









TO  
SOME UNDERGRADUATES OF TRINITY COLLEGE

'Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,  
In things best known to you finding the best, or as good as the best;  
In folks nearest to you finding the sweetest, strongest, lovingest;  
Happiness, knowledge not in another place, but this place – not for  
another hour but this hour.'

WALT WHITMAN.



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## POETS AND DREAMERS

### RAFTERY

#### I.

One winter afternoon as I sat by the fire in a ward of Gort Workhouse, I listened to two old women arguing about the merits of two rival poets they had seen and heard in their childhood.

One old woman, who was from Kilchreest, said: 'Raftery hadn't a stim of sight; and he travelled the whole nation; and he was the best poet that ever was, and the best fiddler. It was always at my father's house, opposite the big tree, that he used to stop when he was in Kilchreest. I often saw him; but I didn't take much notice of him then, being a child; it was after that I used to hear so much about him. Though he was blind, he could serve himself with his knife and fork as well as any man with his sight. I remember the way he used to cut the meat – across, like this. Callinan was nothing to him.'

The other old woman, who was from Craughwell, said: 'Callinan was a great deal better than him; and he could make songs in English as well as in [Pg 2] Irish; Raftery would run from where Callinan was. And he was a nice respectable man, too, with cows and sheep, and a kind man. *He* would never put anything that wasn't nice into a poem, and *he* would never run anyone down; but if you were the worst in the world, he'd make you the best in it; and when his wife lost her beetle, he made a song of fifteen verses about it.'

'Well,' the Kilchreest old woman admitted, 'Raftery would run people down; he was someway bitter; and if he had anything against a person, he'd give him a great lacerating. But there were more for him than for Callinan; some used to say Callinan's songs were too long.'

'I tell you,' said the other, 'Callinan was a nice man and a nice neighbour. Raftery wasn't fit to put beside him. Callinan was a man that would go out of his own back door, and make a poem about the four quarters of the earth. I tell you, you would stand in the

snow to listen to Callinan!' But, just then, a bedridden old woman suddenly sat up and began to sing Raftery's 'Bridget Vesach' as long as her breath lasted; so the last word was for him after all.

Raftery died over sixty years ago; but there are many old people still living, besides those two old women, who have seen him, and who keep his songs in their memory. What they tell of him shows how closely he was in the old tradition of the bards, the wandering poets of two thousand years or more. [Pg 3] His satire, his praises, his competitions with other poets were the dread and the pride of many Galway and Mayo parishes. And now the songs that he never wrote down, being blind, are known, if not as our people say, 'all over the world,' at least in all places where Irish is spoken.

Raftery's satires, as I have heard them repeated by the country people, do not seem, even in their rhymed original—he only composed in Irish—to have the 'sharp spur' of some of his predecessors, such as O'Higinn, whose tongue was cut out by men from Sligo, who had suffered from it, or O'Daly, who criticised the poverty of the Irish chiefs in the sixteenth century until the servant of one of them stuck a knife into his throat. Yet they were much dreaded. 'He was very sharp with anyone that didn't please him,' I have been told; 'and no one would like to be put in his songs.' And though it is said of his songs in praise of his friends that 'whoever he praised was well praised,' it was thought safer that one's own name should not appear in them. The man at whose house he died said to me: 'He used often to come and stop with us, but he never made a verse about us; my father wouldn't have liked that. Someway it doesn't bring luck.' And another man says: 'My father often told me about Raftery. He was someway gifted, and people were afraid of him. I was often told by men that gave him a lift in their car when they overtook him now and again, that if he asked their name, they wouldn't give it, for fear he might put it in a song.' [Pg 4] And another man says: 'There was a friend of my father's was driving his car on the road one day, and he saw Raftery, but he didn't let on to see him. But when he was passing, Raftery said: "There was never a soldier marching but would get his billet. But the rabbit has an enemy in the ferret;" so then the man said in a hurry, "Oh, Mr. Raftery, I never knew it was you: won't you get up and take a seat in the car?"' A girl in whose praise he had made a song, Mary Hynes, of

Ballylee, died young, and had a troubled life; and one of her neighbours says of her: 'No one that has a song made about them will ever live long;' and another says: 'She got a great tossing up and down; and at last she died in the middle of a bog.' They tell, too, of a bush that he once took shelter under from the rain, and how he 'praised it first; and then when it let the rain down, he dispraised it, and it withered up, and never put out leaf or branch after.' I have seen his poem on the bush in a manuscript book, carefully written in the beautiful Irish character, and the great treasure of a stonemason's cottage. This is the form of the curse: 'I pronounce ugliness upon you. That bloom or leaf may never grow on you, but the flame of the mountain fires and of bonfires be upon you. That you may get your punishment from Oscar's flail, to hack and to bruise you with the big sledge of a forge.'

There are some other verses made by him that have been less legendary in their effect. The story is: — 'It was Anthony Daly, a carpenter, was hanged [Pg 5] at Seefin. It was the two Z's got him put away. He was brought before a judge in Galway, and accused of being a Captain of Whiteboys, and it was sworn against him that he fired at Mr. X. He was a one-eyed man; and he said: "If I did, though I have but one eye, I would have hit him" — for he was a very good shot; and he asked that some object should be put up, and he would show the judge that he would hit it, but he said nothing else. Some were afraid he'd give up the names of the other Whiteboys; but he did not. There was a gallows put up at Seefin; and he was brought there sitting on his coffin in a cart. There were people all the way along the road, and they were calling on him to break through the crowd, and they'd save him; and some of the soldiers were Irish, and they called back that if he did they'd only fire their guns in the air; but he made no attempt, but went to the gallows quiet enough. There was a man in Gort was telling me he saw it, planting potatoes he was at Seefin that day. It was in the year 1820; and Rafferty was there at the hanging, and he made a song about it. The first verse of the song said: "Wasn't that the good tree, that wouldn't let any branch that was on it fall to the ground?" He meant by that that he didn't give up the names of the other Whiteboys. And at the end he called down judgment from God on the two Z's, and, if not on them, on their children. And they that had land and farms in all parts, lost

it after; and all they had vanished; and the most of their children died [Pg 6] —only two left, one a friar, and the other living in the town.' And quite lately I have been told by another neighbour, in corroboration, that a girl of the Z family married into a family near his home the other day, and was coldly received; and when my neighbour asked one of the family why this was, he was told that 'those of her people that went so high ought to have gone higher' — meaning that they themselves ought to have been on the gallows; and then he knew that Raftery's curse was still having its effect. And he had also heard that the grass had never grown again at Seefin.

This is a part of the song: —

'The evening of Friday of the Crucifixion, the Gael was under the mercy of the Gall. It was as heavy the same day as when the only Son of Mary was on the tree. I have hope in the Son of God, my grief! and it is of no use for me; and it was Conall and his wife hung Daly, and may they be paid for it!

'But oh! young woman, while I live, I put death on the village where you will be; plague and death on it; and may the flood rise over it; that much is no sin at all, O bright God; and I pray with longing it may fall on the man that hung Daly; that left his people and his children crying.

'O stretch out your limbs! The air is murky overhead; there is darkness on the sun, and the fish do not leap in the water; there is no dew on the grass, and the birds do not sing sweetly. With sorrow after you, Daly, till death, there never will be fruit on the trees.

'And that is the true man, that didn't humble himself or lower himself to the Gall; Anthony Daly, O Son of God! He was that with us always, without a lie. But he died a good Irishman; and he never bowed the head to any man; [Pg 7] and it was with false swearing that Daly was hung, and with the strength of the Gall.

'If I were a clerk — kind, light, cheerful with the pen — it is I would write your ways in clear Irish on a flag above your head. A thousand and eight hundred and sixteen, and four put to that, from the coming of the Son of God, to the death of Daly at the Castle of Seefin.'

I have heard, and have also seen in manuscript, a terrible list of curses that he hurled at the head of another poet, Seaghan Burke. But these were, I think, looked on as a mere professional display, and do not seem to have any ill effect.

Here are some of them: —

'That God may perish you on the mountain-side, without a priest, bishop, or clerk. Seven years may you be senseless and without wit, going from door to door as an unfortunate creature.

'May you have a mouth that will go back to your ear, and may your lips be turned back like gums; that your legs may lose feeling from the knee down, your eyes lose their sight, and your hands lose their strength.

'Deformity and lameness and corruption upon you; flight and defeat and the hatred of your kin. That shivering fever may stretch you nine times, and that particularly at the time of Easter ('because,' it is explained, 'it was at Easter time our Lord was put to death, and it is the time He can best hear the curses of the poor').

'May a sore heart and cold flesh be upon you; may there be no marrow or moisture in your bones. That clay may never be put over your coffin-boards, but wind and a sharp blast on you from the north.

'Baldness and nakedness come upon you, judgment from above, and the curses of the crowd. May dragon's gall and poison mixed through it be your best drink at the hour of death.'

[Pg 8]

Sometimes he left a scathing verse on a place where he was not well treated, as: 'Oranmore without merriment. A little town in scarce fields—a broken little town, with its back to the water, and with women that have no understanding.'

He did not spare persons any more than places, especially if they were well-to-do, for his gentleness was for the poor. An old woman who remembers him says: 'He didn't care much about big houses. Just if they were people he liked, and that he was friendly with them, he would be kind enough to go in and see them.' A Mr.

Burke, who met him going from his house, asked how he had fared, and he said in a scornful verse:—

'Potatoes that were softer than the fog,  
And with neither butter nor meat,  
And milk that was sourer than apples in harvest—  
That's what Raftery got from Burke of Kilfinn.'

'And Mr. Burke begged him to rhyme no more, but to come back, and he would be well taken care of.' I am told of another house he abused and that is now deserted: 'Frenchforth of the soot, that was wedded to the smoke, that is all that remains of the property.... There were some of them on mules, and some of them unruly, and the biggest of them were smaller than asses, and the master cracking them with a stick;' 'but he went no further than that, because he remembered the good treatment used to be there in former times, and he wouldn't have said that much if it wasn't for the servants that vexed him.' A [Pg 9] satire, that is remembered in Aran, was made with the better intention of helping a barefooted girl, who had been kept waiting a long time for a pair of shoes she had ordered. Raftery came, and sat down before the shoemaker's house, and began:—

'A young little girl without sense, the ground tearing her feet, is not satisfied yet by the lying Peter Glynn. Peter Glynn, the liar, in his little house by the side of the road, is without the strength in his arms to slip together a pair of brogues.'

'And, before he had finished the lines, Peter Glynn ran out and called to him to stop, and he set at work on the shoes then and there.' He even ventured to poke a little satire at a priest sometimes. 'He went into the chapel at Kilchreest one time, and there was some cabbage after being stolen from a garden, and the priest was speaking about it. Raftery was at the bottom of the chapel, and at last he called out in verse:—"What a lot of talk about cabbage! If there was meat with it, it would feed the whole parish!" The priest didn't mind, but afterwards he came down, and said: "Where is the cabbage man?" and asked him to make some more verses about it; but

whether he did or not I don't know.' And another time, I am told: 'A priest wanted to teach him the rite of lay baptism; for there were scattered houses a priest might take a long time getting to, away from the roads, and certain persons were authorized to give the rite. So the priest put his hat in Raftery's hand, and told him the words to say; but [Pg 10] it is what he said: "I baptize you without either foot or hand, without salt or tow, beer or drink. Your father was a ram and your mother was a sheep, and your like never came to be baptized before." He was put under a curse, too, one time by a priest, and he made a song about him; but he said he put his frock out of the bargain, and it was only the priest's own body he would speak about. And the priest let him alone after that.' And an old basket-maker, who had told me some of these things, said at the end: 'That is why the poets had to be banished before in the time of St. Columcill. Sure no one could stand the satire of them.'



## II.

Irish history having been forbidden in schools, has been, to a great extent, learned from Raftery's poems by the people of Mayo, where he was born, and of Galway, where he spent his later years. It is hard to say where history ends in them and religion and politics begin; for history, religion, and politics grow on one stem in Ireland, an eternal trefoil. 'He was a great historian,' it is said; 'for every book he'd get hold of, he'd get it read out to him.' And a neighbour tells me: 'He used to stop with my uncle that was a hedge school-master in those times in Ballylee, and that was very fond of drink; and when he was drunk, he'd take his clothes off, and run naked through the country. But at evening he'd open the school; and the neighbours that would be working all [Pg 11] day would gather in to him, and he'd teach them through the night; and there Raftery would be in the middle of them.' His chief historical poem is the 'Talk with the Bush,' of over three hundred lines. Many of the people can repeat it, or a part of it, and some possess it in manuscript. The bush, a forerunner of the 'Talking Oak' or the 'Father of the Forest,' gives its recollections, which go back to the times of the Firbolgs, the Tuatha De Danaan, 'without heart, without humanity'; the Sons of the Gael; the heroic Fianna, who 'would never put more than one man to fight against one'; Cuchulain 'of the Grey Sword, that broke every gap'; till at last it comes to 'O'Rourke's wife that brought a blow to Ireland': for it was on her account the English were first called in. Then come the crimes of the English, made redder by the crime of Martin Luther. Henry VIII 'turned his back on God and denied his first wife.' Elizabeth 'routed the bishops and the Irish Church. James and Charles laid sharp scourges on Ireland.... Then Cromwell and his hosts swept through Ireland, cutting before him all he could. He gave estates and lands to Cromwellians, and he put those that had a right to them on mountains.' Whenever he brings history into his poems, the same strings are touched. 'At the great judgment, Cromwell will be hiding, and O'Neill in the corner. And I think if William can manage it at all, he won't stand his ground against Sarsfield.' And a moral often comes at the end, such as: 'Don't be without [Pg 12] courage, but join together; God is stronger than the Cromwellians, and the cards may turn yet.'

For Raftery had lived through the '98 Rebellion, and the struggle for Catholic Emancipation; and he saw the Tithe War, and the Repeal movement; and it is natural that his poems, like those of the poets before him, should reflect the desire of his people for 'the mayntenance of their own lewde libertye,' that had troubled Spenser in his time.

Here are some verses from his '*Cuis da ple*,' 'cause to plead,' composed at the time of the Tithe War:—

'The two provinces of Munster are afoot, and will not stop till tithes are overthrown, and rents accordingly; and if help were given them, and we to stand by Ireland, the English guard would be feeble, and every gap made easy. The Gall (English) will be on their back without ever returning again; and the Orangemen bruised in the borders of every town, a judge and jury in the courthouse for the Catholics, England dead, and the crown upon the Gael....

'There is many a fine man at this time sentenced, from Cork to Ennis and the town of Roscrea, and fair-haired boys wandering and departing from the streets of Kilkenny to Bantry Bay. But the cards will turn, and we'll have a good hand: the trump shall stand on the board we play at.... Let ye have courage. It is a fine story I have. Ye shall gain the day in every quarter from the Sassanach. Strike ye the board, and the cards will be coming to you. Drink out of hand now a health to Raftery: it is he would put success for you on the *Cuis da ple*.'

This is part of another song:—

'I have a hope in Christ that a gap will be opened again for us.... The day is not far off, the Gall will be stretched [Pg 13] without anyone to cry after them; but with us there will be a bonfire lighted up on high.... The music of the world entirely, and Orpheus playing along with it. I'd sooner than all that, the Sassanach to be cut down.'

But with all this, he had plenty of common sense, and an old man at Ballylee tells me:—'One time there were a sort of nightwalkers—Moonlighters as we'd call them now, Ribbonmen they were then—making some plan against the Government; and they asked Raftery to come to their meeting. And he went; but what he said was this, in a verse, that they should look at the English Government, and think

of all the soldiers it had, and all the police—no, there were no police in those days, but gaugers and such like—and they should think how full up England was of guns and arms, so that it could put down Buonaparty; and that it had conquered Spain, and took Gibraltar from it; and the same in America, fighting for twenty-one years. And he asked them what they had to fight with against all those guns and arms?—nothing but a stump of a stick that they might cut down below in the wood. So he bid them give up their nightwalking, and come out and agitate in the daylight.'

I have been told—but I do not know if it is true—that he was once sent to Galway Gaol for three months for a song he made against the Protestant Church, 'saying it was like a wall slipping, where it wasn't built solid.' [Pg 14]

