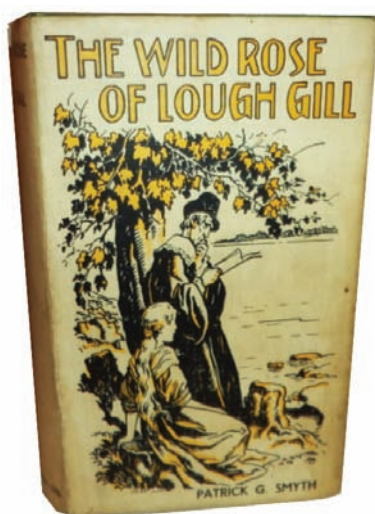


The Wild Rose of Lough Gill *and* The Knight of Glencar

Two popular 19th-century historical novels which were both set in North Leitrim

DOMINIC ROONEY



Background

The Irish Literary Revival of the late 19th century strove to reawaken an interest in Ireland's rich Gaelic heritage and culture. By recalling the achievements of Irish mythological and historical heroes, it encouraged people to take pride in their Irish heritage. It also aimed at inspiring them to imitate the accomplishments of these heroes.

This literary movement was closely allied with the growth of interest in the Irish language (Gaelic League), the Home Rule Movement and the Gaelic Athletic Association. The rise in nationalism which animated all of these organisations eventually led to the achievement of the country's independence some decades later.

The two authors — Patrick G. Smyth and Margaret Pender — whose novels are the subject of this article, were associated with the Irish Literary Revival. They also promoted the Irish nationalist cause in their writings. Not surprisingly, therefore, these two tales, which are both set during the 1641 Rebellion period, extol the valiant efforts of the Irish insurgents to overthrow the

power of the British authorities in Ireland.

Patrick G Smyth 1857-1934

Patrick Grehan Smyth was born in Ballina where his father was clerk of the local Town Commissioners. After completing his teacher training, Patrick secured a teaching job in his home town. He displayed an early literary talent and began writing poetry for various periodicals from 1876 onwards. In 1880, while still only 23 years of age, he wrote *The Wild Rose of Lough Gill* and succeeded in getting it serialised in the *Dublin Weekly News*, beginning on 21st of September of that year. The novel was published by M H Gill & Son of 50 Upper Sackville Street, Dublin in 1883. It achieved instant popularity and was reprinted five times over the course of the following two decades. It was also serialised in the *Connacht Tribune* in 1912. Other novels by Smyth include *The Duchess of Inver* and *King and Viking*, but neither of these achieved the same acclaim as *The Wild Rose of Lough Gill*.

In 1883 Smyth also co-founded

and edited the *Western People* newspaper in Ballina. The paper had a nationalist view and used the motto 'The West's Awake'. Smyth was elected president of Mayo GAA in 1887, but offered his resignation two years later, having decided to emigrate to the USA. He subsequently secured a job with a Chicago newspaper but also worked in his uncle's furniture store in that city.

On 15th August 1891, he married Katherine Doris, daughter of William Doris, MP for West Mayo and co-owner of the *Mayo News*. The couple had two sons, but unfortunately, Katherine died two years later. Smyth married Teresa Ryan in 1900 and they were blessed with a son and two daughters. The novelist died in July 1934 and was buried in Lockport Cemetery, Chicago.

The Wild Rose of Lough Gill

The Wild Rose of Lough Gill was one of the most popular novels ever published in Ireland. It is a fast-moving romantic story of love and hate, war and kidnapping, towns besieged and bloody battles. The narrative is set during the Irish Confederate Wars (1641-1652) in strife-torn North Leitrim, but it also follows the fortunes of the Irish insurgents throughout the whole country in their attempts to defeat the British forces. The hero, Edmund O'Tracy, the 20-year-old foster son of Owen O'Rourke of Dromahair, and the heroine, 16-year-old Kathleen Ní Cuirnin, the Wild Rose of Lough Gill, are caught up in the terrible events of the period. Their love for each other is frequently thrown into jeopardy by the villain,



Margaret T Pender (1852-1920)

Gilbert Harrison of Creevelea, who not only had Kathleen imprisoned in Castle Hamilton, but also crossed swords with Edmund on several occasions.

Smyth's extensive knowledge of the history of the period enables him to paint an accurate and vivid picture of the Confederate Wars. Most of the characters in the novel — Owen Roe O'Neill, Rory O'Moore, Hugh MacMahon, Owen O'Connolly, Captain Swanley and Sir Frederick Hamilton — are real. The battles and major events outlined in the story did actually take place. However, the characters of Edmund, Kathleen, Harrison and Murty MacSharry are fictitious. So too is Smyth's account of the destruction of Castle Hamilton and Sir Frederick's escape therefrom. But then, this is a novel, and the author does admit in his preface to 'a due dash of fiction — but where it ends and fact begins, is

left to the enquiring reader to distinguish'.

The novel has a strong storyline with plenty of twists and turns along the way. The focus is maintained on the central characters, as the story of the insurrection unfurls around them. Both Kathleen and Edmund experience several exciting escapes from their adversaries and captors, and although some of these may seem a little implausible, they do nothing to take away from our overall enjoyment of the story. The element of high suspense is sustained right up to the very last chapter. In addition, Smyth's dramatic depiction of such events as the defeat at the Bridge of Finae, the duel at Dundalk and the assault on Charlemont enable the reader to almost experience the incidents at first hand.

Margaret T Pender 1852-1920

Margaret Pender (née O'Doherty) was born on a small farm in Killead, Co Antrim in 1852. Her father came from an impoverished Catholic family, while her mother was a landed Presbyterian whose family disowned her when she married. Margaret was brought up in a literary atmosphere under the influence of her mother. In 1870, while still only eighteen, Margaret married Owen Pender, a linen printer, from Belfast. They went on to have six children. Margaret Pender made a name for herself as a poet, fiction writer, and political spokesperson. Throughout all her work, whether poetry or fiction, the predominating motive power was a proud patriotism and a burning love of country. Irish land

disputes and struggles for independence became the subjects of her poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Her best known novels include: *The Green Cockade*, *The Jackets Green*, *Red Hugh O'Donnell* and *The Knight of Glencar*. One critic stated that Pender's historical romances 'glorified the then neglected Irish heroes, and rescued from oblivion her country's proud past, shedding upon it the glamour of romance, the fire of patriotic love and the power of unequalled genius'. In 1916 her novel *O'Neill of the Glen* was adapted for the Film Company of Ireland's first Irish film. It drew great crowds both in Dublin and throughout Ireland.

In 1893 the antiquarian Fr Joe Meehan, a native of Manorhamilton, who was then on the teaching staff of St Patrick's College Cavan, made contact with Mrs. Pender and gave her some historical documents relating to Sir Frederick Hamilton. He also arranged accommodation for her in Manorhamilton where she spent three months in the autumn of that year researching and writing *The Knight of Glencar*. The novel was serialised in *The Irish Emerald*, a Dublin weekly journal, and in a US publication, in 1894. It also appeared in weekly editions of the *Sligo Champion* in 1900 and in *The Irish Volunteer* in 1914. Margaret Pender, prolific fiction writer and outspoken nationalist died at the age of sixty-eight in 1920.

The Knight of Glencar

This romantic tale is set almost entirely in North Leitrim during the



Illustration which accompanies the 1st chapter of *The Knight of Glencar* in the *Irish Emerald* 6th Jan 1894

early period of the 1641 Rebellion. It follows the fortunes of twenty-three-year-old Angus O'Rorke, Knight of Glencar, who returned with Owen Roe O'Neill from the Spanish Netherlands to Ireland in June 1642. Angus makes his way to his native Glencar where he rescues and falls in love with the eighteen-year-old heroine Bride Ní Gara, the foster-child of his uncle Owen O'Rorke of Castle Car. The novel describes the adventures and setbacks which the couple experience over the course of the following twelve months or so, as the rebellion rages around them. The villains in this story are Captain Carn Cross Cullen of Skreeny and Sir Frederick Hamilton who capture Angus and imprison him for a time in Castle Hamilton. Bride, for her part, is abducted by Cullen and confined at a secret location.

Pender's familiarity with two of Hamilton's historical documents —

An Exact Relation and *The Information of Sir Frederick Hamilton*, — as well as her knowledge of the folklore and topography of the North Leitrim countryside, enable her to authentically set the scene for this romance. Most of the background details are correct. However, as in Smyth's *Wild Rose*, the hero, heroine and one of the villains — Cullen — are all fictitious characters. With regard to 'Devil' Hamilton, Pender takes liberties with her description of his physical features and attributes to ensure that he fits the role of an evildoer. While writing the novel in Manorhamilton, Pender used many local legends and traditions associated with Hamilton to colour her dramatic depiction of the capture and sacking of Castle Hamilton and the escape of the crafty Sir Frederick. She also incorporates the legends associated with well-known local landmarks

and artefacts, such as the Cranny Wood silver mine, Teampall Cedrick on Gurteen Mountain, the crannógs in Glencar Lake and the O'Meehan Sheskeil, into her absorbing tale.

Pender's plot is cleverly crafted. Several sub-plots add to the interest and enjoyment of the story. The pace of the novel is maintained throughout and the reader is left in suspense right up to the very end as to whether or not the heroine will be located and rescued. One contemporary critic of Mrs Pender's work stated that 'her description of the picturesque places in which the scenes of her stories have been set, surpass anything in modern fictional literature'. The author's ability to draw very graphic pen-pictures of her characters in this novel is also worthy of note.

The inclusion of a few rather unconvincing incidents such as Captain Cullen's sleep-walking trance, Christina Hamilton's loss of reason following her marriage to Sir George Munro, and Sir Frederick Hamilton's raving episode in the White Grotto do not really detract from the enjoyment of reading this skilfully constructed and exciting tale full of local interest.

Conclusion

In 1970, in an attempt to stimulate the tourism sector in North Leitrim, several organisations, drawing their inspiration from Smyth's novel, designated the whole northern half of the county as 'The Wild Rose Country'.



Illustration depicting the destruction of Castle Hamilton in *The Knight of Glencar*

Tourists were encouraged to visit the towns and villages dotted along the 'Wild Rose Ring'. That same year the Wild Rose Festival was inaugurated in Manorhamilton. In imitation of the Rose of Tralee Festival, Manorhamilton developed its own Wild Rose International Competition, with young ladies from many of the areas mentioned in the novel competing for the coveted Wild Rose title. The week-long festival enjoyed great success for many years. As well as attracting large crowds of visitors to the town, it also developed among local residents a wonderful sense of community and pride in the area. Perhaps it is timely to reinstate the festival in the North Leitrim capital!

Although there are copies of both the *Wild Rose of Lough Gill* and *The Knight of Glencar* available for

consultation in Manorhamilton Library, it may be opportune to explore the possibility of having the two novels republished, as they have been out of print for many decades. Modern generations of local people could then have a chance to appreciate these engaging tales, as well as deriving a renewed sense of pride in North Leitrim from seeing it portrayed so well by novelists from other parts of the country. Such re-publications might also help to capitalise on the rising popularity of North Leitrim as a tourism destination.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Gerry Kavanagh of the National Library of Ireland for going far beyond the call of duty in his efforts to locate a copy of The Irish Emerald of 1894. Terry Reilly of Ballina was also helpful in providing information on Patrick G. Smyth.