

The Revival at local level: Katherine Frances Purdon's portrayal of rural Ireland

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Until relatively recently, most of the attention of scholars of the Irish literary revival has been focused on the writings of the 'leading lights' of the movement, especially those of Yeats and, to a lesser extent, Synge. Although Yeats and Synge still continue to attract their share of attention from academics, research into the literary revival and its political, cultural and social contexts has considerably widened in scope. One of the important areas that is still under-researched is that of the literary revival's impact at the regional and popular level, and the extent to which its representation of Irish life took distinctive regional forms. By exploring the work of the Meath author, Katherine Francis Purdon (1852–1920) – one of the numerous writers of minor rank who contributed to the work of the literary revival but whose publications are now largely overlooked – this essay demonstrates the potential that a focus on the regional dimension of the revival offers to historians.

As stated above, Katherine Frances Purdon's writings are now largely ignored. Kevin C. Kearns, in his recent book on the oral history of the Dublin slums, contains a number of references to *Dinny of the Doorstep*, Purdon's only novel dealing with city life, but such glaring errors as mistakenly dating the novel to 1920 (it was published in 1918) and, more regrettably, using the masculine first person singular pronoun when referring to Purdon, merely serve to highlight the neglect accorded to her and her work.¹ Sadder still is the fact that no extracts from Purdon's work have been included in volumes four and five of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* devoted to women authors. This neglect of Purdon's work is even more surprising when one considers the popularity of her writings in the early twentieth century, the critical acclaim she received, and the fact that she published in some of the leading Irish literary journals of the period. From January 1906, Purdon wrote the regular 'Gardening Notes' column for the *Irish Homestead*, the journal of the co-operative movement. Her gardening column frequently reflected the spirit of the Revival.² She contributed fairy tales and tales of rural life to the *Irish Homestead's* popular 'Celtic Christmas' numbers

¹ Kevin C. Kearns, *Dublin tenement life: an oral history* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. 39.

² There is a very fine example in the 28 Apr. 1906 issue.

from 1899 to 1910, as well as to *The Shanachie* in March 1907 and the *Irish Review* in August 1911. Another mark of her contemporary stature is the fact that many of her writings were illustrated by leading Irish artists. Jack B. Yeats illustrated four of her *Irish Homestead* stories,³ and George William Russell (Æ) illustrated two.⁴ While in 1914, Beatrice Elvery illustrated *Candle and Crib*, Purdon's reworking of the Christmas nativity story in an Irish rural setting.⁵ Another famous contemporary British magazine illustrator, Arthur Rackham, illustrated Purdon's posthumously published fairy tale, 'Living or Dead', in 1927.⁶ Purdon's most famous novel, *The Folk of Furry Farm*, proved to be so popular that it went through two editions in 1914 and was also republished after her death, in 1926. *Candle and Crib* was also reissued in December 1920, and Purdon's dramatized version of this novella was performed on the Abbey stage in the same month.⁷

The distinctive quality of Purdon's work was frequently commented on by contemporaries, and it is this distinctiveness which makes her contribution to the revival so worthwhile to historians of the movement. Canon James Owen Hannay (George Birmingham) was an enthusiastic admirer of Purdon's fiction, and in his introduction to *The Folk of Furry Farm* he summarized much of what was unique in her novel:

Her distinction is that she has chosen a new part of the country to write about. I do not know exactly where the Furry Farm is, but I am inclined to place it somewhere in the western part of Leinster, in Meath or Kildare, on the great plain which fattens cattle for the market. Other Irish writers, whether they wanted humour, romance, or mysticism, have gone to the maritime counties for their material. Galway, Cork, and Wicklow provide scenes for most of the plays which are acted in the Abbey Theatre. Some poets write about Donegal, others prefer North-East Ulster, and a few brave spirits have ventured into the streets and suburbs of Dublin I cannot remember that any plays or poems of importance have been written about the people of the central plain. They are regarded, for some reason obscure to me, as unworthy of a place in literature. They have, one would gather, lost the virtues of Gaeldom without acquiring the sentimental regard for them which rescues Dublin from the reproaches of 'seoininism'. The accepted view of literary Ireland is that the people of

3 'Match-Making in Ardenoo', *Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1902, pp 12-15; 'A Settled Girl', *Irish Homestead*, 5 Dec. 1903, pp 1-5; 'An American visitor', *Irish Homestead*, 3 Dec. 1904, pp 1-6; 'The furry farm', *Irish Homestead*, 2 Dec. 1905, pp 1-5. 4 'Comrade children at the Furry Farm', *Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1907, pp 11-15; 'On the stray', *Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1908, pp 10-14. 5 For more on Beatrice Elvery, see her memoirs (written as Beatrice Lady Glenavy), *Today we will only gossip* (London: Constable, 1964). 6 'Living or dead', *Nash's and Pall Magazine*, 79, no. 407 (Apr. 1927), pp 14-17, 85-90. 7 *Abbey Plays 1899-1948, including the productions of the Irish Literary Theatre* (Dublin: Sign of the Three Candles, 1949), p. 44.

Meath are as uninteresting as the bullocks which they herd. Miss Purdon comes to us to prove the contrary.⁸

Purdon's fictional Ireland draws, for the most part, on her native Church of Ireland parish of Rathcore, in southern Meath. Purdon resided all of her life at Hotwell, the 'Big House' at Ballinakill, that is named after the natural hot spring in its grounds. She gives the name of Ardenoo or the Furry Hills to her native district, an area of generally flat land but with some gently rolling hills and one large hill, the Hill of Rathcore, which is about half a mile from Hotwell. Purdon's close friend, Susan L. Mitchell, pointed out that the Ardenoo of the novel and some of her short stories 'is less a townland of that name than an extension of her own rich personality into the lives and interests of the folk who live scattered in small houses on the roads of Meath'.⁹ Purdon's sympathetic portrayal of her native area proved very attractive to her readers, and also provides an important social document to historians of this part of the country and an insight into how some of the main motifs and preoccupations of the more famous figures in the revival were recast and reworked in the unlikely fictional setting of southern Meath. Jack B. Yeats's illustrations of some of Purdon's Ardenoo short stories might at first glance seem incongruous, since they evoke images that are more suggestive of the West of Ireland than the Meath plain. One can argue, however, that Purdon's general portrayal of rural life has much in common with the romanticization that was a hallmark of many of the other revivalists' writings. From this perspective, Yeats's illustrations are not entirely inappropriate. As pictorial representations, they evoke the Revival's idealized landscapes of the West rather than the visually uninspiring Meath plains, but they nevertheless serve to capture the Arcadian quality of Purdon's rural world.

Purdon, like many other revivalist writers, was fascinated with the language of the peasantry. In her *Irish Homestead* pieces, she renders the narrative voice and the speech of the peasant characters phonetically. Many of these short stories were reworked and incorporated into *The Folk of Furry Farm*; however, the narrative voice of the novel is in standard English, with the distinctive Meath accent being reserved for the peasant characters. In the novel, Purdon included footnote explanations or translations of some of the distinctive words and phrases used by her peasant characters, many of which derive from the Irish language. Her Ardenoo fiction¹⁰ is an important social document as her phonetic rendering of peasant speech gives an invaluable glimpse into the way in which people in southern Meath spoke in the early twentieth century, and indeed one can still

⁸ George Birmingham, 'Introduction', in K.F. Purdon, *The Folk of Furry Farm* (London: James Nisbet, 1914, 2nd edition), pp xiv–xv. ⁹ Susan L. Mitchell, 'Introduction', in K.F. Purdon, *The Folk of Furry Farm* (Dublin: Talbot, 1926), p.ix. ¹⁰ The name Ardenoo is probably derived from the townland of Ardenew, which is roughly midway between the villages of Rathcore and Rathmolyon.

hear strong echoes of her characters' voices in the Rathcore area today. Unlike Synge, who invented his own peasant speech after being inspired by reading Lady Gregory's 'Kiltartanese', Purdon may be seen as having portrayed the language of her peasant characters in a fairly accurate manner.

The accuracy of the peasant speech in Purdon's writings is vouchsafed for by a number of contemporaries, including her close friend and fellow *Irish Homestead* contributor, Susan L. Mitchell. Mitchell, who was familiar with Purdon's native area,¹¹ wrote of Purdon's language: 'Her dialect is genuine. It is a vivid and homely speech, the speech of midland Ireland. She wrote it as one who lived it ...'¹² Æ was another admirer of Purdon's language:

She has a feeling for words. She has listened to the dialect of her county until she knows it by heart ... Painters often speak of the nice fat colour, at least those do who are in love with their materials. Miss Purdon is in love with nice fat phrases. It is not merely dialect which is revealed in them but imagination and humour.¹³

Purdon's 'nice fat phrases' reveal her to be a sympathetic observer of the peasant life around Hotwell, and they added to the appeal of her literary output.

The 'nice fat phrase' that particularly caught Æ's fancy was the following description by Dark Moll Reilly, an old woman who pretends to be blind, of the 'returned Yank', Patsy Ratigan, after she encounters him on one of the roads of Ardenoo:

it's that bright boyo, Patsy Ratigan, as sure as God made little apples! And the great big size of him now! The broad red face of him! and he the full of his skin; instead of the way he was, so thin that there wasn't as much fat upon him as would grease a gimlet! And the thick back to his head! and [he] used to have a long neck upon him, like a distracted gander peeping down a pump-hole to look for poreens!¹⁴

One can point to numerous further examples of Purdon's gift for employing simple but vivid imagery for the telling phrase or description. For instance, when Mickey Heffernan, the middle-aged bachelor, sees young Rosy Rafferty in her house, the following description of the impact of her beauty on him is given:

11 Hilary Pyle, *Red-headed rebel: Susan L. Mitchell, poet and mystic of the Irish cultural renaissance* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 1998), p. 138. **12** Mitchell, 'Introduction', p.x. For other reviewers' agreement on the accurate manner in which Purdon had depicted the Meath peasants' speech, see *Irish Independent*, 9 Mar. 1914; *Meath Chronicle*, 14 Mar. 1914; *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Mar. 1914. **13** *Irish Homestead*, 14 Mar. 1914. **14** *Ibid.*; Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 211.

To Mickey Heffernan in especial, that had never before passed much remarks about any girl, it appeared something altogether strange and new, to see the bright little face of her, shining there in the dim, smoky cabin, like a lovely poppy among the weeds of a potato-patch.¹⁵

When Heffernan later discovers that he has been thwarted in his hopes of marrying Rosy, Purdon writes that he 'just gave one laugh out of him; like the cough of a sick sheep it was ...'¹⁶ She writes of Hopping Hughie, the crafty, itinerant man without permanent work who does various odd-jobs around Ardenoo, that 'He could build a nest in your ear, he was that cunning', while Dark Moll Reilly 'was that clever, she could knot eels, the people said'.¹⁷ The most vivid physical description of any of Purdon's characters is that of Peetcheen Caffrey, a lazy labourer who rises in the world as the result of marrying Julia Heffernan, the sister of the 'comfortable' farmer, Mickey Heffernan: 'and he wid a head upon him that you'd think should fizz, if he put it into could water, it's that red! And the mouth of him! the same as if it was made wid a blow of a shovel!'¹⁸ Hopping Hughie is the subject of another well-chosen observation: 'Gay and happy he was after his supper, and soon fell asleep on the straw, with his ragged pockets that empty, that the Divil could dance a hornpipe in them and not strike a copper there.'¹⁹ Purdon's other writings offer other examples. For instance, in *Candle and Crib*, she describes Mrs Moloney's house-cleaning on Christmas Eve as resulting in the tables and chairs being 'scoured like the snow, and the big old pewter plates and dishes upon the dresser polished till they're shining like a goat's eyes from under a bed!' While in *Dinny of the Doorstep*, Purdon's account of the slum-dwelling Doran orphans, a character remarks on their tenement room: 'Sure there's not as much coal in the place as ud blind the eye of a bee!'²⁰

Purdon brought similar astute powers of observation to the activities of the peasantry. Indeed, according to one commentator, in *The Folk of Furry Farm* Purdon 'altogether has succeeded in approximating to real life and with much attractiveness'.²¹ Fr Stephen Brown concurred with this positive estimation in his description of the novel as 'depicting in the most intimate way the conversation, manners, humours, kindness of the people'.²² Purdon had already shown in her first short story for the *Irish Homestead*, 'Her Christmas Cailey', that she had an intimate acquaintance with farming homesteads, as is apparent in her evocative description of the living room of the 'snug farmers', the Fogartys:

She [Mrs Fogarty] had had visions of a new table-cover and curtains, and maybe even a sofa for 'the room', a somewhat desolate apartment open-

15 Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 13. 16 Ibid., p. 33. 17 Ibid., pp 38, 88. 18 Ibid., p. 76. 19 Ibid., p. 39. 20 Purdon, *Candle and Crib* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1920), p. 3; Purdon, *Dinny of the Doorstep* (Dublin: Phoenix, 1918), p. 4. 21 *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Mar. 1914. 22 Stephen J. Brown, *Ireland in fiction* (Shannon, 1969 reprint of 1919 edition), p. 257.

ing off the big cheery kitchen, and which was devoted to the accommodation of an old brass-mounted bureau, battered and worm-eaten, a tall clock 'that didn't lose more nor two hours in the week', some chairs covered in hair-cloth, sacred pictures, and photographs of friends in America. No one ever used this room from choice; still it was a certain satisfaction to Mrs Fogarty to know that it was there, a kind of white elephant, conferring dignity, but otherwise useless.²³

Most of Purdon's fiction affords us glimpses into the homes and lives of the 'snug' and especially the small farming classes – and, occasionally, the gentry – of her part of southern Meath, although some of her fiction is also set in other parts of Ireland. Her writings also feature a vivid array of people living on the margins of rural society, such as tramps, peripatetic matchmakers, 'tinkers' (who are usually portrayed in an unsympathetic light) and people coming out of, or about to enter, the workhouse. The main focus of her interest, however, is the daily round of the settled, small farming community. Her tales are mostly simple and gently humorous stories, affectionate portrayals in which failed and successful attempts at matchmaking are central to the dynamics of the community. The overwhelming impression is one of a neighbourly, harmonious, compassionate community, whose people rarely exhibit unpleasant traits and whose equilibrium, although it might be occasionally upset, is invariably restored at the end of each episode. *Æ* gave an effective summary of Purdon's fictional world:

We have written ourselves hastily about Meath and its humanity, and as if to rebuke us a cloth has been let down from the heaven of the affections filled with every manner of human thing that moves in Meath and we are challenged to say that there is anything vile in it. Miss Purdon knows her people as intimately as Mr Stephens knows his charwomen, his clerks, or his policemen, and we feel affection for them growing as we read her book ... Miss Purdon's affection for her people gives her a vision of their nature and she finds the love inside them all which endears them to us. We will always think now of County Meath as a county with exceptionally nice people in it.²⁴

Purdon's rural world is, then, in many ways, a Kickhamesque Arcadia, but without the melodramatic extremes of *Sally Kavanagh* or *Knocknagow* and with the additional ingredient of what one reviewer referred to as 'the mysticism which is inseparable from the Celt'.²⁵ It was an appealing mix to her contemporaries;

²³ Purdon, 'Her Christmas cailey', *Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1899, p. 13. ²⁴ *Irish Homestead*, 14 Mar. 1914. ²⁵ *Irish Independent*, 9 Mar. 1914. It is telling that the same writer gives an extremely negative review of Patrick MacGill's *Children of the Dead End* as containing 'much that nauseates and revolts and very very little that either edifies or entertains'.

indeed, according to Susan L. Mitchell, the 'great literary success' that *The Folk of Furry Farm* had in the troubled year of 1914 rested to a large extent on the novel's rose-tinted portrayal of a stable society: 'At a time of extraordinary agitation in men's minds there were readers who seemed to cling to this book as to an anchor. There seems something prophetic in the reception it met with in those days when the old order was about to slip from under our feet.'²⁶

Purdon's portrayal of relations between the various strata of settled rural society promotes a picture of a harmonious world. In particular, there is no sense of hostility between the peasantry and the people in the 'Big House', which might be a reflection of the Purdons' relations with the local farming community. Purdon's gentry are invariably depicted as living in good relations with their peasant neighbours. For instance, in her early short story 'Christmas in the Valley', which is set in the Wicklow mountains, Ould Mickey Byrne, a poor, small tenant farmer has a fond, almost feudal, regard for his landlord, named O'Byrne. The O'Byrnes used to reside in Grouse Lodge, and according to Ould Mickey: 'It was once very grand, but the O'Byrnes that owns it is very bet down now, and can't live there themselves, only lets it for shootin', and fine sport there does be in it too.' Ould Mickey 'remimbered to see great style kep' up there, the Lord knows how long ago, by an O'Byrne that was a grand soart of a man, at a time when the poor in Ireland wanted a protector'. He goes on to explain the reason why he holds the O'Byrnes in high esteem:

'Yiz may talk about Crumwell and all the rest,' he'd say, 'but any of them had humanity and nature in them, only Lord Norbury. Wasn't I one of twinty he sintined in a batch on circumstance evidence? An' 'twas well for us that had the O'Byrne to spake up for us – a Justice ov Paice and Dain of the church he was. "Your Lordship," says he, "I know them boys well, and there's not a word agin wan ov them, barrin' the sup they might take an odd time. An' sure that's only human nature, and no man can alter that only God. An' you can't put an ould head on young shoulders." So he got us off, the Lord mark him to grace! An' the next fair day ov Ballinclash wasn't every hat off to him, and we drew him home in his carriage, till, says he: "For God's sake, boys, put to the horses agin before yiz are all stuficated!"'²⁷

In 'The Marrying of Barney Maguire', set in the townland of Ballinamaddagh, about whose exact geographic location it is impossible to be certain, Mr O'Farrell, the landowner, is a benevolent landlord: 'Scarce a house in the whole countryside but was behoulden to him at one time or another, for the lind of

²⁶ Mitchell, 'Introduction' (1926), p. xii. ²⁷ Purdon, 'Christmas in the valley', *Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1900, p. 6.

money, or seed pitaties, or to do a bit a ploughin', an' a dacent tinant like Barney [Maguire] always got his time to pay'. Miss O'Farrell, the landlord's daughter, repeatedly gives presents of flowers and books to Maneen, a young girl who has been taken in by the Maguire household and cared for as one of their own, and Miss O'Farrell frequently 'pass[es] the time of day and take[s] a hait of the fire' in the Maguires' house. The Widdah Maguire repays Miss O'Farrell's kindness with presents of eggs or spring chickens, and an easy familiarity exists between the two women.²⁸ A similar state of cordial relations is evident in the Ardenoo story 'On the Stray', between Old Judy Scanlan 'who lived by herself in the tumble-down cabin a piece up Scanlan's boreen' and Miss Rosy, 'the only child at the Big House beyant'. Miss Rosy spends much of her time in Judy's company, and ensures that the indigent old woman is supplied with cartloads of her father's turf.²⁹ It is noteworthy that the deplorable state of Judy's cabin is not blamed on Scanlan, her landlord, who is described with sympathy by Judy as 'out of his health, God help him ... livin' somewheres far – seven miles beyant France, some says.' She explains that 'It's Halligan, the steward, has a right to look after things; but he's as bad a baste as ever stood on two legs, as cross as a briar and as conthrary as an armful as cats!'³⁰ These warm relations between landlords and landholders are mirrored by the charity and friendliness shown by the small and 'comfortable' farmers towards itinerant and semi-itinerant members of the community, with the exception of 'villyans of tinkers'.³¹ Indeed, the roguish Hopping Hughie, who was crippled in both legs 'ever since he had got implicated with some sort of mesheen he was striving to work', probably while under the influence of drink,³² manages to make quite a comfortable living for himself by relying on the charity of his neighbours. The narrator of *The Folk of Furry Farm* tells us that 'His pockets would be like sideboards, the way he would have them stuck out with meat and eggs and so on, that he would be given along the road. Hughie was better fed than plenty that bestowed food upon him.'³³

The charm of Purdon's fictional rural world was added to by the inclusion of details of peasant folk beliefs and superstitions, particularly relating to the fairies. Such aspects were almost a prerequisite for contemporary portrayals of life in the Irish countryside, and the frequency with which Purdon incorporates fairy lore into her work helps to firmly locate her as a revivalist writer. Purdon often slips these details into her narrative in an unobtrusive manner, helping to open a window into the peasant worldview rather than adding to the plot. A good example of this occurs in 'Christmas in the Valley', when Bidy lights her kitchen fire and 'the fire blazed up the minute she put her hand to it, and that put Bidy in great humour, for it's a sign whoever you're thinkin' of is thinkin'

²⁸ Purdon, 'The marrying of Barney Maguire', *Irish Homestead*, Dec. 1901, p. 26. ²⁹ Purdon, 'On the stray', pp 10, 12. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12. ³¹ Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 229. ³² Purdon, 'Christina divelly', *Irish review*, i., no.6 (Aug. 1911), p. 287. ³³ Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 40.

of you'.³⁴ References are also made to the belief that if young women looked into a well or a mirror on Halloween Eve they would see the image of their future lover reflected there,³⁵ and that if an unmarried woman accidentally burned her dress it was a sign that she would get married.³⁶ In 'Rosy at Furry Farm', one of the chapters of Purdon's most successful novel, we learn of the superstition against opening a grave on Tuesdays.³⁷ The hot spring at Purdon's home features as a holy well in *The Folk of Furry Farm*:

The Holy Well lay in a corner, where the Big Pasture Field sloped down to a hollow. Many's the time Marg had seen it, of a Saint's Day, with the lone thorn that leans out over the water all dressed up with bits of ribbon, and even rags, that the people would tie there, when there would be a Pattern at the Holy Well.³⁸

It is to the Holy Well that Marg Heffernan goes on Hallow Eve to collect some water to cure her husband's lame leg.³⁹ People also repair to the 'Fairy Doctor', a seventh son, who effects cures for various ailments, particularly toothache.⁴⁰

As stated above, most of the references to folk belief concern the fairies. In 'Owny on the Turf', Purdon's interest in plants and fairy lore shows when she has the eponymous hero, a tramp just out of the work-house, discuss the rag-weed or 'boholauns' that are 'all about us here':

'I often heard tell, and so did you, maybe, how that at night them very boholauns will turn into little horses, saddled and bridled, and bells jigglin' out of them, for the f—the Gentle People to go off on their pattheroles all over the whole of Ireland.'⁴¹

Many more characters in the region of the Furry Hills express or show their belief in the 'Gentle People'. One such example is 'The Daylight Ghost', a love story in which Christina Flanagan mysteriously disappears after realizing that the 'returned Yank', Jim Cassidy, loves her sister Nelly rather than herself. After Nelly and Jim get married, they always leave the door of their house open, and food ready at night, particularly on Hallow Eve, as they are convinced that Christina is not dead 'only "away" with the Good People in the old rath, at the top of the hill behind Greenan-more' and that she will return to Ardenoo.⁴² The rath at Greenan-more is described as having 'a hollow, with a Lone Thorn grow-

34 Purdon, 'Christmas in the valley', p. 8. **35** Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 223; idem, 'Rebels they were called', *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, lxxviii, no. 406 (Mar. 1927), p. 80. **36** Purdon, 'Treasure', *Irish Homestead*, 11 Dec. 1909, p. xi. **37** Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 258. **38** *Ibid.*, p. 223. **39** *Ibid.*, p. 221. **40** *Ibid.*, p. 296. **41** Purdon, 'Owny on the turf', *The Shanachie* (Mar. 1907), p. 20. **42** Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), pp 130–1.

ing in the middle of it, and nettles and stones. Lonely places, raths are! where the Good People live, and their music can be heard, and they themselves be seen, by them that are able to do so.⁴³ The peasantry use various charms to remain on good terms with their fairy neighbours:

Marg was counted a very lucky hand over a dairy, and always had good yield from the milk. Near though she was to the Furry Hills, that were well known to be full of fairies, she never got any annoyance from them, such as the Good People to 'milk the tether' on her, or to take away the value of the milk from her. But, of course, that mightn't be luck, so much as that Marg knew what she was about. She was very particular not to give anything away to a stranger that might come borrowing from her on May Day; a mistake that has cost many a woman the loss of a fine cow. And she never forgot to throw a grain of salt into the churn, before she began to stir the dash. And as soon as ever she had the butter taken off the churn, she took care to stick the first bit against the wall, for the fairies. People can't be too careful in such things, especially if they live anyway near such a place as the Furry Hills.⁴⁴

The ubiquity of the fairies in the area becomes apparent when the reader learns that in one part of the Furry Hills there is a gap, like a cleft, 'and the old people said, it had been made there by a fairy sword'; fairy music can be heard there, and people never travel on the road through the cleft by themselves, or late at night.⁴⁵

In addition to incorporating elements of fairy lore into her fiction, Purdon also wrote two complete fairy tales, 'The Witchery Ladder' and 'Living or Dead', that are set in Ardenoo. The former is a didactic tale cautioning against the evils of drink, and has unmistakable echoes of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. It relates the story of drunken Dinny O'Dowd and his wife, the unnamed 'Vanithee' who gives hospitality to a mysterious 'little Black Man' one night when Dinny is away at a fair selling his wife's pig. In return for the kindness which Mrs O'Dowd shows to him, the Black Man sets out to shock Dinny into changing his drunken ways. He does this by transforming himself into a giant and forcing Dinny to climb a magic ladder on which he and Dinny travel into the future; like Ebenezer Scrooge, Dinny gets to see what the inevitable consequences of his unreformed behaviour will be. In this case, it means the break-up of his family, with some of his children 'at sarvice' for poor pay and the others languishing in the workhouse with his wife, while Dinny ends his drunken days contemplating suicide in a canal in an unnamed English town. This pathetic vision of the future is enough to shock Dinny into reforming his ways.⁴⁶ 'Living or Dead' is

43 *Ibid.*, p. 96. 44 *Ibid.*, p. 214. 45 *Ibid.*, p. 215. 46 Purdon, 'The Witchery Ladder', *Irish Homestead*, 17 Dec. 1910, pp 1043-7.

a more complicated story. Set on Geraghty's Island in Lough Bo-Finn, it tells the tale of how the old, eccentric, hunchbacked bachelor, the Butt Geraghty, befriends a 'Poor Scholar' who has had to abandon his studies due to poor health. The Poor Scholar loses his way in a bog in Ardenoo while making his way home, and the Butt saves his life. The taciturn and lonely Butt grows to relish the Poor Scholar's company, especially as he is a gifted fiddle player and reads stories to the Butt from his stock of ancient books. Their idyllic existence comes to an end, however, when the Poor Scholar digs under the lone 'sciog' or thorn bush on the island and unearths a store of treasure. He falls into a trance, in which he sees a group of 'wild and fierce' men in 'some old far-away forgotten days' burying the treasure on the island. Their leader gets one of the group, a slave, 'to put his hand to his forehead and swear by all his heathen gods, that he would guard that treasure, living or dead, for ever'; after the slave has sworn this oath, the leader kills him by stabbing him through the heart with a spear, and the man falls into the hole in which the treasure has been hidden. This slave, the Poor Scholar recognizes with a shock, is the Butt Geraghty! The enraged Butt, true to his oath, attacks the Poor Scholar and we are told at the end of the story that 'That young stranger was never seen after, by any son of man'.

Purdon's fictional world was, then, both enchanted and enchanting, the world of the Celtic Twilight transported to the unlikely setting of Meath. As stated earlier, it proved to be tremendously popular with contemporary readers. One reviewer, probably Æ, was particularly entranced by Purdon's depiction of rural life: 'We suspect that though the hither side of Ardenoo may hug the homely earth, there is a far side of it that rolls up to the celestial mountains. Over there beyond the gentle Furry Hills people often meet their heart's desire and are no whit surprised at the familiar face it wears.'⁴⁷ It is instructive to note that Charles L. Graves included one chapter from *The Folk of Furry Farm* – 'The game leg' – in his 1915 anthology of representative tales of Irish humour, and he wrote of Purdon's fiction that 'the dominant impression left by its perusal is one of confidence in the essential kindness of Irish nature'.⁴⁸ Purdon, however, did not entirely ignore some of the seamier sides of Irish life. For instance, the fear of ending in the workhouse torments several of the lonely old women in her writings; the following description is one of several in which Purdon alludes to the fate of these vulnerable members of rural society:

At last we got to the ward, and you'd wonder where all the old women came from, to fill it! It was as big as the chapel beyant ...but as large as it was, it was small enough for all it had to hold. You could scarcely drop a pin between the beds. And some of the women were asleep and a few

⁴⁷ *Irish Homestead*, 12 Dec. 1914. ⁴⁸ Charles L. Graves (ed.), *Humours of Irish life* (Dublin: Talbot, 1915), p. xxxviii.

lay there middling quiet. But the weight of them were sitting up, talking and laughing, or fighting with one another; and a few were crying to themselves. And most of them had little weeny tin boxes in their hands that they held out, begging you for a pinch of snuff. You'd have to pity them, they were so anxious for it!⁴⁹

Purdon also touches on the topic of crime in 'An American Visitor', a tale in which the 'returned Yank', Patsy Ratigan, supports his extravagant lifestyle by stealing cattle from his erstwhile neighbours and a substantial sum of money from Marg Heffernan. She also wrote a number of children's novels, didactic tales denouncing animal cruelty. These contain surprisingly graphic descriptions of cruelty towards animals, with drink being a common causal factor in the abuse suffered by pets and other animals. 'Tinkers' are common offenders in these novels, but so are members of the settled community, particularly the lower orders.⁵⁰ It should be noted, however, that there are no instances of cruelty towards animals in Purdon's Ardenoo stories.

While there are, then, some suggestions of a darker reality behind the idyllic southern Meath world portrayed by Purdon, it is, in the main, a comforting picture that emerges in her writings. Purdon obviously loved her local area, and succeeded in presenting a case, to echo George Birmingham, that the people of Meath had not lost the 'virtues of Gaeldom'. The last words should be left to Æ:

Her peasant folk are real human beings, not like the criminals and lunatics who form so large a part of the population on the Abbey stage, and whose boast it is that they are realistically Irish. Miss Purdon is perhaps more akin to Padraic Col[u]m than to any other of our writers, not because there is any affinity of style, but because they both know and love country people as they really are. So many Irish writers insist on treating Irish people humorously or making them the vehicle for expressing ideas of their own, that we have few books to which we could point and say, 'Here are Irish country people as they really are.' Padraic Col[u]m wrote such a book in 'My Irish Year'. Miss Purdon has written such a book in 'The Folk of Furry Farm', with a wealth of humour and insight and affection, and over it all flits, like sunbeams over a field, the essential Irish spirituality.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Purdon, *Folk of Furry Farm* (2nd 1914 edition), p. 269. ⁵⁰ Purdon, *The Fortunes of Flot: A dog's story, mainly fact* (London, Thomas Nelson, 1910); idem, *Spanish Lily, or Only an ass* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1920); idem, *Kevin and the cats* (London: Society for the Promoting of Christian Knowledge, 1921). ⁵¹ *Irish Homestead*, 14 Mar. 1914.