



# *"Poor Green Erin"*

German Travel Writers' Narratives on Ireland  
from Before the 1798 Rising to After the Great Famine

Texts Edited, Translated  
and Annotated by  
**EOIN BOURKE**

PETER LANG  
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## 10 Anonymous 1 (1832)

Although the catalogue of the German Library Institute, Berlin, gives the author's name as the professor of geography Friedrich A. Klebe, it is not known for definite who wrote the *Sketches from Ireland*. Andreas Oehlke [see Oehlke 1993, 343f.] puts a strong case for the Austro-Moravian author Karl Anton Postl (1793-1864), alias Charles Sealsfield and Charles Siddons, who took on the Anglo-Saxon-sounding pennames while in America from 1823 to 1831. In that year he returned to Europe and spent two years writing political correspondences from Paris and London. This would fit to the year in which the account of Ireland – 1832 – was written. Oehlke also draws attention to the fact that Postl was Catholic, as was the author of *Sketches from Ireland*, and that he was to write a story called *Der Fluch Kishogues oder der verschmähte Johannestrunk* (The Curse of Kishogue or the Spurned Parting Cup) – a “wild sketch of Irish life and death” out of the mouth of an Irishman called Phelim – in a collection of short stories entitled *Nationale Charakteristiken* of the year 1841. The Charles Sealsfield biographer Alexander Ritter, however, considers it more likely that the author of *Skizzen aus Irland* was S.A.L. Ernst Zander, the Ireland correspondent for the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*. Whoever it might have been, the anonymous author used his day-to-day experiences while travelling through Ireland to express his severe criticism of the legacies of colonialism.

### 10.1 Cork Harbour

The harbour of Cobh is one of the loveliest I have ever seen. A fortress situated on a steep height protects the entrance; but as soon as one comes quite close to the coast its artillery becomes useless and cannot be of any effect until one has sailed a considerable distance into the harbour. To the left and right pleasantly wooded hills with their feet washed by the waters alternate with sombre rocks and precipices which make a part of the entrance dangerous. Numerous stately homes, partially owned by inhabitants of Cork and giving evidence of their wealth, look out from behind the park-like copses on the hilltops. Gradually the harbour curves until one catches sight of the large island of Cobh [Great Island], on which there is an imposing barracks that can house a large garrison and is quite capable of blocking further progress. [...] To the right the hills soon disappear behind Cobh, but to the left they still rise for some miles upwards towards a

great cliff, which, if I am not mistaken, is called the “Black Rock”. Nearby among the diverse mansions a very large modern edifice is particularly conspicuous. It was bought some years ago, probably with the help of some bequest, to form part of a convent and, to the great annoyance of the Anti-Papists, is completely fitted out and inhabited by numerous nuns.

It took till midday to arrive at the actual river of the Lee, on whose quays the foremost warehouses of Cork are located. The innumerable ships that were being loaded and unloaded here and among which I noticed seven or eight Portuguese as well as several Spanish ships, gave me an idea of the not inconsiderable trade of the city, which is at least the equal of Dublin’s. [...] The Lee cuts Cork into two unlike parts, of which the smaller one forms little more than a suburb. But even in the larger section there is only *one* reasonably well-built district. The rest is made up of narrow smoky lanes, and one needs only to glance into the side streets to be more than enough convinced of the bitter poverty that prevails there. Meanwhile I had little time left to look about in the town and its environs, for Irish hospitality monopolized us at the cost of our curiosity and bound us to the table already at half past five for the rest of the evening. [Anon 1, 3ff.]

## **10.2 Recollections of Pickle and Mustard**

The rest of the evening is spent in a large company of Corkonian wits with anecdotes and repartee from whose sharp edge not even the guest is exempt:

“I was once in your fatherland,” a fat old man piped up, “it was about thirty years ago, but I’ve never stopped thinking about it and was glad when I was back on the ship. Every night they packed us into a heap of quilts as if they wanted to smother us or send us off somewhere wrapped in bales like mummies. I would not have believed my wife that we were in a civilized country at all if, to top it all, I hadn’t seen a gallows and on it a creature hanging in chains.” This argument on the subject of German civilization was too well told for me to contradict it, but no sooner had the traveller of “thirty years ago” finished drinking to my health that a certain Mr. Ryan, a landlord from Tipperary, called to me from the other end of the dining table: “Fair dues to your fellow-countrymen, I won’t hear a word said against them, but who on earth can that man have been who travelled around this country some time back and passed himself off as a German prince?”

There was a great fuss made about him and everybody bent over backwards to pay him compliments and show him hospitality, but afterwards, I hear, he wrote a book about us under the name of “a deceased person” in which he had a good laugh at us and concocted as many yarns about us as a horse-trader. I myself have never read his scribblings, but as thanks for all the favours I did him, I’m told that he wrote more lies than words about me. On the other hand, it serves us right: why did we let such an adventurer cock a snook at us? We should have known straight away that he was a travelling writer, for who has ever heard of a Prince Pickle and Mustard?”

The “pickle and mustard”, as can be imagined, called forth hearty laughter, but my friend Ryan was not to be disabused of the conviction that the “deceased person” was called “Pickle”. I tried to make it clear to him that he should not take a Semilasso [the title of a later work by Pückler-Muskau], a self-confessed “half-rascal”, too seriously with regard to truthfulness, but he shook his head almost automatically and repeated again and again: “the fellow is a humbug and no prince!” Only when a few partridges in front of him were laid claim to from various sides was his attention diverted and he turned to hunting yarns, a pastime in which the Irish are even more adept than their English neighbours. [Anon 1, 5f.]

### **10.3 From Cork to Killarney**

On the next day the author set out with a member of the company of the previous evening in the Royal Hotel, Cork, whom he names as “Mr. Donolly”, on the way to Killarney:

Already at daybreak on the next morning a pair of sturdy post horses trotted along with us in a light trap over the hills on the north side of the Lee to Macroom, a miserable dump where we did not bide longer than was necessary to feed our bay horses. As this route is hardly used by travellers, it is not only lacking in decent inns but also in coach-houses. We therefore had no choice but to cover the whole journey with the same horses. From Macroom our route went northwards over the relatively high mountain range that is aligned in the East with the Mangerton and Macgillicuddy Mountains, but in the West divides up and runs along the two peninsulas to the north and south of Kenmare Bay

and ends in the Atlantic above the bay near Valencia and below it at Cape Crow.

Here nothing is to be seen far and wide except barren mountains on which hardly a tree or a shrub is to be found from the summit to the floor of the valley. The area is unquestionably one of the most desolate and wildest of Ireland. The isolated cabins that one becomes aware of here and there appear to be just occasional dwellings for shepherds. From time to time on the slopes of distant hills one can make out a lot of moving points in the heather, herds of a peculiarly small type of sheep with black heads and feet that clamber half wild like goats over the rocks and boulders and yield bad wool but a very palatable meat that, particularly if roasted, reminds one more of a saddle of venison than a leg of mutton. Also the cattle that one encounters in these mountains are extraordinarily small, hardly the size of the one-year-old calves of German cows; but the quality of both meat and milk compensate for the diminutive bulk.

Only after several hours of journeying through these wilds did we reach a great valley that like our path ran along the foot of the mountain range we had just crossed and at the same time broadened out in rolling landscape towards the north as far as the eye could see. At this point the area is quite densely strewn with farmers' dwellings, which I would call cabins if this word did not conjure up the image of houses that, compared to these holes in the ground, would have to be styled palaces. The majority of them are literally hollowed out of the remaining walls or terraces of turf cuts and covered over from above with a roof of only grass or reeds. Only in very few cases did I notice a door or window, or even an aperture for smoke; in short, everything that I saw could be described at the very most as the first stage of a dawning culture. In one of these boggy dugouts, whose interior was at the most ten feet long and about half as wide, there lived a family of no less than seven persons whose appearance, as can only be expected, corresponded in misery to that of their habitation. The earth roundabout is probably cultivable in part, but completely neglected, barren and wild. One would tend to call the area the *Vale of Tears* if its inhabitants were not so unconscious of or indifferent to their poverty, indeed blither and wittier than their fellow-countrymen in more prosperous districts. It is hard to imagine that only a few miles from this populated wasteland there lie the world-famous lakes whose beauty lures hundreds of travellers every year from far and near. [Anon 1, 7f.]

## 10.4 In praise of poteen

It had begun to get dark when we reached Killarney. We therefore let our rather exhausted horses be exchanged to travel on without delay to the little village of Cloghereen, where Roche's Inn right on the bank of one of the lakes was where my Dublin friends had arranged to meet me. [...] That day our nourishment had been extremely meagre and we were therefore all the more pleased to be told on entering the inn that the Dublin gentlemen were already there and had sat down to dine. We dallied all the less on greeting them and the steaming masses of meat that towered before them. I must say that the innkeeper did credit to the recommendation: even his port and sherry were vastly superior to what was offered in most small towns of Ireland, and his *poteen*, something one must get accustomed to if one wants to travel on the Emerald Isle, is beyond compare. However, in order that I and my company should not acquire the reputation of whiskey swillers at the mention of this drink, I have to point out to the readers that whiskey is only drunk by the lower classes, and even then seldom taken *pure* but usually is transformed into punch by means of a good and proper admixture of hot water, sugar as well as lemons. In this form it is to be seen in most houses of not only the middle classes but also the gentry as the customary drink instead of wine after dinner. – There are two kinds of whiskey, the “Parliament”, as it is commonly called, and poteen. In accordance with a parliamentary decree, whiskey distilling, as almost everywhere, is subject to excise, requires official approval and is supervised by excise officials. But as this raises the price of the Emerald Islanders' favourite drink considerably, there exist a host of bootleggers who, whether in the mountains and moors or in their cabins, maintain secret distilleries whose products can be procured surreptitiously in the neighbourhood for less than half the price of the “legal” variety. The authorized whiskey is distilled almost exclusively from barley malt while the poteen is made out of dried oats, and is easy to distinguish from the “Parliament” by its special smoky taste and smell. Partially due to the fact that it is much less expensive, but especially because forbidden fruit always tickles the palate more than what is allowed, the latter is far more favoured than the taxed malt whiskey, and innkeepers usually do well to be able to put a bottle “that has never paid excise” in front of their guests. Incidentally, one has to be very much on one's guard as the so-called gaugers are everywhere on the trail

and often come at the dead of night especially to financially solvent gentlemen in order to inspect the cellars or other premises. Not only for the distilling but also for the possession of a quantity greater than half a pint the fine is very high and can be fixed at up to £100 sterling. But as a half of the fine ends up in the pocket of the prosecuting official, they and their accomplices are very active in spying – they bribe the servants and buy over traitors anywhere where it is worth the trouble. But wherever this is not the case, they turn one or even two blind eyes and often have more poteen in their own cellar than anyone else. I know a gentleman in a northern part of the island who in various ways did well for himself, became rich and even made it by a quirk of fate to Justice of the Peace. But many years have elapsed since His Honour was a gauger and made himself a fortune, with which he later bought himself a very fine country estate. As long as he had to do with customs and excise, he could boast that he had always practised leniency and rigorousness with discretion. Among other things, in those very profitable times he was once riding cross-country in great haste when he caught sight of a farmer unknown to him who rode straight towards him with a cart and a great big barrel on it. The rogue was on the way to deliver his illegal load to a gentleman of the district with whom he had made a fair deal. Fortunately he noticed the well-known excise officer's face soon enough to turn in his direction before being noticed himself. He addressed the gauger first with "Good morning, Your Honour" as soon as he had come close enough. "I hope Your Honour is riding home, as that's where I was heading myself."

"So?" asked Lucas, uncertain as to whether the farmer meant it honestly or not. "And what do you have there in the barrel?" – "Hm! Sure Your Honour knows that well; isn't it a drop for your own cellar, Your Honour", retorted Paddy mischievously. – "You rogue, I'm sure that wasn't meant for me! Confess! Where were you bringing it?" – "Oh, Your Honour, where else would I have wanted to bring it except to yourself? Anyway it's only a small drop!" answered the farmer with the sincerest expression in the world. The excise officer felt flattered. "But I have no time; I've been invited to dinner, it's already late and I can't possibly return now!" – "Well all you have to do, Your Honour, is to tell me where I should unload it." – "Do you know what?" Lucas replied after he had pondered for a moment, "you could go alone to my house, but don't let yourself be seen by anybody on the way! Tell my cook that she is to open the small cellar and put your barrel in

beside the one already there. Do you understand?" – "Yes, of course!" cried Paddy with a wink, "I'll take care of everything!" Delighted to have made such a good catch, the gauger trotted happily on his way, while the farmer, studying the instructions received, rode to his house and knocked loudly on the door. – "Quick, quick!" he called to the cook who opened the door, "open up the small cellar! Get a move on! I just met your master – someone informed against him that he has poteen in the house, and I'm to fetch the barrel before the other excise officers come and take it, the bloody crooks!"

The cook, filled with consternation, immediately hurried with the smuggler to the aforementioned cellar, helped him to load up the barrel and in her terror hid a few bottles that were left over in a corner of the garden, while the rogue, laughing up his sleeve and doubly gleeful about his unexpected booty as well as the rescue of his own cartload, made himself scarce as fast as he had come, and left it up to the gauger whether he should be most annoyed at his own gullibility, that of his cook, or the empty space in his cellar. –

Mr Lucas, by the way, is by no means the only example of this kind. A few months before I set off on my journey to Killarney I went on a hike with some friends through County Wicklow, where one day the rain drove us into one of those isolated she-beens which are to be found everywhere. [On being asked if poteen was available] the innkeeper swore to high heaven that he did not have a single drop in the house. We believed what he said, and presumably he had told us the truth, at least in the literal sense, for as we made a stop at the same tavern one week later we came across two pretty villainous looking fellows in the taproom who had a whole bottle of the forbidden beverage before them and from whose glasses full of punch a smoky aroma enveloped us. "So, for other people you have poteen, but not for us?" one of my friends said to the innkeeper, who probably did not have a *drop* in his cellar but rather a whole bucket full. "Oh, Your Honour," he retorted with a cute expression, "they're the gaugers; they won't do with anything else!" [Anon 1, 8ff.]

### **10.5 Signs of decay in Muckcross Abbey**

The untamed beauty of the area [of the Lakes of Killarney] seems already in ancient times to have found admirers among great Irish figures as indicated by the numerous buildings all around



dating from different periods, some of them massive and now lying in ruins. A half-hour ride took us on the next morning through a lovely park to the old Abbey of Muckross, one of the largest and best preserved of these ruins. Only the roof has fallen in, while the nave with its chancel, the side-aisles and even the cloister have defied the ravages of time as well as the wrath of the Reformers, and are in such good condition that it should not be too difficult to restore them. Besides, the architecture of the whole complex, but primarily most of the memorial plaques let into the walls, manifested a standard of taste and artistry such that one would not have ascribed to the ancient inhabitants of the region. The favourable impression given by this observation, however, is unfortunately negated by the horrible sight that awaits the traveller who enters the interior of the church. Not only are the coffins of the numerous graves that are to be found here and outside the building only very sparingly covered with earth, but the whole place is littered in a scandalous way with skulls and skeleton parts that only too strongly remind one of the scenes which made the Abbey into a ruin. Strangely enough, standing out against these signs of decay is an undoubtedly very ancient yew tree which, nourished lavishly by decomposing matter, has reached such an extraordinary size that it fills out the whole inner space of the cloister and with its dark foliage throws an almost sinister shadow over the bones and skulls scattered about beneath it. Apart from these grisly things, which the owner's sense of propriety should have had removed or concealed, Muckross Abbey is unquestionably to be counted among the most beautiful ruins of Ireland due to its excellent state of preservation and its charming location on the banks on the lowermost of the three lakes. [Anon 1, 12f.]

## **10.6 Cromwell's legacy**

The author's viewing of Ross Castle, Killarney, leads him to bitterly ironic reflections on Oliver Cromwell's "contribution" to Ireland:

This very old fortress was seized by General [Edmund] Ludlow in the year 1652 and was immediately destroyed by the Parliamentary troops, increasing the numerous proofs of Cromwell's special predilection for picturesque landscapes by yet another. In this respect, Ireland's indebtedness to the Protector is enormous, and for the same reason a London dealer in engravings who was at a