

The stranger standing at Maam Cross Station

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Patrick Pearse: Awarded a BA in modern languages (included English, Irish and French), and photographed here when he was studying law at King's Inns. He was called to the Bar in 1901, two years before he came to Ros Muc.

There was a humorous mix-up when Pádraig Pearse first visited Ros Muc in 1903. He was 24 years of age, and already imbued by a passion, and a vision for the Ireland of the new century. *

It was an exciting time in Ireland. Practically on every level, whether it was sporting, cultural, political, spiritual, even the growth of a distinctly Irish military force (however, poorly armed), all contributed to a rediscovery of an Irish identity, and the possibility that at last, whether through Home Rule, or by some sort of personal sacrifice, Ireland could stand alone for the first time in many centuries.

The young Pearse believed that the Irish language was intrinsic to the identity of that new nation. He was not alone. Already a nationwide language movement, Conradh na Gaeilge or the Irish League, was gaining momentum year after year; with Irish colleges being set up to teach teachers the best methods of teaching the language. These were popular summer activities usually accompanied by music, outings and fun. **

Pearse had joined the League as a student at Dublin University (known then as the Royal University), where he graduated in modern languages, and a law degree from King's Inns. His work rate, and commitment, soon made him indispensable to the League. It certainly helped him win the editorship of its bilingual weekly newspaper An Claidheamh Soluis (The Sword of Light'), in 1903, the same year as his first visit to Connemara.

Laughter and surprise

In the previous year, a branch of Conrad na Gaeilge had been founded by a group of young people, most of whom had been attending school at An Gort Mór. When they read in An Claidheamh Soluis that there was to be an examination for would-be teachers of Irish, a dozen of them contributed a half-crown each to pay for an examiner to come down from Dublin. The schoolmaster at An Gort Mór agreed to put him up.

The idea of meeting enthusiastic Irish speakers in the heart of Connemara appealed to Pearse directly. He decided that he would be the examiner. Probably no one in the Ros Muc area had heard of Pearse at the time, nor had they any knowledge what he looked like. They gathered at Maam Cross station to welcome him. The train steamed in, and a stranger stepped down. He was at once surrounded by the welcoming committee, and escorted out to the waiting side-car to be whisked off to the teacher's house. When the committee went back inside the station they noticed that another stranger was waiting on the platform. With what could make a superb cinematic moment, there was laughter and surprise when it was realised that the man on his way to the teacher's house was himself a candidate for the exam, and from Mayo. The second stranger standing there was Pádraig Pearse.

'A peaceable, silent man'

One of the young men who met Pearse that day was Colm Ó Gaora, the secretary of the local branch of Conrad na Gaeilge. He was deeply impressed by the examiner and came to idolise him. In his autobiographical work Mise (Myself), he describes Pearse as he saw him that first day....

'He was handsome, well-built young man of medium height. A pale complexion - the complexion of one who worked indoors. Very diffident - the diffidence of people who lack relationships with other people. He was a peaceable, silent man, more ready to listen than to talk. A notable, noble brow and thick black hair. A slight cast in one eye added to his good looks. He was very well dressed, it seemed to me. I can truthfully say that I was under the influence of this examiner from then on. Without my realising it he put me under a sort of spell that I couldn't shake off from that day to this. Pearse gave his affection to Ros Muc in the same way.' (Tim Robinson's translation)***

Pearse immediately felt at home. He began to visit the area every year. By 1910 he had built an attractive three-roomed cottage at An Aill Mhór, overlooking a lake. It is an ideal and beautiful place even today. Pearse was to bring his students there who camped outside. Local people enjoyed his visits. He became known as An Píarsach (an affectionate Irish term). The cottage became a focus for revolutionary talk and planning. Pearse's famous oration at the funeral of O'Donovan Rossa, the old Fenian hero, August 1 1915, was composed there. He electrified the large crowd, gathered at the graveside, with the words: "Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women, spring living nations."

Next week: Mary Brigid's account of a family visit to Ros Muc.

NOTES: *Pearse is an interesting man from whatever angle you see his character. His father, James, was a stone carver, and successful monumental sculptor from London, who came to Dublin in the wake of the boom in church building which followed the achievement of Catholic Emancipation. His business prospered. With his second wife Margaret, their four children, Patrick, Willie, Margaret, and Mary Brigid enjoyed a comfortable childhood living over their father's business at 27 Great Brunswick Street, now Pearse Street. Their mother Margaret came from a strong nationalist background. She imbued her children with her firmly held beliefs.

** Up to the closing years of the 19th century education in Ireland was through English. Pearse developed his own ideas as to how language should be taught. He visited Brussels where he was impressed by the bilingual educational system where French and Flemish were taught together. Later, with his brother Willie, and their friend Thomas McDonagh, he famously established his own school, St Enda's for boys and St Ita's for girls, at Rathfarnham, Dublin. The children

enjoyed an imaginative curriculum through Irish and English; and all the subjects of the day, with a generous helping of drama, gymnastics, and wonderful outings into the fresh air, and countryside. There were even camping holidays around his cottage at Ros Muc.

***I am taking this from Connemara - A Little Gaelic Kingdom, by Tim Robinson, published by Penguin Ireland 2011.

Watch out for two informative and well illustrated books on Galway and the Rising: Pathway to Rebellion - Galway 1916 by William Henry, and Rebellion in Galway - Easter Rising 1916 by Kevin Jordan, both books selling for €15. each.

Teach an Phiarsaigh

Patrick Pearse's cottage is now open to the public

Not surprisingly, it was burned down by the Black and Tans in 1921. But although the furniture was destroyed its structure remained. After some years' work, it has been thoughtfully restored by the Office of Public Works.

An ambitious plan for a visitors' centre is under construction, and a new approach path is planned leading through a small building which will show films and documentaries.

But the cottage, in its beautiful location overlooking lake Eileabhrach, is both moving and informative. It is open every day. It is well worth a visit.

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