Some memories of North Leitrim

BY MERVYN WALL

Before casting the net of memory so as to salvage what I can of the impressions of twenty-three years ago, I find that my first instinctive action has been to spread on the table before me that Sligo and Leitrim Ordnance Survey map, somewhat worn and patched, which is not to be wondered at, for I invariably thrust it into my breast pocket before setting out on many solitary bicycle rides in the neighbourhood of Manorhamilton and Lough Gill. This reliance on a map marks me off as thoroughly urban, a city man who discovered quite early on numerous walks and cycle runs in the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains and during holidays spent further afield, that the countryman practically never climbs the mountains under whose shadow he lives, and is not at all a good guide to points of interest in his neighbourhood. Never at any time of my life would it have occurred to me to seek direction if I could get the necessary, and more reliable information from a map. I may have lost something in not being content to travel half the distance and stop to talk to every man I passed on the roads, but it is perhaps instinctive to us who write, that we should travel alone and discover for ourselves.

I had always lived in cities, in Dublin and in Bonn, now a monstrous nightmare of glass, concrete and screaming motorcars, but when I lived there as a boy it was an easeful university town with great traditions of scholarship and music. So when, as a civil servant in the Department of Industry and Commerce, I suddenly found myself transferred from Dublin to Sligo, the shock was a very great one indeed. I had just published a novel which had attracted some notice, and with three plays produced and half-a-dozen short stories in English and American magazines, I found myself a small niche in literary, Dublin, so that to be suddenly planted on the Western seaboard and separated from my books, my family, my friends, all literary conversation and companionship, with no certainly of ever being returned to Dublin again, was a nightmare experience at which I still shudder when I think of it. If I had been married, it would have been different, because a great part of my world would have accompanied me, but to quote what an Arranman said to Synge, in as far as I can remember the passage, what is a single man but the like of a jackass braying below on the rocks ?

I arrived in Sligo on the last day of November, 1945, a day of pouring rain and it continued raining every day until the end of January. One hurried to and from the Department's office along the narrow Sligo streets under dripping gutters, and at every corner the winds spawned on the Atlantic, lay in wait. One took it on faith that the sun and moon still existed, but one never experienced their benevolence. I never remember a time when I so longed for Spring. It was very delayed that year, and only after a week of alternate rain and sun at the end of March did the first buds appear. But when Spring came and Summer followed, a whole wonderland unfolded itself. I explored Colgagh, Deerpark, the wonderful little roads north of Lough Gill, Rosses Point, deep Glencar, sat by the healing stones in Killery graveyard and never ceased to marvel at Slieve Daeane of which the fairytale hue and ruggedness fascinated me and fascinates me still.

After nine months my Department transferred me back to Dublin. They left me there for eight months and then in March, 1947, again sent me to Sligo, which began to become a more tolerable place because I made some friends, and there was a new, highly efficient and obliging librarian, Nora Niland, so that good books were made readily available. R. M. Smyllie, the editor of the Irish Times, had urged me to call on Bertie Anderson, a bookish recluse with similar tastes to my own. I also came to know a man named Benjamin whose house and garden bordered the lake. After three months in Sligo the Department again moved me, this time placing me in charge of their office in Manorhamilton. I began to feel like a piece on a draughtboard whom an eccentric player moves according to whim.

In July, 1947, when I first saw it, Manorhamilton seemed a dull stone in a dull setting. I seem to remember an absence of trees and therefore a bare countryside. The fact that Manorhamilton has not got a good-sized river is also a loss, because a river gives light and life to a town. The depression of the war years still hung over all Ireland, and accommodation was difficult to obtain. I stayed over a shop called Fox's for six weeks, and then was supremely fortunate in obtaining a bedroom and sittingroom from a very kindly lady, Miss Keaney, who looked after me very well. She understood that I was a writer and placed a sittingroom at my disposal where I worked erratically at my second novel " The Return of Fursev."

There were many reasons why I did not like being in Manorhamilton. My mother was a widow and in her seventies, at an age when her chief pleasures were to read the newspapers and chat inconsequentially about the day's happenings with her children. I felt that it would have been right to be more with her in the closing years of her life. My eldest brother was a Colonel in command of something or other in India and then in Ghana, and I under the rain-charged skies of the West of Ireland must have seemed to her just as far away, though I travelled to Dun Laoghaire at Christmas and Easter to see her. I was without the conversation of people with similar interests to my own, and any bookish person will realise what a deprivation that it; and finally, my daily work in the small Manorhamilton office of the Department of Industry and Commerce was about the dullest and most boring it is possible to imagine, being mostly the checking of countless forms, an operation in which the utmost care and accuracy was necessary because public money was involved. When I was not working my way through this unending mountain of forms, I was puzzling over headquarters letters and stencilled instructions couched in the grim, dry and dreary language of officialdom, almost incomprehensible to all except those who have composed them.

The Manorhamilton of 1947-48 was not a gay place. A cinema opened while I was there, and that was a great boon. I went to it twice a week, no matter what was being shown. There was a hostlery in the main street run by a very nice friendly family, and one got the habit of dropping in there for an evening drink. An ex-school-teacher known as " The Master " frequented it, a clerk from the National Bank whose name I have forgotten, and a cheerful man called Curneen. I remember them very well and a remarkable local character named Gallagher who was a source of information about practically everything. Once I spent an hour talking to the T.D., Stephen Flynn, and once to the German manager of the local button factory. Notice how I remember individual conversations, so few opportunities had I for long conversations with anyone. It is not that the Manorhamilton people were not nice and friendly: they were, the fault was on my side. It lay in the fact that I had been severed from activity and contacts to which I had been accustomed, and that I had no ideea how long such a state might last. I was very

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cheered by the news that a party of Belfast writers, of whom one was, I think, Joe Tomelty, hearing of my isolation, planned a mass visit to see me; but it never came off. Communications in those years after the Second World War were bad. There were no cars, and the bus connection with Sligo was a thin thread. There was no Sunday service. Confined as I was by office hours, I found it almost impossible to get out of the nighbourhood, but on one Saturday a month I took the 11.15 bus to Sligo just to see crowded streets again, and during the few hours I was there, Sligo seemed to me a big bustling place by contrast with the quiet and sleepiness of Manorhamilton.

The only exciting events were the two occasions on which the Sligo Unknowns visited the town to play a match against the local team. I was surprised to notice that some of the supporters of the Sligo Unknowns carried hurling sticks although it was a soccer match which was to be played. I was not at the match, having little interest in sport, and in any case the football field seemed a good place to keep away from. Anytime Manorhamilton threatened to score, the hurling sticks were raised and the supporters of Sligo Unknowns raised blue murder. Eventually the refreshment stall of a woman named Rosie was overturned and a minor riot ensued. Some Manorhamilton people explained their team's defeat to me by saying that if they had been so foolhardy as to win, few of them would have left the field alive. Later that evening there was a disgraceful scene outside the church when some supporters of Sligo Unknowns, brandishing hurling sticks, danced a war dance around the parish priest. Later that year when the Sligo Unknowns again visited Manorhamilton, the buses containing their supporters were stoned.

Small things intrigued me. The owner of a shop on the street which leads to the church, told me that he could not remember when he was last in the main street although it was only fifty yards away, and another shop owner admitted that it was twenty-five years since she had crossed the bridge. I met nobody who had climbed Benbo, and when I myself climbed O'Donnell's Rock one afternoon, several admitted that they had never been there and asked me what was on the other side. Little work had been done on Irish roads during the war, and the roads, except those near Dromahaire, were in poor surface condition so that cycling was somewhat hazardous and punctures frequent. There was a particularly atrocious stretch on the Sligo border, so laced with potholes that a cyclist had to dismount and walk, and I was given the strange explanation that this particular piece of road was in dispute between the Leitrim and Sligo County Councils, each insisting that it lay within the other's territory, and as neither local authority admitted responsibility for its upkeep, the surface simply disintegrated over the years.

My favourite short walk was to Lurganboy and back. I remember it as an attractive road of which I never tired. I liked too to cycle over the hill at Morerah and descend to Lough Gill at a point marked on the map as Sriff Cottage. There was an attractively-placed little church by the roadside which invariably reminded me of a similar little wayside church which I had come on unexpectedly many years before in the Pyrenees, but the little French

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Some Memories of North Leitrim Contd.

church was graced with the tomb of a crusader and filled with the aura of history, which the church under O'Rourke's Table was bare of romantic associations.

"The Return of Fursey"

I believe the Leitrim shores of Lough Gill to be the most beautiful place in Ireland. There is a spot where a stream flows over a flat sloping rock and creeps under the road and a small bridge to lose itself in the waters of the lake, and this became a favourite resting place of mine. I brought the unfinished MS. of my novel, "The Return of Fursey" there and sought to capture the sound of lake water while writing a passage describing a tarn high in the Knockmealdown Mountains. I am so attached to that spot that many times in recent years when returning to Dublin from the Yeats Summer School in Sligo, I have driven that way and stopped the car so as to linger for a little while by the water's edge. A couple of years ago, greatly daring because of the lack of shelter in which to undress, my fourteen-year-old daughter and I hooked our bathing costumes out of the boot and swam from there out into the lake.

I explored on a bicycle every road leading out of Manorhamilton for many miles. I was never very impressed by Glenade, but places mentioned by Yeats in his early poety were on that account particularly attractive to me, Dromahaire and Glencar and others further away. A fishing excursion to Lough Melvin was a disastrous failure. My independence was my undoing. I had made no enquiries in advance, and the result was that when I got to the lake, I could not get within fishing distance because of the reeds.

Time passed, and after ten months in Manorhamilton, through the intercession of the Secretaries of two Government Departments, I was enabled to accept an invitation I received to join the staff of Radio Eireann; and in May, 1948, I was transferred, moving from the darkness of Industry and Commerce into the light of a lively communications body. I have only passed through Manorhamilton twice during the intervening years. I read that it is a much brighter and more prosperous place that when I knew it, and assuredly I wish it well

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TASTY Fish Recipes

By Breeda Mahon

Now that the Friday abstinence has been abolished we hope that fish will no longer be regarded as a penitential food but hold its rightful place high on the list of the most nutritious foods we have. Fish is an excellent source of digestable protein, having a high mineral and vitamin content and low in cholesterol and calories the later two factors are beneficial to doctor and dietition in the prevention of coronary disease.

You may remember from our ancient literature when Findabhair, daughter of the King of Connaught, wished to impress a visiting prince, it was with a fish dish that she charmed him—so be you a busy housewife caring for your family, a hostess to our overseas visitors or a fair maid trying to impress Prince Charming, I hope you like these recipes which I have kitchen tested for you.



Breeda Mahon, Fish Cookery Adviser with Bord Iascaigh Mhara— a native of Drumshanbo.

SEAFOOD HOT POT

Ingredients:

2 lbs. filleted and skinned cod, haddock or whiting
2 onions, peeled and sliced
6 young carrots
¼ lb. mushrooms, sliced
4 ozs. butter.
½ lb. tomatoes, peeled and sliced
1 lb. potatoes sliced
¼ pt. fish stock or water
Salt and pepper.

Method:

1. Wipe the fish with a clean cloth, and season it well.
2. Fry the onions, carrots and mushrooms gently in 1 oz. butter. Put them in a casserole, place the fish on top and cover with a layer of sliced tomatoes and potatoes. Add the stock.
3. Dot with 2 ozs. butter and season with salt and pepper. Cover the casserole and bake for 50-60 minutes in a moderate oven 400°F or Gas Reglo 6°.
4. When fish is nearly cooked, dot with remaining butter and bake uncovered until the potatoes are golden brown.
5. Serve in the casserole, sprinkled with parsley.

Serves: 4-5 portions.

BAKED STUFFED PIKE

Ingredients:

1 medium sized pike.

Stuffing:

4 ozs. white breadcrumbs
1 tablespoon chopped onion
2 ozs. chopped mushrooms
1 tablespoon chopped parsley
1 oz. melted butter or margarine
1 beaten egg
Pepper and salt
Butter or fat for basting

Method:

1. Wash, scale and clean the fish and remove fins and grills.
2. Make the stuffing by mixing all the ingredients together and binding with the melted fat and egg. Season well.
3. Fill the inside of the fish with the stuffing and sew the opening using a large needle and coarse white thread.
4. Place the fish in roasting tin, baste liberally with melted fat or oil, cover with lid or tin foil and bake in a moderately hot oven 425°F allowing 10 mins. per lb. for stuffed fish.
5. When cooked garnish with lemon wedges and parsley.

HERRING KEBABS

Ingredients:

4 large herrings
8 button mushrooms
8 button onions
8 small tomatoes
Salt and Pepper
8 pineapple chunks
2 tablespoons prepared mustard
Little cooking oil or melted butter
8 ozs. patna rice

To Garnish:

Chopped parsley
Lemon wedges

Method:

1. Scale, clean and fillet herrings. Spread with prepared mustard and season well.
2. Cook onions in salted water and sauté mushrooms until tender. Skin tomatoes.
3. Thread herrings, cooked oninions, mushrooms skinned tomatoes and pineapple chunks on 4 long skewers.
4. Brush with oil or melted butter and grill turning once for 10 minutes or bake in a moderate over for 20-30 minutes.
5. Boil rice in salted water for 15 minutes, drain and refresh.
6. Serve kebabs on bed of rice with buttered mustard sauce dripped over the kebabs and garnished with chopped parsley and lemon wedges.

BUTTERED MUSTARD SAUCE

Method:

1. Melt 2 ozs. butter or margarine, add 2 tablespoons of prepared mustard
2. Season well and serve.

Serves: 4 portions.