A Soldier’s Lebanon

John Kenny

The Broken Cedar
By Martin Malone
Scribner
306pp, £12.99stg

Martin Malone has taken an interesting route to the bookshelves. After more than twenty years as a Military Policeman and three minor publications (one of which won the John B. Keane/Sunday Independent Award in 2001), he has become a full-time writer. Soldiering may not be commonly regarded as conducive to fiction writing, but Malone, now resident in Kildare, has turned his experience of service in the middle-east to good effect in a novel that seems likely to attract considerable attention, and not simply because he now has a major international publisher.

The first line of The Broken Cedar drops us right in it: “South Lebanon, 6 km from the Israeli border, 1994”. With “snakelike” streets and “pockmarked asphalt”, this place is, in many senses, close to the anus mundi. In the background, damaged Palestinians, Lebanese and Israelis stumble in rage, apathy and vague normality while peacekeepers, Irish and otherwise, try to stay sane and alive. In the foreground, one Khalil Abbas, erstwhile shopkeeper to UN troops, has a cancer “blackening his innards” which, while physically actual, also acts as a metaphor for the keeping of a fifteen-year-old secret about the brutal murder of an Irish soldier.

The first few chapters of twenty-eight are overly dependent on a standard building of anticipation around this secret. The unfamiliar terrain slows things down generally; but perseverance is rewarded as O’Driscoll, the son of the murdered soldier, arrives in the area and begins asking questions. Khalil, a “liberal Muslim”, emerges as a fully-rounded character, and the detailed account of his mental and physical trauma is nicely matched by the eventual eerie uncovering of the fate of O’Driscoll’s father.

Though precisely imagistic in places, the third-person narration is characteristically direct and literal: “If they walk to the water’s edge, let the sea lap at their toes and bend their torso forward they can see Palestine – a chalk coloured promontory with sea caves, where the Israelis have their border with Lebanon. They hold title deeds of lands that belonged to their fathers, worthless in the eyes of a conquering race”.

Given the ongoing middle-eastern situation, The Broken Cedar will generate a natural anthropological and geographical interest. Malone stops well short of exoticism however, and his on-the-ground experience of the milieu is reflected in his style. Many of his fictionalising devices are still patently in the developmental stage, but even at present his prose has qualities that would be welcome in more new Irish novelists: restraint, steadfastness, comprehensive adult empathy.

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