

The background of the book cover is a watercolor illustration of a coastal landscape. It features a prominent cliff face with a natural rock archway or cave opening. The colors are muted and earthy, with shades of brown, tan, and grey for the rock, and soft greens and blues for the vegetation and sky. The overall style is artistic and evocative.

THE
Irish Sketches
OF
FLORENCE VERE O'BRIEN

edited by

DAVID ROWE

with the introduction by

VERONICA ROWE

ballinakella press

CHAPTER FOUR

NEW HALL

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New Hall is an elegant house, (the front part probably designed by Francis Bindon) situated off the Kilrush road, about four kilometres south-west of Ennis. At the date of writing it stands, empty and dusty, but apparently in very good condition. In 1890 it was owned by Charlie MacDonnell, who was some sort of cousin of Robin's; but Charlie had no immediate need of the house, and let it to Robin and Florence, initially for three years, extending eventually to eight years.

For Robin, the decision to move from his old home at Old Church to New Hall was cause of great anxiety and uncertainty. Florence, who was with her mother in Yorkshire, writes –

... I could not have stayed, for just at this time we were in all the agonies of making up our minds about our migration from Old Church to New Hall; or, rather, Robin has actually agreed to rent New Hall from Charlie MacDonnell for three years, and was now, judging by his letters, in great despair and regret having done so.

However, things turned out well – indeed, remarkably so. Of April, 1890, still in the trauma of uncertainty, Florence writes –

We had actually taken New Hall, and several times Robin and I went over there together to see about getting the house painted and set to rights, and the garden sown with a few essential vegetables and sweet-peas. I thought the place and country more beautiful and attractive than I had imagined, and could not but long to find myself living, if only for a time, in the real country, not to speak of being within reach of R's work. But my dearest Robin's heart was sadly torn, at the thought of abandoning his home of thirty years, where his dear mother had lived and died; and, besides, the practical difficulties of the move loomed so large before him, that at times he would fall into great despair, and disconcert me by suggesting that we should give up the whole idea of leaving Old Church, and get out of our agreement with Charles MacDonnell. Seeing him so desponding, I would often ask myself whether I had not been

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In the garden.



The house itself.



Seen through the trees on the avenue.



With its long, central return.

wrong all along, in pressing for this migration into Clare, of which I had thought him to be in favour himself; and at times I would be almost in as much perplexity and despair as himself. Happily for me, Ellie [*Eleanor Monsell, Robin's youngest sister*] came to stay with us at this time, and by her encouragement and cheerfulness helped us both greatly through this rather trying time, both she and Mary [*Mary Perceval, another sister*] being in favour, on the whole, of our keeping to the original, and long talked-of, scheme of setting up our abode in Clare instead of Limerick. Meanwhile nothing was disturbed at Old Church, and, except for an occasional visit to New Hall, and the choice of papers for the drawing room and my bedroom, no steps seem to be taken towards the intended migration, which we knew would have to come off soon, as Charles MacDonnell was going to withdraw his caretaker, and the house could not be left unoccupied. On the 30th I had a man over from Todds, to point out to him what furniture, books etc., I wished to have transported from Old Church to New Hall, which we have taken as a furnished house.

The next day Robin went to Dublin about servants, and I got through a good deal of private packing and letter sorting. On May 2nd ... Ellie and I superintended the men from Todds, and got all the books, and most of the large pieces of furniture packed, and carried in to the conservatory. On the next day, Tuesday, May 6th, at 10.30, we left Old Church, and set forth on our migration to our Clare abode. The children went for the night to Summerville [*in Limerick, home of the Bannatynes*]. Ellie, Robin and I, with three of the maids, travelled out by the 11.10 train, reaching New Hall at 1. Everything was in dire confusion, and there was hardly a chair to sit down upon, nor a cup to drink tea out of. However, we all worked hard, and made the best of things; and Robin seemed less unhappy than when the move was still before him. On Tuesday evening arrived Daly and the two dogs, dear old Puck still following my fortunes, though seventeen years of age, and very infirm, except when animated by a

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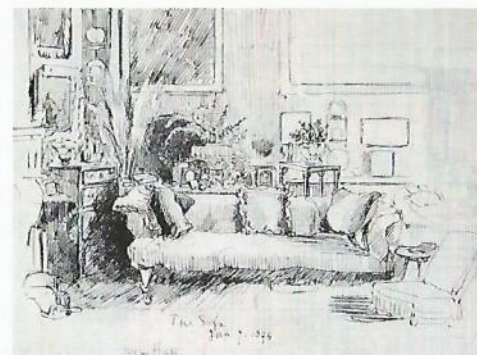
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The interior - the drawing room



The entrance hall, with its view down to the fergus.



The sofa.

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sudden burst of feeling, when he still leapt up on me like a young puppy. We sat in the library, the drawing-room being left unpapered and uncarpeted for nearly ten days, from a delay in sending the wallpaper from London. On Wednesday 7th the darling children joined us, and soon made the rooms, which I had set apart for their nurseries, look the most familiar and comfortable part of the house.

[On Sunday 11th April] Ellie left. And on Tuesday Aubrey and Alice *[probably Robin's elder brother, and younger sister]* came to stay. The next Saturday I spent arranging the drawing-room, which was ready for Robin to sit in, when he got back from Limerick in the evening, and with which he was much pleased.

In the late Spring—May/June—

In spite of cold, wet and bad weather, New Hall has looked beautiful, for the lie of the ground, with its graceful slopes, and the view across the valley of the Fergus, to the distant Shannon and the hills beyond, have a charm that is abiding, whether seen under storm or sunshine. In short, this corner of Clare, with the delightful limestone crags, through which ferns and moss and flowers push their way at every crevice, is a most lovely and liveable-in countryside. Over all, from the rocky knolls at our feet, to the soft many-coloured plain, and the distant river, rather guessed at than seen, there is a touch of natural grace, and indefinite, mysterious charm, that seems to appeal to our imagination, with the pathetic interest of a beautiful face, and not only of a beautiful view. It is here that one can understand the sad, passionate yearning of “The Dark Rosaleen”, and feel why it is that the “Wild Geese”, who were driven to take flight from their home in Clare, could never forget their old country, however well they might settle down in a new one.

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Uncle Aubrey at St. John's Well.



Killone Abbey, down by the lake.



In the woods.

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Clearly Florence is happy. And Robin, too, is settling in, forgetting his early anxiety. In June:

Whatever the advantages and disadvantages of our move to New Hall may be, one thing is plainly a gain, and that is that Robin is very much less away from home; and, instead of spending half of his time on the railway, he has been able to come back, to occupy himself in the garden here, or in looking after his cattle, which are a great interest to him. I need not say what a difference this makes to me; and as for living in the "real country" for once in my life, I find it quite as delightful as I had imagined. The neighbours are all very friendly, and I have been called upon from twenty miles around. Returning the visits has been pleasant, for it has meant that Robin has driven me miles over the country, in all directions – the best guide possible to the county of Clare.

Naturally the beloved dog Puck takes his place in the tale:

In May 1890 Puck made his last migration with us from Old Church to New Hall. He was very happy in his new, and last, home, and I am glad that I can picture him investigating thoughtfully every corner of the garden there; lying beside me in the grass, while I drew the house, under the arch in the wall; straying after us on the crag; often seeming to be left, hopelessly, behind (thanks to his enquiring mind, his failing hearing and his infirm limbs); but always getting on our track at last, and making up for lost time somehow. His devoted affection for me never lessened, nor his anxiety to be with me. Quite towards the end of his life, at the age of 16, when we had thought he was quite past running after a carriage, we found him one Sunday following the wagonette to church. It was more than a mile from New Hall, when I first espied the little, white figure, galloping after the carriage in a cloud of dust, his head down, eagerly following our track, and quite regardless of the stiffness of his old limbs, in his anxiety to rejoin his mistress, who had slipped away from him unawares.

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On returning home to our lodgings on March 9th [1891 – *in London*] I found a letter from Robin telling me of the death of my dear Puck. He had been overjoyed at Robin's return, always expecting to see me following him, and on the morning of Friday, March 6th, when Robin had gone for his usual morning walk around the garden, Puck had leapt for joy, and accompanied his master and his friend Roy [*the second dog*], with his usual staid enjoyment. An hour later Clooney came to tell Robin that my little old Puck had been found lying dead in the middle of the garden walk.

So ended Puck, and so too, in due course, was the shadow of the end of their time in the much-loved surroundings of New Hall:

It was during this week [March 1896] that we heard of Charlie MacDonnell's intention to return to New Hall, consequent to his marriage with Mrs Stuart (Mary Stacpoole). It is a great blow to have to leave our beautiful abode, where we have been so happy for 6 years; but we have never ceased to bear in mind that New Hall was not our own house, and that, sooner or later, whenever Charlie married "his heiress", and could afford to come back, he would naturally wish to do so. On the whole, in my secret heart, I am glad that this great, inevitable upheaval in our lives should come sooner rather than later, as it was bound to come. But the parting from New Hall will be very sad. I shall never live in so beautiful home again; nor have such a pleasant and spacious house, and so delightful a garden; and from no other place shall I ever look out, daily, on such gracious curves of near meadow, and straight lines of shining waters (sometimes mysteriously distant and dim; sometimes brightly coloured and near) as rejoice my very heart, morning, noon and evening, from my bedroom windows here. There is a grace and quiet attractiveness about the lie of every field, the attitude of every crag and tree, in this corner of Clare, and a charm in the wide-spreading distances, whether of land or water, which compel you to make friends with the country, as well as admire it. So the parting must needs be sad. Still, I am very thankful to

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Killone Lake.



The view to the Fergus estuary.

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have lived here, at peace, for these six happy years; and, after all, "home" means those we live with, more than the place where we live. Our plans for the future are still rather vague.

However, there was a reprieve:

On Thursday morning [2nd July 1896] Robin told me Charlie MacDonnell had sought an interview with him the previous day at the court house, and asked him if he would consent to keep on New Hall for two years longer, as his wife did not wish to come and live here at present. Robin told him that he would consult with me and let him know; and on Friday morning July 3, my birthday (42), he came up to New Hall, the first thing after breakfast, and we agreed to stay on – the arrangement being until August 1898. I am very sorry for our most kind and friendly neighbour, Mrs Stacpoole, in being thus disappointed of having her daughter near her; and also for Charlie's family, who must have so looked forward to their beautiful old home being thrown open to them again. But of course, as far as we personally are concerned, the sense of a reprieve is delightful, and it is no small comfort to feel that we need not spend this month in packing up and uprooting ourselves, and saying last goodbyes to this dear place, and house and garden. We look on everything around us now with such different eyes, and like to think that Aubrey [her son] will see his garden again, and that dear old Roy [the dog] will be left to lay his old bones here, and be laid beside his little old friend Puck. As for the kind feeling shown us by our friends and neighbours, over our sudden and unexpected decision to remain for two years longer, it is very touching, and makes one realise how much has contributed, besides the mere beauty of the place, to make New Hall such a pleasant home to us for the past six years.

But the time to depart had to come, eventually, and in March 1898 she writes -

New Hall was looking so beautiful and home-like, on our return, that it was sad to think it was our last home-coming to this happy home of eight years.

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And later—

During the rest of July we were gradually making preparations for our exodus, and constant cartloads of our possessions — animal, vegetable and mineral — made their way over, day after day, from New Hall to Ballyalla. Meantime everything appeared much the same at dear New Hall, for we left the drawing room untouched almost up to the last; and my weekly Clare Embroidery class, in the nursery, and Jenny's lessons in the schoolroom, were carried on steadily all through July.

Florence did many sketches of New Hall, of the ruins of Killone Abbey at the foot of the hill, of the lake, and of the more distant view across the estuary of the Fergus.