

# Gauls, Galls and Gaels: Ireland from the French Angle

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‘EVERYTHING has its bright side’ as John Wilson Croker cynically thought of the Great Famine and the tragic remedy it provided for the problem of overpopulation in Ireland. The present furore in Ulster has been more successful in putting Ireland back into the limelight than anything she may have achieved in more peaceful times. And, quite naturally, her return to the headlines has brought with it a new crop of studies, most of which are historical and documentary in nature.

France is no exception to the rule: 1970 alone saw at least two volumes published in each of the above classes. On the historical side there were the studies of Jean Guiffan<sup>1</sup> and René Fréchet;<sup>2</sup> as for documentary, there were the books of two left wing journalists, *Guerre Civile en Irlande* by Christian Casteran<sup>3</sup> and *La Rumeur Irlandaise* by Jean-Pierre Carasso.<sup>4</sup>

The troubles in Northern Ireland, however, have been in fact the pretext rather than the fundamental cause of the renewed interest in Irish Studies on this, the French side of the Channel.

In the country of Arbois de Jubainville, although the celtic light might momentarily have remained hidden behind a bushel, it is unthinkable that it should have gone out. Therefore it is pleasing but not surprising to see appear a scholar as worthy of his illustrious predecessors as Jean Markale, who has published

<sup>1</sup> J. Guiffan, J. Verrière, P. Rafroidi, *L'Irlande*, tome 1: Milieu et Histoire, Paris, Armand Colin, 'U 2', 1970.

<sup>2</sup> René Fréchet, *Histoire de l'Irlande*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 'Que sais-je', n° 394, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Casteran, *Guerre civile en Irlande*, Paris, Mercure de France, 'En direct', 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Carasso, *La Rumeur irlandaise*, Champ Libre, 1970 (diffusion Denoël, Paris).

in record time three exciting studies: *Les Celtes*,<sup>1</sup> *L'Épopée celtique en Irlande*,<sup>2</sup> *L'Épopée celtique en Bretagne*.<sup>3</sup>

In the country which played such an important part in forming George Moore and John Millington Synge, which welcomed Joyce and Brendan Behan and where Samuel Beckett and John Montague now live, it was only to be expected that the school of Anglo-Irish criticism founded by Anatole Rivoallan, whose remarkable works<sup>4</sup> are unfortunately too little known outside France, should one day emerge.

And, as a matter of fact, during recent years there have appeared a whole series of doctoral theses: Jean Noel's *George Moore*,<sup>5</sup> *L'Exil de James Joyce* by Hélène Cixous,<sup>6</sup> our own *L'Irlande et le Romantisme*,<sup>7</sup> *Somerville et Ross, témoins de l'Irlande d'hier* by Guy Fehlmann<sup>8</sup> to which I would like to devote the rest of this review.

The English have a tendency to take French leave at the sight of publications coming from the Sorbonne or similar institutions. It is difficult to hold it against them, as one must admit that the outward appearance of French theses is such that more often than not it would check even the most determined of inquiring minds. First there is the sheer mass of the thing, in itself surprising, coming as it does from a nation reputed for its triviality; then there is the somewhat uninspiring methodology (A.B.C., etc.); the lack of originality in presentation and the ugliness of the print.

<sup>1</sup> Jean Markale, *Les Celtes*, Paris, Payot, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Épopée celtique d'Irlande*, *ibid.*, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> *L'Épopée celtique en Bretagne*, *ibid.*, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Anatole Rivoallan, *Littérature irlandaise contemporaine*, Paris, Hachette, 1939; *Présence des Celtes*, Paris, Nouvelle Librairie celtique, 1957.

Anatole Rivoallan's latest book is a collection of poems on Celtic themes, original or translated, *Lexobie et autres légendes des Celtes*, Rodez, éditions Subervie, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-C. Noel, *George Moore, l'homme et l'œuvre*, Paris, Didier, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous, *L'Exil de James Joyce*, Paris, Grasset, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Rafroidi, *L'Irlande et le Romantisme*, Lille, Centre d'Études et de Recherches Irlandaises de l'Université de Lille III, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Fehlmann, *Somerville et Ross témoins de l'Irlande d'hier*, Caen, Association des Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines, 1970.

Guy Fehlmann could not possibly escape all of this. Yet in this instance, it would be quite unfair not to go beyond surface appearance. His 516 page thesis is rich in erudition such as to make the task of the reviewer whose duty it is to spot errors or omissions a difficult one indeed. Apart from the very few *errata* listed on the first page there is little to mention here. On page 146, the subtitle of one of Lady Morgan's novels, 'The Heiress of Desmond' is given instead of the main title *St Clair* (London, Harding; Dublin, J. Archer, 1803, vi + 248 pp.); there are one or two books not included in the bibliography such as Norreys Jephson O'Connor's *Changing Ireland*<sup>1</sup> worth mentioning for its treatment of the literary background of the time even though it is not concerned with Somerville and Ross themselves or again E. V. Lucas's delightful article in *Cloud and Silver*<sup>2</sup> on 'The House of Fahy'. Next to nothing — Guy Fehlmann is master of his subject.

And the subject, to which the author sticks but not slavishly, is clearly indicated in the title: its purpose was not biographical, nor to present the novels and short stories of the two famous cousins: Maurice Collis<sup>3</sup> and Violet Powell<sup>4</sup> had, anyway, set about this job almost at the same time. What Guy Fehlmann sets out to do is to examine Somerville and Ross as 'objective witnesses' of their time ('rechercher un témoignage objectif') and to analyse their work from a 'socio-historical' point of view. In this he has perfectly succeeded.

Attentive to the smallest detail, the Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature in the University of Caen can also draw an overall picture from his material. His careful analyses reveal the destiny of a doomed class and even that of a whole people

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born.

The second part of the book (a trifle long perhaps, extending from pp. 33-91) includes in the general historical development

<sup>1</sup> N. J. O'Connor, *Changing Ireland. Literary Backgrounds of the Irish Free State 1889-1922*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard U.P.; London, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> Edward V. Lucas, 'The Two Ladies', *Cloud and Silver* (pp. 134-40), New York, George H. Duran Co., 1916.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Collis, *Somerville and Ross, a biography*, London, Faber & Faber, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Violet Powell, *The Irish Cousins, The Books and Background of Somerville and Ross* London, Heinemann, 1969.

of the country the circumstances peculiar to the moment. The distinctive features of the two authors are given in the wider context of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition and interesting comparisons are made with other Irish novelists: Maria Edgeworth, Lever, Mrs Hall, George A. Birmingham, as well as telling contrasts: Carleton, Griffin, the Banim brothers and even Liam O'Flaherty. And all this serves to highlight and set in perspective a fictional (and yet true) world every social type of which is thoroughly examined by the critic: peasant, aristocrat and bourgeois alike (cf. pp. 83-349).

In the course of such a substantial study there will inevitably be some points over which one would like to quibble. For instance, the author seems unfortunately to have allowed a somewhat excessive, if legitimate, discretion to cut short what might well have been the starting point of a fascinating 'psycho-critical' study:

The sudden friendship that arose between the amazon of Castle-townshend (Edith Somerville) and the 'little philosopher' of Ross is not easy to understand. The friendship was however both deep and longlasting as it went on until after the death of Violet Martin in 1915. The word 'friendship' does not even exactly express the nature of the relationship which the two women had, so moving and disturbing it was (. . .) (Their) partnership was founded on affection and faithfulness quite similar to that of a married couple . . . (pp. 13-14)

The sentence on page 15 is hardly convincing — 'Ireland had not known Roman domination and hence did not benefit from its *healthy* administrative rule' ('la SAINTE discipline de son administration' — Oh, the superiority complex of the Latin races!) — nor this one (on p. 17): 'historians have often been *hard* on Cromwell and his Irish policies' — even if an Englishman finds the remark less shocking than does a descendant of Hibernian catholics. It is irritating to see a critic who has refused the image of the stage-Irishman, constantly referring to 'Paddies'. It is surprising to find the odd cliché concerning the natives' incurable laziness (cf. p. 117), a rather harsh remark about peasant fanaticism or a little over-admiration for aristocratic grandeur: perhaps Mr Fehlmann has identified himself too well with his subject by making his own the point of view of the Protestant Ascendancy which may not be so deserving of compassion.

But it also shows that the French scholar is not afraid to take a personal stand and that he is capable of considerable sympathy with his subject, both of which qualities are laudable. This, however, is not his only claim to our admiration and gratitude. He has been able to transcend his sociological concern and devote an important part of his study to the linguistic and literary aspects.

Part Six (pp. 355-429) entitled 'Anglo-Irish in Somerville and Ross's prose' is without doubt the finest study yet made on the language of an Irish author. Because his study of pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, imagery and devices is both rich, logical and well backed up with convincing and delightful examples, because his methodology shows awareness of modern linguistic practice without pandering to fashionable grotesque jargon and obscure thinking, Guy Fehlmann's success here must have gone beyond his own expectations. This part of his work, whilst being a must to any student of Somerville and Ross, will also be useful for the study of any other Irish author writing in English from Carleton to Synge. Moreover it could well serve as a useful example of a methodological approach to all those interested in the more reasonable developments of stylistics.

The same judicious modernism can be found in the 7th Part (Forme et Témoignage). Three diagrams show the geographical and psychological evolution as well as that of the climate of superstition in 'Harrington's', one of the short stories in the exquisite *Irish R.M.*, but Mr Fehlmann states and proves that he does not aim at reducing a work of art to a series of formulae.

If it is true that the Somerville family originally came from Normandy, near Evreux, it is only right and proper that the 'Irish cousins' should have found a French interpreter. And they could not have found a better one than Guy Fehlmann.

It only remains to wish for him and all those in the same position that they will find readers and perhaps a translator and publisher in Ireland, England or the States. There is also something to do for the Common Market of culture where agreement would be easier to reach among the nations involved.