

The Twilight of the Big House

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ALTHOUGH it is probably true that for the general public the names Somerville and Ross still connote the 'Irish R.M.' and nothing else, within the last few years there have been scattered indications that they are at last beginning to receive the serious consideration they deserve. These two Victorian maiden ladies who began in the last years of the nineteenth century to create literature out of the decaying world of the Anglo-Irish gentry into which they were born are in fact of equal interest to the critic, the biographer and the historian. Such professional attention as has been paid to them so far has come mainly from the critics, but a true verdict on Edith Ænone Somerville of Drishane, county Cork, and Violet Martin of Ross, county Galway, will not be reached until we know more about their personalities and about the context within which they worked.¹

The ambitious biography of the two writers published in 1968 by Maurice Collis (himself of Anglo-Irish origins) takes us some way towards understanding these problems of personality and context, though his book is notably more successful in dealing with the fascinating relationship between the collaborators than in elucidating the central dilemma of their lives — the central dilemma, indeed, of the whole caste to which they belonged — namely, how to come to terms with an environment that was rapidly and cruelly changing under their very eyes.² Mr Collis

¹ For critical appreciations see especially B. G. McCarthy, 'E. Æ. Somerville and Martin Ross', in *Studies* (1945), v. 183-94; Ann Power, 'The Big House of Somerville and Ross', in *The Dubliner* (Spring, 1964), 43-53; T. Flanagan, 'The Big House of Ross-Drishane', in *The Kenyon Review* (Jan. 1966), v. 28, no. 1, 54-78; C. Cruise O'Brien, 'Somerville and Ross', in his *Writers and politics* (London, 1965), pp. 106-15; and *Somerville and Ross: a symposium* (The Queen's University, Belfast, 1968).

² Maurice Collis, *Somerville and Ross*, Faber and Faber, 1968, 425.

has had the supreme advantage of apparently unrestricted access to the diaries, letters and other papers carefully preserved by Sir Patrick Coghill, nephew to Edith Somerville. The papers are voluminous — apart altogether from an enormous correspondence, each author left a diary of over two million words — and the material with which Mr Collis has had to work has included some very intimate items requiring great delicacy of handling. This delicacy he has conspicuously displayed and the freedom given to him by the Coghill family has certainly not been abused. To this it is proper to add that Mr Collis's own expertise as a writer of books, and especially of biographies, has enabled him not only to quarry what was most worth winning from this vast store of documentation, but out of it to construct a worthy monument to two of the most remarkable women of their generation.

Edith Somerville was slightly the older of the two. Although born at Corfu in 1858, she spent almost her whole, long life at Castle Townshend, in West Cork, where she died as recently as 1949. Her family were not aristocrats in the grandest sense of the term, but belonged rather to the squirearchy, producing generation after generation of soldiers and sailors who carried the family name to every corner of the world, sometimes — as in the case of two of her brothers who became admirals — with great distinction. Edith was the eldest of seven children who survived infancy and since she herself never married she became in effect the mistress of the family home, Drishane, which she dominated with effortless ease almost to the end of her days. She was a woman endowed with strong personality, immense energy and a wide variety of talents. She was a painter of promise who held several exhibitions and only gradually came to subordinate that art to literature. She was a famous rider to hounds and M.F.H. of the West Carbery Hunt for a number of years. She made a gallant attempt to run a farm, but found it more than she could cope with; horse-coping, however, was another matter and late in life she was able to supplement her always meagre income by judicious sales to America. She was an indefatigable member of the tight-knit family circle which ruled Castle Townshend and played the organ in the parish church for no less than seventy-five years.

All this Mr Collis faithfully describes for us, but he goes further (far further than any previous commentator¹) when he reveals an aspect of Edith Somerville's psychology which was to be profoundly important to her relationship with Violet Martin. This was that women were, and remained, important to her in a way that men could never be. Very early in her career her diary records her nausea and distress when her closest girlhood friend — a cousin, Ethel Coghill — decided to marry. Mr Collis well explains the significance of this episode:

For Ethel there was no incompatibility between love for a woman and marriage with a man. For Edith the incompatibility was absolute. The kind of feeling she had for Ethel gave Ethel no licence to fall in love with a man. Any sexual union with a man had something revolting about it for Edith. Deep in her was a profound distaste for the opposite sex. Ethel did not suffer from this disability. Her love for Edith had no trace of homosexuality in it. Edith's deepest feelings, however, were entirely concentrated on her own sex. The emotion, however, was sublimated. It did not include what she would have termed its grosser manifestations. Nevertheless, as any psychiatrist will declare, it was the same emotion.²

This traumatic event occurred in 1880. Six years later, when Edith Somerville first met Violet Martin, the void at the centre of her being was still there, waiting to be filled. Violet was a Martin of Ross which, when she was born in 1862 at Ross House, near Oughterard in County Galway, was then no mean thing to be. For generations the Martins had been looked up to by the peasants in their part of Connemara as 'The Family' and only a few years before Violet's birth her father had ruined himself in the exercise of the traditional benevolent paternalism by trying to save his tenants from the worst effects of the Famine. When he died in 1872 the Martins' fortunes were still at a low ebb and Violet, like Edith far to the south, grew up in those circumstances so typical of an ascendancy in decline, where the money available for keeping up appearances was generally in inverse ratio to the need to do so. Her girlhood was dominated by her

¹ Compare, for example, the biography by Geraldine Cummins, *Dr. E. A. Somerville* (London, 1952), which contrives to be at once incorrigibly chatty and impeccably discreet.

² M. Collis, *Somerville and Ross*, pp. 32-3.

mother's powerful personality — that Mama of whom traces were to reappear in Lady Dysart in *The Real Charlotte* and in the formidable Mrs Knox of Aussolas in the 'Irish R.M.' stories — and it was as a minor satellite of that overpowering sun that Violet first visited Castle Townshend in January 1886 where, as was almost inevitable in the small world of the Anglo-Irish, she found relations among both the Somerville and Coghill families.

Acquaintance between Edith and Violet (or Martin as Edith soon came to call the latter) ripened rapidly that summer into an intimate friendship which, on Edith's side at least, began by following closely the course of her previous affair with Ethel and might quite easily have ended in the same way. Again, Mr Collis gives us a clue:

Unlike Edith, Martin might have married. That she had not done so may be ascribed to her not having met a man who roused her in that way. But she was capable of falling in love with a man, while Edith was not. Edith could only fall in love with a woman. In falling in love with Martin she was taking the same risk that she took with her cousin Ethel . . . Martin might be seduced from her by a member of the other sex. But though this could happen, it was not so likely as in Ethel's case. Martin was a literary genius in embryo. Such women may, of course, marry, but that state is not essential for their happiness; the development of their talent comes first. To be fully satisfied, Martin must find an outlet for her genius. She was to find it in collaboration with Edith, whose love she could return with the tenderest affection. Edith's feeling for Martin, however, was something more overwhelming than tenderness and the development of a common talent. It was a passion, an obsession from the depths of her being.¹

While on this topic it is only fair to add that her family and friends maintained, and still maintain, that Edith, throughout her long association with Martin, was, as Lady Violet Powell has recently written, 'unenlightened on the subject of sexual inversion'. Much later, after Martin's death, her friendship with Dame Ethel Smyth made such unenlightenment difficult to preserve intact, though here again all those best qualified to know seem to be agreed that 'the grosser manifestations' were absent as before. Indeed, it may even be that Edith herself was unconscious of the nature or extent of the attraction; for this

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

we have Dame Ethel's own, perhaps grudging, tribute that her friend's chief charm was to be 'fastidious . . . and rather virginal'.¹

Although the two girls shared many of the interests of their class and time — horses, dogs, tennis, boating, dances, picnics — each seems even at that early date to have been driven by an inner urge towards self-expression, Edith through her painting and Martin by the ambition to imitate the literary success (modest but real) which her brother Robert was having in London with sketches and stories drawn from Irish life. As a matter of historic fact, recorded, incidentally, not by Mr Collis but by Edith herself, the collaborators were 'incited' — Edith's word — to their first joint effort by their respective mothers who set them to work to compile a 'Dictionary of the Family Language'. This ambitious work had about as much chance of completion as Mr Dick's Memorial, but near the end of her long life the recollection of it evoked from Edith a definition of the 'Family Language' which takes us at once into the heartland of the Somerville and Ross collaboration. As she described it, it consisted of 'the froth on the surface of some two hundred years of the conversation of a clan of inventive, violent Anglo-Irish people, who, generation after generation, found themselves faced with situations in which the English language failed to provide sufficient intensity, and they either snatched at alternatives from other tongues or invented them'.²

But to invent language or record it was one thing, to use it creatively quite another. That same year — in the famous 'Home Rule' summer of 1886 — the two friends began to do just this, in the teeth of every kind of difficulty and discouragement. True, they did not set their sights very high and claimed no more than to be writing a sensational novel, or 'Shocker' as the family called it. *The Irish Cousins*, to give it its proper title, took them nearly two years to write and grew into something rather more

¹ Violet Powell, *The Irish Cousins*, William Heinemann Limited, 1970, pp. 142-3, 190-1. This is a perceptive, if rather rambling, book which should help towards a rehabilitation of Somerville and Ross. Because the rehabilitation on any significant scale has yet to take place, Lady Violet has felt obliged to devote much of her space to summaries and descriptions of the two authors' main works. How long, one wonders, before an enterprising publisher will give us the works themselves?

² This description appears in the last essay she ever wrote. Entitled 'Two of a Trade', it was first published in 1946 for a new, but unhappily short-lived, periodical, *Irish Writing*, and was reprinted by Geraldine Cummins in *Dr. E. A. Somerville*, pp. 180-6.

considerable than a shocker, though, compared with their subsequent work, it represents not much more than exceptional promise which might or might not have been fulfilled. Its main significance in the Somerville and Ross canon is that it marks the real beginning of their literary partnership and, more important, that it allows us the first glimpse into what is still to a large extent the mystery of their method of writing. In 1917, after Martin was dead, Edith summed it up briefly as follows:

Our work was done conversationally. One or other — not infrequently both simultaneously — would state a proposition. This would be argued, combated perhaps, approved or modified; it would then be written down by the (wholly fortuitous) holder of the pen, would be scratched out, scribbled in again.¹

Nearly thirty years later, towards the end of her own life, Edith tried once more 'to formulate,' as she puts it, 'an effective confession' to satisfy all the demands she had had to face for the truth about the partnership. She found it as difficult as ever to explain the inexplicable, but even in old age remained absolutely clear that what really underlay their collaboration was a personal, indeed a spiritual, affinity. 'Our respective stars collided and struck sparks,' she wrote of that first summer's meeting. 'We very soon discovered in one another a comfortable agreement of outlook in matters artistic and literary, and those colliding stars lit for us a fire that has not faded yet.' There were, of course, differences of insight and feeling between them and Edith herself conceded, what most critics would agree to be true, that whereas she contributed more to their descriptive passages and to the movement of their stories — especially in the hunting scenes — to Violet should be ascribed 'the more subtle and recondite adjective, the more knife-edged slice of sarcasm, the more poetic feeling for words, and a sense of style that seems to me flawless and unequalled'.²

This tribute from one collaborator to the other does not, perhaps, take us very far into the heart of the mystery, but it is

¹ M. Collis, *Somerville and Ross*, p. 45. A study of their MS. notebooks, Edith's nephew, Sir Patrick Coghill, has recorded, 'is less helpful than might be imagined as so similar were their handwritings, that even D. [Edith] could not always be certain whose hand had written each sentence' (Sir P. Coghill, 'Somerville and Ross' in *Hermathena* (1952), pp. 47-60).

² J. Cummins, *Dr. E. Æ. Somerville*, pp. 184, 186.

important because of Edith's intense conviction that their joint authorship continued beyond the grave. Violet had always been frailer and more vulnerable than her friend and when in December 1915 she died after a long illness, Edith was at first inconsolable. But within six months she believed herself to be in contact with Violet through the medium, Jem Barlow. She never lost her belief thereafter and felt herself not only to have been encouraged by Martin to go on writing, but actually to have been helped by her in doing so. Mr Collis prints the records of the earliest seances, held in June 1916, but since, as he points out, no full account of subsequent and so-called collaboratory seances is extant it is impossible to imagine how such a collaboration can have occurred. Nevertheless, to Edith it was real as their work together while Martin lived, and to the end it remained an essential condition of her continuing to write — so much so, indeed, that all the major works written by her after 1915 still went out under the names of Somerville and Ross.

In drawing our attention to the peculiar and enduring qualities of the relationship between Edith and Martin, Mr Collis has performed a valuable service. Indeed he has done more than this, for he has also attempted — though with rather less success — to describe for us the world which the two ladies inhabited and of which they were the fascinated, candid and quite unsentimental chroniclers. Mr Collis's knowledge of Irish history can scarcely be called profound — his brief account of developments between 1916 and 1922 has several inaccuracies — but he has at least grasped the crucial fact about the environment of Somerville and Ross, that it was crumbling to pieces while they watched. They themselves were well aware of the transformation, at any rate of its consequences if not of its causes. The latter were many and complicated, but for the Protestant landed gentry to which their families belonged, the most significant by far was the agrarian and social revolution whereby between about 1870 and 1914 the land passed slowly but irrevocably into the hands of the tenants, so long subservient but now at last emerging as the owners of their former holdings. That this revolution was achieved in part by actual violence as well as by parliamentary legislation left a legacy of bitterness on both sides. Such bitterness was already in the air when Edith and Martin were growing up

and to it they showed themselves extremely sensitive. So much is evident from their letters and diaries, but if these had all perished we should still have been able to deduce it from the three serious novels which stand in their name — *The Real Charlotte*, *Mount Music*, and *The Big House of Inver*.

Of these three novels only the first — in most judgements incomparably the best — was written before the death of Martin Ross, which may explain why it is that although *The Real Charlotte* was a very early work (published in 1894), whereas the other two appeared after the displacement of the gentry had become an accomplished fact, it is this book which penetrates most deeply into the change that was taking place in Irish society. What *The Real Charlotte* portrays is not only the decadence of a southern ruling family — the Dysarts — but the thrusting ambition of a rural bourgeoisie (it sounds a strange mixture but Ireland was able to produce it) which besides seeking to add field to field and farm to farm, aimed also at usurping the social prestige and dominance that had belonged to the Ascendancy until the Land War and the land legislation had together loosened their hold upon the countryside. It is true that the authors make their female land-grabber, Charlotte Mullen, a Protestant (one wonders how much significance they attached to having given her what in Ireland is usually a Catholic name), but in her ruthlessness and greed she symbolizes, if in an exaggerated form, the energy and ability that were driving out the old and bringing in the new.

The Real Charlotte was a remarkable achievement, not only as the literary masterpiece it can claim to be, but as a work of profound historical insight.¹ Edith Somerville, when she came to publish *Mount Music* and *The Big House of Inver* (in 1919 and 1925 respectively) had had time to weigh the full devastation wrought upon her people by the storm that had begun to break in 1916, and although the action of both books takes place before 1914 the emphasis on futility and decay is even more apparent. Of the two, *The Big House of Inver* is the more impressive, and it is perhaps

¹ Most critics have praised its economy of language, its characterization and its construction, while deploring the crudity with which the *dénouement* of the tragedy is bundled into a few pages at the end. But it was entirely characteristic of the authors that the crucial passage in which the 'heroine' (in reality, there is no heroine) is killed was actually written in the train on the way to Mallow on 8 June 1892.

significant that the idea for the book had been conceived by Martin as far back as 1912 after a visit to an old and derelict family mansion. 'A great cut stone house of three stories,' she wrote. 'Perfectly empty . . . It is on a long promontory by the sea, and there rioted three or four generations of X's, living with the countrywomen, occasionally marrying them, all illegitimate four times over . . . About one hundred and fifty years ago, a very grand Lady' . . . married the head of the family and lived there, and was so corroded with pride that she would not allow her two daughters to associate with the neighbours of their own class. She lived to see them marry two of the men in the yard.'¹ The theme of *The Big House of Inver* is precisely the degradation of such a family, worked out with that feeling for the social nuances of the Irish countryside that Edith Somerville and Martin Ross both had to an almost uncanny degree.

Nowadays it is the deep, underlying pessimism of these books, combined with the stoic determination of the authors to see their world as nearly as possible as it actually was, that most impress the observer. Yet it is only right to remember that this view of Somerville and Ross is a very recent one and that until a few years ago nearly all appraisals of their work were distorted by the immense success of their three volumes of stories, *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899), *Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1908), and *In Mr. Knox's Country* (1915). This distortion has tended to occur in two quite different ways. On the one hand, generations of readers, captivated by the vividness, humour and sheer high spirits of the stories, have agreed in establishing them as classics of the hunting-field and in placing the two ladies firmly in the same stable as Surtees, forgetting that the stable was never more than an outlying appendage to the Big House which was their real habitation, with the ironic result that to this day the R.M. stories are the only work of Somerville and Ross to be found regularly in print. But, on the other hand, nationalist critics have generally seen in the undoubted 'Ascendancy' tone of the stories a kind of heartless arrogance, a deliberate emphasis upon the stage-Irishman in the vein of *Handy Andy* and all those

¹ An extract from this letter, dated 8 March 1912, appears at the end of the novel. Mr Collis gives us the name of the family — the St Georges (*Somerville and Ross*, p. 163).

other Anglo-Irish novels which set out, in Yeats's phrase, to exploit rather than to express the people.¹

With the innocent amusement of the general reading public we are not here concerned, except perhaps to regret that the unending demand for more of the Irish R.M. almost certainly diverted Edith and Martin from further experiments of the calibre of *The Real Charlotte*. But the charge of Handy Andyism is more serious and more difficult to refute. In a sense, indeed, it cannot be refuted. The Somervilles and Martins were acutely aware of belonging to a governing class and both ladies — especially Edith — were very much alive to the frontier between acquaintance and familiarity. In much of their writing — and this is as evident in the R.M. stories as in their more serious work — there is a distinct tone of *de haut en bas*, which, at least to those *en bas*, was all the more irritating because it was almost unconscious. It is perfectly true that they measured social gradations with almost pedantic accuracy, but it has to be said that what they measured did actually exist. However lamentable, however injurious to patriotic pride, the historical evidence is unmistakable that landlords *were* dominant, tenants *were* servile, servants *were* unreliable, dirty and dishonest, different standards *did* prevail for different strata of society.

Yet, it may still be argued, granted that social differentiation of this kind existed, was it necessary to make the Irish peasant a caricature of his true self by putting into his mouth a flow of language which to the outsider may seem richly funny, but which to others may be no more than a grotesque parody of the real thing? But is the peasant language of Somerville and Rossa grotesque parody, are the tenants and grooms and servants no more than caricatures? On the contrary, there are strong indications that the truth is very different. It is apparent from many of the extracts from the letters and diaries of the two ladies printed by Mr Collis that from their earliest days as writers both Edith and Martin not only had an infallible eye for the drolleries (and discomforts) of life in rural Ireland at the turn of the century,

¹ 'It is true,' asserted one of the foremost of these critics, 'that in Ascendancy literature the common Irish people are the comic relief; that is their part; moral responsibility would not go with such a part: they therefore are painted as if they were incapable of ever going beyond the teaching of mother-wit'. Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish literature* (Mercer Press edition, Cork, 1966), pp. 78-9.

but also had a quite exceptionally exact ear for the speech — undeniably vivid and racy as it was — that surrounded them in their impressionable youth and which they reproduced time after time, in the novels as well as in the R.M. stories, with astonishing fidelity. Indeed, one might go further and say that with them, unlike, say, Synge, or even Lady Gregory, one has a sense not of a speech that is deliberately contrived to be poetic or dramatic, but rather of something flowing naturally out of the environment and recorded with all the tender precision of a folk-lorist. What Somerville and Ross did have, of course, and what folk-lorists generally don't, was a highly developed sense of the ridiculous and the ability to extract the maximum amusement out of the most mundane and trivial occasions. For that, surely, they do not need to be forgiven.

It was this feeling of being close to the sources of their material, without the necessity of having to invent a style, that separated Somerville and Ross so decisively from the literary renaissance that was proceeding simultaneously with their own development. They came to know most of the leading figures of that renaissance, and even to win through to a rather grudging respect for Yeats as the chief of them, but all attempts to corral them into any of the movements active in the Ireland of their prime are doomed to failure. They worked happily in their own medium and were content to leave others to work in theirs, but they were a world removed from the aesthetic and political preoccupations of Dublin. This again was partly a consequence of their never-sleeping class-consciousness — they had no wish to attach themselves to a group which seemed to them to have conspicuously few 'gentlemen' in it.¹ But their aloofness reflected also their instinctive distrust of the attempt that Yeats and some

¹ Martin visited Coole Park in 1901 and Yeats carved her name on the famous tree. In a letter to Edith written at the time Martin described the poet as looking 'just what I expected, a cross between a Dominic Sampson and a starved R.C. curate — in seedy black clothes — with a large bow at the root of his long naked throat'. She conceded, though, that he 'has a sense of humour and is a gentleman — hardly by birth, I fancy, but by genius'. Yet this did not make her any more responsive to Lady Gregory's suggestion that Somerville and Ross should write a play for the Abbey. 'It seems to me,' Martin commented, 'that they are very anxious now to rope in the upper classes and to drop politics'. She refused to be roped in (M. Collis, *Somerville and Ross*, pp. 128-31; Hilary Mitchell, 'Somerville and Ross: amateur to professional', in *Somerville and Ross: a symposium*, p. 23).

of his friends were making to come to terms with nationalism. Edith and Martin were uncompromising Unionists and never saw any reason to change their views. Edith, indeed, had the strongest reasons for not doing so, for not only did she live through the period in the 1920's when many Big Houses were destroyed and many Ascendancy families harried into exile, but in 1936 her own brother, Admiral Boyle Somerville, was shot on the door-step of his house in Castle Townshend for no other reason apparently than that he had helped a number of local young men to join the Royal Navy.

In the last analysis, what gave them their special distinction was a proud refusal to abandon the views and standards of their youth even while seeing so clearly the weakness and vulnerability of the caste to which they belonged. It is not merely that they caught so exactly the quality of Anglo-Irish life in the twenty years or so before the First World War, it is also that they realized its transience. This is why the fashion of dismissing them simply as comic writers fails utterly to do them justice. Comedy was there, of course, and often in the very forefront of their work, but when that work is viewed as a whole the note of tragedy is inescapable. And if we are to sum up their art in a single sentence it is surely this — that they carried into literature more completely and more perceptively than any of their contemporaries the essence of the Anglo-Irish dilemma. It is the dilemma of those who stand between two traditions — the native and the alien — and can never become completely assimilated to either. Certainly, it could be argued — and often has been argued — that the Anglo-Irish, with their wide-ranging service to the Empire in all sorts of capacities, had assimilated themselves to the alien tradition all too well, and the nationalist gibe that an Anglo-Irishman is an Englishman who happens to have been born and/or lived in Ireland dies hard. This, however, is a superficial view of a complex phenomenon, assuming, as it seems to do, that many generations of living in the country have made no difference to the 'colonial' or 'alien' stock. But in reality even the most expatriate of Anglo-Irishmen have generally regarded themselves as other than English, and the more they have lived among the English the more important to them this otherness has tended to become.

Yet there remained — and still remains — the apparently insoluble problem of the second assimilation, assimilation with the native tradition. Not for nothing was the Big House set apart from the village, surrounded by its high stone walls, leading its own quite separate life. For the physical isolation in which most of the Anglo-Irish grew up was no more than the visible manifestation of the intellectual and spiritual isolation in which they were condemned — it is not too strong a word — to live.¹ No doubt many of them were unconscious of the fact and right up to the end fledged the time carelessly as of old. No doubt, also even for those who were intelligent enough to understand what was happening to them the ambivalence of their situation cannot have seemed all loss, since their very detachment bred that ironic temper which permeates their writings and may perhaps have been their greatest intellectual strength. But when all is said the price they paid was a high one. To be born in a country and to grow up to love it, but never fully to possess it, never completely to belong to it, may create not just great literature but also unhappy men and women. Of such, Somerville and Ross stand as the truest and most compassionate interpreters.

¹ The same point was made by Daniel Corkery, though he drew characteristically extreme conclusions from it. 'We recall to vision,' he wrote, 'an estate round which one of those Ascendancy families had erected a wall ten or twelve feet high and fully seven miles in length. As I read Ascendancy literature, such walls . . . throw their shadows across the pages. Many an Ascendancy writer must have wished to present, under the form of art, the teeming life he saw about him, many must have believed they had done so. But where are now their novels or plays? No-one casts the failure in their face; it was not from any want of heart or goodness or intelligence or scholarship or craft they individually failed; it was that the system into which they were born made it impossible for them to succeed' (*Synge and Anglo-Irish literature*, p. 39).