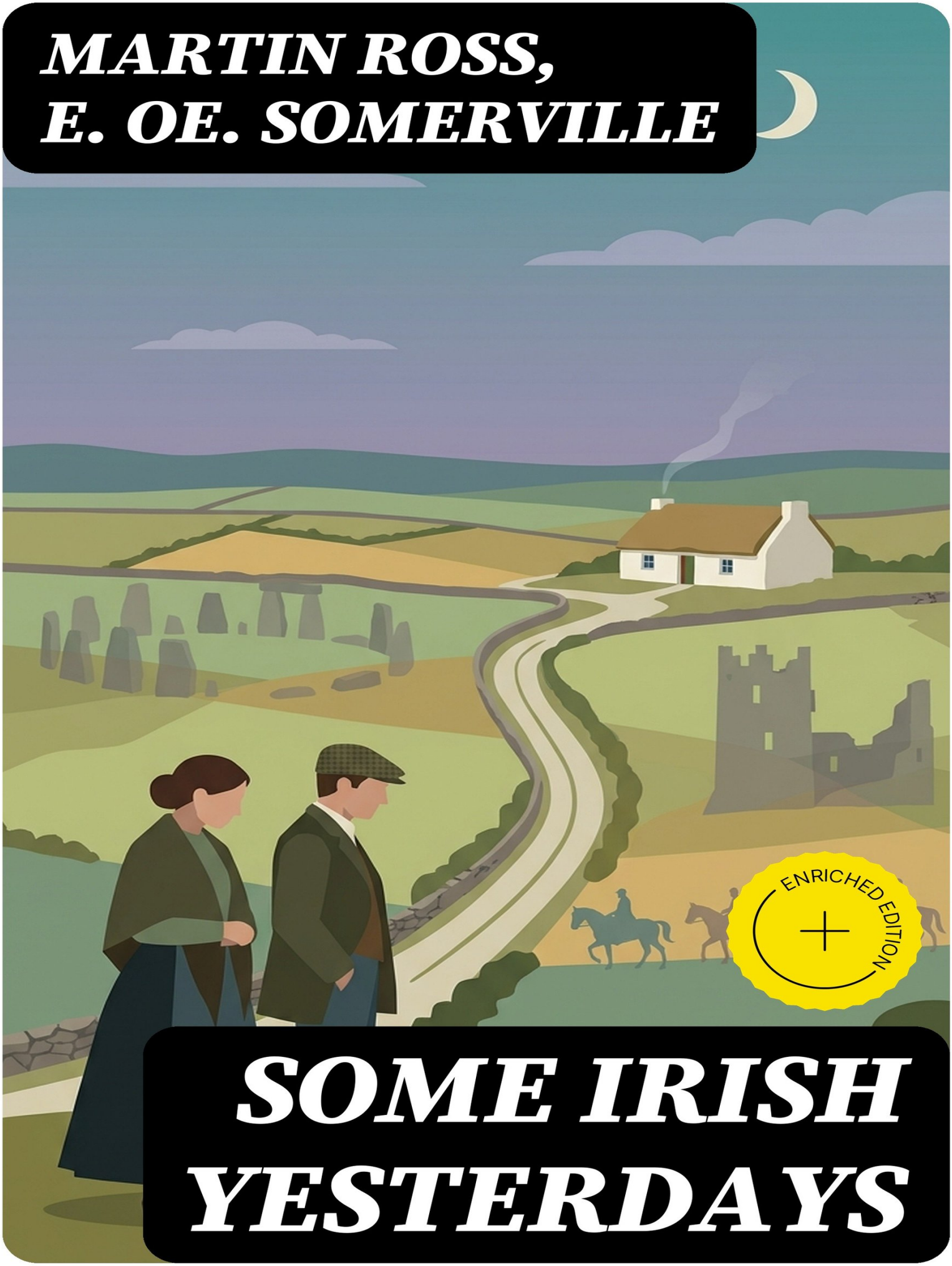
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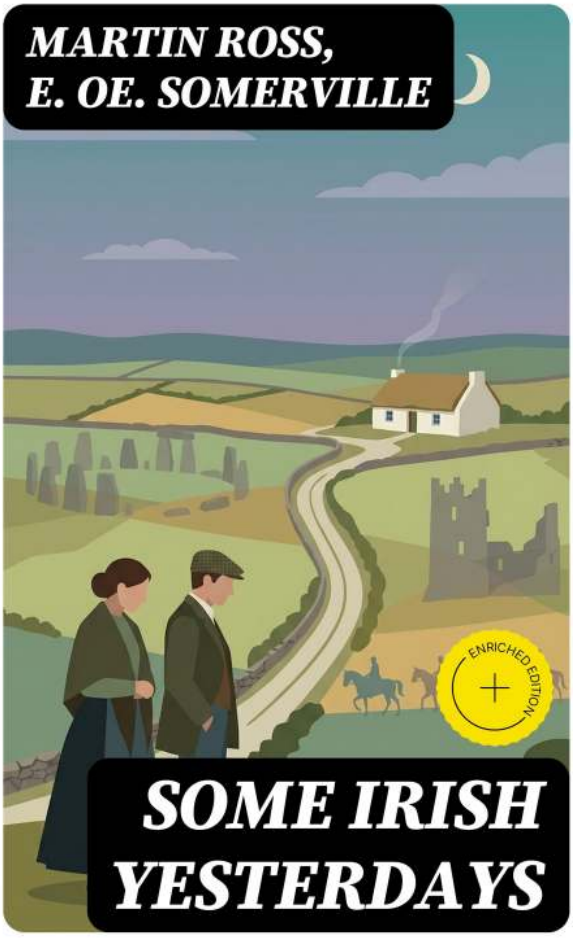
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YESTERDAYS

Martin Ross, E. Oe. Somerville

Some Irish Yesterdays

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Aria Caldwell

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Introduction

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Balancing affectionate remembrance of rural Ireland with a shrewd, often comic scrutiny of human ritual and contradiction, Some Irish Yesterdays traces how the textures of everyday life—its voices, improvised customs, small loyalties, and stubborn quarrels—persist in memory even as time unsettles them, inviting readers to consider the delicate negotiation between nostalgia and clear-sighted observation, belonging and distance, continuity and change, through a sequence of moments that refuse to fossilize the past, instead presenting it as a living, disputable presence that questions the stories communities tell about themselves and the meanings that survive when the world that made them begins to recede.

Co-authored by E. OE. Somerville and Martin Ross, the longtime Anglo-Irish writing partners best known for their portraits of Irish life, this volume belongs to the tradition of regional prose that mingles observation with storytelling. Set in Ireland, largely among rural scenes and small-town circuits, it gathers episodes and character studies into a mosaic rather than a single plot. First appearing in the early twentieth century, it reflects the concerns of that era’s cultural crosscurrents while remaining accessible to today’s readers. Its form—compact sketches with cumulative resonance—places it between narrative nonfiction and literary vignette, with a steady attention to place, habit, and voice.

Rather than marching through a conventional storyline, the book offers a guided drift through meetings, recollections, and encounters that build a portrait of community life. Readers meet figures at work and at leisure, observe the social choreography of visits and markets, and witness rituals that hinge on weather, land, and local reputation. The narrating presence is at once participant and observer, attentive to nuance, partial to irony, and quick to notice the telling detail. The style is vivid without ostentation, the pacing unhurried but exact, and the tone travels from playful to tender to quietly rueful, always anchored in precise noticing.

Memory and change are the central currents: the past is neither embalmed nor dismissed, but inspected for what it can still teach about attachment, pride, resilience, and blind spots. Social gradations appear in their everyday workings—who speaks first, who holds knowledge, who must improvise—and the book is alert to how wit, hospitality, and ritual can both ease and mask strain. Language itself becomes a theme, as idiom encodes history and temperament. The landscape is not mere backdrop; it is an agent shaping rhythms of labor and celebration, the measure by which endurance is tested and companionship, however provisional, is forged.

Because the authors write from an Anglo-Irish vantage, the book’s insights arrive through a perspective both embedded in and standing apart from the lives it portrays. That doubleness—insider to custom, outsider to some affiliations—creates a productive tension: affection is tempered by skepticism; satire is softened by care.

Contemporary readers can approach this voice with curiosity and critical attention, noticing where the gaze is generous and where it turns partial, and considering how class and position contour what can be seen. The result is not a definitive map of Ireland but a situated account that invites dialogue across time about representation and responsibility.

Somerville and Ross excel at the art of the telling incident: a glance that redirects a conversation, a minor mishap that reveals an entire social code, a shared task that becomes a tacit negotiation. Their dialogue registers the cadence of local speech without caricature, and their descriptive passages rely on tactile specificity—weather, surfaces, and work—to anchor reflection in the heft of daily life. Humor functions as both welcome and critique; it lowers defenses so complexity can be smuggled in. The pieces accrue a quiet architecture, circling moments of threshold and crossroads where choices are tested and identities briefly come into sharper relief.

For contemporary readers, the book matters as a study in how communities narrate themselves and how those narratives carry forward even when circumstances change. It offers a humane, attentive record of the everyday as history-in-the-making, valuable both as literature and as a window onto an era whose legacies still ripple through cultural debates. Its wit remains fresh, its empathy instructive, and its caution against easy mythmaking timely. Reading Some Irish Yesterdays today encourages an ethics of attention: to listen for nuance, to see how humor can

illuminate power, and to recognize how the past persists without dictating the terms of the present.

Synopsis

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Some Irish Yesterdays, a collaborative work by Martin Ross and E. Oe. Somerville, assembles a series of reflective sketches that look back on the textures of Irish country life. The authors organize recollection into distinct episodes rather than a single plot, letting memory and observation guide the sequence. Their perspective privileges the everyday—domestic rhythms, local talk, and the small negotiations that sustain community—while maintaining a measured distance that clarifies detail without sentimentality. Humor and restraint coexist, resulting in a portrait that balances affection with scrutiny. The book’s method is cumulative, building a composite of place through successive scenes, voices, and settings.

Early chapters dwell on interiors and kinship, where households serve as microcosms of broader social codes. The authors trace how etiquette, hospitality, and work are interwoven, noting the tacit agreements that hold families and dependents together. They dwell on the interplay of deference and defiance, observing how subtle gestures can signal allegiance or dissent. Domestic spaces, from kitchen to parlor, become stages on which personal pride and communal reputation are negotiated. Without moralizing, the narrative lets practical considerations speak—how goods are kept, stories are shared, and duties divided—revealing the quiet economies of trust that underpin daily continuity.

The scene widens to the out-of-doors, charting how seasons and weather regulate both labor and leisure. The authors attend to roads, fields, and shorelines as lived environments, where travel is as much an act of social engagement as of movement. Field sports and country pursuits enter not as spectacle but as social frameworks, establishing who meets whom and under what tacit rules. The writing underscores skill, endurance, and judgment more than bravado, showing how shared risks and rituals foster bonds. Landscape is treated as active partner: the lie of the land, the temper of the day, and the stubbornness of terrain shape outcomes and temperaments.

Public gatherings—markets, fairs, and festivals—introduce a different register, where negotiation, performance, and communal memory converge. The authors sketch the choreography of bargaining and banter, the rhythms of music and procession, and the ways humor defuses friction. These scenes bring disparate groups into temporary alignment, testing boundaries between town and country, old custom and practical necessity. The social fabric appears resilient yet finely graded, with unspoken limits that everyone recognizes. Through anecdotal lenses, moments of mishap or triumph illuminate the unwritten law of reciprocity: a standard of fairness enforced as much by reputation as by authority.

Portraits of individuals anchor the book’s middle movement, capturing characters across occupations and stations. The authors avoid flattening difference, allowing contradictions—stubbornness and generosity, shrewdness and innocence—to coexist within a single figure. Speech

patterns, habits of dress, and local knowledge become cues to history and temperament. Rather than building toward dramatic revelation, these sketches accumulate insight, suggesting how identity is fashioned out of place, memory, and necessity. The result is a mosaic of voices, with each vignette adding nuance to the broader picture of community life, including the strain between self-reliance and interdependence that defines many encounters.

Threaded throughout is a quiet awareness of change, expressed less as thesis than as atmosphere. The authors hint at shifting economic pressures, altered patterns of work, and the slow encroachment of modern conveniences. While the book resists overt political argument, it recognizes the fragility of certain arrangements—those dependent on land, lineage, or custom. Memory is the organizing principle: by returning to scenes of instruction, celebration, and loss, the narrative measures what persists and what recedes. The restraint of the approach keeps judgments provisional, allowing readers to sense transition without being told precisely where it will lead.

The closing sections return to the ethics of noticing—how to recall a place without freezing it in nostalgia, and how to render people without simplifying them. Without disclosing hidden climaxes or final pronouncements, the book leaves a composite impression of an Ireland apprehended in careful detail and tempered affection. Its lasting significance lies in the precision of its social observation and the durability of its voice: a record of manners, landscapes, and exchanges that outlives the circumstances that produced them. As a

portrait of memory at work, it continues to inform understandings of regional life and Anglo-Irish letters.

Historical Context

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Published in 1906, Some Irish Yesterdays gathers essays and sketches by the Anglo-Irish cousins E. Œ. Somerville (Edith Oenone Somerville) of Castletownshend, County Cork, and Martin Ross (Violet Martin) of Ross House, near Oughterard, County Galway. Their vantage is the Protestant landed class embedded in rural Munster and Connacht. The setting spans the later nineteenth century into the Edwardian moment, when British administrative institutions, estate management, parish life, and market towns structured daily routines. Drawing on acute observation and long familiarity, the authors record customs, characters, and landscapes of southwest and western Ireland, preserving a tone of amused detachment while attentive to the textures of local life.

Land and tenancy conflicts form the essential backdrop. The Land War of 1879–82, led by the Irish National Land League, pressed for fair rents, fixity, and free sale, provoking coercion laws and widespread boycotts. Legislative responses—Gladstone’s Land Acts of 1870 and 1881, the Ashbourne Purchase Act of 1885, and especially the Wyndham Act of 1903—channeled state funds to enable tenants to purchase holdings from indebted estates. The Irish Land Commission and, after 1903, Estates Commissioners administered mass transfers. In rural districts, these measures eroded landlord power, altered

rent relations, and reshaped estate economies, changes that inform the book’s portraits of custom and community.

Contesting constitutional futures heightened tensions throughout the period. Home Rule bills introduced at Westminster in 1886 and 1893 failed, while Charles Stewart Parnell’s fall and death in 1891 fractured the Irish Parliamentary Party before its reunification under John Redmond. The Royal Irish Constabulary, Resident Magistrates, and Petty Sessions courts embodied Crown authority in the countryside. Somerville and Ross knew these institutions well, having earlier satirized a Resident Magistrate’s world, and their observational prose here assumes equal familiarity with rural justice and administration. The founding of Sinn Féin in 1905 signaled new political currents, though mainstream constitutionalism still framed public debate during the book’s composition.

Parallel to politics, a cultural reorientation gathered force. The Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill, promoted Irish-language study, local feiseanna, and revived traditions; literary energies coalesced in the Irish Literary Revival, reaching a public stage with the Abbey Theatre’s founding in 1904 by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and others. While Irish was receding in many districts, distinctive Hiberno-English idioms thrived. Somerville and Ross, writing from an Anglo-Irish milieu, rendered speech and folklore with care, yet remained outside organized cultural nationalism. Their sketches register both proximity to, and distance from, revivalist aspirations, emphasizing lived rural habits over programmatic manifestos.

Rural economies were in flux. Smallholders and graziers depended on mixed farming and cattle fairs, while seasonal migration and overseas emigration supplemented precarious incomes. Railways and branch lines connected market towns to ports and cities, accelerating movement of livestock and news. Reformers such as Horace Plunkett advanced cooperation through the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (1894), catalyzing creameries and buying societies that reshaped dairying. The Congested Districts Board, established in 1891, targeted the impoverished west with road, pier, and land-improvement schemes. Against this economic backdrop, the book’s scenes of fairs, trades, and household economies observe how livelihoods balanced tradition with new organizational forms.

Religious and educational structures framed everyday experience. The Church of Ireland was disestablished by the 1869 Irish Church Act (effective 1871), diminishing formal privileges of the Protestant ascendancy to which the authors belonged. The Roman Catholic Church exerted strong parochial influence in rural communities, while the National School system, founded in 1831, provided mass primary education largely through English. These arrangements affected language use, social calendars, and norms of authority. Somerville and Ross write across denominational lines, noting points of contact and friction between clergy, laity, and gentry, and showing how festivals, missions, and school routines textured village life without dominating their narrative emphasis.

Class and gender dynamics surface through sport and sociability. Foxhunting, point-to-point racing, and horse-breeding sustained a trans-county network of gentry and farmers; Edith Somerville was a renowned huntswoman and, in the early twentieth century, one of the first women to serve as a Master of Foxhounds in Ireland with the West Carbery Hunt in County Cork. Field sports brought laborers, grooms, and landowners into regular contact, while newspapers, post, and rail broadened horizons. The domestic economies of the “Big House,” already strained by land purchase, still supported layered staff hierarchies, which the authors observe with humor and precision rather than overt advocacy.

Composed before the Home Rule crisis of 1912–14 and the revolutionary rupture of 1916, the volume looks backward from 1906 onto communities transformed yet recognizable. Its scenes of travel, sport, law, and labor register an Ireland pivoting from landlord-tenant structures toward small proprietorship and cooperative habits. Somerville and Ross deploy comic understatement and sharp observation to probe pretension, bureaucracy, and provincial foibles, while extending sympathy across ranks. Without programmatic argument, Some Irish Yesterdays becomes a record of transition: an Anglo-Irish lens on rural lifeways that preserves voices and textures of place, while quietly questioning the durability of the world it depicts.

Some Irish Yesterdays

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The Authors desire to thank the Editors of the Magazines and Periodicals in which the following Sketches have appeared, for their permission to reprint them here; and they wish also to acknowledge the courtesy of Messrs. Constable & Co. in permitting the reproduction of "A Patrick's Day Hunt."

October 1906

ILLUSTRATIONS

"*The hovering horde vacillates no longer*"

"*A voice fell like a falling star*"

"*I wash meself every Sathurday morning*"

"*It's all would be about it, she'd break the side car!*"

"*The like o' the crowd that was in Kyleranny*"

"*He's gone North agin!*"

"*The Widow Brinckley faced him the same as Jeffrey faced his cat*"

"*The villyan wheeled into the yard as nate as a bicycle*"

"*Sending his wild voice abroad*"

Old Michael

"*Ancient widowhood and spinsterdom*"

"*What have ye on yer noa-se*"

"*She's the liveliest of them, God bless her!*"

"*And cabbages!" said the mountainy man*

The Candidate

"*A man must wote the way his priest and bishop 'll tell him*"

Facing America

AN OUTPOST OF IRELAND

"Is it a bath on Twelfth Day**[1]**? Sure no one would expect that, no more than on a Sunday!"

Twelfth Day was accordingly added to Miss Gerraghty's list of Bath Holidays—that is to say, the list allotted to Miss Gerraghty's visitors. Judging from appearances, her private list was composed of one infinite bath holiday; indeed, she has been heard in the kitchen announcing in clear tones her opinion of "them thrash of baths" to an audience whose hands and faces wore a sympathetic half-mourning. Nature, we were given to understand, had intended Miss Gerraghty to be a lady**[1q]**; a fate more blind to the fitness of things decreed that she should serve tables in a Galway lodging-house, a position in which higher destinies are likely to be overlooked. Some touches of dignity remained hers by an

immutable etiquette; no cap had ever found footing upon her raven fringe; a watch chain took the place of the ignoble white apron. Chiefest of all prerogatives, she was addressed as "Miss Gerraghty" by the establishment, an example so carefully set by her brother, the proprietor, as to suggest that her dowry was mingled with the funds of the management.

With these solaces she doubtless fed her inner need of refinement, even while she launched the thirteenth trump of repartee at the woman who came to sell turkeys, or broke a lance in coquetry with the coal man. Such episodes were freely audible to the sitting room by the hall—indeed, the woman with the turkeys finally thrust her flushed face and the turkey's haggard bosom round the door, in an appeal to Cæsar that made the rooftree ring. These things occur in Galway, with a simplicity that is not often met with elsewhere.

There was an afternoon when a native of the Islands of Aran penetrated to the hearth-rug of Miss Gerraghty's front sitting-room, in the endeavour to plant upon its occupants a forequarter of mutton that smelt of fish, and was as destitute of fat as the rocks of its birthplace. Even the Aran man's assurance that it was "as sweet as sugar," could not relax by a line the contempt with which Miss Gerraghty, when summoned to judgment, surveyed the dainty and its owner. In course of the discussion, she took occasion to inform the company that she herself could only "eat ram mutton by the dint of the gravy," which bore, as it seemed, somewhat darkly upon the matter, but had the effect of deepening the complexion of the Aran man by quite two