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Of Irish Interest

John Kenny

Protection

By Molly McCloskey

Penguin Ireland, 309pp, £10.99

In 1909 the Belfast-London literary journalist and editor, Robert Lynd, attempted a phlegmatic settlement of the matter of Irishness in his book *Home Life in Ireland*: “The truth is, there is a great deal of nonsense talked about the ‘real Irishman’ and the ‘typical Irishman’ - to mention two phrases common among thoughtless people. The ‘real Irishman’ is neither a Celt nor essentially a Catholic. He is merely a man who has had the good or bad fortune to be born in Ireland or of Irish parents, and who is interested in Ireland more than in any other country in the world”.

In a time when we are at ongoing pains to ease the clash of self-definitions that were his context, Lynd’s homogenisations - by implication more expansive than reductive - are suggestive for debate about what specifically Irish literature is or might continue to be. It is increasingly widely mooted that in the face of the three-point challenge of domestically disputed meanings of native ground, the social and linguistic uniformities imposed by or welcomed from the march of globalisation, and the recent influx of new ethnicities, we should, so to cast off the troublesome past and avoid the exhaustion of perpetual redefinition, simply abandon all application or adoption of Irishness and associated epithets.

Equally, there seems to be a gathering feeling, among our younger authors especially, that even though the useful marketability of Irish Fiction as a brand might not have waned, the expectations of the brand may be too restrictive, too disregarding of the right of the brand suppliers to expand into the grander domain of World Fiction. While that sought expansion will not necessarily confer greater artistic success or credibility, it attests to the mood of the times, almost as though national affiliation were a set of training wheels now to be cast off.

What is clear, nevertheless, is that, as in the common verse categories (Love Poetry, Nature Poetry, Political Poetry ...), any fiction writer can choose a country as a theme, not just as a setting or as a place to write out of as a place of birth or residence. To adapt Lynd’s imperative: we could choose to call an Irish book that which is more interested in Ireland (it being for the book itself to decide whether Ireland is merely a matter of geography) than any other country in the world. We might not want “Ireland Fiction” to stand categorically and so hurt our ears, but at least those who would have us uninterested in, let alone proud of, what might be culturally particular to us would thereby be dissuaded from too easy a scornfulness towards “Irish” when it is taken to refer to anything beyond a passport.

This is not to foist on Molly McCloskey a set of issues she has never courted, but it is to suggest that in both her particular position as an author and her themes in *Protection*, her first novel and a novel indubitably interested in Ireland, she may be a provocative focus of attention.

McCloskey was born in Philadelphia in 1964, grew up in Oregon, but has lived in Ireland, largely in Sligo and Dublin, since taking an intended short holiday here in

1989. She has written some excellent fiction in the form of short and long stories motivated, separately and in combination, by her cultural experiences: in *Solomon's Seal* (1997), stories from which won the RTE Francis MacManus Award and the Fish Competition, and in *The Beautiful Changes* (2002), perhaps the finest exhibition of her talents for the minute portrayal of the confusion and obsessiveness of single personalities, and the vagaries of intimacy in the family setting.

The more convincing aspects of *Protection* see these talents developed. The story concerns a middle-class contemporary Dublin family: Gillian, who runs a health farm in Meath and who has had an affair with a Vietnamese divorcee that she may rekindle; Damien, her husband, who manages a 1950s theme village called Kill somewhere in north Roscommon and who tends to fall in love easily with girls who work in Boots; and their daughter, Heather, who is busy being a confused teenager. While their treatment in separate chapters somewhat stultifies credible interaction, these three are well rounded in their individual relationships, particularly in Gillian's love for her Aunt Grace who reared her, Damien's exasperation with his mother, and Heather's encounters with boys.

The treatment of contemporary Ireland McCloskey builds round these people is ambitious. The big theme is memory. Aunt Grace is afflicted by Alzheimer's, and, following her death, Gillian begins to take memory-enhancing drugs to try to recapture her past and the parents she lost when a child. Damien's hopes that Kill will ease the epidemic of nostalgia degenerates into media ridicule accompanied by the associated topic of the potential trivialising of the Famine through commemoration. Her parents's respective utopian projects are paralleled by Heather's obsession with a futuristic series on the "Dystopia Channel", detailed descriptions of which concern the implantation of CCTV-like computers in people's heads so they can be eased of the burden of remembrance.

With occasional comedy, McCloskey is serious in all these aligned themes, but there are potential problems. Despite its careful contemporariness (email threads, mobile phones), the novel's version of rural tourism (complete with truly awful cover design) seems dated, and, as frequently happens in current Irish fiction, an actual and complex country gets lost somewhere between a realistic depiction of modern Dublin and a parody (even if self-consciously so) of the west. The novel runs somewhat out of ideas in the end, though this may be an intentional aspect of McCloskey's appreciable refusal to provide any clear interpretive code or moral standpoint on either her characters or her version of Ireland.

To her American and Irish dimensions, McCloskey is adding experience of Kosovo where she currently spends half her time with her partner who works there. Whatever one's carps for the moment, *Protection* is overall a thoughtful attempt at comprehending our current state, and hopefully she will on further occasion want to write about Ireland more than any of her older or newer places.

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