

"Bean an Tí"

(Source "Colaisde Muinteoireachta Na Mumhan",

Liam De Róiste unpublished)

It was difficult to convince the people of Ballingeary that the College would be permanent; difficult, therefore, to get them to enlarge and improve their houses for the accommodation of students. Their attitude was understandable, no one could say whether the College would progress or not. There were rumours also that classes may be held elsewhere, in other Irish-speaking districts of Munster.

The first that moved was Bean Ní Lusaigh of the residence that came to be called "Tig na mban". Her husband, Michael C Luasaigh, was a skilled craftsman. He had a fine knowledge of Irish, sharp and witty sayings; but was a very silent man in the presence of strangers. Mrs. Lucey herself was a generous and hospitable woman and spared no effort to make her guests comfortable. There was a learned discussion in her diningroom, for here the priest-students who came to the College dined: Jesuits, Vincentians, Professors in Diocesan Colleges and others. I remember one such discussion on "Cad is fírinne ann? What is Truth?".

In time, others, and some at a sacrifice, improved and extended their residences. There were "Tig an bhfear", "Tig na sagart", "Tig na mbuachaillí", "Tig an droichid", "The Chalk Line" (Teach Laighean!); and, later, "Ard na Laoi"; Two miles to the north, "The Lodge", most pleasantly situated, and west, on the road to Celmanahish and Guagan, "Tuirindubh", the townland name which became identified with the ever-open, welcoming house of Muintir Tuama. The latter was a "College", and a village in itself during the summer season. The smell of the good turf fire on the open hearth, the home-made bread, the heather-honey, the fresh lettuce, are, I am sure, still remembered by many a visitor to "Tuirindubh".

The kindness, the courtesy and the care for students and visitors displayed by the people of Ballingeary were in the very best traditions of Irish hospitality. The older people soon came to understand the difficulties of students of the language and, with patience and gentleness, afforded them help in their studies. The older Irish speakers had many pithy sayings, many an adage, many a fable, many a rann with hidden meaning, from which a student could learn some of the most beautiful expressions and turns of the language.

Out of many, I hear recall a few personal reminiscences. On several occasions, on sunny afternoons, cycling from Macroom, I would find Ben Shorten, of Curraithe, seated on a grassy bank at the roadside, about half a mile from the village. "De bheathasa a Liam" was the first salutation. Then "Conus a thainis? An fada a ghgana' tu?" The questions and answers led naturally to a general conversation easy and pleasant.

There was Bean Uí Choitir, who, when I entered her house, would say "Na suidhfa a Liam?" - a courteous invitation: not "suidh síos", which may be said to a naughty child. It taught me a lesson in the subtleties of language.

There was Bean Uí Mhongain, mother of Most Rev. Dr. Tadhg Manning of Los Angeles: always pleasant, always helpful, careful, bustling. Her enterprise got "Ard na Laoi" erected. Gura fada buan i.

There was "Kit"; Bean Uí Shiothain, of "Tig a'droichid", whose humour was infectious and whose eyes sparkled one day when a student referred to "bainne na ngadhar" instead of "bainne na ngabhar"! Her worthy son, Sean, has inherited her quality of quiet humour and his bean a' tighe, Nora, possesses the same amiable disposition. From Sean I learned a "rann" about the poet who advised a confrere, the day after a drinking bout, to partake of the tail of "Cu Phinn"! ("Bran-dighe!").

Sean O Tuama, of Tuirín, was one of nature's gentlemen. I could never imagine him uttering a harsh word. He was the soul of kindness; his Irish speech smooth and pleasant. Bean Ní Thuama, quick, active, hardworking, was hospitality personified. The family were all Irish speakers from childhood. There were stories here of "Cath Ceimanghiaigh": a conflict of the Tithe War in the Pass, of which Maire Bhuidhe sang. A story, too, of a "spirit funeral" that crossed the hills from Achros to Guagan. In Tuirindubh I saw, for the first time, "creachóili giuise", pine wood torches. The wood was from trees that had been found deep in the bogs, under many layers of turf.

The first time I called to "the Lodge", on a quest for accommodation for students, Bean Ní Chroinin, bean a' tighe was apologetic, as

the house was not in the order she would have it. To me, it seemed admirable, as there was good accommodation, a large room that could serve as a dormitory, and the situation ideal. Showing me over the house, which was only part of the residence, she said: "Nil aon chrob air; nil aon chrob air". The place had been a shooting lodge and there was a farmhouse attached. Fear a'tighe, Seamus O Croinin, was a splendid type of man, easy spoken, quiet, polite. The whole family, indeed, had the same easy, gentle manners.

Many persons of note were to spend a time at "the Lodge" afterwards, including Terence Mac Swiney, Professor Domhnal O Corcora and Sean O Coindealbhain. The "Hidden Ireland" of O Corcora was, I imagine, largely inspired by the traditions of Ballingeary and his development as author, dramatist, artist, influenced by those surroundings. Sean O Coindealbhain, as member and President of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society has done notable work in historical research. One memory of Traolach Mac Suibhne I may here record: a ramble over the hills from "the Lodge" to Tuirindubh. My wife accompanied us. We went across the hills by Ceim-cora-bhuaille, passed near the cromleach, over soft, turfy land, through furze and briars, through bracken and heather, over crags and rocks. It was a quiet calm evening; an evening for meditation and contemplation. For a time we were wrapped in silent admiration of the beauty of the hills, and the purple glow over the mountains. Friendship seemed deepened in such surroundings. Traolach and myself had been friends and associates since boyhood. The stress and the strain, the glory and the tragedy of events to come were hidden in the womb of the future. The memory of that quiet evening in the hills may have come to mind when I knelt by his deathbed in Brixton Prison.

Not far from the Lodge was the cottage of Siobhan Bean Uí Cheilleachain ("Siobhan a'tSagairt"), a famous bean-sheanachaidhe, having an amazing store of songs, poems, stories, proverbs, rhyming riddles. She used illustrate some obscure sayings and difficult passages by actions. On one occasion, I recollect, she illustrated thus the line, "go ceafnach, buacach, beannach" by holding aloft a poker in her hand, and assuming a martial attitude. She was also skilled in home crafts, and took pride in her variegated-patterned knitted quilts. Once I made arrangements for a Dublin University graduate to stay in her cottage. His bed was of the tester variety, with curtains drawn around it. For his comfort, Siobhan had laid in it two feather ticks, two or three heavy blankets, and one of her intricately-worked heavy quilts. I learned from him afterwards that he put one of the ticks on the floor, a blanket over him and slept soundly thus.

Risteard O Maolcatha used to stay in Siobhan's cottage and recorded, I believe, many of her pithy sayings, rhymes and stories. Perhaps some day, when he casts off the burden of political life, he will give for publication his impressions of his days in Beal-Atha 'n ghaorthaigh.
