

A Tour Through Ireland

The Letters of "Norah" in her Tour Through Ireland

Margaret Dixon McDougall

Being a Series of Letters to The Montreal "Witness" as Special Correspondent to Ireland

1882

•

Off—Experiences in a Pulman Car—Boarding The “ Ontario”—The Captain—The Sea and Sea-sickness—Imaginings in The Storm—Landing at Birkenhead.

ON January 27th I bade good-bye to my friends and set my face resolutely towards the land whither I had desired to return. Knowing that sickness and unrest were before me, I formed an almost cast-iron resolution, as Samantha would say, to have one good night's rest on that Pulman car before setting out on the raging seas. Alas ! a person would persist in floating about, coming occasionally to fumble in my belongings in the upper berth. Prepared to get nervous. Before it came to that, I sat up and enquired if the individual had lost anything, when he disappeared. Lay down and passed another resolution. Some who were sitting up began to smoke, and the fumes of tobacco floated in behind the curtains, clung there and filled all the space and murdered sleep. Watched the heavy dark shelf above, stared at the cool white snow outside, wished that all smokers were exiled to Virginia or Cuba, or that they were compelled to breathe up their own smoke, until the morning broke cold and foggy.

Emerged from behind the curtains, and blessed the man who invented cold water. Too much disturbed by the last night's dose of second-hand smoke for breakfast at Island Pond. The moist-looking colored gentleman who was porter, turned back to Montreal before we reached Portland. I strongly suspect that a friend had privately presented him with a fee to make him attentive to one of the passengers, for he came twice with the most minute directions for finding the Dominion Line office, at Portland. Still his conscience was unsatisfied, for finally he came with the offer of a tumbler full of something he called pure apple juice. There are some proud Caucasians who would not have found it so difficult to square a small matter like that with their consciences.

It was pleasant to look at the comfortable homes on the line as we passed along. Not one squalid looking homestead did we pass ; every one such as a man might be proud to own. All honor to the State of Maine.

The train was three hours late—it was afternoon when we arrived in Portland. Following the directions of my colored friend, I went up an extremely dirty stair into a very dirty office, found an innocent young man smoking a cigar. He did not know anything, you know, so sat grimly down to wait for the arrival of some one who did. Such a one soon appeared and took a comprehensive glance of the passenger as he took off his overshoes.

“ Passenger for the ‘ Ontario,’ ” explained the innocent young man.

“ Take the passenger over to the ship,” said the energetic one, decidedly. “ We will send luggage after you. How much have you ?”

Explained, handed him the checks, and meekly followed my innocent guide down the dirty stair, across a wide street, up some dirty-looking steps on to the wharf where the ‘ Ontario’ lay, taking in her cargo. Large and strong-looking, dingy white was she, lying far below the wharf.

My guide enquired for the captain, who appeared suddenly from somewhere—a tall man with a resolute face and keen eye, gray as to hair and whiskers, every inch a captain. I knew that his face—once a handsome face, I am sure—had got that look of determination carved into it by doing his duty by his ship and facing many a storm on God Almighty’s sea. I trusted him at once.

Did not sail through the night as I expected, but were still in Portland when morning came. We had fish for breakfast ; found mine frozen beneath the crisp brown outside. After breakfast went up on deck. The sky was blue and bright, the air piercing cold. The town of Portland looked clean and beautiful in the fair sunlight. It is a place that goes climbing up hill. The floating ice and the liquid green water ruffled into white on the crest of the swells, are at play together. The ship moves out slowly, almost imperceptibly. Portland fades from a house-crowned hillside into a white line, darkness comes down. We are out at sea.

The glass has gone down ; the storm has come up ; the sea tyrant has got hold of the solitary passenger and dandles her very roughly, singing “ The Wreck of the ‘ Hesperus’ ” in a loud bass to some grand deep tune, alternating with the one hundred and third Psalm in Gaelic. The passenger holds on for dear life and wonders why the winds sing those words over and over again.

Sabbath passes, day melts into night, night fades into day, the storm tosses the ship and sea-sickness tosses the passenger. The captain enquires, “ Is that passenger no better yet ?” Comes to see in his doctoral capacity, looks like a man not to be trifled with, feels the pulse, orders a mustard blister, brandy and ammonia, and scolds the patient for starving, like a wise captain and kind man as he is. All the ship stores are ransacked for something to tempt an appetite that is above temptation ; but the captain is absolute, and we can testify that eating from a sense of duty is hard work. It was delightful to get rid of an occasional apple on the sly to one of the ship’s boys and be rewarded with a surprised grin of delight.

It is grand to lie on cushions on the companion-way and watch the long rollers as they heave up and look in at the door-way. They rise rank upon rank, looking over one another’s shoulders, hustling one another in their boisterous play, like overgrown schoolboys, who will have fun at whoever’s expense. Sometimes one is pushed right in by his fellows, and falls down the companion-way in a little cataract, and then the door is shut and they batter at it in vain. Then there is a great mopping up of a small Atlantic.

The storm roars without, and within the passenger lies day after day studying the poetry of motion. There is one motion that goes to the tune of “ Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep,” but this rocking is so violent that as one dashes from side to side, holding on to the bars above and the edge of the berth, one is led to pity a wakeful baby rocked wickedly by the big brother impatient to go to play. The tune changes, and it is “ Ploughing the Raging Main,” and the nose of the plough goes down too deep ; then one is fastened to the walking beam of

an engine and sways up and down with it. A gigantic churn is being churned by an ogre just under our head, and the awful dasher plunges and creaks. Above all the winds howl, and the waves roll, and sometimes slap the ship till she shivers and leaps, and then the "Wreck of the Hesperus" recommences. Things get gloomy, the variations of storm grow monotonous, nothing delights us, no wish arises for beef tea, nothing makes gruel palatable. Neither sun nor stars have been visible for some days ; the only sunshine we see is the passing smile of the ship's boys, who are almost constantly employed baling out the Atlantic.

It was the ninth night of storm. They say every ninth wave is larger than the rest ; the ninth night the wind roared louder than ever, the Almighty's great guns going off. The ship staggered and reeled, struggling gallantly, answering nobly to the human will that held her to her duty, but shivering and leaping after every mighty slap of the mad waves. I got one glimpse at the waves through a cautiously opened door, I never thought they could climb upon one another's shoulders and reach up to heaven a dark green wall of water ready to fall and overwhelm us, until I looked and saw the mountains of water all around.

Land in sight on the 8th of February, the Fasnet rock, then the Irish coast ; the great rollers drew back into the bosom of the Atlantic ; the winged pilot boats appeared ; the pilot climbed up the side out of the sea ; we steamed over the harbor bar and stopped at Birkenhead on the Cheshire side to land our fellow-passengers the sheep and oxen.

I might have gone up to Liverpool but was advised to remain another night on board and go direct to the Belfast packet from the ship. I considered this advice, found it good and took it.

II

From Liverpool To Belfast—Ireland's Condition discussed—Evictions—A Sunday in Belfast.

From Liverpool to Belfast, including a cup of tea, cost in all four dollars and fifty cents. It seems ridiculous to a stranger that the cars and cabs always stop at a little distance from the steamers, so as to employ a porter to lift a trunk for a few yards at each end of the short journey by cab.

The kind steward of the "Ontario" came over to the packet to look after his passenger ; had promised to see that passenger safely conveyed from one steamer to the other, but, detained at home by sickness in the family, came back to the ship a few minutes too late, and then came over to explain and say good-bye. There could not possibly be a more courteous set of men than the captain and officers of the steamship "Ontario."

On the Belfast packet two ladies, one a very young bride on her way from her home in South Wales to her new home in Belfast, were talking of the danger of going to Ireland or living in it at the present disturbed time. A gentleman in a grey ulster and a blue Tam o' Shanter of portentous dimensions broke into the conversation by assuring the handsome young bride that she would be as safe in green Erin as in the arms of her mother. Looking at the young lady it was easy to see that this speech was involuntary Irish blarney, a compliment to her handsome face. "You will meet the greatest kindness here, you will have the heartiest welcome on the face of the earth," he continued.

"But there is a great deal of disturbance, is there not ?" asked her companion.

“ Oh, the newspapers exaggerate dreadfully—shamefully, to get up a sensation in the interest of their own flimsy sheets. There is some disturbance, but nothing like what people are made believe by the newspaper reports.”

Old lady—“ Why are Irish people so turbulent .”

Tam O’ Shanter—“ My dear lady, Ireland contains the best people and the worst in the world, the kindest and the cruelest. They are so emotional, so impulsive, so impressible that their warm hearts are easily swayed by demagogues who are making capital out of influencing them.”

Old lady—“ Making money by it, do you mean ?”

Tam O’ Shanter, with a decided set of his bonnet—“ Making money of it ! Yes, by all means. They have got up the whole thing to make money. But here in Belfast, where you are going,” with a bow to the bride, “ all is tranquil, all is prosperous. In fact all over the north there is the same tranquillity, the same prosperity.”

Here, a new voice, that of an enthusiastic supporter of the Land League, joined in the conversation, and the controversy becoming personal the ladies disappeared into the ladies’ cabin. There was an echo of drunken argument that was likely a continuation of the land question until the wind increased to a gale. The little boat tossed like a cork on the waves ; there was such a rattle of glass, such a rolling and bumping of loose articles, such echoes of sickness, above all, the shock of waves and the shriek of winds, and the land question was for the time being swallowed up by the storm.

Belfast, with its mud and mist, was a welcome sight. The dirty-faced porters who lined the quay and beckoned to us, and pointed to our luggage silently, seemed to be a deputation of welcome to *terra firma*. At a little distance from the line of porters the jaunting cars were stationed to convey passengers to the hotel. It did look ridiculous to see full-grown people take the long way round in this fashion.

At noon Saturday, the 19th of February, I had the blissful feeling of rest connected with sitting in an easy chair before a coal fire, trying to wake up to the blissful fact of being off the sea and in Ireland.

On Sunday it was raining a steady and persistent rain ; went through it to the Duncairn Presbyterian Church because it was near, and because I was told that the minister was one skilled to preach the gospel to the poor. Found myself half an hour too early, so watched the congregation assemble. The Scottish face everywhere, an utter absence of anything like even a modified copy of a Milesian face. Presbyterianism in Ulster must have kept itself severely aloof from the natives ; there could have been no proselytizing or there would have been a mixture of faces typical of the absorption of one creed in another.

Judging from the sentiments I have heard expressed by the sturdy descendants of King Jamie’s settlers, the sympathy that must precede any reasonably hopeful effort to win over the native population to an alien faith has never existed here. There is a great social gulf fixed between the two peoples, with prejudice guarding both sides. The history, the traditions of either side is guarded and nourished in secret by one, openly and triumphantly by the other, with a freshness of strength that is amazing to one who has been out of this atmosphere long

enough to look kindly on and claim kindred with both sides. Still there is a perceptible difference between these Hiberno-Scotch and their cousins of Scotland. Their faces have lost some of the concentrated look of a really Scottish congregation. They are not so thoroughly 'locked up ;' the *cead mille failte* has been working into their blood imperceptibly. The look of curiosity is kindly, and seems ready to melt into hearty welcome on short notice.

It is not the minister of the Duncairn Church who preaches, but a returned missionary, who tells us by what logical hair-splitting in the regions of Irish metaphysics he confounds Hindoo enquirers after truth, and argues them into the Christian religion. Pity the poor Hindoos upon whom this man inflicts himself. In the afternoon I strayed into a small Sabbath-School where the Bible never was opened ; heard a stirring Gospel sermon at night, and joined in a prayer-meeting and felt better.

III.

Belfast—Temperance—"The Eve of A Great Rebellion"—The Poor House—The Police—County Down Making Ends Meet—Waiting for Something to turn up.

Belfast seems a busy town, bustle on her streets, merchandise on her quays. Did not meet one man on the streets with the hopeless look on his face of the poor fellow who carried my trunk in Liverpool. There must be distress however, for the mills are not running full time, and there are entertainments got up for the benefit of the deserving poor. I saw no signs of intoxication on the streets, yet the number of whiskey shops is appalling. Had a conversation with a prominent member of the Temperance League, who informed me that temperance was gaining ground in Belfast. "Half of the ministers are with us now ; they used to, almost entirely, stand aloof." But where are the rest ?

The land question is the absorbing topic. Every one seems to admit that there is room for vast improvement in the land laws, that there has been glaring injustice in the past. They acknowledge that rents are too high to be paid, and leave anything behind to support the farmer's family in any semblance of comfort. There is a very strong feeling against Mr. Parnell among the Protestants of the north. In fact they talk of him exactly as they did of Daniel O'Connell when in the height of his power. Many whisper to me that we are on the eve of a great rebellion. One strong-minded lady who informed me that she had come of a Huguenot stock talked of the Land Leaguers as if they were responsible for the revolution of the Edict of Nantes ; but she acknowledged that the land laws were very unjust and needed reform.

Visited the Poor House, a very noble building in well-kept grounds. Went on purpose to see a sick person and did not go all over it. It was not the right day, or something. It was very distressing to see the number of able-bodied looking young men and rosy-cheeked women about the grounds who begged for a halfpenny, and so many loungers in hall and corridor—perhaps they were only visitors. If they were inmates there was plenty of cleaning to be done—the smell in some parts was dreadful. In the hospital part the floors were very clean, and the head nurse, a bright, cheery woman, seemed like sunshine among her patients. She showed us all her curiosities, the little baby born into an overcrowded world on the street, the little one, beautiful as an angel, found on the street in a basket. It was very touching to see the beggar mothers sparing from their own babies to nourish the little deserted waif. A poor house is a helpless, hopeless mass of human misery.

One thing that impresses a stranger here is the number of policemen ; they are literally swarming everywhere. Very dandified as to dress and bearing, very vigilant and watchful about the eyes, with a double portion of importance pervading them all over as men on whom the peace and safety of the country depend. These very dignified conservators of the peace are most obliging. Ask them any question of locality, or for direction anywhere, and their faces open out into human kindness and interest at once.

Went out into County Down by rail about twenty miles. No words can do justice to the beauty of the country, the cleanness of the roads, the trimness of the hedges, and the garden-like appearance of the fields. The stations, as, we passed along, looked so trim and neat. The houses of small farmers, or laborers I suppose they might be, were not very neat. Many of them stood out in great contrast as if here was the border over which any attempt at ornament should not pass.

On the train bound for Dublin was a little old woman travelling third class like myself, who scraped an acquaintance at once in order to tell me of the disturbed state of the country. She emphasized everything with a wave of her poor worn gloves and a decided nod of her bonnet.

“ They are idle you know, they are lazy, they are improvident. They are not content in the station in which it has pleased God to place them. I know all about these people. They are turbulent, they are rebellious ; they want to, get their good, kind landlords out of the country, and to seize on their property. It is horrid you know, horrid !” and the little old lady waved her gloves in the air. “ If they had a proper amount of religion they would be content to labor in their own station. I am content with mine, why not they with theirs ? You understand that,” appealing to me.

“ Have you a small farm ?” I enquired.

“ Indeed I have not,” said the little old lady with the greatest disgust, “ I live on my money.”

It was quite evident I had offended her, for she froze into silence. As I left the train at Tandragee she laid her faded glove on my arm and whispered, “ It is their duty to be content in their own station, is it not ?”

“ If they cannot do any better,” I whispered back.

“ They cannot,” said the little old lady sinking back on her seat triumphantly.

It is rather unhandy that the names of the stations are called out by a person on the platform outside the cars, instead of by a conductor inside.

The manufacturing town of Gilford is a pretty, clean, neat, little place clustered round the mills and the big house, like the old feudal retainers round the castle. Here, as in Belfast, a certain amount of distress must exist, for the mills are not running full time.

The wages of a common operative here is twelve shillings (or three dollars) per week. If they have a family grown up until they are able to work at the mills, of course it adds materially to the income. Girls are more precious than boys, I have heard, as being more

docile and easier kept in clothing. They can earn about half wages, or six shillings (one dollar and a half) per week. Rents are about two shillings (or half a dollar) per week. It takes one and sixpence for fuel. A young family would keep the parents busy to make ends meet in the best of times. In case of the mills running short time I should think they would persistently refuse to meet. No signs of distress, not the least were apparent anywhere. The mill hands trooping past looked clean, rosy and cheerful, and were decently clad. The grounds around the factory were beautiful and very nicely kept, and beautiful also were the grounds about the great house. I felt sorry that there were no little garden plots about the tenement houses occupied by the operatives ; so when hard times come they will have no potatoes or vegetables of their own to help them to tide over the times of scant wages. How I do wish that the large-hearted and generous proprietors of these works could take this matter into consideration.

People waiting at the station talked among themselves of hard times, of farms that were run down, that would not yield the rent, not to speak of leaving anything for the tenant to live on. There was no complaint made of the landlords ; the land was blamed for not producing enough. Of course, these people ought to know, but the fields everywhere looked like garden ground. The only symptoms of running down that I could see were in some of the houses, two-roomed, with leaky-looking roofs and a general air of neglect. I must own, however, that houses of this description were by far the fewest in number. At one station where we stopped, one respectable-looking man asked of another, “ Have you got anything to do yet, Robert ? ” “ Still waiting for something to turn up,” was the answer. This man was not at all of the Micawber type, but a well-brushed, decent-looking person with a keen peremptory face, evidently of Scottish descent. A group of such men came on the train, whose only talk was of emigrating if they only had the means.

I have heard a great deal of talk of emigration among the people with whom I have travelled since I landed, but have not heard one mention of Canada as a desirable place to emigrate to. The Western States, the prairie lands, seem to be the promised land to everyone. One of these would-be emigrants took a flute out of his pocket and played the Exile of Erin. The talk of emigration stilled and a great silence fell on them all. There were some soldiers on the car, young men, boys in fact, who seemed by the heavy marching order of their get-up to be going to join their regiment. Some of them struggled manfully with the tears they vainly would hide. Truly the Irish are attached to the soil. I could not help wondering if these lads were ordered to foreign service, and on what soil they would lay down their heads to rest forever.

Two persons near by, conversing in low tones on the state of the country, drew my attention to them. One was a sonsie good wife with any amount of bundles, the other a little old man with a face of almost superhuman wisdom.

“ The country will be saved mem, now ; when the Coercion Bill has passed the country will be saved,” said the old man.

“ There’s a great deal too much fuss made about everything,” remarked the good-wife. “ Look at that boy ten years old taken up, bless us all ! for whistling at a man.”

“ Did you take notice, mem, that the whistling was derisive, was derisive, it was derisive. That is where it is, you see,” said the old man with a slow, sagacious roll of his head.

“ I would not care what a wee boy could put into a whistle : it was awfully childish for a man and a gentleman to take up just a wean for a whistle.”

“ You see, mem, they have to be strict and keep everything down. The Government have ways of finding out things ; they know all though they don’t let on. There will be a bloody time, in my opinion.”

Oh, the wisdom with which the old man shook his head as he said this, adding in a penetrating whisper, “ The times of ’98 over again or worse.”

IV.

Loyalty in The “Black-North”—Gentlemen’s Residences—A Model Irish Estate—A Good Man and His Wife—Visiting The Poor.

Down in the North the loyalty is intense and loud. An opinion favorable to the principles of the Land League it would be hardly prudent to express. Any dissatisfaction with anything at all is seldom expressed for fear of being classed with these troublers of Ireland.

The weather is very inclement, and has been ever since I landed. Snow, rain, hail, sleet, hard frost, mud, have alternated. Some days have been one continuous storm of either snow or sleet.

The roads through Antrim are beautifully clean and neat, not only on the line of rail but along the country roads inland. The land is surely beautiful, exceedingly, and kept like a garden. The number of houses of some, nay of great, pretensions, is most astonishing. Houses set in spacious and well-kept grounds, with porter lodges, terraced lawns, conservatories, &c., abound. They succeed one another so constantly that one wonders how the land is able to bear them all, or by what means such universal grandeur is supported. There is an outcry of want, of very terrible hard times, but certainly the country shows no signs thereof. The great wonder to me is where the laborers who produce all this neatness and beauty live ? Where are the small farmers on whom the high rent presses so heavily ? Few houses, where such could by any possibility be housed, are to be seen from the roadside. There are so very few cottages and so very many gentlemen’s houses that I am forced to believe that the peasantry have almost entirely disappeared. Yet I know there must be laborers somewhere to keep the place so beautiful.

Ballymena, always a bustling place, has spread itself from a thriving little inland town into a large place of some 8,000 inhabitants. Notwithstanding the depression in the linen trade, this town presents a thriving, bustling appearance as it has always done. The number of whiskey shops is something dreadful, The consumption of that article must be steady and enormous to support them. There is squalor enough to be seen in the small streets of this town, but that is in every town.

The public road from Ballymena to Grace Hill passes through the Galgorm estate which passed from the hands of its last lord, through the Encumbered Estates Court, into the hands of its present proprietor. On this estate a most wonderful change has been effected, and in a short space of time to effect so much. During the old *regime*, and the good old times of absentee landlordism, squalor and misery crept up to the castle gates. The wretchedness of the tenants could be seen by every passer-by. The peasantry tell of unspeakable orgies held at

the castle even upon the Sabbath day. The change is something miraculous. The waste pasture-like demesne is reclaimed and planted. The worst cabins have entirely disappeared ; the rest are improved till they hardly know themselves.

They match the new cottages for which the proprietor took a prize. These little homes with their climbing plants, their trim little gardens, look as if any one might snuggle down in any of them and be content. The castle itself looks altered ; it has lost its grim Norman look, and stands patriarchal and fatherly among the beautiful homes it has created.

Not far from the castle gate is a pretty church and its companion, an equally pretty building for the National School. I enquired of several how this great improvement came about ; the answer was always the same, “ The estate passed into the hands of a good man who lived on it, and he had a godly wife.” Passing the pretty little church I heard the sound of children’s voices singing psalms, and was told that the daughter of the castle was teaching the children to sing. I noticed *In Memoriam* on a stone in the building, and found that this church was built in memory of the good lady of the castle, who has departed to a grander inheritance, leaving a name that lingers like a blessing in the country side. So the old landlord’s loss of an estate has been great gain to this people.

It is in the country parts, more remote from the public eye, that one sees the destitution wrought by the depression in the linen trade. People there are struggling with all their might to live and keep out of the workhouses. Hand-loom weaving seems doomed to follow hand-spinning and become a thing of the past. Weavers some time ago had a plot of ground which brought potatoes and kale to supplement the loom, and on it could earn twelve shillings a week. But alas ! while the webs grew longer the price grew less and they are in a sad case.

I called, with a friend, on some of these weavers : one, an intelligent man, with the prevailing Scotch type of face. We found him, accompanied by a sickly wife, sitting by a scanty fire, ragged enough. This man for his last web was paid at the rate of twopence a yard for weaving linen with twenty hundred threads to the inch, but out of this money he had to buy dressing and light, and have some one, the sickly wife I suppose, to wind the bobbins for him. He must then pay rent for the poor cabin he lived in, none too good for a stable, and supply all his wants on the remainder.

Another weaver told me that all this dreary winter they had no bed-clothes. They think by combining together they will be able to obtain better prices ; but they are so poor, the depression in the trade is such a fearful reality that I am afraid they cannot combine or co-operate to any purpose. However, people in such desperate circumstances grasp at any hope.

It is wonderful with what disfavor some of these people receive a hint of emigration. It seems like transportation to them. Truly these Irish do cling to the soil.

The weavers seem to blame the manufacturers for the reduction of wages. They complain that the trade is concentrated into a few hands ; that therefore they cannot sell where they can sell dearest, but are obliged to take yarn from a manufacturer and return it to him in cloth. They complain that he still further reduces the poor wage by fines. As many of these have only a hut but no garden ground, they have nothing to fall back on. There are many suffering great want, and with inherited Scotch reticence suffering in silence. There may be some injustice and some oppression, for that is human nature, but the hand-loom weaving is doomed to disappear, I am afraid.

There are some complaints of the high price of land here, and of the hard times for farmers, but there is no appearance of hard times. Laborers are cheap enough. One shilling a day and food, or ten shillings a week without food, seems to be the common wage. The people of Down and Antrim, as far as I have gone, are rampantly loyal to Queen and Government and to all in authority. If a few blame the manufacturers, or think the land is too dear, the large majority blame the improvidence of the poor. "They eat bacon and drink tea where potatoes and milk or porridge and milk used to be good enough for them." It is difficult to imagine the extravagance.

I went through part of the poor-house in Ballymena. It is beautifully clean and sweet, and in such perfect order out and in that one is glad to think of the sick or suffering poor having such a refuge. What fine, patient, intelligent faces were among the sufferers in the infirmary. The children in the school-room looked rosy and well-fed, and the babies were nursed by the old women. So many of them—it was a sad sight indeed.

V.

One Result of The Coercion Act—The Agricultural Laborers in Down and Antrim—Whiskey—Rain in Ireland—A Discussion on Orangeism.

It is the eighth of March. The weather remains frightfully inclement ; the snow and sleet is succeeded by incessant rain storms. The Coercion bill has become law and even in the north there seems a difference in the people. There is a carefulness of expressing an opinion on any subject as if a reign of governmental terror had begun. The loyalty always so fervent is now intense and loud. The people here think that there is an epidemic of unreasonableness and causeless murmuring raging at the south and west.

In all that I have seen in Down and Antrim, the agricultural laborers seem to be never at any time much above starvation ; any exceptionally hard times bring it home to them. In cases of accident, disease, or old age, they have no refuge but the workhouse. There is a constant struggle, as heroic in God's sight as any struggle of their Scottish ancestors, to escape this dreaded fate. When it does overtake them, however, the beggar nurses wait upon the sick beggars with a tenderness that is inexpressibly touching.

Emigration is impossible to the laborer or the handloom weaver. They have no money, they have nothing to sell to make money, and they are utterly unwilling to be torn from the places where they were born to be expatriated as beggars, and as beggars set down upon a foreign shore. I am literally giving utterance to the opinions expressed to me.

I have heard these people loudly accused of extravagance ; on enquiry was told that they bought American bacon and drank tea, whereas, if thrifty, they would be content with potatoes and buttermilk, or ditto and stir-about. As the cow has disappeared, and potatoes have been known to fail, I did not see the extravagance so clearly as I saw the parsimony that would grudge the hard-worked laborer or the pale over-worked weaver any nourishment at all.

The charge of spending on whiskey seems more likely by the frightful amount of whiskey shops. Ireland's whiskey bill is going up into somewhere among the millions. It is a fearful pity that this tax on the industry and energy of the people could not be abolished. Truth com-

pels me to add that faces liquor-painted abound most among the well-dressed and apparently well-to-do class whom one meets on the way.

The tenant-farmers, in some cases, complain of their rents, and would complain more loudly but for fear of being classed with the Land League, for they in the north are intensely loyal. As for the mere laborer, no one seems to consider him or think of him at all.

The weather has been so inclement, the days all so much alike, rain, hail, snow, sleet, high winds, and we were so busy coughing, that the days slipped by almost unnoticed. Refusing the tempting offer of a free trip to see the beauties of Glengarriff, through the medium of a heavy rain we started for Derry by train. Ah ! it does know how to rain in Ireland. Such a downpour, driven aslant by a fierce wind, so that, disregarding the thought of an umbrella, we held on to the rail of the jaunting car and were driven in the teeth of the tempest, smiling as if we enjoyed it, up to the station.

Both sides of the road at the station were crowded with men in all sorts of picturesque habiliments. If it had been near the poor-house we would have thought that the population was applying for admittance *en masse*. As it was, seeing the station likewise crowded, the platform beyond crammed, all eager, expectant, waiting on something, we thought it was some renowned field preacher going to give a sermon, or a millionaire going to give largess. Not a bit of it. It was some person, idle and cruel, who was bringing a couple of poor captive deer to be hunted, and the hounds to hunt them, and the immense crowd represented the idle and cruel who had assembled to get a glimpse of this noble and elevating diversion. If it were possible for the deer and the man to change places the crowd would be still more delighted.

Leaving Ballymena behind we panted through a completely sodden country. Everything was dripping. In many places the waters were out, and the low-lying lands were in a flood. Potatoes in pits linger in the fields, turnips and cabbages in the rows where they grew, bearing witness that even the last hard winter was many degrees behind the winters of Canada. The land on this road is not so good as what I left behind ; therefore there were few gentlemen's houses, and the small farmhouses wore the usual poverty-stricken and neglected appearance. There were more waste hillsides devoted to whins, and flat fields tussocked with rushes as we swept on through the dripping country, under the sides of almost perpendicular rocks, down which little waterfalls, like spun silver, fell and broadened into bridal veils ere they reached the bottom. Then along the historical Foyle, " whose swelling waters," rather muddy at this season of the year, " roll northward to the main," and so following its windings and carvings we flashed into Derry.

VI.

The Hills of Lough Swilly—Tenant's Improvements—A Man-of-war and Men of Love—The Pig Ramelton—Intelligent Rooks—From Potatoes and Milk to Cornmeal Stirabout and Nothing—Milford—The Late Lord Leitrim's Injustice and Inhumanity—Account of his Death.

On the 14th March we left Derry by train, crossing from the banks of the Foyle to Lough Swilly. Got on board a little steamer, marvellously like an American puffer, and panted and throbbed across the waters of the Lough. The sun shone pleasantly, the sky was blue, which deserves to be recorded, as this is the very first day since I arrived in Ireland on which the sun shone out in a vigorous and decided manner, determined to have his own way. We have had a

few—a very few—watery blinks of sun before, but the rain and sleet always conquered. Sailed up among whin covered mountains, with reclaimed patches creeping up their sides, and pretty spots here and there, with handsome houses, new and fresh looking, built upon them. It is an inducement to merchants and others to build their brand new houses here, that the air is fresh and pure, the scenery grand and beautiful and the salt water rolls up to the foot of the rocks.

It was pointed out to me by a friend, that these mountain side farms were reclaimed, by great labor I'm sure, by the tenants, trusting to the Ulster custom, but the landlords, knowing that custom was not law, then raised the rents upon them. If they could not, or were not willing to pay the increased rent, increased because of their own labor, they could leave ; others would rent the places at the increased figure. "As for you, ye shiftless, miserable tillers of the soil, ye can go where you like ; emigrate if you can ; get you to the workhouse or the grave if you cannot." It is hard to believe that this could be done, or has been done lawfully again and again. If it is true it spoils the comfort of looking at the pleasant homes built upon reclaimed spots. We look more kindly on the cottage homes nestled among nooks of the hills.

The sky did not cloud over again, it remained blue and bright and coaxed the waters of Lough Swilly to look blue and bright also. Flocks of white sea gulls dipped, darted and sailed about in an abandonment of enjoyment. Flights of ducks rose on the wing and whirled past.

We sailed between two forts that frown at one another in a grim and desolate manner at Rathmullen. Was informed that a man-of-war ordinarily lay at anchor in this Lough to keep half an eye on things in general, and poteen, I suppose, in particular. It was complained that the blue jackets, finding these mountain girls sweet and pretty, and easy to keep—for since cows are become such a price, a good one, not one of the bovine aristocracy, but a commonly good one, being value for £20, the damsels of the hills are accustomed to "small rations of tea and potatoes"—the sailors marry them, "and that," said my informant, "makes servant girls scarce about here."

I did not sympathize properly with this complaint. I was glad to hear that any form of humanity in this island is scarce. I hoped the blue jackets were happy with their Irish wives, for a Liverpool sailor lamented in my hearing that the girls of seaport towns did not often make good sailors' wives. Let us hope that they did better who chose among the wild hills of Lough Swilly.

I am told that another cherished institution of Ireland is passing away—

"The pig that we meant
To drynurse in the parlor to pay off the rent."

The pig is becoming an institution of the past, I was told by a gentleman of the first respectability in Derry, that sucking pigs are sold in that market for thirty shillings. These would be precious to the peasant if he had them, but he has not, nor means to get them. This great resource for paying the rent is gone.

Up the Lough we sailed into beautiful Ramelton, an exceptionally pretty, clean little place, boasting of a very nicely kept hotel. The scenery all around is delightful. Across the Lannon River, on the banks of which is one of the principal streets, is a lofty ridge crowned with grand trees. The Lannon runs into Lough Swilly, and is affected by the ebb and flow of the

tide. The trees on the ridge are tenanted by a thriving colony of rooks, very busy just now with their spring work. Two delightful roads, one above another, run along the brow of the hill under the shade of the trees.

I discovered that rooks know a great deal ; that there is infinite variety of meaning in their caw. The young couples who are starting housekeeping have not only to provide materials and build their homes, but to defend their property at every stage from the rapacity of their neighbors. They have also to build in such a manner as to satisfy the artistic taste of the community. I saw an instance of this during a morning walk. Five rooks were sitting in judgment on the work of a young and thoughtless pair of rooks, I suppose. The work was condemned, the young couple were evicted without mercy and the nest pulled to pieces by the five censors with grave caws of disapprobation, while the evicted ones flew round and showed fight and used bad language. The Coercion Act was not in favor among the black coated gentry of the air.

It has fallen like a spell over Ireland though, and evictions are hurried through as if they thought their time was short. People are afraid to speak to a stranger.

I have succeeded in obtaining introductions, which I hope will give me an entrance into society in Donegal.

Was driven by my new friends over a part of Lord Leitrim's estate, and though his town of Milford. The murdered Earl has left a woful memory of himself all over the country side. He must have had as many curses breathed against him as there are leaves on the trees, if what respectable people who dare speak of his doings say of him be true, which it undoubtedly is. Godly people of Scottish descent. Covenanters and Presbyterians, who would not have harmed a hair of his head for worlds, have again and again lifted their hands to heaven and cried. " How long. Lord, are we to endure the cruelty of this man ?"

One case (which is a sample case) I will notice. In the plantation of Scottish settlers in the North it seems that either for company or mutual protection, against the dispossessed children of the soil, the farmhouses are built together in clachans or little groups. After a lapse of years these clachans in some cases expanded into small towns. The people built houses and made improvements on their holdings, paying their rent punctually, but holding the right to their own money's worth, the result of years of toil and stern economy under the Ulster custom. In this way the greater part of the town of Milford sprung into existence.

One John Buchanan, a Presbyterian of Scottish descent, son of respectable people who had lived on this estate for generations, was employed in the land office of the Earl of Leitrim over twenty years. This man trusting to the Ulster custom, and the honest goodness of the old Earl, grandfather of the present Earl, a good landlord and a just man, by all accounts, invested his savings in building on the site of the old farmhouse in Milford a block of buildings—quarrying the stone for them—consisting of two large houses on Main street, and the rest tenement houses on Buchanan street. He improved his farm by reclaiming land, making nice fields out of bog.

When the good Earl died and the late Earl came into possession, he immediately raised the rent to nearly double what was paid before, making John Buchanan pay dearly for his improvements. John Buchanan died rather suddenly, leaving a widow and five children. The

widow in her overwhelming grief was visited by Lord Leitrim personally. He told her with great abuse and outrageous language, that she had no claim whatever to a particle of the property, “ she did not own a stone of it.” The widow, worn and nervous with the great trouble she had passed through, was unable to bear this new trouble ; his Lordship’s violence gave her a shock from which she never recovered. He then sent his bailiffs and put her and her children out ; put out the fires, as taking possession, and re-let the place to her, again doubling the rent. Her eldest son, a young lad, boiling with wrath over the wrong done and the language used to his mother, went to his aunt, living at some distance, and besought her to send him out of the country, lest he should be tempted to take vengeance in his own hand. His aunt seeing this danger, fitted him out from her own pocket, and the poor lad, his mother consenting, was expatriated out of harm’s way to far Australia.

The widow never recovered the shock which Lord Leitrim had given her. It was aggravated by despair at seeing all the savings of her husband’s lifetime appropriated by the strong hand, and her children left destitute. She was also in debt to the value of £600 for building material for an addition built to the house and some office houses, built later on, some time after the rest of the property. This debt of £600 wore on her. She had no means of payment ; all her means were swallowed up in this property. The creditors could not collect it off the property, it was not held liable for the debt, neither was Lord Leitrim, who had seized the property. Her sense of honesty and the honor of her husband’s name made her fret over this debt. The doctor had declared her illness heart disease brought on by a shock, and her death imminent. To soothe her mind her sister again came forward and out of her own pocket paid the money. The widow died and was buried. Their only relative tried what the law would do to redress the grievances of the orphans. The presiding judge, the chairman of the quarter sessions, lifted up his hands saying, “ Must I issue a decree that will rob these helpless orphans.” The decree was issued, and the children ejected without a farthing of compensation. To leave no stone unturned, the children went in a body to Lord Leitrim to ask, as justice had been powerless, for mercy from him. He ordered his servant to put them out. At the time these orphans were turned out of the house their father built, there was not a farthing of rent due, all had been paid up at the unjust Earl’s own estimate.

This case had been heard by the Royal Commissioners sent to enquire into these things, but it appears that there is no law to redress a tenant’s wrong. This occurred under the tenant custom of Ulster.

I drove round this fine property in Milford. It was pointed out to me that almost all the houses in the town were acquired by Lord Leitrim, by the strong hand, in the same way. Passed the house from which the Presbyterian minister, the Rev, Mr. White, was evicted. It was his own private property. It stands windowless and roofless, a monument to the dead earl. The priest of the parish had no house of his own ; he was a boarder with one of his flock, who had built himself a house in the time of the good earl. When Lord Leitrim fancied that he had cause of quarrel with the priest he obliged his tenant to put him out, on pain of losing the house which he had built. After he had got rid of priest and minister, he built a little Episcopal Church, that the people might worship at his shrine. The little church stands empty now. The graveyard about this little church was a rocky corner with little soil. The minister ventured to request that the people might have leave to draw a little clay from a hill nearby, to cover the bodies interred there, as there was not soil enough. “ I’ll not give a spoonful ; let their bones bleach there,” said the earl.

During the life-time of the good earl, the people being encouraged to improve their lands, crept up the mountain side, reclaiming whatever land they could. I have seen some of these portions, and noticed how they had got up close to the rocks, by using the spade where the plough would not go. They cleared off the whins of the mountain ; they drained the bogs. They made kilns and burned lime for top-dressing. When the wicked lord came into possession he not only raised the rent on the tenants' improvements, but built a kiln of his own, and burned lime, forbidding them to use theirs, compelling them to buy from him at his price. He would not even allow them to make manure of the floating sea-weed that drifted in from the sea.

Went to see the place where Lord Leitrim was done to death. Looked down on Milford Bay, dotted with little treeless and shrubless islands. Round it are round-shouldered hills, brown and bare now—purple with heather bells in summer time, I dare say. On a point stretching out into this bay stands his residence, Manor Vaughan. The road leading from Manor Vaughan to Milford is screened by a plantation of trees. On the opposite side of the bay the hills are really mountains. The murderers crossed the bay, tied their boat to a stone, and waited in the plantation. Lord Leitrim, with his clerk, was driven along on one car, followed by another containing his servants. His car, somewhat in advance, went slowly up a little hill. Those lying in wait fired ; the driver fell dead. Lord Leitrim was wounded ; he jumped off on one side, the clerk on the other. He had pistols but they were in the car ; he retreated, trying to defend himself as they poured on him shot after shot. Those in the other car, instead of coming up, stopped in mortal terror. The clerk, only slightly wounded in the ear, ran to them, exclaiming, “ They are killing Lord Leitrim, they have killed me,” and dropped dead with nervous terror. The assassins had poured in all their shot, still the Earl was not dead. He might yet have been saved if there had been any one to help him. What must his thoughts have been in that supreme moment. They beat the life out of him, he defending himself to the last. They cut loose their boat, rowed across the bay, cast it adrift, took the mountains and escaped.

The Earl fell, his head in a little pool of water. The country people coming in to Milford town passed by with white faces on the other side ; no one lifted his head, no one looked to see if life was extinct. At length the constabulary came, and the remains of the dreaded lord were carried in a cart into Milford. There was a *post mortem* examination ; part of his poor remains was buried in the graveyard of the little church which he built, and a load of the clay he refused to his tenants brought to cover it. His name will long linger in evil fame among the mountains and deserts.

It is but just to the memory of this man to say, that some, who with good reason abhor his memory, do not believe that charges of gross immortality made against him were true. Others who think themselves equally well informed hold a contrary opinion. To think of mentioning all I have heard of his oppressive injustice would be impossible. I was told that when news of his death came into certain places, men clasped hands and drank one another's health as at a festival ; that pious people thanked God for the deliverance, who abhorred the means by which it came about.

I saw among the hills three nice farms, which a well-to-do farmer bought and improved, and finally bequeathed to his three sons. One died and the Ahab-like Earl took possession. Wishing to evict another for the purpose of throwing two farms into one, he offered the farm to the remaining brother in addition to his own. The man refused to ruin his brother. The Earl, to punish him, raised his rent from £35 to £70. Griffith's valuation of this farm is £29 5s.

Another eviction from Milford was so pitiful in its cruelty that the compassion of the country was aroused, and a home bought by subscription for the old people. I saw the property from which these people were evicted in Milford, a valuable row of houses.

The present Earl acknowledged the justice of the claim of John Buchanan's children, and spoke of restitution, but his agent, on whom the mantle of the late Earl had fallen, persuaded him against it, as nearly all the property in Milford town had been acquired in the same way. "Making restitution to one would open up the question of the others, and could not be afforded."

The Letters of "Norah" on Her Tour Through Ireland: Being a Series of Letters to the Montreal ... (1882)

Author : Margaret Dixon McDougall

Publisher : Published by public subscription as a token of respect by the Irishmen of Canada

Year : 1882

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

Book from the collections of : New York Public Library

Collection : americana

Notes : Auteur identifié comme Margaret Dixon McDougall. — A checklist of Canadian literature / Watters.

Source : Internet Archive

<http://archive.org/details/lettersnorahonh00mcdogoog>

Edited and uploaded to www.augty.org

October 25 2013