

# UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

PÁDRAIG PEARSE

From his sister Mary Brigid Pearse's book:  
The Home Life of Pádraig Pearse



*P. H. Pearse*

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# MY CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

## 1: Myself—My Father—My Mother and Her People

There has been so much tempest in my life that the quiet places in which my childhood was spent, and the quiet voices that sounded there, seem to me sometimes not to have belonged to my life at all, but to have been part of the life of another of whom I have heard or read, or whom I have imagined; one whom I can observe with considerable detachment as the story of his days pieces itself together in my mind again and his dreams come back to me.

And this detachment is in no wise inconsistent with a certain charity and definiteness in the recollections of impressions and emotions. I am not sure whether it is a good thing for a man to possess, as fully as I have possessed it, the faculty of getting, as it were, outside of himself and of contemplating himself as if from a little distance.

Many of my failures have doubtless been due to the fact that my thoughts and emotions of yesterday, my ordeals and triumphs of tomorrow, have always been more to me than my deeds of today: the remembered or imagined experience more insistent than the actual. Often in a world which demands swift and ruthless action I have found myself pausing to catch some far-off sound—the echo of a long-silent voice—or to anticipate some unspeakable glory of a new sunrise or moonrise. When people have been talking to me about national policies, I have been listening to the flickering of the wings of flies on a window-pane that I once knew; in the midst of military plans and organisations I have been watching myself as a child come out of a certain green gate into a certain sun-lit field; or as a lad breasting great breakers beneath the moon, striving with strong white shoulders, wet and glistening.

And continually my thoughts have gone back to the places that were first familiar to me, and my ear has heard the voices that it first heard. I will set it down to my credit, that I have never loved any place

better than those old places; or any voice better than those old voices. I have been faithful to them in my heart even when I have deliberately turned my feet from them, seeking far places and far voices ...

You must not think that we who love perilous adventure have not also the common affections; that we do not remember, as poignantly as you bankers and solicitors and government clerks, some fireside where our kin once gathered, some caress of a woman's or a child's hand. For myself, I have never gone out to do any difficult thing, or to face any long road of sea or land, that my heart did not yearn at the leave-taking; and I have never spent a night away from the house where my kin were that I would not have given much to be among them.

Two things have constantly pulled at cross-purposes in me: one, a deep homing instinct, a desire beyond words to be at home always, with the same beloved faces, the same familiar shapes and sounds about me; the other, an impulse to seek hard things to do, to go on far quests and fight for lost causes.

What I have written here is the only defence I shall make for myself in this book, whose object, as I plan it, is simply to record things done and thought; not to explain, or to apologise for, or to justify anything. And it may perhaps stand as a defence for many a nameless brother of the ages; for I suppose that what I have said of myself is true of many others, and has its root in some old duality in the nature of man who, born of a woman, is yet the child of God. The woman in us loves to sit by our own fireside; the man in us urges us forth on divine adventures.

I was born in the city of Dublin on 10 November 1879. My father was an Englishman. My grandfather and grandmother on my father's side were, I assume, born in London, but my grandfather's family was certainly of Devonshire origin. The three children of the marriage (my father and his elder and younger brothers) were born in London, my father's birthday being the 8 December, 1839. While the children were young the family removed to Birmingham. My father was a sculptor, and had, as it were, only drifted to Ireland; but Ireland was to become

his home, and, through his children, his name was to become an Irish name.

On my mother's side I can go back to a great-great-grandfather, Walter Brady of Nobber in the County Meath, a Cavanman by origin. He fought in '98, and one of his brothers was hanged by the Yeos; another lies buried in the Croppy's Grave at Tara. His son Walter, my great-grandfather, married Margaret O'Connor, who had five sons and three daughters—Catherine, Phil, Anne, Patrick, Larry Christy, John and Margaret.

Irish was the language of North Meath in their days, and the only language that my great-grandfather knew well. His home, by all accounts, was a place of mirth and kindly cheer and song. The famine year drove him from his land in Meath, and he came to Dublin with his five tall sons and his three daughters. My mother remembered him as a tall old man who wore knee-breeches and a silk hat, and who spoke Irish.

I remember my grand-uncle Phil as a patriarchal man, whom I regarded with awe on account of his mighty age. My grand-uncle Christy was the youngest of the brothers. He had beautiful horses, and drove with all the pride of a Meath yeoman's son to Baldoyle and Fairyhouse. He had wide fields, which I remember white and fragrant with hawthorn. To spend a day at Uncle Christy's was always an event in our lives. He had married a Wicklow woman—a double Keogh—and great was their generosity, and great the cheer of their table and hearth. I know many Irish words which I first learned from my Uncle Christy. His voice had a ring, and his eye a humour that I have never known in any other man's.

My grandfather was a very different man from my Uncle Christy. He was taller and gentler, and less successful in life. His place was smaller, and his cattle and horses were fewer. The bad year of '79—the year in which I was born—hit him hard. But his temper was so placid, his manhood so true and fine, that even greater reverses than those which came to him could not have brought any bitterness into his life,

or have affected the charitableness of his spirit. He never, to my knowledge, said a hard word about anybody.

My grandfather had married Brigid Savage, a Fingall woman, who was the best step-dancer of her day in the North County. Their children were Walter, Brigid, Catherine and Margaret. This Margaret, daughter of Patrick, son of Walter, son of Walter, was my mother. Of my grandfather I shall speak again, for I spent part of my childhood in his house; and I shall have to speak, too, of his youngest sister, Margaret, my fosterer and teacher.

For the present, I have said enough to indicate that when my father and my mother married there came together two very widely remote traditions—English and Gaelic. Freedom-loving both, and neither without its strain of poetry and its experience of spiritual and other adventures. And these two traditions worked in me, and, prised together by a certain fire proper to myself—but nursed by that fostering of which I have spoken—made me the strange thing I am.

## 2: A Little Boy in Wonderland

I was the second child of my father and mother. My elder sister Margaret was some fifteen months my senior. I was born in a back room on the first floor of our house at 27 Great Brunswick Street. My Auntie Margaret (that was one name for my mother's aunt, my dear fosterer and teacher) was present at my birth; and she has told me how her heart leaped when it was found that I was a boy. It has long been her desire that my mother's first boy—for my mother was her favourite niece, as my grandfather was her favourite brother—should be called after that beloved brother. So it was decided that my name should be Patrick. The name of Henry was added, after my father's youngest brother. Auntie Margaret carried me to the church—St Andrew's, Westland Row—to be christened.

When I was six months old I had a dangerous illness, and it was thought I should die. Auntie Margaret disputed with my mother as to which of them was entitled to nurse me; they compromised and watched me together, winning me from death to the great surprise of the doctor. He had given me only a few days.

When the Theatre Royal went on fire, Auntie Margaret held me in her arms at a back window to see the flames. I do not remember it, for I was, I think, less than a year old.

My first recollection is of our living-room in the basement, and I am not sure how much of what I can piece together about that room in my own recollection, and how much has been told me by others. The room ceased to be our living-place some little time before I was two. It was a dim room, because the single large window opened, not on the street, but on my father's workshop. I seem to remember a fire-place on which a kettle sang; a fire-place surrounded by clothes-horses, designed, I now imagine, as a barrier to my progress forwards. For the singing of the kettle was as the carolling of a cheerful fire-fairy inviting me to be its playmate.

All this is phantasmagoric and uncertain; imagined, perhaps, rather than recollected. Much more clearly defined in my memory are

the characteristic sounds of the room: the carolling of the black fire-fairy, the ticking of a clock, and the rhythmic tap-tapping which came all day from the workshop. In this tap-tapping there were two distinct notes: one sharp and metallic, which I knew afterwards to be the sound of a chisel against hard marble; the other soft and dull, subsequently to be recognised as the sound of a chisel against Caen stone. In the one case the chisel was struck by an iron; in the other by a wooden mallet.

To this rhythmic and not unmusical sound, there was superadded at intervals a sound lawless and strident: later on I fixed it in my mind as the voice of a strenuous pig clamorously resisting the attempts of someone to force it into a bag. Still later, I knew it to be the sound of a chisel against marble whirled on a lathe. But in the beginning all these sounds were alike unexplained and inexplicable. They were among the eternal postulates, things that always were and always would be: like the crackling of the fire; like the carolling of the fire-fairy; like my mother's voice!

Our dim room, at a period which I can scarcely determine, and by a process of which I can offer no explanation, transformed itself into a mountainside; a mountain on which yellow furze flamed and where larks sang. As in the case of the room, it is by its characteristic sounds I remember the mountain best; and its characteristic sound was the singing of larks. I have often re-visited it; indeed for long spells it has been my hone; and to me it is always a hill of larks. For ever larks sing there—trill there—vociferous, triumphant—above the furze, above the city, above the sea!

From the mountain-side we returned to the house in the city—not to the dim room, but to another room higher up, a bright room with great spaces of floor. And this event is to be regarded as a sort of Hegira in my history, the beginning of an era; before it, all is dim, shadowy, legendary; after it, all is clear, certain, historic. I speak henceforth of what I know.

I am familiar with every inch of the floor space of the immense room that now became our habitat. I knew every nail and knot and crevice by which its configuration was diversified. It is a matter of

congratulation to me to have obtained at so early an age so intimate a knowledge of that large region. How a house of moderate size can have contained so vast a room is a matter which I am not very well able to explain; but that the room was vast beyond the custom of rooms I have, and can have, no doubt.

I have sailed over its surface in ships; I have traversed it in sleighs, in Roman chariots, in howdahs on the backs of elephants; I have discovered, in remote corners of it, jungles where wild beasts prowled; and I know that on one of its verges there stretched for miles a sandy desert across which caravans moved.

All these discoveries were not made at once; it takes a long time to know a room. In the beginning, my knowledge of this room was confined to the perception that it contained the black fire-fairy, the clock, and certain other familiar bulks and shapes translated, like myself, to this new country; that my sister was there, and my mother; that my father sometimes came up from the shop in his white blouse; that one Nannie, an exceedingly tall person, moved about with sweeping brushes; that there was a somnolent cat (named Minnie) who monopolised the centre of the hearthstone; and that there was an energetic dog (named Gyp) who made things lively in the house, and had continual hair-breadth escapes from death in the street.

The room had two large windows which looked out on a street where the most extraordinary things were always happening. Nearly opposite to us there was a break in the row of houses, through which we caught a glimpse of the green tops of trees. If one got out on one of the iron balconies, and craned one's neck, one could see the wall and paling of the College; and the trees, we found out afterwards, were in the College Park. Their green tops were so beautiful and so high that I thought, for a long time, that they were in heaven.

I had many adventures in that sun-lit room, so near to heaven; adventure the most thrilling of all that have befallen me on land or sea, giving plenary satisfaction as only the adventures of childhood can. The real adventures of a man are like the adventures of a dream; they trail off inexplicably and end ingloriously or even ridiculously. The half-

real, half-imagined adventures of a child are fully rounded, perfect, beautiful, often bizarre and humorous, but never ludicrous.

### 3: New Arrivals on the Scene

My first great adventure (after those strange migrations which some may look upon as myths) was the coming of Dobbin.

Dobbin was of wood, but apart from that disadvantage he was as gallant a steed as ever knight-errant rode. My father had fashioned him, toiling at him for many nights in his workshop after his apprentices had gone home; building him five hands high; giving him mighty limbs and a proud head and a fiery eye; a broad back and round shapely haunches. He was grey, as all famous steeds have been; and he towered grandly the evening my father set him up on a table for us to see.

‘Dobbin is his name,’ my father said solemnly, not as if he were making a suggestion, but as if he were announcing some fact as old as the Creation.

That night, my mother, who had been ill for a few days, stole down from her room to see Dobbin; and the next morning a little brother came to us mysteriously—a more momentous coming even than that of Dobbin.

And my mother was very ill, and the little brother had to be sent away to Uncle Christy’s, where he was fed on the milk of one cow. My mother nearly died; and during all that time Dobbin remained quietly stalled behind the door. Sometimes I climbed up upon him and bestrode him; but oftener I sat with my sister near the fire, and watched the fire-fairy, and studied the ways of Minnie and Gyp.

It was a long time before my mother came down to us again. When she did come, looking very pale, one of the first things she did (after pressing my sister and myself to her heart) was to go over and kiss Dobbin; and in gratitude for that gracious kiss I told her that I would consider the little brother (who returned to us the same day) entitled equally with me to bestride that noble steed, as soon as his little legs should have the necessary length and strength to grip on. For the present they were obviously too fat for any such equestrian exercise. So I alone rode Dobbin, and galloped him to many a battle. Sometimes I harnessed him to a state-coach, and he drew my sister on triumphant

entries into cities; often I yoked him to a carrier's cart, and he rattled along country roads at night; there were times when he toiled under loads of hay; I have even known him, suitably draped in black, to pace mournfully with hearse and coffin behind him to Glasnevin. But oftenest I rode him in quest of some Holy Grail, to the relief of some beleaguered Ascalon or Trebizond, or over the slaughtered hearts of some Roncesvalles or Magh Mhuirthemhne.

I have been told it is a marvellous thing that I remember so clearly the days before and after the birth of my brother; for I was only two years and five days old when he was born. It would seem marvellous to me if I did *not* remember that time and all its little incidents. What greater thing has ever happened to me than the coming of that good comrade? Willie and I have been true brothers—companions! As a boy he was my only playmate; as a man he has been my only intimate friend. We have done and suffered much together, and we have shared together a few deep joys.

While Willie was too small to play with, my sister and I were sufficiently loving companions. Sometimes we quarrelled. One of the chief grounds of quarrel was her frequent insisting on my putting Dobbin to what I considered base uses. She was perpetually killing people in the most terrifying and unheard of ways, and calling upon me to bury them. This meant that, instead of driving Dobbin to war, I had to yoke him to a hearse and go on a lugubrious progress to Glasnevin. I thought that she should bury her own dead.

In those days she was both bigger and of a more dominating character than I, and she generally had her way. She extracted considerable deference from me as her junior by over a year. She insisted that her wisdom and experience were riper than mine, and, by dint of hearing this again repeated, I came to believe it and to entertain for her a serious respect.

She finally lost my confidence, in the affair of the London Horse's tail.

The London Horse was a present which my father had once brought me from London; he was much smaller than Dobbin, but was

more elegant and had real hair. One day my sister instructed me in the properties of hair.

‘If hair is cut, it grows. For instance, if I were to cut the London Horse’s tail, it would infallibly grow again.’

I was dubious; she was positive. She urged me to dock the tail quite short so as to ensure a luxurious growth. I yielded so far as to reduce the flowing appendage by half its length. Not one fraction of an inch did it ever grow again!

We always tried to persuade ourselves that our toys had life. We quite realised that their life was different from our life, or from Gyp’s, or Minnie’s. But we felt that they had a kind of mystic *toy* life; and we thought it probable that at night, when the house was still, they disported silently on the carpet; that the dolls rode frantic races on the London Horse; that the cows (I had a fawn and a brindled cow) browsed in secret pastures under the furniture; that my white goat climbed the back of the sofa as if it were a crag.

Once I crept out of bed and downstairs, although sore afraid, to see these esoteric gambols; but all the toys were very quiet. I hoped then that I had come too soon or too late. I could not bring myself to believe that they were merely wooden, without any quickening of joy anywhere within them. But fear of the dark staircase would never allow me to steal down to see them again.

The night at that time was always terrible to me. I thought the house was peopled by strange beings, uncanny and terrifying. My mother and Auntie Margaret knew that visions of some gruesome sort (I never coherently described them) affrighted my sleep, and they used to sit by me as if I was restless.

Often and often did Auntie Margaret steal up to me when she was visiting us, and sit silently beside my bed. How good it was to hear her step! And when my mother did not come (thinking I was asleep like the others) how often have I lain tossing from one side to another, trying to call their names, yet fearing to raise my voice lest it might attract the notice of some grisly thing outside the door!

Only when my father and mother came up to bed would relief come to me. I used to pray as my mother taught me, but the prayers never drove away the spectres. Only when dawn began to come greyly through the window-blinds did they creep back to their lairs.

#### 4: More Comings and Goings, Adventures and Mysteries

I had my day-dreams as well as my visions of the night. Chiefly I used to imagine our living-room as an island of which I was king. It had its spired cities and its lonely hills and its green glens. Or again, it was a sea across which I voyaged in towering ships. Or it was a forest where deer lay down at evening by a stream in a brake, and I lived alone but for their gentle companionship.

It was not to be supposed that I was utterly moonstruck and melancholy; I was imaginative and liked often to sit still and give my imagination rein. But I was not morbid. Physically I was a healthy child, and my animal spirits were high. Many a jolly game I had with my sister, and with my little brother as soon as he began to toddle about on his fat little legs; and many a well-deserved smacking did I get for going into some forbidden place, for breaking some precious thing.

When Auntie Margaret was with us, however, it was *geasa* to touch me. She used to say to my mother: ‘What is he but a child, Maggie? He doesn’t know the difference!’ It has been handed down as folklore that once, when caught doing something atrocious, I myself alleged this irresponsibility by saying: ‘Pat don’t know the diffy!’ and that my mother was disarmed.

When I was nearly four and a half, and Willie two and a half, my younger sister was born. We were sitting at the fire eating toast with dripping on it when the nurse came in and told us that the doctor had brought us a little sister. We asked her how much my father would have to pay for the infant, and she answered, ‘a hundred pounds.’ That evening we were taken up to my mother’s bedroom, and the little sister was placed for a few minutes, in turn, in each one’s arms. She was given the names of Mary and Brigid after our two grandmothers.

It was soon after this I was breeched for the first time. Up to then I had worn (as boys in those days generally did up to the age of four or five) a frock and pinafore. My first breeches and jacket were of blue serge, and the socks I wore with them were cardinal. It was a grievance

to me that for some time longer I was made wear a pinafore over my manly suit.

About this time my half-sister (for my father was a widower with a son James and a daughter Emily when he married my mother) was married to Alfred MacGloughlin, an architect. Her wedding was a very magnificent affair. My sister was her little bridesmaid, and I was her little page. I held up her train as she walked from the carriage into the church.

At the wedding breakfast we had apple pie. I thought they ought not to have put us children at a separate table; but when Auntie Margaret came to sit with us, I was content. Willie made an outcry, during the meal, for pie, and I felt wounded when they laughed at him. I was always wounded when Willie was slighted or ill-used.

Not long after she went away my half-sister sent us a wonderful scrapbook into which she has pasted thousands of pictures. It was so immense that it took two of us to lift it. There were pictures of giants and dragons and fairies in it; of clowns and harlequins and circus horses; of redcoated huntsmen on grey hunters—a book that was full of echoes from a world of romantic and far adventure.

I began straightaway to people our house with the creatures of that book, and to see myself going into the perils that were pictured there. This was my way with every book that was read to me; with every picture that I saw; with every story or song that I heard. I saw myself doing or suffering all the things that were dared or suffered in the book, or story, or song, or picture; toiling across deserts in search of lost cities; cast into dungeons by wicked kings; starved and flogged by merciless masters; racked with Guy Fawkes; roasted on a gridiron with St Laurence; deprived of my sight with the good Kent. When I heard of anyone's sorrows or of anyone's triumphs, I suffered the sorrow and enjoyed the triumph myself.

Few visitors came to our house. My father had not many intimate friends. Those who did come to see him were mostly artists whom he had known in other places, and who looked in upon him when passing through Dublin. I liked them for their quaint costumes, and their

humour and gentleness. Ever since I have looked upon painters and sculptors as a kindly and lovable and pathetic race.

Most of those who came to see us seemed poor, and many of them seemed sad. There was one who used to kiss my little sister tenderly and say: 'God bless thee, little one!' And when he was going away he used to say that my father was fortunate to have children around him.

Many of these visitors made drawings and paintings of me; sometimes of my head only, and sometimes of my whole body without any clothes on. They said I had a thoughtful face, and that I was very finely shaped. I think what they valued me chiefly for was my faculty of remaining still for a long time.

I liked to stand—or, better still, to lie—without my clothes in the warmth of the fire, and to think out my thoughts. Some of the longest stories I ever made up about myself were made up while a man was making a picture of me stretched on my face with my chin resting on my hands. He said I was the best and quietest little model he had ever had. I used to be drawn and modelled and painted by people until my father and mother thought I was getting too big.

Our only frequent visitor was Auntie Margaret. Sometimes she came only for an evening; sometimes she stopped a few days. When she came I used to bring a little square stool that was recognised as mine, and sit beside her. I would show her any new toys or picture-books that I had got. She would tell me where she had been; and of the white chickens that she was rearing for me, and of the foal that my grandfather's black mare had, which I must ride when it was a little bigger. She would put back my hair on my forehead, and pull up my red socks (which had an inexplicable tendency to get down into my boots), and she would sew in tightly any button that was loose on my jacket. Often she brought me something, and she used to make me guess what it was she had brought. When I was in bed, she would steal up to me and share her supper of bread and cheese with me: a secret proceeding supposed to be unknown to my mother. But I think now that my mother knew about it, and pretended not to. Then Auntie Margaret

would sit with me for a little while, and whisper some story or some old song into my ear.

She had many endearing names for me, and I for her, but these names are too sacred to be written here.

Auntie Margaret was small, the only one of her family who was not big and stately. Her face had kindly little wrinkles in it, and her hair was grey; it had been grey almost from her girlhood. She wore that dear grey hair in a net; and I remember well the fragrance of her hair and of her nets. She dressed in black always, with a collar buttoned up high on her throat, and black braid down the front.

We all knew her step on the stairs and would run to meet her. She would take my hand, and the others would cling around her. Often she would draw us all to the window, and we would watch the pageant of the street. We got to know everyone that came and went, and of the time of every coming and going.

In the open space nearly opposite, where the line of houses broke, a grey horse was stalled. Every morning a man would come and yoke him to a van, and they would go out on a day's adventures. Soon after they were gone the doctors would begin to make their morning calls to a Children's Hospital that was next door but one to us, on the right. There was one doctor who drove a very beautiful horse, without blinkers. There was another who was so stout that he had to ride in a hansom—the only hansom in Dublin—for he could not have gone through the door of an ordinary carriage.

Then in the evening there was the thundering by of the mail cars to Westland Row railway station. And always there were the trams, with the tinkle of their horses' bells. We liked especially what we called 'the little tram.' It went on a circular journey from Westland Row to College Green all the way for a penny! We often thought it would be a great exploit to get into the little tram and drive round and round eternally, expending interminable pennies.

In the evening about six o'clock the grey horse would come home; and it was always a satisfaction to see him getting his truss of hay, or his nosebag of oats.

## 5: First Lessons and Schooldays

I have not written as much here about Auntie Margaret, about my mother and father, or about my brother Willie, as I shall have to write hereafter about mere acquaintances; people whom I came across, or who came across me, fellow-travellers for some little part of a journey, but nothing to me, or less than nothing, except as portions of a story I am telling.

And the reason is the same as I have given for not writing here the secret names that Auntie Margaret and I had for each other. I have undertaken to record the things done and attempted, the dreams dreamt, during a life that has not been without exterior and interior activity; but I have entered into no bond to tell all the little things that happened between me and the few with whom I have been intimate—to confide to everyone the little and beloved memories that bind me to men and women who are dead. One must not put all one's secrets in a book!

Of the young mother of my childhood it is sufficient to say that I remember her best by her kind true eyes, and by the softness of her cheek, and by the music of her voice. She had the beautiful voice that all her people had; the voice which in Uncle Christy had a jolly ring—which in my grandfather was mellowed, and deep and grave; which in Auntie Margaret was so low and caressing. All music was in my mother's voice! All sweetness and strength, as of music which was in her nature! ...

My father came up to our room only once or twice in the day, and at evening. He was big, with broad shoulders that were a little round. He was very silent, and spoke only once or twice during the course of a meal; breaking some reverie to say something kind to my mother or something funny to one of us. At times, indeed—but these were very, very seldom—he would, in order to please my mother, rouse himself to exercise the wonderful social gift that he had and then my mother's face would flush with pleasure, and we would laugh in pure happiness, or join shyly in the conversation.

Occasionally at night, when he was kissing us, or when going away (he sometimes went away to look after some work he was doing) the deep reserve of his nature would break down. Then he would lift one of us, and press our face against his face, and put his arm around us, and draw us very close against his stone-dusty blouse.

Before my half-sister had gone away she had taught my sister Maggie and me our letters. We both learned quickly; so quickly that I have no recollection of any effort on my part, or of any difficulty that beset my path through the Spelling Book. Soon I knew it all; from the alphabet, in which A was the Ass, and K was the King, and Q was the Queen, and X was Xerxes, and Z was the Zebra, down to the Boy and the Wolf—a story which frightened me, and which I disliked because it was in very small print. When my half-sister sent us the great scrapbook, we were able to read the legends under all the pictures with the greatest ease, and then to learn them by name as well as by sight—Prince Greatheart and the Giant Despair, and all their heroic or gigantic kin.

When my sister was eight and I seven, we were sent to school. The school was in Wentworth Place, and its presiding dragon was a Mrs Murphy. We had been only a month or two at school when a great migration took place. We all left the house in Great Brunswick Street and went to live at Sandymount in a house near the sea. It had a large garden behind it, and a field behind the garden, and another field across the road opposite.

Scarcely had we moved into this pleasant place when I became ill with scarlatina. During the first day of my illness, before they knew what I had, Willie came to my bedside and kissed me. The next morning he, too, was ill. Auntie Margaret came out to nurse us: the other children were sent back to Brunswick Street. I was very dangerously ill, Willie less so; I tossed feverishly for several days and nights. The nights would have been dreadful (for I could not sleep) but for my dear nurse, who sat unweariedly beside me. She taught me a hymn for a child awake at night which consoled me in the long watches.

When I was a little better she sang me in her low crooning voice old ballads and snatches of songs in Irish and in English. Her songs were mostly of men dead, or in exile for love of Ireland, or of some Royal Blackbird or Green Linnet that was to come from beyond the sea. She had many songs of Napoleon; chiefly I remember the ‘Old Grey Mare,’ which I long afterwards printed with a stanza that I prefixed to it in order to complete it. I also printed another song of Auntie Margaret’s, in which were the lines:

*In a very little while  
They took from St Helena’s Isle  
The body of Napoleon that lay mouldering in the grave.*

These songs were printed in *An Macaomh*, May, 1913. I never heard the songs from any other, nor ever saw them in print until I printed them.

Auntie Margaret spoke of Wolfe Tone and of Robert Emmet as a woman might speak of the young men—the strong and splendid young men—she had known in her girlhood. The Young Irelanders she did not talk so much of, except Mitchel; but she had herself known the Fenians, and of them she had songs full of endearing expressions, and musical with the names of O’Donovan Rossa and the Hawk of the Hill.

She had long before taught those songs to my mother; perhaps when she was nursing her through some childish illness as she was now nursing me—and my mother had often sung them to us as lullabies. They have always seemed to me the most gallant of all songs; and the names that were in them the most gallant of all names.

That long convalescence is, in the retrospect, the happiest and, at the same time, the most important period in my life. In it, all the strengths and fealties and right desires that have worked in me, and have given to my life such utility as it can claim, have authentically their roots. They were as yet puny and faltering and inarticulate enough; such strengths and fealties and desires as a child is capable of. But they were destined, through effort and suffering, with not a few set-backs

and deflections, to grow with my boyhood and youth, and to find at length, in my manhood, some sort of expression ...