Abstract

Poet, diarist, prolific correspondent, Customs Officer, and devoted lion-hunter, the Anglo-Irish William Allingham is quintessentially of his period on a number of fronts. He is perhaps most valued by literary scholars, however, for the anecdotal sketches of some of his most prized trophies – Emerson, Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Thackeray, Clough, and George Eliot, among others – with which his diary abounds. Alternately at the heart and on the peripheries of nineteenth-century literary life, Allingham resourcefully cultivated an acquaintance with some of the leading lights of Victorian letters, and yet not infrequently found himself isolated from them – culturally, socially, professionally, and (perhaps most poignantly) geographically.

Born on the west coast of Ireland, and conducting much of his literary career remotely from his hometown of Ballyshannon and a number of other provincial English and Irish towns, Allingham’s story is frequently one of alienation and dividedness. Whether looking out across the Atlantic (‘to Emerson’, he writes in his diary), south to Dublin (where the world of Irish letters, represented by his friend Samuel Ferguson, is based), or eastwards to the Victorian literary scene – and especially Tennyson, the sun around which he orbits as poet – centred on London, Allingham finds himself at the ends of the earth, subject for long periods to a kind of literary exile at the extreme edge of Europe, Britain, and Ireland.

This paper considers Allingham’s fraught relationship with his homeland, his countrymen, and the English friends who so little understood – or cared to understand – either. Based on MS material at the University of Illinois and elsewhere, as well as Allingham’s thoughtful and eclectic poetry, it reflects on both the geographical and cultural ‘ends’ of nineteenth-century Ireland.

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