

SWEET LEITRIM

Susan Slott

IN MY MIND'S eye there are two Leitrim's. One, a dark, sodden landscape under black skies and unrelenting rain, where the waters of Lough Rynn rise up and destroy all boundaries between land and lake. In this Leitrim I spent afternoons in front of the fire in my mother's house, grateful for both heat and high ground and, being Californian, marvelling at the extraordinary absence of daylight.

And then there is the other Leitrim of hot summers, lazy days on the porch batting away clouds of midges, the field in front a blaze of bright, yellow daffodils and pale narcissi, the calm, inviting waters of the lake glistening below. There was occasional birdsong but I have never known, before or since, such a

stillness in the air as there was around Cloon Cahir.

Somehow, in the early seventies, my mother and that strange and wonderful dower house outside of Mohill, found each other. She had returned to Ireland in 1964 after fifteen years in America, a widow with two young daughters, myself and my sister, and settled back into Dublin life. She was an urban woman with no connection to Leitrim in any way, but the bond that she formed with Cloon Cahir and the countryside was so strong that I often think that was where she was at her happiest. She never lived there full-time, entrusting the care of the house and land to the loyal and capable Francie Byrne, a neighbouring farmer. The house was

■ **Susan Slott spent her early childhood in California but moved to Ireland in the sixties. She has worked in theatre, television and radio throughout her life and is probably most familiar to Irish audiences as Shirley from the long running series, Glenroe.**

in need of a great deal of tender-loving care and although my mother was never able to restore it to its former glory she did what she could. It was a beautiful house with a different view of Lough Rynn from every window. There was a magnificent stairway that curved up to the second floor from a large, elegant hallway that was always cold. There was never central heating; hot water bottles, fires and a Superser in the kitchen were good enough for us.

In spite of the cold, though, it was a house with a warm and welcoming spirit. I'm sure that was mostly my mother's doing, but there was something beyond that, a sense of security that is unusual in old houses that are uninhabited for long periods of time. I remember driving down there one Saturday night after finishing a play in the Gate. I was with my (now) husband, it was his first visit, and it was very late and



■ **Home at Cloon Cahir**

very dark when we arrived. The empty house was full of groans and rumblings but they were friendly noises, like an old dog greeting us and, with the exception of the time an unkempt man was spotted in the rhododendrons wielding a pair of scissors, I cannot remember ever being afraid there.

There was an orchard with curious paths in and around trees that had suffered some mysterious blight years before but still produced apples. There were outhouses with a two ancient pony traps and a cobbled courtyard and a huge water tank because we were never attached to the mains. The water would often run dark and brackish from the taps and we became accustomed to making tea and drawing baths with brown water.

And there were the donkeys, two sweet creatures my mother acquired who would greet all visitors gently on arrival and stroll with them as far as the gate when they left. Unfortunately, these guests included robbers who twice burgled the house, stealing things that belonged to my father and my grandmother and broke my mother's heart. She came across one piece years later in an antique shop in Dublin and had to buy it back.

We had a visit from a family of goats once. They trooped straight

through the hall and into the kitchen, grabbed a quick bite and ambled off again. It was that kind of house. The only mildly sinister area lay below stairs. The old servants' quarters and scullery, complete with a dusty dumbwaiter, fanned out in a network of dark rooms underneath the house. In spite of many dares between little boys to venture down, I don't believe any of them ever did.

There were trips into Mohill once or twice a week to buy food, but the first port of call was always to dear Mrs Meehan's for the Irish Times and cigarettes...her son, Chris, whom we knew in Dublin, became a life-long friend and a further connection to the village. Mohill ran at a more leisurely pace and it always took me a few days to shake off Dublin time and slow myself down. I would invariably find myself standing in a queue, waiting to pay for groceries with fingers thrumming, foot tapping and heart racing, wondering what in the name of God everyone found to chat about with the girl on the till. But after a little while I would adjust to Leitrim time, relaxed and happy to listen to the conversations ahead of me. We move too fast in the city.

My mother sold Cloon Cahir a



■ Cloon Cahir

couple of years before she died. It was the right thing, the right time, for she had lost her sight almost completely and also her strength. I see her hacking through weeds in the garden or tending her flowers and grandsons or laughing in the kitchen with Nora O'Mahoney, another Dublin woman who grew to love Leitrim as my mother did. But mostly I see my mother being herself in her own place. I have not been back since. It was a hugely important part of our lives.

I have heard that the house has been lovingly restored and I am thankful that it will delight other generations, but I think that I would rather keep intact the memory of the house as it was when it was my mother's.

And even though I may never return, there will always be a small corner of my heart that belongs to Leitrim.