

AN INTERPRETATION OF IRELAND

THE Irish Tangle for English Readers' (Macdonald; 10s. 6d.) is a mainly political history of Ireland. The historian, Sir Shane Leslie, sees himself under the sod—'turt' would have hotter associations in Ireland—and free to speak his detached mind without fear or favour. One cannot imagine a better place for this feat than a country house on the Ulster border guarded by Yankee sentries; with an occasional coffin of butter, followed by pious mourners, proceeding north, and a few gewgaws from Belfast infiltrating in the other direction. Here the book was conceived. It was finished in a military building in London as 'impartial reading for Englishmen who are weary of Ireland and the Irish'. It is very good reading for anyone.

The book sets out to tell what Irish and English between them have made of Ireland. It does not saddle the living with the follies, vices and misdemeanours of the dead. Nevertheless, history and the climate have made the country what it is, and neither is particularly helpful. The author insists that Nordic interbreeding has been propitious, and that the climate can always be counted upon to turn immigrants into Irishmen. 'The only pure blood in Ireland is . . . in the racing-stables.' There is a climate, too, one notes, of the soul. Cromwell has to expel Spenser's grandson for becoming a Papist. Nearly all the great Irish leaders have been of mixed stock. The supreme chance for an independent Ireland, without Partition, was lost, the historian insists, with Parnell. Any new opportunity, he says, will be hard and slow to come by; though it is quite possible now that Conservative Ulster may throw in its lot with the farmers of the South, rather than risk entanglement with English Reds. This, roughly is his thesis.

It is handled with characteristic verve and an unusual care to spare susceptibilities. Its annals are interleaved with special chapters on special themes: 'A Note on the Papacy in Ireland', 'A Note on Strategy', 'A Note on Sport', 'A Note on American Influence', and so forth. Each of these emphasises a knot in the tangle, or a means of cutting it, or both.

You begin at the beginning with a land of Celtic communities which, see it how you will, is still predominantly Celtic. When the Irish missionaries of the sixth and seventh centuries took Europe in their stride, they came from the holy places of the Celtic clans. Gospel manuscripts, commented in Irish, were left behind even in England. Yet Ireland never left behind her the idea of her individual

place in Christendom, the idea of her own way of life. This is the life of the clan, and primarily the life of the land. It is not the way of the feudal system or the way of industrialism—the two successive ideologies imported from ‘the other side’. Sir Shane Leslie has grasped its obvious weaknesses and he sees the waves of invaders as, at their best, an antidote. But one cannot live upon antidotes; a Sinn Fein has sought to show that you can build up your own constitution without them.

The book’s introduction deals, among other things, with geology; and notes how this happy island, being denuded of coal seams at some pre-historic date, was spared the industrialism that wrought such havoc in Great Britain. Swift, ‘the first Sinn Feiner’, advised the Irish to ‘burn everything English except their coal’; and the natural result of this lack of carboniferous strata is admirably described as follows:

‘In some ways it is an advantage to be backward, and Ireland’s charm is that in many ways she is what England under happier circumstances might have been!’ (It should be observed, in passing, that this nostalgia for old England is a more potent factor than butter in the present English emigration to Ireland.) ‘She has a beautiful Georgian capital, country villages and a remnant of County families all based on a background of agriculture and sport. No modern countries can be happy or permanently balanced unless there is a two-thirds majority on the land. Ireland is essentially agricultural by the will of God, the power of the elements and generally by the wish of the people. . . . But the country is strewn with small mills or factories that have gone to seed or ruin’.

The main stress of the book is on the County families; and rightly in so far as they were good leaders and are ungratefully forgotten. Disinterested talent being equal, an aristocrat is more useful and exhilarating than a bureaucrat. Good and bad, Ireland’s aristocracy were the builders of the beautiful Georgian capital—and how beautiful it is, even as consulting rooms and unusually vivacious slums! They were the builders of those gigantic country houses, quietly decaying among their magnificent trees or broken up by the bungalow contractor in search of timber and stone. Actually some of the Georgian town houses are being wisely reconditioned as flats. The country houses yet await some such revival as Rolf Gardiner offers to Wessex at Springhead. All these eighteenth century vestiges are probably more beautiful in their pathos than in their prosperity. The age of mahogany opulence was the bane of the peasant everywhere; and its Irish operation is one of the historical reasons why the two-thirds majority of men and women that Sir Shane Leslie so soundly postulates for the land, will be increasingly hard to come

by. Pride of ownership—the only valid incentive for eluding the baits of town life—has been withheld perhaps too long. To the present-day onlooker, it seems as though a proletarian mentality were a far worse danger to Ireland than Landlordism ever was. After all, the Irish never cooperated with the landlords as they cooperate with the film magnates.

The story of the landlords: Norman gangster-knights, Elizabethan swashbucklers, Cromwellian planters and the rest, is admirably told. Ireland could never get rid of the Lords of the Pale and the Lords of the Pale could never get rid of Ireland. Both sides did their best, and worst; and their mutual massacres have been so often recounted that this book's brief way with them is to be commended. A hold on Ireland was always necessary to English strategy; and a hold on England—and therefore on Ireland—was often necessary to continental militarists who cared not a jot for either. Philip of Spain and William of Orange saw both as pawns in their anti-French manoeuvres. The historian points out that the Dutch liberator, cherished by the Orangeman, hardly exists. Had there been no Louis XIV there would have been no Battle of the Boyne.

But there was always a credit side to the invader's account; a few items not to be set down in red ink. Raleigh's potato was the ruin of sound crofting; and even apart from its famine record, a Danaian gift. But politically, from Strafford to Parnell, there was seldom an entire lack of constructive policy. Strafford, who held 'an iron balance between the Council, the Lords, the Chiefs and the Outlaws', sought to revive a parliament representative of Protestant and Catholic. 'Divide not between Protestant and Papist. Divide not nationally between English and Irish'. No other Protestant aristocrat intervened in the same sense before Parnell, and the fates of both were not dissimilar.

The Union, however, was as Byron remarked, 'that of a shark assimilating its prey'. Irish industry and shipping were sabotaged. In one little town in Kildare, five hundred looms had shrunk to ten by 1833. When the present writer passed through it (July 1946), a woman in the bus pointed proudly to a mill got going again.

The revolution of 1798, which precluded the Union and was said by Lecky to have been fomented by Pitt for that purpose, is not portrayed here in all its savagery. There are valuable sidelights on the spirit that kept, then and thereafter, the insurgent ardour alive, including Maynooth, encouraged by the British Government in the pious hope of severing the continental affiliations of the clergy. But the old priests, the historian points out, were shocked by what they had seen of the French Revolution and such traces of its ideology as had been taken over by the United Irishmen. 'Their Maynooth-bred

successors had no such scruples. They followed O'Connell into democratic agitation and Parnell into the struggle for the land and the battles of the Land League. In the end they made Sinn Fein triumphant'.

Sir Shane Leslie's tributes to O'Connell and Parnell are as heartfelt as anything in his book. He seeks to rekindle the enthusiasms that surged over his own childish head; and has done so at any rate for one contemporary, who in the Manchester that hanged the Fenian martyrs in the 'sixties, was taken in the early 'nineties, bedizened with red and green favours, to see a vote cast for Home Rule. It is largely because he has always been so conscious of the political scene as the intimate concern of the individual, that he makes such memorable reading now.

Parnell's death was the virtual end of the constitutional movement which, had it succeeded, would, the historian believes, have meant a Conservative country, with peasant proprietorship and 'business in the hands of Belfast commercialists'. He does not suggest how peasant-proprietorship could survive the whip-hand of Big Business. Once again Eire has the chance of cherishing what O'Connell called 'the finest peasantry in the world' at the cost of excluding incompatible elements and incompatible standards of living. What, one wonders, would Sinn Fein do with Belfast commercialists if it got them? Among all the speeches on Partition that the present reviewer has read in the Irish Press, the repercussions of Belfast on the little mill in Kildare, have never been mentioned.

The basis of Eire's economy being agriculture, it is only right that *The Irish Tangle* should devote a chapter to Horace Plunkett, 'the most practical man in Ireland and the furthest-sighted dreamer of all'. A Protestant himself, he worked to build up the Irish countryside, enlisting Jesuits and pagan poets like 'A.E.' whose frescoes of fairies and enchanted woods still adorn the Farmers' Cooperative Headquarters in Plunkett House, Dublin. Plunkett's *Ireland in the New Century*, written in 1904, has still great topical value; and his career has a magnificent parallel in that of Sister Arsenius of the Irish Sisters of Charity, who flouted all sectarian prejudice to find work for the workless in Co. Mayo. Sir Shane Leslie applauds Plunkett's endeavours to build up 'the forces, the amenities and the happiness of rural life. Ireland's shining exemplar was to be a light to the Gentiles and inspire English economists to save their own battered country communities one day. To Plunkett the downward trend was always the downward trend. He was terribly right'.

This panegyric is oddly set off by a rather short-sighted lack of sympathy with Plunkett's criticism of 'the spate of church-building which absorbed the savings of the peasantry for over half a century'

and with Plunkett's injunction to the poor to 'spend more on their bodies and less on their souls'. Sir Shane Leslie's riposte to Plunkett's no more than Papal plea for 'frugal comfort' is ill-considered. One cannot imagine even St Joseph handing out a handsome subscription to the Temple while the Holy House was falling to pieces around the Child and his Mother. It is not apathy towards the altar but apathy towards the home that needs countering in Eire—as in the rest of the 'civilised' world—today. From the point of view of the necessary kettle or the children's shoes, it does not matter whether the money goes to churches, as it did in Plunkett's time, or to cinemas, dance-halls, tobacco, racing and beer as it so largely does now. This is not a plea for 'standards of living' at the expense of holiness. Anyone who has sat by a turf range in a bungalow and by an open hearth in a cottage knows where essential comfort is lacking and where it usually abounds. But the Irish have had a raw deal over homes. The more the old-time tenants improved their holdings, the higher, very often, rose the rents. Even today, it is said you ought to look as unkempt as possible to qualify for assistance. When the peasant at last got secure tenure, modern notions of spending, imported from England and America, encouraged him to spend as much as possible outside his own four walls; and the historic habit of the precarious home, reinforced by industrialism's long siege to women-folk as factory fodder and consumers of frippery, cigarettes, cosmetics and synthetic amusement, needs heroic measures to eradicate it. If it does not get them, what is to stop the drift to England, where your mouth can be kept continuously vermilion even if there is nothing to put in it? Mrs Clarke, the president of the Irish teachers, suggested that education was out of touch with life. As this is a world disability, there is nothing invidious in stressing her informed comment.

The vexed question of the Irish language—which the present reviewer has only heard spoken once, and that officially—brings you once more up against austere, high and indigenous ideals and the modern cosmopolitan line of least resistance. If only the lapse had not been so long! If only young Eire were prepared to pay the price for the treasure the Welsh have—to their infinite gain—preserved!

As for the censorship, Sir Shane Leslie admits that it keeps out a good deal of trash, even though it would probably keep out Dante, Shakespeare and Swift if they appeared at the Customs today. Irate correspondents to the *Irish Times* say it leaves the field to 'pious tripe and racing tips': but Eire has no monopoly of pious tripe and racing tips. Moreover the historian is right in insisting that the Celtic tradition is largely oral—speech and song come first. Peasants read very little. If your work interests you, books are a side-line.

No proletarian majority prefers Shakespeare to, say, the *Daily Mail*; and *Daily Mails* sell like hot cakes in O'Connell Street. So the censorship affects very few: which may be a reason for dropping it, or a reason for keeping it. It all depends whether you think the few worth keeping. They should be; but Sir Shane Leslie makes no mention at all of present-day baskers in what was once the Celtic twilight.

Protestants in Eire enjoy generous legal privileges; and Eire's handling of her minority problem is rightly praised as well ahead of Belfast's. But the absence of any common Christian front against foes far more dangerous than Christ's misguided lovers is disquieting.

'I say to the leader of the Nationalist Party', said Carson to Redmond, 'if you want Ulster go and take her or go on and win her'. 'Why not', suggests Sir Shane Leslie, 'win her even now?'

Only fighting and sport, he maintains, induce friendliness between North and South. The noble savage exhibits a comradeship unknown to the Christian. But there is a better approach than fighting and sport; and since *The Irish Tangle* was written Sir Shane Leslie himself has contributed to the 1946 handbook of *Muintir na Tiré*—'Country People'—a rural guild movement which courts the co-operation of all men and women of goodwill. In the present reviewer's opinion, *Muintir na Tiré* exhibits the most exhilarating and intelligent outlook of all on the problems of present-day Ireland.

Reverting to back numbers, the historian affirms that Eire did well for all concerned to keep out of the late war—in so far as she did keep out. Even those who were unable to share this view at the time, are coming round to it now. She gave more fighting men in proportion to her population than Ulster, besides labourers, nurses and chaplains innumerable.

A full-scale invasion by the Germans might well have welded Ireland, while their tanks would probably have stuck in the bogs their invasion-maps had so carefully indicated. But neither fighting nor sport are what they were; and there are, as indicated above, other and more constructive approaches. 'The Irish will never face the future and the English decline to look into the past', affirms the historian. This is very true; and no one can say he has not done his best—and a very good best—to rid England of her retrospective cowardice. England owes him her gratitude. Her failure to assess the past—its glories as well as its ignominies—is not the least shattering of her handicaps today.

HELEN PARRY EDEN.