

Clive E. Driver: On The Notes to "Spenser's Ireland"

The books and articles to which MM refers in her notes to "Spenser's Ireland" provide contexts for parts of the poem and show her method of finding affinities among seemingly disparate materials. Of the poem's 67 lines (counting the title as line one, as MM did), forty have their genesis in the works noted. The six notes appended to the poem are derived from four sources, namely single publications by four Irish writers: novelists Maria Edgeworth and Donn Byrne, storyteller Padraic Colum, and boatman-bard Denis O'Sullivan.

MM made extensive use of "Ireland: The Rock Whence I Was Hewn" by Donn Byrne in *The National Geographic Magazine*, 51 (March 1927), 257-316. In his somewhat polemical and spirited description of Ireland, Byrne was writing for an American audience, among whom he lived in New York for many years. He tries to disabuse future tourists of certain ideas held by Ireland's "Saxon neighbours," for example, that the "Irish bull" (a locution like "If that colt could catch the other, he'd beat him!") has no subtlety, or that all Irish stories are about little people. He ranges over Irish history, language, customs, scenery and monuments, concluding on a note of dissatisfaction that the "New Ireland" has not attained his dreams.

The first aspect of the article on which MM draws is Byrne's comment on Irish language and names. MM's "Every name is a tune" (line 5) was inspired by a list of town names and their translations. Byrne says that while in some countries, there are "names like a bar of music," their meanings are no longer alive. In contrast, "Our names are still alive in Irish speech. Aderg means the Red Ford, . . . Booleyhasruhan, the Milking Place of the Little Stream, . . . Killabrick the Wood of the Badger and so on for about fifty names.

Elsewhere, Byrne describes Irish servants who

. . . have a pathetic loyalty. They are often of a carelessness which drives a sane man mad. But no tongue-thrashing will affect them. They will say: "Ah, sure, himself doesn't mean a word of it! 'Tis only a gray day in his heart." The only discipline you can use is to forbear speaking to them for some days. This is torture.

MM turns this comment into her lines 6-8:

Denunciations do not affect the culprit; nor blows, but it is torture to him to not
be spoken to.

"Cheating the fairies"--Along the Connemara coast, boys were dressed in red flannel skirts up to the age of twelve. Fairies were thought to spirit off male children. The Irish believed that they would mistake the boys for girls, whom they would not touch.

A photograph of red-skirted boys suggested lines 31-32: "Outwitting / the fairies." In Connemara, boys are dressed in "red flannel petticoats in order to deceive the fairies who are

supposed . . . to run away with male children if they have the opportunity, but will not touch little girls."

Three other photographs prompted lines 45-53:

Concurring hands divide

flax for damask that when bleached by Irish weather has the silvered chamois-leather water-tightness of a skin. Twisted torcs and gold new-moon-shaped lunulae aren't jewelry like the purple-coral fuchsia-tree's. Eire? the guillemot so neat and the hen of the heath and the linnets spinet-sweet--bespeak relentlessness?

Irish ornaments, with torcs and lunulae clustered at the lower left and two gold lunulae at the lower right.

First, a weaver is shown at a hand loom, making table damask: "Some of the linen is so fine that it resembles silvered chamois leather. . . and will hold water . . . The thread is woven unbleached and the cloth is bleached afterward on the wide lawns of the mill." Page 279 shows "a collection of old Irish ornaments," among them an "assortment of torcs and old lunulae." Page 317 offers a colored photograph of a grandmother, knitting, in front of a fuchsia-tree whose bicolored flowers are best described as "purple-coral."

MM's last selection comes from Byrne's discussion of Irish peasants: "When they are young they are supple as a larch. When they are old they have the kindness and sanity of a gnarled apple tree. Always, our trouble is their trouble and your joy theirs." MM rephrased the comment and made it a question:

The Irish say your trouble is their trouble and your joy their joy?

It should be noted that MM's lines 6-8, concerning "torture to him to not be spoken to " were applied in their original context to servants. The first reference to Castle Rackrent, which MM embeds in her next lines, 9-12, also concern a servant:

They're natural,-- the coat, like Venus' mantle lined with stars, buttoned close at the neck, -- the sleeves new from disuse.

Drawing on her copy of Maria Edgeworth's *Stories of Ireland: Castle Rackrent and The Absentee* (London: George Routledge, 1892), MM chose the opening self-description of Thady Quirk, the narrator-family retainer whom the Rackrents call "Poor Thaddy"

for I wear a long great coat¹ winter and summer, which is very handy, as I never put my armes in the sleeves; they are as good as new, though come Holantide

next I've had it these seven years: it holds on by a single button round my neck, cloak fashion.

The footnote is Edgeworth's own. In it she cites Spenser's "View of the State of Ireland" as the authority for the cloak's "high antiquity," offering his many proofs from the history of the Jews, Chaldees, Egyptians et al: ". . . the Greeks also used it anciently, as appeared by Venus' mantle lined with stars." Then she invokes Spenser's knowledge of "the convenience of the said mantle as housing, bedding and clothing:

Because the commodity doth not countervail the discommodity; for the inconveniences which thereby do arise are much more many; for it is a fit house for an outlaw, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloak for a thief.

From the second part of the footnote, MM takes Spenser's remark about the discommodity of the cloak's ability to cover up riffraff as well as the loyal servant and saves it for the end of the poem where it joins the "Earl Gerald" story: "Discommodity makes / them invisible."

From *The Absentee*, MM draws material for lines 38-43:

When large dainty fingers tremblingly divide the wings of the fly for
mid-July with a needle and wrap it with peacock tail, or tie wool and
buzzard's wing. . . .

On pages 163-164 of MM's edition, Edgeworth sets a hilarious scene wherein sportsminded houseguests of Lady Dashfort collect two British officers and impose on Count O'Halloran to request permission to hunt on his lands. The British officers make fools of themselves in trying to show off their limited knowledge of fly tying to the count, an expert at the craft. First, they tell him how to tie a feather: ". . . and then, Sir Count, you divide your wings with a needle." Then, the count produces a basket of his flies:

There was the dun fly, for the month of March; and the stone-fly, much in vogue for April "and chief the sad-yellow fly, in which the fish delight in June; the sad-yellow-fly, made with the buzzard's wings, bound with black braked hemp; and the shell-fly for the middle of July, made of greenish wool, wrapped about with the herle of a peacock's tail, famous for creating excellent sport."

A gentleman to the quick, the Count gives the flies to the officers, noting that since he had made them they are "of Irish manufacture." The British officers never catch on that they have been bested by the Irishman, a man whose pride "is in care, not madness."

In her notes, MM refers to a work by Denis H. O'Sullivan as the source for the "guillemot" in line 53 and the "linnet spinet-sweet" in line 56. It is unlikely that O'Sullivan's *Happy Memories of Glan-Garriff* (Dublin, n.d.) would have survived had MM not kept a copy herself. It is a 16-page pamphlet of poems by "The Bard of Glengarriff," a boatman whose work was to row tourists around Bantry Bay, Cork. From these jaunty verses, MM admired two phrases: "the guillemot so neat" and "Tis there you'll hear the linet so equal with the spinnet." Not given to

modesty about Bantry Bay or himself, O'Sullivan repeatedly applies "so neat" to flora and fauna and advertises his fame:

As Denis H. O'Sullivan is recommended here, By this well known
writer, G. B. Shaw who says he ne'er had found A
Boatman guide my equal for knowledge, wit and sport,
For truthfulness and humour around the Irish coast.

Like Donn Byrne, Padraic Colum was an Irish writer who spent much of his time in New York. Like O'Sullivan, he strains credulity, although through fantasy rather than hyperbole. MM heard Colum tell the "Earl Gerald" story at a lecture (he published it in *The Big Tree of Bunlahy*, New York, 1933). From this tale comes inspiration for lines 15-20 where the question is posed: "If in Ireland they

. . . gather at midday the seed of the fern, eluding their "giants all covered with iron," might there be fern seed for unlearning obduracy and for reinstating the enchantment?

and lines 58-61:

they are to me like enchanted Earl Gerald who changed himself into a stag,
to a green-eyed cat of the mountain. Discommodity makes them invisible;
they've disappeared.

In "The Wizard Earl," Colum tells that one who gathers fern-seed unseen on Midsummer's Eve gains the power of invisibility. Earl Gerald tried to do so, but was seen. Later, his wife begged him to show her his wizard's shapes. After obtaining her promise not to be frightened and thus make him disappear against his will, Gerald became first a stag, then a "cat of the mountain," and then himself in miniature form. All went well until the castle monkey swept up the tiny Earl, the Countess screamed in fright, and the Earl disappeared forever.

Discommodity, that makes the Earl Gerald invisible (lines 62-3), circles back to Spenser's comment on the discommodity of the coat which could make an outlaw invisible. Although MM wrote to a student (T.L.C. to John D. Sheehan, 22 March 1955) that "Spenser's Ireland" was "too opportunistic a title," it is the Elizabethan poet's Ireland, as transmitted by Maria Edgeworth, that MM describes. MM went on to say: "I had in mind the appearance of Ireland, and the Irish idiosyncrasies as seen in Maria Edgeworth's *Ireland* -- Thady Quirk, for example. . . -- his coat worn as a mantle, 'the sleeves new from disuse.'" Edgeworth, Spenser, Byrne and Colum, whose writings were the chief inspiration for the poem, share MM's intent, best expressed in the introduction to her copy of *Castle Rackrent*. There, the editor, Henry Morley, quotes Sir Walter Scott on his debt to Maria Edgeworth and his desire to do for his island what she had done for hers, namely to "introduce her natives in a more favourable light than they had been placed hitherto, and tend to produce sympathy for their virtues, and indulgence for their foibles."

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