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Lady Gregory: "The Book of the People"

by MAUREEN MURPHY

LADY GREGORY once wrote of herself, "I think sometimes that my life has been a series of enthusiasms" (Robinson, 340). If that is so, one of her abiding enthusiasms was folklore. Her interest in folklore can be dated to her "Emigrant's Notebook" (1884); however, it was her friendship with W. B. Yeats that stimulated her to begin to collect the folklore of her Kiltartan district.

When they met in London in the spring of 1894, Lady Gregory, impressed with the Sligo folklore in *The Celtic Twilight*, turned to her own Clare-Galway neighbors. She described her early collecting efforts in an unpublished lecture she called "The Continuity of Folklore":

But now I began to enquire sincerely and with a desire to know and knowledge came to my hand. That was 15 or 16 years ago. I thought I might help Mr. Yeats whose work I admired so much to make up another little book, for he was living chiefly in London then. I began filling a copy book with what I heard. These copy books have grown through the years. I have them of different colours according to the difference of the content (brown for visions, terra cotta for history and legend). I may say what the requisites are for any of you thinking of beginning the work, endless patience, some leisure and a good memory. I have cultivated my memory to be as it were phonographic for such things as visions and beliefs and legends. I have done this at the cost of sacrificing other things. I forget names and dates and the multiplication table and all useful things.¹

During his first summer at Coole (1897), Yeats began the folklore expeditions with Lady Gregory that he described in *Dramatis Personae 1896-1902*: "Finding that I could not work and thinking the open air salutary, Lady Gregory brought me from cottage to cottage collecting folklore" (Yeats, *Dramatis*, 18). Lady Gregory recorded in her diary for that summer:

We searched for folklore. I gave over all I had collected and took him looking for more. And whoever came to the door, fish woman or beggar or farmer I would get on the subject and if I found the stories worth having would call him down that he might have them firsthand. (Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 313)

By the end of 1897 she could report to her friend Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, "If you see the *Nineteenth Century* look at W. Yeats' paper, the result of his stay here last summer and the first of a series. He is a genius and will go far."²

1. Lady Gregory, "The Continuity of Folklore," unpublished lecture, unsigned, undated, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation. Some material from this lecture appears in the Preface to "Sea Stories" in *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, 15.

2. Letter to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, January 9, 1898, Berg Collection. The Yeats article was probably W. B. Yeats, "The Prisoners of the Gods," *The Nineteenth Century* (January 1898), pp. 91-104.

The harvest of Lady Gregory's early collecting included the supernatural folklore she supplied W. B. Yeats for the 1902 edition of *The Celtic Twilight*, stories about the nineteenth-century Connacht poet Anthony Raftery for Douglas Hyde's *Abhráin atá Leagtha ar an Reachtuire* (1903), and other Raftery lore for her article "The Poet Raftery" (1901) and a chapter of *Poets and Dreamers* (1902).³ In addition she collected Fionn MacCumhaill legends and the folk history that became the substance of *The Kiltartan History Book* (1909, 1926), the work she called "The Book of the People."⁴

From the dated items in her notebooks, we know that Lady Gregory collected the legends for *The Kiltartan History Book* between August 1898 and March 1923 or 1924.⁵ Who were her informants during those years? First her household and her tenants. When she was in residence at Coole, her tenants found their way to her for help of all kinds and she heard stories in return. She appears to have been on good terms with her neighbors and that relationship was a source of satisfaction to her. A measure of those good terms was the peace around Coole even during the most violent times when other big houses in the area—including her own family's Roxborough—were threatened or destroyed. Concerned about maintaining her tenants' loyalty, she waited twenty years to publish *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920).

She was, of course, a woman of her class: Anglo-Irish, Protestant, and landed—though not, strictly speaking, a landowner herself—and those things influenced the rapport between collector and informant. Elizabeth Coxhead was probably correct when she wrote in her Introduction to the Coole edition of *Visions and Beliefs* that tales were bowdlerized for her and that certain kinds of tales, those about wicked landlords, for instance, are generally absent from her collections.⁶

Many stories came to Lady Gregory at her doorstep from regular visitors to Coole like Curley the Piper, Power the Basketmaker, and Mary the Dance, whom Lady Gregory called Wandering Mary and who achieved literary immortality as Yeats's Crazy Jane.⁷ Other informants were those she met along country roads near Coole. She even collected folklore in London drawing rooms, stories that made up the "Folklore in Politics: Mr. Gladstone and Ireland" in her memoir *Seventy Years*.

3. Lady Gregory was responsible for several essays in the second edition of *The Celtic Twilight* (1902): "Mortal Help," "Dust Hath Closed Helen's Eye," "And Fair, Fierce Women," "Aristotle of the Books," "The Queen and the Fool," "The Friend of the People of the Fairy," and "Dreams that Have no Mortal." These essays appear in manuscript form in Lady Gregory's copy books and memoirs. See July 15, 1899 letter from Lady Gregory to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, "There is a little paper of mine 'Irish Visions' in the last *Spectator*. I have got a good deal, but I am going to hand it over to our best young writer, Yeats for a new edition of his *Celtic Twilight*," Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation.

4. Lady Gregory used the phrase "book of the people" first in *The White Cockade* (1905); she used it again in a note to the second edition of *The Kiltartan History Book* (1926). Yeats used the phrase in his poem "Coole and Ballylee, 1931."

5. Lady Gregory dates "An Old Man's Prophecy" as 1923 in the 1926 edition of *The Kiltartan History Book*; however, it is dated 1924 in her Journal.

6. If there were any tensions between Lady Gregory and her tenants, it was less her position as chatelaine of Coole than her position as daughter in a family with a local reputation for Souperism. Lady Gregory threatened George Moore with libel when he suggested in an early draft of *Hail and Farewell* that appeared in *The English Review* (1914) that she herself was a Souper.

7. Anne Gregory gives her readers a glimpse of those collecting sessions with Curley the Piper and the Basketmaker in her reminiscence of Coole (A. Gregory, 116).

Finally, Lady Gregory made collecting trips to the Workhouse in Gort (1902, 1906), in Galway (1902), and in Oughteraard (1902) and to the townlands in Slieve Echtge near her own family's Roxborough home. The stories she collected along the slopes of Slieve Echtge are particularly important because it was folklore collected as living tradition in a rural community, not as fragments from travelling people or from workhouse inmates living away from their own communities, living in the past.

Lady Gregory collected stories for *The Kiltartan History Book* from Irish-speaking as well as from English-speaking informants. Her first five years of collecting (1897–1902) were the years she was more energetically involved with the work of the Gaelic League. She developed a proficiency in reading and translating Irish, but she had some trouble understanding spoken Irish and used an interpreter to collect from Irish-speaking informants (Murphy, 147). If she collected in Irish, she transcribed all of the Irish stories into English, for the only Irish items in her notebooks are translation exercises and Irish poems and songs, most of which appear, in her Kiltartan dialect, in *The Kiltartan Poetry Book* and *Poets and Dreamers*. Yeats credited her experience of writing out the stories she collected with helping to develop that dialect. "Every night she wrote out what we heard in the dialect of the cottages. She wrote, if memory does not deceive me, 200,000 words, discovering that vivid English she was the first to use upon the stage" (Yeats, *Autobiography*, 267).

It is impossible to know the extent to which Lady Gregory edited the stories she heard from her informants. She claimed the right to praise the 1926 edition of *The Kiltartan History Book*, because "there is not in it one word of my own: all comes from the lips of the people" (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 147). We can examine the sixty-one stories for which there are manuscript versions to see that she did reproduce the texts faithfully; however, she departed from usual folklore methodology in two respects: to protect the identity of her neighbors she did not give the names of her informants and—the more serious change—she took parts of different versions of stories about a mythological or an historical character or event and combined them into a single narrative. "Grania" (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 71–72), for example, a short section of seventeen lines, is a composite story taken from the accounts of three different informants: from an unidentified old woman in the Gort Workhouse, from Power the Basketmaker, and from Herrigan, an old man from Moycullen, Co. Galway.⁸

The narratives she gathered had a purpose for Lady Gregory beyond their importance as a collection of oral tradition. She used the stories to create a bridge to the past and to define the history of her Kiltartan people by providing an insight into "myth in the making." Her twenty stories about Daniel O'Connell demonstrate this process. She collected O'Connell stories from informants who had actually seen O'Connell as well as from those who knew O'Connell only from legends.

8. This is the case with at least eleven episodes in *The Kiltartan History Book*: "Old Times in Ireland," "The Fianna," "Grania," "Conan," "Mannanan," "Usheen and Patrick," "Witty Wife," "The Goban's Secret," "Wisps," "German Prisoners," and "In Bounoparte's Time."

Recognizing the heroic process, she wrote in 1909 when O'Connell had been dead some sixty years:

The stories of him show more than any other how swiftly myths and traditions already in the air may gather around a memory much loved and much spoken of. I have known many who had seen and heard him speak, and yet he has already been given a miraculous birth, and the power of a saint is on its way to him. I would like those who come after me to keep their ears open to the growth of legend about him who was once my husband's friendly enemy, and afterwards his honoured friend. (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 149)⁹

The miraculous birth Lady Gregory mentioned ("O'Connell's Birth," Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 99–100) is one of the characteristics shared by folk and epic heroes. Others include extraordinary attributes: usually strength, skill or cleverness, and death at the height of his power. Frequently the place of burial of the hero is left uncertain in order to suggest that the hero is not dead at all but will return in a time of need.

The stories Lady Gregory collected about O'Connell describe his ability to save himself and others. He makes the messenger who brings a suspicious gift open the parcel; it explodes, killing him rather than O'Connell (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 100). He turns the shoes on his horses to confuse his pursuers (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 89) and, in one of the most famous legends, he switches cups when a servant girl tells him in Irish that his cup has been poisoned (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 101–02). The story has a special irony because, while O'Connell himself was a native speaker of Irish, he discouraged its use, believing that English was a more practical language for commerce and politics.

Language skill is also the critical element in the O'Connell clever-lawyer legends, many of which are similar to those told about the American clever lawyer—also a liberator and an O'Connell contemporary—Abraham Lincoln. They are stories which demonstrate the hero's ability to win his case for his innocent client tried against a guilty, but powerfully backed, adversary. One legend describes how O'Connell tricked a shopkeeper into a bet that disqualified his testimony as a witness (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 101); in another O'Connell pleads that the letter of the law has been met and wins his case (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 103).¹⁰

Lady Gregory's O'Connell legends usually neglect to mention his skill at cross-examining, a skill corroborated by contemporary accounts of O'Connell at the Bar. The exception is "The Fight at Carrickshook," which begins with a description of an episode of agrarian unrest in 1831 in Carrickshook, County Kilkenny, which resulted in the death of fourteen policemen, and shifts to another O'Connell defense in the Doneraile conspiracy (Gwynn, 187–90). In both trials it was O'Connell's cross-examination of the Crown informers that saved his clients, but it is easy to identify elements in the Doneraile trial that made it memorable in the folk mind: O'Connell called out of retirement to defend

9. A measure of the importance of O'Connell in the folk mind is the number of stories that have accumulated about him. There are more stories about O'Connell in the Department of Folklore archives at University College, Dublin, than there are about any other historical figure (MacNeill, 348).

10. The legend is a version of Motif J1161, Literal Pleading.

innocent men against his rival the Solicitor-General Doherty, O'Connell's race from Derrynane to Cork, O'Connell's call for bread and milk which he ate while interrupting the proceedings with shouts of "that is no law," and finally the judge's ruling that acquitted O'Connell's clients (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 106).

Both oral tradition (Lady Gregory's collection as well as other folk accounts) and conventional historical records celebrate O'Connell's cleverness before the Bar, but O'Connell's greatest political triumph—Catholic Emancipation—meant little to the Irish countryman. In Lady Gregory's "The '48 Time," her informant says, "He got us Emancipation, but what is the use of that?" (Gregory, *Kiltartan*, 111).¹¹

A countryman might have said, "what is the use of that?" about a hero whose death failed to conform to the heroic model, for the Irish hero, like all epic and folk heroes, traditionally reaches his apotheosis at his death, at the height of his power, fighting against overwhelming odds on behalf of his people. While O'Connell's horror of violence resulted in his efforts to establish moral force rather than physical force as a means to achieve political and social reform, at least two contemporary poets saw O'Connell as another Patrick Sarsfield. Raftery wrote in his O'Connellite, "Ar Election na Gaillimhe" (Galway Election):

Ach d'iompuigh an rotha, ní sásadh dúinn aon rud
Gan seasamh (le) chéile 's na Sasanaigh 'claoidh

(But the wheel has turned, and there is no satisfaction for us,
without standing together and destroying the Sassanachs.), (Hyde, 262–63)

and at the time of the Clare election (1828), when O'Connell defeated Vesey Fitzgerald and became the first Catholic elected to Parliament, Owen O'Curry wrote words to the traditional air "Sheela ni Guire":

D'fhág Véisi Mac Gearailt faoi tharcuisne ar lár
Agus Dónmhnaíl O'Conaill i gcumann 's i bhfeidhriocht
Agus pósta le snódh leat, a Shiglhe ní Gadhra

(Vesey Fitzgerald despised and overthrown,
And Daniel O'Connell in love and pride
And wedded in beauty with you, O Sheela ni Guire.). (Hyde, 266, 267)

The union of Daniel O'Connell with Sheela ni Guire (an allegorical name for Ireland) is an important element in O'Connell and the heroic process. Proinsias MacCana had described the importance of this ritual marriage:

In Irish tradition it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this idea of the land as its sovereignty conceived in the form of a woman. From the beginning of history and before, until the final dissolution of the Irish social order in the seventeenth century, traditional orthodox thought was dominated by this image of the *puella senilis*, the woman who is literally as old as the hills yet endlessly restored through union with her rightful mate. (MacCana, 7)

11. The American traveller Asenath Nicholson recorded the voice of a skeptical countryman who stood watching the bonfire celebrating O'Connell's release from prison in 1844. "It's many a long day that we have been working for that same to do somethin' for us, but not a hap'orth of good has come to a cratur of us yet. We're atin' the praties today and not a divil of us has got off the rad since he began his discoorse" (Nicholson, 113).

After the seventeenth century the myth of the union of the old woman with her rightful mate is the myth of the restoration of Ireland to the Catholic Gael, not through sacred marriage but through martyrdom. An essential aspect of this myth is its mode—violence—and its vision—apocalyptic.

A final Armageddon, a feature of the apocalyptic vision, is a Counter-Reformation phenomenon. In the political turmoil of seventeenth-century Ireland, poets enumerated the Gaels' grievances, pointed to millenarian prophecies for signs of the date and place of the Armageddon, and counted on God to intervene on the side of the Gael. In the late eighteenth century two particular prophecies strengthened this apocalyptic tradition in the Irish countryside: the prophecy of St. Columcille and Pastorini's Prophecy. These prophecies continued to appear in folklore and literature through the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century.

Looking at the allusions to the prophecies in Raftery's poems, one can see their importance to this mythic view of history. In her introduction to *Poets and Dreamers* (1903), Lady Gregory said of Raftery's poems, "It is hard to say where history ends in them and religion and poetry begins" (Gregory, *Poets*, 20). This mingling of history and religion through the medium of poetry is most striking in Raftery's poems describing contemporary historical events, poems that comprise their own folk history of nineteenth-century Ireland: "The White Boys," "The Catholic Rent," "O'Connell's Victory," "Barney Richards," "The Dispute with the Bush," "The Cause a-Pleading," and "How Long Has it Been Said?" The poems share a number of characteristics: a call for courage or a marshalling of the Gael expressed in formulaic language, an assurance that God will bless the Gael, an allusion to the prophecies (Columcille, Pastorini, the Gospel of St. John or the Book of Revelation), a belief that the prophecy invoked would be fulfilled in a particular year (most often a year with a nine in it), and an anticipation of bonfires in celebration of the Catholic Gael's victory over the English Protestants (or Orangemen).

Lady Gregory appears to have been impressed with the importance of the prophecies to the "Book of the People," for they became associated with her vision of Irish folk history. The prophecies that appear in her translations of Raftery and the mention of the prophecies in six of the stories she collected about twentieth-century events, World War I and the Irish War of Independence, demonstrate the tenacity of belief in the folk memory and the degree to which oral tradition continues to offer an explanation or a context for a contemporary event. They illustrate what Lady Gregory described as the "continuity of tradition." "Folklore is of importance to the whole world if only as a testimony to continuity, that continuity that is in all of nature" (Gregory, "Continuity").

In her own plays, *The Rising of the Moon* and *The White Cockade*, there are traditional references to the defeat of the strong by the weak and to the coming change in the social order when Irish and English roles would be reversed. Early in *The Rising of the Moon* the Sergeant lectures Policeman X about duty. "Haven't we the whole country depending on us to keep law and order? It's those that are down would be up and those that are up would be down, if it wasn't for us"

(Gregory, *Plays*, 22). Later after the ballad singer/rebel has engaged the Sergeant's deeper loyalty, he is let escape. He takes leave of the Sergeant saying:

Well, good-night, comrade, and thank you. You did me a good turn tonight and I'm obliged to you. Maybe I'll be able to do as much for you when the small rise up and the big fall down . . . when we all change places at the Rising (*waves his hand and disappears*) of the Moon. (Gregory, *Plays*, 30)

Lady Gregory repeats some of the same dialogue in an exchange about winning and losing between Patrick Sarsfield and a Williamite soldier in *The White Cockade*. When the Williamite says that it is best to be on the winning side, Sarsfield replies: "The winning side—which is it? We think we know, but heaven and hell know better. Ups and downs" (Gregory, *Plays*, 153). Later, warned that King James will not escape, Sarsfield calls up the same image and alludes to the traditional song of rebellion that gives its title to Lady Gregory's most popular play. "Who knows? There are ups and downs. A King is not as a common man—the moon has risen . . ." (Gregory, *Plays*, 154).

In *The Unicorn from the Stars*, a 1908 collaboration with W. B. Yeats, the beggar interprets the meaning of Martin Hearne's vision as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Columcille. Johnny Bocach believes that Martin's League of the Unicorn is the force that will destroy the English power over Ireland. When the coachman Thomas Ahearne threatens Johnny Bocach and the beggars with jail, Johnny responds:

Filthy troop, is it? Mind yourself! The change is coming.
The pikes will be up and the traders will go down.
(*All seized Thomas and sing.*)
O, the lion shall lose his strength,
And the bracket—thistle pine,
And the harp shall sound sweet, sweet at length
Between the eight and nine. (Yeats, *Plays*, 235)

Lady Gregory's use of the myth of restoration in her folk plays was a recognition of the power of that myth in Irish folk history. Its significance to the vision of Irish history offered in her *Kiltartan History Book* demonstrates the way that folklore can reflect the attitudes and aspirations of a people, particularly a "submerged" or marginal population (Dorson, 232). In the case of Irish folk history, the legends illustrate the ambiguity of a folk mind that, on the one hand, counts Daniel O'Connell—advocate of nonviolent constitutional nationalism—as its most popular folk hero and, on the other hand, sustains a tradition of violent, physical-force nationalism.

Lady Gregory herself avoided the politics of nationalism. She preferred instead to say that she was ". . . not working for Home Rule but preparing for it" (Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 54). Her work for Ireland, however: the Abbey Theatre, the Irish language movement, the Hugh Lane pictures, and especially the folklore—her collections from the oral tradition of her people and her gathering and retelling from manuscript sources the hero tales of Cuchulain and of Fionn and the Fiana—contributed significantly to the cause of constitutional nationalism, for basic to that movement is a national dignity and self-respect.

In his poem "Paupers," Austin Clarke describes the poet wandering along the main street of Gort, passing a laneway and stopping, as if in a dream, by the ruins of the Workhouse. Along with the ghosts of paupers, the ghost of Lady Gregory appears:

A lady came from seven woods, a lake.
 Bringing the inmates twist, snuff, apples.
 She took their minds away in a basket.
 Left them on Feast-days a curranty cake. (Clarke. 26)

It is an arresting and bitter image of a woman whose record deserves better. Take their mind she did, but to make their words imperishable and to give the new Ireland for which she worked tirelessly a sense of the wealth of its folklore and a continuity with its past.

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