

The First Celtic Tiger

Kevin Higgins

The term 'Celtic Tiger' has been used recently to describe Ireland's economic progress. Among climbers a 'tiger' denotes a young, dynamic, driven character who seems to be able to climb anything he's pointed towards, and who shows scant regard for tradition or the reputation of others.

Valentine John Eustace Ryan seems to have burst upon the British climbing scene in the first decade of the 20th Century in just such a fashion. As Winthrop Young said of him 'he climbed with an almost feverish energy and daring'. This was in an era well past the 'Golden Age of Mountaineering'² and was a period when no new big climbs were being done in the Alps. Some exploration was being done on the Aiguilles around Chamonix in the French Alps and in the eastern Alps, but the major figures of British climbing - Slingsby, Collie and Conway - were in the distant greater ranges. Into this scenario 'a young climber suddenly ranging up and down the whole length of the Alps for several seasons each year, making only the most difficult ascents, many of them new... a standard of rock technique altogether unprecedented,' would fit the definition of a tiger.³

V.J.E. Ryan was certainly Celtic. The Ryans of Tipperary can be traced back for centuries as a significant landed family owning extensive estates in the county. Much of their lands was purchased in the seventeenth century from a Cromwellian grantee⁴. Inch House was the ancestral home and Castle Ffogarty was acquired through marriage into the Lenigan family. V.J.E. Ryan was a scion of this latter branch of the family.⁵

Through the generations the Ryans remained part of a tightly knit circle of Roman Catholic landowners, with whom they intermarried. Their religion was important and led many members of the family to seek careers abroad in the Catholic armies of Europe. Valentine's great-great grandfather was taken to Spain at the age of nine, from where he went to Peru. There he went on to become a sergeant-major of a regiment of militia (as Don Jorge Rian), before returning to Ireland to take charge of the family estates.⁶ Valentines female cousins attended convent schools in England and France.⁷ His father, also Valentine, was a Major-General in the British Army and both sons (Val and Lionel) followed in their father's footsteps into military service. Army life meant that Valentine lived much abroad as a child and was educated at Stonyhurst, the Jesuit college in Lancashire, and at Woolwich, the military academy. He passed out from there into the R.G. Artillery and served in Malta, Ceylon⁸ and Halifax (Canada)⁹. He was fifteen years old when he made his first mountain ascents - Pizzo Lucendro and Pizzo Fibbio in the St Gothard area, probably while on holiday with his family, in the summer of 1898. Two years later he climbed Aiguille de la Za, Pic d'Artzinal, Ulrichhorn and almost summited on the Nadelhorn. In 1901 he climbed the Dom.¹⁰

The winter of 1901/02 was interesting. The family was on holiday in Switzerland, possibly for health reasons. Val was on leave from the army. The father, writing to his brother in County Tipperary from the Grand Hotel, Locarno, states:

Bob (family name for Lionel) after a few days here found the place too dull for him so he went off alone - he crossed the Simplon in deep snow on a sleigh which upset two or three times on the journey - he then did some wonderful mountain attempts in winter ...he has become quite notorious for his daring feats of climbing.¹¹

The London *Daily Mail* reported the details:

The honour of the first important Alpine ascent of 1902 has been gained by Mr Ryan, an Englishman. (sic.).

Accompanied by three guides, he left Zermatt on Friday and climbed to the summit of the Weisshorn, 14,805 ft., and returned safely today (12th). This is the first time the Weisshorn has been ascended in winter.¹²

Val, also, seems to have wanted some of the action. He and his mother went to Lausanne, where they were joined by Lionel. The two boys (19 and 17 years old) then went to Chamonix and 'enjoyed a week in the snow there but the bad weather drove them back to Lausanne to their mother who was waiting anxiously'.¹³ The week in the snow (as in Val's Alpine Club candidate's form) involved climbing the Aig. De l'M and Petit Charmoz; Aig. du Moine, and attempts on the Charmoz and the Aig. du Plan, which was stopped high up by bad weather¹⁴.

There is no record of the boys using guides on these climbs but it would be expected that they had done so. Most climbers used local professional guides in their climbs and the signed the guides 'carnet' as a reference for future clients. Lionel had engaged Joseph Lochmatter in August 1901 and in January (Weisshorn), August and November (Dent Blanche) of 1902. 'Lochmatter's certificates are signed 'L.F. Ryan', and the climbs are remarkable for so young a man'¹⁵. Lionel's regiment went to India soon after that and he died there in April 1903¹⁶. This was surely a climbing career cut short.

The effect of Lionel's death on Valentine is a matter of surmise. He was on a posting to Malta at the time where he did some rock climbing and his attitude to the sport is indicated in a letter to his mother: 'I am getting rather fed up with Malta but...I would serve ten months in Hell if I could climb for the other two'.¹⁷ In any



Portrait in pastels of VJE Ryan, executed by his sister-in-law, Ms Gully. Photo courtesy of Rosemary Ryan Testa.



Miniature photo of VJE Ryan. Courtesy of Rosemary Ryan Testa

event he 'took over' Joseph Lochmatter as a guide when he first engaged him in May 1903 and in that month they climbed the Aig. du Midi, Grepon, Charmoz traverse, Dent du Requin and the Riffelhorn by the Matterhorn couloir. In early June he climbed the Aig. d'Argentiere and Petit Dru with Franz Lochmatter as guide. He also climbed the Blaitiere and attempted the Col des Hirondelles, where he was 'stopped by a storm close to the crest' _ and no guides are indicated for either.¹⁸

1903 may have been something of an emotional roller coaster for Val. It was in September of that year that his mother died. However, as far as climbing was concerned, as Winthrop Young says, 'in 1904 he began really to get going and must have spent his whole leave in the Alps'. The list of climbs, with Joseph and Franz Lochmatter, is impressive: Rimpfischhorn; Charmoz traverse; Aig. Verte; Grèpon and Blaitière in one day; Tacul; the two Drus

(traverse from Little to Big); Dent du Geant; attempt on the Grand Jorasse from Col des Grand Jorasses; Aig. Sans Nom; Gabelhorn and Wellenkuppe in one day; Rothorn traverse; Täschhorn by Teufelsgrat; Mominghorn traverse; Trifhorn traverse; Weisshorn, descending by N. Ridge; Dent Blanche by Viereselgrat; Dent d'Herens; Lyskamm traverse; Matterhorn traverse; Col du Géant. Consider that Valentine was twenty-one years old and on his second Alpine season. Young points out that most of the above ascents were the 'great' and outstanding climbs of that era and the traverse of the Little and Great Dru was an extremely fine first ascent.¹⁹

In April 1905 Frederic Philip Bennet of Thomastown Park, Birr Co. Offaly, died in Monte Carlo. This was Valentines's maternal uncle and it was he who bequeathed his estate near the village of Rath in Co. Offaly to his nephew on condition that he adopt the name Bennett²⁰. Now financially secure, Valentine promptly resigned his commission and returned from Ceylon to take possession in June. Within a week he was once more in the Alps and climbed with Joseph and Franz, together and alternately, from June 25th to October 1st. The list of ascents was impressive and ranges from the western Alps to the Dolomites and includes a number of new routes: Nonne from the Charpona Glacier; Aig. du Plan; Charmoz from Montanvers; Blaitière from Mer de Glace; Schienhorn direct.²¹

It was during this season that Ryan met Geoffrey Winthrop Young and their teams combined in climbing a number of routes, notably the S.E. face of the Weisshorn. Young was a leading Alpinist and also by this time had spent many years walking and climbing in Ireland and Britain. He was also a gifted poet, writer and philosopher; his book 'On High Hills' is regarded as a classic of mountain literature.²² As a result of their shared mountain



The Weisshorn. First winter ascent by Lionel Ryan. Later climbed by different routes by VJE Ryan. Photo : Kevin Higgins

exploits it was probably Young who became closest to being a friend to Ryan. In his writings it is he who provides the greatest insight into Valentine's character and personality. They met in London during the following winter and Young introduced him to Norman Collie and other leading mountaineers. The idea of a Himalayan expedition was broached because of Val's 'ample leisure, means and splendid guiding team'. Ryan certainly considered the possibility and went as far as deciding on dates for an expedition in 1906 and a destination area; he invited Young to join him on the proposed expedition. Due to work commitments Young was unavailable.²³

Two other events occurred during that winter which may or may not have influenced Valentine's decision not to undertake the Himalayan venture. It had been suggested that he apply for membership of the Alpine Club.²⁴ J.H. Wicks, its vice president, had agreed to propose Ryan's membership and had arranged a seconder and supporter. However, when it came to the ballot, as Wicks wrote to Ryan the following day: '...the result was that you did not get a sufficient number of white balls to cancel the black balls put in the box'. His application was rejected. Wicks was 'disgusted and annoyed...at the action of the AC'. Other renowned climbers had been treated in a similar fashion and Wicks promised to propose Valentine the following year if he so wished. Ryan never did apply again.²⁵

In March 1906 Ryan married Louisa Florence Gully who was twenty-five years older than he.²⁶ They did not have any children. The 'honeymoon' was spent in the Alps from June to September, climbing with the Lochmatters. New routes included: the Blaitière ascent from Chamonix; Dent d'Herens from Col Tournanche; Monte Rosa from Jägerjoch - 'a first and formidable ascent'; the Aig. Du Plan from the Mer de Glace was 'the hardest climb I have ever done'. On August 11th he had a defining experience along with Young and their guides on the Täschhorn. Their route was 'straight up the centre of the face from the glacier above

the Täschalp'. At a critical point when they had got into great difficulty, Ryan asked Young if he thought they would come out of it alive. Young replied that the odds were bad. Ryan's response, as Young says, was 'that the year before he would not have cared a damn which way it went, live or die, but that this year he had married, and he left it at that'²⁷.

He did not go on to the Dolomites that year and from 1906 to 1914 he lived on and off at Thomastown. However, as he wrote to Young, 'his wife hated Ireland' and 'he hated England' so they decided to build a house in Jersey, 'a land which they both hated'. Although he did visit the Alps on occasions during those years he did very few climbs until 1914, which, in the event, was to be his final climbing season.²⁸

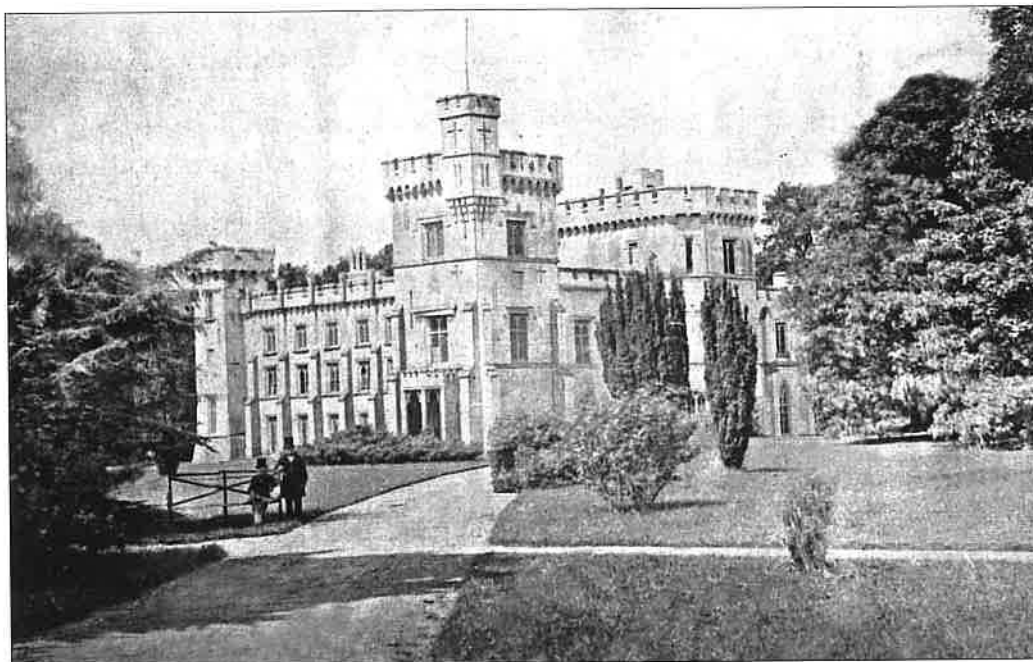
This, his last season, started early with the Wellenkuppe, climbed on the last day of April. There followed some 'great climbing feats, especially after his years of inaction, a flaring up once again of the once consuming fire'. They included, with Joseph and Franz, a first ascent of the Grépon by the Nantillons face (Lochmatter Chimney); 2nd ascent of Young's Grépon from the Mer de Glace; a new route on the Aig. de Blaitière and other admirable climbs²⁹.

These were his last climbs. Of course the Great War intervened; he enlisted and was wounded, but Young felt that 'the desire had now finally gone'. He subsequently returned to the Alps but never climbed. After the war he returned to Ireland but left again in 1921 because of the 'Troubles'. He acted as an air raid warden in London during WWII and was planning to revisit Ireland once again when he died in 1947, aged sixty-four.³⁰

Valentine Ryan left little account of his climbs. He was not much given to writing and seems to have found it tedious. Some notes he was preparing for publication were mislaid by the person to whom they were given and he never rewrote them. Some fragments of a possible book of climbs are quoted by Young in the Climbers' Club Journal. What is known of Ryan's character is gleaned from Young's account of dealings with him and observations of him as a fellow climber. As such he was 'reserved, proud, excitable, dissatisfied; without any trace of the more sociable Celtic qualities, the wit, the humour or the ready human sympathy'. While Young had huge admiration for his climbing abilities he records that Ryan:



Thomastown House as it appeared in about 1951. Photo courtesy of Rosemary Ryan Testa.



Castle Ffogarty in its heyday. Photo courtest of Rosemary Ryan Testa

never carried a sack - his guides were there for that; and I never saw him carry an ice-axe - his guides , he said, were for that too, and it bored him...He had daring, initiative, endurance...(but)... defeat, delay or inaction exasperated him to irritable sarcasms. ...In his relations with his guides... he belonged to an older fashion and a past generation..³¹

In Rath, an elderly man who, as a boy, had served Mass in the local church, recalled seeing Valentine walk the mile from Thomastown House to attend Mass. The church, built by the Bennett family in 1800, had private pews, separated from the rest of the congregation, for the use of residents of Thomastown³². In his dealings with his family Valentine seems to have been generous and charming, as recalled by his cousin's daughter. On one occasion her family was invited, by Valentine, to have tea in the Grosvenor Hotel, where he and his wife resided while in London. On hearing that this cousin would not inherit anything from the Inch estates, Valentine went straight to his solicitor to change his will so that the cousin - Richard Ryan, Group Captain RAF - would inherit Thomastown³³. So he did on Valentine's death in 1947 but the estate had to be sold to the Land Commission in 1951. Val's concern for, and his willingness to contribute financially to another cousin at Inch, is evident in their correspondence.³⁴

Geoffrey Winthrop Young, who was a contemporary, likened him in many ways to the renowned Edward Whymper. He says, in 1949, that Whymper and Ryan

... were both for a few years in youth fired into something like heroism, inspired to pursue adventurous and almost romantic achievement, by the fascination of Alpine heights and by the physical satisfaction of climbing.

Because of those years of enthusiasm in his youth, because of his exceptional prowess, and of the independent courage with which he attacked new spheres of difficulty and danger, Ryan's name lives on among the Alps... We at least can realize, ... what a novel mountaineering movement was launched during those few seasons at the start of the century, and what a leading role he himself played in the launching³⁵

Justifiably then, V.J.E. Ryan might be regarded as a type of Celtic Tiger. With so many people visiting the Alps in recent times, this Tipperary man, a pioneer in his day should not be forgotten.

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⁷*ibid*. p166
⁸Winthrop Young, G. 'A great climber, Valentine J.E. Ryan', *Climbers Club Journal*, vol ix, 1949, p21
⁹University College Cork, Ryan of Inch papers BL/EP/R/65
¹⁰National Library of Scotland, Acc 4338/205, P3.
¹¹University College Cork, Ryan of Inch papers BL/EP/R/65
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¹³*ibid*
¹⁴National Library of Scotland, Acc 4338/205, p 3.
¹⁵*ibid*. p 1.
¹⁶Montgomery-Massingberd, H. *Burke's Irish family records*, (London 1976)
¹⁷Winthrop Young, G. 'A great climber, Valentine J.E. Ryan', *Climbers' Club Journal*, vol ix, 1949, p 22.
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²⁵The Alpine Club, London. Archive B/49
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