

# Styx and Stones

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Christopher Koch

*The Many-Coloured Land: A Return to Ireland*

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THERE ARE SOME enticing vignettes in Christopher Koch's new travel memoir. One of them concerns a period in 1961, soon after publication of his first novel, during which Koch had a fellowship at Stanford University in California. The fellowship involved attending a 'writing class', an idea for which Koch felt some disdain and, judging by his need to clap the activity in inverted commas, perhaps still does. The tutor was Frank O'Connor, the Irishman who had written a biography of Michael Collins and who became deservedly renowned as an author of short fiction. O'Connor believed a writer had to tell a story. He said that a writer had to be like the bloke in a pub who grabbed somebody by their lapels and made them listen. Some of his students thought otherwise. It was the 1960s. They wanted to be artists, not craftsmen. Koch has the grace to mock this former arrogance. Nevertheless, his subsequent fiction suggests that, if he failed to agree with O'Connor at the time, he certainly does now. His readers have had ample cause to be grateful for that.

It is harder, however, to work out what story Koch wants to tell in this book about Ireland and the Irish. It starts with an investigation of Koch's Irish ancestry. On one side of his family, he is descended from a member of the Protestant ascendancy, Jane Devereux, who emigrated to Tasmania as a free settler when her family had fallen on difficult times. Devereux is the name Koch gave to the central character in his most recent novel, *Out of Ireland*. But *that* Devereux was a convict, a political activist who was transported to Tasmania. *The Many-Coloured Land* articulates the broader political context in which the fictional Robert Devereux was a player, deftly sketching two hundred years of Irish political tension.

In reality, it was the other side of Koch's family that bore 'the stain'. His grandmother's grandmother, Margaret O'Meara, was transported to Tasmania in 1845 for theft. O'Meara was seldom discussed in the Koch family. Ironically, she left many more marks in official records than her free counterparts, and turns out to be easier to bring to book. In spite of this, Koch is left to do some intelligent guesswork about why she married a much older man, why she left him, why she returned to him and why a women's prison may, for her, almost have been a place of refuge. Koch brings the loose ends of her story together with compassion. He then slides

into a recollection of travelling with O'Meara's granddaughter on a bus in 1942 when he was ten years old and Australia was under threat of invasion. His grandmother's sympathies, even in that emergency, were not with the British. Koch provides recollections of his schooling at the hands of the Christian Brothers, whose origins were in Ireland, and some memories of a brief visit to Ireland in 1956. Eventually, the book gives itself over to an account of a trip Koch made to Ireland two or three years ago with his friend Brian Mooney, a folk musician.

All this material is entertaining. Some of it is merely conventional: there is much discussion of how Ireland has 'changed', many descriptions of accommodation and pubs, and deep resentment about the high cost of car rental. Certain accounts are funny. Mooney is not one for travelling light and, however many times you've seen it before, the spectacle of a tourist with too much luggage is always winning. Some aspects, such as a description of a shopping stopover in Dubai, seem superfluous. Other material goes deeper. Koch manages to find the eighteenth-century house 'Deerpark', which the Devereux family had to relinquish. It still stands, but in ruins. He also finds Tim Pat Coogan, another biographer of Michael Collins and a man steeped in the history of Sinn Fein and the IRA. Coogan's hospitality is warm. But his company is uncomfortable. He invites sympathy for figures it feels more natural to revile.

If *The Many-Coloured Land* has a story of its own, I suspect it is one about violence and its opposite, whatever that might be. There is frequent acknowledgment that the history of Ireland has many bloody chapters. But, in Koch's telling, incidents of violence are nearly always balanced by some insight into the nature of creativity, beauty or hope. Even the landscape features in this way. Stones are important in this book: they make up the landscape of Connemara, a part of Ireland whose barrenness has kept tourists at bay. Stones help create famine and hence engender emigration. They also build penal settlements, and towers. Students at the Christian Brothers', where fighting is encouraged, throw stones at each other. The stucco has fallen away from the façade of 'Deerpark', exposing the stonework, a sight that occasions a pang of grief.

By the same token, Koch also finds 'the country of the spirit'. Near a town 'of solid stone houses', past a limestone slope 'bare as some alien desert ridge', he and Mooney discover a fairy fort. Faery has long been of interest to Koch. It features in *The Doubleman*. Here, it provides a conceptual keystone to the book:

The idea of Faery has become absurd: an infantile whimsy, of little interest even to the juveniles of the computer age who are preoccupied instead by pseudo-legendary warriors, fighting and maiming in those screen-bound computer games ... Legend, exploited and reinvented in the animation studios of Hollywood

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and Tokyo, is supremely fashionable and makes money. But not Faery; not those spirits in trees and streams and hills that the Greeks knew ... Perhaps this is because the interest in Faery was also bound up with Beauty; and Beauty in the Platonic sense — as an archetypal Form, as an absolute and perfect essence — has lately been driven into the street and mocked, and left to wither.

Koch is gently persuasive on this point. Yet what he says here is strangely at odds with one of the most sour lines in the book, albeit one that looks like a throwaway remark. He speaks of contemporary Catholic religious education as 'today's squalid efforts to make the Redeemer into a buddy'. One senses in that remark the kind of reaction to the Catholic revival of the 1970s that is becoming commonplace. That reaction tends to forget the disabling anti-intellectualism of earlier Catholic religious education, one that wanted to produce only warriors. This might be extrapolating too far from what Koch is saying. It is striking, however, that he is sensitive to attempts to mock Faery and yet, at the same time, prepared to mock a kind of Catholicism that tries to enable precisely the experience of the world of the spirit that he and his buddy find so significant: an unsettling sense that you can be more alone in a crowded pub than you can be in solitude.