

Standish O'Grady

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Standish O'Grady (1846-1928), was a historian, novelist, dramatist and journalist. It was as editor of the "Kilkenny Moderator" that he came to Kilkenny and here one of his great Celtic Dramas was performed in a grassy meadow beside the Nore.

He was a Limerick man who was educated at Trinity College, Dublin. He became a barrister but never practised turning instead to the history and literature of Ireland for which he developed an ardent love while yet at the university.

ROMANTIC INTEREST

His was a romantic interest in our storied past. So, he decided to write a history conceived on imaginative lines. The first volume of "The History of Ireland —The Heroic Period", appeared in 1878 and is regarded by Ernest Boyd as "the starting point of the literary revival". O'Grady himself expressed as his intention the reconstruction "by imaginative process of the life led by our ancestors".

As he developed his themes, his heroes and heroines became living people to him. This first volume dealt with the Cuculainn saga, but it was not widely bought and read so O'Grady turned to historical novels based largely on the Elizabethan period.

An obvious subject here was the escape of Red Hugh O'Donnell from Dublin Castle. This he did in "The Flight of the Eagle" — a tale that won popular approval.

A JOURNALIST

He also was a journalist in the editorial chair of "The Daily Express" in Dublin. It was work of the same type that brought him to Kilkenny and it was this local link that Dr. Gwynn detailed. A Unionist, with a long family tradition in a privileged class, Standish O'Grady firmly believed that the aristocracy, the Protestant Ascendancy, were the natural leaders of the people. The land

owners, he realised, had shamefully failed, and these he indicted in his "Crisis in Ireland".

But in Kilkenny he found the atmosphere he wanted and the kind of patron he admired in that great and noble woman, Ellen Lady Desart. So, in 1898 he arrived here to edit the bi-weekly "Kilkenny Moderator" which he was to use as an organ for preaching his ideas and a platform where he and his friends could express themselves freely.

And worthwhile men these proved to be. It is said that the first Christmas issue contained contributions by W. B. Yeats, A. E. and T. W. Rolleston. But unfortunately his association with the paper was not of long duration because his special talent for denunciation landed him in libel proceedings and he had to return to Dublin where he continued till 1906 with the publication of "The All Ireland Review" which had been initiated here to encourage free speech and constructive ideas.

AMUSING LETTER

There is an amusing letter that comments on O'Grady's sojourn in Kilkenny. Written by George Russell (AE) to W. B. Yeats, it asks: "Do you know that O'Grady has gone to Kilkenny? He has taken over "The Kilkenny Moderator" and is going to make it an organ for "All Ireland". How are the mighty hurled from their seats!

"You are mixed up with '98; O'Grady edits a local bi-weekly paper. I explain to starved looking peasants how advantageously they could buy pigs under the benign influence of a rural Bank."

But though he might laugh at Kilkenny and its local paper, AE admired and respected its editor. He wrote—"I brood over the books which most profoundly affected me. I find none which excited my imagination more than Standish O'Grady's epical narrative of Cuculainn . . . As I read I felt exalted as one who learns he is among the children of Kings".

It was the other great tale of ancient days he



dramatised for presentation by a group under the patronage of Lady Desart. This was called "The Masque of Finn", intended for presentation in the open air. The author himself wrote of it:

"The Masque was acted in Aut Even on the banks of the Nore. The stage was raised upon a level meadow behind which rose a wooded ridge. The wood was illuminated with lights largely from the branches of the trees, for the acting was by night, and here were the tiring booths of the actors whence they came down and onto the stage.

Local talent supplied, and supplied very well, all the acting that was necessary under the leadership of the late Captain Otway Cuffe, whose early death I believe, a national calamity. Then we had real hounds which helped much to deepen the illusion — two splendid Russian boar hounds, whose yowling in the woods kept us all reminded that we were dealing with a race of hunters.

Masque presented. I told her at the time that she should regard it as her property, and that no one should re-enact it without her permission.

IN ST. ENDA'S

Re-enacted it certainly was, and perhaps this production is as dramatically interesting as the first was picturesquely attractive, for in 1909, the Masque was performed in St. Enda's school with none other than Denis Gwynn in the principal part. Our lectures let his mind travel back over the 60 years between to recall his surprise on being chosen for the heroic young Finn, the promised deliverer of tired, starving and nigh hopeless men without a leader.

"I was far from being a figure for heroic parts" commented the speaker "But it was a most exhilarating experience and I still remember some of the dramatic lines".

Also worthy of memory was the behaviour of the Head of the school after the first performance which found him tongue-tied. Patrick Pearse remembered him-

self as the shy young man bashful about the compliments. But after the second performance attended by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory (possibly), Padraic Colum, and the celebrated author himself. Pearse was ready with a speech in which he so clearly drew comparison between the play and the present, that he left no doubt that he considered Ireland was in a similar mood of dejection and despair awaiting a deliverer.

Dr. Gwynn commented "It dawned on me then that not only did Pearse long for political martyrdom as a national hero. He actually believed that he might himself fill the heroic role that had inspired him so much".

SYMBOLIC MEANING

The author — "seated in the audience with his grey hair and piercing eyes, and his general air of personal distinction —" being asked to reply, stated that like Pearse he noted the symbolic meaning.

"He hoped that it might presage a new age in which the young men and women of Ireland would once again lead the lives of free people on the mountains."

Smithstown Axe-head

A flat decorated bronze axe-head was found during the operation of removing a mound with a bulldozer about June, 1968. Finder James McDermot. The axe-head was acquired by Rothe House Museum in June, 1969. The site it situated in the townland of Smithstown Upper, about one mile from Thomastown on the Kilfane Road, on the lands of Mr. Michael Carroll.

Axeheads made of bronze were used as utilitarian tools, like hatchets, throughout the Bronze Age, from about 2,000 B.C. to 700 B.C. or later. They were originally modelled on the stone axehead but with less bulk so as to economise the valuable metal. For this reason they are described as Flat Axeheads and also to distinguish them from the subsequent elaborated types which culminated in the Socketed Axehead.