

The Vintage Voice

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Cast a Cold Eye

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The call jolted us awake. A Northern Irish accent on the phone. It was Bishop Gilbert Wilson, getting the time change all wrong, phoning at 3 A.M. to offer Bob the position of rector of Drumcliff parish in County Sligo, Ireland.

Unable to get back to sleep, I said to my husband, "Just think, you could be buried next to William Butler Yeats." "That," said Bob, "doesn't get me very excited." But the opportunity, derived from friendships we had forged twelve years earlier when our family spent a month in a County Limerick parish, *did* excite my husband. After a difficult cure in a big urban parish, Bob wanted a change to something completely different.

My fascination with Drumcliff was more romantic. In college I had taken a seminar in modern poetry: W. B. Yeats was my favorite. In one of his last poems, "Under Ben Bulben" (named after the mountain that presides over Drumcliff), Yeats dictates his burial place:

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.

If Ben Bulben was good enough for Yeats for all eternity, I wanted to see the mountain, maybe even live in its shadow.

And so, Bob and I made a whirlwind trip to Drumcliff on a dark November weekend, met with the vestry and wardens, and were shown around the rectory and church by Bishop Wilson. The visit went well, and we were unaware of any commotion about the appointment until *The Financial Times* published a tongue-in-cheek article headed, "The Parish No Irishman Wanted." The parish with the burial place of the archetypal Irish poet in the hands of an American clergyman? That was an anomaly they could not let pass without comment!

Any potential culture shock was mitigated by the truly warm, respectful welcome from the people of the parish. There were cards, flowers, cakes, formal calls, sacks of newly dug potatoes, and strong handshakes from work-hardened hands. Almost all parishioners were farmers. The first morning that I woke up to sheep on the grass by the house, I was charmed. The second morning, I became alarmed at shrubbery being gobbled up before my eyes.

The largest shock was the discovery that this Christian island was divided into two worlds, Catholic and Protestant. I had always considered myself a catholic with a small "c" in the Episcopal Church. Now, in the Church of Ireland, I was a part of the three percent Protestant minority of the country. I learned that there were Catholic names (Siobhan, Maeve, Aiofe, Rosaleen, Sean) and Protestant names (Trevor, Iris, Olive, April, Charles). There were Protestant sports (rugby) and Catholic sports (hurling). There were Protestant merchants and Catholic merchants. Most absurd of all, I thought, was the Protestant Orphan Society. "How," I asked

Rosaleen, the postmistress and source of wit, wisdom, and stamps, “can you tell the difference between a Catholic orphan and a Protestant one?” “They have a wee mark on them when they pop out,” said Rosaleen with a wink.

I soon learned that, except for two weeks in the summer during the Yeats Summer School, when Yeats scholars and poets gathered from all over the world, the parish went about its business with nary a thought for the poet, except for the hope that some coins might fall in the alms box from visitors to the famous grave. But I wondered why Yeats had chosen to set his tombstone right by the door of this Church of Ireland parish, dedicated to St. Columba. He was certainly no saint. He dabbled in the occult, frequented mediums like the charlatan Madame Blavatsky, saw ghosts, and heard banshees. He was not a conventional or pious Church of Ireland member.

The setting he chose is magnificent. The stone church with its disproportionately tall tower sits in a valley created by the Drumcliff River between Ben Bulbin and a chain of other low mountains. All around it are places that figured in Yeats’ poetry, the mountain itself haunted by the ghosts of the lovers, Dermot and Grania, and the Glencar Waterfall, the setting for Yeats’ poem “The Stolen Child.” Near here, on one church member’s farm, St. Columba fought the “Battle of the Books.” The round tower and ancient cross hark back to these Celtic times.

But Yeats gave another reason for his choice: “An ancestor was rector there.” His great-grandfather, Parson Yeats, lived in the fine old rectory, facing the Drumcliff River. He rode to the hounds, kept a curate to do the work, and died leaving a wine bill at the Sligo cellars greater than his annual income. The rectory has been torn down, and the parson’s style of life is, alas, long gone, but he was one of the “hard-riding country gentlemen” celebrated in “Under Ben Bulbin.” Parson Yeats was the ancestral avatar that W.B. chose, rather than his mother’s family, prosperous Sligo merchants, buried beside the Church of Ireland Cathedral there. But Yeats was a snob. The Pollexfens were “in trade” and — unlike W.B. — would not be invited to Lissadell, the great Anglo-Irish family house of the Gore-Booths.

Yeats came reluctantly to support the rebellion against British Rule in his “Easter, 1916” poem, where he wrote, “A terrible beauty is born.” But he could see the new Ireland emerging in the mold of the Catholic Church. As a Senator of the new republic he railed against the Catholic ban on divorce. “We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people,” he said. “We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we the people of Swift, of Emmet, the people of Parnell.” Such tough rhetoric did not endear Yeats to the Catholic majority.

At least in Drumcliff churchyard Catholics and Protestants share common ground. Will they meet in heaven? Yeats avoids the final question in his unconventional epitaph:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!

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Sally and Bob Hayman were in Ireland from 1988–1997. They now live in Seattle, Washington.