commitment that bore heavily on families of the police, is given poignant space in Chapter 7, dealing with 'the barracks and constabulary family life'. Here she is able to call on the memoirs and other writing of those who were police or children of police, among them Sean O’Faolain and Denis Donoghue. On the relatively thin evidence that these accounts allow, Malcolm wonders whether the personalities of such police had indeed been moulded into nothing more than a 'variation on the stereotype of the loyal Irish policeman'. The devastating portrait in the late John McGahern's Memoir of his father, a Leitrim Garda of the 1940s, points to the depths that fine writing might plumb in getting beyond the stereotypes – but historians are victims of the texts they are left with and there may not be much more that we can learn now than what Malcolm has ventured in this very original chapter of her book.

I have emphasised the contribution made by The Irish Policeman to an Irish historiography that reaches beyond a focus on the RIC as Dublin Castle's agents. This is not to gainsay the importance of the book for our general understanding of the social forces and actors that constituted Ireland under the Union. For as Malcolm argues in a passage typical of the reflective engagement of the book, the RIC's 'Nationalist critics perhaps missed the point somewhat when they accused its Catholic members of being disloyal to Ireland; Catholic policemen may just have had a more personal and less abstract notion of what constituted the Irish nation' (p. 43).

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The Literary Essay as a genre does not find many practitioners in the twenty-first century, though the tradition of fine letters produced many essayists in the nineteenth century and some way into the twentieth century. But this is different: Chris Arthur's essays are as artful and literate as Hazlitt's and Lamb's, but they are much more narrative in mode and more personal and, significantly, haunted by the past. The genre to which this volume and its predecessors in the series, Irish Nocturnes (1999) and Irish Willow (2002), belong is, the writer suggests, sui generis, but I think there is a genre which fits it better than the author knows. Indeed, I would be claiming Irish Haiku (I haven't
yet read the earlier volumes but will be doing so) for a genre which was, maybe still is, very important in our Australian post-colonial culture, and that is the genre of Fictocriticism. Anna Gibbs defines the form in a recent online edition of TEXT (vol. 1, April 2005) as performative, resistant to the dead hand of the past, furnishing its own codes as model or anti-model, as ‘an always singular and entirely tactical response to a particular set of problems - a very precise and local intervention’, and as conscious of its own writing processes. She claims the genre for feminism, but at least one notable Australian exponent of the form has demonstrated its usefulness for post-colonial analysis, and I think that is precisely Arthur’s agenda too, in the Northern Irish context.

Belfast-born and raised in Antrim, Arthur returns to what is for him a quite distant past in Northern Ireland. After working as a nature-warden on the banks of Lough Neagh early in his adult life, he left Northern Ireland to do a PhD in Scotland, and is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales at Lampeter. It is interesting that Northern Ireland is his source and heart country, and in reading one often wonders why, and in this collection that is not explored. One could be cynical and suggest that in the USA (where his essays are published in lavish, elegantly artful, editions) Northern Ireland is marketable, but I suspect the reasons are more profoundly connected with psychic and even sacred realities: Northern Ireland, even for a man of Arthur’s refined sensibility and pluralist philosophy, and perhaps especially for such a one, constitutes an identity formation and a personal history with more scope for contradiction, discontinuities, and slippage than most. And these are essays that artfully endeavour to slip in under the radar and explore troublesome cultural identity issues.

That his academic roots are in Religious Studies is intriguing. Arthur is careful to position himself as belonging to the ‘tribe’ of middle-class Protestants, farming stock, but in the essays he is equally careful to distance himself from the narrow pieties of Northern Ireland, and to align himself with the Zen traditions of Buddhism (and haiku) rather than those of Calvin, Knox or Luther, and as Northern Irish rather than British. As a reader, I’m not quite sure of the watertightness of these categories, and this is especially true of the superb essay, ‘Witness’, about Tony, the drug-soaked, IRA-trapped young man overheard in a second-hand bookshop. The realignments he desires simply prove irrelevant to his predicament. The old alignments necessarily reassert themselves – ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’ (Seamus Heaney). And slip out the door, if possible without being noticed, and furthermore, send your cousin in for a copy of the book the guerrilla happened to touch, ironically Conze’s Buddhist Meditation. Is
it important as a first-class relic of the boy-guerrilla, as proof that the
enigmatic discussion did indeed happen, or does the book bespeak
needs in Arthur to be free of his culture’s ghosts? Fiction doesn’t do
much better than this, but Arthur insists on the truth-value of his
medium. Bombings and distress form a muted, a very muted,
substratum of these narrative-meditations and may be a reason
themselves for the condition of writing as an émigré who often visits his
homeland.

The essays are quintessentially of a time and place: Northern Ireland,
for about three generations and more if history counts for personal
knowledge, and in his now (2005), though they have been written over a
longer period, since the early ’90s. For this Irish-Australian reader, who
is non-Protestant (but with some Protestant forebears from the North),
the essays give a glimpse into embattled lives subtly different from my
own. He conveys a sense that battlements which fell dramatically and
conclusively in Australia in the early ’70s (I put that down to
Whitlamism and State Aid being given to Catholic schools, but the
reasons may be more complex) are still very much in place in the North,
but, as in the story ‘Witness’ and in ‘Water-Glass’ which is about
Batchelors’ Walk, an old street in Lisburn, he approaches the
unavoidable issues of sectarianism obliquely, and he hedges his history
with qualifications about his own philosophical hatred of violence and
his religious pluralism.

Despite Arthur’s designation of his new medium as ‘essentially a
guerrilla genre’, the narrative method of these essays becomes
predictable as one reads, and it is both delightfully postmodern and
digressive in a way that returned me to the more leisurely digressive
novels of Sterne and Furphy, with their long forays into philosophy and
semi-religious thinking. It is simply a pleasure to watch a well-stocked
mind move around its narratives with few restraints on its operation and
modes of discourse. Contemporary novels have for about a century
tended to refuse the philosophical/moral excursus and have avoided
explicit moral commentary. The essayist, especially the intelligent
morally relativistic one, operates within a genre which is self-conscious,
lacking in rules and generative of its own, and which values using
language precisely and exactly, and poetically. His method is normally
to focus on a narrative, or character-based centre, and to spin off from
that into meditative considerations, often by locating a tiny event in
time and space in order to focus on the paradox of meaning-making in a
context of meaninglessness in the vast scheme of things. In Chris
Arthur’s world, history goes back to palaeogeology and the big bang, as
for example in the essay ‘Miracles’, which circles back from a 32-
month-year-old otolith (fossilized whalebone), via Brother Erskine’s
strategic and moral silence about his desert war experience and his
eloquent challenge to a preacher’s fundamentalism, to ‘tribal otoliths of pathological dimensions’, and he has in mind the politico-religious dualisms which create fissures in the north. Every element in this essay has to be there, is justified, elegant and spare in its elaboration of its own form. His centrifugal spin-offs can lead to some surprising places: for example, from a prized Vulture’s egg, to memories of his mother’s egg-preserving technology, and this in turn serves to explain not only the limitations of her method, but also the opacity (a metaphor which also does double-service) of the workings of memory. It’s a tortuous route and typical of many of the essays, but somehow justified and illuminating, and again, it is fundamentally different from conventional fiction-writing, and for its sheer elegance of design and expression, literary and literate.

Each of the essays is self-contained and theoretically they could be read in any order. I was very pleased I did not do this, as there is a strangely cumulative quality in them, which again is part of the art of the collection. Unlike a memoir, they offer shards of a life, and sometimes the essays are more personal than not. The story ‘Obelisk’ concerns his grandfather and takes the form of his own (unsuccessful) forensic attempt to solve an old mystery in his family: why did his mother not know of the violent death of a young uncle? It is a fascinating if inconclusive glimpse into his grandfather’s grief, one that was too deep for expression within the family and is therefore inadequately documented, but which was able to be memorialised nonetheless in stone by the traumatised father who probably survived a murder attempt by a loved son. It is easy to understand how a code of silence within the family might prevent younger family members knowing of the catastrophic death of their uncle, and also that historical documents may fudge the issue, but it is entirely astonishing that the loving father could so contradict what he presumably enjoined in the way of secrecy as to construct the most aggrandizing memorial obelisk among otherwise modest tombstones in a local country graveyard. Love works in these mysterious ways and will not be gainsaid.

Probably the most moving essay in the collection occurs at the end, and I was pleased that my sense of who Arthur might be had grown incrementally from the beginning of the volume because this sense of familiarity was crucial to the credibility of the essay. Punningly entitled ‘Swan Song’, it is Chris Arthur’s own memorial (and a very different one from ‘Obelisk’ with which it invites comparison) to a still-born son, and its exploration of how such griefs are ‘valued’, or not valued, by those who have not experienced them. What is superb about this essay is its weighing up of different kinds of grief, its judicious marking of undeniably huge human calamities (like the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda), and its refusal to compare. This writer is wise, careful,
considerate in his discussion of these catastrophes, and still needs to claim a small space for himself to mourn a child he never saw alive, but with whom he feels an intense imaginative relationship. The essayist is poignantly aware of the potential melodrama of the subject-matter and does not fall into it; he is also aware that the subject of a still-born death is regarded by most as a negligible grief and that its content is close to unspeakable, and he is not daunted by any of this, nor does he refuse the titanic battle in his psyche between dissonance and a predawn darkness shot through with ‘unstoppable wedges of light’ (p.216). He is haunted by the choices he and his wife had to make about burial rather than cremation; by the young three-year-old sibling’s grief which according to the ‘experts’ is not supposed to occur, but does; and he does not seek or find consolation in religion. The objective correlate for this grief, a feather, is one of the most poetic elaborations in a book which is studded with them. It is a personal adaptation of a caption for a black-and-white sketch he saw in an archaeological museum some distance into his mourning. The drawing showed a child buried nestled in a swan’s wing. The image provided consolation for the grieving parent, and finds its own delicate translation in the idiosyncratic secular ritual of marking his own child’s grave with a single feather, and writing miraculous prose about what the personal symbolism old and new might entail.

To return to the provenance of the writer’s disciplinary alignments and his negotiation of them, these essays intrigue for another reason. Arthur’s essays explicitly eschew belief in God, but struggle to articulate a more contemporary and secular definition of the sacred. Perhaps the most repeated word in his lexicon is ‘wonder’. He follows the Zen masters and Blake’s lead in trying to see the world in a grain of sand, and frequently finds wonder and exquisiteness in the banal, the everyday. He demonstrates that human beings do not need the authority of the church or academy to predetermine how they experience the wonder of day-to-day reality, that: ‘We daily deal in the incredible’ (p.83). What he reveals to be incredible is the operation of an independently thinking mind and moral sensibility, what lies hidden behind the veil of ordinariness, and at the heart of dead words, his awareness that his own consciousness is but one of many, potentially as exquisitely tuned as his own in their potential to resist the dead hand of authority when it no longer justifies its existence, if it ever did and however strongly its claims to privileged access to truth were asserted.

This is a superb post-colonial text, as well as being one with much to say about how the sacred might be redefined in a genuinely pluralist world, a world in which the terms sacred and secular would not be separated by a drawn sword. It offers insights into a life lived richly and thoughtfully in a particularly interesting place and time. Congratulations
to the publishers for picking up so unusual a text and for discerning its socially progressive agendas.

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FRANCES DEVLIN-GLASS


The publicity accompanying this book refers to it as ‘heroic’ and ‘indispensable’, and these are not inappropriate descriptions. The book offers an historiographic guide to the whole sweep of Irish-American history (which necessarily includes the Irish background), deftly weaving substantive information and astute historiographical judgements. A series of chronological chapters outline a ‘History of Irish Americans from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century’. There are four valuable and stimulating thematic chapters on Gender and the Family, Politics, Nationalism, and Race in Irish-American History, a section of briefer, encyclopaedia-like articles on prominent Irish-American people, organisations and events, and a timeline. Perhaps inevitably, a reader of the whole volume will find some repetition of material between the chronological chapters and the separate brief entries in the later sections of the book, but that will not trouble most users, who will be consulting this as a reference book or as a handy guide to further reading. A great strength of the book is its range, not just over time, but across the fields of immigration, social, economic and cultural history.

The colonial sections of the book deal well with the difficulties of researching the largely Protestant early Irish and Scotch-Irish migration to North America, and with the sometimes extravagant historiography which surrounds them. The nineteenth-century and Famine chapters give an excellent guide to work in these rapidly changing areas of scholarship. The twentieth-century chapters are more political and cultural in their focus on latter-day Irish Americans, though still with careful attention to the demographics of the continuing flow of migration from Ireland.

Meagher describes a dynamic Irish-American history, one certainly not able to fit comfortably into a simple model of assimilation to dominant American values or proud ethnic resistance to them. He understands Irish-American culture as a changing, created and invented