With a burning love for Leitrim and Leitrim men, "Ceolan" writes . . .

Leitrim Lingers In Memory

How do we come to like a person, or place, to the point of permanent admiration? Does the feeling grow on one or is it that there comes a moment of truth in which the object of our affection is revealed to us, utterly: all make-believe dropped and all routine habits of judging disregarded: when the individual person or place becomes known and understood and for us, personally, forever admired? Is it the same for groups, for communities, even for counties? Do we like people and places by nature, or do they attract us almost against our will?

Looking back through a long haze of memory, I find it hard to say. Perhaps some attachments are sudden and the result of insight or revelation; and some slow, the result of sub-conscious observation; perhaps even some are inexplicable. Either way, it matters little, for the haze of memory has a magic that sublimates people and places we admire. It holds them, as it were, on a screen and provides us with one of the last of life's permanent pleasures. That is why Leitrim lingers with me.

My first contacts with Leitrim were from the outside, but in time I learnt it from within. I came to know the dark of its soil and the gleam of its waters; the breadth of its plains and the height of its hills; the prowess of its men and the gentleness of its people. I had already known of its sturdy past and its tenacious loyalty to its own. I had read its story, and carried in my youthful memory the face and form, the voice and the words of that great O'Ruairc, who asked only that his dead gaze from the battlements of the Tower of London should be turned forever westwards, to the land of his loyalty. I became immersed in its struggling present. I was to turn my hand and mind to the preparation of its brighter future.

Today there might be those, within and without, who would regard it as waste of words to dwell on Leitrim's past, or to foretell its future. From over its borders, however, it is possible to hear the beat of its heart; to see the distant light return to its eyes; to feel the trace of red blood begin to warm its cheek. These are the signs of strength and health founded in the past; and of courage that dares the future. As a fallen warrior crushed by the hoof, county Leitrim bore the iron of tyranny longest of all. But its men were always strong and, eyeing the future, they are always brave. The signs of revival might be more evident at times to its neighbours when amongst the weak and the strangers within, there circulates the dark talk of the grumbler and the pessimist. I have heard it. But the voice of young Leitrim is stronger for it reminds me of those young voices, and of those young men and women, that I listened to when clouds all around were darkest and when the din of strife was loudest, almost fifty years ago.

Strange that the first of those voices should have been a far-off echo from the rustling branches about Coillte Clochar. A faint echo from the past that was heard along the four shores of Eireann. The echo of the voice of a man who was lame, but whose spirit walked erect, even to the rifle's bore. The voice of Sean MacDermott, who was gentle in demeanour, strong in spirit, hard in conflict.

And after him came the louder voice of one



James N. Dolan,
called to his countymen to rally to the standard of orange and green.



Stephen Flynn,
the confidant of his people.



Martin Bernard McGowan,
for him . . . a lasting monument of stone.

who was first to raise the new flag of Ireland and to call on his countymen to rally to the standard of orange and green, James N. Dolan of Manorhamilton. Soon there arose the impatient voices of younger men, whom I knew in the flesh; men eager and active in the cause of liberty.

These come marching back through the haze of memory; gentle, upright and strong. Their countenances are cheerful, their bearing erect; their arms swing. Ned Bofin, Officer in charge of the training camp during the Truce, tall, sallow-featured, debonair with sam-brown spotless, voice sharp on the word of command. In the rear his brother Paul, broad-shouldered, slower in movement, but active and cheerful. There comes Stephen Flynn, ruddy, smiling, the confidant of his people; and farther back, his brother Hugh, the man of the books. Ben Maguire, sinewy, strong, determined, dark-eyed, popular. Paddy McGowan, low-sized, serious, like a kinsman of Sean MacDermott. Brian Gilgunn of the serious smile, and a dozen others, mostly North Leitrim men, crowd my screen of memory, wherein the haze deepens and shadows fall; and there is the sorrow of tears and the voice of family strife. . . .

In the haze three young men enter my cell and, with them, all the brightness and sincerity and innocence of Leitrim rejuvenated. Taken in arms after their last stand they face the dark future; but they tell the gallant tales of their comrades already gone. My new friends are Mick Deignan, great quiet boy but in torn subaltern's uniform; Tom McEniff, taller and gentler still, one of a family of ten, nearly all of whom were to serve God in religion; and Jim O'Hara, dark-eyed, stocky, hard-boned and jolly. These three grieved mostly for Commandant Jimmy Coll and his brother, who had fought on to the lonesome end, as so many young Leitrim men did, then and before. Today, from a far-off land, they also hope for and watch their county's progress.

With the passage of time the mists disperse, the scene brightens and other men of the past

come clearer. Their outlines harden and in each personality county Leitrim shines through. Gentle, kindly, fond of learning, strong and hard in conviction and spirit. Liathdroma of the grey back mountains, of the hospitable homes, of the quiet speech and gentle manner; but also of the firm hand against the stubborn soil and the stout heart in the face of difficulty and danger. Leitrim, typified in the person of the gentle but defiant Seán MacDiarmuida; in all those whom I have known and recalled; and in these whom I see now clearly arising as from a magic past on the coloured screen of recollection.

Father Peter Conefrey, first patron of the plain people's heritage, who wore himself out for his flock. M. J. McManus, whose brilliant and kindly pen sought only what was good in people and served only Ireland's cause. Peadar Keaney, most genial of all the Gaels, lover of literature, purest of patriots, Peadar, fondest of friends. . . . Did the spirit of these three most lovable Leitrim men together fashion the mind of the young historian of the Franciscans, Father Canice Mooney of Drumshanbo? He, too, was so zealous for Ireland's glory, so steeped in scholarship—but, alas, so briefly spared.

Here in the forefront of memory, in a final frame, epitome of all that have gone before, I recall Leitrim's finest champion, Martin Bernard McGowan; truest of teachers, stoutest of soldiers, fastest of friends. For him, there has been raised from the grey hewn rock of his native soil, amongst his beloved neighbours near Baile na dTri Lic, a lasting monument of stone, wherein the memory of his love of Leitrim and of Ireland will be long preserved amongst his people.

Leitrim men all: Lovers all, but not of themselves, whether living or gone to their reward, may the great smile of God's peace hover above them, forever.

Welcome Ballagh's sons and sires,
To the battle of Sinn Fein,
Worthy champions, sterling heroes,
Whom your fathers, foes have slain,
Come and join the nation mustering,
With the spirit of the Glen,
Who can cut a prouder figure,
Who can boast of braver men?
—James McGauran.

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