

VOICES IN IRELAND
A Traveller's Literary Companion
by
P.J.KAVANAGH

INTRODUCTION

This is a journey round the island of Ireland led by the literary associations of place; and the best way for a visitor to enjoy the trip, at least for a visitor from England, like me, is to remember that Ireland has the fascination of a foreign country, with a different history: despite its close links it is not a quaint variant of England. Failure to recognise this has been the cause of many misconceptions.

The reasons for the differences of Ireland are many and ancient. The Romans with their laws and roads never reached it, and the Normans only did so long after they had conquered England, and when they came they were soon absorbed into the island (it has that power, of absorption). However, as Frank O'Connor said, 'Books about Ireland that begin with its history have a tendency to remain unread. The misunderstandings are too many'.

One way to reduce the misunderstandings is to remember that Ireland is a different country because, uninvaded, it was able to develop a language and a culture of its own (and a system of laws) unlike those of the rest of Romanized Europe. When these became troublesome to English government, a systematic effort was made to destroy them, to 'anglicize' Ireland. This was resisted, the language and culture were forced underground and jealously, secretly, recorded; which is why Ireland is richer in its early literature than almost any other country in Europe. This 'hidden' Ireland, tenderly guarded, unknown to its governors or ignored by them, became a part of its separate identity; as did, after the English Reformation, its allegiance to unreformed Catholicism. (In fact, with Irish contrariness, this book begins in the Protestant north; but that also is a foreign country, sometimes in surprising and pleasant ways.) The richness of Ireland's distinct tradition is proved by its Irish-language poets down the generations, many of whom are quoted here. Fortunately, there are also many brilliant translators of these -- among them Frank O'Connor.

There is, however, an internal twentieth-century argument in Ireland, concerned precisely with this past. The rediscovery of the vast extent of the Irish literary inheritance was largely made in Victorian times, and the excitement of its riches caused it to be exalted, waved like a flag of cultural nationhood. Later Irish writers grew impatient, they felt Ireland was looking back too much, it was time it thought about its present. In 1943 Ireland's Taoiseach, de Valera, was publicly dreaming of a land 'bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of sturdy youths and the laughter of comely maidens'. This at a time, as Sean O'Faoláin never tired of pointing out, when Ireland was run by townsmen, who knew nothing of 'fields' and 'villages', and when 25,000 Irish men and women were being forced to emigrate every year. It is no wonder that the Irish became uneasy at any whiff of sentimentality about their past. An Irish anthologist of Irish writing complained in 1993 that the majority of such compilations still have a donkey on their cover, or a broken Celtic cross. (On his own he put a photograph of a demure Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses*.)

Ireland has changed and is changing, and does not want to be lumbered with stale images of itself. A book such as this, although it comes up to the near-present in terms of living writers, is bound, riskily, to be concerned largely with past associations; that is its purpose. It is to be hoped that the affection the place and its writers arouse in me will not be mistaken for sentimentality.

In this book also, behind these Irish discoveries and arguments, are four centuries of English voices wondering, in tones that vary from the sympathetic to the murderous, why these people on England's doorstep insist on

remaining so resolutely un-English. Perhaps the quotations included here will go some way to explaining why. They concern Irish doorsteps -- and lanes and lakes and towns, and ideas. The Irish traditionally have, or had, an acute sense of locality. There was no Industrial Revolution to displace the population; there was instead the long-drawn-out tragedy of emigration. Those who stayed felt all the more identified with the places they lived in, and those who left tended to exaggerate their beauties from afar. This attachment to place was also a literary convention of great strength; from the earliest times, in the sagas, a story was fixed topographically, and the characters defined in terms of where they came from. More recently, James Joyce's *Ulysses* could hardly be more pedantically 'placed'.

For this reason, to have some knowledge of the associations of a place is to begin to see it as the local Irish see it themselves. The modest hill of Ushna (Uisneach) for example, in County Westmeath, is seen differently when we learn it was the ancient crowning-place of kings, and that King Cormac, having lost an eye, wore on the Hill a new one 'made out of gold leaves, fastened with silver springs'. Instead of a gentle slope out of the plain of Meath, dotted with peaceful cows, it now puts us in mind of Agamemnon's Mycenae. When we listen to the roar of waves on Inch Strand in the Dingle peninsula, they are further dramatized for us if we know of the great Egan O'Rahilly's full-throated defiance of them, in his lament for the fate of eighteenth-century Ireland, and the end of its bards. In a similar way, at Drumsná in County Leitrim, a certain ruined farmhouse looks like any other such dilapidation, until we learn that the sight of it gave Anthony Trollope the plot for his first novel, *The MacDermots of Ballycloran*.

The intention in this book is to allow a traveller to see Ireland and Irish preoccupations through a variety of Irish eyes, and those of non-Irish visitors, and in this way to get a little under the skin of the place: through myth and saga, which were always particular as to locality, and through poems, stories, personalities and argument. Through novels too, but to a lesser extent, because fiction often conflates landscapes and settings, or may be true to atmosphere but constricted when confined to one actual place (when it is exact in this respect it usually arouses local ire).

There is a second purpose which is almost incidental, and a bonus: to tempt the reader further into exploration of an extraordinary landscape. The following of literary associations was found to lead not only into corners of the Irish mind but into corners of the island itself, often surprisingly beautiful ones now they came to be looked at closely, even if at first they were not obviously so; an unexpected beauty, not deceptive, but subtle. In Ireland nothing is quite what it says or seems; not even the landscape, in the constantly changing light. Many of the landscapes celebrated by writers quoted here have altered hardly at all.

One generalization can be risked at the end of what was a fascinating journey. The national and historical diversity of this articulate island -- its invention, celebration, boisterousness, lament and wit -- always remains recognizably the expression of a particular people, and this is still true. It retains, in the phrase of the German writer Heinrich Böll, who was besotted by the place, 'this utterly un-uniform unity that is Ireland'.

P.J.Kavanagh

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P.J.Kavanagh (1931-) is of Irish descent though born and brought up in England.

His *Collected Poems 1959-1992* were followed by *Something About* (2004).

He is also known as a novelist, anthology editor, broadcaster and columnist, and for two autobiographical works, *The Perfect Stranger* and *Finding Connections*.