

The Carra Days / 2018

Dairbhre Press

John Ennis has found a poetic mother lode in his 'retirement' and his latest collection of poetry, *The Carra Days*, revisits his time in a junior seminary in the early sixties. Teenagers were prepared for the African Missions at Ballinafad (The Fad) in Co Mayo near Lough Carra. It was a time, described by historian, Joe Lee, as "one of the more remarkable conquests of the age of imperialism". The language of the Missionary texts used words like 'pagans', 'darkness', 'savagery', and 'superstition'. Irish Catholics were beseeched to "help us to make poor abandoned Africa a Holy Ireland beyond the seas".

The narrative poems use 'personae' to mask the real people, and it is the story of Fintan Daly, being welcomed by a Dean of Studies outlining to 15-year-olds a rigid litany of 'next year the Inter, then the Leaving, a spiritual year, possibly University, or sent to man a school on the Niger. Then Canon Law, Philosophy, Theology'.

No wonder these boys found a temporal paradise in Lough Carra to avoid the family 'shame' of being "chucked" or sent home to an even more unsympathetic world. Those boys were described as being akin to those in William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'.

Some were described, mostly with nostalgic fondness - the most 'exotic' an Irish American boy, Oisín, who dropped out and "joined a squadron back in the States, dropping hosts of bombs on North Vietnam".

Or in 'After the Game' - "these two just fell into each other's arms in a narrow bed" - no special friendships.

The teaching staff were either fondly remembered or hinted at for their rigid, Loyola army talk.

What sings out in this book is the music of the poetry, the sounds and selection of words and the snatches of songs of the era. Pat Boone on the radio 'April Love' or Al Jolson's 'April Showers'. In 'A Dream Of Ben Conducting' there was 'Men Of Harlech', 'Camptown Races', 'Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair', 'Beautiful Dreamer', 'The Isle Of Capri', 'Hucklebuck', 'Sloop John B', and 'Westmeath Bachelor'.

By the end of the book, there is a wonderful epiphany, forgetting "the rule embittered year" where even fleeting "erections" were like a dream time beside a lake "little aftermath for analysis" and the last phrase - "memory that will last".



On John Ennis:

"What astonishes this reader is the relentless exclusion of sentimentality, without the destruction of tenderness. One has the thrilling experience of encountering an imagination that has dominated its experience with no loss of urgency". John Jordan

". . . A master-builder of architecturally-demanding long poems, he is at the same time capable of writing short lyrics. Satirical poems of Swiftian or Clarkean ferocity can be found alongside tender poems of love and family . . ." from the citation for the Butler Award, the Award of the Irish American Cultural Institute.

"The Gospel according to John I call it". Seamus Heaney's response to Ennis's Anthology *How the Light Gets in*.

"Ennis's rare talent for successful religious poetry . . . where in a reversal of the approach of Heaney or Longley, he manages to be religious without being religiose". John Goodby, University of Swansea, *Graph 17*.

". . . he is, I would say, the most interesting and original poet of his generation . . . he is . . . a frequently glorious loner." Brian Lynch reviewing Ennis's Selected Poems, *The Irish Times*, 29 April 1997.

"Ennis is, by any standard, a poet of international significance, whose work is characterised by an integrating moral and humane perspective, which is fortified by contact with the structures of consciousness itself". Professor Robert Welsh, UU at Coleraine, writing of Ennis's *What Verities Remain*.

