Chapter 2

THE EAST MIDLANDS

counties
Louth -- Monaghan -- Meath -- Westmeath -- Longford -- east Cavan

LOUTH

Dundalk -- Ardee -- the Cooley Peninsula -- Mount Oriel

Ever since Synge and Yeats, romance has been held to reside in the wild west of Ireland; but it is here, in the north-east midlands, good farming land and at first sight prosaic to the visitor's eye, that the action of most of the sagas and stories took place. It is now business-like, and in An Irish Journey (1940) Sean Ó'Faoláin wonders if anybody in Dundalk, or in Ulster, talks about Cuchulainn and the Táin (the 'Cattle Raid of Cooley') these days, any more than they talk about Agamemnon in Athens. He asks a friend from the north, who says:

I was going home to Belfast one Christmas, drinking in the dining-car with a bacon-slicer salesman who had driven me to Dublin. As we left Dundalk the Mournes pounced [sic] on me, as sudden and as exultant as that grand blare of brass in Beethoven's Fifth. I went mushy. I began to talk -- me and the whisky -- about Cuchulainn and the Táin. About the way I always imagined myself in the spacious savagery of pre-Christian Ireland, whenever the train went through that Gap. I enthused and enthused. The bacon-slicer man knocked back his liquor -- he drank lemonade in it by the way -- and pressed the bell. "Man," he said, "you're the quare boy!"

The Cooley Peninsula, which is between Dundalk Bay and Carlingford Lough, is the 'Cooley' (Culaigne) of the famous 'Cattle Raid', the Táin Bó Cúlainge ["Toyn Boh Coolinger"], where the bull was kept that Queen Maeve came to seize. Cuchulainn's native patch was Murtheimne ["Mur-hevny"], which corresponds with present-day Co. Louth, the plain below Cooley and the hills bordering Ulster; and this he defended against her.

Cuchulainn mostly fought at fords. At Ardee (Ath Ferdiadh) took place the most famous of Irish single combats, and in the river. After a four-day fight, filled with end-of-the-day courtesies, Cuchulainn reluctantly slew his foster brother Ferdia, but only after he had been run through by a sword himself. This extremity forced Cuchulainn to resort to his secret weapon, the gae bolga, the precise nature of which many scholars have pondered. It was magic, of course, and seems to have been something like a present-day heat-seeking missile, with many war-heads, launched from underwater. Cuchulainn mourns Ferdia:

All gaming, all sport,
Till I met Ferdia at the ford...

'Well, my friend Laeg,' he says to his charioteer, 'cut open Ferdia now and take the gae bolga out of him, for I must not be without my weapon.'

'The Cattle Raid', says Frank O'Connor, 'bears the same relation to epic that Avebury, say, does to the Parthenon, and those who can be impressed by the magnificence of Avebury may appreciate the beauty of The Cattle Raid [3]. O'Connor is selling the saga short; it is more exciting than Avebury, even though (in the various versions that have come down to us) it is a great muddle. Thomas Kinsella, by conflation, has made much of this confusion clear in his fast-moving version, which brings out the mixture of the barbaric with the natural; also the variety, which enabled Yeats to say that 'not one of those fights is like another, and not one is
lacking in emotion and strangeness. When we think imagination can do no more, the story of the Two Bulls, emblematic of all contests, suddenly lifts romance into prophecy [4]. (The two bulls, the Brown and the White, fight locked together all over Ireland. The Brown -- the one the Raid was about -- dies last.)

`The Táin Trail' is signposted at the Cooley Peninsula, and to climb by car from the sedate seaside villas around it to the heights above is to find yourself, in a matter of minutes, among the rock-bordered fields of the west of Ireland, or the wind-swept moors of Kerry. You have moved, in moments, into what Daniel Corkery called the 'Hidden Ireland'. This Ireland continued to have its own poets, right into the eighteenth century, when to outward appearances native culture might have been thought to be dead. With the defeat of the Irish at the battle of Kinsale, in Cork, in 1601, and the 'Flight of the Earls' from Ulster that followed soon after, the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland was completed. [5] Within a century nearly all (85%) of Irish land was in English hands, and the old, feudal Ireland, which protected its bards, had all but disappeared. It was the end, or seemed to be the end, of literature in Irish.

Now, in their poems (they continued to write because they still had a native audience), Irish-language poets looked back to the previous times as a golden age, or looked forward to the return of the old ways and the old patrons, until that hope was extinguished (nearly) by the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the victory of King William. As they sank in the social scale (their new employers having no idea how they were revered among their own people) their poems, still in the traditional strict forms, became more personal, allusive, more 'modern', but remained part of a continuing oral culture. There were groups of these poets in the south and west of Ireland, and one such group flourished in this district, south-east Ulster. They are called the `Oriel' poets, after the region round Mount Oriel, between Dundalk and Drogheda. [6]

One `Oriel' poem is much translated. Cathal Bui Mac Giolla Gunna (d. 1756? probably on the Cavan-Fermanagh border) was apparently a famous drinker (he ends his lament for himself, for 'Yellow-haired Cathal', I shall say in the presence of God, I am guilty, my Lord). In his most famous poem, 'The Yellow Bittern', he laments the death of a bird for which he has a fellow-feeling because it dies of its thirst: trying to scoop a drink from the lough it broke its neck -- the lough was frozen. [7] The translation is by Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916) executed for his part in the Easter Rising.

The yellow bittern that never broke out
   In a drinking bout might as well have drunk;
His bones are thrown on a naked stone
   Where he lived alone like a hermit monk.
O yellow bittern! I pity your lot,
   Though they say that a sot like myself is curst--
I was sober a while, but I'll drink and be wise,
   For fear I should die in the end of thirst.

It's not for the common birds that I'd mourn,
   The blackbird, the corncrake or the crane,
But for the bittern that's shy and apart
   And drinks in the marsh from the lone bog-drain.
Oh! if I had known you were near your death,
   While my breath held out I'd have run to you,
Till a splash from the Lake of the Son of the Bird
   Your soul would have stirred and waked anew.

My darling told me to drink no more
   Or my life would be o'er in a little short while;
But I told her 'tis drink gives me health and strength,
   And will lengthen my road by many a mile.
You see how the bird of the long smooth neck
   Could get his death from the thirst at last.
Come, son of my soul, and drink your cup,
   For you'll get no sup when your life is past...

The poem has fascinated generations of Irish poets. Here is MacDonagh’s second verse translated by a contemporary, Tom MacIntyre (b.1931) [8]:

Heron, blackbird, thrush, you've had it too:
sorry, mates, I'm occupied,
I'm blinds down for the Yellow Bittern,
a blood relation on the mother's side;
whole-hog merchants, we lived it up,
carpe'd our diem, hung out our sign,
collared life's bottle disregarding the label,
angled our elbows met under the table...

The rescue of the work of these poets, from oral sources and from manuscripts, has been a part of Ireland’s rediscovery of itself, ‘an act of repossession’ as Thomas Kinsella says. The Irish largely relies on verbal music; non-Irish-speakers have to take it on trust when Irish scholars and Irish-speaking poets tell us how good the poems of these centuries can be. Fortunately, there have been some brilliant translators, and the existence of this Irish-language culture cannot be forgotten. Its presence, ‘underground’, is what gives the special flavour even to English-speaking Ireland.

MONAGHAN

Urnea -- Forkhill (Co.Armagh)

The Oriel district is ‘rightly famous for Ó'Doirnín’s poetry, which is a delightful combination of traditional learning and passionate expressions of independence and love.’ Peadar Ó'Doirnín, ["Peedoor O'Dineen"] (1704?-1769), was a ‘hedge schoolmaster’ (i.e. non-official, Catholic, teacher) at Forkhill, near Dundalk [9]. Indeed he is said to have been found dead by his pupils outside his school there, ‘sleeping in the sleep that would never be broke’. His poetry sounds rather like that of the much earlier, Welsh, Dafydd ap Gwillym, concerned with successful wooing, or with rueful accounts of being turned down by girls.

O quiet sweet-tempered lady of the pearly tresses,
Come along with me in a little while,
When the nobles, the clergy and the layfolk will be deep
Asleep under white bedclothes...

Ó Diornín is buried at Urnea, in a tiny churchyard isolated in a field, with an old church, long roofless, whose walls have nearly sunk into the ground. Urnea is below Forkhill, almost on the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Forkhill, just into county Armagh, was (in 1992) a fortified British Army observation post; so that a visitor to the grave, with its recent commemorative stone, felt himself to be under surveillance by the present and by the past: many of the surrounding slate gravestones have older hand-scratched lettering, in Irish; indications of past poverty, of ‘secret’, defiant, burial.
Crossmaglen -- Inniskeen

These poets were not isolated village rhymsters, however ignorant of their existence the ruling class might be. Ó'Diornín knew the work of his fellow Oriel poets because he makes reference to it, echoes it, in his own poems, 'in which he makes claims to be at least their equal'. A story is told about one of these, Art MacCooey (Mac Cumhaigh, 1738-73), that, lost in poetic reverie, he once carried the same load of dung up and down a hill several times, forgetting to unload. MacCooey was born near Crossmaglen and not far south of this, at Inniskeen, was born probably the most influential of recent Irish poets, Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), who in his youth surely drove loads of dung while lost in reverie, and wrote a poem about this, which he called simply, 'Art MacCooey'.

There is a charming sense in which Irish poets make a point of acknowledging their predecessors, as though there were an unbroken tradition. In fact Kavanagh, all of whose poetry is in English, seems effortlessly to retain the tone of earlier Irish poetry, in his satires, and in his descriptions of sudden illuminations brought about by some fact of nature, like a fog, or a blackbird, which have the simplicity of Irish poems written in the margins of ninth-century manuscripts.

As you approach Inniskeen (not easy in the 1990s, the signposts seemed to have been taken down, perhaps to confuse cross-border smugglers), between Dundalk and Carrickmacross, at last there are signs and these tell you that you are entering 'Patrick Kavanagh Country'. This is true, because he recorded it in detail, with love and loathing. A sign points to his birthplace, and this only partly tells the truth; he says himself in his autobiography, The Green Fool (1938) that the house he was born in was knocked down when he was five years old, and the present two-storied house his father built in its place. Kavanagh has been called a 'peasant-poet' but he always denied he was a peasant. His father was a shoemaker who also farmed sixteen acres of his own, a considerable number for this region.

Kavanagh, loftily, never thought much of his neighbours [10]:

The River Fane ran through our parish on its way to the Irish Sea. It was a clear, swift-flowing stream. Anglers came long journeys to dream and smoke tobacco on its banks. These anglers said the Fane was as good a trout-stream as there was in Ireland. I shouldn't say so Â the trout in its waters took after the people of Inniskeen in being hard to catch. Like the people, they knew humbug, and were dubious-minded as a jealous husband...

The name of my birthplace was Mucker... The name was a corrupted Gaelic word signifying a place where pigs were bred in abundance. Long before my arrival there was much aesthetic heart-aching among the folk who had to put up with, and up in, such a pig-named townland. In spite of all this the townland stuck to its title and it was in Mucker I was born.

The work was hard. A sign directs you to a steep hill, Shancoduff, part of the acres his family owned and worked. He ends his poem of that name:

The sleety winds fondle the rushy beards of Shancoduff
While the cattle-drovers sheltering in the Featherna Bush
Look up and say: 'Who owns them hungry hills
That the water-hen and snipe must have forsaken?
A poet? Then by heavens he must be poor.'
I hear and is my heart not badly shaken?
The young Kavanagh found his way to Dublin, then to London where the first contact he approached did not help him, but the second one did:

Miss Helen Waddell was in, and in to a stranded poet. She received me as the Prodigal Son was received.

It is pleasing to hear first-hand evidence that Helen Waddell deserved her sobriquet, 'The Darling of Ulster'. Of course it was not the Promised Land. His experiences in London were 'a trifle comical, the image of my soul.' Years later, in London again, now an admired poet, he was not able, perhaps had no wish, to shake himself free of Inniskeen:

We borrowed the loan of Kerr's big ass
To go to Dundalk with butter,
Brought him home the evening before the market
An exile that night in Mucker.

We heeled up the cart before the door,
We took the harness inside --
The straw-stuffed straddle, the broken breeching
With bits of bull-wire tied;

The winkers that had no choke-band,
The collar and the reins ...
In Ealing Broadway, London Town
I name their several names

Until a world comes to life --
Morning, the silent bog,
And the God of imagination waking
In a Mucker fog.

**MEATH -- Boyne valley**

Newgrange -- Dowth

The **Boyne** is the sacred river of the Irish, and many things happened in its beautiful valley, both real and imagined [11].

**Cuchulainn** fought his first battle with the invaders from Connaught at **Ath Gabla**, a ford across the River Mattock that meets the Boyne near the tumulus of Dowth. There are three of these famous tumuli -- or burial mounds, or fairy palaces -- next to each other and to the river, on its north bank between Drogheda and Slane: **Dowth, Knowth** [the names rhyme with 'mouth'] and **Newgrange** [12]. They are more than five thousand years old. Their associations in Irish mythology go back even further than Cuchulainn: they reach back to Aengus Óg, the Celtic God of love [13], one of the Tuatha Dé Danann ['Tooha Day Danann'], the 'People of the Goddess Dana', who were said to have come from Greece in 1896 BC [14]. The Tuatha Dé Danann became the gods of ancient Ireland, and they certainly seem to exude a Mediterranean or Aegean spirit; there is nothing dark and Nordic about them, and when you read their stories it is hard not to believe they were taking place under some Olympian sun, not below Ireland's changeful skies.
The story of Aengus Óg's dream, the lovely Aisling Aengusa, was written down in the eighth century but is much older than that. The aisling ['ashling'] is one of the earliest, and longest lasting, of Irish literary forms. It consists of a dream of an absent love: literally, a falling in love with an absence. Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this absent love was a personification of Ireland in her woes, and therefore an expression of longing for a return of the Stuarts, or for help from abroad, and so became political.[15]. But the original Dream of Aengus is about a real woman (or nearly so, Aengus discovers that she spends every other year in the form of a swan), who appears to him in a dream, and for whom he searches Ireland. After various happenings, practical and magical, she is at last found [16]:

She went to him. He cast his arms about her. They fell asleep in the form of two swans, and went round the lake three times, so that his promise might not be broken. They went away in the form of two white birds till they came to [the Brugh] and sang a choral song so that they put the people to sleep for three days and three nights. The girl stayed with him after that.

(One of the most attractive features of these early Irish magical stories is the abrupt and matter-of-fact way that they end.)

The place that Aengus took her to, the Brugh, also called Brugh na Bóinne (Hill of Boyne), is generally identified as the mound of the chamber-tomb now known as Newgrange, thought to be the palace of the Tuatha Dé Danann and, afterwards, the Druidical burial place for the ashes of the Kings of Tara. Or perhaps Aengus flew with the girl, Caer Ibornet (‘Yewberry’) to another tumulus or ‘fairy palace’, to Dowth nearby? George Moore (1852-1933) [17] and ‘AE’ (George Russell, 1867-1935) [18] appear to think so, in Moore's account of their visit to Dowth in 1901. He describes this trip in Hail and Farewell, one of the most entertaining books to come out of the Irish Literary Revival.

In London at the turn of the century, cosmopolitan novelist George Moore (of an old Irish family, from Lough Carra in Co. Mayo) has become so disgusted with British Imperialism, with the Boer War and Britain's involvement in it, that he decides to quit London forever and, boulevardier though he is, throw in his lot with his native Ireland and the Gaelic Revival -- even attempt to learn Irish. As a man of the world it seems to him therefore essential to get in touch with the Top People, which in this case are the ancient Irish Gods, the Tuatha Dé Danann. He recruits AE, mystical poet, painter, practical agricultural reformer and key figure in the Revival, to effect the introductions.

AE decides to take him to the tumuli near the Boyne. The Gods are sure to be there. They go by train and then by bicycle. ‘We'll seek the ancient divinities of the Gael together', says Moore, triumphant. He clearly feels that AE is an excellent contact. On the way AE points out to Moore the monument erected in commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne (1690). Moore is indignant. ‘The beastly English won that battle. If only they'd been beaten.'

They both crawl inside the tumulus at Dowth, holding candles. Moore decides it is time AE did his job, and introduce him to the Gods:

AE acquiesced, and he was on the ground soon, his legs tucked under him like a Yogi, waiting for the vision, and, not knowing what else to do, I withdrew to the second chamber, and venturred to call upon Angus...

Disappointed, Moore decides to leave AE to it, and climbs out of the tumulus. He lies on the grass above while AE meditates below, and then, horror, two clergymen arrive and enter the mound:

I leaned over the opening, listening, hoping their bellies might stick in the narrow passage; but as they seemed to have succeeded in passing through, I returned to the tumulus hopeless. The Gods will not show themselves while Presbyterian ministers are about; AE will not stay in the tomb with them; and at every moment I expected to see him rise out of the earth. But it was the ministers who appeared a few minutes afterwards, and, blowing out their candles in the blue daylight...
Is it a history he’s brooding down there? one of them asked, laughing; and I lay down on the warm grass thinking of the pain their coarse remarks must have caused AE, who came out of the hill soon after. And it was just as I had expected. The vision was about to appear, but the clergymen had interrupted it, and when they left the mood had passed.

Outside Newgrange, AE begins to sketch the designs on the stones, and the loquacious Moore, at first irritated, decides it is perhaps impossible to talk outside a building that is four thousand years old. So he surrenders himself to enjoyment of the view, but is not silent long:

The same landscape that had astonished me at Dowth lay before me, the same green wilderness, with trees emerging like vapour, just as in AE’s pastels. My eyes closed, and through the lids I began to see strange forms moving towards the altar headed by Druids. Ireland was wonderful then, said my dreams, and on opening my eyes Ireland seemed as wonderful in the blue morning, the sky hanging about her, unfolding like a great convolvulus...

A giant outline showed through the sun-haze miles away. Has Angus risen to greet us, or Mac Lir come up from the sea? [19] I asked, and, shading his eyes with his hand, AE studied the giant outline for a long time. It’s Tara, he said, that you’re looking at. On a clear evening Tara can be seen from Newgrange.

Moore now starts to enthuse about Tara, and as they bicycle off AE tells him repressively that no Gods are to be seen there. AE is clearly getting huffy, he does not want to make the detour to Tara, but Moore eggs him on. ‘We passed a girl driving her cows homeward. She drew a shawl over her head, and I said I remembered seeing her long ago in Mayo, and AE answered, ’Before the tumuli she was...’ Then, ”You’re punctured!” AE said’, and Moore has no need to describe how triumphantly he said it.

The tunnels they entered at Dowth are now closed by gratings, though the mound is (so far) untouched. Newgrange, formerly tree-grown, has been excavated and refurbished, its front set with stones of white quartz so that it gleams from afar, and this is thought to be how it originally looked. Deep inside it are three beautiful stone bowls, said to have been for the ashes of the kings. They are now empty. Where are the ashes? A question worthy of George Moore. Vanished on visitors’ feet, says the guide. (There has been a crescendo of visitors since 1700.)

**Rosnaree -- Slane -- Dunshaughlin**

On the opposite bank to the Brugh/Newgrange is Rosnaree, scene of another clash (or fusion) between paganism and Christianity.

The great king, Cormac Mac Art [20], said to have reigned over a supposed Golden Age in the Third Century -- though it sounds troubled enough -- refused to be buried with his ancestors in Newgrange because, a century before the arrival of Saint Patrick, he had decided there was one God, not several, so he did not wish to be interred according to Druidical rites.

`Spread not the beds of Brugh for me
When restless death-bed’s use is done;
But bury me at Rosnaree,
And face me to the rising sun.

`For all the Kings who lie in Brugh
Put trust in gods of wood and stone;
And ´twas at Ross that first I knew
One, Unseen, who is God alone.´
Samuel Ferguson’s poem ‘The Burial of King Cormac’, known to generations of Irish schoolchildren, celebrates for their edification a sense of Christianity that is deeper in the past of Ireland, even, than St Patrick. The pagan Druids did not give up without a fight. They tried three times to get Cormac’s body across the Boyne, to the Brugh, but the river kept flooding:

And now they slide, and now they swim  
And now, amid the blackening squall,  
Grey locks afloat, with clutching grim,  
They plunge around the floating pall;

While as a youth with practised spear  
Through jostling crowds bears off the ring,  
Boyne from their shoulders caught the bier  
And proudly bore away the king.

At morning, on the grassy marge  
Of Rosnaree, the corpse was found;  
And shepherds at their early charge  
Entombed it in the peaceful ground.

The poem is evidence, early in the nineteenth-century Irish Revival, of the thousand-year attempt to knit Christian Ireland to its mythical past.

Slane

Perhaps Cormac’s descendants were also buried at Rosnaree. Francis Ledwidge (1897-1917) [21] dreamed of it in the trenches of 1917 Flanders:

All the dead kings came to me  
At Rosnaree, while I was dreaming,  
A few stars glimmered through the morn,  
And down the thorn the dews came streaming...

Ledwidge was born opposite Rosnaree, not far from Newgrange, at Janeville, near Slane. The tiny cottage he shared with his parents and seven siblings is still there on the road from Knowth, a museum dedicated to him.

Few peasants are poets, it is too time-consuming an art, but Ledwidge has a claim to be one. At the age of fourteen he was at work in other men’s fields, and before he joined the army he was a roadman. Before the Great War he was making contact with other poets, Nationalists, like Thomas MacDonagh and Padraig Pearse. (And with mystical/practical AE: ‘I have not seen Ledwige for four months because he borrowed £5 from me on promise to return it the next day. This singular silence which I have not broken by enquiry has made me think that his verse will lack something or other.’)

As a nationalist, and trade-union activist, it seems surprising that Ledwidge joined up. ‘I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation, and I would not have her say she defended us while we did nothing but pass resolutions.’ He survived Gallipoli, served in Serbia, but on his last leave home before being sent to France he confessed his disillusion. His friends MacDonagh and Pearse had been executed for their part in the Easter Rising in 1916. ‘If someone were to tell
me now that the Germans were coming in over our back wall, I wouldn't lift up a finger to stop them. They could come! He was offered a chance to desert, by the Nationalist underground, but he went back to France, and died there.

The poet Padraic Colum knew Ledwidge, and praises him for his response, `not to the tumult but to the charm of life.' Poets are usually best at defining what other poets are good at [22]:

It was his triumph that he made us know the creatures of his world as things freshly seen, surprisingly discovered. The first poem in his first volume let us know the blackbird's secret -

- And wondrous impudently sweet,
  Half of him passion, half conceit,
  The blackbird whistles down the street...

It would be near Janesville that Ledwidge stood and watched, 'As raindrops pelted from a nodding rush/To give a white wink once and broken fall/Into a dark deep pool...' He could be exact, and musical, and had a good ear. His 'Lament for Thomas MacDonagh' (written a week after the 1916 execution), contains a memory of MacDonagh's translation of Gunna's poem about the bittern [23]:

He shall not hear the bittern cry
In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds
Above the wailing of the rain...

In the bar of the Conyngham Arms in Slane, Ledwidge met a local sculptor who had found a patron and advised Ledwidge to do the same. So Ledwige sent his notebook to Lord Dunsany, who was enthusiastic. In the Ledwidge museum there is a framed newspaper cutting, headlined 'Peer discovers Poet'.

**Dunshaughlin**

Dunsany Castle is south of Slane at Dunshaughlin (about half-way between Slane and Dublin). Ledwidge was given the run of the place. Dunsany (1878-1957) was sensitive about the effect of social position on the writer because he had suffered from it, as it were, from the other end. He ends his preface to Ledwige's first collection, Songs of the Fields (1914):

I hope that not too many will be attracted to this book on account of the author being a peasant, lest he come to be praised by the how-interesting school; for know that neither in any class, nor in any country, nor in any age, shall you predict the footfall of Pegasus, who touches the earth where he pleaseth and is bridled by whom he will.

(The last sentence caused mirth in the cottage at Janesville. 'Pegasus' was the name Ledwige and his brother had given to their bicycles.)

Dunsany's rank gave him a varied life; he was an international chess-player, big game hunter, crack shot. In what is considered his best, powerfully nostalgic, novel, The Curse of the Wise Woman (1935) there is a suggestion of himself as a boy: passionate about hunting and shooting, in love with the landscape of his Irish home, respecting what Irish people he was able to meet, but somehow, in some essential, cut off from both, as if from an adult world, with Ireland an extra element in this alienation.
Laura and I understood the glory of leaf and flower, and the rejoicing symphony of blackbirds and thrushes... the mention of any of these things at Eton, or elsewhere, usually met with derision, as though there was something evil about the song of a bird, or contemptible in a flower...

The natural description in his writing has a closeness of detail which is like W.H.Hudson's [24], and rises to the level of poetry. There are many bogs in Ireland, and Dunsany's is the way to stare into one [25]:

I looked and saw little beetles navigating the dark water like bright pellets of lead, and rather seeming to be running than swimming. Then an insect with four legs skipped hurriedly over the surface, going from island to island of scarlet grass, and a skylark came by singing. Above me in the mosses beyond the top of the bog's sheer edge the curlews were nesting, their spring call ringing over the pools and the heather. Beside me a patch of peat was touched with green as though it had gone mouldy, and up from it went a little forest of buds, each on its slender stalk, for spring had come to the moss as well as the curlews. In amongst the soft moss grew what looked like large leaves, but so fungoid was their appearance that it was hard to say whether they belonged to the moss, or were even vegetable at all: rather they seemed to haunt the boundary of the vegetable kingdom as ghosts haunt the boundary of man's...

As a peer, and a loyal British subject in Ireland, he had little in common with most of his fellow-writers and the Gaelic Revival. His first play was commissioned by W.B.Yeats, but there was not much sympathy between them. Dunsany's stories in The Book of Wonder could be thought of as mocking the whole 'faery' aspect of the Revival; and of having a bash at Cuchulainn as well [26]:

When Plash-Goo came to the mountain he cast his chimahalk down (for so he named the club of his heart's desire) lest the dwarf should defy him with nimbleness; and stopped towards Lrippity-Krang with gripping hands, who stopped in his mountainous walk without a word, and swung round his hideous breadth to confront Plash-Goo.

Already then Plash-Goo in the deeps of his mind had seen himself seize the dwarf in one large hand and hurl him with his beard and his hated breadth sheer down the precipice that dropped away from that very place to the Land of None's Desire...

Bective

Ledwidge was not the only writer Dunsany helped. Not far from Dunsany Castle, between Navan and Trim (the castle of which Dunsany at one time also owned), Mary Lavin (1912-1996) bought the Abbey Farm next to the ruined abbey at Bective, and Dunsany wrote the preface to her first book of short stories, Tales from Bective Bridge (1942). As a widow, Lavin had a struggle to bring up her children, run the farm and write. She described herself as a 'one-armed writer', one hand stirring the pot and the other steering the pen. Lavin's subjects are for the most part domestic (her children say she wrote while they played around her), and the 'domestic', and her personal experience, are put to powerful use. 'In the Middle of the Fields', the title story of her 1967 collection, is about a widow's aloneness and bafflement set, precisely, in the middle of the fields of Meath.

Like a rock in the sea, she was islanded by fields, the heavy grass washing about the house, and the cattle wading in it as in water. Even their gentle stirrings were a loss when they moved away at evening to the shelter of the woods. A rainy day might strike a wet flash from a hay barn on the far side of the river. Not even a habitation! And yet she was less lonely for him here in Meath than elsewhere. Anxieties by day, and cares, and at night vaguer, nameless fears, these were the stones across the mouth of the tomb.
But who understood that? They thought she hugged tight every memory she had of him. What did they know about memory? What was it but another name for dry love and barren longing? They even tried to unload upon her their own small purposeless memories. 'I imagine I see him every time I look out there,' they would say as they glanced nervously. Oh, for God's sake! she'd think. She'd forgotten him for a minute.

Tara

The English writer, T.H. White (1906-1964), who came to Co.Meath to fish in the River Boyne and stayed for six years, describes the landscape with one of the culinary metaphors this hill-studded part of Ireland seems to inspire. 'Meath and Louth are what you might get if you brought Norfolk to the boil... a country of bubbles.' [27]

One of the larger bubbles, but not that much larger, it only swells to about five hundred feet, is Tara, chief capital of ancient Ireland, a seat of kings and of the High King from the earliest times to the sixth century AD. Despite its modest height you can see for miles in every direction, and from the top it is easy to understand its significance; the kings could overlook and supervise their lands. The grandeur that once was there can be deduced from early descriptions of other palaces [28]:

...nine couches (or bedchambers) between hearth and wall; thirty-five feet was every façade of bronze, chased with gold. In the front part of the house was a royal couch for the king ... above all the couches of the house, covered with carbuncles and with precious stones, and with the hue of every region, in such wise that day and night were of equal brilliance...

The kings of Tara have been thought of priest-kings, guardians of the sacred fire. Ritual fires were certainly lit on Tara, and no fire was allowed in the district until the sacred fire of the Druids had been kindled. To light one was a punishable blasphemy. Saint Patrick had to challenge the priest-king and so, before the fire of the Vernal equinox was lit on Tara by the Druids, Patrick lit his own fire on the Hill of Slane, on March 25, 433, the date of Easter that year. As George Moore noticed, the other way round, Slane can be seen from Tara; outraged, the king and his Druids rode from Tara to punish the culprits.

Saint Patrick, in his own simple and dignified Confessio, left no description of their encounter. Instead the story is told in Muirchu's Life of the saint in which it is mixed up with all sorts of wizardry [29]. However, it was recorded that on the Hills of Slane and Tara there took place one of the key moments in the Christianising of Ireland, because Patrick converted the High King.

Tara was the site of at least three early ecclesiastical Synods [30], and was a place for games and bardic competitions. These verse contests, in tightly controlled traditional forms, could attain great complexity. There is nothing in Ireland that can be taken seriously (as James Stephens took its myths, and poetry, seriously) which cannot also be taken lightly [31]:

The Games were being played at Tara... The bards were in Convention at the Well of the Elf Mound discussing if all that could be achieved by the Great Eight Line Curved Verse could not be as competently managed by the Little Eight-Line Curved Verse, and whether the Great Curving Eight-Line Return Verse was a necessity or an outrage: these holding that brevity, and those that diversity, was the chief ornament of poetry.

"Where there is only room for brevity," quoth a young bard, "there is no room for poetry."

A savage ancient confounded him.

"Where, sir, there is space for diversity there is place and to spare for foolishness."

"A goat in a small plot," cried a pastoral bard, "starvation follows."
"Ah!" cried another, who knew his animals, "a goat in a large plot -- extended destruction!"

Love poems, war poems, place poems, histories -- this would be a busy, a contentious, gathering.

James Stephens (1882?-1950) was a leading figure in the Irish Revival. *Deirdre* (1920) and *In the Land of Youth* (1924) were part of a projected retelling of all the ancient tales, which he never completed.

If it is true that, as Heinrich Böll said in his *Irish Journal*[32], 'Folklore is something like innocence; when you know you have it, you no longer have it', then Stephens is the exception, the proof that by some chance of temperament, or effort of will, the past can be reinhabited. You feel if there had been no ancient literature to draw upon he could have made it up himself and got the tone of it right. Stephens found in Dunsany's stories 'great windy reaches and wild flight among stars and a very youthful laughter at the gods', and he contains such laughter himself. In his poem "The Ancient Elf" he might be describing his own method:

I, careless and gay,
Never mean what I say,
For my thoughts and my eyes.
Look the opposite way...

**Trim -- Laracor**

T.H.White, author of a re-telling of the King Arthur stories, *The Once and Future King*, which strongly suggests the influence of Stephens, stayed in a farmhouse ('Doolistown', now a ruin) by the River Boyne, near Trim, not far from Tara, for six years (1939-45). He had a complicated relationship with the Irish, part awed affection, part Blimpish exasperation. He even said the Rosary every evening with his landlady and her family, but, 'I have strange feelings about this. They are of love for the family but lack of communion with the thing: like somebody trying to be sick, when he has been sick.' Whenever he feels the affection for Ireland, and the exasperation, overwhelming him, he takes refuge in his Blimpish persona [33]:

It is not the Irish, he thought, it is the climate. It is not the fault of the race. The Irish are not lazy, not backward, not dirty, not superstitious, not cunning, not dishonest. They are as nice as anybody else. It is not them. It is the air.

It is that bloody Atlantic, said Mr White, looking angrily in the direction of Mullingar: that's what does for us. It is those millions of square miles of water vapour pouring in from the south-west, supersaturated, bulging, coloured, and weighted like lead. It is like living under a pile of wet cushions: they force us to our hands and knees...

Why, even champagne will hardly fizz here: one might as well be living down a coal mine. I believe, he continued doubtfully, that champagne does not fizz in coal mines; but, if you take it to the top of a mountain, where the air is lighter, it fizzes so much that the whole bottle turns to froth. That is what happens if you take an Irishman away from his native hell... Drop him across the channel, and immediately he boils over like a firework display. He invents quaternions or conquers Napoleon or writes *St Joan*. And the same thing happens the other way round. Leave him in England, and Swift is the master of ministers, the friend of princes, and cynosure of wit. Drag him away to the atmospheric pressure of the County Meath, and he is only a nasty-minded, complaining parson at Laracor, and finally he goes dotty altogether, and no wonder.
Doolistown was a couple of miles from Laracor, south of Trim; and White's view of Swift not an unusual one. **Frank O'Connor** feels otherwise [34]:

If you share my mania for Swift, you may well aim for Laracor, but you will find it a disappointment. It contains no memories at all of the great Dean, of Stella and Dingley... and the other characters who grow upon you from the pages of *Journal to Stella*. "The willows by the river's side my heart is set upon..." but you are not likely to find them.

The willows are now replaced by alders, and the church by the roadside which replaces Swift's has become a private house. But there is the knob of a burial mound (tree-grown) in the field by the river where his glebe house used to be, which he must have looked at often, and the friendly, intimate landscape cannot much have changed. 'Stella's Cottage' is a short way down the road towards Trim, labelled but with its walls reduced to waist height, giving it the dimensions of a largish pig-stye.

### WESTMEATH - LONGFORD

**Delvin** -- **Hill of Uisneach** -- 'Goldsmith Country' -- **Edgeworthstown** -- **Lough Derravaragh** -- **Castlepollard**

**Delvin**

North-west of Trim is the small town of *Delvin*, scene of a famous literary row in 1918. **Brinsley MacNamara** (1890-1963) -- real name John Weldon, son of the town schoolmaster -- in that year published *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*. It was his first book, and, drawing on his youthful experiences of Delvin, he cheerfully and wholesale maligned everybody in 'Garradrimna', which was as recognisably his native town as its natives were recognisable to themselves, and to others. There are eye-witness accounts of the local people reading the book out loud to each other (proud of their local author), laughing as they recognised their neighbours, falling silent and aghast when they recognised themselves. The postmistress, for example, is represented as in the habit of steaming open letters (the plot hangs on this); the publican's wife is described as 'the hardest woman in Garradrimna. Her childlessness had made her so. She was beginning to grow stale and withered, and anything in the nature of love and marriage, with their possible results, was to her a constant source of affliction and annoyance.' The response of the enraged publican, and his childless wife, was to grimly order drinks all round until there was soon an inflamed mob. The book was burned.

MacNamara fled. Metropolitan Ireland, having got over its delight at any sort of a rumpus, decided that the burning was symptomatic of the narrow prejudices of rural small-town life, and that MacNamara was some kind of martyr. He had to live away from Delvin for the rest of his life, which possibly he did not mind, but one consequence was more serious; the book has been suspected of inaugurating a 'squinting windows' school of writing, in which Irish small-town life is seen to contain nothing but malice, hypocrisy and frustrated lust, usually under a stream of unceasing rain. *Squinting Windows*, save for its melodramatic end, is funny. It contains what MacNamara said he wished all his work to contain, 'the long, low chuckle of the mind.' [35]

**Delvin** also had its bards. **Bonaventura O'Hussey** (O hEodhasa, c.1570-1614) was trained in a traditional bardic school, went to France at the end of the sixteenth century, became a Franciscan and was one of the founders of the Irish College of St Anthony in Louvain. His poem, lamenting the death of Richard Nugent, son of his friends William and Janet Nugent, 'has the rare combination of sincere feeling and the polished language and technique of Classical Irish poetry.' [36]
The sound of your sighs makes my ears go numb,
The sight of your weeping drains the blood from my heart.
I wish I could take your pain to add to my own,
And I may be able to do this, mine is so great.
You have lost your son, your delight (the pain of it)
Your only one, your laughter-bringer is dead, Janet...

The poem makes you realise that at least at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Delvin contained the sensitive, or even civilised, people whom Macnamara later failed to find.

In *The Absentee* (1800), Maria Edgeworth describes a 'Nugentstown' in all its terrible dilapidation. Delvin is not far from where she lived, and its connection with the Nugent family may well have suggested the invented name [37]:

This 'town' consisted of one row of miserable huts, sunk beneath the side of the road, the mud walls crooked in every direction; some of them opening in wide cracks or zig-zag fissures, from top to bottom, as if there had just been an earthquake -- all the roofs sunk in various places -- thatch off, or overgrown with grass -- no chimneys, the smoke making its way through a hole in the roof, or rising in clouds from the top of the open door -- dung-hills before the doors, and green standing puddles...

Daniel Corkery in *The Hidden Ireland* remarks that `the appearance of the countryside changed but little in all the years of misery between 1690 and 1881'.

Uisneach

There were ancient glories further to the south west, beyond Mullingar [38]. The little Hill of Uisneach ['Ushna”] probably pre-dates Tara as a crowning-place for Kings. Like Tara it is a 'bubble', gently rising to about six hundred feet, but as is so often the case with these apparently insignificant 'royal' hills, the view from it is vast. On it is the 'Cat Stone' or 'Stone of Divisions' or 'Umbilicus' which signals that it was considered the physical, as also a mystical, centre of Ireland [39].

*The Annals of Westmeath* (1907) [40] is enthusiastic about Uisneach. The entertaining *Annals is prone to nationalist excitement: it was a favourite of John Betjeman's while staying at nearby Pakenham Hall and he derived at least one poem from it.  Uisneach is, in appearance, just a pretty little hill, but ‘This noble seat is sacred as the ancient meeting place of the renowned men of Ireland, the city of Laberos, mentioned by Ptolemy. The memorials of this once famous and ancient city are strewn around and over the plain... ’

A king was not allowed to continue as king if he became deformed or disabled. According to the *Annals Cormac Mac Art (he of Rosnaree) found a classically stylish way round this:

When Cormac Art was obliged to retire from the sovereignty of Ireland owing to having been deprived of one of his eyes by Aengus of the poisoned spear, Aengus was arraigned at Uisneach before a great convention of the chiefs, and himself and his tribe were banished for ever from Erin. King Cormac, who attended the convention, wore leaves of gold fastened with silver springs on his eye in order to conceal the injury.

This strikes a note 'both great-hearted and light-hearted', like James Stephens's recreations of ancient times.

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'Goldsmith Country'

On past Uisneach, a right fork towards `Auburn' and you are at `The Pigeons' pub, signalled to `Goldsmith country' which is shared by counties Westmeath and Longford.

**Oliver Goldsmith** (1728-1774) [41] spent his boyhood at Lissoy, later variously called `Auburn', the name he gave it in his poem `The Deserted Village', or `The Pigeons', after `The Three Pigeons' inn where Tony Lumpkin caroused, in his play *She Stoops to Conquer*:

> Let schoolmasters puzzle their brain,  
> With grammar and nonsense and learning;  
> Good liquor, I stoutly maintain,  
> Gives *genus* a better discerning.  
> Let them brag of the heathenish Gods,  
> Their Lethes, their Styxes and Stygians:  
> Their Quis, and Their Quae, and their Quods,  
> They're all but a parcel of Pigeons.  
> Torodlle, toroddle, toroll...

Goldsmith could write a good drinking song, but he could write a good just-about-anything: a long poem, a play, and a novel (*The Vicar of Wakefield*); and for all of them he draws on his boyhood experiences of Lissoy, where his father was Anglican vicar. But he left Ireland early.

The house he was supposed to have mistaken for an inn -- thus providing himself with one of his best plots, in *She Stoops to Conquer* -- still stands, in Ardagh nearby, now a convent. Not much is left of his father's vicarage. Not much is left of Lissoy, though various mildewed notices point out places mentioned in `The Deserted Village' -- the schoolhouse, the mill, and so on, 'of which few traces remain'.

Nationalists have sometimes been shocked that there is little specific reference to the woes of Ireland in `The Deserted Village', but Goldsmith was trying to earn a living in London, and London has seldom been receptive of Irish woes. He was a warm-hearted man, and cared for his country. `Why, why was I born a man, and yet see the sufferings of wretches I cannot relieve!' [42]

Although he was only ten years old when the now-famous blind harper Turlough Carolan (1670-1738) died, it is possible that Goldsmith heard him, for Carolan played at Edgeworthstown nearby, and Goldsmith wrote a short *Life*, calling Carolan `The Last Irish Bard'. [43]

The original natives never mention his name without rapture; both his poetry and music they have by heart...

His death was not more remarkable than his life. Homer was never more fond of a glass than he; he would drink whole pints of Usquebaugh, and, as he used to think, without any ill consequence. His intemperance, however, in this respect, at length brought on an incurable disorder, and when just at the point of death, he called for a cup of his beloved liquor... and when the bowl was brought him, attempted to drink but could not; wherefore, giving away the bowl, he observed with a smile, that it would be hard if two such friends as he and the cup should part at least without kissing; and then expired.
Edgeworthstown, Longford

Goldsmith is said to have gone to school in Edgeworthstown (or Mostrim, Co.Longford). There, in the Big House (as such places are called in Ireland) Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) lived from the age of fifteen.

Her first and most enduring novel, Castle Rackrent, was published in 1800. The intention was to give the English reading public a picture of the true state of Ireland; she attacks the irresponsibility of the landed gentry (among whom, of course, the Edgeworths belonged)[44]. Her touch, in Rackrent, is light. She hits upon a marvellous comic device. Her narrator is the butler, or family steward, Thady, and he reports the chaotic and often dreadful goings-on of successive generations of his masters with such deep respect that even while you wince you are forced to laugh. Her popularity was immense, so was her literary influence. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) says in his preface to Waverley (1829) that it was after reading her that he was inspired to become a novelist:

I felt that something might be attempted for my own country, of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland -- something which might introduce her natives to those of the sister kingdom, in a more favourable light than they had been placed hitherto, and tend to procure sympathy for their virtues and indulgence for their foibles.

Scott and Maria Edgeworth became friends. They shared the same practicality and commonsense. In 1825 he came to stay with her at Edgeworthstown where, according to Scott's son-in-law and biographer, John Gibson Lockhart, her brother filled his classical mansion every evening 'with a succession of distinguished friends, the élite of Ireland.'

Lockhart, like most nineteenth century British visitors, exaggerates the popularity of the Irish protestant gentry. The Edgeworths had had to flee before the rebels in 1798, were nearly blown up by an exploding ammunition cart, and Maria's father, thought to be a spy, narrowly escaped lynching. In 1836 a visiting American writes of Edgeworthstown [45]:

As we passed through the crowd to the schoolhouse the enmity of the Papists to the Protestant landholders was but too evident. Though Mrs Edgeworth [Maria's stepmother] had been the Lady Bountiful of the village for many years, there were no bows for her and her friends, no making way before her, no touching of hats, no pleasant looks. A sullen expression and a dogged unmovability on every side of us.

The Edgeworths were undoubtedly good landlords. Scott was delighted with the conditions of the Edgeworth tenants, though when they all make a journey into the west of Ireland even Lockhart notices that his father-in-law's face is becoming sadder. Maria remarks in a letter that Scott said to her, ’ “Do explain to the public why Pat, who gets forward so well in other countries, is so miserable in his own.” A very difficult question: I fear above my power. But I shall think of it continually, and listen, and look and read.’

William Wordsworth visited the Edgeworths in May 1829, but in his rather stolid letters home he says little about them or the place [46]. He refers to Maria only as 'Miss Edgeworth the authoress'. He reports that when he is detained by rain, 'I made the best use of my time in conversing with the people.' He finds that many he spoke to 'forbode the worst from Catholic bigotry', just as Scott seemed to forbode the worst from the 'determined Orangemen' he met, who reminded him 'of the Spaniard in Mexico'. But perhaps Scott had been talking to Maria's brother, because Wordsworth says, 'Mr Edgeworth whom we had left in the morning sees things from quite a different point of view -- but I will not enter into particulars, it is late and I bid you all good night as I propose to be up before six to look about me.' Wordsworth's letters from Ireland are like that. 'I have no more room and the subjects before me are inexhaustible.' As for 'the authoress': 'I enjoyed the snatches of Wordsworth's conversation that I was able to have and I think I had quite as much as was good for me...'
Perhaps she considers that a little sharp, and she relents: 'He was a good, philosophical bust, a long, thin, gaunt face, much wrinkled and weather-beaten... with a cheerful and benevolent expression.'

Maria Edgeworth devoted her life to being happy and to being useful. She lived long enough to devote her last energies to relieving some of the effects of the Great Famine of the 1840s. Above all, she loved family life, and her home. In Paris (in 1820) she is fêted, meets everybody, but the constant chorus of our moral as we drive home together at night is, "How happy we are to be so fond of each other! How happy we are to be independent of all we see here! How happy that we have our dear home to return to at last!"

The Edgeworth house at Longford is now a convent nursing home, and although the original house has been more or less preserved, the extensions and additions to it are not sensitive. Lockhart's 'classical mansion' -- Maria described her father's house as 'tolerably good, old-fashioned' but that may have been before he improved it -- now stands on a bald slope, the old trees cut down and few replanted, with a stark box-like extension and salt-cellar chapel.

**Lough Derravaragh, Castlepollard**

East of Edgeworthstown, back in Co. Westmeath, is Lough Derravaragh, scene of one of the ‘three sorrowful tales of Ireland,’ the ‘Fate of the Children of Lir’. It takes place in the time of the Tuatha Dé Danaan. The Children are taken by their jealous stepmother to Lough Derravaragh to be drowned, but she relents and turns them into swans. The spell over them is to last for nine hundred years: for the first three hundred they live on the lake, sweetly singing, for they retain their human voice. 'From all parts of the island companies of the Danaan folk resort to Lake Derravaragh to hear this wondrous music and to converse with the swans, and during that time a great peace and gentleness seemed to pervade the land'. But then they have to fly to the freezing seas of the northern coast, by Rathlin Island, for a further three hundred years; and for the last three centuries to the wild Atlantic off the Belmullet peninsula. The sister Fionuala protects her three brothers throughout their ordeal. According to T.W.Rolleston, 'in all Celtic legend there is no more tender and beautiful tale than this.' [47]

Maria Edgeworth knew Derravaragh because it is near Pakenham Hall (now called Tullynally), at Castlepollard, and there was much visiting between the Pakenhams and the Edgeworths, even though there was (and is) a bog between them. Apart from the bog there were other hazards [48]:

On Friday we went to Pakenham Hall. We sat down thirty-two to dinner, and in the evening a party of twenty from Pakenham Hall went to a grand ball at Mrs Pollard's... We stayed till between three and four in the morning... The postilion had, it seems, amused himself at a club in Castle Pollard while we were at the ball, and he had amused himself so much that he did not know the ditch from the road: he was ambitious of passing Mr. Dease's carriage -- passed it: attempted to pass Mr. Tuite's, ran the wheels on a drift of snow which overhung the ditch, and laid the coach fairly down on its side in the ditch. We were none of us hurt... I never fell at all, for I clung like a bat to the handstring at my side, determined that I would not fall upon my mother and break her arm. None of us were even bruised...the gentleman hauled us out immediately.

**John Betjeman** (1906-84) [49] knew Lough Derravaragh in the early 1930s. He came often to stay at Pakenham Hall (Tullynally) and it was in the library there that he came across the gossipy Annals of Westmeath and the story of Sir John Piers, a famous and cynical rake who made a bet in 1807 that he could seduce the new bride of a friend. In his poem about this, 'The Return', Betjeman has the would-be seducer liken the eyes of his prey to the lake, and he attempts an old Irish metre:
I love your brown curls / black in rain, my colleen,
    I love your grey eyes / by this verdant shore
Two Derravaraghs / to plunge into and drown me...

Betjeman calls Co.Westmeath 'the lake-reflected' (in 'Ireland with Emily'). His Irish poems are among his best, he seems to have loved the place:

O my small towns of Ireland, the raindrops caress you,
The sun sparkles bright on your field and your Square
As here on your bridge I salute you and bless you,
Your murmuring waters and turf-scented air...

Castlepollard

Betjeman's hosts were Edward and Christine Longford. Edward, Earl of Longford (1902-1961), was a playwright, as was his wife, and they ran their own theatrical company [50]. To Pakenham Hall they invited other young writers; it was in the library of Pakenham Hall that Evelyn Waugh, idly spinning a globe, decided to go to Abyssinia, a journey that inspired a travel book and a novel. Longford had more money than most of his guests and had the endearing habit of making bets with them just before they left, which he was bound to lose, thereby helping them with their travel expenses.

The present owner of Tullynally is his nephew, Thomas Pakenham, the historian, himself the author of a book about travels in Abyssinia; perhaps the spun globe always stops at the same spot, like a fixed roulette-wheel. Pakenham's account of the 1798 Rising, The Year of Liberty, is the most factual and unbiased. The Crown forces mobilised to put down the Rising camped on the lawns of Pakenham Hall.

EAST CAVAN

Virginia -- Mullagh -- Moybolgue

Castles, like Pakenham Hall, and big houses, like the Edgeworths', had their own Anglo-Irish cultures, and their distinguished visitors. However remote from 'the centre' -- in this case Dublin, Trinity College, and England -- we are not surprised if they have literary associations; people visit them from the Centre. It is more surprising, though perhaps it should not be, to find in the eighteenth century clusters of literary folk in less grand circumstances and more out-of-the-way places, some of whom had a notable influence on the future. One such group was in the south-east corner of Co.Cavan, near the border with Co.Meath.

Thomas Sheridan the elder (1687-1738), friend of Swift, was a schoolmaster and classicist; father of Thomas Sheridan the actor-manager (1719-88?); who was father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1761-1816), the playwright. The older Sheridan was one of the group of valued younger-brotherish cronies (he was twenty years younger) in whose company Swift could take off his wig, amuse himself with country exercise, exchange facetious verses -- and revise Gulliver's Travels [51].

The Sheridans' house, Quilca (near Virginia) was a modest place, by a small lake, in pretty scenery. The successor to the original house is probably not all that different, with the mound across the road from it on which Thomas Sheridan the Younger used to rehearse his theatrical troupes. Nor can the watery landscape
have changed much since Richard Brinsley Sheridan spent his early childhood here. The place was sold-up in 1768, when he was seven. There is a selling-up scene in The School for Scandal; he may have been in Quilca at the time, and remembered it.

The elder Thomas Sheridan sounds a disorganised sort of man and Swift never tires of teasing him about the discomforts of Quilca. He makes the house speak: ‘Let me my properties explain / A rotten cabin, dropping rain / Chimneys with scorn rejecting smoak / Stools, tables, chairs and bed-steads broke... ’ There is a Marie-Antoinettish quality about these eighteenth century intellectuals enjoying their discomforts. Swift reports: ‘I battle as well as I can, but in vain... Our kitchen is a hundred yards from the house, but the way is soft and so fond of our shoes that it covers them with its favours.’ Nevertheless he went there often, at least one summer (1725) with ‘Stella’ (Esther Johnson) and her companion, Rebecca Dingley. Quilca had an idyllic quality in summer. But Swift warned Sheridan, in December, 1722:

You will find Quilca not the thing it was last August; nobody to relish the lake; nobody to ride over the downs; no trout to be caught; no dining over a well; no night heroics; no morning epics; no stolen hours when the wife is gone; no creature to call you names. Poor miserable Master Sheridan! No blind harpers! No journeys to Rantavan!

The `blind harper' could have been Carolan, who was born near Nobber, a few miles to the east. ‘Rantavan' suggests visits to the Brooke family; it was the name of their house, near Mullagh (between Virginia and Kells/Ceanannas).

The Rev. William Brooke (1680-1745) was Rector of three adjacent parishes, Mullagh, Killinkere and Moybolgue. His more celebrated son, Henry Brooke (1705-83) built himself a house nearby, at Corfodd, renamed Longfield, where in later life he lived in reduced circumstances with his daughter Charlotte Brooke (c.1740-93), who put together the pioneering Reliques of Irish Poetry. Henry Brooke, through Swift, became a friend of Pope's in England, and his Rousseau-influenced novel, The Fool of Quality (1765) was greatly admired by John Wesley, who produced a successful abridged version; in the next century Charles Kingsley found in it ‘more which is pure, sacred and eternal than in anything which has been published since Spenser's Fairy Queen.' [52]

The lives of the Brookes in Co. Cavan also seemed pure and Vergilian to outsiders. In 1804 a book was published containing anecdotes about them and their circle, Brookiana. This contains a kind of classical Eclogue, a conversation between a Traveller who has ventured into these wilds and an Old Man who has lived all his life in a cottage adjoining the ancient ruined church at Moybolgue. What is significant is the notice taken in it of the Irish, and their language. ‘One of our best poets reposes in that corner,’ the Old Man says. ‘Let us drop a tear on his grave...' says the Traveller. ‘In what language did he write?’ ‘In Irish, a language admirably suited to all that is tender in the human heart...’

The Old Man then translates for the Traveller an elaborate Irish poem, and the whole conversation could be taking place in the graveyard at Urnea, where Ó Doirnín is buried, which in fact is not far away. It is an unusual note to hear in an English book of that time: the meeting in the Moybolgue churchyard is supposed to have taken place in 1780, when the Irish language was despised and, for public purposes, proscribed.

Moybolgue, with its ruined church and ancient graveyard that, like so many, is still used, still suits the Old Man’s description (‘Solitude, the companion of the wise and the good’); the remains of the Old Man’s cottage are perhaps there by the wall. It overlooks the rich, lumpy Cavan countryside, like a soft swell of green waves, criss-crossed at all angles by hedges of hawthorn; in the summer a place brilliantly green and white, and soft.

The Traveller's courteous interest in the Irish language is, as has been said, unusual. Henry Brooke intended to learn it, after a man on the banks of the Shannon addressed some verses to him in Irish. He never did so but, importantly, his daughter Charlotte did.
Charlotte Brooke wrote down poems and songs repeated to her by Irish-speakers in the country, and was shown manuscripts by scholars in Dublin, where literature in Irish was beginning to be studied. Inspired by Bishop Percy's Reliques, in 1789 she published her own Reliques of Irish Poetry, in a bilingual edition: the first.

It is true that her English verse translations sound too much of her century to be convincing, but by printing the originals, in Gaelic script, she rescued much that could otherwise have been lost, and made herself possibly the earliest figure in the Gaelic literary revival. She included two songs by Carolan, refuting the claim that literary Irish was dead.

It was not usual in English literary circles to have much regard for the weird and difficult Irish people; it was easier to dismiss them as bumpkins, and their ancient literature as crude. So when she writes in her Introduction, 'The productions of our Irish bards exhibit a glow of cultivated genius... totally astonishing, at a period when the rest of Europe was nearly sunk in barbarism,' it was too much for her (otherwise favourable) London reviewers. No one of her kind had spoken of the Irish like that before. 'She will excuse us for sometimes smiling at the excess to which she has carried her enthusiasm' [53]. It was her 'enthusiasm', from this secluded corner of Cavan, that rescued a significant part of Ireland's past to be built on by the enthusiasts of the following century.

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NOTES

to Chapter 2: The East Midlands

1 Sean Ó Faoláin (1900-91), An Irish Journey (1940). Cuchulainn: see note at Slemish [1].
2 Unpub. trans.
3 Frank O'Connor, Leinster, Munster and Connaught.
4 W.B. Yeats, introduction to Lady Gregory's Cuchulain (1902).
5 Sean Ó Faoláin's The Great O'Neill (1940) gives a powerful account of this 'watershed' battle.
6 Mount Oriel is west of the Ardee-Slane road. The province of Ulster traditionally includes the 'Six Counties' of present-day Northern Ireland (Down, Antrim, Derry/Londonderry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh) with Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan; historically it often extended further south-east.
7 'Yellow-Haired Cathal', i.e. Cathal Bui ['Cahal Bwee']. The 'Bittern's lake' is claimed by Lough Macnean, on the Cavan-Leitrim-Fermanagh borders. There is a monument to Cathal Bui on the shore by Termon, near Blacklion (Cavan).
   He is said to have composed the 'Lament' as he was dying destitute in a ruined cottage; a mysterious messenger calls a priest for him. Daniel Corkery (who wrote a play on this) says that his verses were recited as prayers by country people.
9 Peadar O Doirnín: comment, and translation quoted, by Seamus O'Neill in Dictionary of Irish Literature (Gaelic Literature). The story of O Doirnín's death is told by the Donegal (Gaelic) writer Seosamh Mac Grianna (quoted in Field Day Anthology). Examples of Da'fdd ap Gwilym (c. 1325-80) are in H. Jackson's A Celtic Miscellany. There is a shrine to St Brigit nearby, at her birthplace at Faughart, near Dundalk.
10 Patrick Kavanagh: all prose quotations from The Green Fool.
11 The Boyne Valley: As well as the legends and prehistory, this stretch of the river (between Drogheda and Slane) contains a concentration of historical sites. The Battle of the Boyne (1690, when the troops of William III beat James II and his allies) took place near Cuchulainn's ford.
12 Newgrange (constructed c. 3100 BC) is the most prominent site among the tumuli, which made it a focus of legends. Its interior, with the mysterious circled patterns and stone bowls, was rediscovered in the 1690s. It was covered with trees before the restoration in the 1960s. Like other prehistoric buildings, its entrance passage is aligned to a significant solar date: here, sunrise at the winter solstice, so Newgrange is associated with rebirth and renewal.
13 Aengus (Oenghus) Óg ['Oghe'] (= young) is the son of Boann, goddess of the Boyne river. He is friend to lovers as well as a lover himself as here. Birds flutter round his head; 'Angus of the Birds' was a nickname for the young Yeats.
14 Tuatha De Danaan: In the chronicles, the Tuatha come in one of the successive Invasions of Ireland. They fought the previous inhabitants, the Firbolgs, and the more monstrous Formorians from the western seas, in two decisive battles both confusingly called 'Moytura' (possibly near Lough Arrow, Sligo-Roscommon). The Tuatha in turn were fought the previous inhabitants, the Firbolgs, and the more monstrous Formorians from the western seas, in two decisive battles both confusingly called 'Moytura' (possibly near Lough Arrow, Sligo-Roscommon). The Tuatha in turn were fought the previous inhabitants, the Firbolgs, and the more monstrous Formorians from the western seas, in two decisive battles both confusingly called 'Moytura' (possibly near Lough Arrow, Sligo-Roscommon). The Tuatha in turn were fought the previous inhabitants, the Firbolgs, and the more monstrous Formorians from the western seas, in two decisive battles both confusingly called 'Moytura' (possibly near Lough Arrow, Sligo-Roscommon). The Tuatha in turn were fought the previous inhabitants, the Firbolgs, and the more monstrous Formorians from the western seas, in two decisive battles both confusingly called 'Moytura' (possibly near Lough Arrow, Sligo-Roscommon). The Tuatha in turn were fought the previous inhabitants, the Firbolgs, and the more monstrous Formorians from the western seas, in two decisive battles both confusingly called 'Moytura' (possibly near Lough Arrow, Sligo-Roscommon).
15 Ferguson's 'Lark in the Clear Air' (see chapter 1, Donegore) has been interpreted as being addressed to Ireland, in the aising tradition.
16 Trans. F. Shaw in A Celtic Miscellany. James Stephens retells these stories in In the Land of Youth.
17 George Moore: see also chapter 6, at Ardrahan (Galway) and Lough Corra (Mayo).
18 George Russell was born in Lurgan (Armagh), lived in Dublin from 1878, was an art student and Theosophist with Yeats. The pen-name AE came from a printer querying the diphthong in 'æon' ('age-old').
19 Mananan ['Mannanan'] mac Lir (= 'son of the Sea'), the sea-god. AE's supposed remark 'Before the tumuli she was...' is a parody of Pater's essay on the Mona Lisa.
20 Cormac Mac Art: a more or less mythical King who appears in the Fenian' stories as well as the chronicles.
22 Padraic Colum, The Road Round Ireland.
23 'The Yellow Bittern': see above (Dundalk).
25 Lord Dunsany, The Curse of the Wise Woman (1935). In the novel, the great bog stretches to a lost paradise in the west (Tir na nOg, Land of the Young, Land of Heart's Desire).
26 'How Plash-Goo came to the Land of None's Desire' from Tales of Wonder (1916). Dunsany presents these whimsical stories as escapes from the 'world of blood and mud and khaki' of the First World War.
28 From 'The Feast of Biriciu', one of the 'Ulster Cycle' (Cuchulainn) tales; quoted by R.A.S. Macalister (1870-1950, author of The Archaeology of Ireland, 1927) in Tara (1931).
29 Muirchu: see note 70 at chapter 1 (Armagh). A.B.E. Hood's edition of the *Life of St Patrick* says that Muirchu treats the saint as 'a hero capable of standing beside those of secular saga', and that he compares Tara and its king to Nebuchadnezzar's wicked Babylon in the Book of Daniel.

30 Tara: At these meetings rulings were made to revise pagan laws in the light of Christianity. Rulings continued to be made on the privileges of Bards -- whether they should be obliged to fight, entitled to free hospitality, etc. (if refused, they revenged themselves with satires). *St Columba* (Columcille) 'may be regarded as a kind of patron of poets': when one assembly threatened to abolish their privileges he hastened all the way from Iona to defend them. (Stephen Gwynn: *Highways and Byways in Donegal and Antrim*, 1899).

31 James Stephens, *In the Land of Youth* (1924). His mixing of realism with fantasy produces 'humour of a strange kind not easy to define' (Stephen J. Brown, S.J., *Ireland in Fiction*, 1919). Stephens was a close friend of James Joyce, who suggested he might complete *Finnegans Wake*.


33 T.H. White (1906-64), *The Elephant and the Kängaroo* (1948); a fable about a second Flood, with an apocalyptic ending in the manner of James Stephens, as the survivors float through Dublin. Other quotations from journals and letters in the biography of White by Sylvia Townsend Warner (*1967*). White's teasing attitude to Ireland, and the descriptions of the people he stayed with, caused offence. See also chapter 6, at Westport and Belmullet.

34 O'Connor, *Leinster, Munster and Connaught*. In the *Journal to Stella* (written from London 1710-13) Swift often refers to Laracor, how he misses the river and planting trees.

35 The *Burnings of Brinsley MacNamara* by Padraic O'Farrell (1990). *MacNamara* (John Weldon) was a playwright, actor and director at the Abbey Theatre.

36 O'Hussey: Version by PJK.

37 The heroine of *The Absentee* is called Grace Nugent, and one of the best-known songs of the harper Carolan is 'Gracey Nugent'. *Edgeworth*'s novel ridicules the pretensions of irresponsible Irish landlords living off their rents in London society, abandoning their estates to often crooked agents -- unlike the Edgeworths themselves, who lived chiefly in Edgeworthstown and practised what they preached. 'This town': the word is used for 'townland', a village, hamlet or farm.

38 Mullingar: As in Ennis, Co. Clare (see chapter 6), the slender connection of Mullingar with James Joyce (in *Stephen Hero*) is recorded on a plaque.

39 Uisneach is north of the road between Mullingar and Ballymore. The 'stone of divisions' (*Aill na Mireann*) on the side of the hill is 'a large erratic boulder' (*Shell Guide*). Called 'umbilicus', 'the Navel of Ireland' by Gerald of Wales (*Giraldus Cambrensis*) in his *History and Topography of Ireland* of 1135. There are deep traces of fire on the summit of the hill, indicating that it was the scene of Beltane (1 May) fire rituals. Michael Dames in *Mythic Ireland* (1992) explains the significance of ancient Uisneach as literally the centre of a wheel of fire beacons, whose sightlines could extend from horizon to horizon to the edges of the island, marking significant points in the solar year. The hill is mentioned in Ptolemy's Geography; it has associations with the 'Cattle Raid of Coolcy'; with *St Patrick*; with Brian Boru; with an early (legendary) 'festive hall of literature'; and with later (Norman) persecutions of bards (who had great influence on their hereditary rulers).

40 *Annals of Westmeath Ancient and Modern* by James Woods (Dublin, 1907).

41 Oliver Goldsmith: He was born (probably) at Pallas near Ballymahon, Co. Longford; moved to Lissoy (Auburn, 'The Pigeons') aged two; his father's church near there was at Kilkenny West. Later he also went to school in Elphin (Co. Roscommon) and to Trinity College, Dublin (a statue of him is outside the entrance there); he left Ireland for London in 1749. There is a memorial at Forgney church (on the Ballymahon-Mullingar road).

42 Goldsmith's long poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) is 'ostensibly an English village ruined by the Industrial Revolution, but quite clearly based on his memories of some village in Longford or Roscommon in the 1740s, ruined by the Penal Laws or a grasping landlord' (Brian Cleeve, *Dictionary of Irish Writers*, 1966).

43 Carolan: 'There is scarcely a book of tunes published in the eighteenth century which doesn't contain something of his, and even when anonymous it is nearly always possible to identify his peculiar blend of masculinity and grace.' (Frank O'Connor, *Leinster, Munster and Connaught*). See also chapter 3 (Ballyfarman).

44 'Leo' Casey (1846-70), author of popular Fenian ballads such as 'The Rising of the Moon', was born near Ballymahon (Longford). One of the articles in *Annals of Westmeath* is by William Bulfin (1862-1910, born in Co.Offaly), a journalist from Buenos Aires, who had heard Leo Casey recited by 'suntanned sheepshearers on the Pampas'. Bulfin's *Rambles in Eirinn* (1907, reprinted 1981), a popular ultra-nationalistic account of a bicycle tour in 1902, appeared in his Argentine newspaper *The Southern Cross*.

At Longford Charlotte Brooke died (see below); also Isola Wilde, aged 9, sister of Oscar, whose poem 'Requiescat' was written for her.

45 Maria Edgeworth's other 'Irish novels' are *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812), and *Ormond* (1817). Quotations from *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Augustus Hare (1894).

46 Quoted by Hare, as above.
William Wordsworth (1770-1850) made an extensive Irish tour in 1829. He is taking a gloomy view of the feared effects of the recent Catholic Emancipation.

Lough Derravaragh: T.W. Rolleston (1857-1920), Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race (1911). Another of the 'sorrowful tales' is that of Deirdre. The outline of this lough is supposed to be the shape of a swan in flight.

Between Lough Derravaragh and Mullingar is Lough Owel, site of the 9th-century story of the Drowning of Turgesius (a Viking who demanded the daughter of the local king; she came with fifty beardless youths disguised as handmaidens, who took revenge); also of a house called Lilliput, said to be the origin of the name in Gulliver's Travels. The ruin of Tristernagh, Sir John Piers's house (see Betjeman's poem, below) by the smaller Lough Iron nearby, is said to have inspired Castle Rackrent.

John Betjeman: the poems on Sir John Piers are in Old Lights for New Chancels (1940); Ireland with Emily ('Bells are blooming down the bohereens . . .') in New Bats for Old Belfries (1945); 'The Small Towns of Ireland': in High and Low (1966). When young Betjeman stayed frequently in Ireland, among other places at Clandeboye (see ch.1) and Ballinahinch -- reluctantly, fishing with his father). During the Second World War he was a press attaché in Dublin.

Longfords: They produced mainly classic plays at the Gate theatre from 1936. Edward Longford's Yahoo (on Swift and his 'ladies') was a success in London in 1934. His translations from Irish included Merriman's scandalous The Midnight Court (and see chapter 4, note 56: at Knockainey, Tipperary). Christine Longford's novels (e.g. Country Places, 1932) have been called 'an Irish version of Evelyn Waugh' (Dictionary of Irish Literature).

Thomas Sheridan (the elder): 'People used to say that Sheridan's wit and sweet gaiety was the harp of David, that could play the evil spirit out of Saul' (i.e. Dean Swift) -- Lord Dufferin in his biography of his mother, a descendant of this Sheridan (see chapter 1, Clandeboye, Co.Down).

Quilca: Portrait of a Parish by the Mullagh (Cavan) Historical Committee (1988) gives contemporary accounts of the sale. Quilca House was described as long, single-story and thatched, with a painted canvas ceiling in the hall.

Swift's 'Brobdingnag' is said to have been inspired by a local giant who performed feats, carrying a pony.

Thomas Sheridan the Younger was an actor in London and Dublin, and manager of the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin; he was Swift's godson and wrote a memoir of him, with anecdotes of Quilca. His wife was the playwright and novelist Frances Chamberlain Sheridan (1724-66).

Henry Brooke: Comments by Wesley and Kingsley from Field Day Anthology. Brooke's other successful works were the poem 'Universal Beauty' (1735) and the play Gustavus Vasa (1739). He lived at Corfoddy (or Longfield) from the 1770s, after he lost money. Brookiana: anon., 2 vols, 1804.

Charlotte Brooke: 'She will excuse us' quoted in 2nd ed. of the Reliques (1816), with a memoir by Aaron Crossley Seymour, who says that in Dublin 'she could scarce meet with any person that could read a word of the originals'; also that in reduced circumstances after her father died, she tried unsuccessfully to get a job in the Royal Irish Academy.

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