

The Auld Airds Tramp

Written by George Francis Savage-Armstrong

Fierce blaws the bitter whustlin' blast
Roon' Cloghy's wreckfu' bay,
But A maun tramp the wathery road
An' beg my lanesome way.
Och, grim auld Keep o' Kirkistone,
Ye've stud there years on years,
But nivver a storm sae lood an' cau'd
Cam' peltin' roon' yer ears!

Och, Mickie Keown, ye 're lame an'
crook'd,
Yer chin's a' raspy-white,
Yer taes gang ramblin' through yer
shoon,
Yer breeks let in the light;
Atween yer greezly pow an' heaven
The shelters' thin an' sma';
The win' nigh lifts ye aff yer fit,
An' slings ye 'gen' the wa'!

Och, trampin' on a night like thon
For yin sae wake an' puir
Is bitter coomfurt! On an' on
A gang by fiel' an' muir.
What help ir sich auld brogues an' rags
Whun roads ir jist yin sea?
It's wather high, an' wather low
A' s wather,—och-a-nee

Time wuz whun A cud jimp an' dance,
An' trot frae toon tae toon,
An' whun the day's lang trudge wuz din
Wud sleep furnenst the moon,
An' cared nae whaur A laid my heed,
By rick or ditch or hedge;
But life's last cliff A've climb'd, an' noo
A'm tremblin' on the edge...

My! thon's a gust! ... A'll totter on
Ower Bellagelget's height,
An' beg a bite at Dinver's daur,
An' shelther fur the night.
Ay, snug's auld Davy Dinver's barn ;
Jist there adoon A'll lay,
An', slumberin' 'mang the trusses, drame
Uv meadda-lan's in May.

Vocabulary

blaws – blows

whustlin – whistling

roon – round

maun – must

watthery – watery

cau'd – cold

roon – round

taes – toes

gang – going

shoon – shoes

breeks – trousers

pow – head

wa' – wall

thon – that

fiel – field

auld – old

yin – one

toon – town

furnenst – facing

heed – head

daur – door

adoon – down

meadda-lans – meadow lands

Poem Analysis

Like ‘Donegore Hill’, this poem is set in a recognisable location, in this case ‘The Ards’ in County Down. Savage-Armstrong spent some years away from the Ards area, which might explain a few non-standard variant forms in the poem. For instance, the unusual form ‘*cau’d*’ (for ‘cold’) does not appear in other Ulster-Scots literature: the ‘l’ is sounded rather than the ‘d’, giving *cauld* or *caul*. In recent years, the Ulster English form *coul* has become more frequent in Ulster-Scots speech. This is a result of close contact between the different language forms, when ‘borrowings’ take place. Other examples are the distinctive Ulster-Scots words *crack* and *sheugh* which have been borrowed into Irish Gaelic as *craic* and *seoch*.

For those not used to reading Ulster-Scots, there is also the difficulty of distinguishing in the poem between *A* (I), *a’* (all) and *a* the indefinite article (as in English). Ulster-Scots and Ulster English have a pronunciation of the letters ‘t’ and ‘d’ that linguists call ‘interdental’ – which just means that in forming these letters the tongue comes up against the back of the upper front teeth, producing a sound more like ‘th’ or ‘dh’. This is realised in this poem as *watthery* in verse one but reverts to *wather* in the third verse.

In that same third verse, the final line contains the term *och-a-nee* (an expression of sorrow, grief or weariness) which, unusually for Ulster-Scots, derives from Scots Gaelic. Brendan Adams, first Curator of Language at the then Ulster Folk Museum, maintained that, at the time of the Plantation, Galloway still had a small number of Scots Gaelic speakers and that part of Scotland supplied a proportion of the settlers who made their way to Ulster.

It is important to note that, until recently, recommended spellings for writing in Ulster-Scots did not exist; and also, Savage-Armstrong does not appear to have had the advantage of interaction with other Ulster-Scots poets that was the norm among the ‘Bards’ of the time, by which a measure of consensus on variant forms might have emerged.

Nonetheless, the poem is full of character: in verse two, the lines *Yer taes gang ramblin’ through yer shoon, / Yer breeks let in the light* (‘Your toes go wandering through your shoes, / Your trousers are see-through’) is hard to beat as a picture of the poor tramp’s condition. Also, the fact that the poem can be firmly located in the scenes of the Ards (*Cloghy, grim auld Keep o’ Kirkistone, Bellagelget*) adds to its charm. *Bellagelget* is of course ‘Ballygalget’, a townland to the south-east of Newtownards.



Poet Bio

George Francis Savage-Armstrong

George Savage-Armstrong was born in Dublin on 5th May 1845, at a time when the whole island of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. His father's family were Armstrongs whose forebears had been Border Reivers, bands of men who roamed the border area between Scotland and England rustling livestock in lawless times from the late 13th to early 17th century. The main Ulster-Scots influence on George, however, was his mother Jane, daughter of the Church of Ireland rector of Ardkeen on the Ards Peninsula. She grew up in Glastry House, near Ballyhalbert, and was very familiar with the Ulster-Scots speech and legends of the Ards.

Jane seems to have had a huge influence on George and his writings. He graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1869 and the following year became Professor of History and English Literature at Queen's College, Cork. Over the next thirty years, he wrote extensively on a wide range of subjects, such as travel and religion, and he appears to have been fond of the poetry of Robert Burns.

Only a few months after George's marriage in 1879, his mother died, and her loss seems to have prompted an impulse in him to research and write down many of the stories of the Ards she had passed on. In 1884, George visited the old church at Ardkeen, where his grandfather had been rector, only to find it in ruins. Together with a neighbouring minister, George set about a major overhaul of the old church ruins, graveyard and grounds.

The first result of George's examination of the origins of the Savage family was a 400-page book entitled *The Ancient and Noble Family of the Savages of the Ards*, published in 1888. It is the outcome of painstaking research into genealogy, local history and family tales, helped by some of the most important historians of the time, such as Sir Samuel Ferguson. As the undisputed Savage family historian, in 1890 George Armstrong added 'Savage' to his surname and became George Francis Savage-Armstrong.

The Auld Airs Tramp

From 1892 to 1899, George used many of the old tales of County Down as material for a book of poems, many in the Ulster-Scots speech of the Ards. In 1901 he published *Ballads of Down*, a collection of 92 songs and poems dedicated ‘*to the memory of my mother*’.

Savage-Armstrong had some very definite opinions about language. He rejected any idea that he was using an “Irish brogue” and explained: “*The Downshire dialect, with its variants, is an Ulster development of Lowland-Scottish – principally Ayrshire – brought over by Scottish settlers in the reign of James I...*”. He also pointed out that the speech of many of the ordinary people of County Down was in such dense Ulster-Scots that it was “*hardly intelligible to the stranger...*”.

George lived in County Wicklow until 1905, before moving to Strangford House, an imposing house on a hill overlooking ‘The Narrows’ towards Portaferry. He died the following year, aged 61, just after completing an amplified version of *The Savage Family in Ulster*, and was buried at the old Ardkeen Church. He was survived by his wife Marie and two of their three children, his son Francis having been killed in the First World War.