

THE WALL OF SLIEVE LEAGUE.

MEARING STONES

Leaves from my Note-Book on Tramp in Donegal, by JOSEPH CAMPBELL (Seosamh Mac Cathmhaoil), with Sixteen Pencil Drawings by the Author.

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MEARING STONES

IN THE MOUNTAINS

“In the mountains,” says Nietzsche, “the shortest way is from summit to summit.” That is the way I covered Donegal. Instead of descending into the valleys (a tedious and destroying process at all times), I crossed, like the king of the fairies, on a bridge of wonder:

With a bridge of white mist
Columcille he crosses,
On his stately journeys
From Slieve League to Rosses.

What seems in places in this book a fathomless *madhm* is in reality bridged over with wonder—dark to the senses here and there, I grant you, but steady and treadable in proportion to the amount of vision one brings to the passage of it. All, I know, will not follow me (the fairies withhold knowledge from the many and bestow it on the few), but if blame is to be given let the fairies get it, and not me. And I may as well warn the reader here that it is unlucky to curse the fairies. Rosses is but a storm’s cry, and—the curse always comes home to roost!

With regard to the pictures illustrating the book, several

people who have seen them in the original have criticised their darkness, as if they were all drawn “in twilight and eclipse.” But the darkness of Donegal was the first thing that struck me when I crossed the frontier at Lifford, and the forty miles’ journey through the hills to Ardara bit the impression still more deeply into me. And if I were asked now after a year’s exile what I remember most vividly of the county, I should say its gloom. I can see nothing now but a wilderness of black hills, with black shadows chasing one another over them, a gleam of water here and there, and just the tiniest little patch of sunlight—extraordinarily brilliant by contrast with the general darkness—on half a field, say, with its mearing-stones, to relieve the sense of tragedy that one feels on looking at the landscape.

THE WANDER-LUST

Sea-ribbons have I cut, and gathered ling; talked with fairies; heard Lia Fail moaning in the centre, and seen Tonn Tuaidh white in the north; slept on hearth-flags odd times, and under bushes other times; passed the mill with the scoop-wheels and the house with the golden door; following the roads—the heart always hot in me, the lights on the hills always beckoning me on!

THE DARK WOMAN

We were talking together the other morning—the publican and myself—outside the inn door at Barra, when a dark woman passed. “God look to that poor creature,” says he; “she hasn’t as much on her as would stuff a crutch.”

“Stuff a what?” says I, for I didn’t quite understand him. “The bolster of a crutch,” says he. “And she knows nobody. Her eye-strings is broke.”

CLADY RIVER, NEAR GWEEDORE.

BY LOCHROS BEAG

A waste of blown sand. The Atlantic breakers white upon its extremest verge. A patch of sea-bog before, exhaling its own peculiar fragrance—part fibre, part earth, part salt. Ricks of black turf stacked over it here and there, ready to be creeled inland against the winter firing. The dark green bulk of Slieve a-Tooley rising like a wall behind, a wisp of cloud lying lightly upon its carn. The village of Maghery, a mere clachan of unmortared stone and rain-beaten straw, huddling at its foot. A shepherd’s whistle, a cry in torrential Gaelic, or the bleat of a sheep coming from it now and again, only to accentuate the elemental quiet and wonder of the place. The defile of Maum opening beyond, scarped and precipitous, barely wide enough to hold the road and bog-stream that tumble through it to the sea. The rainbow air of our western seaboard enfolding all, heavy with rain and the fragrance of salt and peat fires.

COACHING BY THE STARS

Coaching by the stars, night-walking—all my best thoughts, I find, come to me that way. Poetry, like devilry, loves darkness.

A RAINBOW

I was watching a rainbow this afternoon—a shimmering ring in the sky between the fort at the mouth of the Owentocker river

and Slieve a-Tooeey beyond. “That’s a beautiful sight, now,” said a beggar, stopping on the road to have a word with me—the sort of person one meets everywhere in Ireland, friendly, garrulous, inquisitive, very proud of his knowledge of half-secret or hidden things, and anxious at all times to air it before strangers. “We do have a power of them this speckled weather.” He looked into the sky with a queer look, then started humming over the names of the colours to himself in Irish. “And they say, sir, it’s unlucky to pass through a rainbow. Did you ever hear that?”

CHANGE

My heart goes out to the playing and singing folk, the folk who are forever on the roads. Life is change; and to be seeing new wonders every day—the thrown sea, the silver rush of the meadow, the lights in distant towns—is to be living, and not merely existing. I pity the man who is content to stay always in the place where his mother dropped him; that is, unless his thoughts wander. For one might sit on a midden and dream stars!

PROPHET’S FOOD

A man hailed me on the road, and we were talking. . . . “If one had nothing but fraochans to eat and water to drink, sure one would have to be satisfied. And remember,” says he, “that a prophet lived on as little.” “Who was that?” says I. “John the Baptist,” says he. “You’ll read

that in the books.”

THE TRANSIENT

Only the transient is beautiful, said Schiller; and Nature, in the incessant play of her rising, vanishing forms, is not averse to beauty. Beauty, said Turgenev, needs not to live for ever to be eternal—one instant is enough for her.

WOMEN AND HARES

It's curious in Donegal sometimes, when going along the road, or crossing a footpath through the fields, to see a shawled woman, a perch or so off, dropping over the edge of a hill, and then when you get up to the edge there is no sign of her at all. And, maybe, a pace further on you will start a hare out of the hollow where you think the woman should have been, and you begin to wonder is there any truth in the story about women—that have to do with magic and charms and old freets, and the like—changing into hares, after all! I have had many experiences like that in my travels through the county, and in not a few instances have I been puzzled how a figure—silhouetted sharply against the skyline, and only a few yards off—could disappear so quickly out of view.

THE SMELL OF THE TOWN

A woman said to me to-day: “You'll get the smell o' the town blowed off you in the Donegal hills!”

GLENGESH

Darkness and austerity—those are the notes I carry away from this wild glen. Its lines have something of the splendid bareness of early architecture; its colour suggests time-stained walls, with

quiet aisles and mouldering altars where one might kneel and dream away an existence. When you meet a stranger going the road that winds through it, like a coil of incense suspended in mid-air, you expect him to look at you out of eyes full of wonder, and to speak to you in half-chanted and serious words, stopping not, turning neither to left nor to right, but faring on, a symbol of pilgrimage:

*Le solus a chroidhe,
Fann agus tuirseach
Go deireadh a shlighe.*

CLOG-SEED

“What are you sowing?” “Oh, clog-seed, clog-seed. The childer about here is all running barefoot, and I thought I might help them against the winter day!”

HERBS AND FLOWERS

Lusmór, lus-na-méarachán, sian sléibhe, foxglove, or fairy-thimble—whatever you like best to call it—it, I think, is the commonest herb of all. One sees it everywhere with its tall carmine spray, growing on ditches in the sun, in dark, shady places by the side of rivers, and under arches. Then the king-fern, the splendid *osmunda regalis*; the delicate maidenhair and hart’s-tongue, rooted in the crannies of walls; bog-mint and bog-myrtle, deliciously fragrant after rain, and the white tossing *ceanabhán*; brier-roses and woodbine; the drooping convolvulus; blue-bough; Fairies’ cabbage, or London Pride; pignuts and anemones; amber water-lilies, curiously scented; orchises, purple and white; wild daffodils and marigolds, gilding

the wet meadows between hills; crotal, a moss rather than a herb, but beautiful to look at and most serviceable to the dyer; eyebright and purple mountain saxifrage; crested ling; tufts of sea-holly, with their green, fleshy, spiked leaves; and lake-sedge and sand-grass, blown through by soft winds and murmurous with the hum of bees. Donegal, wild though it be in other respects, is surely a paradise of herbs and flowers.

PASS OF GLENGESH.

A YOUNG GIRL

A young girl, in the purr and swell of youth. Her shawl is thrown loosely back, showing a neck and breast beautifully modelled. She is barefooted, and jumps from point to point on the wet road. At a stream which crosses the road near the *gallán* she lifts her dress to her knees and leaps over. She does not see me where I am perched sunning myself, so I can watch her to my heart's content.

THE GENERAL LIGHT AND DARK

“The words of the maker of poems are the general light and dark.” One feels the truth of this saying of Walt Whitman's in a place like the Pass of Glengesh, or the White Strand outside Maghery. Chanting a fragment of the “Leaves” one night in the Pass, when everything was quiet and the smells were beginning to rise out of the wet meadows below, I felt how supremely true it was, and how much it belonged to the time and place—the darkness, the silence, the vibrant

stars, the earth smells, the bat that came out of the shadow of a fuchsia-bush and fluttered across a white streak in the sky beyond. And I have tried Wordsworth's sonnet beginning, “The world is too much with us,” by a criterion no less than that of the Atlantic itself, tumbling in foam on the foreshore of Maghery when daylight was deepening into twilight, and the moon was low over the hills, touching the rock-pools and the sand-pools with flakes of carmine light. When I said the sonnet aloud to myself it seemed to rise out of the landscape and to incorporate itself with it again as my voice rose and fell in the wandering cadences of the verse. Nature, after all, is the final touchstone of art. Tried by it, the counterfeit fails and the unmixed gold is justified.

SOUL AND BODY

“It’s a strange world,” said a tramp to me to-day. I agreed. “And would you answer me this, gaffer?” said he. “Why is it when a man’s soul is in his body, and he lusty and well, you think nothing of kicking him about as you would an old cast shoe? And the minute the soul goes, and the body is stiffening in death, you draw back from him, hardly daring to touch him for the dread that is on you. Would you answer me that, gaffer?” I was silent. “It’s a strange world, sure enough,” said the tramp. He rose from the gripe where he lay making rings in the grass with his stick. “Good-day, gaffer,” said he. “God speed your journey.” And he took the road, laughing.

LOCHROS BEAG.

A MAN ON SHELTY-BACK

A man on sheltly-back. He has come in from the mountains to the cloth fair at Ardara. He is about sixty-five, black on the turn, clean shaven, but for side whiskers. He wears the soft wide-awake favoured by the older generation of peasants, open shirt, and stock rolled several times round his throat and knotted loosely in front. His legs dangle down on either side of his mount, tied at the knees with sugans. His brogues are brown with bog mud, very thick in the sole, and laced only half-way up. He has a bundle of homespun stuff under his left arm. A pipe is in his teeth, and as I approach he withdraws it to bid me the time of day. “*Lá maith*,” he says in a strong, hearty voice. I return the greeting, and pass on.

THE FAIRIES

I was in a house one night late up in the Gap of Maum, a very lonely place, yarning with two brothers—shepherds—who live there by themselves. I had sat a long time over the *griosach*, and was preparing to go, when the elder of them said to me: “Don’t stir yet a bit. Sit the fire out. A body’s loath to leave such a purty wee fire to the fairies.”

STRANORLAR STATION

In a quiet corner, seated, I see a woman come in from the mountainy country beyond Convoy. She is waiting for the up-train. She is dark. Her hair and eyes are *very* dark. Her lips are threads of scarlet. Her skin is colourless, except for a slight tanning due to exposure

to sun and weather. She has a black shawl about her shoulders, and a smaller one of lighter colour over her head. She moves seldom. Her hands are folded on her knees. She looks into space with an air of quiet ecstasy, like a Madonna in an old picture. Her beauty is the beauty of one apart from the ruck and commonness of things. . . . She spits out now and again. I cannot help watching her.

STONES

“Donegal is a terrible place for stones.” “Heth, is it, sir—boulders as big as a house. And skipping-stones? Man dear, I could give you a field full, myself!”

THE STRAND-BIRD

I could sit for hours listening to the “bubbling” of the strand-bird; but that’s because I am melancholy. If I weren’t melancholy I’d hardly like it, I think. The tide’s at ebb and the bollans and rock-pools are full of water. Beyond is space—the yellow of the sand and the grey of the sky—and the pipe-note “bubbling” between. A strange, yearning sound, like nothing one hears in towns; bringing one into touch with the Infinite, and deep with the melancholy that is Ireland’s . . . and mine.

SPACE

In towns the furthest we see is the other side of the street; but here there is no limit to one’s prospect—Perseus is as visible as Boötes—and one’s thought grows as space increases.

RABBITS AND CATS

Donegal is over-run with rabbits; and sometimes on your journeys you will see a common house-cat—miles from anywhere—stalking them up the side of a mountain, creeping stealthily through the heather and pouncing on them with the savagery of a wild thing. The cats, a stonebreaker told me, come from the neighbouring farm-houses and cabins, “but they are devils for strolling,” says he, and in addition to what food they get from their owners “they prog a bit on their own!”

THE GLAS GAIBHLINN

“That’s a very green field,” I said to a man to-day, pointing to a field, about two furrow-lengths away, on which the sun seemed to pour all its light at once. “Is there water near it?” “There’s a stream,” says he. “And the Glas Gaibhlinn sleeps there, anyway.” “And what’s that?” “It’s a magic cow the old people’ll tell you of,” says he, “that could never be milked at one milking, or at seven milkings, for that,” says he. “Any field that’s greener than another field, or any bit of land that’s richer than another bit, they say the Glas Gaibhlinn sleeps in it,” says he. “It’s a freet, but it’s true!”

A HOUSE IN THE ROAD’S MOUTH

A house in the road’s mouth—it is no roundabout to visit, but a short cut. Often I go up there of an evening, when my day’s wandering is done, to meet the people and to hear the old Fenian stories told—or, maybe, a tune played on the fiddle, if Donal O’Gallagher,

the dark man from Falcarragh, should happen to be present. It is as good as the sight of day to see the dancers, the boys and the girls out on the floor, the old people looking on from the shadow of the walls, and Donal himself, for all his blindness, shaking his head and beating time with his foot, as proud as a quilt of nine hundred threads!

THE QUEST

Where am I going? Looking for the dew-snail? No, but going till I find the verge of the sky.

MUCKISH

“When you see Muckish with a cap on,” said a man to me one day, “you may lay your hand on your heart and say: ‘We’ll have a wet spell before long.’” This mountain, like Errigal, has a knack of drawing a hood of grey vapour round its head when the rest of the landscape is perfectly cloudless—like the peaks of the Kaatskills in *Rip Van Winkle*.

THE MAY-FIRE

The May-Fire is still kindled in some parts of Donegal. It is a survival of a pagan rite of our forefathers.

“And at it (the great national convention at Uisneach in Meath) they were wont to make a sacrifice to the arch-god, whom they adored, whose name was B el. It was likewise their usage to light two fires to B el in every district in Ireland at this season, and to drive a pair of each herd of cattle that the district contained between these two fires, as a preservative, to guard them against all the diseases of that year. It is from that fire thus made that

the day on which the noble feast of the apostles Peter and James is held has been called Bealteine (in Scotch Beltane), *i.e.*, B el’s fire.”

MUCKISH, WITH A ‘CAP’ ON.

The boys and girls of a whole countryside repair to these fires, which are usually lit upon a high, commanding hill, and they spend the night out telling stories, reciting poems, singing, and dancing to the accompaniment of pipes and fiddles. The May-Fire is not quite so generally observed as the John’s-Fire, which is kindled on the night of

the 23rd of June, St. John's Eve.

BLOODY FORELAND

Bloody Foreland. An old woman comes out of the ditch to talk to me. . . . "It's a wild place, sir, God help us! none wilder. And myself, sir—sure I've nothing in the world but the bones of one cow!"

TWILIGHT AND SILENCE

Some places in Donegal seem to me to brood under a perpetual twilight and silence—Glen-Columcille, for instance, and the valley running into it. And mixed up with the twilight and silence is a profound melancholy that rises out of the landscape itself, or is read into it by the greyness of one's own experience. Those dark hills with the rack over them and the sun looking through on one little patch of tilled land, and the stone mearings about it, figure forth the sorrow that is the heritage of every Irishman; the darkness the sorrow, the sunshine the hope, iridescent and beautiful, but a thing of moments only and soon to fade away. I stand on the

bridge here where the road forks, Slieve League to the left of me, a dim lowering bulk, and the road to Glen reaching away into the skyline beyond. The water of a hillstream murmurs continually at my feet. A duck splashes, and flaps dripping into the greyness overhead. Not a soul is in sight—only a blue feather of turf-smoke here and there to show that human hearts *do* beat in this wilderness; that there are feet to follow the plough-tail and hands to tend the hearth. The sense of wonder over-masters me—the wonder that comes of silence and closeness to the elemental forces of nature. Then the mood changes, and I feel rising up in me the sorrow that is the dominating passion of my life. Do many people go mad here? I have heard tell that they do, and no wonder, for one would need to be a saint or a philosopher to resist the awful austerity of the place.

THE POOR HERD

There is a poor herd at Maghery—a half-witted character—who lives all his days in the open, with nothing between him and the sky. He was herding his cows one evening in a quiet place by the caves when I happened on him. “What time o’ day is it?” says he. “Just gone four,” says I, looking at my watch. “What time is that?” says he, in a dull sort of way. “Is it near dark?”

A MOUNTAIN TRAMP

Bearing south by the Owenwee river from Maghery, we strike up through Maum gorge. Outside Maghery we come on two men—one of them a thin, wizened old

fellow with no teeth; the other a youngish man, very raggedly dressed, with dark hair and features like an Italian. The old man tells us in Irish (which we don’t follow very clearly) to keep up by the river-bed, and we can’t possibly lose our direction. A quarter of a mile further on we meet another man. He bids us the time of day in passably good English. I answer in Irish, telling him that we are on the road for Glen-Columcille, and asking him the easiest way over the hills. He repeats what the old man told us, viz., to keep to the river-bottom, and to cut up then by the fall at the head of Maum to Laguna, a cluster of poor houses in the mountain under Crockuna. “When you get there,” he says, “you cannot lose your road.” He comes a bit of the way with us, and then we leave him at a point where the track ends in the heather, and where a squad of navvies is engaged laying down a foundation of brushwood and stones to carry it further into the hills. It gives us a shock, in a way, to come on this squad of wild-looking men in so lonely and desolate a place.

We are now well into the gorge, and a wild place it is! Half-way up we come on a house—if one could call it such—with a reek of blue smoke threading out of a hole in the thatch. No other sign of life is visible. The walls of the gorge close in darkly on every side except the north. On that side is the sea, white on Maghery strand, and stretching away, a dull copper-green colour, into the sailless horizon beyond. Hearing the voices, a young man comes out from

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