INTRODUCTION

WYNDHAM PAPERS

November 2007

Wyndham Papers (T3221)

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Summary

The George Wyndham Papers photocopied by PRONI in 1977 by courtesy of the late Duke of Westminster (in whose London Estate Office they were) comprise c.450 selected items, mainly of Irish interest, 1888-1892, 1900-1906 and 1913-1914.

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Papers and background notes

The Rt. Hon. George Wyndham (1863-1913), of Clouds, near Fonthill, Wiltshire, Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1900-1905, is best remembered nowadays as the author of the Wyndham Land Act of 1903, and as a party to a scheme of 'Devolution' in 1905 which contemporary Unionists deemed a striking piece of perfidy even by English standards. Within his own circle of friends and admirers, he was regarded as a potential Prime Minister. However, as these and many other letters show, he was a sensitive soul, temperamentally ill-suited to high political office and certainly to the rough and tumble of Irish politics. He married, in 1887, Sibell, Countess Grosvenor, the widowed daughter-in-law of the 1st Duke of Westminster. She was adopted to a quite extraordinary degree by the Grosvenor family, and this, combined with the fact that she outlived both her husband and their son, explains the curious presence of George Wyndham's and her papers among the archives of the Dukes of Westminster.

The largest and most important component of the papers is the correspondence between George Wyndham and Lady Grosvenor. Particularly relevant to Ireland is the correspondence for the years 1888-1892 (when Wyndham was private secretary to A.J. Balfour, then Chief Secretary) and 1900-1905, when Wyndham was Chief Secretary himself. A cursory inspection of the letters written in the intervening years, and in the period between 1906 and Wyndham's death in 1913, revealed nothing of Irish significance, although the inspection was only cursory, and the conclusion therefore tentative. However, the year 1912 was searched exhaustively, because of the Home Rule Bill, and yielded no references to Ireland. Furthermore, the letters from Lady Grosvenor to Wyndham, even during the years when he had responsibility for Irish affairs, are largely of a personal and indeed 'lovey-dovey' nature, and contain virtually no serious comment about anything.

The photocopying was therefore confined to Wyndham's letters to Lady Grosvenor, excluding hers to him, and was also confined to the years of his Irish responsibility, 1887-1892 and 1900-1905. A few letters of Irish relevance to Wyndham and Lady Grosvenor from others have also been included, together with some speech notes of Wyndham's.

The remaining George Wyndham papers - that is, exclusive of those which were then in the Grosvenor Estate Office - are in Wyndham family possession and were extensively published, either in Guy Wyndham, Letters of George Wyndham, 1877-1913 (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1915), or Guy Wyndham and J.W. Mackail, Life and Letters of George Wyndham (2 vols, London, 1924). George Wyndham was a literary figure of some merit (as well as pursuing a military career in earlier life), and was descended on his mother's side from Lord Edward Fitzgerald. The letters which form the bulk of these volumes range widely across personal, political and literary matters and are from correspondents who include Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, A.J. Balfour, G.K. Chesterton, Rudyard Kipling, Ellen Terry and Hilaire Belloc.

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Correspondence

The letters in the present selection comprise: 374 letters, 1888-1892 and 1900-1905, from George Wyndham to his wife during the time that Wyndham was concerned with Irish affairs, first as private secretary to the Chief Secretary for Ireland, A.J. Balfour, 1887-1892, then as Chief Secretary himself, 1900-1905; 57 letters to George Wyndham and his wife about Irish affairs, 1892, 1905-1906 and 1913-1914; and some miscellaneous speech-notes by George Wyndham, with newspaper cutting annotated by him, mainly 1906.

A literary man like Wyndham is best represented by quotations from his own letters, such as the following written on 25 October 1890 from the Royal Hotel, Belmullet, Co. Mayo, where Wyndham was on a Connaught tour with his boss, 'Bloody' Balfour, the Chief Secretary:

> '... We have had a great day. We slept last night with Sir Robert Lynch Blosse, Baronet, wife and sister, daughter and son. I prefer to call him "Sir Blosse" after the French manner, as that name recalls his portly and pompous presence more vividly to my mind. ...
>
> At Ballina we found the interested silent crowds of the day before, but more kindly and curious in their gestures. We drove over the bridge across the [?quay] seeing the salmon leap below the long tumbling weir, to the Bishop's house. He received us with urbane hospitality. But great age has impaired the mind which in its prime fashioned the lines of his shrewd ecclesiastical face. He talked to Arthur of his land bill, but evidently confused it with Gladstone's Act of '81. We had to drink a glass of his port, after a vain protest. It was necessary, if only to give a point to his old jest of "the port being welcome in a storm". We were introduced to seven or eight of his priests, and heard them plead keenly for unlimited relief and public works. I ought to say that every priest I have seen has denounced mere relief as demoralising, and asked for work; nor have they exaggerated, and all have shown perfectly good manners and fine intelligence. In fact, we only hear of the bad ones in England. ...
>
> We drove next to Sir C. Gore's house (his sister bred "Barcaldine", the famous racehorse), and on in procession, Arthur on Lord Arran's tandem car, Sir W. Ridgway and County Inspector Miller, Miss Balfour and I on two other cars, and a correspondent who toils painfully in our rear on a fourth, to Killala, where the French army landed [in 1798] ... . A beautiful view of the estuary of the river, little bay, ruined abbey, and on the left the town with a round tower catching the gleams of rainy sunlight above the birch trees and dark roofs.
>
> Here we were welcomed, for the government have given a railway from Ballina. We got off our cars, shook hands with Father Nolan, the P.P. and the leading man of the town, whom we had seen before at the Castle, speaking for one of the innumerable deputations asking for railways (they

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want another on to Ballycastle!). The whole party with a crowd of 40 or 50 peasants adjourned upstairs to the Poor Law Guardians Room. Father Nolan and the leading man spoke. Arthur replied and for the first time was cheered. Then he was asked to come and see the round tower, the finest specimen in Ireland, and off we started, Farther Nolan arm-in-arm with Arthur, the shovel hat and shooting cap making the strangest pair of silhouettes I have ever seen [he provides a cartoon impression]. Behind followed all the crowd, Sir W. and I. "Would he like a ladder to climb up and see in [sic]?" "Indeed he would", and in an instant everyone was rushing for ladders. In another Arthur was scaling the "dizzy heights" with his Ulster flying in a hurricane of wind to the delight of all the crowd. We soon mounted our cars and actually drove off amid the ringing cheers of the whole population.

The wind was now blowing great guns, with frequent storms of hail, but on we went to Ballycastle, stopping to look at a beautiful bridge and at two cannon still lying where they were abandoned by the French. At Ballycastle we fed off scones and fried eggs and bought woollen gloves to keep our hands from being quite frozen. Here again we saw all the priests and had an address and a few cheers on driving away.

We now had glorious scenery. The road runs along the heathery edge of the cliff, against the base of which the Atlantic thunders and falls back with loud "rock-thwarted roar". We stopped often to go and talk to the men digging potatoes. All were delighted to meet Arthur. At one place, we got down to look at an inlet of the sea hollowed out from the land like an arena with precipitous sides. About 300 yards across, we went to the very verge, and Arthur and I lying on our faces peered over and down on the gulls, seeming no bigger than sparrows, that skimmed along and paused in their flight between us and the water of a blue deeper than lapis lazuli curded over with white breakers. A little stream fell over the cliff close at hand, but the wind, "tyrannous and strong" never let it fall, but blew it about continually upward, like the spray of a fountain.

We stopped to change horses at the fishing harbour of Belder, and walked on while they put to. They sky chrysolite, with the amethytine light soaring up, but traversed by huge cumulus clouds which that great scene-shifter, the wind, had kept moving across the heavens all day. Then on our left the moon, like an argent shield, rose over the darkening moorland. We got on our cars, and drove "as though one dreamed" of driving, now with a glimpse of sea on the right, or of inland loughs on the left, and with shadowy hills receding behind us. Hour after hour we drove on, with short blasts of cold wind and hail from time to time in our faces. At last, we began to meet the folk returning from Belmullet fair. All the women with their white faces and bare legs gleaming out from the dark folds of loos indigo-blue cloaks, many of them riding pillion on the cruppers of horses, like princesses in disguise. I cannot make you feel how mysterious and wonderful it was. Every moment I expected to see "the dark tower".

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However, all things end in this "transitorye lyf", as Caxton has it - even the drive from Ballina to Belmullet. We got here at a quarter to nine, and had to work off an interview with a prosy Protestant parson before we could sit down, famished, to an aldermanic feast of mackerel, roast mutton and turkey. The whole provisions of the peninsula must have been sacrificed in Arthur's honour. A very large crowd met us, but for the first time the priests held back. I have found out since dinner that this has caused a civil war. The fishermen wished to approach Arthur, and one of them stepped out with his speech ready, but was pulled back by another, who told him he would get into trouble, as the clergy were against it. The other party, however, very keen and indignant, were only just dissuaded from illuminating the town. I have put it about that he will be delighted to see anyone who cares to come at 9.30 tomorrow, and am prepared to bet they will come in after all. I really feel tonight that this is business. Here we are at a shocking bad inn - drafty rooms, board floors, the feeblest and smokiest of peat fires, forbidding beds with time-honoured feather quilts heaped up halfway to the low ceilings.

Tomorrow we take to the ocean. As it is blowing a gale, cannot land on the north coast of Achill, but have to run right round the island in H.M.'s gunboat, the "Bantry", to effect a landing, if we can, on the south. Unless too sick, we shall see Achill Head, the finest cliff in the British Isles. We visit the districts of Achill threatened with distress, sleep on the island, and drive 70 miles the next day to Kylemore.

I am not telling you all the amusing and beautiful things that occur. Every spot has its story. Here a landlord has been shot, there we pass a derelict farm. For instance of [sic] Balla this morning, we were seen off by "Scrab Nally", a man who was imprisoned by Lord Spencer for being the prime mover in a murder conspiracy. I am glad to say he looked the part. On the stage, I never remember a better villain but of the silly kind who come to grief in pantomimes by tumbling over their own swords. A brown Tyrolese hat, with a pheasant's feather in it, blear eyes, ruby nose, portentous scarlet moustaches, a [?Melton] cloth coat, once black, now fawn colour, light trousers on his long lean shanks, and huge chrysanthemum in his button-hole.

I have rarely had better fun than this trip, but can write no more.'

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Letters from Bayreuth

In view of Wyndham's temperament and literary talent, it is not surprising to find him, nearly a year later, rather more at home in Bayreuth than he had been in Belmullet. His letters from Bayreuth have been included in the present selection, even though they have nothing to do with Ireland, for the light they shed on Wyndham.

They have the great charm that they are very obviously not the letters of a music critic. His approach to Wagner is literary and romantic and emotional. He tells us nothing about tempi and pitch, but he does (as he says himself) enable us to 'guess from what I have written the sensations experienced by the hearer of Parsifal'. His style is too precious and studied for modern taste, which does not react kindly to deliberate archaisms like 'graal' and 'chaunt'; but the letters do have a striking immediacy and freshness, in spite of being the letters of a very literary man. Nobody nowadays would write in this way, unless for publication. But this was clearly not Wyndham's intention: he gets the names of two of the characters wrong, and in any case many of his private letters to his wife - the recipient of these - are written in a similar vein.

On 12 August 1891 he, jokingly, 'Sends first letter of Tristran [sic] to Isolde. Must be short, as it is nearly time to start for "Parsifal". ...' On the following day he records his reaction to 'Parsifal' in a letter address from 2 Siegfried Strasse, Bayreuth.

> '... I drove up at 3.15 to the theatre, one and a half miles out of the town, with Mr Shuster who has been more than kind to me. We got down from the fly and walked past the theatre, built of red brick and wooden beams, to a bench by the fir-woods on the hill behind it. There I read a fair introduction to Parsifal, and returned in good time to take my seat. The theatre is constructed on a classical model so far as the seating of the audience is concerned, i.e. in semi-circular tiers of seats, each raised two-thirds of a foot above the one below, so that all the 1,400 seats are of nearly equal value. I took mine, and after the last blast of the trumpets outside, heard faintly within, had died away, all the lights were darkened, the audience sat down, and became only a glimmering slope of pale faces hardly seen in the gloom.
>
> Then, out of the dead silence, the music of the agape and the graal [i.e. grail], blown softly, began to breathe through the darkness, to soar and sink and loose [sic] itself in tangled tunes of sorrow and suffering, only to be born again and changed then to quiet joy, and at last to soar up in triumph and sink in a second silence.
>
> Then, after a pause, the curtain opens. You hear the reveille of the trumpets blowing faintly in the far-off castle of the graal, whilst the aged Gurnemanz tells two youths to arise and wait for the wounded King. I will not dwell on the opening of the first act which, possibly because I was over-tired, did not impress me nearly as much as all that followed. After the shooting of the swan and the going and return of the wounded King from his bath, and the

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first meeting of Kundry and Parsifal (of which I will speak when I come to Act II), Gurnemanz, thinking he has found the promised deliverer in Parsifal, leads him through the woods and rocky [? wastes] to the temple of the graal. Here the trees and rocks and scene move slowly by, to the most marvellous orchestration till the brain reels. They come to gloomy caverns, in the green depths of which rock-hewn pillars are dimly discerned, and giant steps hewn in the entrails of the hill. The caverns grow darker, and take the semblance of huge halls, which cease to move and to change and gradually grow light, till the inner shrine of the temple is seen, an octagon of arches supported on strange Byzantine pillars, with a triforium running round the base of the dome, reared above the altar and circle of seats enclosing the table of the knights. Here the holy supper is celebrated. Amfortas lifts the glowing cup, the voices of youths and children ring round the dome, and rise ethereally to heaven. Then the knights rise, and marching slowly, meet, each gives the other his hand, and then they embrace and part and slowly disappear down the altered aisles. Parsifal fails to do aright, and Gurnemanz casts him out contemptuously, while the orchestra play a grotesque and abortive perversion of Parsifal motive.

Act II. We now come to Kundry. And I may as well confess at once that the second act moved me more than the first, for in it there is all the terror and infinite pathos of sin and sorrow. What we call sin. by which we mean the same passions that go to make the godlike and heroic, somehow distorted and directed amiss, even as the same powers of feeling that give man joy, give him also sorrow. Kundry is the type of the sinner I love: the instrument of fate, whose best virtues are used against her will to inspire others and to torture her own soul.

Kingsler [sic – Klingsor], the embodiment of evil that falsifies life for us and makes it meaningless with magic, in a hideous underground chamber calls Kundry up from the depths, where she has been laid to sleep. Kundry is a female wandering Jew. She laughed at Christ, and is condemned to live forever trying to expiate her crime by good deeds, but never free from the dominion of evil; forced to lure others to their doom, forced forever to laugh at all she seeks to love, knowing no solace of tears. In the first act she does some kind office to Parsifal, but anon is seized with demoniac laugher, and at the end caught in magical sleep and dragged down with a despairing cry. Now she is called up to life again in a shape of beauty, and rises to life with a shriek running up with the violins and flute, that will long haunt my nightmares. She tries to avoid the task laid on her by Kingsler, but all to no avail, and with another heartrend[ing] shriek, ending in unwilling laughter, disappears to tempt Parsifal.

The scene [is] changed to the magical gardens of the flower maidens. Parsifal enters, and is in no wise tempted to them. Then Kundry comes and tempts him, not of set design, but deceiving herself, believing that the love she feels and asks is love that will redeem and save her. So that here we have the real mystery of life, the mystery of love's two-fold nature, that are [sic] so hard to distinguish, if indeed there is any distinction possible to man.

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Parsifal, feeling his heart burn with love, remembers the wound of Amfortas, pities him, and filled with mingled horror and pity of sin, escapes. Kingsler enters to slay him with the lance. Hurls it. The lance shoots through the air and floats over Parsifal's head, who grasps it, the music threatens and is aroused to anger and triumph. He waves the lance, makes the sign of the cross, the palace falls "shattered into shards", Kundry cries out and falls, and all the flowers fall ruined upon the desert that alone remains.

This second act is tremendous. I left the house well "purged by pity and terror". It was now getting dark. I sat out in the gentle rain that fell from purple skies, and anon went in for the third act.

The desert, a lovely scene, wild flowers growing, a stream in the foreground and hills in the distance. Parsifal enters, armed, with Gurnemanz, who bids him unarm, since 'tis "Good Friday". He does so, and appears in white, in the garb of our Lord. At the spring-side there is a beautiful scene, during which the repentant Kundry anoints his feet and dries them with her hair, the while Gurnemanz pours the chrism on his head. From this point onward, the music takes your heart, seizes your senses, drowns you in waves of emotion, the air vibrates round your tingling brain, and quivers with the intensity of all love, all sorrow and all rest, until at last the world itself seems melted into the calm, which must be the end and answer to the problem of unrest.

After the spring music, the scene moves as in the middle of the first act. A stream seems to flow, and the rivers of sound do flow, and mingle and shine out. We pass through strange places of awe, and at last reach the dark hall of the graal. The knights enter. Amfortas despairs of healing, of any good coming in a world of evil, and rushes down past the graal to tear open his wound. He meets Gurnemanz who bids him stay, for behold, the Saviour cometh. Parsifal in white, with a scarlet robe, advances, holding up the sacred lance, the steel-head of which glows, too, blood-red. All fall down and worship, kneeling on their knees. Parsifal holds the lance aloft, and singing out aloud the triumph of right and the healing of all wrong, mounts the steps of the graal-altar, reverently lays down the lance, and taking the glowing cup, raises it to heaven. The music, like the splintering of crystal in the spheres, thrills ethereally through infinite space, the dove descends, the curtains close, the music pauses. Then, on all the horns and trumpets and wind instruments, the graal-motive in blasts of triumph is blown to abolish evil beyond the bounds of the world.

Although I cannot describe it, you will guess from what I have written the sensations experienced by the hearer of Parsifal. ...'

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