Secret gardens: unearthing the truth in Patrick O’Keeffe’s *The Hill Road*

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The publication of Patrick O’Keeffe’s 2005 collection of four novellas, *The Hill Road*, marked the arrival of a significant new voice in Irish fiction. Born in Ireland in 1963, O’Keeffe grew up on a dairy farm in Limerick near the Tipperary border. At the age of twenty-three he emigrated to the United States, but only became legally resident there in 1989, after winning his green card in a lottery. His stories clearly reflect his own diasporic status, since his characters are frequently haunted by the culture they cannot quite leave behind. While the recurring motifs of buried secrets in an occluded past, painful revelations or half-revelations and thwarted desires hardly rank as new in Irish literary tradition, O’Keeffe’s distinctiveness lies in his chronicling of the economic, cultural and spiritual condition of rural Ireland in the decades preceding the 1990s boom.

Only one of the novellas, ‘That’s Our Name’, was published prior to the publication of *The Hill Road*.¹ That all four eventually comprised one volume is fitting. Valuable as individual pieces of fiction, they gain substantial power and currency by adjoining one another. What unifies them are their settings in and around the fictional town of Kilroan, Tipperary,² and their unique treatments of time. O’Keeffe’s narratives constantly intercut between time present – various decades in the latter half of the twentieth century – and times past. Secrets of the most heartrending, terrible and sometimes gruesome kinds are repeatedly unearthed in these novellas, yet significantly many disclosures turn out on closer inspection to be partial and incomplete. As a result, his narrators, like his readers, are left at once feeling knowledgeable, yet in some strange way bereft.

By providing a detailed, analytical reading of two of the novellas, ‘The Hill Road’ and ‘The Postman’s Cottage’, this chapter will seek to demonstrate O’Keeffe’s concerns and status as an emergent artist. In the title novella, truths gradually emerge about a famous local character, Albert Cagney, who had served as a soldier during the Great War. While

it is tempting to read this damaged casualty as emblematic of *many* generations of the lost and hurt, his presence in O’Keeffe’s fiction is a sign of what has been only a very recent public recognition in Ireland of the contribution Irish soldiers made during World War I.³ Through the attention it pays to Cagney’s fate, O’Keeffe’s novella, like Sebastian Barry’s novel, *A Long, Long Way*, participates in an important, more inclusive interpretation of Irish history.

The veteran’s story is conveyed by O’Keeffe in non-linear fashion, pieced together by a first-person narrator–investigator, Jack Carmody. The fact that the boy’s movement towards maturity is strategically advanced through his relationship with two female characters, his mother and his aunt, is of considerable significance, reflecting as it does Ireland’s changing gender politics since the mid-1980s. Jack is himself meticulous in his designation of dates, first recalling family life in Kilroan in the late 1960s, before the arrival even of black-and-white television, when evenings revolved around simple meals, the recitation of the Rosary, listening to the wireless and endless tales about Albert Cagney’s return. Jack recalls the local, communal rituals, Sunday Mass and the gatherings at Powers’ public house by the men of the neighborhood, and then – most importantly – the transformative effect of a summer spent with his maiden aunt on Conway’s hill.

It is during that seminal visit that he learns of his aunt’s intimacy with and loss of Albert. Boosted by drink, Mary counsels Jack – as his dying mother later will – to make the *right* choice, which is to leave home in order to achieve success. Mary’s and his mother’s views, of course, typify those held in rural Ireland in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and lead directly to Jack’s becoming the first family exile. Albert Cagney, by contrast, made a *wrong* choice, persuaded by John Redmond’s⁴ claims that fighting for the British Empire would be the best way of enabling Ireland to achieve her independence. In what will prove to be a recurring feature in *The Hill Road*, the initial impetus for departure comes from the women in the family, a phenomenon which suggests how much O’Keeffe has drawn from the work of John McGahern.⁵

It is through his aunt’s whiskey-fuelled, yet apparently faultless, memory that the reader learns of what might now be termed Albert’s post-traumatic stress disorder,⁶ a condition brought on by his wartime experiences. Harried by nightmares, Albert could no longer function as he did before the war. After discovering that he has made a young girl pregnant, Mary rejects him, unable to accept his breaking of traditional religious and social codes. It is only on his last night at Conway’s hill, however, that Jack learns the extent of the tragedy – that Albert had committed suicide. In order to ensure that he received a proper

Catholic burial, local men concocted a story about him being killed by the Black and Tans. A drunken neighbour subsequently reveals this to Mary, unaware that she already knew the truth. She makes Jack promise never to divulge a word of this at home.⁷

O'Keeffe then shifts the narrative forward once more, to 1983 and Jack's mother's deathbed. She startles him with an account of how another local man had pined for her, had tried to woo her away from Jack's father, and had lived to lament his failure. Within days, Jack's mother is dead, and we are left wondering whether her final memories were true or merely the fantasies of a drifting mind. Because of a jarring ellipsis, he, and we, will never know. Particularly vivid at the novella's close are the series of epiphanic moments that Jack experiences. A neo-sophisticate Dubliner now, Jack has come to look down on the old ways at his mother's wake:

She was gone. Her blood was. And all this pageantry. To have to endure it. Just so that others can have a bit of a get-together. Celebrate the life of the dead you or they don't know a thing about. Their poor mother. Not long after their father. Oh, to be alone! To be alone and far from all of them! Back in my flat in Dublin and dancing on a Saturday night after work, pissed and holding a girl against a wall to the pounding music, and my mickey filled with warm blood. My posters of Bob Dylan and The Smiths above my single bed.⁸

Minutes later Jack attempts a farewell to his parents' world and muses that after death:

There was only the clay; that's all we all are. I raised my hand and waved good-bye to the cows. I then said good-bye to the fields and the trees. This was Nora Carmody's world. She and Mike Carmody made it. Adam and Eve Carmody. The Easter Rising. The Civil War. The six counties. The Irish Republic. The Troubles. The small farmer. Put up the ditches and made the gaps and plowed the fields, milked the cows and had their children, listened to the priests and DeValera and those who came after him, praying like they were the chosen ones. (pp. 97–8)

However, closing the novella, Jack discovers that it is not so easy to extricate himself from his ancestral world:

I saw myself wandering down a street in London and a street in New York, staring at things and the people going by. I wasn't thinking about Dan selling Conway's hill, or that my aunt's cottage had fallen to ruin, as she had predicted and, like Albert and Mr. Cagney's cottage, that it would become a mound of stones and weeds. I thought about my sisters, in an airplane over the Irish Sea, my brothers walking, alone, through a field behind our house, and I saw clearly the petals on the rhododendrons flickering like flames in the bright sunshine of a spring Sunday morning,

feeling safe then, with my mother's warm body beside me, as we made our way home, and I heard my aunt singing: How lucky I was that day I walked through the evergreen trees, to have heard her voice; the single pink rosebush growing through the flagstones and clinging to the gable end of the whitewashed cottage; the land my father was born and raised on. (pp. 98–9)

The passage is a beautiful exile's lament, one reminiscent of the ending of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, in which the narrator's memories are fittingly accompanied by the fading of lights, inception of soft music, and gentle swaying of the characters onstage: 'As Michael begins to speak the stage is lit in a very soft, golden light so that the tableau we see is almost, but not quite, in a haze'.⁹ Michael's words are a prescient fore-runner to Jack's:

In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. In that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties. It drifts in from somewhere far away – a mirage of sound – a dream music that is both heard and imagined; that seems to be both itself and its own echo; a sound so alluring and so mesmeric that the afternoon is bewitched, maybe haunted, by it . . . When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. (p. 71)

Jack Carmody's past, at home, and the more distant past, inherited from his family and his community, are what make him what he is. He finds that time's secrets, whether revealed or not, can neither be escaped nor occluded nor trivialised. What Anna McMullan has written of Friel's Michael could be equally applied to Jack: 'Authority is simultaneously exercised and disavowed, as the narrator himself struggles between analytical detachment and emotional response'.¹⁰

Perhaps the strongest piece in O'Keeffe's collection is 'The Postman's Cottage', a masterful conjoining of absorbing plot, brilliant characterisation and efficacious narrative strategy. Told by a third-person narrator, the novella focuses on the story of Kate Welsh Dillon, and begins with a finely wrought paragraph evoking a past time:

Every third or fourth Friday, up till thirty or forty years ago, which is long before milking machines were even heard of, and places not even too far in from the road still didn't have electricity, there used to be autumn Fairs in the village of Pallas. After morning milking, the farmers who were selling would gather their heifers and bullocks and hunt them down the fields, along the byroads and the main road to the square in Pallas. For miles around you could hear the cattle lowing along the roads, although louder than them were the shouts of the farmers themselves swinging at and hitting the often restless beasts with their ash sticks. (p. 153)

The opening is pastoral, peaceful, warm, seductive even in its evocation. In time-present, the 1980s, the widowed Kate is travelling from Dublin, where she has been visiting her only son, back home to the house her husband, Tom Dillon had inherited, the Postman's Cottage. Serendipitously, on the train Kate meets Timmy, nephew of the late Eoin O'Rourke. It transpires that long ago Eoin had sold five bullocks for a grand price at a Pallas Fair and then disappeared; a suicide note was found with his belongings, but the sale money was gone. An investigation had been conducted, which concluded that he may have simply become drunken and fallen somewhere into a trench. Gallows humour is deployed in depicting the incompetence of the local police officer:

He halted all searches at the end of the week and he announced in the barracks he now definitely believed young O'Rourke did run mad, screaming, splashing, and laughing, with the money in hand, into the bog, where the fierce waters of the Main Trench brought him to the Shannon and his body was dragged out like a coffin ship itself into the miserable and unforgiving Atlantic Ocean. (pp. 162–3)

On Kate's train journey, meanwhile, matters darken. The reader learns just how detached Christy, her son, had been in Dublin, and that he is about to set off for an engineering job in Qatar. Like Davie Conlon in *The Hill Road's* second novella ('Her Black Mantilla'), Christy's travels will take him to an alternative space infused with 'eastern' mystique, but which equally represents a new form of transnational mobility that differs markedly from previous patterns of emigration.¹¹ Kate opens up to the young stranger, Timmy, gradually discovering his kinship to the lost Eoin. The O'Rourkes, Timmy's family, had told him that Uncle Eoin had left for America and never contacted them again. Kate does not disabuse him, but she does tell him that she and Eoin 'walked out once or twice' (p. 179).¹² The reader becomes privy, however, to deeper disclosures, that Kate and Eoin had loved each other, but that her family opposed the match. Suddenly introspective, Timmy announces, as they arrive in Kilroan, that 'Home never is what you thought it was in the first place' (p. 186), a maxim that applies to all of *The Hill Road* tales.¹³

Characteristically, O'Keeffe releases morsels of information, but withholds total, forthright disclosure. In yet another flashback, it is revealed how, when her son was a baby, Kate had found money under a floorboard. Obviously lying, her husband suggested that his own father must have hidden it long ago. On the night of Eoin's disappearance, all those years ago, Kate had waited, as arranged, for her sometime beau, Tom. When he arrived, she sees that his clothes and boots are drenched and muddy, and his bicycle broken:

He then began to cry. He tottered before her, pulled her to him, and kissed her fervently on the face and mouth, his two mucky hands clutching her head and soiling her scarf. She finally got his hand off her head and persuaded him to sit on the graveyard wall. . . . She rubbed his hands in hers, in an attempt to warm him, but he squeezed her hands tightly and cried loudly, I love you Katie. You're mine, Katie, and no one else's, now and forever, you'll never need no-one else. (pp. 196–7)

Kate envisions a terrifying picture of Eoin's murder and its concealment: 'A young man, a good-natured boy, who must have cried and cried not to die like that in the dark, without his mother, calling against that beaten, cruel, and bloody land, and not a soul there to help him. Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus' (p. 197).¹⁴ Once more, O'Keeffe exposes a hidden crime, and, by means of great observational and analytical skill, carries us deeply into the consciousness of the tale's central character, Kate. In the words of Ada Calhoun, 'O'Keeffe conveys the pain that comes from standing over the corpse of a loved one, as well as the greater suffering that comes when there's no body over which to stand'.¹⁵

What characterises the novellas in *The Hill Road* is their emphasis on the masking of history, and on moments of submerged violence. *The Hill Road* exemplifies Eve Patten's contentions about contemporary Irish fiction:

For the most part, it remained formally conservative: beyond a prevalent social realism, its chief stylistic hallmark was a neo-Gothic idiom which signaled a haunted or traumatized Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche.¹⁶

Gerry Smyth's comment that 'Pastoralism failed to acknowledge both the complexity and the banality of Irish rural life' is certainly one which contemporary writers like O'Keeffe disprove.¹⁷ In O'Keeffe's novellas, rural Ireland's apparent day-to-day banality belies intense actual complexity. Time's passage heals, at best, very little, and memory refuses to remain submerged. Perhaps like his characters and fellow exiles, O'Keeffe recognises how tied he remains to his place of origin, remembering that 'I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed / The woven figure cannot undo its thread'.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 'That's Our Name', in slightly different form, was published as 'Looby's Hill' in *DoubleTake* (winter 2001).
- 2 A real Kilroan parish exists in Cork, and the real Kilroan Bay is off the Scottish coast.

- 3 Indeed, the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Messines in Flanders only joined the gallery of other European Great War monuments in November 1998. In a characteristically pointed yet eloquent speech, President Mary McAleese paid tribute to the soldiers while reminding her listeners of how the battles of World War I were concurrent with the struggle for independence in Ireland. Standing alongside the current British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, at the park's unveiling, President McAleese said: 'Today's ceremony at the Peace Park was not just another journey down a well-travelled path. For much of the past eighty years, the very idea of such a ceremony would probably have been unthinkable. Those whom we commemorate here were doubly tragic. They fell victim to a war against oppression in Europe. Their memory too fell victim to a war for independence at home in Ireland. . . . The Peace Park does not invite us to forget the past but to remember it differently. We are asked to look with sorrow and respect on the memory of our countrymen who died with such courage far from the common homeland they loved deeply. . . . These too are Ireland's children as those who fought for her independence are her children, and those who fought against each other in our country's civil war – and of course the dead of recent decades': Mary McAleese, 'Speeches: Messines Peace Tower, Belgium', Irish President's Website, 11 November 1998, www.president.ie (accessed 2 August 2007). (Note: The acknowledgments to Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way* cites ten titles on Ireland and the Great War, eight of them published since 1995.)
- 4 John Redmond (1856–1918) was the Nationalist Party Leader at the outbreak of World War I.
- 5 There are strong resemblances between Aunt Mary and Mrs Carmody and McGahern's decisive feminine characters in *Amongst Women*. In that novel, Rose, Moran's second wife, at first seems to have a secondary role, but ultimately emerges as a person of integral importance and influence. For a discussion of her character, see Robert F. Garratt, 'John McGahern's *Amongst Women*: Representation, Memory, and Trauma', *Irish University Review* 35/1 (spring/summer 2005): pp. 121–35.
- 6 For an account of this condition, see the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Public Education website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthproblems/posttraumaticstressdisorder/posttraumaticstressdisorder.aspx (accessed 13 December 2006).
- 7 Buried secrets abound in Irish literature and, for that matter, Irish history. In his parleying with secret pasts, O'Keeffe is undoubtedly indebted to Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996; New York: Knopf, 1997), discussed earlier in this volume by Stephen Regan. See also below, end-note 14.
- 8 Patrick O'Keeffe, *The Hill Road* (2005; New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 96. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 9 Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber, 1998), p. 70. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

- 10 Anna McMullan, “‘In touch with some otherness’: Gender, Authority and the Body in *Dancing at Lughnasa*”, *Irish University Review*, 29/1 (spring/summer 1999), p. 99.
- 11 In his depiction of the eastbound Christy, soon to be representative of a new Irish diaspora, O’Keeffe deftly alludes to Joyce’s stifled, eastern-yearning boy narrator in ‘Araby’.
- 12 In Kate one senses the shadow of Gretta Conroy remembering Michael Furey in Joyce’s ‘The Dead’.
- 13 I am compelled to remember here the words of the American poet Robert Frost in ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, ll. 122–3: ‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in’. Many of O’Keeffe’s characters would be forced to disagree.
- 14 It is illuminating to compare O’Keeffe’s novella at this point with Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*. When Deane’s narrator’s mother realises that her father, an IRA leader, had her husband’s brother Eddie killed as a traitor back in 1922, she cries, ‘Eddie, dear God Eddie. This will kill us all’ (p. 123). *Reading*’s hermeneutics lie far deeper: Eddie was innocent; the mother’s old boyfriend, McIlhenny, was the actual traitor who set Eddie up for execution. McIlhenny’s treachery was eventually discovered, and his life was obviously not worth a farthing. But the mother, although jilted by McIlhenny in favour of her own sister, tipped him off, and he escaped to Chicago. Ironically, akin to Timmy O’Rourke’s belief that his Uncle Eoin is alive in America, fabrications of sightings of Eddie in Chicago and in Melbourne passed around Derry through the years, but the reader is certain of his death. The tangled web of betrayals, deceits, and secrets makes for a tortuous relationship between Deane’s inquisitive narrator and his agonised mother. O’Keeffe has flipped the situation somewhat: a formidable woman again holds secrets that haunt her and discovers new ones, but Kate’s son is gone at the time of her discovery, and he was never too interested in his mother in the first place. For further discussion of *Reading*’s concealments and revelations, see Vivian Valvano Lynch, ‘Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* yields “a door into the light”’, *Working Papers in Irish Studies*, 3 (2000), pp. 16–22.
- 15 Ada Calhoun, ‘Fiction Chronicle’, *New York Times*, 14 August 2005.
- 16 Eve Patten, ‘Contemporary Irish Fiction’, in John Wilson Foster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 259.
- 17 Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 60.
- 18 Louis MacNeice, ‘Valediction’, *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (1966; London: Faber, 1979), p. 53.