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POET
A FIGURE OF THE CELTIC TWILIGHT

ELLA YOUNG

a talk by Dorothy Macardle

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When we heard that Ella Young had died in her Californian home, it was as if the last glimmer of the Celtic Twilight had vanished into history. For there, among the sand-dunes of Oceano, that phantom-haunted half-light had lingered, in the words and ways and ambience of the poet who left Ireland more than thirty years ago. When she died she was eighty-eight years of age and she was still telling wonder-stories from Irish myths, still writing poems about Niav and Fionavar, still keeping, with ancestral ritual, the vigil of All Hallows. She never ceased to draw her devoted friends and thousands of charmed readers within the circumference of that spell. Where Ella lived, the Celtic Twilight endured, and she has become a part of its legend now.

When I hear that phrase, and think again of that phase of our literature, the Celtic Twilight, there comes to my mind, as its symbol and incarnation, a memory of the pale, ardent face and large, deeply shadowed eyes of Ella Young. Slight, light of movement, her delicate head poised on a slender neck; with a dreamy voice, quizzical lips, and hair like a silvery nimbus, she made one think, as she brooded on a stool by the hearth, of the wise woman one of her poems evokes:

"Druid woman, sombre-eyed,
Turn the spindle at your side,
Spin a doom for Fionavar."

I knew her in Ireland during the trouble times.
Even then, she seemed to have strayed from the misty past.
She was a scholar and a seanachie and a bard, and, some of us

suspected, a clairvoyante or white witch. She would tell you where, in some derelict city house, you might, any dark night, see a ghost; how to listen on Maúlin for the faery music or, before sleeping on Kilmashogue, invoke a protective circle of magic fire.

I wish she had talked more of her vigorous youth when, an explorer and pioneer, she helped to save the Gaelic language with all its treasury of poetry and folk lore from dying when old men and women died. We find vivid fragments of the story in "Flowering Dusk", the book she wrote when she was growing old. Here is the Ireland of the nineties, when scholarship and patriotism and the work of the creative imagination were all fused, all one. We see her with Maud Joynt and Mary Scarlett in Connacht, listening, enthralled, to a man, descendant of a fabulous line of story-tellers, reciting a hero-tale, in the words in which his forebears had recited it to the ancient kings - words now beyond the power of those scholars or his own Gaelic-speaking neighbours to comprehend. We see her with Maud Lloyd in Iona, listening to noisy ghosts; then studying magic with Maud Gonne in Paris; the, with A E and Standish O'Grady and the Daughters of Ireland and a troop of boys, producing, in a back room in Camden Street, new plays that are famous far beyond Ireland now.

Already, she had forged, for her book of "Celtic Wonder Tales", a charming and simple English prose with only here and there an archaic word. Already, her verse had its individual rhythm and character, limpidly flowing, richly embroidered with the symbols and imagery of Chivalric romance and lit with those Ariel-flights of fantasy by which sorrow and anguish suffer a sea-change and are made sweet. She struck this same note still in her later years:

In those days - the first of the twenties - "the wind that wails about the world" was beating with little mercy

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upon Ireland. The poet's twilight was threatened most ominously and Ella Young felt this. I remember that, because she liked something that I had written, she took me walking on the Hill of Howth and told me that I must live in an ivory tower; that I must not allow the breath of public affairs or Irish politics to invade my peace. Fantastic counsel, in Ireland, at such a time!

She herself did not follow it. It was not until the fighting was over that she left Ireland and while it lasted she took a share in Danger, acting as messenger for the Volunteers.

I wonder whether the quality of Ella's poetry would have altered greatly if she had stayed, or whether she might have ceased to write verse. The twilight mood could hardly have survived.

I think A E was right when, a young poet himself, reflecting a little uneasily on the genius of his friend, Willie Yeats, who was still wandering with Oisín, he wrote this:

"...the soul must cast off many vestures before it comes to itself. We, all of us, poets, artists and musicians, who work in shadows, must some time begin to work in substance, and why should we be grieved if one labour ends and another begins?"

Most of them came out of the shadow-land. Himself, although his verse rarely emerged from mists of amethyst and rose, he turned to doing his part for this country in as practical and durable a piece of work as a small group of men has ever achieved. Padraic Colum wrote of the earth, the boglands and the plough, while James Stephens expressed in verse, in spite of his wild fantasy, thoughts as hard and clean-edged as cleft rock. And Yeats, to whom the fame and the

very name of the Celtic Twilight phase was due, rigorously left it behind him with all its intricate imagery.

"I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat."

he writes in a bitter mood, flinging that coat away,

"For there's more enterprise
In walking naked."

But for Ella Young the veils of fantasy were not rent by the trampling years or even by fierce events. The Easter Rising stirred her to an unwonted bugle-note, but, even in that red sun-rise, the twilight phantoms move.

"Its dark the land is and its dark my heart is
But the red sun rises when the hour is come
The red sun rises and the dead rise
I can see them and it's glad they are and proud
White Oscar's with them."

Ella went to America in 1925, expecting to stay there for less than three months. Lucy Middleton, in whose gift of clairvoyance, Ella fully believed, troubled her deeply, by saying, "You will stay there; you will never return."

Ella never came back. The reason was that countless numbers of American people as well as Irish people living in the United States vehemently wished her to stay. They were enchanted by the vision of Ireland that she revealed to them in her lectures and her talks. They loved the stories and poems that she was writing and the atmosphere she moved in. They loved her. So she stayed, and those twilight visions survived.

Early in thirty-nine I was in California, in Berkeley, where the University had created a Chair of Celtic Mythology for Ella, - but I had not heard about that. When, at the close of one of my lectures, I saw those wide blue eyes looking at me, saw that elfish smile and the luminous

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cloud of hair, it was as though I had been transported to my own youth. She seemed not to have altered in twenty years. Half child, half sage, credulous, yet possessed of a glinting humour, Irish to the heart, yet attuned to all earthly mystery and beauty, she trailed the Celtic Twilight about her still.

Everyone talked to me, smiling affectionately, about Ella Young.

"Do you believe?" I was once asked: "Do you believe what she tells us about beams of light that stream out of the mountains, and the faery music?"

I hesitated; evaded it; asked, "Do you?"

Many voices called out at once: "No! Yes! Yes! Let us believe!"

That was her own reaction to scepticism, in her later years.

"Let's play at make believe
Since all we see
(These poplars straight and tall
The sunburnt flower on the wall
This light aslant the stream,)
Is but a dream
A brave pretence,
Where only a philosopher
Seeks for sense."

Life is a bubble, she declares, and concludes.

"While the bubble is blown,
While the dream is our own,
Let's play!"

When her lecturing days were over she retired to a cottage on the Pacific coast which she called Ard Cluain. Friends made a pool for her in her garden and in the pool the lotus flowered. She studied the mysticism of Egypt and wrote three more long stories from Irish myths: recast some of her youthful poems, and wrote new poems which reveal scarcely the faintest change of mood or style.

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A poem written in her old age is called Vale.
I will read the opening and the close.

"Should I not, at the ending of my days,
Praise Life and Love and Death? Praise
Love that sings
First song and last, triumphant Love that flings
A net about the stars.....

.....Praise Live, that dancer in a motley siut,
And last praise Death, bursting the prison door."

It has been said that a poet has died young in
many of us. In Ella Young the poet lived to the age of
eighty-eight - undefeated, unsilenced and unafraid,- lived
until Ella slipped away from her friends, without any warning
illness, in her sleep.
