

Edward A. MacLysaght: Some Autobiographical Notes

Edited by ETIENNE RYNNE

I have known Dr. MacLysaght, my kinsman (his word, the exact relationship between our two Clare families being difficult to trace, despite my Lysaght great-grandmother), for many years, and consequently I foolishly imagined that I might be equipped to provide this special issue of *The North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, which is being published in his honour, with an adequate sketch of his career. However, despite much long and deep conversation with him over the years, and lengthy correspondence on the subject, I found it quite impossible to write about him in the third person without losing much of the typical flair for life and amusingly descriptive comments which so characteristically illuminated his own words on the subject. I have, as a result, opted to let my friend speak for himself, the following being an edited selection (only occasionally augmented by footnotes and the odd word or date) of his answers to my questions concerning his own story.

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My first step in the right direction was being born on November the 6th, that being the feast of All the Saints of Ireland (in 1887)—even though it was at sea, somewhere off the Cape of Good Hope—anyway I was baptized in Co. Clare.

I was brought up in an atmosphere of Moore's *Melodies*, Irish (i.e. Anglo-Irish) literature, and mild Redmondism—my father, S. R. Lysaght, poet, novelist and gentleman-farmer,¹ was a Redmondite in politics. Being sent to two places of "education" in England had, rather ironically, a lasting effect on my life. Firstly there was school life—an English public school may make a boy with a Unionist background more anglicized, but for one having a background like mine it has the opposite effect and makes him more consciously Irish. Secondly there was Corpus Christi College, in Oxford, where I went at nineteen—against my wishes, for I wanted to go to Trinity College, Dublin, but was thwarted by the strong advice of my father's friend, that well-known "character" Professor F. Y. Edgeworth, who's *ipsissima verba* were "Oh my dear man, don't send Ned to Trinity: vice stalks the streets in Dublin!" I was at Oxford for just two terms and then left in disgrace in an atmosphere of horses and whiskey: the effect of that was immediate, for it turned me from being a useless idler into a man who, however ineffectual his efforts were, has ever since been a continuous hard worker.

There followed six very useful months as a farm labourer, after which, in 1909 at the age of twenty-one, I found myself an extensive farmer at Raheen, near Tuamgraney, Co. Clare, on the property then fairly recently acquired by my father. The horticultural nursery was started at Raheen in 1913, a business which was shortly to change the whole face of the countryside around and more recently still to be the

¹ James P. O'Reilly, *Irish Times*, 20th September 1941. Stephen Rynne, *Sunday Press*, 24th July 1963. Edward MacLysaght, *S. R. Lysaght. The Author and the Man*, Dublin 1974.

reason for the selection of the parish as the site for Ireland's largest chipboard factory; the nursery at present thrives under the management of William, one of my sons.

In 1913 I married Maureen Pattison; we had one son (Fergus Patrick—with whom I have never spoken a word of English unless in the company of another who did not understand the language) and one daughter, Máire.

Up to 1915 I remained a working farmer, with interest only in one other thing: the Gaelic League and the Irish-Ireland movement. Indeed, it was in that year that I got the *fáinne* (which I wore as a tie-pin); we had great plans at the time for the establishment of a *nua-Ghaedhealtacht* in East Clare² and of a co-operative community of the Ralahine type,³ both of which efforts finally failed after the upsets of the Black-and-Tans and Civil Wars.

In 1915, also, I began to have interests in Dublin, both business (in connection with our Raheen Rural Industries) and literary: my first book, *Irish Eclogues*, a collection of short poems, was published that year—I now find the rhymes in it, even if true to life, definitely amateurish, though they were highly praised by A.E.⁴ I became chairman of Maunsel and Co. Ltd., the Dublin-based firm which published books by almost every writer of note connected with the Irish Literary Renaissance except W. B. Yeats, and I got to know many of these, especially A.E. From that time till the Black-and-Tan menace stopped him, A.E. came each summer and Easter to stay at Raheen, to paint pictures of Lough Derg and the oaks in the surviving primeval forest there.

1916 woke us up. Being Gaelic Leaguers, etc., however keen, was not enough. So I got into politics, first in the East Clare by-election of July 1917 when the then little-known Éamon de Valera, starting as an outsider, won in a canter;⁵ then as a member of the now-forgotten Irish Convention of 1917-18, from which I resigned as a protest against the futility of its meetings;⁶ I was later a member of the Industrial Resources Commission appointed by the first Dáil (1912-20), and also of several other national and semi-national bodies.

In 1920 I, and members of ten other families bearing the name Lysaght, came to a concerted agreement to resume the prefix Mac to our surname, a prefix discarded like so many O's and Mac's in the period of Gaelic submergence of the preceding centuries.

East Clare was put under martial law, the first area so treated. From 1919 to 1921 there were twenty-six raids by Auxiliaries and Black-and-Tans on our place at Raheen. Indeed, on one occasion my mother was court-martialled and sentenced to a month in jail or, alternatively, a fine of twenty-five pounds—on that occasion for the trivial offence of being in possession of two copies of a "seditious" journal called *The Irish Bulletin*!⁷ Atrocities occurred in the neighbourhood, including the

² "Do theip orainn sa deireadh", *An Pobal*, Samhain 1972.

³ William Pare, *Co-operative agriculture, a solution to the Land Question, as exemplified in the history of the Ralahine Co-operative Agricultural Association, Co. Clare, Ireland*, London 1870. E. T. Craig, *An Irish Commune, the History of Ralahine (an early Irish Co-op Venture)*, Dublin n.d.

⁴ George Russell, for whom see H. Summerfield, *That Myriad-minded Man: a biography of George Russell, 'AE', 1867-1935*, Gerrards Cross 1975.

⁵ Lord Longford and T. P. O'Neill, *Éamon de Valera*, Dublin 1970, pp. 62-65.

⁶ E. MacLysaght, "Some Memories of the Irish Convention—1917-1918", *Capuchin Annual*, 35 (1968), 345-350.

⁷ *The Irish Bulletin* was a cyclostyled journal edited by Erskine Childers and issued by the Publicity Bureau of Dáil Éireann from 1919 to 1921.

murder of four local men while prisoners of the Tans. Most affecting, for me, was the murder of my close friend Conor Clune who, a worker on our office, had accompanied me to Dublin in November 1920. When there, he went to Vaughan's Hotel, Parnell Square, on Gaelic League business, but was taken prisoner by soldiers who were looking for Michael Collins—he was later brutally shot in a room in Dublin Castle on the night of Bloody Sunday, the 21st of November, together with Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy. Although not a Volunteer, Conor died for Ireland as much as did any man.⁸ I sought the body and persuaded an ex-British Army surgeon, Col. Pearson, to examine it—in a stable near Westland Row—and he was able to show that Conor had been shot in the chest, thus proving that it was all bluff to say that he had been trying to escape. Arthur Griffith sent me to London to protest against the murder and to expose the lies being told by the British authorities. Among other people, I saw Asquith for two minutes but got no good of him, and on my return to Ireland I was promptly arrested myself.

I and my associates supported our East Clare I.R.A. leader, Mícheál Brennan, throughout the War of Independence, as indeed did the whole local population, and after the Treaty in 1921 we therefore followed the lead of Michael Collins, whose “freedom to achieve freedom” attitude we all accepted.

In 1922 I was a member of the Government Commission on Irish Railways, and was elected to the Senate that year by the vote of the Dáil. I lost my Senate seat by a short head in the subsequent election held in December 1925, that extraordinary election when the whole country was one constituency. And so, after all those years of pre-occupation with public affairs, I went back to my former life as farmer and nurseryman. But I also resumed my university career—very much part-time so it took several years before I got my M.A. degree (1st class honours in History) at University College, Cork. I also took up again my writing, publishing books both in Irish and English.

In 1936 I got married a second time, this time to Mary Frances Cunneen, of Doneraile, Co. Cork, a place with which my father, a friend of Canon Sheehan, had close associations; we have three sons. That same year, 1936, we left Ireland for South Africa, and spent two years in Capetown where I worked as a journalist, writing many articles in *The Cape Argus* and other newspapers.

On our return to Ireland in 1938 I was appointed an inspector for the Irish Manuscripts Commission—very interesting work, discovering and reporting on manuscript collections throughout the country. I did most of the travelling about the country on a bicycle with a suitcase, work which brought its own reward with the discovery of many important papers, and also work which entailed kissing more bishop's rings than anybody else in the world! Perhaps my most exciting and least orthodox discovery was made when I met a man with a horse and cart in South Kilkenny. The cart was full of old papers which he was taking away to burn. I stopped him and offered him £2 for the lot—and among them discovered a letter from Charles II, written in cypher to a royalist named Lane who lived in the district, discussing his prospects of restoration. Perhaps giving even greater personal satisfaction was the discovery of sixteenth-century land deeds written in Irish among papers belonging to the Inchiquins.

⁸ E. Mac Giolla Iasachta, “Conchubhar Mac Clúin, a shloinne agus a shaothar”, *Misneach*, 58 (Nodlaig 25, 1920), 4.

In 1941 I was elected to membership of the Royal Irish Academy, and in that year, too, I obtained my D.Litt. degree — later, in 1972, I was honoured by my university, the National University of Ireland, with an LL.D. degree, this time *honoris causa*.

But all the fun was soon to end, for at the end of 1942 I was appointed to the staff of the National Library, and soon after I was given the job of taking over from the British the Irish Office of Arms. On the 31st of March 1943, the Office was transferred to the Government of Ireland and has since been known as the Genealogical Office; the post of Ulster King of Arms was abolished and I, as the new head, was given the title Chief Herald of Ireland. Although my literary interest in Irish surnames dates back to at least 1919,⁹ my real work in this field results from my official position at the Genealogical Office.

Meanwhile I also continued to work on the staff of the National Library, and in 1948 I was made Keeper of Manuscripts and thus had the interesting task of forming a manuscript department in that Library. I retired at the end of 1954, but after a year and a half back on the farm with my son at Raheen I was made Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, a position I held until the 14th of September 1973, when I retired from it at the age of almost eighty-six. Since my retirement I have been living partly in Dublin and partly in Raheen, but have always kept busy writing articles and books—against time!

⁹ E. Lysaght, "A Forgotten Blue Book", *The Catholic Sulletin*, 9 (1919), 657-673.