

THE SEÓINÍN.

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In the world of Irish-Ireland the abject figure of the Seóinín stands prominently before the eyes of all. Conspicuous but undignified he presents the appearance of a scarecrow and performs some of its functions although not so innocuous. Appeal and exhortation have swept round his feet, censure and denunciation have buffeted his breast, contempt and ridicule have beat upon his face, until he has been stripped of all his trappings of humbug and pretence.

The type which the Seóinín represents is not, of course, confined to Ireland. Every country has its ineffective class of weak character, imitative instincts, and silly and shallow vanities. In those countries they are simply negligible quantities. But in Ireland where wealth and power and – most insidious of all – social influence are all combined to denationalise and demoralise the people Seóinínism is a national danger which threatens to rot the fibre of the national character. The extent to which it permeates all classes of society, infecting and weakening even those who should be the most robust and independent, is the strongest proof of its abnormal influence.

So far as the Seóinín makes any conscious or coherent defence he sometimes claims that the attacks made upon him are the outcome of spleen and jealousy, that they reveal a spirit of revolt against the amenities of life and against conventions which have still their uses although their development has been forgotten. In this, we know, he shows his failure to understand the evil which is being attacked or to appreciate the motives of those who are attacking it. In a normal state of affairs it would be more philosophic to smile at the foibles and weaknesses of the frivolous, it would be a waste of energy to devote undue attention to the ephemeral tastes of fashion. In a nation whose very existence is threatened it would be criminal to expend resources on these alone.

It is, however, against no mere idle fashion or superficial folly of unthinking minds that the mind of the Irish nation is being awakened.

We do not seek to direct blind prejudice against individual customs and mannerisms. We do not interfere with the right or freedom of indulging in personal taste except it impairs the public welfare. What we condemn in the Seóinín is more profound and fundamental. What we must banish from the minds of all sections of the Irish people is that tendency towards slavish imitation which is the result and the auxiliary of Anglicisation. What we fight against is that spirit which can find no staple base on native soil – no native canons of taste, no native material for art or literature, no native resources for industry, no native fields for enterprise. This hopeless subservient spirit is seen alike in the educated man who despises all things Irish as crude and the uneducated who picks up the (to him) latest music-hall jingle, in the business man who thinks the English accent of a commercial traveller is an indication of superior goods, and in the farmer who clothes his children in English shoddy, in the professional man as much as in the young seóinín of public resorts, in the English speaker who ridicules Irish, and in the Irish speaker who ridicules the early attempts of the student.

The fight against seóinínism is not a fight against refinement and culture. It is a fight against vulgarity, not in favour of it. It is not directed against the ordinary niceties and pleasantness of social intercourse. It aims at destroying the frigid shams and affectations which destroy it. It does not suggest the adoption of any rough and uncouth aggressiveness – to replace the contemptible by the offensive. It does not advocate the reduction of Irish humanity to a drab monotony of appearance and behaviour. The nature and the history of the Irish people are against it. The temperament that developed elaborate sumptuary laws, that founded great schools, and wrought great works of art should be sufficient proof that the native life it aims at will be one of warm, rich, colouring and cultured completeness.