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The Rocky Road to Cork

Track & Field

by Cormac James

New Island, 192pp, £8.99.

The proof of the integrity of a work of literature very often lies less in what is included as material than in what is omitted. The authenticity of the Koran is evinced, Borges insisted, in the fact that it does not mention camels—they were so completely endemic that they were not assumed noteworthy. The point applies, or at least should apply, to historical fiction, especially when narrated by a period voice: While an omniscient narrator can freely detail a time-scope, if historically situated characters are to convince they must walk in a world where certain things are taken for granted, where a sense of the conventional emanates from what is not said.

Readers of Cormac James's first book, an historical novel set in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, will discover in it a curious absence of concentrated Irish history. With no attempt made at temporal scene setting, the opening of the story is potentially confusing; but the gradual emergence of the ceremonially elemental scenario appears deliberate. Three brothers, Jack, Dan, and the narrator, Jim, drive the remains of their brother from Dublin down to Mitchelstown for a quiet burial. Using a kind of on-the-road structure, organised simply by chapters titled "Night/Night-Dawn/Early Morning ...", James gets these three quickly on their journey and manoeuvres them into a sequence of tribulations—blown bridges, army patrols, hostile pub crowds, obstructive ferrymen and numerous roadblocks—all of which have a surprisingly vicious climax. The brothers also manage, as light relief, to fit in some picnicking, a spot of fishing, and a bullet-throwing match before finally, in a somewhat abrupt ending, getting down to solemn duty.

James's characterisations are not particularly nuanced and his plot is quite static in places, particularly when it involves playful Shakespearean dialogue, the extensive use of which is puzzling. While the main rhetorical feature of repetition also becomes monotonous, the rhythmic flow of James's intensely descriptive style is at times almost mesmeric: "And come summer, the hillsides all around would be gaudy with furze and rape and fields of cabbage lucent blue and striped and scored with ditches of fuschia and buddleia and montebretia, all those exotic refugees from the formal gardens of the local estates and former estates and all the colours would be bright and gaudy and new in the bright light."

While tighter editing could have contracted *Track and Field* into an even more powerful novella, there is no overwriting of history here; the turbulence of Ireland in the early twenties is certainly identified, but the retrospective view of the period as abnormal never intrudes on the sense that these characters are driving around in a land that is, to them, utterly familiar. Most importantly—and the involvement of a native publisher may be consequent in this—there is no selfconscious overdetermination of Irishness. Amidst the prose of younger Irish men, such quietness is virtually singular.