Irish Convention In English Novels

The Irish have suffered much at the hands of England, as every well – informed and fair-minded Englishman will admit. But we are a generous and forgiving race, as we ourselves acknowledge. We are willing to let bygones be bygones ~~if a~~ and even to love our English neighbors if they will allow us. We are ready to forgive our and forget everything else, if only they will abstain from writing about us. Fifty Coercion Acts can be less deadly than one well-meaning novelist.

Most English novelists have the fixed idea that Ireland is inhabited by a race of Peter Pans – naïve and irresponsible children who refuse to grow up. These charming creatures have had a dialect specially manufactured for them – a kind of topsy-turvy broken English, which is spoken alike by peasant and aristocrat. This type of “Irish” character and this variety of “Irish” speech afford great delight to English readers, a delight not lessened by the fact that both are equally unknown to Ireland. When an Irish reader comes across one of these “Irish characters” he feels that there are, for the moment, only two things in life worth doing – first to murder the character, and then to slay the author.

(2)

A few days ago I borrowed from the local library a ~~bo~~ novel by Frank Danby – “Let the Roof Fall In.” on page five an Irish peer says – “Let me present my cousin to you, Lady Carrie, It’s the broth of a boy he is, and he only speaks Irish.” I found as I expected that the Irish spoken by he “broth of a boy” was not the Irish Language, but the strange dialect I have mentioned. I must admit that I am not personally acquainted with any members of the Irish nobility. Possibly they use this extraordinary speech, but I doubt it. Lloyd George – whatever may be his full designs for the future has not yet deprived the upper classes, either in England or in Ireland, of the advantages of education. Many Irish aristocrats enjoy even the supreme blessing of an English University training.

Towards the beginning of Harold Spenders novel “The Call of the Siren”, an Irishwoman is speaking. She is the widow of Major O’Gorman, JC and it is not mentioned that the late Major contracted a mesalliance, or that he rose from the ranks. This is the sample given of Mrs. O’Gorman’s conversation – “Well, an’ even

(3)

if we do meet the poor man in the other world an’ are forced to know him because we knew his wife?” ~~Later [Later on]~~ As the book [progresses] an Irish Baronet wothily [(worthily)] maintains the good old tradition.

Max Pemberton is a frequent ~~and horrible~~ offender in this respect. Many a time have I opened a novel of his with pleasurable anticipation – only to be stabbed by a Pembertonian Irishman ere the first chapter had been safely passed. When this catastrophe occurs there is nothing for the Irish reader but flight.

One of these “Novel” Irishmen spoils the first half of H De Vere Staepoole’s “Blue Lagoon”, but fortunately he dies at page and leaves one free to enjoy the latter part of an otherwise charming book.

Once upon a time I read and tremendously enjoyed some stirring romances from the pen of Stanley Weyman. The scenes were laid in France – a country of which I know next to nothing. But unfortunately the writer turned his attention to Ireland, and produced a book called “The Wild Geese.” It dealt with Irish people, and the events – of the beginning, at any rate – took place in Ireland. I struggled

(4)

through some pages, and then succumbed. Now if I meet ab book by Stanley Weyman, I run away and hide.

Not long ago I came across a novel entitled “Herself” by Ethel Sidgwick. I had read in some English reviews that it presented a remarkably faithful ~~acco~~ picture of Irish character. This mad e feel rather suspicious, but still I hoped for the best. The heroine of the book ~~was~~ is an Irish ~~and~~ girl, and her father and cousin also play prominent parts in the story. They are weird [well meaning] creatures ~~and the like of their speech is not to be found within the four seas of Ireland.~~ [and their speech is even more peculiar than their behavior. The title of the book may have some reference to the fact that amongst Irish people the wife, or woman of the house, and the husband, or man of the house, are sometime spoken of as Herself and Himself. If so, the connection is not very obvious.

[Neither in speech nor behavior do they resemble anything to be found within the four seas of Ireland – outside of a lunatic asylum]

(5)

Of quite a different type is “The Hate Flame,” by Percy Barron. Most of this production is taken up with detailing the perfections of its hero – a cool silent Englishman, with damp curls, a half-shy laugh, and unconquerable modesty. These attributes are joined to a quite extraordinary ability and an unrestrained philanthropy. The rest of the book is occupied in vilifying the ranting, malevolent, good-for-nothing, priest-ridden Irish, ~~seen in~~ who are seen in black relief against the English background of radiant perfection. ~~It might have been very offensive, but it only succeeds in being funny. It is all very absurd, though, had it been less foolish it might have been very offensive.~~ This Vitriolic production ~~is unusual, and~~ quite departs from the [usual] convention of English novelists with regards to their Irish ~~characters~~ [puppets] – the tradition of amiable irresponsibility.

It is difficult to see whence arose the legend of Irish character at present so popular in this country. Scores of well-known Irish names rise to one’s mind to make the illusion seem still more strange –names of keen and successful men of business, brilliant litterateurs, clever layers, daring and distinguished soldiers, intrepid explorers, able administrators – names

(6)

which are household words throughout the British Empire. But, although Irishmen like these find their doings recorded in the English press, the great heart of the English novelist has not yet opened to them. Perhaps this is because when an Irishman achieves distinction he ceases to be merely Irish and becomes “British.” It is a form of canonization which success invariably thrusts upon him.

It is equally difficult to account for the strange obsession regarding our speech. Possibly it contains a delicate complement to our nationality. English people, are as we know, too patriotic to speak a foreign language perfectly, and it may be that they credit us with a like fine sensitiveness. However this hyper-sensitive patriotism does not obtain in Ireland – we like to do the best we can for any language that comes our way. Consequently the only difference between the English spoken by educated people in Ireland and in England is that better English is heard in Ireland. Many present day vulgarisms in the speech of Irish country people ~~w~~ are simply a survival

(7)

of the pronunciation of English. What is commonly known as the “brogue” is a literal translation from the Irish language into ~~Ireland~~ English, and a giving of the Irish pronunciation to the corresponding English letters .to reproduce it faithfully requires either a knowledge of Irish, or a long and intimate acquaintance with the people. Writers without one of these necessary qualification will be well-advised to leave the “brogue” alone.