

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 6
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

December 1962

The Crock of Gold: Fifty Years After

Augustine Martin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.4, December 1962, p.148-158

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

148 Colby Library Quarterly

"A past-mistress of the art of flattery," said Dickens as they walked up the platform, hand in hand, toward the waiting parent.

The little girl was Katie Smith, who would become famous as Kate Douglas Wiggin. She first tells the story, which has been retold many times since, in *A Child's Journey With Dickens*. A charmingly inscribed copy of this book is in the Colby College Library.

By way of postscript, let me add the item in the *Portland Argus* of April 1st: "Dickens has come and gone . . . Now, as we cannot have Dickens again, let us do the next best thing and have Henry John Murray, Esq., who in some respects is better than Dickens." The *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of American Biography* throw no light on Mr. Murray, and I have not pursued the subject further. To those who will not be swerved from the trail of Genius I say, "Good hunting!"



THE CROCK OF GOLD: FIFTY YEARS AFTER

By AUGUSTINE MARTIN

IT is fitting that the current revival of interest in the works of James Stephens, marked by the appearance of Lloyd Frankenberg's excellent *Selection* should coincide with the golden jubilee of *The Crock of Gold*. This remarkable fantasy appeared in 1912, when Stephens was at the height of his creative activity, and it immediately shot him into the front rank of contemporary Irish writers. It was a bad time for the making of Irish literary reputations, accompanied as it was by the rise of the two giant talents of Yeats and Joyce. Despite the immense shadows cast by these twin eminences, *The Crock of Gold* continued to glitter unobscured for the next fifty years. It is, in fact, one of the very few modern Irish prose works — perhaps the only one — to survive in print long enough to cele-

Colby Library Quarterly 149

brate its golden jubilee. Furthermore, it has done so without the slightest help from that criticism which begets criticism. It has endured simply by giving delight and there is no reason why it should not endure forever for that very reason. Nevertheless, the time for a critical reassessment has arrived. In the following review I propose to make some attempt at analyzing the nature of the book's success and placing it against its historical background.

The Crock of Gold is one of those rare occurrences in literature, a pure or radical fantasy: the sort of book that calls into being an entire world where the rules of this world no longer apply, a world sufficient in itself, possessing its own laws or its own indigenous anarchy. A more recent Irish novelist, Mervyn Wall, hit off the idea very well when he placed his incomparable Fursey books in ancient monastic Ireland, "where anything may happen to anyone, anywhere and at any time, and it usually does." Such worlds have been created by Lewis Carroll, Swift, Kenneth Grahame, Tolkien, and perhaps Orwell, Kafka and Aldous Huxley, though the nightmare sits uneasily within our definition of fantasy — more frequently the happy dream. The pure fantast usually has some purpose other than the story itself; his purpose may be satirical like Swift, Carroll and Wall, cautionary like Huxley and Orwell, dimly allegorical like Kafka. Stephens, as we shall see, has didactic purpose lurking beneath the charm and humor of the book's surface, a unique and eccentric vision of a better life, and this vision provides him with the motive power to create and energize his imaginary world. This didactic purpose forms the frame and the scaffolding upon which the glittering tapestry of his invention is stretched. But the pure fantast, having created his world, must by an unusual exercise of imaginative control maintain it in being, its magical atmosphere unimpaired. He can allow no intrusion from the mundane world and the difficulty of this control probably explains why perfect fantasy is so rare. One recalls that horrid bargewoman who intruded into the world of animals in *The Wind in the Willows*. I recall vividly my childhood uneasiness during her brief appearance; for one fearful moment the candles of fantasy fluttered and almost went out. But Stephens triumphantly maintains his imaginative control. The golden aura

150 Colby Library Quarterly

of fantasy is so brilliantly created and sustained that a policeman can arrest a leprechaun without disrupting it, just as a walrus and a carpenter can converse freely and convincingly in Carroll's masterpiece once the author has waved his magic wand over their beach.

The plot of *The Crock of Gold* is remarkably simple. Characteristically, the actual crock of gold, the mythical treasure of the leprechauns, has very little to do with it. It merely forms the center of a sub-plot in the story which we need not concern ourselves with. The real story concerns the adventures of the Philosopher and Caitilin Ni Murrachu, the farmer's daughter. As there are allegorical overtones involved I will sketch the main events briefly. The Philosopher lives at the center of the Dark Wood, dispensing his wisdom to people with problems "too recondite for even those extremes of elucidation, the parish priest and the tavern." To him comes Meehawl O Murrachu, who is worried because his daughter Caitilin has run away from home with a curious stranger, a man with goat's legs playing on pipes. The Philosopher identifies him as the god Pan and resolves to send his children — not having reached puberty they are immune to the erotic influence of Pan's music — to tell him to return the girl. If this fails, he proposes to call in the services of the Irish god Angus Og. The children take the message but get no satisfaction, so the Philosopher goes himself but also fails. So he undertakes the journey to the home of Angus Og, meeting with various adventures by the way. Angus Og intervenes and takes Caitilin for himself. On his return, the Philosopher is arrested by policemen, rescued by leprechauns, but eventually imprisoned and taken to the city. His wife, the Thin Woman, goes in turn to Angus Og for help, and the book ends with Angus Og mustering the dormant host of fairy Ireland and rescuing the Philosopher.

Before going on to trace the allegorical significance of these events, it is interesting to focus them momentarily against the background of their time, to see the material and its treatment in relationship to that strange state of mind, The Celtic Twilight, that had for two decades previously held literary Ireland in its grip. It will be recalled that around the turn of the cen-

Colby Library Quarterly 151

ture people like Yeats, AE, William Sharp (Fiona Macleod), and Maud Gonne had been trying to institute a Celtic cult and ritual, an amalgam of theosophy and fairy faith that was expected to transfigure the world and make of Tara a new Jerusalem. And while by 1914 this movement to found a pan-Celtic religion had petered out, it had but recently been living with a tremendous and intense zeal. Even ten years before, it might not have been so easy to treat the Celtic gods with the sublime irreverence that Stephens accorded them. In 1896 AE was confiding momentarily to Yeats: "The gods have returned to Erin and have centered themselves among the sacred mountains and blow fires through the land. They have been seen by many in vision, they will awaken the magical instinct everywhere and the universal heart of the people will turn to the old druidic beliefs."¹

Part of the cult was the belief in the coming of a new redeemer. An avatar, AE termed it, and he himself claimed to have seen the Irish avatar in one of his celebrated visions. Perhaps it would be easy to exaggerate the connection between the Celtic dream and Stephens's fantasy, but I cannot help associating these words of Russell's about the old gods coming back and Stephens's reincarnation of Pan and Angus Og and the leprechauns of Gort na Cloca Mora. Further point is given the association by Stephens's choice of Angus Og, because this god was one of the twin deities of the Celtic cult as conceived in 1902; he was their figure for Divine Imagination. His complementary deity was Etain, their goddess of beauty, and it is hardly without significance that Stephens chooses her story for redaction in his *In the Land of Youth* (1924).

Now it is obvious from his treatment of this material that Stephens comes at the end of the movement. He is sufficiently removed from the cult to treat its notions with a gentle mockery, as evidenced in the following extract, where Meehawl listens to the Philosopher formulating his strategy for getting Caitilin back from Pan.

¹ To get a full view of this movement, which I can only glance at in passing, one must go to Richard Ellmann's excellent book, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948).

152 Colby Library Quarterly

"I'll send my two children with a message to him to say that he isn't doing the decent thing and that if he doesn't let the girl alone and go back to his own country we'll send for Angus Og."

"He'd make short work of him I'm thinking."

"He might surely; but he may take the girl for himself all the same."

"Well I'd sooner he had her than the other one, for he's one of ourselves anyhow and the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know."

"Angus Og is a god," said the Philosopher severely.

There is obviously no great solemnity in Stephens's approach to the Celtic pantheon. It is not all mockery either, because Stephens shared the aspirations if not the beliefs that gave rise to this synthetic conjunction of theosophy and superstition. He shared the antagonism to 19th century rationalism, to Victorian convention, to the hidebound set of rules and regulations that civilization had become; he shared too the general antipathy towards a religion that to him seemed to exclude all possibility of mysticism and beauty in its emphasis on devotion and discipline. And this is in fact the rhetorical trend of *The Crock of Gold* which is in itself a plea for the old pagan and sensual delight of Pan and the divine spiritual intellect of Angus Og. Consequently, Stephens uses the machinery of Celtic paganism to embody his social message. In its message *The Crock of Gold* foreshadows Lawrence's sexual manifesto in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* which was sixteen years in the offing. It is ironical that two books so disparate should stand for such similar values; one so cold, crude and humorless that it repelled its public, the other informed with such whimsical charm and wit that its message has been almost completely overlooked. And certainly no one will regret that in *The Crock of Gold* the artist triumphed over the didact. Before going on to consider purely literary things however, some attempt must be made to pin down the allegory. Fortunately, Stephens has provided us with a useful key.

In her authoritative assemblage of Stephens's literary remains² Birgit Bramsbäck draws attention to a remark written by the author on a flyleaf of a copy of *The Crock of Gold*.

² James Stephens; *A Literary and Bibliographical Study* (Dublin, 1959).

Colby Library Quarterly 153

In this book there is only one character, Man — Pan is his sensual nature, Caitilin his emotional nature, the Philosopher his intellect at play, Angus Og his intellect spiritualized, the policemen his conventions and logics, the leprechauns his elemental side, the children his innocence, and the idea is not too rigidly carried out but that is how I conceived the story.

I have attempted privately to trace the allegory pedantically in terms of this key and have found that the plan, as he stated, is not rigidly enforced. In fact it is doubtful that the plan is not a rationalization after the fact, or at least a conception that emerged as the book took shape on paper. For instance, it takes no account of the fact that he sets out with two philosophers and kills one of them off half way through the second chapter. However, instead of getting litigious over a correspondence that the author does not claim, it is better to follow the allegorical directions that he actually indicates. They can be briefly stated as follows.

In the adventures of Caitilin the emotions of man reach puberty, pass into a state of happy sensuality under Pan — resisting the dry intellectual restraints of the Philosopher — and go on to a perfect fulfillment under Angus Og, the intellect spiritualized. On a related progression the Philosopher — who has hitherto lived in the midst of barren intellectual speculations — resists with difficulty the persuasion of Pan but flees in terror when Pan reaches for his pipes. He goes on to Angus Og while “through his perturbation there bubbled a stream of such amazing well-being as he had not felt since childhood.” To emphasize that his cerebral conventionality is already being overthrown, he kisses a fat woman by the wayside. Soon we find him at the cave of Angus Og, prostrating himself before the god, and this we take to be the homage of the cerebrating intellect to the higher spirituality.

The confusion that keeps arising with Stephens’s use of terms such as Spirit, Soul, Mind, intellect, and intelligence seems to be due to the theosophist terminology, which as a devotee he made use of. In Madame Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* the following distinction is made:

Man is triune; he has his objective physical body; his vitalizing astral body (or soul), the real man; and these two are brooded over by the third, the sovereign, the immortal Spirit. When the real man succeeds in merging himself with the latter he becomes an immortal entity.

154 Colby Library Quarterly

Angus Og obviously represents this immortal Spirit and in the scheme of things he is destined to absorb and transmute the cerebrating intellect in the figure of the Philosopher, which in fact he does at the end.

On his way home the Philosopher is captured by policemen. In all of Stephens's work the policeman is consistently seen as the hostile embodiment of law and convention at its most stupidly menacing, and here the policemen are made savage sport of. Now, in the person of the Philosopher, man's intellect is subjected to a deeper incarceration than ever before. But the book ends with Angus Og summoning the elfin hosts to rescue him:

Even the intellect of man they took from the hands of the doctors and lawyers, from the sly priests, from the professors whose mouths are gorged with sawdust and the merchants who sell blades of grass — the awful people of the Fomor and they returned again dancing and singing to the country of the gods.

This, crudely, is the allegorical trend of the novel. It does not attempt to account for the significance of the leprechauns, the old beggar-woman, the company of tinkers, the three alembics — which are self-explanatory — and the other more or less meaningful figures in the book. It is impossible to fit them all into the symbolic plan without creating labyrinths of ingenuity. Even if Stephens did set out with the plan in his mind, it is well that he did not tie himself to it. Instead, he gave rein to his inventive energy and let the characters take on life of themselves. He could never have sustained a world populated by fragmented human faculties; he would not have arrived at a book but a boneyard.

Before leaving these deeper implications of the book, however, let me return fleetingly to the notion of Celtic paganism towards which the author had such an ambivalent attitude. At the end of the story, as Angus Og and Caitilin watch the fairy hosts mustering for their march on the city, the following snatch of dialogue takes place. Angus says:

"This will be our first journey, but on a time not distant we will go to them again, and we will not return from that journey, for we will live among our people and be at peace."
"May the day come soon," said she.

Colby Library Quarterly 155

"When thy son is a man he will go before us on the journey," said Angus, and Caitilin shivered with a great delight, knowing that a son would be born to her.

There is no lack of solemnity in this exchange, and it is obvious that Stephens wants it to be taken with some seriousness. It is a clear reference to the redeemer myth, the avatar for which Russell and Yeats were seeking, this son born of a god and a mortal. It is a ubiquitous notion in the theosophist concept and had a strong fascination for Stephens. In the culmination of the next fantasy, *The Demi-Gods* (1914) he marries a tinker girl to an angel. The whole book, in fact, in a gentle ironical way is levelled at the status quo, to use a more recent phrase — the Establishment in Ireland. This mildly satirical motif becomes initially evident in Pan's sad strictures on "this country where no people have done any reverence to me," and it culminates in the flourish quoted above, where the intellect of man is rescued from the awful people of Fomor. This thread of social commentary could be pursued at length, but enough has been said to indicate its presence and the manner in which it operates.

While these underlying attitudes, these significant myths and allegorical patterns are important in giving body and structure to the novel, they do not explain its success, its perennial appeal to successive generations of readers, the majority of whom only barely sense any message beyond the story itself. One does not have to probe deeply to recognize the book's secret. Apart from its primary achievement in weaving an atmosphere of unassailable fantasy, the book owes its triumph to its superb comic characterization, the Philosopher. This irresistible old cod stands at the center of the book and from him emanates an infectious drollery that seems to imbue his whole fabulous world with a sense of enlightened absurdity. No man quite like the Philosopher ever lived but — and this is the point of radical fantasy — within the structure of his world he is utterly real, utterly convincing; he stands for all that is garrulous, argumentative and imperturbable in man and he also shares with such fellow immortals as Pickwick, Mole, Fursey, and Bottom the weaver, that divine innocence that is a shield against all vicissitude and that makes an eternal appeal to the embattled innocence in man. The Philosopher's is a subtle innocence. He not

156 Colby Library Quarterly

only knows everything in theory but he can reduce everything to theory. His is the sort of brain that can neatly field any new suggestion however dangerous and render it harmless by fitting it into the elaborate, never-ending thought sequences that are his mind.

He is the purest of stoics whether replying with maddening imperturbability to his wife's abuse, digressing superbly on the subject of clothing in the presence of Pan, or holding forth with intemperate calmness on the dispensability of policemen while being borne along beneath one of their colossal arms. Only once is his tranquillity ruffled, and that is when the power of Pan sets him pondering the naked beauty of Caitilin. When he runs in terror from the cave of the god it is not because his argumentative powers have failed him but because Pan threatens him with a weapon that is not of the mind. The incident is so finely written that I quote it in full. Not only does it give us a glimpse of Stephens's dialogue and characterization but it contains a good deal of the book's message. On entering Pan's cave, the Philosopher has been momentarily unnerved by the sight of Caitilin naked. Recovering splendidly, he takes refuge in a philosophical discussion of the entire subject of clothing, emerging triumphantly and at length with the question:

"Now, what is virtue?"

Pan, who had listened with great courtesy to these remarks, here broke in on the Philosopher. "Virtue," he said, "is the performance of pleasant actions."

The Philosopher held the statement for a moment on his forefinger.

"And what then is vice?" said he.

"It is vicious," said Pan, "to neglect the performance of pleasant actions."

"If this be so," the other commented, "philosophy has up to the present been on the wrong track."

"That is so," said Pan. "Philosophy is an immoral practice because it suggests a standard of practice impossible of being followed, and which if it could be followed would lead to the great sin of sterility."

"The idea of virtue," said the Philosopher with some indignation, "has animated the noblest intellects in the world."

"It has not animated them," replied Pan. "It has hypnotized them so that they have conceived virtue as repression and self-sacrifice as an honorable thing instead of the suicide, which it is."

"Indeed," said the Philosopher, "this is very interesting, and if it is true the whole conduct of life will have to be very much simplified."

"Life is already simple," said Pan. "It is to be born and to die and in the interval to eat and drink, to dance and sing, to marry and beget children."

Colby Library Quarterly 157

"But this is simply materialism," cried the Philosopher.
"Why do you say *but*?" replied Pan.
"It is sheer unredeemed animalism," continued his visitor.
"It is any name you please to call it," replied Pan.
"You have proved nothing," the Philosopher shouted.
"What can be sensed requires no proof."
"You leave out the new thing," said the Philosopher. "You leave out brains. I believe in mind above matter, thought above emotion, spirit above flesh."
"Of course you do," said Pan, and he reached for his oaten pipe.
The Philosopher ran to the opening of the passage and thrust Caitilin aside.
"Hussy," said he fiercely to her, and he darted out.
As he went up the rugged path he could hear the pipes of Pan, calling and sobbing and making high merriment on the air.

Nothing demonstrates the fantast's skill better than this extract. The atmosphere of an enchanted world is so brilliantly sustained that a conversation between an archetypal philosopher and an old shaggy god disputing for custody of a demurely naked Irish girl goes forward without any sense of unreality. Real fantasy is not fiction, it is heightened reality, reality free from the inhibiting conventions of realism. Note that the dialogue itself is neither inflated nor restrained. It makes no false rhetorical gestures, it is miraculously real, springing organically from the pressure of the situation. Its humor too is superbly spontaneous, from the judicial image of the Philosopher spearing an epigram on his forefinger to the timing of Pan's final formidable gesture.

No wonder we feel the tears of things when, towards the end of the book, we find this intrepid cerebral adventurer trapped and confined in a dark cell asking himself sadly, "Can one's mind go to prison with one's body?"

Around the Philosopher is assembled a number of other vivid characterizations; the policemen, in one of the most hilarious sequences in modern fiction, exhibit that massive fumbling ineptitude that Stephens reserves for his policemen; the children are instinct with that unabashed yet wondering innocence that we recall in Seamus Beg of the poems; the leprechauns enjoy an elemental vitality that seems to energize their whole fantastic world; but in Meehawl Stephens caught miraculously a certain attitude of drollness, an amused tolerance in the presence of a crotchety genius that anyone who knows the Irish countryman

158 Colby Library Quarterly

closely cannot fail to recognize. This is to say nothing of the impressive figures of the two gods wherein are mirrored for all time, on one hand, the anguished loneliness of the esthete and, on the other, the grievous dignity of the unloved sensualist.

Yet, however true these observations may be, they fall pitifully short of explaining the miracle of invention that is *The Crock of Gold*. There is that about true fantasy, a feeling in the air, elusive airy, magical—the word cannot be avoided. It is a quality that defies logic just as the happy dream defies any effort to render it in words. It is this quality which makes *The Crock of Gold* endure, though its philosophy be discredited and its occasional flaws of structure be dissected by a hundred pedants. In *Ave*, George Moore came close to catching the rare elfin atmosphere that Stephens's book evokes:

Suddenly the songs of the birds were silenced by the sound of a lyre; Apollo and his muses appeared on the hillside; for in those stories the gods and mortals mixed in delightful comradeship, the mortals not having lost all trace of their "divine" origin, and the gods themselves being the kind of beneficent gods that live in Arcady.

He was, in fact, writing of the now neglected stories of AE, but one feels justified in stealing them to pay right tribute to the curious enchanted genius of James Stephens, as he passes on steadily towards immortality.



A DAY IN DODGSONLAND

By DANIEL F. KIRK

THE first draft of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was composed on July 4th, 1862, one hundred years ago. Soon after Professor Cary, editor of the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, asked me to write an article commemorating this memorable event, I began to make plans for telling all of the essential facts surrounding what happened on that July afternoon. But I eventually came to realize that the facts have already been presented so often and well by Lewis Carroll's biographers that to