Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Irish Impressions

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I. Two Stones in a Square

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When I had for the first time crossed St. George's Channel, and for the first time stepped out of a Dublin hotel on to St. Stephen's Green, the first of all my impressions was that of a particular statue, or rather portion of a statue. I left many traditional mysteries already in my track, but they did not trouble me as did this random glimpse or vision. I have never understood why the Channel is called St. George's Channel; it would seem more natural to call it St. Patrick's Channel since the great missionary did almost certainly cross that unquiet sea and look up at those mysterious mountains. And though I should be enchanted, in an abstract artistic sense, to imagine St. George sailing towards the sunset, flying the silver and scarlet colours of his cross, I cannot in fact regard that journey as the most fortunate of the adventures of that flag. Nor, for that matter, do I know why the Green should be called St. Stephen's Green, nor why the parliamentary enclosure at Westminster is also connected with the first of the martyrs; unless it be because St. Stephen was killed with stones. The stones piled together to make modern political buildings, might perhaps be regarded as a cairn, or heap of missiles, marking the place of the murder of a witness to the truth. And while it seems unlikely that St. Stephen was pelted with statues as well as stones, there are undoubtedly statues that might well kill a Christian at sight. Among these graven stones, from which the saints suffer, I should certainly include some of those figures in frock coats standing opposite St.

Stephen's, Westminster. There are many such statues in Dublin also; but the one with which I am concerned was at first partially veiled from me. And the veil was at least as symbolic as the vision.

I saw what seemed the crooked hind legs of a horse on a pedestal and deduced an equestrian statue, in the somewhat bloated fashion of the early eighteenth century equestrian statues. But the figure, from where I stood, was wholly hidden in the tops of trees growing round it in a ring; masking it with leafy curtains or draping it with leafy banners. But they were green banners, that waved and glittered all about it in the sunlight; and the face they hid was the face of an English king. Or rather, to speak more correctly, a German king.

When laws can stay . . . it was impossible that an old rhyme should not run in my head, and words that appealed to the everlasting revolt of the green things of the earth. . . . "And when the leaves in summer time their colour dare not show." The rhyme seemed to reach me out of remote times and find arresting fulfilment, like a prophecy; it was impossible not to feel that I had seen an omen. I was conscious vaguely of a vision of green garlands hung on gray stone; and the wreaths were living and growing, and the stone was dead. Something in the simple substances and elemental colours, in the white sunlight, and the sombre and even secret image, held the mind for a moment in the midst of all the moving city, like a sign given in a dream. I was told that the figure was that of one of the first Georges; but indeed I seemed to know already that it was the White Horse of Hanover that had thus grown gray with

Irish weather or green with Irish foliage. I knew only too well, already, that the George who had really crossed the Channel was not the saint. This was one of those German princes whom the English aristocracy used when it made the English domestic polity aristocratic and the English foreign policy German. Those Englishmen who think the Irish are pro-German, or those Irishmen who think the Irish ought to be pro-German, would presumably expect the Dublin populace to have hung the statue of this German deliverer with national flowers and nationalist flags. For some reason, however, I found no traces of Irish tributes round the pedestal of the Teutonic horseman. I wondered how many people in the last fifty years have ever cared about it, or even been conscious of their own carelessness. I wonder how many have ever troubled to look at it, or even trouble not to look at it. If it fell down, I wonder whether anybody would put it up again. I do not know; I only know that Irish gardeners, or some such Irish humorists, had planted trees in a ring round that prancing equestrian figure; trees that had, so to speak, sprung up and choked him, making him more unrecognisable than a Jack-in-the-Green. Jack or George had vanished; but the Green remained.

About a stone's-throw from this calamity in stone there stood, at the corner of a gorgeously coloured flower-walk, a bust evidently by a modern sculptor with modern symbolic ornament surmounted by the fine falcon face of the poet Mangan; who dreamed and drank and died, a thoughtless and thriftless outcast, in the darkest of the Dublin streets around that place. This individual Irishman really was what we were told that all Irishmen were, hopeless, heedless,

irresponsible, impossible, a tragedy of failure. And yet it seemed to be his head that was lifted and not hidden; the gay flowers only showed up this graven image as the green leaves shut out the other; everything around him seemed bright and busy, and told rather of a new time. It was clear that modern men did stop to look at _him;_ indeed modern men had stayed there long enough to make him a monument. It was almost certain that if his monument fell down, it really would be put up again. I think it very likely there would be competition among advanced modern artistic schools of admitted crankiness and unimpeachable lunacy; that somebody would want to cut out a Cubist Mangan in a style less of stone than of bricks; or to set up a Vorticist Mangan, like a frozen whirlpool, to terrify the children playing in that flowery lane. For when I afterwards went into the Dublin Art Club, or mixed generally in the stimulating society of the intellectuals of the Irish capital, I found a multitude of things which moved both my admiration and amusement. Perhaps the best thing of all was that it was the one society that I have seen where the intellectuals were intellectual. But nothing pleased me more than the fact that even Irish art was taken with a certain Irish pugnacity; as if there could be street fights about aesthetics as there once were about theology. I could almost imagine an appeal for pikes to settle a point about art needlework, or a suggestion of dying on the barricades for a difference about bookbinding. And I could still more easily imagine a sort of ultra-civilised civil war round the half-restored bust of poor Mangan. But it was in a yet plainer and more popular sense that I felt that bust to be the sign of a

new world, where the statue of Royal George was only the ruin of an old one. And though I have since seen many much more complex, and many decidedly contradictory things in Ireland, the allegory of those two stone images in that public garden has remained in my memory, and has not been reversed. The Glorious Revolution, the great Protestant Deliverer, the Hanoverian Succession, these things were the very pageant and apotheosis of success. The Whig aristocrat was not merely victorious; it was as a victor that he asked for victory. The thing was fully expressed in all the florid and insolent statuary of the period, in all those tumid horsemen in Roman uniform and Rococo periwigs shown as prancing in perpetual motion down shouting streets to their triumphs; only to-day the streets are empty and silent, and the horse stands still. Of such a kind was the imperial figure round which the ring of trees had risen, like great green fans to soothe a sultan, or great green curtains to guard him. But it was in a sort of mockery that his pavilion was thus painted with the colour of his conquered enemies. For the king was dead behind his curtains, his voice will be heard no more, and no man will even wish to hear it, while the world endures. The dynastic eighteenth century is dead if anything is dead; and these idols at least are only stones. But only a few yards away, the stone that the builders rejected is really the head of a corner, standing at the corner of a new pathway, coloured and crowded with children and with flowers.

That, I suspect, is the paradox of Ireland in the modern world. Everything that was thought progressive, as a prancing horse, has come to a standstill. Everything that

was thought decadent, as a dying drunkard, has risen from the dead. All that seemed to have reached a _cul de sac_ has turned the corner, and stands at the opening of a new road. All that thought itself on a pedestal has found itself up a tree. And that is why those two chance stones seem to me to stand like graven images on either side of the gateway by which a man enters Ireland. And yet I had not left the same small enclosure till I had seen one other sight which was even more symbolic than the flowers near the foot of the poet's pedestal. A few yards beyond the Mangan bust was a model plot of vegetables, like a kitchen garden with no kitchen or house attached to it, planted out in a patchwork of potatoes, cabbages, and turnips, to prove how much could be done with an acre. And I realised as in a vision that all over the new Ireland that patch is repeated like a pattern; and where there is a real kitchen garden there is also a real kitchen; and it is not a communal kitchen. It is more typical even than the poet and the flowers; for these flowers are also food, and this poetry is also property; property which, when properly distributed, is the poetry of the average man. It was only afterwards that I could realise all the realities to which this accident corresponded; but even this little public experiment, at the first glance, had something of the meaning of a public monument. It was this which the earth itself had reared against the monstrous image of the German monarch; and I might have called this chapter Cabbages and Kings.

My life is passed in making bad jokes and seeing them turn into true prophecies. In the little town in South Bucks, where I live, I remember some talk of appropriate

ceremonies in connection with the work of sending vegetables to the Fleet. There was a suggestion that these proceedings should end with "God Save the King," an amendment by some one (of a more naval turn of mind) to substitute "Rule Britannia;" and the opposition of one individual, claiming to be of Irish extraction, who loudly refused to lend a voice to either. Whatever I retain, in such rural scenes, of the frivolity of Fleet Street led me to suggest that we could all join in singing "The Wearing of the Greens." But I have since discovered that this remark, like other typical utterances of the village idiot, was in truth inspired; and was a revelation and a vision from across the sea, a vision of what was really being done, not by the village idiots but by the village wise men. For the whole miracle of modern Ireland might well be summed up in the simple change from the word "green" to the word "greens." Nor would it be true to say that the first is poetical and the second practical. For a green tree is quite as poetical as a green flag; and no one in touch with history doubts that the waving of the green flag has been very useful to the growing of the green tree. But I shall have to touch upon all such controversial topics later, for those to whom such statements are still controversial. Here I would only begin by recording a first impression as vividly coloured and patchy as a modernist picture; a square of green things growing where they are least expected; the new vision of Ireland. The discovery, for most Englishmen, will be like touching the trees of a faded tapestry, and finding the forest alive and full of birds. It will be as if, on some dry urn or dreary column, figures which had already begun to crumble

magically began to move and dance. For culture as well as mere caddishness assumed the decay of these Celtic or Catholic things; there were artists sketching the ruins as well as trippers picnicking in them; and it was not only evidence that a final silence had fallen on the harp of Tara, that it did not play "Tararaboomdeay." Englishmen believed in Irish decay even when they were large-minded enough to lament it. It might be said that even those who were penitent because the thing was murdered, were quite convinced that it was killed. The meaning of these green and solid things before me is that it is not a ghost that has risen from the grave. A flower, like a flag, might be little more than a ghost; but a fruit has that sacramental solidity which in all mythologies belongs not to a ghost but to a god. This sight of things sustaining, and a beauty that nourishes and does not merely charm, is the premonition of practicality in the miracle of modern Ireland. It is a miracle more marvellous than the resurrection of the dead. It is the resurrection of the body.

II. The Root of Reality

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The only excuse of literature is to make things new; and the chief misfortune of journalism is that it has to make them old. What is hurried has to be hackneyed. Suppose a man has to write on a particular subject, let us say America; if he has a day to do it in, it is possible that, in the last afterglow of sunset, he may have discovered at least one thing which he himself really thinks about America. It is conceivable that somewhere under the evening star he may have a new idea, even about the new world. If he has only half an hour in which to write, he will just have time to consult an encyclopaedia and vaguely remember the latest leading articles. The encyclopaedia will be only about a decade out of date; the leading articles will be aeons out of date-- having been written under similar conditions of modern rush. If he has only a quarter of an hour in which to write about America, he may be driven in mere delirium and madness to call her his Gigantic Daughter in the west, to talk of the feasibility of Hands Across the Sea, or even to call himself an Anglo-Saxon, when he might as well call himself a Jute. But whatever debasing banality be the effect of business scurry in criticism, it is but one example of a truth that can be tested in twenty fields of experience. If a man must get to Brighton as quickly as possible, he can get there quickest by travelling on rigid rails on a recognised route. If he has time and money for motoring, he will still use public roads; but he will be surprised to find how many public roads look as new and quiet as private roads. If he has time

enough to walk, he may find for himself a string of fresh footpaths, each one a fairy-tale. This law of the leisure needed for the awakening of wonder applies, indeed, to things superficially familiar as well as to things superficially fresh. The chief case for old enclosures and boundaries is that they enclose a space in which new things can always be found later, like live fish within the four corners of a net. The chief charm of having a home that is secure is having leisure to feel it as strange.

I have often done the little I could to correct the stale trick of taking things for granted: all the more because it is not even taking them for granted. It is taking them without gratitude; that is, emphatically as not granted. Even one's own front door, released by one's own latchkey, should not only open inward on things familiar, but outward on things unknown. Even one's own domestic fireside should be wild as well as domesticated; for nothing could be wilder than fire. But if this light of the higher ignorance should shine even on familiar places, it should naturally shine most clearly on the roads of a strange land. It would be well if a man could enter Ireland really knowing that he knows nothing about Ireland; if possible, not even the name of Ireland. The misfortune is that most men know the name too well, and the thing too little. This book would probably be a better book, as well as a better joke, if I were to call the island throughout by some name like Atlantis, and only reveal on the last page that I was referring to Ireland. Englishmen would see a situation of great interest, objects with which they could feel considerable sympathy, and opportunities of which they might take considerable