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# A Corner Forever Ireland

**John Kenny**

## **A Long Long Way**

By Sebastian Barry

Faber & Faber

292pp. £12.99

“The Song They Sing as They March Along” proclaimed the cover of one of its many booklet versions, a million of which were sold in 1914 alone. O’Casey marches the Dublin Fusiliers out of act one of *The Plough and the Stars* to its chorus. With the resonance that even a musical cliché can have when paused over, the yearning assonance of *It’s a Long Way to Tipperary* has now been organically borrowed by Sebastian Barry for the title of a surprisingly plangent novel about the Irish dimension of the Great War.

It will be no surprise to anyone who has read a Barry novel or seen one of his more numerous plays to find him writing fictionalised history and allying himself with the “growing shelf of pioneering works on the First World War and Ireland” he lists at the back of this new novel. As he allowed in the preface to *Plays I* (1997), Barry’s intention has never been to immerse himself in the historical archives but, instead, to “try and guess the shape of things in the ordinary dark.” This guesswork has mainly emanated from the private histories of a number of Barry’s own ancestors, and his involved sense of urgency is appreciable: “What I have to do to tell a story is accept in my mind that these people survive in me somewhere, in a corner of the brain, in the heart, wherever, and somehow or other release their stories.” Those who saw Donal McCann in the first performances of Barry’s signature play, *The Steward of Christendom*, in 1995 still testify to the singular power of a character based on the author’s great-grandfather, who was a superintendent with the Dublin Metropolitan Police.

At face value, the wider discursive context in which Barry sets his ongoing project is equally creditable: “There were people in the past who are not spoken about because the truth about them cannot be admitted to ... A silence grew up around them. So we have a censored past, censored individuals, and a country whose history is erased.”

Much of the resultant work, however, amounts merely to in-service reading for a fairly standardised brand of revisionism.

The sententiousness of Barry’s concept of historical revision is revealed in the epigraph, from Revelations, to his most celebrated novel to date, *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998), which bears close comparison with this new endeavour: “*And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.*” In his rewriting of the Irish (nationalist) book of life Barry has averred that “a game is played with our history and our society, of cops and robbers, goodies and baddies. But there is no such thing”. His own heroic/anti-heroic antinomies, however, have been only simplistic inversions. In *Eneas*, for just one standard example, great care is taken to account for the Black and Tans as men simply damaged into ruthlessness by the

Great War, while the same favour is not granted the equally ruthless Republicans fighting back.

The political transparency of Barry's writing, at its worst in the weak dramatic farce that was *Hinterland* (2002), disables any potential suasive force it might have amongst those who conceivably need convincing. This need have nothing to do with contrary ideologies; it is simply that such *parti pris* work recommends itself less to those in search of balanced new stories than to those readers, already open-armed, who like to have their revisionist sensibilities cuddled. Because it is more mature, more modulated, more quietly challenging than any of his fiction heretofore, *A Long Long Way* therefore deserves to win for Barry a renewed attention even amongst readers who may before have folded their arms and turned away.

As is already Barry's pattern, this new tale of Willie Dunne, a young volunteer with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in 1914, is intermeshed with previous work. Willie is the son of Thomas Dunne of *The Steward* and brother of the eponymous narrator of *Annie Dunne* (2002). An undulating third-person narrative initially takes Willie quickly from the early stages of youth, family, and romantic experience with his slum-dweller love, Gretta, through military training and over to Flanders.

Barry's prose, like his drama, often depends too much on lyricism at the expense of driving action, and the pace slows intermittently as the mixed motives (a "deep, dark maze of intentions") of Irish volunteers are thematically worked through, but the cast of support characters and the developing frantic scenes of battle, especially the first experiences of gas warfare and forays into no-man's land, are brilliantly devised. For a writer who has also worked in poetry, affective evocation is as crucial as statement and Barry is unafraid to risk sentimentality, as in the beautiful scene where Willie, on his first furlough, is deloused and washed by his father.

It is difficult to separate Barry's wish, deeply evident in all his work, for there to be goodness and redemption in the world from his tendency to politically sanctify his mouthpieces. A chief strategy has been to prevent the heightened innocence of his heroes being sullied, and thus ideologically complicated, by the dirt of volitional experience; things tend to happen *to* - rather than by or because of - his usually guileless principals; in Barry's world it seems history, not the individual, is always to blame. Willie Dunne is typical to some degree, but by the time he is taken to the far side of direct involvement in the Easter Rising, of a decimated regiment, of destroyed relationships with Gretta and his father, of sheer physical pain and the speechless horror of the trenches, his complex feeling of homelessness is plainly believable and he has earned the elegiac inscriptive ending Barry grants him.

Prior to *A Long Long Way* Barry had frequently failed to convince with his themes and styles, with his leading characters who frequently fell under the weight of their ideological equipage. Here, in a lighter combination of personal motivation with considered artistic execution, he succeeds on almost all fronts.

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