

John Banim in Windgap Cottage

By MRS. T. G. LANIGAN

LAST year we were privileged to hear an interesting account of John Banim from Dean Wyse-Jackson, of Cashel. I have tried to discover something of his later life in Kilkenny, that is, the period he spent in Windgap Cottage in the parish of St. John's, from 1835 till his death in 1842.

You have already heard from Mr. Wyse-Jackson of Banim's early struggles as an art teacher in Kilkenny; of his tragic love affair with one of his pupils, the brutal refusal which resulted in the girl's death and of Banim's sudden collapse. From this period dated the spinal affliction which visited him intermittently all his life, and which was eventually to reduce him to the state of a cripple.

After his marriage to Miss Ruth in 1822 he set out for London to make his name in literature. He succeeded in doing so in spite of the poverty, ill-health and misfortune which dogged his footsteps during his whole life. We find him, then, in Paris in 1835, successful, certainly, but wearied by the unending struggle against illness and poverty. On the advice of his doctors he had moved to France, where he encountered a series of those misfortunes which seemed to be his lot in life. The bankruptcy of his publisher, a severe attack of cholera, the death of his son from diphtheria, the death of his mother, to whom he was particularly devoted — all these misfortunes, together with the steadily progressive paralysis, had reduced Banim to a state of misery and dejection which alarmed his brother, Michael. Early in 1835, Michael wrote to beg him to come home to Kilkenny, and John agreed. He was now a broken man, unable to walk and in almost constant pain. The following rather beautiful letter which he wrote to Michael gives an idea of the nostalgia which he felt for Kilkenny as a quiet place to end his days:—

Paris.

April 30, 1835.

My dear Michael.

What I require is this: I must have a little garden, not overlooked, for with eyes on me I could not enjoy it. Herein paths to be, or afterwards formed, as to enable three persons to

walk abreast. If not paths, grass-plots formed out of its beds, for with the help of your neck or arm, dear Michael, I want to try and put my limbs under me: this is the reason for my last, and, to you, perhaps, strange request, but, indeed, there is a reason connected with my bodily and mental state, for all the previous matters to be sought for in my contemptible abode, and which I have so minutely particularised.

If possible, I would wish my little house to have a sunny aspect; sun into all possible windows every day that the glorious material God shines. I am a shivering being and require, and rejoice in, his invigorating rays as does the drooping, sickly plant.

If this little house could be within view of our Nore stream, along the banks of which you and I have so often bounded, but along which I shall never bound again, it would enhance my pleasure.

I will begin to go home on the 10th of next month; travelling is to me a most expensive and tedious process. Every league of the road will take a shackle off me. My mind is fixed on a sunny nook in Kilkenny, where I may set myself down and die easily, or live a little longer as happily as I can . . .

Well, Michael promptly set about finding the required "sunny nook" in Kilkenny, and his choice fell on Windgap Cottage, on the Dublin Road. John set out from Paris with his wife and daughter, on May 10, 1835, on the long and tedious journey back to Ireland.

The journey was not without its misfortunes: at Boulogne Mrs. Banim contracted typhus fever which delayed them for a month, during which at one time her life was despaired of. They rested some days in London and finally reached Dublin towards the end of July. Both in London and Dublin, Banim was received with considerable acclaim by the literary world. His friends gathered round the poor invalid; a special performance of two of his plays was given in the Theatre Royal, Dublin, on July 16, 1835. The Lord Lieutenant attended. Banim reclined on a sofa in a private box. An address of welcome was spoken by one of the performers. The last stage of the journey to Kilkenny took three days by post-chaise, the invalid being by this time too exhausted to travel by the public coach. Early in September, 1835, John Banim was received in Kilkenny with a warm welcome from his fellow citizens, who presented him with an inscribed silver snuff-box containing £85, and an address of welcome embossed on satin. The meeting was held at the Rose Inn. The address was moved by Mr. E. Egan and seconded by Mr. Hackett. The value of the snuff-



box was £5; it was later presented to the Corporation of Kilkenny, in whose possession it still remains.

Banim took up residence at Windgap with his wife and daughter, the cottage was a happy choice of Michael's. Windgap must have been a favourite spot with the brothers, for a minute description of the view of the town and river from the summit of Windgap Hill appears in "The Mayor of Windgap," a joint publication which was published in 1832. A second very beautiful description of the same view from the river bank, the Lacken Walk, appears in "The Fetches," a story of John's which was published in 1825. This story was later dramatised, translated into French and produced in Boulogne during Banim's residence in that town.

The "sunny aspect" he found in an upstairs room with a window facing south and a superb view of the river and the town. This was John's own room in the house where he slept and did his writing. The garden was not overlooked and, indeed, to this day is only overlooked by one single window. It was screened from passers-by on the road by a high wall in which was a wooden door. The high wall still exists except for a small portion which has been replaced by railings. Banim, being by this time a cripple, was very sensitive to the curiosity of strangers. Michael tells us that when seated in his garden the outside passengers on the stage coach could look down on him in passing. On one occasion he overheard the driver, while pointing him out to his passengers with his whip, say, "He'll never see the bushes an inch higher." A passenger replied, "He's booked for the whole way, and no mistake." Banim's wry comment was, "My exhibitor did not deserve praise for superior discrimination, when the entry on the way-bill was so legible." But he contrived to have himself removed from the garden when the stage coach was expected after this incident.

The last requirement was "the garden with broad paths," and in the spring of 1836 he set about planting this. He hoped some day to walk on the paths with the help of a friend on either side, but this wish was never granted to him. In the meantime, he found great pleasure in directing from his bathchair the work of construction. The garden which he made was probably on the site of the present front garden, inside the railings; the eastern wing of the house which now juts out on this patch of ground was probably not added until about 1853. A visitor to Banim describes the garden as a small courtyard bordered by a trimly-kept plot of garden ground. A gravel walk ran round a circular flower bed and a single tree stood at either end of the enclosure.

Various neighbours were engaged voluntarily or otherwise, according to the state of the Banim finances to push the bath-chair around the walks, as motion and air for a portion of each day were prescribed for the sufferer. Mr. Michael Banim, who lives at present in Barrack Street, describes how his grandfather, one Martjn Phelan, used to wash and dress Banim, carry him down from his bedroom and put him in the bathchair. He would wheel him up to the top of Altimount, a spot he was very fond of, or to some other quiet place in the neighbourhood, where he would spend the morning.

In addition to the bath-chair he had a peculiar contraption which John himself called the "Shandaradan," a translation, he said, of its rattle and rumble as it went along. This was an old wheel-chair which seated two people side by side and a driver in front. It was drawn by a horse and held together by bits and pieces—the contrivance of one Geoffrey Grady, a neighbouring carpenter. In this conveyance, well supported by cushions and accompanied by his wife or his daughter, or a friend, for he was nervous of going out alone, the author drove abroad to pay calls.

In spite of his state of health—Michael tells us he suffered almost constant pain—Banim seems to have been fairly happy at Windgap. Shortly after he came to live there he received a pension from the Civil List of £150 per annum, and subsequently a further pension of £40 a year was granted to his daughter, Mary. This relieved John's more pressing financial worries. He was too ill to undertake any work requiring sustained effort; in his own words "I am now only fit for stringing loose and pawky verses together," but he did make some contributions to Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, wrote some verses and, finally, collaborated with Michael in producing a last novel, "Father Connell," which was published in 1842.

Many distinguished visitors found their way to the invalid of Windgap Cottage, among them Gerald Griffin, Richard Lalor Sheil, the Earl of Carliyle and the Lord Lieutenant, the Marquis of Normandy. Griffin was a close friend of Banim's since their early London days; he stayed at the cottage for a fortnight, during which the poor invalid forgot his pains in the pleasure of recollecting happier times. Together they drove out every Sunday in the Shandaradan. Griffin, who was tall, "with his long shanks doubled up." In the evenings, gathering together the more intellectually-minded citizens of Kilkenny, they talked of old times and of literature. John recited his own poetry, and Griffin sang his (Banim's) songs. A friend who was present during this fortnight comments, "He seemed happier than I ever knew him, even in

his best days." Banim was at this time 38 and Griffen 33, but within six years, both authors were to die.

On the whole, however, Banim found little intellectual companionship in Kilkenny. He was saddened by the poverty and misery he found on his return to Ireland, and particularly by the low state of literature in the country. In Paris he was made much of; his soirees were attended by the elite of the French capital, whilst in Ireland he complained of the neglect of those who had the means but not the will to make his sojourn in his native place more agreeable. The people were but slowly recovering from the darkness and ignorance of the penal times; poverty and squalor were everywhere evident; the literary revival of the forties had not yet come, but even in more prosperous times, Ireland has never been noted for her appreciation of her men of letters.

That the people were proud of him, however, there is no doubt. He was known affectionately in the neighbourhood as the "Mayor of Windgap," a title which he was not unwilling to accept. In 1835 one "P.W." waxed lyrical in the "Kilkenny Journal" on the subject of the occupant of Windgap. The poem is entitled "To Lacken Hill," and there are many verses. Here are two of them:—

Dear hill, set thy glories afloat,
 Bid the groves pour their minstrelry wild,
 Let thy warblers unite in one welcoming note
 To Banim—to nature's own child;
 Bid the zephyrs more gently to break
 'Mong the foliage encircling thy brow,
 That their whispers may court back the flush
 to his cheek,
 Blanched with sickness and suffering now.

Bid nature's self round thee rejoice
 At the laurels so gloriously won
 By the talents untiring—the richly-wrought mind
 Of her true and much-gifted son;
 Bid the pines from their loftiest spires,
 And the tall osiers shading the rivers,
 Re-echo in chorus with her living choirs
 The name of thy Banim forever.

The education of Ireland was a subject dear to the heart of both the Banim brothers. No doubt, they, themselves, acquired their knowledge with no little difficulty in those early days of the 19th century, so they determined that nothing they could do for the younger generation should be left undone. John paid frequent visits to what was then the new school in Windgap—the same school which has recently been vacated. It was built in 1809.

His own chair would be sent down in advance, piled with cushions, and there he would sit for hours lecturing and interrogating the boys and encouraging the bright ones. Before his death, he had plans made for light theatrical performances in connection with the school, for he believed that a high moral style of drama was the test of a country's greatness.

Typical of his sense of justice was the last letter which Banim wrote to the Press. It was written on July 20, 1842, and in it he thanks them for a complimentary criticism of "Father Connell," and protests strongly against the novel being attributed solely to him, thus giving no credit to his brother, Michael. It was true, in fact, that Michael wrote the major portion of "Father Connell," but under the direction and supervision of John. Indeed, so much effort did the latter put into the work that Michael was convinced that it shortened his life, and regretted having attempted it. The book is one of the most readable of Banims', the character of the lovable old priest being extremely well drawn. He was a Father O'Donnell, Parish Priest of St. John's in Banim's boyhood. Both the brothers attended his funeral, which is described in great detail in the book. Apart from the story, it contains a good deal of history and description of interest to Kilkenny folk. There is the pathetic description of Father Connell's efforts to build a school forty or fifty years earlier. He supplied the ragged children each with a wooden bowl in which they collected stones and sand from the highways and by-ways, and thus he managed to build a hut in which to educate his wretched congregation in defiance of the law. Then there is a minute description of George Buchanan's English Academy, where Banim went to school. It would appear to have been in Rothe House. The dominant note in the Irish reviews of the novel was relief that Irish life was portrayed as it really was rather than the highly-coloured improbable exaggerations which passed for descriptions of the Irish life of the period. The "Kilkenny Journal" said: "Banim was the first, the very first, to depict Irish life as it really is. He does not substitute absurd buffoonery for Irish humour, nor represent Irishmen as being all quarrelsome blackguards. Banim was the first to describe us as we are."

About a week after this last letter to the Press was written. Banim's illness took a serious turn and he died in Windgap Cottage on August 4, 1842, aged 44 years. He was buried beside his parents in St. John's burial ground in Maudlin Street. Strangely enough, since Michael outlived John by 32 years, there is no inscription on the tombstone to mark the burial place of John Banim. The only inscription is that placed there by the sons to the memory of their mother. The monument, an altar-tomb, is in a sad state of disrepair and will probably fall down very soon.

Windgap Cottage was part of the Pennyfeather Estate in Kilkenny, which also included property around Pennyfeather Lane. It is still in the possession of the descendants of the Pennyfeather family. The building originally consisted of two double-storied labourers' cottages, built probably sometime in the 18th century. In the early 19th century, Windgap was a thickly populated suburb with a self-contained community who referred to Kilkenny rather disparagingly as "the town below." The town below was, of course, entered by the Magdalen Gate in Maudlin Street. In spite of the four winds of heaven which blew, and still blow, down the valley, thus determining the apt name of the district, the inhabitants were celebrated for their longevity. The Dublin Road, which ran past the cottage, was much narrower then than it is now, as was also the hill leading down to Maudlin Street. A row of cottages stood on the river side of this hill in 1816. The eastern addition to Windgap Cottage was probably built on the site of Banim's garden about 1853; the western addition, that towards the town, some time after 1861.

After John Banim's death, the family left the cottage. His daughter, Mary, his last surviving child, was placed in a convent school in Waterford. She died of consumption two years later. Windgap Cottage was inhabited by a Thomas Hart, J.P., who was probably one Alderman Thomas Hart, who died in 1871. The cottage remained in the possession of the Hart family until about 1912, when they either died out or left the district. It had at least six different tenants between that and 1931, when it came into possession of the Lanigan family.

After Banim's death, the cottage was named Banim Cottage as a memorial of him, and this name persisted, along with the name Windgap, up to recent times. About 20 years ago, some tenant found his letters going astray owing to confusion with Windgap, near Callan, so he changed the name to Lacken. As there are now on the same road a Lacken Lodge, two Lacken Houses and Mount Lacken, it is high time the cottage reverted to its attractive old name of Windgap, or Bearna Gaoite.