

MEATH

History and Society

Interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish County

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Series Editor:

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GEOGRAPHY PUBLICATIONS

CHAPTER 27

Like the end of a beautiful world:
eco-critical perceptions of
landscape in the writings of
Francis Ledwidge and Lord
Dunsany

CHARLIE TRAVIS

All the dead kings came to me
At Rosnaree...

Francis Ledwidge, *The Dead Kings* (1917)

Looking once westward from Tara, I saw before me rows and rows of trees,
thin dark lines with the mist in layers between them; and I thought how
history was like that, a sentence or two of fact, and mystery thickly in
between the lines. A few trees at the edge of the hill were sighing
mournfully, and the wind that troubled them seemed to bring the evening
on, for soon the mist had hidden the whole scene, like Time effacing
history.

Lord Dunsany, *My Ireland* (1937)

Introduction

Eco and *critic* both derive from the Greek, *oikos* and *kritis*, and in tandem they mean 'house judge'.¹ Whether as a subject of inspiration or a site of composition, Francis Ledwidge's (1887-1917) Slane and Lord Dunsany's (1878-1957) Tara act as respective points of *genius loci* which 'housed' their eco-critical literary perspectives of the landscapes of County Meath. The friendship and support with which Dunsany provided the young Irish volunteer, and their mutual devotion to literary pursuits, have been commented on previously, so it is worthwhile to excavate and explore in more detail the environmental impressions

in their various works. 'Eco-critical' literature focuses on the roles that place, environment and geography play in literary texts, and is informed by a troubling awareness that human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems.² Both Ledwidge and Dunsany's works are imbued with traces of this sensibility, and their lasting eco-critical depictions of the county's landscapes, illuminates Douglas C. Pocock's observation that 'literature is the product of perception, or, more simply is perception,' and provides the 'basis for a new awareness, a new consciousness.'³ Recently, an 'eco-critical' consciousness has become focused on mediating the roles that place and geography play in literary texts, to communicate environmental issues.⁴ Eco-criticism offers a unique fusion of literary, scientific, ecological and philosophical perspectives.⁵ William Rueckert has defined this school as an application of 'ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world.'⁶ Eco-critical approaches complement the emerging school of 'geocriticism', which explores the overlapping territories of physical geography, cognitive mapping and literature. 'Geocritical' approaches consider both the geometric and philosophical coordinates of real and fictional space, such as when one considers, the stream of consciousness narrative of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) while mapping the streets, districts and squares of Dublin and plotting out the sites of actual pubs, shops, churches, and houses.⁷

This chapter will consider 'eco-critical' themes in the works of Ledwidge and Dunsany, and speculate in a 'geocritical' sense upon how their biographical paths and literary works operate in relationship to specific historical co-ordinates, such as the role played by the juxtaposition of Dunsany Castle and the Hill of Tara on Dunsany's writing, and the roads of Slane, the army barracks, and First World War battlefields and trenches which shaped Ledwidge's verse, and were transposed in his imagination upon the cultural and natural landscapes of Meath. The following biographical sketches will precede a discussion of Ledwidge and Dunsany's mutual literary interests, pursuits and descriptions of their overlapping poetic and discursive impressions and representations of Meath, which 'eco-critically' resonate well beyond the borders of their shared county.

The blackbird poet

Francis Ledwidge was born in a labourer's cottage granted by the Rural District Council to Anne and Patrick Ledwidge in Slane on 19 August 1887 (plate 27.1). He was their eighth child and the second youngest in a family of four brothers and three sisters. Socially, the Ledwidges occupied the lower rungs of the Irish rural class system. Francis Ledwidge's work has been recognized within the canon of 'British' First World War poets, such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owens, Robert Graves and Isaac Rosenberg. Though featured along with twelve other



Plate 27.1: The house in Slane where Francis Ledwidge was born (courtesy Francis Ludlow).

poets in the British Imperial War Museum in London, only Rosenberg and Ledwidge who worked as a 'navvy on the roads of Meath,' could be described as working class.⁸ Until recently his presence and poetry were often overlooked in the memory of the Great War on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Family tradition has it that the Ledwidges were descendants of settlers from Germany and England who were reputedly granted land in the Kingdom of Meath in 1200.⁹ As Catholics, the family's slide down the rungs of the social hierarchy in the 'Royal County' was hastened by Oliver Cromwell's invasion, and other cataclysms marking Ireland's history. Displaced west of the Shannon, the Ledwidges according to family lore, made their way back to Slane, over the course of centuries. In a letter to the American professor Lewis Chase, who admired the poet's work, Ledwidge recounted family lore:

I am of a family who were ever soldiers and poets... I have heard my mother say many times that the Ledwidges were once a great people in the land and she has shown with a sweep of her hand green hills and wide valleys where sheep are folded which still bear the marks of dead industry and once, this was all ours.¹⁰

In 1892, when Ledwidge was four, his father died and he was raised by his mother who toiled as a labourer in the fields of local farmers, to ensure the family's survival. He left national school at fourteen in order to contribute to the meagre household income. After a brief stint as a grocer's apprentice in Dublin, Ledwidge returned to Slane and worked as a farm hand, road navvy, and supervisor of roads. In 1912, Ledwidge sent a copy-book of verse to Lord Dunsany, who subsequently helped him to publish his work and also allowed him access to the library at Dunsany Castle. Dunsany introduced the young poet to his literary circle in Dublin, which included W. B. Yeats, who was fascinated by Ledwidge's literary impressions of the Boyne Valley. In 1913, due to his dismissal for organizing labour at the Beauparc copper mine, Ledwidge was appointed secretary of the Slane branch of the Meath Labour Union, but his aspirations of white-collar employment ended when he was let go in 1914 for faulty book-keeping. Despite obtaining and losing several positions, he continued to self-educate and compose verse, publishing his poetry in the *Drogheda*



Plate 27.2: Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917).

Independent. Ledwidge's politics were nationalist at this stage and he supported the cause of labour. Both facets were expressed in his attempt to establish a Gaelic League branch in Slane, and his success in co-founding and acting as the secretary for the Slane Irish Volunteers. At the outbreak of war in 1914, Ledwidge initially demurred from John Redmond's pledge that the Irish Volunteer's would fight for the British cause but subsequently changed his mind. He explained the reason for so doing to a friend: 'I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy common to our civilisation and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing at home but pass resolutions.'¹¹ On 24 October 1914 Ledwidge enlisted in Dunsany's regiment of Royal Iniskilling Fusiliers, though the baron offered him a stipend not to join. Biographers point to his failed love affair with a local woman, Ellie Vaughney, as one possible reason for his enlistment. Initially stationed at Richmond Barracks in Dublin, he continued to compose poetry, and did so across the killing fields of Europe, until his tragic death in France in 1917.

The literary baron

Lord Dunsany was born Edward Plunkett in 1878, the first son of John William Plunkett, seventeenth baron of Dunsany and his wife, Elizabeth Louisa Maria Grosvenor. His early life was spent between several family properties, most notably Dunstall Priory in Shoreham, Kent, Dunsany Castle in County Meath, and a townhouse in London. Related to Oliver Plunkett, the martyred Catholic archbishop of Armagh, Dunsany's kin also included Horace Curzon Plunkett, the Unionist-turned-Home Rule politician, and Count George Noble Plunkett, the Republican, father of Joseph Mary Plunkett, who was executed for his role in the 1916 Rising. Dunsany attended school in Britain, where he was both socialized and exposed to the influences which would shape his later works:

When I went to Cheam school I was given a lot of the Bible to read. This turned my thoughts Eastward... When I learned Greek at Cheam and heard of other Gods a great pity came on me for those marble people that had become forsaken and the mood has never quite left me.¹²

After Cheam, Dunsany matriculated to Eton where according to Frank Harris, one of his biographers:

... he lost a little of his Celtic kindly humane manners and learned 'good form'; instead of prizing Celtic equality and the Kingdom of man upon earth, he came to believe in British imperialism and the world-devouring destinies of the British Empire.¹³



Plate 27.3: Lord Dunsany, 1878-1957.

He entered Sandhurst, the British Military academy in 1896, was conferred with his title at his father's death in 1899, and soon after enlisted as a second lieutenant in the Coldstream Guards to fight in the Second Boer War. Sent to Gibraltar, before shipping off to South Africa, he twice crossed the straits to visit Tangiers. Despite its north-west African location, Dunsany conflated the place with a sense of 'orientalism'; later ascribing such 'eastern' locales as providing the exotic inspiration for many of his stories. Though both trips lasted less than a day, Dunsany argued: 'how long do you have to stand in an oriental street before you can get the smell of it? How long does it take to see the flat roofs of a city and a hundred people wallowing in the sunlight?'¹⁴

He returned to Dunsany Castle in 1901 after war duty where his uncle Horace Plunkett instructed the young baron on how to manage his estate and investments. In 1903 he met Beatrice Child Villiers, the youngest daughter of the earl of Jersey, during the annual social season in London. They were married in 1904 and their son Randal was born in 1906. Dunsany would serve as a

captain in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in World War I. He was at Dunsany castle in 1916 when the Easter Rising erupted. Hearing the news he hurried to Dublin, where in an encounter with Republican riflemen, he was shot by a Clare man, Peadar Clancy of the 1st Battalion, Dublin Brigade, and a fragment of the bullet lodged under his eye. Dunsany then surrendered to Clancy and was hospitalized, before being released. Neither man bore the other any long term animosity, with Dunsany stating of his republican captors 'although in different uniforms, we are all Irishmen and you are all gentlemen.'¹⁵ Dunsany circulated in both Dublin and London's social and literary scenes, and travelled between his homes in Meath, London and Kent. An enthusiastic hunter and cricket player, he hosted the local hunt at Dunsany Castle, and established a cricket ground near Dunsany crossroads. He was friendly with Oliver St. John Gogarty, George William Russell, and, for a time, William Butler Yeats, who co-founded the Irish Academy of Letters in 1932. However, Dunsany's writings were viewed as too exotic and not concerned, as Yeats required, with the 'national question.' He was offered only an associate membership in the academy, a snub which alienated him from Ireland's literary set. Politically estranged as well, Dunsany transferred his estate in Meath in trust to his son in the 1930s, and returned to Shoreham Kent, where he resided close to Rudyard Kipling, a kindred imperial spirit. In 1957 he was dining in Dublin with the earl and countess of Fingall when he was stricken by appendicitis, and died in hospital. He was buried in England.



Plate 27.4: View from Hill of Slane towards Slane Castle with the Boyne on the left (courtesy Francis Ludlow).



Plate 27.5: Weir and forested banks of the Boyne at Slane (courtesy Francis Ludlow).

Decoding the landscape

In decoding the landscapes of Dunsany and Ledwidge, Seamus Heaney notes that the bridge over the River Boyne at Slane acted as a borderland for the 'two Irelands' which distinguished the blackbird poet and the literary baron's separate but interlocking heritages.¹⁶ 'Upstream' are 'pleasant and potent reminders of an Anglicized, assimilated country' comprised by the Marquis of Conyngham's landscaped parkland 'sweeping down to artfully wooded banks of the river... pouring in a delicious sheen over the weir.'¹⁷ Located here too is 'Slane Castle and the big house at Beauparc' with its canal and towpath.¹⁸

The scene visualized in fig. 27.1 is, as Heaney notes, 'composed and historical as a topographical print, and possessed the tranquil allure of the established order of nineteenth-century, post-union Ireland.'¹⁹ Downstream (and to the east) Heaney observes 'historical and prehistorical reminders of a different sort', including the 'Boyne battlefield, the megalithic tombs at Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, [and] the Celtic burying ground at Rosnaree.'²⁰ These places, Heaney writes, have been 'construed as part of the mystical body of an Irish culture which had suffered mutilation and was in need of restoration.'²¹

An irony underlies Heaney's reading of the landscape of Meath associated with the blackbird poet and the literary baron. Ledwidge, a Catholic nationalist, would die in a British Army uniform at Ypres, Belgium, in the First World War in 1917.

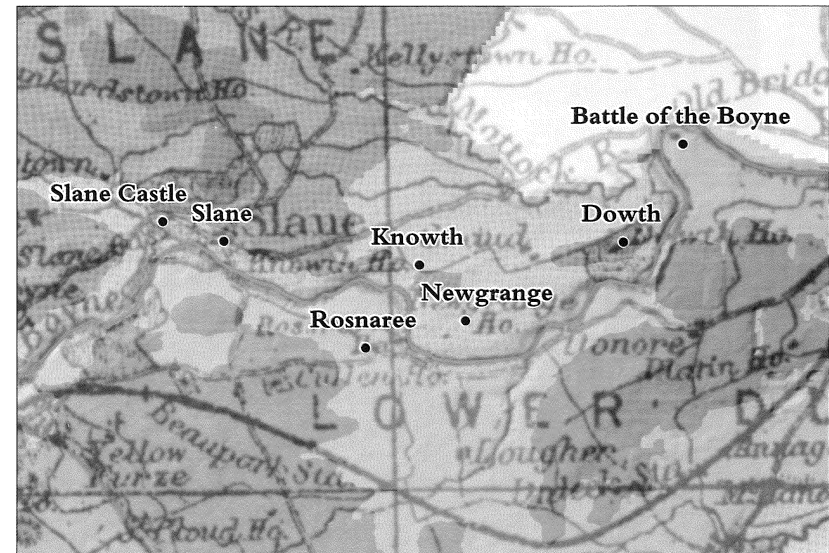


Fig. 27.1: The two Irelands of Ledwidge and Dunsany.

As a young man he lived with his mother and siblings in a cottage owned by the Rural District Council, north of the Boyne in Slane. In contrast, Dunsany, a Protestant landed peer, inherited a family estate which was established as a fortification of the Norman Pale in the eleventh century, southwest of the Hill of Tara, with its mystical, Celtic overtones. Despite the historical walls of hierarchy and tradition, each writer infiltrated the other's cultural landscape in literary reconnaissance.

Introducing Ledwidge's *Songs of the Fields* in 1914, Lord Dunsany wrote:

Of pure poetry there are two kinds, that which mirrors the beauty of the world in which our bodies are, and that which builds the more mysterious kingdoms where geography ends and fairyland begins, with gods and heroes at war, and the sirens singing still, and Alph going down to the darkness from Xanadu. Mr. Ledwidge gives us the first kind.²²

Dunsany's description of *Songs of the Fields* is apt, and he reflected, after receiving a copy book of Ledwidge's poems, that he was:

... astonished by the brilliance of that eye that had looked at the fields of Meath and seen there all the simple birds and flowers with a vividness that made those pages like a magnifying glass, through which one looked at familiar things seen thus for the first time.²³

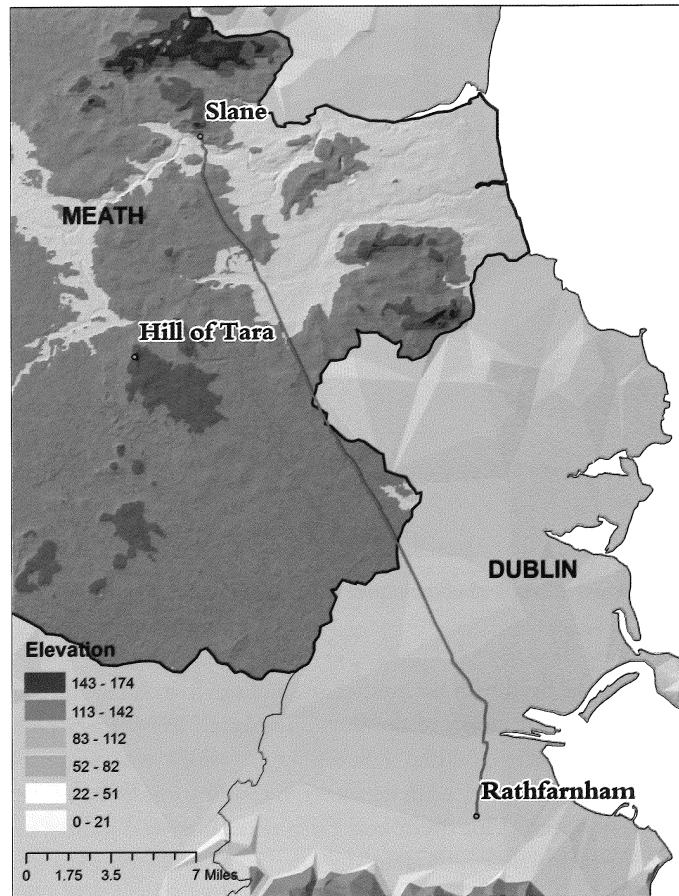


Fig. 27.2: Topography of Ledwidge's walk (1902)

Ledwidge's preternaturally poetic and geographical eye blossomed when he migrated from Meath to work as a grocer's apprentice in Rathfarnham, Dublin, at the age of fifteen. Being forced out of his rural landscape and thrust into an environment with 'brick horizons' seemed to jar an element of his psyche. Overwhelmed by homesickness and estrangement, he composed *Behind Closed Eyes* (1902), which provides a panoramic view of the village of Slane, as seen from one of the roads leading to it:

... Above me smokes the little town,
With its whitewashed walls and roofs of brown
And its octagon spire toned smoothly down

As the holy minds within.
And wondrous impudently sweet,
Half of him passion, half conceit,
The blackbird calls down the street
Like the piper of Hamelin.
I hear him, and I feel the lure
Drawing me back to the homely moor,
I'll go and close the mountains' door
On the city's strife and din.²⁴

Ledwidge's biographers have recounted that after finishing the poem, he abandoned his apprenticeship and set off in the night to walk the thirty-five miles from Rathfarnham to Slane, pausing to rest on the mile-markers dotting the route.

Figure 27.2 provides a map of Ledwidge's walk and it is interesting to not only see the distance visualized, but the varying topography that he crossed as he returned home. While the route still exists, it has now become part of a patchwork of concrete and asphalt roads and motorways which now have been carved upon the rural landscape. Liam O'Meara writes that:

... in the town of Slane, four large Georgian houses [locally known as the "four sisters" stand at the intersection of the Dublin / Derry and Drogheda / Navan roads. The houses are angled towards one another in a way that creates an octagon. In earlier times the area was known as "the octagon". Thus, when Ledwidge referred to the "octagon" spire he meant the spire within the octagon, or village. In his time the spire was completely clad in ivy with just the smoothed down top and cross showing.²⁵

Arriving in Slane as dawn was breaking, Ledwidge slipped over the wall surrounding the family cottage and patiently waited for his family to awaken; when they did, he was welcomed back warmly by his mother and siblings.²⁶

Behind Closed Eyes fuses the poetic and the biographical and signals a return to the space of the cottage, a place which would anchor Ledwidge's daily rhythms as he travelled across County Meath creating his poetic impressions. In 1914 he volunteered with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers for service in the First World War. Promoted to lance corporal, in 1915 he was shipped to the Dardanelles and survived Winston Churchill's suicidal assault on Gallipoli and later became ill during a mountain campaign in Serbia. He received an edition of his first collection *Songs of the Fields* the same year, its poetry gently dropping into his battle-hardened hands. Recuperating in 1916 in a British Army hospital in Egypt, Ledwidge would sketch from memory in *Skreen Cross Roads*, a panoramic perception of the landscape centred on the Hill of Tara:

Five roads meet on the hill of Skreen
 Five fair ways to wander down.
 One road sings of the valleys green
 Two of the Sea, and one of the town.
 And one little road has never a song
 Tho the world be fair and the day be long.²⁷

This poetic perspective intersects with Dunsany's more historical and fantastical depictions of Tara, but Ledwidge's depictions of the fields, hills, streams and rivers of Meath seem more poetic, and born of the embodied experience of the labourer who feels the county's soil underneath his fingernails. Such a perspective is further elaborated in *The Wife of Llew*, which exhibits basic eco-critical perceptions conversant with William Howarth's observation that 'ecology is a science strongly connected to the history of verbal expressions. In the medicine rites of early people, shamans sang, chanted and danced stories to heal disease or prevent disasters.'²⁸ The poetry and mythology performed by the Celtic *fili* seems to have fulfilled this function as well. Fromm states that 'classical scholars sustained that equity by reading or mapping the body and earth in analogous terms.'²⁹ In *The Wife of Llew*, Ledwidge brings together ancient and classical eco-critical tropes by conjuring to life earthy figures of Celtic mythology from the tree boughs, violets, daisies and poppies growing in the fields around Slane:

And Gwydion said to Math, when it was
 Spring:
 "Come now and let us make a wife for Llew."
 And so they broke broad boughs yet most moist with dew,
 And in a shadow made a magic ring:
 They took the violet and meadow-sweet
 To form her pretty face, and for her feet
 They built a mound of daisies on a wing,
 And for her voice they made a linnet sing
 In the wide poppy blowing for her mouth.
 And over all they chanted twenty hours.
 And Llew came singing from the azure south
 And bore away his wife of birds and flowers.³⁰

Grounded by his labour, poverty and class position to an intense physical relationship with the landscape, Ledwidge poetically braided desire and heartbreak with a luminous perception of the flora, fauna, fields and woods of Meath, before emerging as one of the haunting voices in the chorus of slain World War I poets. As a champion of Ledwidge, Dunsany projected his young

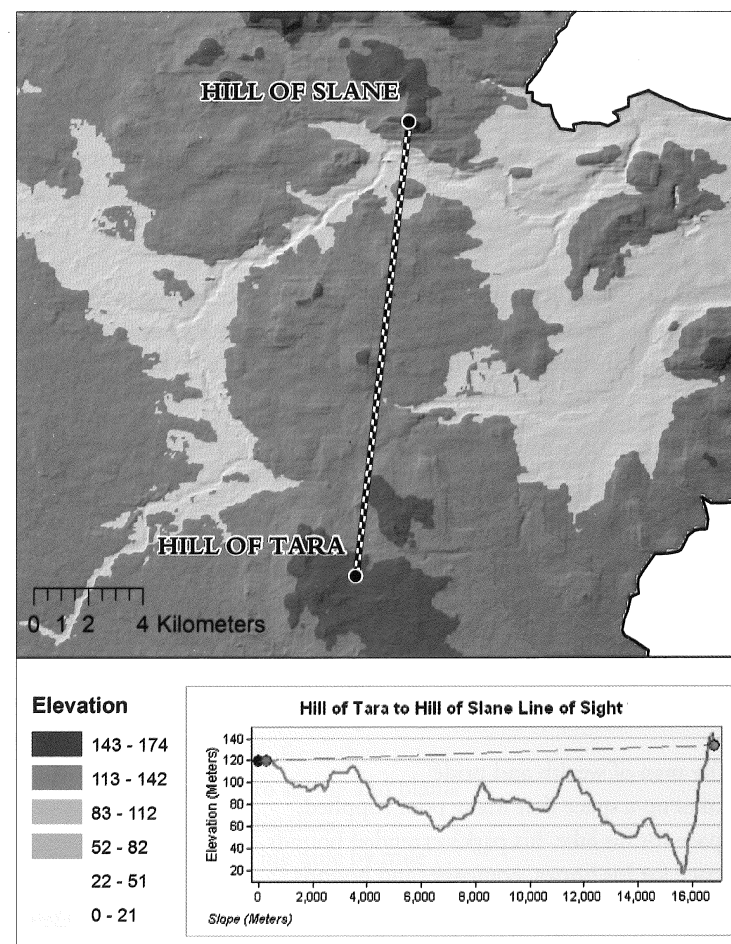


Fig. 27. 3: Topographical view, line of sight and slope in elevation from Hill of Tara to Hill of Slane.

poetic protégé's literary perspective and sense of *genius loci* upon the county's elevated terrains:

He came from Slane, whose wooden hill standing above the Boyne is one of those hills that one can see from Tara, lying between the Mourne Mountains and the hills of north-west Meath, going pale-blue into Cavan; but much nearer than either.³¹

The map and image in figure 27.3 illustrates this line of sight perspective between the hills of Tara and Slane, as well as the drop in elevation as one moves from the

former to the latter. It also conveys a sense of the topography that Ledwidge may have experienced as he travelled back home from Dunsany Castle, and provide a clue to how the landscape and his movement through it may have inspired his poetic eye.

Inspired by 'beautiful afternoons' spent at Dunsany Castle, Ledwidge, in a letter to his host, thanked Dunsany for his friendship and inspiration and revealed one of his verse writing techniques:

Then the long ride home with beautiful memories of your appreciation,
reciting my latest all the miles until the pedals of my bicycle turned to the
rhythm of the piece, delaying me often, for you know I love slow rhythm
and slow words.³²

In letters written when he was stationed in Richmond Barracks, Ledwidge makes a number of references to the 'exhilarating vista' he views when cycling from Slane to Wilkinstown and out by the bog road, and biographers recount how the fields, forests, roads and farms of Meath, impressed themselves into his poetry.³³ Though Dunsany was attracted to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan* (1816) and its fantastical landscape of Xanadu, Ledwidge was drawn to the mournful and historically-rooted space of dispossession depicted in Oliver Goldsmith's poem the *Deserted Village* (1770):

The man of wealth and pride
Takes up a space that many poor supplied;
Space for his lake, his park's extended bounds,
Space for his horses, equipage, and hounds.³⁴

Ledwidge's status as a landless labourer may have made him sympathetic to the polemical verses in Goldsmith's poem on the enclosure of common land, which in Ireland could be arguably attributed to Dunsany's class. In turn, Ledwidge, who believed he lost the love of his life because of his economic status, echoes Goldsmith's lament in the poem *A Song* (1914):

Had I but wealth of land and bleating flocks
And barnfuls of the yellow yield,
And a large house with climbing hollyhock
And servant maidens singing in the field,
You'd love me; but I own no roaming herds
My only wealth is songs of love for you...³⁵

Despite this (or perhaps in spite of it), as Ledwidge's biographers emphasize, he

actively sought out, enjoyed and was sustained by Dunsany's patronage. The latter reciprocated, observing of his young protégé: 'Poets usually have fine eyes, but I never saw eyes with pupils in which there were more room for dreams.'³⁶ One can also intuit a heightened sense of ecological perceptiveness and imaginative foresight in Ledwidge's work. Howarth observes:

. . . ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity.³⁷

Reading Ledwidge's verses in *The Blackbirds* (1916) we can translate an eco-critical perspective in which incompetent husbandry metaphorically strips the landscape of the sweet ambience of the blackbird's song. The poem anticipates the environmental dilemma at the heart of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), a seminal text on the destruction of the eco-system by pesticides silencing forests of bird-song and central to the inauguration of the eco-critical movement:

I heard the Poor Old Woman say:
'At break of day the fowler came,
And took my blackbirds from their songs
Who loved me well thro shame and blame
No more from lovely distances
Their songs shall bless me mile by mile . . .'³⁸

Dunsany's initial appraisal of Ledwidge focused on the strength of his vision, rather than the ability of his writing skills:

He knows nothing about technique and far less about grammar, but he has great ideas and conceptions of the poet, and sees the vast figures, the giant forces, and the elemental powers striving amongst the hills.³⁹

One could say that Ledwidge's poetic vision, as he entered into the First World War, grew starker, more apocalyptic, and its perceptual scope, honed on bicycle trips between Slane and Tara, was elevated to a global level. In a poem entitled *War* (1916) composed while stationed in Derry, Ledwidge ruminated on the forces and elemental powers that he as a volunteer had subjected himself to:

Darkness and I are one, and wind
And nagging thunder, brothers all,

My mother was a storm.
I call
And shorten your way with speed to me.
I am Love and Hate and the terrible mind
Of vicious gods - but more am I,
I am the pride in the lover's eye,
I am the epic of the sea.⁴⁰

Prophetically, Ledwidge also seems to have foreseen his untimely death as a soldier in Ypres, mystically inscribed in the forested hills around Slane, as captured in his poem *A Fear*:

I roamed the woods to-day and seemed to hear,
As Dante heard, the voice of suffering trees.
The twisted roots seemed bare contorted knees,
The bark was full of faces strange with fear.

I hurried home still wrapt in that dark spell,
And all the night upon the world's great lie
I pondered, and a voice seemed whisp'ring nigh,
'You die long since, and all this thing is hell!' ⁴¹

Ledwidge was stationed in Manchester when he heard of the death of his lost love, Ellie Vaughney in childbirth, the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, and the subsequent execution of his friend, the poet Thomas MacDonagh. Compounded by grief and violently ambivalent about his role as a soldier in the British army, he eulogized MacDonagh in his best known poem:

He shall not hear the bittern cry
In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor the voices of the sweeter birds
Above the wailing of the rain.
Nor shall he know when loud March blows
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,
Blowing to flame the golden cup
Of many an upset daffodil.
But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor,
And pastures poor with greedy weeds,
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.⁴²

These verses can also serve as Ledwidge's own epitaph, for in 1917 he was shipped with the first battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers to the Western Front. On 31 July, he was a member of a group assigned to build a road in support of an assault being planned for the Third Battle of Ypres (Ieper). Taking a break for tea, Ledwidge was killed with his comrades-in-arms by a stray artillery shell. One of his final correspondences provides evidence that the war had imbued him with a troubling awareness of how human actions were bringing to an end the cultural and natural environments depicted so sublimely in his poetry. Writing early in the summer of 1917 to his publisher, Edward Marsh, he poetically 'described the many colours of the German rockets at night: white, green, blue, purple' and wrote cryptically 'It is like the end of a beautiful world.'⁴³

Dunsany: under the shadow of Tara

In contrast to Ledwidge's grounded and earthy poetic works, Dunsany's literary canon of plays, poems and prose 'builds the more mysterious kingdom where geography ends' by depicting epic, fantastical landscapes. His works hint at over-arching neo-pagan mythologies and the narrative overtones of science-fiction, as illustrated by the following titles from his prolific canon: *The Gods of Pegana* (1905), *The Blessing of Pan* (1927), *The Sword of Welleran* (1954) and *The Pleasures of a Futuroscope* (2003) - a novel written in the 1950s published only in the 2000s. Mark Armory observes: 'What he liked best in his work was least realistic and therefore not to be pinned down geographically... 'Sunlight and desert and wandering men' he saw, and added fancies drawn from conversation, china dragons or Kipling.'⁴⁴ However, many of his pieces were composed at Dunsany Castle, located a short distance south-west of the Hill of Tara. Whether it was because of his hierarchical role in the Ascendancy class system, or the position of the family castle on one of the higher elevations of Meath (as illustrated in figures 27. 2 and 27.3), Dunsany populated his literary landscapes in an omnipresent manner, perhaps sub-consciously echoing the historical relationship between the gentry and the tenants of the landed estate in Ireland:

And then one day imagination came to the rescue and I made unto myself gods, and having made gods I had to make people to worship them and cities for them to live in and kings to rule over them, and then there had to be names for the huge rivers that I saw sweeping down through kingdoms by night.⁴⁵

Dunsany Castle, according to Mark Armory, was a fine large building which was built to guard a road.⁴⁶ Its antique walls were massive, grey and covered with ivy kept neatly trimmed. Jackdaws nested in the ivy and Dunsany sometimes ate one of their eggs raw in his porridge.⁴⁷ In the verses of an early poem titled

Rhymes from a Suburb, Dunsany framed his youthful perception of the higher terrain upon which his family castle was situated,

And all the hills went sloping down
To meet the moor, where ever blew
The wind that turns the woodland brown.⁴⁸

Hillscapes, castle ramparts and an elevated sense of perspective are reflected in the titles of his 1935 novel *Up in the Hills* and his 1946 collection of essays, *A Glimpse from a Watch Tower*. In a short piece of fantastical fiction titled *The Castle of Time* (1912) Dunsany tells the story of how King Karnith Zo and his army discover a 'City of the Aged in the Territory of Time,' where within 'a great castle standing on a steep hill... dwells Time.' The king tells his army they have 'found the Enemy of the Earth' and decides to storm the castle. As his forces begin their assault, 'Time hurled five hundred years against them.' During the climb 'the knees of the army stiffened, and their beards grew and turned grey, and the hours and the days and the months went singing over their heads.' Coming face to face with the castle walls the soldiers find 'the slope too steep for aged men. Slowly and painfully, harassed with agues and chills' King Zo's 'aged army . . . tottered down the slope.' Retreating to their home territory they arrive with 'rust upon their spears and long beards flowing' finding to their dismay that 'none knew them there.'⁴⁹ Dunsany's works seem to channel and translate the towers of his family's castle and the supernatural ambience of Tara:

Dreamy epics such as the *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, *Time and the Gods* and *The Hashish Man* marry languid surrealism, labyrinthine plotting and a depth of characterisation rarely equalled by later authors in the genre. Dunsany's books represent a vibrant link between ancient myth and modern speculative writing, an enthralling, life-affirming celebration of the otherworldly and unfathomable.⁵⁰

However, Dunsany could also cast his eye on the landscape surrounding Dunsany Castle like a naturalist and historical geographer. In *My Ireland* (1937) he describes the ancient landscape of Tara, and its panoramic views:

... it was the curse of priests that turned the halls of Tara into long mounds and brought the grass up over all of them. Here came the earliest people of whom Irish history knows, and three races after them before the Normans, and all came to Tara. Did they see Tara rise up like music, and inspiration to those early kings? Or was it the only ideal place for cattle, a wider field for them than the neighbouring height of Skyrne [Skreen], the best grass in

Europe, and a view that enabled sentries to see the approach of any enemy with a taste for beef, for a long time before he could reach them from any direction?⁵¹

Recounting local lore, Dunsany wrote

In 177 Conn was King... and became known as Conn of the Hundred Battles; but when he lost ten of them, he agreed to divide Ireland with Owen More, King of Munster, and they chose a line of low steep sandhills running across Ireland as their boundary.⁵²

He continues:

These hills are called eskers among geologists all over the world; and esker is the one word that the Irish language has given to science... I know miles of those sandhills well; they cross all the roads running South from Tara, and only a few miles away from it; sometimes they are bare; sometimes pine trees stand along them, as though the trees had gone to war and the pines were holding the high ground...⁵³.

Today, motorways circle Tara like asphalt necklaces around its ancient sloping hill. In this regard, Dunsany's work *The Ghost of the Valley* and *The Evil Kettle* seem prophetic, as if carbon footprints rising from the jewels of traffic circling the site of the high kings today, could someday come to haunt future generations. In the former title, a man meets a ghost who is one thousand years old; they engage in a conversation:

'Times are changing' it said. 'The old firesides are altering, and they are poisoning the river, and the smoke of the cities is unwelcome, like your bread. I am going away among unicorns, griffins, and wyverns.'
'But are there such things?' I asked.
'There used to be,' it replied.⁵⁴

The Evil Kettle, a play about the industrial revolution is apocalyptic in its depiction of the destruction of the natural environment wrought by twentieth century urbanization and commercialization:

Smoke as of factories rises up covering the entire landscape. The noise and clangour are heard of the twentieth century. The smoke lifts and a factory city appears in all its devilish ugliness, with an unsightly yellow poster in the foreground, on which it is written: TAKE MEDICO. THE CURE FOR ALL AILMENTS. SO NICE. The smoke thickens and the city is covered.⁵⁵

Furthermore, in *A Glimpse from a Watch-Tower* Dunsany applies his local perceptions of the Skreen landscape to a global context. His observations in the 1940s are commensurate with emerging 'eco-critical' tropes, as the Depression and the Second World War turned ecological perception even more towards public narrative.⁵⁶ Looking at the world 'from a great distance for I am in Southern Ireland,' he reflects on 'strange news,' just received: 'we have just heard of the atomic bomb... I think that a new era started yesterday... Now we are like Phaeton, mounting his father's chariot for the first time. Where will the wild horses take us?' He adds 'henceforth we are people with a mission, a strange mission not to destroy the world.' Standing on the hill of Tara, Dunsany called for a 'spiritual revival' lest 'all the history of Man may culminate in a radiance of energy suddenly flashed from our planet, which may scorch our wandering neighbours, Venus and Mars, as they pass.'⁵⁷ Howarth notes that from an eco-critical perspective

... texts do reflect how a civilization regards its natural heritage. We know nature through images and words, a process that makes the question of truth in science or literature inescapable, and whether we find validity through data or metaphor, the two modes of analysis are parallel.⁵⁸

Dunsany entertained both modes in his prolific canon. However, William Butler Yeats remarked on his writing that not all of Dunsany's 'moods delights me, for he writes out of careless abundance.'⁵⁹ On the question of Dunsany's contribution to a 'national canon,' Yeats observed:

I thought that he would more help this change if he could bring his imagination into the old Irish legendary world instead of those magic lands of his with their vague Eastern air; but even as I urged him I knew he could not [...] He could not have made Slieve-na-mon nor Slieve Fua incredible and phantastic enough, because that prolonged study of a past age, necessary before he could separate them from modern association, would have changed the spontaneity of his mood to something learned, premeditated, and scientific.⁶⁰

Yeats on offering Dunsany an associate membership in the Irish Academy of Letters, churlishly informed him that full membership in the Academy was solely reserved for those who wrote about Ireland and the Irish people. Ironically, in *My Ireland* (1937), Dunsany dealt with both subjects, though not with the foggy, mystical eye required by the arch-poet, or an eye attuned to a specific political moment. Rather, Dunsany's style encompassed the skills of the biographer and naturalist, and a wide appreciation of the relevance of many of his concerns

(doubtless impressed upon him by the environs and landscape of Meath) would only come in the future. For instance, his depiction of the view from Tara incorporates the legendary genealogy of County Meath:

Looking... one sees a pale-blue mountain, far beyond Trim and left to the line of it; to the right of the Slieve Bloom mountains, that is to say to the North of them. This pale-blue sapphire set in the western sky is the Hill of Usnagh, lying beyond Edenderry; and on it there was a stone, and to this day, called the Stone of the Divisions, where all the four provinces of Ireland met; and round this stone Tuathal cut out the new province for himself, the province of Meath, taking a bit from all four.⁶¹

Dunsany's concerns over environmental degradation were prescient of the contemporary controversy and global attention generated by the M3 motorway development project in respect of Tara and the Skyrne Valley, illustrating that 'history privileges events, whereas memory is attached to sites.'⁶²

Conclusion

In October 1912, Lord Dunsany delivered a lecture at the headquarters of the National Literary Society on St. Stephen's Green. In his address, entitled *A New Poet*, Dunsany introduced Ledwidge and his work to the Dublin's *literati*. Padraic Colum, who was in attendance, recalled in *An appreciation* in honour of the Slane-based poet that an audience member asked 'Can aught good come out of the County Meath?' Colum noted that 'they thought that this land of ranches and bullocks did not favour the production of poetry.' Dunsany, responding in defence of Meath and its poets, insisted that:

Meath was the part of Ireland most favourable to the production of high-spirited things. Did not the Meath people live under the shadow of Tara? And since they had fought for good lands, was not the dust of Ireland's kings under their feet?⁶³

Both Ledwidge and Dunsany's poetic, fantastical and historical depictions of place are imbued either explicitly or implicitly with the landscape features native to County Meath, and display perspectives on its environment which illuminate J. K. Wright's observation:

Some men of letters are endowed with a highly developed geographical instinct, as writers they have trained themselves to visualize even more clearly than the professional geographer those regional elements of the earth's surface most significant to the general run of humanity.⁶⁴

In conclusion, Ledwidge and Dunsany's works convey Lawrence Buell's idea that eco-critically oriented literature should display the following characteristics. Firstly, that the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; and secondly that some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant is implicit in the text.⁶⁵

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