse attire, and so urbane and so gracious in the old-fashioned manner of the last century, without wishing that some portion of the wide domains of his ancestors was restored to him, and that his grey hairs might descend in decency to the grave ;—or rather it would better become my desire and my prayer to turn these immoderate hopes, these ceaseless anxieties from such unreal fancies, from these fallacies of earthly ambition, to seek a property in a better country—an inheritance with the saints in light : desiring to be found in Christ, clothed in his righteousness, endowed with his unspeakable gifts, and possessing his unsearchable riches. Every year this hearty old Milesian comes down from his mountain glen, and spends a day at the hospitable glebe-house of my friend, and he regularly brings to the younger part of the family an appropriate present ; a gift which from the remotest times a king might accept, and a noble might bestow—a young eagle or jer-falcon of the true hunting breed, from the cliffs of Glen Veagh. Before I left the country, this genuine gentleman brought me such a present as a grateful recompence (the only one he could bestow,) for the hearty interest and attention which I, as he said, condescended to take in the fallen fortunes of poor John M'Swine.

We proceeded on from Glen Veagh to the hospitable mansion at Ards, before referred to, and where the contrast presented by a beautifully planted and ornamented demesne, and by the accurate row-culture and farming, worthy of Norfolk or the Lothians, to the mountains, moors and wastes we passed over, was as grateful as unexpected. But as I do not pretend to be a Young or a Curwen, dealing in the detail of farming or the statistics, I shall pass over what I saw at Ards, only saying, that I trust I shall retain, though I may not describe, the grateful sense of the kindness I received while there. But the lofty cloud-compelling Muckish was near Ards, and on this pig's back [2] I was determined to mount :—there will be no limits to vision from it; I shall see all Donegal, and Innishowen, and Tyrone ; I shall see Derry, the brave, devoted city, the joy of the whole Protestant world, under my feet ; I shall see the fine land-locked Lough Swilly, the deep indented waters of Mulroy. In short, I shall see what I have ever had a passion for seeing, a wide and outstretched view from a mountain. So, in spite of the fervors of a July day, and joined in the daring enterprise by some of the younger part of the family at Ards, we set forth to climb the mountain. And here it was literally climbing. There are some lofty mountains you can ride to the top of. To the craggy height of Snowdon, Welsh tourists, as I am informed, ascend in carriages ; but rest assured this facility was not possible to us ; for actually in many places we had to catch hold of the heath and rock to help us in the ascent ; and so steep and downright was the mountain, that a stone of any size could be hurled from the top to the bottom. Thus amusing ourselves rolling down the compact silicious rock, and observing the noise, velocity, smoke, and flashes of fire that were elicited in the momentum of the descent, at last, after near four hours exertion, we arrived at the summit of our ambition.—I ran, covered with perspiration and panting with heat, to mount the topmost ridge, and just as we arrived there, just as we had cast our eyes around, and began to feast on the immense vision of earth and ocean beneath us, a vast murky cloud from the Atlantic, big with sleet and moisture, enveloped us and the whole top of the mountain as with a night-cap, and made every thing so dark, indistinct, and dreary, that we could scarcely see one another : besides it was attended with such a cold, cutting breeze, that we, who were all with, pores open, under the process of perspiration, felt as if the Cacodæmon of

the mountain, in revenge for his invaded solitariness, had risen in anger, and armed with a scythe had rushed on to cut us asunder—to retreat, therefore, was the best policy. How similar the results attending the ascent of this mountain are to what await our most aspiring hopes and promising speculations in this life ; looking up to attain some desirable elevation, grasping, scrambling, heated, weary, at length the object occupying eye, hand, intellect, and fancy, is gained, the ridge of ambition is conquered, and hope is crowned, and still we are not happy ;—no, some troublous cloud, some misty thing, comes and warns us that after all our toil and labour things were easier and brighter below. But I, whose curiosity was more intense than that of my friends, in spite of a cold and driving sleet, and fearless of a fever, still lingered behind, and hastily observed that on the top of this lofty mountain, which at a distance appears so acute and linear in its ridge, there was a plain of some acres, on which grew in luxuriance that species of saxifrage so great an ornament to our gardens, called London Pride ; so abundant was it that you might suppose that some comical fairy gardener had established a nursery of it here. A poet given to prettiness might point a sonnet here on the natural habitant of pride, as lofty and rocky, and cold and barren ; pride every where to be found, and in all places useless, whether it blows in the garden of a purse-proud London citizen, or extends in dreary solitariness on the mountain of a Donegal Nobleman. I also took time to observe, that on the north-western side of the elevation where it stands exposed to the driving sleet and tempest and saline spray of the great Atlantic, that even the white silicious stone of which it is composed, and which is almost compact as quartz, is decomposed and has been converted by the agency of the elemente into beds of minute fine sand, as pure as the driven snow—this the proprietor of the mountain rolls down the side of the hill in canvas bags, and exports to Dunbarton in Scotland, where it is manufactured into the purest crown and plate glass. My friend and I proceeded onwards from this angry mountain to the promontory of Horn-head, and were received at the hospitable mansion of Mr. Stewart, who amidst the multiplicity of gentry of that name in the province of Ulster, is as usual designated and distinguished by the name of the property over which he resides ; and here on this promontory or island, for it is surrounded by the sea, on this out-port towards America, I found a family as amiable, society as polished, reception as cordial, and attention such as Irishmen could give, or Irishmen be grateful for. Mr. Stewart has the most extensive stocked farm in Ireland, or perhaps in the world. I have heard it said of old Mr. Keating of Tipperary, that he used to sheer at one sheering 25,000 sheep ; but Mr. Stewart reckons his stock not by hundred or thousand but by hundreds of thousands. I can assert he is lord of millions ; the whole promontory of Horn-head, containing upwards of 1000 acres, is one well-stocked rabbit-warren, and the sum arising from the fur alone of these rabbits amounts to a handsome income. But besides this, there is not an ocean-bird that dips its wing in the waves of the Atlantic, the gull, gannet, penguin, peterel, and albatross, and all those numerous and nameless aquatic creatures that live and sleep upon the ocean—these come in countless millions to the precipitous cliffs of Horn-head, for six weeks in the summer, to build their nests on its inaccessible rocks, propagate their species, and then return to be seen no more until the following summer. Birds here are seen of species unknown in the West of Ireland, and which never on any other occasion are seen near land. Therefore, after partaking of most genuine hospitality in the mansion of Horn-head, the young gentlemen of the family accompanied us on the following day to the cliff. Did Shakspear see these enormous battlements of Ireland ? Dover cliff, of which he gives such a sublime description, is perhaps magnified in the imagery of the poet : but certainly I conceive Horn-head comes up to his representation. One would think the Muse had caught up from Stratford-upon-Avon the Poet of Nature, and dropt him on this mighty promontory, until he had made up in his mind's eye the whole magnificent scene.

How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low !

The crows and choughs that wing the midway air,
 Show scarce so gross as beetles : halfway down
 Hangs one that gathers samphire ; dreadful trade !
 Methinks he seems no bigger than his head ;
 The fishermen that walk upon the beach
 Appear like mice ; and yon tall anchoring bark
 Diminish'd to her cock ; her cock a buoy
 Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge
 That on unnumbered idle pebbles chafes,
 Cannot be heard so high.—I'll look no more.

—Nothing indeed could be more astonishing than the whole scene ; there was a mist hanging over the Atlantic, that gave a mysteriousness to its magnificence, like the way into the eternal world—“ shadows, clouds, and darkness rested upon it ;” there was no wind, it was a perfect calm, and yet the roll of the waves and the roar of the tides as they rushed and rolled amidst the caverned cliffs, communicated an awful grandeur to the whole scene. It was as the moan of suffering endurance under the ceaseless vexation of the Atlantic. This promontory as I have before mentioned, has a cliff beetling and overhanging the ocean, and protruded like a horn, from whence it derives its name ; adjoining which a signal station was erected during the war, in which a poor man was induced to reside. Oh ! what a horrid place for a poor mortal to reside when the ocean tempest came on ; but now in the midst of July the scene was quite different—if it was a scene pregnant with grandeur, it was also one teeming with life the whole surface of the boggy or mossy soil of which the mountain was composed, even to the edge of the cliff, was burrowed with holes caused by certain aquatic birds that make their nests in holes in the ground ; the soil was in this way so hollow, that there was much danger in walking ; thence for 1500 feet down the precipice on every ledge of the rock, on every slope, or crag, or point where a nest could be placed, it was black with birds carrying on the process of incubation, all arranged in their different families and species on the face of the precipice ; and here and there on some bolder and broader prominence, too high from below and too deep from above to be accessible to man, were eagles' nests, and young ones as large as turkeys, and the old birds from thirty to forty at a time floating in mid air above, shrieking and challenging from on high our audacity in molesting their sovereignty. Oh ! that some Atheist standing on these cliffs, and surveying this magnificent scene, would reflect upon what it was that brought all these unimaginable myriads of sea fowl to meet at certain unvaried seasons on these precipices—must he not ask himself who imposed a necessity on these dwellers of the trackless ocean to congregate here,` coming thousands of leagues from east and west, from all the winds of heaven, and guided hither by an instinct surer than pole star, or cynosure, or magnet. How they came, how they returned, who fixed the unerring law on them, and see how generation after generation they still obey. But these animals of God have never fallen—they never broke the original law imposed—they still give God the obedience of unbroken fealty and instinct. Man alone is the law breaker, and sin has degraded reason, while instinct is upright ; or as the prophet Jeremiah says—“ Yea the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed time, and the turtle and the crow and the swallow observe the time of their coming, but my people know not the judgment of the Lord.”

Here the country people carry on a more fearful trade than even gathering samphire—namely, the taking these birds off their nests, these dark dwellers of the ocean are all furnished with a covering of the finest down, which bears a high price, I believe about five shillings per pound, and about two dozen of these birds furnish a pound ; it is therefore a most tempting employment for these poor people ; for an active and experienced man can take three or four dozen every day, but it is accompanied with immense danger, and annually two or three or more fall a sacrifice, and are dashed to pieces. This practice of taking birds is

described in some treatises on Natural History, so I shall not trouble my reader with it here. I shall therefore proceed further along the promontory where the cliff arose not so high, to where the curious natural phenomenon occurs, called M'Swine's Gun, which is caused by a horizontal cavern running for many yards under the cliff, from whence a perpendicular shaft rises to the surface, and this is called M'Swine's Gun. This particular point, lies open to the north-west, and when the tempest sets in from that quarter, the storm forces the sea with tremendous power into the cavern, and whenever the gale is most fitful, and an immense surge beats in, up flies the water through the perpendicular shaft like the Geiser spring in Iceland, some hundreds of feet high, accompanied with a report louder than any piece of artillery, and the shot of M'Swine's Gun is asserted to have been heard in the city of Derry.

[1] The visit to Glen Veagh, took place four years ago. I have reason to believe, that in consequence of better arrangements in the revenue department, illicit distillation has ceased long ago in Glen Veagh.

[2] The English for Muckish is a pig's back.

Sketches in Ireland: descriptive of interesting, and hitherto unnoticed districts, in the north and south (1827)

Author : Otway, Caesar, 1780-1842 ; Christian examiner

Publisher : Dublin, W. Curry, jun. and co.; [etc., etc.]

Year : 1827

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

Book from the collections of : New York Public Library

Collection : americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/sketchesinirela01examgoog>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

June 21 2013