Humours of Irish Life: Under MacGillycuddy's Reeks

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There once was a man from Norwich, who lived in an old bothy cottage, on the cliffs of the south of Ireland, and his name was MacCarthy, William Seward MacCarthy, and for one thousand years, his sect of the MacCarthy clan moved from Ireland and England and vice versa, one generation after the next, through changing economic and legal statuses.

But, with only sisters and rural, ascetic seclusion, William seemed to be the final high twig of that family tree. He was the intelligent, easy-going man of the pronounced Celtic type, with a round, good-looking face, a humorous mouth, abundant, twinkling eyes and only a shrewd volubility. He had a small volume, a slight man, his body only slightly escaping the broadness of his neck.

In terms of William's national out look, the fact of each successive generation of his family emigrating back and forth led to a dizzying mixture of religious and political alignments and persuasions, often, living under the same roof; IRA men, Orangemen, Conolly socialists, Parnellites, Catholics, Protestants, Quakers, Huguenots, conversos, Blueshirts and, well, William.

In small metal ammo boxes, William, unemotionally, kept the artifacts of his family history, the tear stained letters about returning to the homeland never seen, or letters lamenting life in Picadilly, Strand and Lester Square, the pages upon pages of opposing pamphlets and flyers emblazoned with "Never Never Never" and "Our Day Will Come," with means-of-production, will-to-power and name-of-the-Father. In his will, William leaves all these bits and pieces, too

varied and many to be relayed, to whatever National Library or Museum will take them.

The plans for his own bodily artefact are also equally undecided. "What the parish will do with me," he was known to say when asked, "Is what the parish will do to me. Throw me, sure, outside the walls of this island into the Atlantic ocean," he would conclude, throwing his eyes to heaven and sounding out an annoyed tsk, "Give me a stick to beat off anything that wishes to be ateing me... Sure, what care do I have when I'm gone?"

He was known by the members of the parish as a sound man, then as a "quare" man. He spoke largely in little phrases to everyone, typically just listening to whomever he met and never replying for very long, but always satisfying, never speaking too little. On a conversation about politics: "Sure, T'was Irish blood they were shpilling in any event, like." On the changing of the seasons: "Sure, jasus, the hours are really sinching in, aren't they, and it only six o'clock, sure." Giving advice to young men: "Sure, make a mouse o'yerself and the cat'll ate ya. 'Tis a true shaying alright. 'Era, Shaint Pether himself cuddn't shtand it and the piper that played before Moses, Lord blessh him."

With this general ease and solemnity, this outward calmness that indicates wisdom, most of the people that knew him believed William to be a relatively pious man, while he didn't always make it to mass or observe the Angelus, he was never seen working on Sunday or never seen behaving in any way estranged from the pulpit, so, in the eyes of the community, he was a sound man, and a good man, if a bit quare, but a sound man.

It is a common phenomenon, especially in these tight-knit communities, to operate with a strange sort of moral calculus, weighing up a fellow's unusual actions and character against their normal qualities within a staunch and often highly biased system in order to form an opinion of any given person. Too strange, you're a fool or a lunatic. Too ordinary, you're a dryshite or frigid.

A healthy dose of Saint and Sinner is needed in everybody, to keep you a good young lad or a good young one and still interesting. William was a bit quare, but a good man and a sound man, he was a reserved man and a blow-in, but still nice and sound enough as not to fall into being an off-putting man. He was a fine man, a sound man, one of life's good guys. It is a shame he does not go to church more often, or does not chat very much or come down the pub at all (unmirthed and unrevelryed by the busy haunts of men), but he's a sound man and a fine man and a lovely fella, and a respectable man for the young lads coming up, because, sure, don't they all call him 'Sir' when they see him on the road?

But, unbeknownst to this small world, he had one secret that he would never allow to darken the confession box or the drunken snug pouring out of the heart, that he would never utter out of his pleasant, intoning voice, never insinuate or hint at. That late at night, the many nights out of the month that the Pooka MacPhellimy, now an obscene drunk after the events of "At SwimTwo-Birds" (1939), would accidentally leave his tremendous heifers roam the field against William's property, William MacCarthy would strip off in his kitchen, in the dark and cold quiet and lubricate himself and sneak through the darkened grass in his socks and vault the small stone wall into the heifer field, in covert darkness, hunched, and sing the song of himself among and with the cattle, to relieve himself of the loneliness that tweaks him by the nose and rips at his beard and fills his heart, in his depths, with sour blood.

But one day, to the knowledge of no one else in the parish, the Pooka MacPhellimy had a stallion out with the heifers. With a regal gait, a shimmering caramel coat and a lush mane, its muscles and fibres visible under its tight skin, its tremendous frame propelled with absolute beauty by angular legs, the stallion made its entrance into the field that first day like a king on the day of his coronation. William flushed and filled with sour and unwhole-

some blood at the sight of it, stirring his depths with sickness. And after a few days of silent observation of the Pooka MacPhellimy and of his heifers, the gate finally was left open and the drunk's animals, the ones who wanted to roam, came slowly trickling from the gate, their haunchebones hitting the gate into the wall it is affixed upon, their hips swaying bowsy into the dark.

But William MacCarthy this time wasn't looking at the heifers' hips. He was looking for the shimmering coat of the stallion, iridescent in the moonlight. He prepares himself in his kitchen, his lights extinguished, the sound of his padding feet moving around the cold tiles as he opens his back door and meets the cold air and moves through the night in his nakedness.

Matters progressed in the field. At the tonic chord of his song of himself, a powerful light blasted from the gate. The standing stallion's coat gleamed all over. With the pale tumour of William MacCarthy at his stallion's rear, The Pooka MacPhellimy, under the shroud of his camera up on its tripod, with a flashbulb held between his precariously slender fingers and long dirty nails clinking on the magma-hot glass, made a photograph of the ragged MacCarthy.

The next day, by only the morning, every parishioner and citizen saw the Pooka MacPhellimy's steel plate daguerreotype and knew his secret. He was caught in the act, and like many men who have been in accidents involving the mind, damaged it thoroughly through intense trauma, William changed, and became withdrawn and even more distinct from the people who knew him, who now knew his secret. He aged slowly, withering and eventually dying a short time later at the age of 56.

But, on what would have been William's 57th birthday, from the stallion's distended stomach was borne a half-man and half-horse boy, named Orlick MacCarthy. At the instant of its birth, it rose onto its spindly legs, bow and bend inwards and steadied itself. It started walking west. Gaining more and more confidence. It start-

ed running. Then bolted fully, at a bent, breakneck speed.

It stayed up in the Kerry Mountains for sixteen years, the rocky MacGillycuddy's Reeks. The creature reared into boyhood and adolescence, disturbing tourists and locals, hiding mostly under the bridge or in rarely traversed routes behind rocks during the day, watching the Germans in luminous red and green and yellow hiking clothes, slowly trailing across the ridge as he lapped water from the lough. This horse-creature, horse-boy, was like the first horses brought to Europe, wild and full of natural, savage knowledge of the world. He was not a centaur, but a certified monster, a body and soul savagely contorted and pulled between horse and man, pale and precariously pink, slightly hairy skin with large liver spots and warts, blotches and freckles, features long and bulbous, with a jawbone protruding in grotesque, asymmetrical deformity, with thick eyelashes fluttering atop tiny eyes in massive caves of dark, evil eye-sockets. But a young man's wish to roam took hold of the beast, and he ventured, ran with ungodly speed, out east further and further until he passed the Pale and ended up in Loughshinny and realised that he could go no further. He jogged down the long, straight road, the dark asphalt flanked by wild hedges and reached the bay, like a visiting royal to Hibernia, the horse-boy met the curved beach and tangent stone pier shooting out into the Irish channel.

The sky was full of gold, playing corridors of it on the water, and with a furious jump off a low point in the cliff, he met the ocean.

His huge horseshoe rings of teeth snapped with saliva and seawater. His hooves exploding huge upturnings and dollops of white water like the perverted jizzum that spawned the unholy behemah. It escapes from the Loughskinny Bay, out into the still waters of the Irish Sea. And after a few, long weeks, Gwilyn Chambers, from his vantage point on the South Stack lighthouse near the Penrhos Feilw standing stones, calls for a rescue of the

animal in the waters as the Louvin Brothers' record, playing atop a small pine side table, fell into the dead wax and filled the small room with a repeating, crushed washing sound as the disc spun. And MacCarthy's son was sent down to London to be studied and became a lecturer of Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) at Brasenose College, Oxford, teaching for a considerable time a future Prime Minister, who spoke during a state visit to Ireland, shortly after the passing of the brute, "the late Dr. MacCarthy was an instructor of mine of a first rate at university. And he instilled in me, the wisdom of not just the material he lectured on, but more broadly, the wisdom of the Irish."