time in his life he had been 'overlooked'. The early wonder tales he heard in Moytura, the stories of the people of the Other World, with their love of dancing, music and fine clothes and their dedication to a life of pleasure, influenced the marvellous stories he wrote for children; they may also have played a part in his hedonistic approach to life. In 1894, at the height of his fame, he would write: 'Superstitions are the colour elements of thought and romance. They are the opponents of common sense.' He encouraged the young Yeats, reviewing his work and praising his book *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (1888): 'It is delightful to come across a collection of purely imaginative work. Mr Yeats has a very quick instinct in finding out the best and most beautiful things in Irish folklore.' Oscar Wilde's son Vyvyan relates how their father kept himself and his brother Cyril enthralled with the folktales he had first heard as a ten-year-old, from Frank Houlihan, a Galway storyteller who worked as a handyman around 'Moytura'. A favourite bedtime story told of a great melancholy carp that lived at the bottom of Lough Corrib and that would rise to the surface only at the music of an ancient song. Oscar Wilde used to sing his children to sleep with the lullaby, '*Táim-se i m' chodladh is ná dúisigh mé*' ('I'm sleeping and don't waken me').

19

The Farm by Lough Gur

Set between the peasant class - maidservants and spailpíns, or landless men of the nineteenth century, who travelled from one end of Ireland to the other or journeyed across the seas in search of work - and the Anglo-Irish, who lived a life apart in their 'Big Houses', were the largely silent people, the tenant farmers. Many were sturdy, honest and hard-working men with a passion for land, who took little interest in politics but believed in the old way of life. Some boasted, as did their poorer neighbours, that they were descended from kings, bards and storytellers, and who could deny their claims! One of the most fascinating accounts of the life of a comfortable farming family is told in *The Farm by Lough Gur* (1937) which is in fact the memoirs of Sissy O'Brien, the daughter of the house. My maternal grandmother had been at boarding-school with the same Sissy O'Brien in Bruff, County Limerick. When the book was first published my grandmother gave me a copy and said that it was 'required reading' for a girl brought up in Dublin. To say I enjoyed it would be an understatement. I didn't leave it

out of my hands until I reached the last page.

Two books of my youth were to have a profound effect on the career I would follow: the Grimms' *Fairy Tales* and Sissy O'Brien's story. Mary Carbery (who wrote the book from Sissy's recollections of her young days) was seeking the words of a lost folk song in Bruff in the summer of 1904 when she met a Mrs Fogarty, who was an enthusiast for the old stories and legends of Bruff and Lough Gur. Mrs Fogarty was the Sissy O'Brien who had been reared in Lough Gur, the daughter of a successful tenant farmer, John O'Brien, who rented his land from a kind and considerate landlord, Count de Salis. Sissy had never kept a diary but had a phenomenal memory. The book that resulted was a labour of love for narrator and scribe.

There were tales of the banshee Áine whose fairy music, the *ceolsí*, comforted the dying and their families, and of Fer Fí, the red-haired dwarf who played three tunes on his three-stringed harp: sorrow, sleep and happiness. It was lucky to hear Fer Fí laughing. The O'Brien children, like their neighbours, knew that the fairies lived in hollow hills and that a drowned city lay beneath the waters of Lough Gur. Sissy recalls superstitions and tales of giants, ghosts, holy wells, and fairy thorns, which she had learned from the maids in her mother's dairy.

There is more to the book than old superstitions and beliefs. Though set in the nineteenth century, it covers a much wider canvas. There is an account of an old woman called Moll Ryan who remembered her father and the neighbours cheering at the death of William of Orange in 1702. A street trader in Moore Street told me a similar story one day in the late 1940s as I left Radio Éireann.

She said that the people of the Liberties held a mock wake when they heard the news and drank to King William's perdition in whiskey and porter. There are folk memories of the Great Famine and the Fenians and an account of Sissy's meeting with Charles Stewart Parnell, who looked tired and pale and before whom she and her sister Bessie secretly agreed to genuflect as they did in church. Before they could do so, he turned away, to the relief of their mother who scolded the girls for trying to make a spectacle of themselves.

Little was known in the O'Brien household of the Irish language or of Irish literature, but the works of Dickens and Thackeray were read by John O'Brien to his family and any of the neighbours who happened by. What was lacking of Irish literature was compensated for by the folktales, charms and legends that coloured their lives. The countryside around is dominated by the awesome Lough Gur. Tradition has it that every seven years the lake demands the heart of a human being and that Garret, Earl of Desmond, is doomed to gallop over the surface of the waters riding a milk-white horse with silver shoes. The belief is that he must continue to ride until the silver shoes are worn out. Then he will be loosed from the enchantment which binds him and live a man among men since he never died.

Like most of the farming class of the time, the O'Brien household was Spartan, self-contained and happy. The household rose early and the maids and farmboys sat down to a breakfast of stirabout (porridge) and plenty of milk, bread and potatoes. Dinner at midday consisted of milk, potatoes and bacon, with maybe a helping of pork

if a pig had been killed. At four o'clock buttermilk or tea and bread and butter were taken out to the men working in the fields. Supper consisted of bread, milk and porridge. The maids had the same food as the family but at different times, the only exception being that the master of the house had two boiled duck eggs and the mistress a hen egg.

Up to the advent of radio and television the monotony of life on many Irish farms was broken by callers: neighbours would visit a particular house to play cards or exchange news, gossip and stories. Beggars were welcomed with food and old clothes and were given help to bury their dead. A long-nosed spinning-woman came to Lough Gur whenever the sheep were shorn and the wool gathered, and there was always the travelling tailor. Occasionally a pedlar might call with a basket of ribbons, coloured handkerchiefs, cheap jewellery, tapes and cotton. Tinkers or tinsmiths, as the travelling people were then known, mended pots and pans, milk-cans and basins, or exchanged ones they had made earlier for food and the loan of a field to graze their horses and, if times were good, the occasional silver shilling.

A couple of times a year a dancing-master called. Then the piper carefully undid the bundle of straw and rags to reveal his pipes tenderly wrapped in red silk. After a few preliminary wails while the pipes were being prepared, a quadrille started the dancing; this was followed by reels, jigs and hornpipes, winding up with the Sir Roger de Coverley. Another musical visitor to the house was a fine violinist, always known as Mr Regan. His pride had been sorely wounded in one of the Ascendancy houses

when, hoping to give the titled owners and their guests a treat, he played Mozart's Adagio in D. 'You would think,' he afterwards complained, 'that the exquisite air would enthral any mortal man or woman, let alone the cultivated nobility. But instead his lordship shouted, "Oh, Regan, do stop that and give us the Fox Chase", and the company roared after him, "Yes, yes, the Fox Chase", and her ladyship clapped.'

If bards and storytellers were welcome to every hearth, the same was true of the ordinary traveller. The Irish are by nature gregarious and fond of alcohol; it was never a hardship on even the poorest to entertain guests. Tourists, travel writers and even the unwelcome settlers noted this characteristic time and again. Fynes Moryson, who came to Ireland as Lord Deputy Mountjoy's secretary in 1600 and remained with him through the long and bitter campaign that led to the defeat of Hugh O'Neill, kept a record of his time in Ireland. In it he wrote, 'The common Irish like to spend money freely. Whenever they come to a market town to sell a cow or a horse, they will never return home until they have drunk the price in Spanish wine which they call "the King of Spain's daughter".' He had no great love for the Irish, as may be gathered, but even he credited Irish whiskey as 'the best drink in the world', a judgement with which, as we have already noted, Elizabeth I concurred.

It was considered important to welcome and invite in any caller to the door; the custom of hospitality was no myth but a living tradition. The greatest dishonour a person could bring upon himself was to be accused of being tight-fisted or miserly. Inns and hostels were free

to all comers, their upkeep paid for by the hosteller, a man of means but not of the first importance, who sought to buy his way into aristocratic society by the lavishness of his hospitality. Even in modest houses it was taken badly if a visitor went away empty-handed or hungry. 'Is it leave with the curse of the house on you!' was cried if food or help were refused.

It wasn't only English travellers who were taken by the extravagant hospitality and conviviality of the peasant class, but the often feckless Anglo-Irish. In this as in other respects they took their colour from the native Irish and many kept up a continuous round of house parties with kitchens thronged with musicians, storytellers, itinerant tradesmen, spailpíns and beggars. The lord of the manor might be reduced to putting his boon companions up in the henhouse but prided himself on the fact that no one was ever turned away. It is in the nature of things that all must come to an end, and customs and traditions that had survived the odds for three or four thousand years were swept away by the Great Famine of 1845-47. It wasn't that the Irish would refuse to share their last potato with a hungry visitor; they were afraid to open the door to the dread spectre of the famine fever. Never again would unstinted and prodigal hospitality be taken for granted.

20

The Great Famine

In 1945, one hundred years after the potato blight struck Ireland, the Irish Folklore Commission issued a questionnaire, *The Famine of 1845-47*, and received a larger response than any questionnaire issued before or since. Over five hundred people from all over Ireland sent harrowing accounts of what was remembered in family lore and in the folklore of the neighbourhood. Over and over again tribute was paid to the Society of Friends (or Quakers as they are popularly known) who worked ceaselessly to feed the starving and nurse the dying. Even when everyone else had given up in despair, they laboured on, and when in 1849 they finally abandoned relief work, Ireland had lost her most valuable friends.

The summer of 1845 had been a halcyon one. A bumper potato crop was expected. Then, in August, with appalling suddenness the blight struck Ireland. This was a disease which had manifested itself in America the year before and was carried back to Ireland - in ships, by vermin or by migrant birds. No one knew. On the eve of the Great Famine Ireland's population was reaching nine