"BUT IT IS STILL LOVELY LEITRIM THAT COMES TO US AT NIGHT TO TEAR AT THE EXILED HEART."

A native of Drumsna, Sean Maxwell has gained renown in journalistic circles in New York where he is a leading figure in the Leitrim Society and in many of that great city's Irish/Ireland organisations.

Like so many of our exiled sons, his heart still pines for the land of his birth. Here he gives an insight into an exile's dream—

"LOVELY LEITRIM"

The valley lay smiling before me
Where lately I left her behind,
Yet trembled and something hung o'er me
That saddened the joy of my mind.
I looked for the lamp which she told me
Should shine when her pilgrim returned
Yet though darkness began to enfold me
No lamp from the battlement burned.

AND THAT is the way it was in the far off distant past. It was a man by the name of Moore—Thomas Moore, the great poet—who wrote it many centuries later. Sitting on the mountain known as "O'Rourke's Table" in North Leitrim,Moore described the valley down below on the return of O'Rourke from his travels in Connaught, only to find that his wife Dervorgilla had eloped with Dermot Mac Murrough. It was a sad day for Ireland and it all happened in Leitrim, and from whence emanated the Norman Invasion. Moore wrote this very sad, sentimental and romantic verse to epitomise the terrible tragedy that followed in its trail. But Thomas Moore had never seen Leitrim as I have seen it on a dark lonely winter night when the clouds of heaven lowered themselves to earth.

Leitrim means much to me as it is the county of my birth. Near the quaint little village of Drumsna, sitting proudly on the Shannon banks as a queen would on her throne—I first saw light of day, many years ago, too many than I care to remember. However, I love those Leitrim folk—they are my people. But Ireland means much more to me—Ireland from the Giants Causeway in Antrim to where the caves of Clashmealcon in Kerry meet the sea—from Kinvara or the back of Achill to Killiney or Beann Eadar. Ireland embracing the 32 counties, its islands and territorial waters—that is Ireland to me, and I will not accept anything less. If there are others willing to do so, then may God have mercy on their enslaved souls.

William Bulfin, famed author and journalist, had this to say during his wanderings through Lovely Leitrim: "It must be awful for anyone born here to go away and never return." I reiterated this statement of William Bulfin's to a Kerryman some few weeks ago. "Ah," he said, "he never was in Kerry. Why, I've been told that Leitrim is a hilly, mountainous county, with green-grey hills and hungry gaping rocks." "Yes," I replied, "not unlike Kerry, we had so much land up in Leitrim, we had to make mountains of it."

Like every other county in Ireland, Leitrim has its legends, its history, its peculiarities and a great abundance of beautiful scenery. But unlike any other county in Ireland, Leitrim is divided in two by a beautiful lake—Lough Allen, a lake on the lordly Shannon. In fact there are two Leitrims—Leitrim of the purple mist-veiled mountains, green-grey hills and winding boreens, and Leitrim of the smiling valleys, rich verdant pastures and flashing streams. Leitrim from Glenfarne to Dromahair—to Drumshanbo. Leitrim from Ballinamore to Carrick-on-Shannon and thence across to Carrigallen.

I am not going to tell the story of Leitrim's

ancient past or its every year of those blood-stained centuries, for that is the history of Ireland in general. Great Chieftains reigned in this land of Breifne in the distant past—O'Rourke and many others. Great patriots, poets and men of literary genius came forward in each succeeding generation. Captain Moonlight, The O'Duigneain and Mac Ragnaill. The men of Leitrim rallied around the banner of Tone, the Fenians and Parnell. Great men they were in the cause of Ireland's fight for freedom, but none so great—for he was the greatest of Leitrim's sons—as Sean Mac Diarmada from Kiltyclogher, who gave his name to the greatest and most memorable document in Irish history: "The Proclamation of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic." It was his signature, together with the signatures of his six fellow patriots, that shaped the destiny of Ireland as a nation. But he, and they, went further and walked the hard road to Ireland's Calvary.

The mills of God grind slowly,
But they grind exceeding small,
Some day the right shall triumph,
And things accurst shall fall,
When slaves and knaves and tyrants,
In oblivious wrap are rolled
The name of Sean Mac Diarmada
Shall shine like burnished gold.

It is in men like Sean Mac Diarmada that we have seen the great and magnificent beauty of our native county, a beauty that dwells in the hearts, minds and souls of men in the land of Breifne—an unconquerable beauty that links the exile with his fellow county and countryman at home.

O'Rourke's Table

Let us take a glimpse at Leitrim from aloft O'Rourke's Table in the northern region and that of Sheemore Hill in the south. O'Rourkes Table is away up there overlooking Lough Gill, far up on the top of the mountain. It was here O'Rourke held his "Noble Feast." It is indeed a table for such an occasion. The solid rock towers aloft on the crest like a huge fortress, and the safest way to climb it is from near the rocks that front Lough Gill. That is the way I conquered it some few years ago. You scramble up through the larches, and then forcing your way through a dense growth of ferns, your feet are on the Table which is two miles long and one half-mile in width. The top of the mountain is covered with peat and turf and with a dense growth of heather. There is moss in which you sink to your knees. Huge tufts of mountain fern are along the edge near the wood, and right in the centre is the "Canavaun" where you can look down on the Atlantic and on hundreds of square miles of Connacht and Ulster, as well as Lough Gill and Lough Allen in the valleys down below. Below are beautiful lakes, valleys and streams and little villages that dot this fair countryside.

You are higher up than the great peaks of the nearest ranges. You are up in the blue air where only the eagle soars and the skylark sings. The rooks and daws and sea-fowl are winging their flight below you over lake and valley and hill. Only the clouds lie here when they are lazy or too full of rain to travel. It is the flower of the bogs—the canavaun of the mountain tops of Erin. No one, however, has yet claimed the Table of O'Rourke. It is little value as an estate. It is only heather, peat, fern and moss. But we covet it all the same.

Sheemore Hill

I passed Sheemore the "Fairy Hill"
And the valleys down below,
It was my native Leitrim,
Where Shannon waters flow.

In the south of this long and winding terrain of country is the Hill of Sheemore (or the Fairy Hill) where once Fionn and his companions rested and slept within its caves —where Leitrim's sons avenged the martyrdom of their comrades in the not too distant past.

Upward you wend your way across the little patches of light which the sun throws on the ground until you come to the cairn on its summit.

Sheemore stands majestic by itself, looking down on the rich verdant valleys of pasture below, and far away across the Shannon towards the plains of Boyle and Rath Cruachain and westward towards the Curlews. To the east is Fenagh's Abbey and the south, Derrycarne, the Killarney of the West. The cairn on the summit is the resting place of monarchs. Away northward and southward are mountain and valley, river, lake and woodland, crowning the land of Erin with a scenic beauty unparalleled, and unsurpassed under the Four Rainbows. To the west rolls the lordly Shannon. The fleecy shreds of mist which float around it in the summertime, adorn it like some silken scarf blown against the curls of a beautiful lady. The angry clouds of winter cap it. The thunder bellows over it. Around this "Fairy Hill" were men and women of literary, epic minds. Their lives were epic, their fate was epic. Their history is epic.

This is just a glimpse of Leitrim from two of its scenic spots—and from an exiled son of Leitrim who treasures glorious memories of his native county. This is Leitrim, "Lovely Leitrim." Leitrim of the patriotic, romantic and mystic past. Leitrim of the groaning present and Leitrim of the unpredictable future. But it is still "Lovely Leitrim" that comes to us at night to tear at the exiled heart.

Overheard in a pub in Dowra. "Well I am convinced that the farmer is the backbone of the country." Reply—"Then the country must be suffering from a slipped disc."

JOHN KEANEY

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