

The Free Country, the Unfree City



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I had had no idea how near the mountains of West Cork are to Cork City. The Pass of Keimaneigh, which marks their southern spur, high above Bantry Bay, is only forty-one miles away. A bare thirty miles out you already feel them closing in when you top the little hillock this side of the village of Inchageelah and its long, lean lake, so indented and twisted that it seems to the traveller beside it not one lake but many. You feel their near presence a bare fifteen or twenty miles out if you take the unfrequented back roads through Kilmurry and Teerelton, as I was to do during the later years of the Troubles when making my cautious way to and from the city. In time they were hundreds of years away.

On the August morning of my first entry into the Free Country I was not more than five miles beyond the last suburb, climbing easily under Ardrum Woods above the valley of the Lee, before I began to feel the ascendancy of their Past. It seemed to flow out of the old furzy fields, an ancient stone bridge, worn rocks, a farmhouse that was as much part of the fields as the trees about it, a crumbling Norman castle at Carrigadrohid rising from its rock in the river, the very road under my wheels that had for centuries led travellers in from the Atlantic along the valley of the Lee to the port of Cork. Simultaneously everything to do with my own life became intensely precious to me because of this sudden sense of its brevity. Out there my love was waiting for me. I pedalled

on faster, as if I were afraid that she might vanish before I arrived.

Less than two hours later I got off my bicycle on the hillock outside Inchageelah, always afterwards to be my mark of arrival in the true West. Beyond the first foothills, across the loose stone walls of the road, the outcropping rock, the sparse, wind-torn trees, the first few tiny fields excavated painfully by generations of cottiers out of a hard, infertile, sweat-making land softened only by the reed-edged lake, I saw the smoke-blue mountains now quite near. On their peaks white clouds, larger far than themselves, rose into the blue sky. I heard over my head a lark trilling invisibly. When I saw and felt all this, and knew that all about me people spoke an ancient tongue, that I could as yet only partly interpret, I experienced the final obliteration of time that turns a moment into eternity. In that moment the crude photograph at whose runic symbols I had gazed so often in the poems of Tomás Rua – the old ruined chapel near the ancient rocks, edging the sea – became clear as a mirror. Remounting my bicycle with a pounding heart, I passed through my mirror into reality. I pedalled on past the village, on beside its lake, now appearing, now disappearing, past small white cottages, through the village of Beal-atha- ' n-Ghaorthaidh, after which I came on the Lee again, now a mere rocky stream, until I came to the farm and farmhouse, called Tuirín Dubh, where I was to stay.

It was not a picturesque house – little in these parts except the scenery is picturesque. It was a plain, cement-fronted, slate house of two stories. I saw an uncombed garden in front, red with fuchsias and old cottage roses. I saw a long stone loft and byres of uncemented stone to its left; a new corrugated-iron barn and more byres directly opposite across the road. Foothills rose rockily, front and rear. At the end of the path down from the house, beside the road, there was a well, separated from the road by a light fuchsia hedge. As I alighted from my bicycle I heard a girl's laugh from behind the fuchsias, and looking through it I saw Eileen's brown eyes laughing at me between its scarlet bells. She came forward, still laughing with pleasure, dressed in a brown frock, her skin almost as brown, her black hair astray, her cheeks fuchsia-red, and, standing on one muscu-

lar leg, she looked at me, as I did at her, quizzically and affectionately – our barrier and our bond. Then she brought me in and presented me to Bean Uí Tuama. The old lady welcomed me in Irish, as warmly as my Aunt Nan in Rathkeale would have done. At once, I felt at home.

We proved to be a company of about twenty or thirty men and women, youths and girls, all as lighthearted as children. Their gaiety was something I have never experienced before or since. The women and girls shared rooms in the house. The men slept in the dry stone loft, which had been turned for the summer into a simple dormitory. We ate in separate sittings, about ten at a time, at the long table in the dining room, and we always ate well. We spoke only Irish, often asking for a word, or a phrase, or a correct pronunciation from the more practiced. We had come from all parts of Ireland. They were clerks, students, craftsmen, carpenters, masons, an electrical engineer. Two, who were more serious than the rest of us, had been in the Rising in Dublin and had been released from jail in the general amnesty of the year before; but all of us were reborn of the Rising and all that led to it, so that the language acted both as a matrix to the tissues of our political faith and as its sign and password. Our zeal to speak Irish bound us into a community, a new, glowing, persecuted, or about-to-be-persecuted, political sect. One small sign of this was that we all adopted and, like myself, most retained for the rest of our lives the ancient, original Gaelic forms of our anglicised names, so, from being Whelan, I became and remain, as my children do, O'Faoláin. It is pronounced Oh-Fay-láwn.

In groups we spent the livelong days together. We spent half the day down in the village studying the language in the corrugated tin shed grandiosely called the College. The rest of the day we spent swimming in the rock pools, or climbing the mountains, or cycling to the farther glens, or dancing informally by the roadside at night, or more formally in the College, or boating on the lake if the moon was up, or simply sitting in the kitchen listening to some local boy or girl singing a traditional Irish song or playing old tunes on the fiddle, or we merely sat and conversed. Late hours were the common rule. I was always so pleasantly tired, so full of oxygen, that I could have slept

soundly under a hedge or on a stone floor. On hot nights I often slept, in the clothes in which I stood, high up in the hay of the outdoor hay barn, waking only when I heard a horse's hooves on the road or somebody working in the stone byres below.

Nowadays, the learning of Irish has lost this magical power to bind hearts together. It has lost its symbolism, is no longer a mystique. This is entirely because the political fight of which it was then a part is over. Today we are not in the least concerned with translating the aspirations of those days into reality; we are concerned with translating the aspirations of these days into reality. For there has been, meanwhile, a shift of ambition. Then we foresaw the new Ireland as a rich flowering of the old Ireland, with all its old simple ways, pieties, values, traditions. Only the old men went on thinking like this, men like President Eamon de Valera. The younger men, proud to be called hard-headed men, indifferent to or even despising those traditional ways, now want a modernised country, prosperity, industrialisation, economic success. These ambitions have, for years, been demolishing the bridge with the past, stone by stone, until, inevitably, the Irish language, which is the keystone of that arch, will fall into the river of time. With it the life procession from the past into the present will cease. The language that once spoke to teeming life, and which is already speaking to fewer and fewer, will then speak only to ghosts, the language of the dead. Already, by 1958, a Swiss philologist could write in a publication of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 'We are dealing with the ruins of a language,' and report that Irish was the vernacular only in pockets of coastal Mayo, of Connemara, of Dingle, and of Donegal. English was infiltrating even into the Aran Islands. The Great Blasket Island was depopulated. Seven years earlier the institute reported that there were then (1951) not more than three thousand people in Ireland who could not speak English, and not more than thirty-five thousand in all who used Irish as their ordinary medium of speech. So the old life dies, the old symbols wither away, and I and my like who warmed our hands at the fires of the past are torn in two as we stand on the side of the bridge and look back in anguish at the doomed Ireland beyond it.

Of all our expeditions the most favoured by Eileen and by me

was to the source of the Lee, beyond the small leaden lake of Gougane Barra, which is backed by a long, dark, dead-end valley or *coom*, known in Irish as Coom Ruadh, or the Red Coom, in English as Valley Desmond. All our symbols were concentrated in this glen. Near the edge of the lake, surrounded by steeply rising slopes or mountain faces, there is a tiny hermit island, now joined by a causeway to the mainland; on this drop of land there is a ruined chapel, beside a discreet little modern chapel in Romanesque style, almost hidden by the mountain ash and the rhododendrons that hang down over the dark water and are darkly reflected in it. There is also a small square cloister of 'cells' where, we believed, hermit monks once slept. Here, a thousand years ago, the patron saint of Cork, Finnbarr, lived and prayed. This is how I have described the quiet calm of this small lake, in one of the most satisfying stories I have written about this part of Ireland, 'The Silence of the Valley':

Only in one or two farmhouses about the lake, or in the fishing hotel at its edge – preoccupations of work and pleasure – does one ever forget the silence of the valley. Even in winter, when the great cataracts slide down the mountain face, the echoes of falling water are fitful: the winds fetch and carry them. In the summer a fisherman will hear the tinkle of the ghost of one of those falls only if he steals among the mirrored reeds under the pent of the cliffs, and withholds the splash of his oars. Tiny muted sounds will then awe and delight him by the vacancy out of which they creep, intermittently.

We loved this valley, lake, ruined chapel and rude cloister because of their enclosure, their memories, and their silence. Many times then and in after years we entered the silent dead-end coom to climb the mountain beyond. Once we got lost there in a summer fog, aiming for the minute loch up there called the Lake of the Speckled Trout, dark as ink and cold as ice water, visited otherwise only by mountain sheep. When we reached the top of the coom after some tough climbing, the fog lifted and we came on another valley, and a vast view westward across other mountaintips far over the sunset sea. On those fortresses what could touch us? We enjoyed among them what I may well call a juvenile fantasy of grown desire, planning tiny

cottages on either side of this lost valley or that, facing one another, so that by day we would descend to the lake and be together there and by night see, each, the other's beckoning light across the darkness of the glen.

Let me drag myself free of that dreamworld, that drunkworld, that heavenworld to try to look at it lucidly, now that it has left me and left all of us, sinking deep into the sea like a drowned bell, tolling more and more faintly as it sways downwards, to be heard in our day only by specially tuned ears like those sonic finders that yachtsmen use to take deep-sea soundings. Its gift was lovely, equivocal, dangerous and ultimately exhaustible. It was the gift of Proteus: to sport with whales and minnows and coloured fishes in the depths of an otherworld, or ascend, under any disguise one chose, to these mortal rocks, these shores. While I was Proteus I had no wish to lie for long on mortal shores. While I was in our Free Country I had no wish to think of any other. In that vast, shapeless, indivisible sea of timeless youth and age my being became an absorbent spirit rather than a perceiving intelligence.

Later, by painful experience, hard discipline, and perforce – because whether one likes it or not one has to cope with the mortal rocks – I added what I could of intelligence to intuition, a keel to keep me from toppling, a diver's case to keep me from being drowned, a compass to steer by whenever the gift of Proteus failed, as fail it must when time and the heart's winds veer. For while it was splendid then to need neither keel nor case nor compass, not to see but feel, swim not like a man but a fish, not to understand but know, fly not like a plane but a bird, not to reason as long as I could better imagine, we have to have other weapons when, with the years, the wagging world descends on us.

It is all a matter of how much one can save from boyhood as a man. Long after, twenty years after, when I had disciplined myself for this wagging world, and begun to travel Europe, I read what others – most of them my contemporaries and some by then my friends – had been seeing, thinking and doing in France, Austria, Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, the far Orient, such men and women as Robert Byron, the Sitwells, Morgan Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, Harold Acton, Christopher Sykes, Raymond