
Castleconnell

by Kevin Hannan

— PART TWO —

Jn **An Essay on the Virtues of the Castle Connell Spa**, published in 1787 as an addendum to his **History of Limerick**, John Ferrar praises the curative powers of the spa waters and concluded his work with "a short extract" from an anonymous poem written at the riverside resort in 1783. The verses give a delightful picture of Castleconnell in its golden age, two hundred years ago:

"Hail Castle Connell! where incessantly
The Shannon pours her rapid, foaming stream,
Impatient to find out her native Sea.
O for a Shenstone's pencil, to describe
The spot where peace and health so much abound.
No gay parade contaminates thy shore,
No bright Rotunda; - but simplicity
Adorns thy glade, and blooms in full

perfection!
Happy the man who flies to Castle Connell,
And banishes each low and worldly thought,
Seeks in the shade to tranquilize his mind.
Here many a sage, and many a hero came,
To taste the spring-fountain of life and vigour!
Here many a generous, many a social soul,
Drank the full cup of pleasures innocent!
Here Hayes with his Celinda strayed,
while love
With every breeze was wafted to her ear!

While folly's sons sleep out their early hours,
How pleasant to forsake the arms of

sleep;
To view the rising sun purpling the skies,
To exhale the sweetness of the fragrant air,
And see all Nature growing to perfection?
Now to the spring repair, where, old and young,
In consultation meet, praising its virtues!
Maria' bloom-impaired, while her fond swain,
Warmly invokes the Naiad of the stream.
To give her back to life renewed and love.
Then we ascend to Westropp's mount and view
The Shannon winding through the verdant meads,
While Massy's bowers and groves enrich the prospect!
Beneath thy shade, how often have I



CASTLECONNELL.

"To lure the finny brood to leave their beds".

laid

My weary limbs, and gazed with transport round,
While Goldsmith's tale beguiled the fleeting time.

Halting to breathe the air of Castle Connell
We joy to see each friend - Soon round the board
With plenty crowned, we share convivial pleasure.
The Heavens serene, while temperate mirth bestows,
Of life, the greatest, best felicity!
The Sun in awful Majesty arrayed
Steals down the western sky, the silence reigns.
The Sportsman takes the opportunity,
To lure the finny brood to leave their beds,
They toss, they play, they rise to fall no more.
These are the scenes that give the zest to life,
These are the joys we find at Castle Connell."

INDUSTRY

It is remarkable that a greater use was not made of the power generated by the fifty foot fall in the river between the World's End and Newgarden. This may be explained, to some extent, by the wealth and independence of the riparian owners. The water mill at Clareview, however, was an exception. One of the many uses to which this enterprise was put in the last century was set out in the following article which appeared in the **Limerick Chronicle** of Sept. 1878:-

"The proprietor of the Clareview Saw Mill, near Castleconnell, begs to inform the nobility, gentry, farmers and traders that the above concern is now in active operation. Gentlemen can have their own timber cut into scantling. Gross timber can be drafted across the river from the Clare shore of the Shannon. Brush heads and turnery executed on the premises.

John Norton, Proprietor."

The quaint old industry of the river ferry was carried on further upstream. This service was a boon to anglers, and those having business at one side of the river or the other. Manoeuvring the ferryboat through the full flow of the river was a skilled operation, and during times of heavy floods, required strength and dexterity of a special order.

An extraordinary and unique feeling of the ferry was its operation, before the turn of the century, by a blind ferryman. A number of visitors of standing have commented on this amazing feat. M.J. Hurley, F.R.S.A., who visited Castleconnell in 1893, in his book, "**Through the Green Isle**", published two years afterwards, advises: "Before leaving we may remind visitors who desire to cross the Shannon at Castleconnell that they are likely to avail of the services of a blind - absolutely blind - ferryman. He has been making the passage safely for many years, and none need hesitate about using the ferry under his control".

No doubt the ferryman (Tom Enright) was a very brave man, but I give the palm to the courage of his patrons.

We had ferries, and stepping stones - and even stilt crossings - before we had bridges. The want of the latter amenity at Castleconnell was felt long before the 12th Battalion of the national army left us the gift of the present fine footbridge. The local people, and some of the more important visitors, broached the subject of a bridge to link up with the Clare shore on a number of occasions during the last century, but it was not until 1909 that a committee of prominent Castleconnell people was formed to pursue the matter. The **Limerick Chronicle** reported: "A meeting was held in the Stradbally National School, Castleconnell, to press the claim of the district for a bridge across the Shannon at Castleconnell. The following working committee was elected - Rev. P. McInerney P.P., Chairman; Rev. Mr. Mylie, Rector, Vice Chairman;

John Hartigan, Treasurer; W.F. Lee, Hon. Sec., Committee - S.C. Vansittart, Dr. Ryan, A. Story, D. O'Brien, D.C.; C. Coughlan, M.T. Keane, F. McCormack, G. Hobson, J. Barry, J. Hogg, Dennis Ahern and Michael Mackey".

Another effort to promote the fortunes of the district in the 1860s was made by the firm of Malcomson Brothers, of Portlaw, Co. Waterford, when they set up a peat briquette manufactory at Annaholy, on the eastern boundry of the parish. This industry was launched with such great promise that a row of workmen's dwellings was erected close to the factory. Despite an enormous investment the project did not prosper, and the ruins of the complex, which were to be seen up to a few years ago, told their own sad story.

SOME GREAT HOUSES

Fortunately there are many mementoes of old Castleconnell, though the needless destruction of the 'Hermitage' and 'Mountshannon' houses were acts of monumental vandalism. The latter was certainly one of the finest mansions in the south of Ireland. This was the stately home of John Fitzgibbon, 1st Earl of Clare and Lord Chancellor of Ireland. I will not dwell here on the merits, or otherwise, of this most powerful and influential resident of old Castleconnell: I would take up more space than this journal would afford, and at best it would prove me an apologist for one who has for long been held up to engage our disapproval, and even hatred.

Though the Fitzgibbon family lived in Mountshannon for more than a century, not one of them died there; they all managed to give up the ghost elsewhere. The great Lord Chancellor himself was almost the exception. It was at Mountshannon that his last illness overtook him; his doctor advised a holiday on the Continent in the hope that the change of climate would achieve what all his skill and knowledge was unable to do, but the failing strength of the once powerful ruler of his country prevented his embarkation at Dublin, and he died at his town house there, No. 6 Ely Place, in December, 1802.

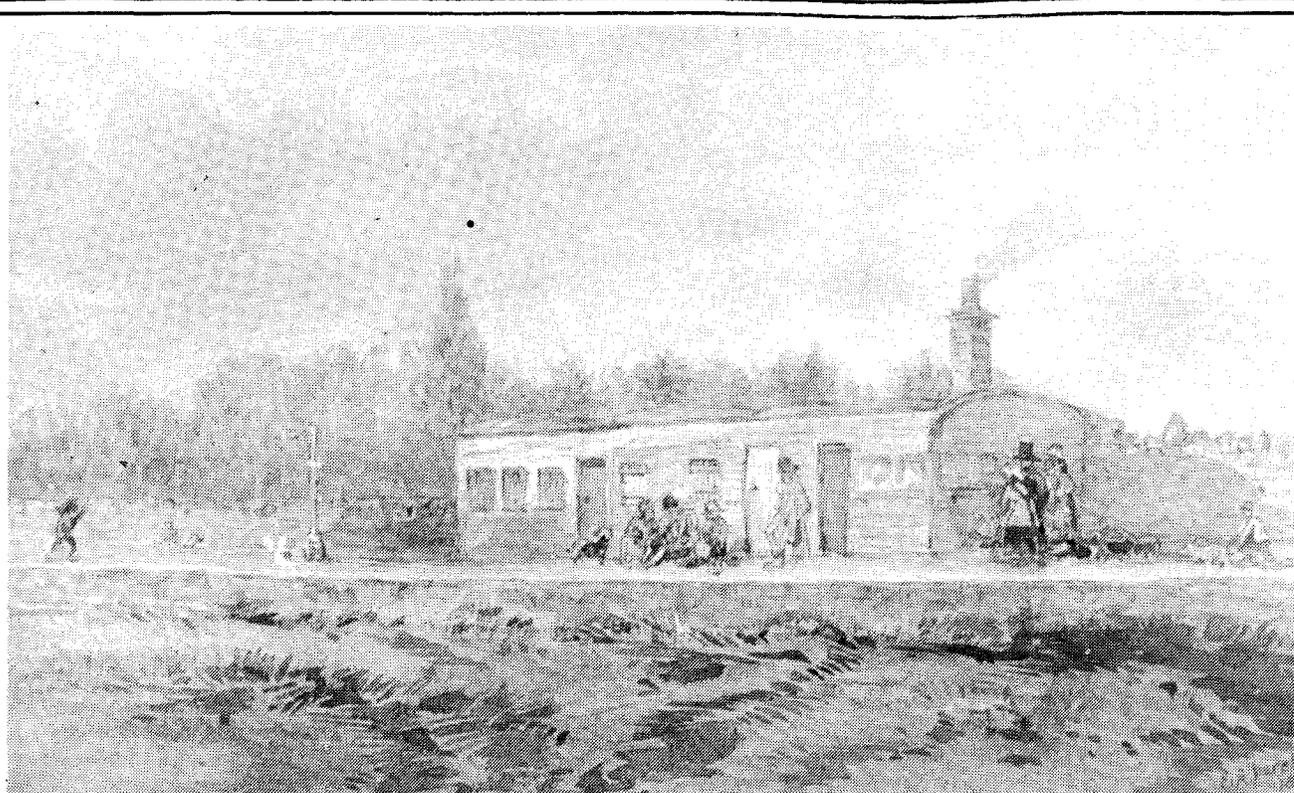
The title passed to his eldest son, John, who became the 2nd. Earl of Clare at the early age of ten years. He afterwards married the beautiful heiress, Elizabeth Burrell. John was educated at Harrow where he became the bosom pal of Lord Byron. The late Constantine Fitzgibbon was of opinion that the great poet enjoyed at least one holiday at Mountshannon.

John died without issue, in 1851, and his only brother, Richard Hobart, succeeded to the title. Richard created a stir when he eloped with the wife of Crosby Moore, of Moorscroft, Co. Tipperary. A widely publicised action by Moore against the Earl succeeded and damages to the tune of £6000 were awarded to Moore. This was an enormous sum in those days and illustrates the system obtaining at the time of awarding damages in relation to one's wealth. Moore, also a wealthy man, is supposed to have said afterwards that he got "the best part of the bargain". The Earl's first child, a son, was born before they were married. His second son, John Charles Henry, Viscount Fitzgibbon, died while leading his troop of Royal Irish Hussars in the famous charge of the Light Brigade at Ballaclava.

The Bard of Thomond, always ready with his poison pen, composed the following scurrilous lines about the monument which stood on the Wellesly Bridge on the site now occupied by the 1916 memorial:

"There he stands in the open air,
The bastard son of old Lord Clare;
They say he's Fitzgibbon, but his name is Moore,
Cause his father is a cuckold
And his mother is a whore".

How wrong Hogan was: the young hero was born well within wedlock and never deserved such an insult. Ap-



A watercolour of Castleconnell Railway Station, 1872, by E.A. Porcher.

parently, the Bard knew no more about the Fitzgibbons than he did about many other people who suffered in his satires.

The Viscount's uncle, the 2nd. Lord Clare, laid the foundation stone of the Wellesley Bridge, one of the finest structures of its kind in Ireland, and his father, the second Earl, was the best friend Castleconnell ever knew. Marks of his bounty were spread over the whole parish, and far outside it. He represented Co. Limerick in parliament for thirty years as a member of the Whig party, a political faction opposed to Royalists and Tories. After his death in January 1864, Rev. Patrick Hennessy, P.P. of Castleconnell, wrote the following letter to the press:

"Sir ... it was truly painful to witness the wailings and lamentations of the people here when they learned of the death of the charitable Earl of Clare. The groups of poor, infirm, old people assembled in our chapel yards after Mass yesterday, bewailing the death of their kindest and best benefactor".

"Two years ago, when a scarcity of fuel prevailed in this country, the Earl supplied gratis all the poor people and farmers with plenty of fuel from the plantations of Mountshannon. Blankets and clothing were distributed liberally amongst the poor and labourers connected with Mountshannon, and the best fatted beef supplied them for their Christmas dinner.

"I should, perhaps, also say for myself that as soon as I had commenced the erection of the new Catholic Church at Castleconnell, his Lordship sent me, solicited, the liberal subscription of £50. When covering in my church, and towards its completion, I was forced by hard necessity to apply again to his Lordship, and my appeal was answered by a cheque for £50 more.

Very truly yours,
P. Hennessy, P.P."

In present day values, these subscriptions would amount to many thousands of pounds. On June 9th., 1930, his son's memorial on Sarsfield Bridge was blown to smithereens by some local republicans.

Lady Louise Fitzgibbon was the last of the family to occupy Mountshannon. Open-hearted to the point of being a fool, she left her lovely home a relatively poor woman,

and settled at Ryde, in the Isle of Wight, where her aunt, the second Lady Clare, had endowed a convent some years before.

The great house remained unoccupied for some time before it was purchased by Thomas Nevins, a wealthy Irish-American. He died in the early years of the present century. The property was taken over by the Estates' Commission and the land divided among some of the country's evicted tenants. The house was purchased by David O'Hannigan, J.P., Kilbolene Castle, Milford, Co. Cork. It was burned to the ground in 1920, during the War of Independence.

Lady Louise's son, Charles Richard George, is commemorated in what is known as the Annacotty Memorial. This is the disused fountain near the junction of the Newport and Dublin roads. Originally erected by the 2nd. Earl of Clare for the benefit of his poorer neighbours, it was renovated afterwards and set up as a memorial to the dead youth. A marble slab on the monument bears the following sad inscription:-

"The pump placed on this spot by John, Earl of Clare, J.P., was renovated in 1875, and this memorial erected by his niece, Lady Louise Fitzgibbon, of Mountshannon, and by her husband, the Honourable Gerald N. Fitzgibbon, in memory of their eldest son, Charles Richard George, who died on the 30th. of April, 1870, in his 21st. year.

'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; as it has pleased the Lord so it is done; blessed be the name of the Lord'.

Job. 1.21.v.
Requiescat in Pace".

This memorial has long been neglected, and is in danger of total destruction. Could we not, in our charity and reconciliation restore this gift to the people and promote a gesture of goodwill to a long forgotten benefactor?

The 'Hermitage' was next in line of importance to Mountshannon, and was better known and more popular, mainly because of its unique position on the high ground commanding the grand panorama. Its magnificent silhouette as seen on moonlight nights from the Clare

shore was an unforgettable sight. John Ferrar, in his **History of Limerick**, remarks: "Hermitage is justly esteemed a good situation; opposite to it the rock of Doonass bends its venerable head over a grand cataract, whose top the salmon, monarch of the tide, often overleaps; add to this the islands in the river Shannon, surrounded by hills and fruitful vales, and very few parts of the Kingdom can produce more of the sublime and beautiful - for where can such another river be found? This is the most desirable excursion near Limerick".

The Hermitage estate was owned by the Wallers of Castletown from the early eighteenth century; it comprised about 200 acres and a house, modest in comparison with the legendary mansion which was built by George Evans Bruce who purchased the estate for £5,000 in 1789. Bruce, a Limerick banker and High Sheriff of Limerick in 1800, was a highly controversial character. The severe criticisms of this man would suggest that he was a skinflint, and one with little or no humanity, but reflecting on the enormous cost of the mansion and the beauty of its architecture and surroundings, I am inclined to the view that his critics turned a blind eye to his better side.

Bruce was the victim of a vicious satire, **'The Nosegay'**, published in 1816. This most cruel indictment was written by Thomas (Spectacles) O'Grady, a barrister who lived in nearby 'Belmont'. Reading through this diatribe does nothing to enhance one's chances of making a reasoned and impartial assessment of the enigmatic Bruce. Though O'Grady was defended by Daniel O'Connell, he lost the subsequent action for libel and defamation of character brought by Bruce, and £500 damages were awarded against him, though the action was for £2,000.

O'Grady was a fine scholar and writer - his satires were regarded to be as brilliant as those of Swift - but his inability to pull his punches got him into all kinds of trouble. Unable to meet the expenses of the libel action, he left his beautiful home and went to France, where he died in obscurity.

In 1802, Bruce sold 'Hermitage' to the Masseys, a family who came to Ireland before the Cromwellian occupation, and settled in Duntrileague, Co. Limerick. The Masseys were a distinguished family and traced their lineage to one of the companions-in-arms of William the Conqueror, who was endowed with large estates in the counties of Durham and Chester, and raised to the peerage as Baron of Durham. They owned much property in Limerick, Clare and Tipperary, and had some beautiful homes, none, of course, to be compared with 'Hermitage'. They lived a high life and occupied some of the highest civil and military positions. In all, they played a colourful and useful part in the life of Limerick for nearly three hundred years.

There was great excitement in Limerick on October 29th. 1872, after the Mayor had received a telegram informing him that the 'Hermitage' was on fire. In a short time, the West of England Insurance Company's engine, drawn by four horses, was on its way to the scene of the conflagration, and completed the journey within an hour of the mayor receiving the telegram. We have no knowledge of the time lag between the discovery of the fire and the receipt of the telegram. The Sun Insurance Company's engine also reached the fire in relatively good time, but the Limerick Corporation engine did not reach the scene for several hours (owing to a mishap) and was only in time to meet the other engines returning to base after dealing with a serious chimney fire that caused great damage to the mansion.

On the first notice of the fire, in Limerick the Cathedral bells pealed out an alarm throughout the city, and the Co. Inspector, Mr. Gallway, with a party of police under Head Constable Robinson, made their way to the fire. Forty

eight years afterwards, there was no pealing of bells and no police as the mansion was completely destroyed after being deliberately set alight during the War of Independence. It had been unoccupied since the death of Baron Massey four years previously. Even in ruin the 'Hermitage' was a noted landmark and its clearance a few years ago left a vacancy that can never be filled.

On the southern boundary of the parish, overlooking the village of Annacotty, stands Woodsdowne House, once the home of Field Marshall Lord Gough. His was the most distinguished career of any Irish soldier, past or present. He was born here in 1779 and baptised in the old parish church of Castleconnell. He started his military career in the Limerick Militia Regiment. From thence he transferred to the 119th., and afterwards to the 78th. Highlands. His first outstanding success was with the 78th. Regiment when he was the hero of the day at the battle of Porto Rico, in the West Indies. A year before the disaster of Corruna, he was ordered to the seething cauldron of the Peninsular war, where again his contribution was enormous. He was wounded at Talavera, and again at Seville, but recovered to take part in the battle of Barossa — an engagement that resulted in the flight of one of Napoleon's crack regiments. It was at Taroufa that Gough's resolution and bravery singled him out as a fearless and resourceful leader. He was in charge of the all-important portcullis controlling the entrance to the fortress. The safety of the place and the lives of all within depended on the bravery of Gough. He was not found wanting. Though the garrison were greatly outnumbered, he galvanised his men into an irrepressible force after ordering the band to strike up the soul stirring air "Garryowen", and the rout of the French was completed to the strains of "Saint Patrick's Day".

On the Castleconnell man's return home after the battle of Waterloo he was showered with honours, including the freedom of the city of Limerick, a distinction of which he was always very proud. He returned again to the army and enjoyed a long and glorious career before retiring to his Dublin residence at St. Helen's, Booterstown, to spend his last years — and much of his wealth — in helping the downtrodden. He died there in 1869, in his 90th. year, and his memorial in the Phoenix Park suffered the same fate as that of his fellow parishioner, Viscount Fitzgibbon — it was blown to pieces in the 1940s. What hypocrites our country has produced.

For many years 'Coolbawn House' was the home of Capt. Vansittart, a noted sportsman and good neighbour. He, too, was kind to the poor, especially the school children.

The well known 'Tontines', a handsome range of 3 storey houses, were built in 1812, by a Mr. Gabbett, on behalf of a number of speculators. The enterprise was not a financial success but the complex gave something to Castleconnell that the many modern buildings can never supply.

Residents of some of the other fine houses in 1833 were: 'Fairy Hill', H.O. Bridgeman; 'Prospect', Godfrey Massey; 'Shannon View', W. White; 'Caherline', W.H. Gabbett; 'Stormont', Mrs. Kelly; and 'Newgarden', Massey Ryves. All these families have passed on and I do not know of any descendants in or around Castleconnell. Such is the infinite transience of human life.

Though Father Matthew was long gone in 1876, there were others who had the temerity to try to achieve what the great apostle had failed to do. A branch of the Confraternity of the Holy Family was established in Castleconnell in December of that year. A report in the local papers of December, 1877, goes on: "We learn that the establishment of a branch of the Confraternity of the Holy Family has been attended with the best possible results in checking drunkenness among the working population of the district. During the past twelve months only



"The Shannon pours her rapid, foaming stream".

two persons from the locality have been convicted at Petty Sessions of drunkenness, a pleasing contrast to the state of things which prevailed when as many as fifteen persons would be charged with the offence at an ordinary session". Checking drunkenness among the gentry — a goodly proportion in those days — does not seem to have been an issue that warranted exhortations from the pulpit. That exalted class could not be expected to suffer the humiliation of answering charges of any kind at courts of Petty Sessions.

The Roman Catholic Church as built in 1863 by Launcelot Ryan, of Newport, to the design of W.E. Corbett. It is a noble edifice, beautifully designed in the revival Gothic style which was so popular at the time. It is now portrayed — the finest ornament in the village — in its pristine condition after the recent elaborate renovations, and must remain a worthy monument to its founder, Rev. Patrick Hennessy, P.P., and to its many benefactors, past and present. Though the building was erected during the golden age of church building in Ireland — the great Famine and its aftermath had caused the postponement of work all over the country — sufficient funds for its completion were not available. As already mentioned, the work would not have been finished so quickly but for the financial assistance of the Earl of Clare.

The stranger must not be deceived by the rather drab appearance of the Church of Ireland parish church, though the handsome octagonal tower must hint at something more interesting than the faded plasterwork of the facade. Inside is a delightful treasury of well executed memorials which tell much of the history of Castleconnell, while the fittings and furnishings reflect the loving care of those who have charge of it.

The mellowed Tudor styling of the sexton's house in the chapel yard adds much to the old world charm of the place, and is a pleasing departure from the rather garish lines of some of the modern bungalows which tend to contrast radically with the older dwellings that maintain so well the captivating heritage of the village.

The little church is probably built on the site of the original pre-reformation church, and displays all the trimmings of antiquity. It was built in 1809 after a gallant effort to preserve the mediaeval church had failed. Stradbally Select Vestry minutes record that on Monday, 9th. April, 1787, "... it has been represented by the Rector and Church Wardens that the Parish Church of Castleconnell is in so ruinous a condition that it is with danger that the congregation do assemble to divine service, therefore we adjourn this vestry to take the same into consideration to

Sunday next". Subsequent to this solemn statement, the vestry agreed, after some deliberation, to spend the sum of £2.18.10 in the following manner:

	£ s d
"for timber to prop up the church	1.0.4½
One day to Gillespie in Limerick to buy timber	1.7
One day for examining roof	1.7½
One horse to draw timber from Limerick	5.4½
Sawing timber	3.0½
Henry Cunningham, (examining one day)	1.7½
Turning an arch over the gate	8.8
A lock for the gate	8.1½
Propping the church	8.5
	£2.18.10

The work resulting from this expenditure, which was considerable enough at the time, was not a success, and despite the riches of some of the Protestant landed proprietors in the parish it was not until 1809 that a new church was built. In the meantime, services were continued "... in the ballroom of the widow Mulloughny prior to 1800 and until the new church was ready". Was this the place known as the 'Spa Ballroom' purchased a few years ago by Mr. R. Hughes from Miss Hartigan?

Up to recent years it looked as if the little church would die for want of worshippers, but the many new residents who have fallen for the charm of the village and its environs has increased the proportion of church-goers to ensure the continuance of the little Church of All Saints as a place of worship.

After the decline of Castleconnell as a salmon fishery, and the general loss of interest in the Spa, the place became a veritable ghost town in the 1940s and 'fifties. To-day, however, there is evidence of a resurgence in its fortunes. The increasing population in outlying areas, and the housing development in and around the village itself has brought new life to the place. The pubs, which, up to a few years ago, carried on only with difficulty, are doing a thriving business, and, generally, an air of prosperity has taken over from one of depression.

The work of the Limerick County Council and AnCo in refurbishing some of the old buildings and renewing riverside walks and other such amenities has done much to improve the district. The return of Martin McCabe, former Monaghan Co. Librarian, to his native place has given a new impetus to this work.

Castleconnell is particularly neat and clean, and a credit to its residents. Its buildings are nicely kept and its character and individuality well preserved in the town pump (shades of Nathaniel Hawthorne) and the castle, and in its churches and mellowed buildings — and, of course, in the trees and the river, so much so that if 'spirits can steal from the regions of air' the shade of Sir Aubrey De Vere would find renewed inspiration for his beautiful lines:

"Broad, but not deep, along his rock-chafed bed,
In many a sparkling eddy winds the flood.
Clasped by a margin of green underwood:
A castled crag, with ivy garlanded,
Sheer, o'er the torrent frowns: above the mead
De Burgho's towers, crumbling o'er many a rood,
Stand gauntly out in airy solitude
Backed by yon furrowed mountain's tinted head.
Sounds of far people, mingling with the fall
Of waters, and the busy hum of bees,
And larks in air, and throistles in the trees,
Thrill the moist air with murmurs musical.
While cottage smoke goes drifting on the breeze:
And sunny clouds are floating over all".