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“Leenane, a Lovely Part of the World”

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There’s a famous song written by an Irish emigrant which pictures sitting ‘beside a turf fire in the cabin’ to ‘see the sun go down on Galway Bay’. Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* also transports us imaginatively to that region on the Western seaboard of Ireland, to Connemara, the wildest part, bounded by the Atlantic. It’s rough, rocky terrain, divided into small fields by dry stone walls – the same stones painstakingly gathered from fields often fertilised by laboriously cart-drawn seaweed. It’s spectacularly picturesque, the moistness of the atmosphere lending an ethereal light, but the region contains some of the poorest land in Ireland. Allegedly, when Cromwell displaced peasants from more fertile parts of Ireland he declared: ‘To ‘Hell or to Connacht!’ The West has the highest rainfall in the country, and has always had a high rate of emigration. In the film *Local Hero*, set in the West of Scotland, a character says: ‘You can’t eat scenery’. Martin McDonagh is a keen movie fan, and this could be a line in one of his West of Ireland plays, though it would undoubtedly be pronounced as ‘Ye can’t ate sane-arie’.

The West has always had an attraction for writers. Yeats grew up in Sligo, and romanticised the region in his poetry. John Millington Synge made it famous in his plays, drawing on the musicality of English speech which is heavily inflected by Irish – parts of Connemara are still Gaelic-speaking. It’s a popular tourist destination, with winding country lanes edged by fuchsia hedges and verges blazing with montbretia. If Ireland functions in the popular imagination as untamed territory full of rambunctious Guinness-drinkers, the West has suffered even more from stereotyping, and writer Edna O’Brien, herself from County Clare, talks eloquently about the prejudice against so-called ‘mountainy’ people.

The Irish West in McDonagh's plays, as in the plays of Synge to whom he is often compared, is more of a mythic, imagined space than an actual geographical region. From the writings of Yeats and Lady Gregory to the postcards of John Hinde, Connemara has long been perceived as 'Real Ireland', where Gaelic-speaking colleens in red petticoats wander barefoot, with pannier-bearing donkeys led by ginger-headed boys. McDonagh's plays savagely undercut such landscapes of cultural fantasy. *Beauty Queen's* 'rural cottage' is claustrophobic rather than cosy. Despite her assertion that 'Me world doesn't revolve around your taste in biscuits', Maureen's life consists precisely of pandering to her mother's desires. Mag's wishes dictate the choice of radio programme and its volume, and the mother's taste in confectionery does influence Maureen, if only in a perverse way. When the daughter begins to display her own desires, including a 'mighty oul taste' to shock her mother, the conflict between the women escalates, from the revealing of unhygienic habits to exposing a hidden past. They co-habit a world in which resentments simmer and eventually boil over, symbolised by a gruesome cooking incident.

McDonagh confines us to that constricted world, following *Beauty Queen* with *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*. A further trilogy has a similarly limited geography: the Aran Islands. According to the late, great Seamus Heaney, Patrick Kavanagh, the 'peasant poet', encouraged him to concentrate on the parish, saying all life is there. McDonagh's Leenane trilogy follows that parochial pattern, and even features the priest, Fr Welsh. A major difference between McDonagh and Heaney and Kavanagh is that the playwright doesn't come from the rural landscape in which he sets his work, although his parents came from the West of Ireland, and like many second-generation Irish, he spent summers there. Indeed, one critic sees the plays as revenge for these enforced 'holidays'.

McDonagh depicts Connemara with the ironic detachment of an outsider, while his use of placenames and Irish idiom (albeit exaggerated) reveal insider knowledge. As James Joyce used 'Irish names of places' in *Dubliners*, McDonagh's work gives pride of place in his titles to recognisable locations: Leenane, Inishmaan, Inishmore. There's an ancient Irish bardic tradition, *dinnseanchas*, in which writers celebrate placenames, and

although you could hardly say he celebrates them, McDonagh has conferred a kind of fame, or rather infamy, on his chosen settings. His fictional Connemara is an imaginary site of violence comparable to Midsomer or Morse's Oxford. As Fr Welsh puts it in *The Lonesome West*: 'I thought Leenane was a nice place when first I turned up here', but he becomes disenchanted. As audience members, we might experience a similar sensation of *dislocation*.

In *Beauty Queen* we hear an outsider's comment on Leenane as 'a lovely part of the world', but in the play Leenane does not seem an ideal environment. For a start, there's the weather: 'Of course wet' when it's not 'Of course cold'. Pato says 'it's beautiful here, a fool can see. The mountains and the green', but the terrain is criticised constantly by those who live there. His brother Ray, being a fool, sees none of the beauty, and complains about that 'big oul hill' being steep, muddy and rocky. The same hill features in Maureen's macabre story, which has the cadences of a nursery rhyme but masks menace in sing-song rhythms. McDonagh goes further in dislodging any complacent memories we may have of childhood: loss of innocence is symbolised by destruction of toys. In *Beauty Queen*, we hear about the spiteful confiscation of part of someone's 'best fecking present', and in *The Lonesome West*, we see a similar symbolic disruption of youthful pleasure in trodden-on Scalectrix and purloined cowboy stagecoach.

On Easter Monday 1916, Padraic Pearse promised a new Ireland which would cherish 'all the children of the nation equally'. The 1916 Proclamation uses the word 'children' metaphorically, to mean the whole population, but Pearse's writings betray a tendency to sentimentalise the early years, especially those of the inhabitants of Connemara, where he owned a cottage. McDonagh's work forms his own proclamation of independence from such fairytales: the children of his imagined nation grow into aggrieved adults. Their lack of cherishing by government is shown in poverty and unemployment, and his characters do little to cherish others or even themselves.

The Connemara cottage is a well-established cliché of Irish literature, and McDonagh is not the first Irish writer to tear the thatch off that construct. Although his work has some aspects in common with the traditional Abbey play, it would be a mistake to see *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (or any McDonagh play) as realistic, any more than *Fr Ted* is

a realistic portrayal of priests. These works use the backdrop of rural Ireland as a jumping off point for dismantling mythologies. Eamon de Valéra, like Pearse, a co-founder of Independent Ireland, and another powerful myth maker, made a radio broadcast on Patrick's Day, 1943, outlining his ideal Ireland: 'a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age'. Mag Folan is of an age when she could have heard such a speech, but you could hardly get a more efficient demolition of the de Valérian myth than McDonagh's *Beauty Queen*, whose homestead is filled with arguments between a very *unhappy* maiden and a mother whom she despises: 'You're out and you're stupid and you don't know what you're talking about'. Disco-dancing Ray Dooley may well be athletic, but he faces ennui rather than industry, and his brother Pato has similarly limited choices. De Valéra, like the Dooleys, grew up in the West of Ireland but wasted no time in leaving it. Perhaps, like the 'continually bored' Ray, he sought more stimulation than 'There goes a calf'.

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