

John McLaren An Unfinished Life: the life and work of Vincent Buckley.
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10 Loving Outsider: the Matter of Ireland

Although Buckley brought a sceptical eye to bear on the land of saints and scholars, of soaks and singers, he still hankered for the older Ireland his forebears had left. This was part family piety or curiosity, part an attempt to heal the imaginative rupture with the past that he believed had been made by emigration.¹ It was also an attempt to find the language, places and names, history, legends, folklore and rhythms that would provide poetry with an imaginative source he did not believe Australia could offer. In Australia, he contended, nature offered no support for the numinous, and therefore lacked in any potential for religious or poetic feeling.²

Over the 30 years from 1956, Buckley visited Ireland at least seven times, for periods ranging from three weeks up to twelve months. He finished most of his first book during his first visit.³ He lived in Dublin and its suburbs, in castles in Kildare and, in 1986, during his final visit, in a cottage in Ardmore in County Waterford, in Munster, homeland of the Buckleys. He describes these visits as *successive goes at learning Ireland*.⁴ In the suburbs of Dublin he found indifference; in rural communities the shame that is a *great nurse to your life hatred*.⁵ Yet he still identified strongly with the country of his ancestors. In a note intended for the publishers of *Memory Ireland*, he described himself "an Irishman born in Australia, who has spent long periods in Ireland over the past 30 years."⁶

His Condon and Scanlan forebears had come from Tipperary, and the doctor who had treated his mother in Australia, a Dr Rye, had connections there, so Buckley interrupted his second year in Cambridge to spend time there with Brigid and Edna. He also went to Dublin, where they lived in the Jewish quarter in Portobello. He felt so much at home that he considered transferring his studies to Trinity College Dublin.⁷ He came again with Penelope and Father Golden in 1966, and in 1973, with Penelope, although they continued to live separately. It was here that they heard from Edna that she now wanted a divorce. Then in 1977 he lived with Penelope and Susannah in Dundrum, and in 1981, now also with Grania, in Rathfarnham. But while during these stays he followed the footsteps of Joyce and St John Gogarty, and spent time in the literary circles of Dublin, his Ireland was the countryside of Munster, where Buckleys and Condons and Scanlans had dwelt, if not from time immemorial, at least from before the keeping of records. His family had told no ancestral stories, so Buckley had made them for himself. His school notebooks contain ballads commemorating the dead who fell in the rebellion of 1798. The dead of Ireland were still the subject of fragments of verse he left behind when he died:

Their bodies polluted the trout streams
 The whole country was sordid
 With the death of its sons & daughters⁸

This Ireland of his imagination, a country where cruel and haughty Englishmen persecuted a peasantry stubbornly asserting its traditional ways, was the country that drove his forebears out in the years of the Great Famine. He found however that its memories now went no further back than 1798. The older Ireland he sought had been lost with its language.⁹

The first of his visits was in search of this Ireland of his ancestors, the Ireland of the Celtic memories they had forgotten in their exile, the layer of myth beneath their Catholic religion. This Irish imaginative experience had been *snipped away* from the emigrants, so that they led *a foreshortened religious life, intense and sometimes generous, but lacking in psychological substance*.¹⁰ Just as Yeats had been nurtured by the stories he heard in his childhood, so Buckley would now hear them and so complete his sense of being an Irish Australian.

... I've always been conscious of being Irish. I grew up in a country town where the people were mostly farmers. The local people were partly Irish-Catholics (most of them, in fact all of them, from the same province in Ireland, many of them inter-related). The other groups in the area were Ulster Protestants and people of English descent. Now we were conscious of difference of course. Our names were different, we went to a different church, we went to a different school. There was little tension, but there was a consciousness of difference. In my case, this was magnified by the fact that I read some Irish history when I was very young.¹¹

He looked now to locate this history among actual people and places.

In western Ireland particularly he found that the remains of past occupations were continuous with present usages of the land, where objects and places were not divided and neatly categorised on the basis of type, or origin, or functions. On the contrary, they were allowed to stand beside one another *in an illuminating blur of chronology, function and ownership*. Even where the sense of history was strong, it was not clearly demarcated from myth and legend: the past remained part of the present.¹² This continuity failed him in his later visits, when he found the Irish sharing in their land the same sense of dispossession he felt in his own. When he came to write his memoirs of Ireland, he found that their hidden theme was its loss of its own memory, *forced out by dispossessors, abandoned by ignorance, sold by jobbers, collapsed for lack of visible support, or simply leached away by the grey misty weather*.¹³ Yet some of the earlier perception lingered when, in 'Notes from Blackhall', he wrote of how, after the autumn fires, the owl returns, and Hermes, *the god of boundaries* marks out again *the mearing of the ditch* that divides ploughland and pasture, restoring the old order of nature, humanity and myth.¹⁴

On his first visit he encountered the more sinister but exhilarating myth of the Sinn Fein. He attended many of their meetings and drank with their members in the pubs. In the poem he says he often stood, wearing their Easter lily but conscious of being a foreigner among them, vague and tongue-tied, a *withered branch of the stem*. He questions their dream, but at the same time joins them in hearing the lone voice of truth *calling for a bloody sacrifice to drown the dragon's tooth*, sown we assume in the Easter rising of 1915. The poet admires them even as he suggests the time of heroism is gone, its voice like a bird calling from a *fruitless wall*. Yet, he thinks, if he had been born in

another time and place, he would have been one of those who fell, *Blindly striking*. This final phrase both identifies with the rebels and places their efforts as futile. The wounds may still be open, but the event remains safely in the past, contained in its ceremony.¹⁵ But by 1957 was in touch with Sinn Fein members who were seeking power by standing candidates for election in the south. A Joseph McEvoy predicted that they would soon have the numbers to form a government, and so justify the loss of lives.¹⁶

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Although Buckley enjoyed his visits to England, and particularly his time in Cambridge he always felt an outsider. He was a part of the “other Cambridges”—as he refers to them in his memoir—of Catholics other outsiders like Leavis—who were excluded from the mainstream, just as he had felt that as a Catholic he was excluded from the establishment of Melbourne University, and indeed of Australia. Even when he received a personal chair, he still declined to submit an entry for *Who's Who in Australia*, which he apparently regarded as an establishment handbook. But in Ireland he felt at home. The world of Dublin writers was *exhilaratingly more informal and easy than its Cambridge counterparts*, yet it was also provincial. Irish writers wanted to be American, but their currency was Ireland, so they had to become Irish in an American way.¹⁷ His entry to Dublin's literary society was through a poet called Richard Weber, who seemed to know everyone. Through him he met Austin Clark, Thomas Kinsella, and others from the group around Trinity College. He was kept apart from Brendan Behan, the dominant literary figure when he first came to Dublin, but otherwise mixed freely through he bars of Dublin. Yet friends in Ireland do not recall him as the heavy drinker he is remembered as in Melbourne. He found that in Dublin the artistic work had to be turned into a literary event, and the social life of its writers circulated through readings, receptions and launches. He said he was too much the curmudgeon to attend the celebrations of Joyce's centenary, which he felt paid too much attention to the figures and places and too little to the language. He admired the *voiceless feeling for the mystical* he found among Irish poets and intellectuals, but was appalled by the *cowardice* that allowed the bureaucrats to silence them on the questions of the hunger striker and Irish unity. He was alternately amused and upset by the lack of organisation or thought put into poetry readings, at the Yeats school in Sligo or the literary festival in Listowel, which sound very like similar events in Australia: *it's what Melbourne was like in the fifties*.¹⁸ On the other hand, he claimed that the audiences at readings in Ireland were always *alert, receptive, neither fulsome nor captious*, lacking the narcissism of American audiences, the minginess of some in England, and the *studied indifference* of Australians.¹⁹

He showed little interest in later writing of the old ascendancy, so like its counterpart in Australia from which he had felt excluded. WB Yeats had mourned its passing, but the writing of its heirs was wrapped in sadness and regret. He was sceptical of the political and religious establishment, but shared the mythology of the common people that held the country together. His family tradition made him a natural nationalist and republican, but he had not shared the later history of the Republic. Consequently, he had no particular leanings towards Fianna Fail, Fine Gael or Sinn Fein, the political parties that had their origins in the war of independence and the civil war that followed it. This independence sharpened his observations.

He was accepted by the local poets and intellectuals as one of their number, an Irish poet of Australian extraction. Those of his own generation, like Thomas Kinsella or Seamus Heaney, accepted him as an equal. Buckley stayed with him on a number of occasions, and also entertained him in his own dwellings in Ireland. In a letter of condolence to Penelope, Heaney summed up what Buckley had meant to him:

... although the meetings may not have been as often as they could have been, they were always trustworthy, fortifying and truly joyful. The presence of his strong good mind, the mixture of unquillible intelligence, a sense of justice and a restrained, tempered disposition did us all good. I loved the verity of his company, and always felt that his approval was worth more than most clamours of reputation. He was vigilant and unbegrudging at once and had an authority that only came through his own traversing of various inner bridges. The force of his mind and the fact of his courage gave both his praise and his blame great weight. The way people who knew and loved him spoke of him always transmitted this sense of him as ringed with influence, quarantined within the highest regard --- but not in pomp or solemnity.²⁰

To younger poets, like Thomas McCarthy or Theo Dorgan, Buckley was more of a mentor. Dennis O'Driscoll said that, although he did not share Buckley's "greenery", he was of tremendous importance to his Irish peers. "He took us seriously, more seriously than we took ourselves. He gave us confidence and encouragement." He also gave practical help by recommending them to publishers. "He was almost unique—there was nothing false about him". McCarthy said simply that he was a genius, a great poet. Dorgan said he saw Ireland directly, without filters. "He was extraordinarily honest, and a shrewd observer of people. He could be cantankerous ... His face had the look of a mediaeval cardinal, fit to command armies." He was direct, charismatic, quick with words, but he showed deep intellectual responsibility as he used words to find his way into the world. He was always conscious of where he was in space, of the world or of a room. put it, he gave them the confidence to write for themselves.²¹

In 1966 Buckley twice visited Ireland from Cambridge with Penelope. Once he stayed with their friends Keith Trace and his wife Collette, a fierce nationalist. Then they travelled around the west with Father Jerry Golden. Ireland was still afflicted by poverty and unemployment, but violence was still distant. In the north, the IRA had turned off its campaign against the border in 1962, and with Sinn Fein had turned to political action. In 1965 the premiers of Northern Ireland and the Republic had begun meeting, and a free trade agreement had been reached between the Republic and the United Kingdom. Yet there were ominous signs. From the Protestant working classes had emerged the Ulster Defence Force, more violent than the established but equally illegal Ulster Defence Association. The divisive cleric Ian Paisley was preaching hatred, Catholics had been murdered and Protestants had rioted against Catholics. The IRA was bitterly opposed to both the Free Trade agreement and the Common Market. At the same time, there was wide support in the north to extend civil rights to all communities.

His poem from this time, 'Places', dedicated to Father Golden, has the same kind of passionate detachment we find in Yeats' 'Ancestral Places'. In both, the poet patrols around great houses overflowing with other men's dreams, contemplating life's self-

delight, feeling themselves ready for some great work they cannot yet discern. Yeats doubts the power of the greatest work to free greatness from bitterness. Buckley shows a similar doubt. The poet's task is in the overheard prayer, "O God, make me worthy of this world", but the words instantly sting the speaker to an embarrassed silence. Although the poems are set in Ireland, their focus is on personal fulfilment rather than on public commitment.²²

Although Buckley did not visit the North, he followed its affairs closely, and was dismayed when the Troubles broke out soon after this visit. Women took the lead in organising resistance to religious discrimination and the destruction of local communities, and in February 1967 their efforts were central to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. This included nationalists, republicans, Communists, moderates, and even liberal Unionists, who sought to unite Catholics and Protestants behind a program of constitutional reform and social reform. Buckley said rather disingenuously that until now his interest in Ireland had been a kind of hobby, but it now became serious. In Australia, he became President of the Committee for Civil Rights in Ireland, an independent body formed in support of the general aims of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association.²³ For a time the British army seemed to protect the civil rights workers, but this apparent alliance ceased when, against the advice of their military chiefs, the British government introduced detention without trial. In August 1971, the army smashed into Catholic homes and detained 340 men in one night—more than the entire membership of the IRA at the time. Then, on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, the army killed 13 unarmed civilians on a civil rights march in Derry. The British Embassy in Dublin was burnt down, the Irish people united in rage. The coroner described the killings as "murder, gentlemen. Sheer unadulterated murder." The British government commissioned Lord Widgery to chair an enquiry, reminding him beforehand that they were "fighting not just a war, but a propaganda war." He ignored medical evidence, and 700 eye-witness statements, to write a judicial cover-up.²⁴

Buckley's involvement in the Committee for Civil Rights brought him into direct touch with activists from Northern Ireland. As President of the Committee for Civil Rights he had read letters giving eye-witness accounts of the behaviour of British troops in Northern Ireland. One correspondent, Mary Kennedy, wrote of her gratitude that their sufferings were remembered. "It's good to know that other people in the world are thinking about N.I. as we have been under the boot so long. After the riots there was a fund started for the homeless who had lost everything at first everyone was running and getting, but now people who have got homes can't get much help as no-one seems to know where the rest of the money is going the things that go on here are unbelievable. ...". A Sean Keenan described the attack on the students' march in January, 1969. The students had planned to march from Belfast to Derry, but at Burntollet Bridge, seven miles from their destination, they were viciously attacked. Keenan claimed there was clear evidence of police collusion. The march continued, receiving a warm welcome from large crowds when they arrived in Derry on the Saturday. Then, "On Saturday night and Sunday morning at 2.30 a.m. large forces of police entered the Bogside area. They smashed doors and windows and terrified the children and elderly people living in the district".

Mary Kennedy sent an equally graphic of the events in Belfast that led up to Bloody Sunday. On Thursday, 14 August, she was working in her kitchen when crowds

had started to form. Women were making petrol bombs, and men were handing out rifles. A girl told Mary they planned to burn her house. She saw police and B Specials everywhere. Petrol bombs were thrown into a flat. "A young man whom I know came and threatened me to get out or be burned out, and the B. men were shouting, 'Don't help them out. Burn them out', 'Beverley St. for Protestants', 'Shoot the Fenian b***s'". The first shot she saw fired came from the Shankhill [Protestant] crowd. "I saw the man who fired it. Then there was a lull, and a few shots came from the Falls Rd., but they were very few, and then the R.U.C. came up with this armoured car, and had it at the top of Beverley St., facing down the Falls Rd. They started shooting that awful thing down into the Falls without any warning.

"My little girl weakened in nerves and I went to the door and asked a B. special what the gun was for and his answer was 'Don't you worry about it, that's only for the Fenians'. ...

Four times she was told to get out or suffer the consequences. An elderly man wearing a great coat swore "Fenian get out or be burned." She tried to sleep for a while, but the door kept getting kicked. Early on Friday 15th August the Catholic families started to move. As this was going she came to the door and saw some women f cried at her "Hitler had the right idea—do the Fenians in." As the street nearby emptied of Catholic families the mob from went into each house and what they couldn't carry they broke, destroyed, or burned.

I was determined to stay in my house, no matter what happened. I had four children whom I bring up myself, their ages are from 8 to 3 years, and the house was precious to me, but unfortunately I was stupid and left the house to go to the shop as I hadn't had anything to eat since the night before and when I came back after about fifteen minutes I found they (the crowd) had put a big wooden thing over the door and finished the barricade they had started that morning. I climbed over the barricade and made to go up to the house as my kids were away to my brothers and all their clothes were with them.

Next Monday her furniture was gone and a young girl was occupying the house. As she walked away the street the burnt shell of the house of an elderly neighbour caught her eye.

I was crying to think of it all and I lifted a stone and smashed the wee window that was all there was left, the crowd turned and ran at me, and then it was bedlam, throwing bottles and stones. I managed to get to the barricade but a man caught up with me and punched me about the face several times. I got free and ran down to the corner and the soldiers whom I knew were around it.

Three women whom I always thought of as good neighbours ran up shouting "Send the *** Fenian up. We don't need the army to protect us", but the soldiers wouldn't let me go up at all. I haven't been back since but someone is still living in the house.²⁵

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In 1973 Buckley spent a time at the University of Alberta in Calgary, and then flew on to Ireland, where Penelope joined him, although they still lived separately. It may have been during the five months of this visit that he interviewed the old nationalist and republican socialist Peadar O'Donnell.²⁶ O'Donnell had published fiction depicting the poverty of rural Ireland, and had decried the way republicans had allowed their obsessions with the 1922 settlement to divert them from social issues.²⁷ He continued to follow a Marxist analysis and ridiculed Bernadette Devlin's claim that Northern Ireland was not ripe for social revolution. He argued that conditions were still very backward in the Falls and Bogside, where the Orange working class supported their bosses politically but opposed them economically. They joined the join B specials for economic reasons, but although they were religious bigots they were good Irishmen. He would say nothing against the Provisional IRA, who were good men, but could not support them. Unlike the original IRA, they had turned to gun without the support of people, and their campaign served to strengthen sectarianism. They should, he believed, have built a mass movement in early days of the civil rights struggle. "Then, when it is all over, ... you will emerge from your armchairs ... while around my own name a confused shadow will hang ... and the dead at funerals and the broken doors and the endless weeping will be there forever, for me to remember and for you to forget." Buckley commented that *Ghosts walk upright in that man's soul*. They went on to talk of the British cover-up of bloody Sunday, and of how "British pleasures are simple ones; pleased contempt". They differed on Hungary, which O'Donnell believed was an intra-party dispute until the Soviet Union ideologised it.²⁸

Buckley made another visit on his own in 1975, when he stayed for three weeks in Dublin. This may be when Dinny O'Hearn introduced him to Jim Kelly, a former Captain in the Irish Army who in 1970 had been set up by enemies of Charles Haughey over a deal to supply arms to Northern Ireland. The jury accepted Kelly's argument that he was at all times acting on lawful instructions from his military superior and the Minister for Defence. Despite the prosecution tampering with the evidence, he was acquitted, but his career was in ruins.²⁹ He was a passionate republican, and after the trial he worked hard for civil rights and for peace in Northern Ireland. Buckley stayed with him, and they became firm friends. Sadly, this friendship petered out when Buckley asked for the return of a loan.

Buckley helped to arrange for him to visit Australia in 1976 as guest of the Committee for Civil Rights. Kelly enjoyed his drink, and fully enjoyed Melbourne hospitality. It may be Kelly who wrote to Buckley and O'Heane, using a *nom de guerre*.

Well lads, I hope you both are keeping well and not drinking too much. I'm sorry about the premature departure, as I was intending to call on you before I left, but however, things worked out O.K. propaganda wise after my arrest. I was told of your phone call Denis, to the Commonwealth Police in Adelaide. ... I am now in Canada for a period and then to the U.S.A. for a few months. I hope to be back with my family for Christmas time. The Australian tour was extremely successful and also very hard but gratifying. There is still so much to be done there, and it is most important, as the struggle at home is going real good and outside propaganda and finance are very important to sustain the pressure on the British. My home address if you wish to communicate is—99B Lenadoon Ave Belfast 11, and for the next few months ... New York : "Irish people". For the latter please use the

name PHIL TOAL. Well lads shall go for now, as I am pretty worn out. Regards to all comrades.

Thankyou for your hospitality.

Keep up the work.

Phil³⁰

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When Buckley brought Penelope and their daughter Susannah to Ireland in 1977, the Republic was still suffering from depression and unemployment. Dundrum, the outer suburb where they settled, like Rathfarnham, where they lived of 1981, was a relatively prosperous suburb, but their neighbours, although friendly, were private, resigned to failure and unable to take an initiative to remedy common problems. Public amenities were lacking or faulty, the children's play was aimless. When the burglar alarm at the local doctor's surgery began to sound, he could get no help either from the police or from neighbours who said this happened every year for the four weeks the doctor was on annual leave. Buckley solved the problem, and restored tranquillity, by contacting the locum. Buckley ascribed the passivity of the people to a history that had programmed them as victims and migrants, but now denied them this escape. But he recognised that their fatalism was also a way of relaxing in a situation that offered them little chance of improving their lives. Yet in the midst of this decadence, the atomisation of community and the loss of any deep sense of religion, the Irish reported themselves as happy with their state.³¹

Buckley distinguished this state of feeling from the excessive tribalism of which the Irish are often accused. There is a rhetoric of concern, but it seemed to him only bourgeois conformism matched by petty anarchism.

What with grandparents, British and bishops, it is no wonder that people defer to authority while failing to obey it, or ... ignore the acts of the authority for which they have voted. Communitarianism comes to them ... as an ethos laden with compulsion; the kindly Irish eyes are minatory. It is good to get away from all that warmth, and to be yourself. If you can do it. Most can't ...³²

If you exclude the warmth, most of his would apply to the Australian ethos he had known growing up in Romsey, or for that matter to the ideas Australians continued to have about themselves throughout his life.³³ This may explain his disappointment, his sense that the warmth that promised him the Ireland of his imagination covered a familiar apathy in a modern world that denied both individualism and community. Most painful of all was the failure of the Catholic church in Ireland to offer any resistance to these forces, and its refusal to accept the revolutionary nationalism that large sections of the oppressed people engaged in as a means to liberation. Although he rejected the violent creed of the IRA, he raised the question of whether *it is actually immoral* for religious leaders to use their sacred authority to *push them back to their sad start, to mystify and embitter the best, to demoralize and unman the others, and to lift the sanctimonious into the seats of the mighty*.³⁴ Poetry, he suggested, could supply at least the consciousness required to resist the national fragmentation induced by colonialism:

Now, an all-Ireland nationalism, of whatever sort, takes form and support in an Ireland which is not united, whose disunity is enforced by acts of a parliament which is not Irish, and in which various efforts are being made to bring about unity. A poetry of nationalist feeling, if it existed, would have some relationship to these facts, and would in some sense push against this state of affairs.

I assume we cannot expect any poet to project his view of the present into the future in such a way as to delineate solutions to intractable problems. We might, however, expect more realism and less impressionism than we are accustomed to get at the moment. We might also be surprised at the lack of “protest”, or of what I might call an adversary note, in the poetry. I do not demand, desiderate, or even request it; but I am surprised at its relative absence. It might include some protest against institutions devised to prevent the desired Ireland from coming into being, a strong sense of some groups as persecuted, and perhaps even some interest in and sense of particular acts of heroism in military, political, or cultural operations conducted against the regime. . . .³⁵

Buckley’s immediate response to this national need was to search for a pattern that would fit the Australian experience into its Irish history. In 1979 he published *The Pattern*, an extensive meditation on ancestry and nationalism that he conceived during his stay in Dundrum. Its major poem, ‘Gaeltacht’, juxtaposes verse and prose, land and history, Ireland and Australia, in a reflection that goes back to the time of Elizabeth and forward to the exile of rebellious peasants and their settlement in Australia. The same themes continue throughout the book, with more immediate moments from his own travels in Ireland, and in particular in Munster. The poet speaks both as the loving outsider and as the involved observer seeking the nature of his own Irish Australian identity. Yet, although the poems in the collection take in many places and people, the poet remains outside them. Unlike the ‘Golden Builders’, their voices remain apart, and no dialogue can take place.

On the dedication page of *The Pattern*, Buckley rejoices in the ambiguities of the word by noting its overlap with “patron”, and citing five of its possible meanings, from matrix to example to precedent or design to its Irish use to refer to the festivities for patron saint. The patron saints of Buckley’s book are his Irish forebears, and its celebration of their lives is darkened by the reminders of their fate at the hands of the English enemy. The landscapes of both Ireland and Australia provide the matrix that shapes these events, but it is by the words and rhythms of the poems that Buckley shapes the meaning of his past. Yet the words, like the past and the land, escape his conscious control. He gives an account of this process in ‘Write’, which begins with which begins with a pared back description of blue clouds over Calare, as one cloud-eye, *stifling near the earth*, shines at his window as he hears, or gives, the command, *Write*. Yet even this seemingly objective description takes the reader into the unknown and the insoluble. Why blue clouds, rather than white clouds against the blue? How can clouds “stifle”? Above all, who is the “you” of the poem whose eye the landscape presses *firm and definite as a plant / upon your hand*. The poet is not free; he is shaped by the matrix of the land itself, and by its history that comes to him as *that cold evening*, he writes of *blood*. His writing hand takes sound and fuses it into words on the page:

poisoned. This is the same disillusion he finds at the end of 'Write', but here his hope is not merely unattainable by him, but blighted for everyone.

Despite this, the poet journeys on, looking for *some way into it*, which is now the landscape of Munster. He finds images of rain, waste, disdain; then of summer heat; then of *groincold winter* in a *stone country that never comes / full colour*, with stone houses and belief in holy wells. Yet the images remain merely visual and sensual, without yielding any further meaning. The poem abandons the verse form and plunges into prose and the past, with the memory of a place of poets and hermits butchered by Lord Grey de Wilton while Spenser watched and Raleigh joined the execution squad. The prose joins in a single vignette the hermits, the Elizabethan executioners, and Pierce Ferriter, aristocratic Irish nationalist and poet killed in the time of Cromwell. The poet then reverts to verse as he tries to suppress his hostility, turning to a music drawn up like liquid or metal, but remains apart, owning the player or but never touching the chanter he plays. The images music touches the countryside to light, but remains mysterious as the poet turns back to prose and the places and people of the county, to St Gobnait, virgin saint of fertility, and Colman, royal bard and patron saint of Cobh and a *dulled and starving people*. Again to verse, with the country now offering not one origin but ten thousand, and condemned in Elizabethan voice as *no good for land but all valleys, cragged rocks, and hills* ... Back in prose to Spenser, now working with *passionate neatness*, full of his calling as scribe and poet, in the faces of the Irish he condemns. Another verse mediation on the country, this time as the poet watches light unwinding over harbour and land, and fearfully thinks of the extinction of light, *the stain/ on the carpet ... the worm-like / ceasing in your throat*. The you is unidentified, whether listener, lover, child. The images contrast the precariousness of death with the fragile beauty of life seen here in the beating in the vein of the neck. Then, in prose this time,, to music swelling *like the grain of the land itself*, and giving life and energy to a Peig Sayers standing in Dingle, on the far west coast, looking further out to a mysterious circle of stones pleased by the sun. A verse addressing the harbour, the harvesters and the village leads to another prose vignette, this time set in Australia among those who left Ireland, and to the poet's reflection that their source is now only *a point of departure ,not home for us, for anyone*. A final verse reflects on a people doomed to be at home nowhere, whose sourceland in the Gaeltacht shines only through the distance of their survival. The shining retrospectively illuminates the sequence that has recorded the oppression of a people, the failure of English poets to see what they were doing, and the failure of the speaker to find his source or meaning.

The title of the next poem, 'The Rousings of Munster', suggests alliteratively the raising of the men of Munster for rebellious duty. This suggestion is taken further by the opening invocation of a red branch, the name of the book of the heroes of Ireland, and by the opening lines of the second stanza, that *we struggled to contain* the province, implying an attempt to put down a rising or defend the territory. But the actual word in the title, 'rousings', means calls to awaken, or, in the Australian, scolding. The containing of Munster seems to be an attempt by the speaker or his forebears as they leave the country to fix it in their mind. As they go the landscape itself dissolves into a jumble of stones, and gaps where there were once houses. The speaker follows these people from Munster to their victory, the pride they take with them to Australia. Yet, like the emigrants in the previous sequence, they bring nothing material with them. In the new country they notice the heat and the sand, and become attuned to the timber houses they

build for themselves. Finally, the speaker seems to address himself, finding on his return to Ireland nothing but the hag's country they had left behind, yet also remarking that

in the twilight lanes their hair
moved and dipped like manes
of light beside the banks of fuschia.

The land seems after all to hold a memory of their pride and beauty as they left it. This beauty however remains apart from the poet.

These opening poems provide a framework for the rest of this collection, which moves from further images of Ireland out to Australia and then back again to Ireland, now in the present. In Ireland the poet sees images of light, hospitality, and, in 'The Blind School', grief and loss. In Australia, he sees the Aborigine he never knew, but who bears an Irish name. He meditates on relatives distanced from him by age and death. He goes back to Springfield, where the land brings back light even as it curses him with his own words that fail to comprehend it. Back in Ireland, he encounters suppression and resistance. Yet even in the most lyrical and composed of these poems there is constantly something unsettling. 'Clouds', for example, seems a pastoral, framed by the hard timbers of Bantry pier and the soft drift of clouds, until the images come together in the last line as *proofs of that cycle / we would not wish to remember*. The cycle may be the annual cycle of the seasons, or the longer cycle of history, but it is not clear why we would not wish to remember it, or even who the 'we' may be.

The shifting and uncertain reference of the personal pronouns is a source of the disquiet the book induces. The 'I' is usually the speaker, but the 'we' may be the speaker and his companions, or his family, or even speaker and readers. In 'Spanish Point', the poem that follows 'Clouds', the 'you' seems to be his sleeping daughter. In 'Sunlight rose ...' and 'Your Father's Memory, when he has returned to Australia, the 'you' seems to be his mother, and the 'he' of 'Purgatory' may be his father remembering his own father. In 'Matrix', the poem that would seem to provide the framework of the pattern, 'she', the *thin hooded northern woman*, is the grandmother, the first settler who calls for her own cattle with her father's commands in a new land where stones represent neither poverty nor ancestry, but a creek bubbling with the hope of new life. By the time the poem returns to Dublin in Easter, the 'you' has become either the impersonal onlooker, or the poet himself. In the final poem, 'Membrane of Air', the 'you' is certainly the poet himself, addressing his own diseased innards.

This poem moves from the speaker to Ireland, which he addresses directly, agreeing to be whatever it wants; "guest, foreigner, son." Yet his acceptance does not make him accepted. Not even by himself. Instead, he finds himself a pensioner amid the stones of Dublin, *afraid of thresholds, / hoping for nostalgias* ... As he walks the streets he is obsessed with his own frailty, comforted by the sun turning the city bright with its fierce colours, by the flight of birds, by the autumn leaves and the rain. The city and the poet seem redeemed by nature. Yet death continues to oppress him, and the last stanza finds him even more the outsider than he had been in the streets of Carlton he had walked in 'Golden Builders'. Now all dissolves into its elements:

Ireland as usual

the soft pad of hands
 blessing, or welcoming,
 till I thought the raw seawall
 floating in rain, the sea

burn, and the city,
 for all its cold
 willow colour, melt into it
 no more than a membrane
 of air between us.

The line pauses momentarily hold back the nouns before granting them their completion, as the act of blessing or welcoming joins host and guest. At last, it seems, the poet has become one with his space. But then the membrane separates him again, no more substantial than air, but irremovably between. Neither Ireland nor Australia, history nor place, has offered him a home.

The uncertainty about the persons addressed, the speaker's inability to find in the landscape his imagination's home, may reflect the unease of the Irish themselves in their landscape. Hugh Kenner claimed that, unlike the agricultural gods of England, the mythical population of Ireland, the Sidhe, are hostile to humans.⁴⁰ The ruins that dot the landscape are not records of developing settlement but of successive failures, and landscapes like the Burren are alien to human purposes. In the same way the language they use remains alien to their history, shaped by a foreign culture. Buckley, who enjoyed the wild Burren, once said that the history of English had nothing to do with him, but, lacking Irish, he had nothing else to make poetry. Not only the vocabulary and grammar, but even the form of his poetry is English, although in his later work he pares away its rhetoric. He lived in what he styled 'Two Half-Languages', neither of them capturing the stillness of whiskey or the land. The loss of language is also the loss of ancestry, in Ireland as in Australia.

I've lost it all, the sound
 of their blood, the nose-pitch of their voices,
 the rustle of their God, the music
 inside me, once steady as a whirlwind.⁴¹

At Millstreet, he may see where the lake-land flat holds the hoofbeats of the Rakes of Mallow, but their rhythms do not appear in his verse. His neighbours serve him plain food, accepting him with a tolerant hospitality that still leaves him as the guest, the outsider: "that's right all right". If their words have a touch of Irish rhythm, his observation remains firmly English, watching them agreeing with everything he said, *creaking like leather with my strangeness*.⁴²

His sense of the loss of language may account for the constant frustration of his verse as he tries to find the rhythms that will move out into the Australian or Irish landscape to discover the Incarnate God, only to come against the membrane that keeps him apart. The *long denial*, as he wrote in a poem to Seamus Deane, soured the clothing