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THE IRISH YEAR*

By JAMES STEPHENS

THERE is in this book a peculiarly personal note. I am always quite certain when I am being made intimate with Michael or Thady Gilsenan, Bartley Mulstay, and a host of others, for with these we are instantly placed on speaking terms, I am equally certain when the author himself takes his turn in the *ceilidh*, for this is not so much a book as a *ceilidh*. Neither the author nor any of the people he writes of ever merge their individuality, and yet, strangely, the distance between Mr. Colum, when speaking in his own person, and that of Michael Heffernan is scarcely perceptible. The temptation to exploit country people in a literary way has not been resisted by others whose books attempted to do what Mr. Colum has now finely done. Seldom does the literary artist emerge from these pages, and yet, as many a beautifully balanced and vivid passage can testify, he is never absent from them, but even this beauty and colour are lined unobtrusively and quietly. I am quite satisfied that the country folk whom we meet here, with their wives and daughters and cronies, speak with the honest homeliness which is their proper speech. The chance remark heard on a road, the chatter of three or four people in a house, what the priest said to the schoolmaster, or what an old stroller said to whoever chanced along—these are the things which gave me most pleasure, and in these unsophisticated exchanges we often get lightness, grace and beauty.

Somehow the impression remains with me as of a quiet, wise people who can afford to overlook many immediate, shifting necessities, regarding these with a slightly cynical perturbation. The extreme quietude of Mr. Colum's writing may be the cause of this. Mr. Colum has a remarkable eye: he sees with the steady sharpness of a camera, and his pictures have an unwavering, wiry outline which is quite peculiar to himself. This, it seemed to me, sometimes reacted on his writing, so that the effect at first was unpleasantly mechanical, but afterwards I came to look for and like it. Sentences like the following are common:

"It was young in the morning. People were working in the fields. I spoke to one of the men."

*"My Irish Year (with 15 illustrations) by Padraic Colum. Mills and Boon, Ltd.; 10s. 6d. net.

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"Although lights were in the windows, it was still the early dusk of an autumn day. Francis had brought up the horse. The cattle were coming up the long bohoreen that led from the road. Michael Cunliffe walked behind his cattle."

Of Mr. Colum's power of portraiture I give a few random examples:

"A beggar went round the skirts of the crowd, a boy with a twisted body, a yellow face and a begging lip that turned spiteful when one repulsed him."

"The house was poor indeed, and inside it was as disordered as the nest of a jackdaw."

Here is a beautiful and tragic piece of writing:

"It was a poor country, and we saw it in the falling rain; and that made the country more desolate. We didn't see any comfortable houses on the second day's journey; we saw wet hills with lone sheep climbing them, and we saw bogs with stretches of canavan and all their white heads drooped in the rain. On a wet, dark night we came to a house. It was a poor little place, but we could go no further. They gave us a bed by the hearth, but their fire was only the wet sods and the bits of sticks."

I like the staccato utterance in that description.

Here is the visitor who was in Bartley Ryan's house:

"He was drunk, but very shrewdly drunk. He expressed himself in winks, nods, gestures, and made no audible remark until a cup of tea had dissipated the deadness of the drink within him. I remember him well, a tough, old fellow, with what they call 'the cordial eye.' He kept a shrewd possession of his hat, his stick, and his tongue."

Bartley Ryan plays the fiddle, and this old man "with the implicating eye-lid" pays his rent for him—he is a patron of the arts. He had a liking for poetry also, and volunteered information about a local poet named MacBrady; said he:

"The house I'm living in now was a publichouse in my grandfather's time. When my father was a little fellow, the poet came into the house. He called for two quarts of whisky (whisky was cheap then). He filled the first quart into a noggin and mixed oaten meal with it. Made porridge of it and ate it with a spoon. Then he drank the other quart. He made the poem after that."

"There you are now," said Bartley. "He made the poem after that."

I expect Bartley was thinking that his own music would not have survived that Olympian diet. I think myself that only a great man and a great poet could feed so mightily.

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The story of how Maelshaughlin sold his horse is very fine; but this book is full of beautiful stories :

"I met the dealer on the road. He was an Englishman, and, above all nations on the face of the earth, the English are the easiest to deal with in regard of horses. I tendered him the price—it was an honest price, but none of our own people would have taken the offer in any reasonable way. An Irishman would have cursed into his hat, so that he might shake the curses out over my head. . . . Then he gave me my price, paid me in hard, weighty, golden sovereigns, and went away, taking the little horse with him. . . . A girl came along the road, and, on my soul, I never saw a girl walking so finely. 'She'll be a head over every girl in the fair,' said I, 'and may God keep the brightness on her head!' 'God save you, Maelshaughlin,' said the girl. 'God save you, my jewel,' said I. I stood up to look after her, for a fine woman walking finely is above all the sights than man ever saw. Then a few lads passed whistling and swinging their sticks. 'God give you a good day,' said the lads. 'God give you luck, boys,' said I. And there was I, swinging my stick after the lads, and heading for the fair."

Here is a picture Maelshaughlin saw in the fair :

"A man came along leading a black horse, and the size of the horse and the eyes of the horse would terrify you. There was a drift of sheep going by, and the fleece of each was worth gold. There were tinkers with their carts of shining tins, as ugly and quarrelsome fellows as ever beat each other to death in a ditch, and there were the powerful men, with the tight mouths, and the eyes that could judge a beast, and the dark handsome women from the mountains."

Maelshaughlin had a great time in the fair. I wish I had been with him.

This is a very different picture :

"In the middle of the street there are three men standing apart. They are sullen-looking fellows. I ask a shopkeeper who they are. 'Two grabbers and an emergency-man. They are in the town about a case that is on to-day.' 'And are they not afraid of the town?' 'They needn't be afraid, no one will touch them.' 'They are boycotted?' 'They won't get bit nor sup in the town.' 'And if one of them comes in and asks to buy this straw hat, what will you do?' 'I'll tell him I wouldn't give it to him for a sovereign.' . . . The grabbers and the emergency-man make a move. No one lifts eyes to them; no countenance is given to them. Gripping their ash-plants the three go down the street."

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The book is full of quotable things. I give one more.

“So together they mounted the road, two old men with staffs in their hands. Whiteness was on the hair and beards of both. The musician, for all his power and erectness, was not much younger than the man with the bag. The years had ennobled his face, giving it a more clear outline, a colour nearer to marble. In his face there were ardours and intellect, and the beauty of the creature that had never submitted to yoke. His eye-balls, far-sunken in his head were astonishingly contracted. Those blinded eyes, the lines of his features that suggest remote ways, gave the face a strangeness that had in it something repellant. The man beside him was of the average humanity, one without excess of will or excess of intellect. one prone to follies, prone to pieties. The pauper’s bag hung across his back, and all the things that affront humanity had overtaken him—age, neglect, and decay. His face was without determination of outline, his clothes were slovenly and dirty, and yet he had a dignity that made a real pathos. This man, surely, had drunken at the same breast as yourself. And now, as he went on with the other, tears streamed down his face.”

I think this is the finest book that has ever been written about Irish humanity. It is inclusive. Many types are here, the playboy, the clodhopper, decent, quiet men and women and those others, stubborn and reckless, to whom God and man are a jape—they are all here, but the unity which underlies all diversity is here also, and it is that which makes the book truly representative of Ireland.