

*Irish Nocturnes.* By Chris Arthur. Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 1999. xxi + 243 pp. \$14.99, paper.

*Irish Willow.* By Chris Arthur. Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 2002. xvi + 234 pp. \$19.95, paper.

*Irish Haiku.* By Chris Arthur. Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 2005. xxiv + 234 pp. \$20.00, paper.

If asked to name an Irish poet, novelist, or playwright, most literary people could respond quickly: Yeats, or Joyce, or Synge would come to mind. But an Irish essayist? Few outside Ireland could name Hubert Butler, for example. Perhaps the problem is partly the lower rank accorded to the essay in the hierarchy of genres (even though it may be rising again under the guise of "creative non-fiction"). But now Chris Arthur's recently completed "Irish trilogy" of essay collections should not only put him on the map as *the* contemporary Irish essayist, but also raise general interest in the possibilities of the essay form for our time.

Arthur is more specifically a writer of Northern Ireland. In two of the three volumes, each piece is preceded by a map of Ireland with circles around the place-names of its settings. But those names are with a few exceptions in the "wee six" counties still in the U.K. (plus the immediately adjacent county of Donegal). This seems to suggest a wish to identify with the whole island of Ireland, even though the experiences narrated are mostly in Ulster. Arthur, despite his Northern Protestant heritage, is concerned throughout to avoid self-definition as "British": hence "Irish" appears in all three titles of the trilogy. But Arthur tells us that ironically he only fully identified as Irish rather than British once he had moved to Britain. Born in 1955, he saw the onset of the "Troubles" from 1969 onwards, and, like many young Protestants, left Northern Ireland to attend university on "the Mainland" and did not return. After completing his education in Scotland, he moved to Wales, where he has taught Religious Studies at Lampeter since 1989. But very little in the trilogy concerns Scotland or Wales: in a sense Arthur is an exile, but is still close enough for regular visits across the Irish Sea to what he belatedly came to see as his homeland.

Arthur frequently touches on the "tragic divide" which governs the recent image of Northern Ireland, while regretting that this divide

overshadows the "normal" life of the Province, as well as its natural beauty. But it is never the only subject of any of his essays, and rarely the main one. He happens across this social fault line accidentally, while engaged in some other activity or inquiry. For example, Arthur describes setting off to meet a friend for a day's hiking in the Mourne Mountains. But this is no ordinary summer day. It happens to be July 12<sup>th</sup> (the "glorious Twelfth"), and the friend's house is almost inaccessible because the whole village is packed with Protestant marchers and their supporters. Arthur is forced to actually join the march, despite his incongruous hiking gear, in order to reach his destination. As he tries to work his way forward through the marchers, he is sternly told to keep in step. The vignette perfectly illustrates the plight of an individualist out of step with the rituals of his community.

Rejecting the ethnic, political and religious sectarianism both of his own Protestant "tribe," and of its mirror image on the other side of the "divide," from early in his life Arthur looked elsewhere for a more congenial sense of identity. He transcends the narrow "us and them" psychology of the sectarian mind for a more tolerant outlook, able to see both sides of a conflict and beyond it altogether. But though Arthur acknowledges that the advent of modernity (secular, liberal, individualistic, materialistic) helps to alleviate traditional hostilities, the process also entails a loss of heritage, a loss of a sense of belonging. This situation presents Arthur with the central question of his essays: how can a disaffiliated individual create a personal heritage, a personal tradition, a personal memory, to replace the collective heritage, tradition and memory that has been lost or rejected? How can an individual make what Arthur finely calls "an inner homeland"?

With regard to religion, the obvious way to move beyond the Catholic/Protestant divide is to move beyond Christianity altogether. The most prominent of the other religions referred to in Arthur's writing is Buddhism, especially its theme of the impermanence of all beings. Paradoxically, an individualist (most essayists are that) turns to a world view which emphasizes the transience and insubstantiality of the self. Though Christianity is in some ways a more individualistic faith than Buddhism (it proclaims the survival of the individual soul in an afterlife, for example), in its sectarian form in Ireland it has come to define collective identities (us and them) which tend to submerge, or at least limit, individual ones. They also limit

the sense of kinship to what lies outside the tribe: thus Arthur's second Buddhist theme is the doctrine of the interdependence of all beings. He complains that the religion he grew up with failed to evoke a sense of wonder at the universe in the way that Buddhist vision of infinite connexity does.

Another way to transcend the "divide" is through Nature. Growing up, Arthur had a relationship to his local landscape as intense as Wordsworth's. In one essay he describes Brookfield, a particular area he came to know intimately as a boy. It is a "townland," an evocative (and paradoxical-sounding) Irish term for an area recognized as distinct in the locality, though without legal significance or precise geographical definition. The traditional names of these townlands are falling into disuse, and often only the older residents know "these intimate semi-secret namings." In Brookfield, Arthur came to know the sights and sounds, smells and tastes, of the multifarious natural life.

Here, too, he experienced something like a conversion in his attitude to Nature. As a collector of birds-eggs, he knew how to "blow" them, that is by making a small needle-hole at each end and blowing through one to force the contents out through the other. Once, unable to complete this operation, he shatters the egg to find a fully formed chick, dying on the tip of his needle. From now on, respect for natural life will be a key value for him. But society moves in the opposite direction: when he returns to Brookfield many years later, the lake is clogged with algae, a litter-strewn path leads right round it, and a new car park is full of vehicles. "Nearly everything living had vanished."

Though Arthur often revisits scenes of his youth, he never finds them unchanged, so it is mainly in his memory that he maps "the topography of [his] individual history." This map differs markedly from the twin collective histories which border the "divide." Its shrines and sites are different from those commemorating Ulster's famous sieges and battles. And this personal memory of the landscape is matched by a personal memory of passages drawn from books. Like Nature, literature offers an effective, if temporary, escape from family and clan. Fearful of drowning on a storm-tossed voyage from Norway to Britain, Arthur finds comfort in quotations from many sources which have somehow stuck in his mind, and which make up a kind of personal sacred text.

Arthur asks why, in rejecting organized religion, an individual should also have to renounce ritual and symbol. Why not create a personal religious practice? In exploring this possibility, he draws more on animistic religions than on Buddhism, using terms like "totem" and "talisman" for the mementos he has collected. His essays become, in his metaphor, nests for significance, "receptacles in which meaning may be laid, nurtured, and hatched." Perhaps the most moving example is in "Swan Song," an essay on the stillbirth of his infant son. Arthur gave him an unsatisfying "traditional" funeral—"a small white coffin, black hearse, prayers offered to a god I don't believe in by a minister of a church to which I don't belong." Only later, in a museum exhibition on "Early Ireland," did the bereaved father find a valid "talisman" for his son's death: the image of a buried infant laid on a swan's wing. Though he cannot (and could not have) carried out this practice literally, it gives him the inspiration for a ritual: when visiting his son's Scottish grave, he plants a feather which he has chanced on while walking and kept for this purpose, knowing it will soon blow away again. He connects this ritual with the ancient Egyptian concept of *Maat* (roughly meaning the natural order), which is symbolized by a feather. At death, a person's heart was weighed against this feather to see how well he had upheld *Maat* in his life.

Arthur's aim in his essays is to move from immediacy to immensity, from the vivid concrete particulars of an incident, an object, or a sight, to the most universal ideas: the human condition, the infinity of space and time, the complexity and connexity of the world. The essays usually involve two or three different themes, and the themes and variations on them are composed, like a piece of music, into numbered movements. His essays try to weave the fragments of experience (often described as "shards" or "splinters"), along with the reflections they suggest, into temporary wholeness. His epigraph could well be Forster's "only connect," which was also aimed at overcoming "us-and-them" thinking. Though all the essays are to various degrees autobiographical, they are not self-pre-occupied: there are many vivid character sketches of, for example, his older relatives, like a great-aunt whose "rigorous order" consisted of "family, farm, tradition," and of people encountered only for brief periods, like a panic-stricken young terrorist overheard in a bookshop.

Arthur has had the wisdom to see that the personal essay is, despite its "minor" status in relation to poetry, drama and fiction, exactly the right vehicle for the investigations he wants to undertake into the complexities of personal, social and religious identity. In an intellectual climate which usually treats meaning as "socially constructed," it is refreshing to see it being created by what Arthur calls "a richly textured individuality." In this he shows himself a worthy inheritor of the tradition of Montaigne.

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