

ROCK  
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# WHEN TWO OLD TREASURES MEET



*The light of evening, Lissadell/ Great windows open to the south/ Two girls in silk kimonos, both/ Beautiful, one a gazelle.../ Many a time I think to seek/ One or the other out and speak/ Of that old Georgian mansion, mix/ pictures of the mind, recall/ That table and the talk of youth,/ Two girls in silk kimonos, both/ Beautiful, one a gazelle.*

WB Yeats

Lissadell is one of Ireland's most storied Great Houses, having been eulogised in Yeats's poem after he stayed there as a guest of his friend Constance Gore Booth — Countess Markievicz — in 1893 and 1894. His poem (above) was a love letter of sorts to her family, especially her daughter Eva Gore Booth.

Now, 115 years later, another great poet will visit this stately home, and try to conjure something magical among the bucolic splendour of the Sligo countryside. Perched beside the windswept Atlantic and Yeats's beloved Benbulbin, Lissadell continues to make history as it stages within its grounds two open air-concerts by Leonard Cohen on July 31 and August 1.

Irish fans of Cohen, who is possibly the world's greatest living singer/songwriter, have been spoiled of late, having been treated to a trilogy of jaw-droppingly great shows in another site of great historical import, the grounds of the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, in 2008.

Grown men and women wept at what they saw and heard on stage those June nights. Recently, Luka Bloom was a guest on an Irish radio station, and he declared Cohen at Kilmainham to be the best gig he'd ever seen in his life. It had everything,

he gushed, love, sex, heartbreak, poetry, pain, pathos...

He thanked the friend who bought the ticket for him, as he had not been that pushed on seeing someone in the autumn of his life who, he presumed, would be well past his best. As he said himself, he couldn't have been more wrong.

It had been decades since the Canadian wordsmith had played live in this country, and many thought they would never get a chance to see the septuagenarian in the flesh again. But the following summer, Laughing Len was back for four shows in the newly reconstituted O2 arena, once again giving a three-hour masterclass in stagecraft and songcraft.

Nine thousand people singing along to 'So Long Marianne' is a memory I won't forget any time soon.

The show had everything — we even got cartwheels from his beautiful backing singers, The Webb Sisters.

Now, the famine has turned into a

feast — from not having played a show here since the 1980s, Cohen has returned for a third set of shows in three years. Alas, there are no Dublin shows this time, but the prospect of seeing him while surrounded by the stunning natural beauty of Lissadell is a prospect to savour.

And it opens a bright new chapter in the story of a house that has known some dark times in the years between WB and LC. At its lowest ebb, the "old Georgian mansion" had fallen into a state of disrepair by the middle of the last century, and was the subject of a bitter and rancorous dispute between the Solicitor General, working on behalf of the State, and Gabrielle Gore Booth, the granddaughter of Countess Markievicz.

The battle for control of the estate became known as The Lissadell Affair and was the subject



First we take Benbulbin... Leonard Cohen plays two shows at Lissadell House, Co Sligo (above) in a fortnight

of a crusading piece of journalism in the UK by Anne Robinson (of *The Weakest Link* fame/infamy) and subsequently an RTE TV documentary.

The gist of it was that Gabrielle had struggled to meet the administrative costs of running the estate and the powers-that-be fought tooth and nail to confiscate as much of the demesne as they could, giving over large swathes of its ancient woods to the Land Commission. It is hard not to feel that there were ulterior motives at work in the dispute — to do with class and religion.

The fact is that by the time Anne Robinson penned her piece in 1971, Lissadell was a ghostly shadow of its former self.

Happily, since then it has been restored to something like its former glory by an Irish couple — Edward Walsh and his wife Constance Cassidy — who bought the house and pumped their own money into bringing about its regeneration.

Lissadell remains their private residence (the couple live there with their seven children), but a dispute has arisen in relation to alleged public rights of way over the land. But their restoration job was superb, and the Leonard Cohen shows, which are promoted by John Reynolds's POD Concerts, are the icing on the cake.

I look forward to seeing for myself the vivid purple of the Primula Candelabra in the Lissadell woods and feeling the Atlantic sea breeze on my cheeks in the light of evening, as Cohen, a huge admirer of Yeats himself, entrances us once again with the magic of his songs that come all the way from Montreal.

Leonard Cohen plays Lissadell House on Sat July 31 and Sunday August 1.

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## MIND YOUR MANORS: IRISH ROCK'S COUNTRY PILE S

Lissadell House is the latest stately home to open its doors to the joys of popular music. The most high-profile is, of course, Lord Henry Mountcharles's country pile in Slane, Co Meath, who set the ball rolling with Thin Lizzy and U2 in 1981 and coaxed the Rolling Stones over to his manor the following year — at a time when such mega-concerts by international acts were few and far between in this country. Mick and Keef returned, of course, in 2008.

Belvedere House near Mullingar, Co Westmeath, hosted the short-lived but fondly remembered country and roots-themed Midlands Festival, which was also held in nearby Ballinlough Castle, just outside Athboy, Co Meath. This

unsung part of the country hosted great sets by the likes of Kris Kristofferson, Richard Thompson, Steve Earle and Jackson Browne. Belvedere House also hosted last year's Life festival.

Ardgillan Castle in north Co Dublin hosted REM a few years back while Malahide Castle is famous for great summer headline shows by Radiohead and Arctic Monkeys among others.

Also taking place on the same night as Leonard Cohen's shows is Castlepalooza, a two-day festival in the grounds of

Charleville Castle in Tullamore, Co Offaly, which features Mercury Rev and a cast of thousands, with the emphasis on leftfield electronica; Irish acts include O Emperor and James Vincent McMorrow.



Wonder-hall: Lord Mountcharles with Noel Gallagher of Oasis