



Rural Gloom and Mayo Gothic

Title	Rural Gloom and Mayo Gothic
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	1999-03-27
Publisher	The Irish Times

Abominable Bogmen

A Crooked Field

by Colm O'Gaora

Picador

313pp, £12.99 in UK

In the Name of the Wolf

by John F. Deane

Blackstaff

172pp, £8.99 in UK

Set mainly in rural Ireland over the last three decades, the plot of Colm O'Gaora's first novel is so basic as to be paradigmatic. Following the death of her mother, Helen is left alone with her father, Kelly, a curmudgeon and small farmer; a progressively miserable existence as Kelly degenerates into gambling and drink reaches a nadir when he sexually assaults her; she strikes out for freedom in London for a year but tragedy strikes when the worry of an unwanted pregnancy turns into the pain of a miscarriage; she returns home where life continues much as before.

With an approach that is slow and accumulative, O'Gaora's first hundred pages are carefully crafted. His attention to the habits and chores of everyday farm and domestic life is precise; he can make even the ironing of clothes seem interesting and delightful depictions of the ceremonies of tea punctuate the entire story. The style loosens after the scene shifts to London however, and there are many *longueurs*. Uniformity of pace is particularly damaged through the structure of the closing chapters when we are jerked twelve years into the future where Helen and her husband look after the ageing and still awkward Kelly.

The main problem is one of characterisation. While stories of afflicted women who ultimately triumph (Helen, at the end, is pursuing a degree course) must be told, their basis in reality can often be diminished by turning that against which such women have to fight into a mere cipher. Kelly conforms to a recognisable Bull McCabe-ish stereotype, more earth than flesh, and, though a few lines explain his background, there is little effort made to develop his individuality. While Helen goes about establishing her unique humanity, her father and his way of life are gelled together as mere symbol: the sounds of farm work are 'like a calling to pagan ritual'; Kelly's shouts are 'like that of some primal animal'; he kneels down before his crops 'like a man at worship'. This reaches the ridiculous stage when, in his sleep, he roars 'The fields! The fields!' And, just in case his emotionlessness is not accentuated enough, Helen is dropped into an inevitably doomed early relationship with an antinomic poetic type for whom the land provides for sensitive observations rather than the making of a living.

The predictability of the whole thing is unfortunate, since O'Gaora's eye for detail and his ear for idiom are impeccable. If he can be more idiosyncratic with his storylines and more editorially ruthless in their elaboration, there is no doubt that he will, in future efforts, turn the frequently fine writing here into something original and cohesive.

I would not like to hazard a guess as to the reasons why, but recent Mayo fiction writers appear to be particularly attracted to the gothic mode. Following Raymond Deane and Mike McCormack, here is John F. Deane's third novel, an Achill Island tale of mystery and imagination replete with references to Poe.

In the Name tells the strange story of how Patricia O'Higgins and her environs develop a similar ailment around the middle years of this century. Just as she is born, an invisible beast begins

to raid the mountains and townland, slaughtering sheep and dogs, leaving a gangrenous stench in its wake and bringing down a miasma of evil that incites peaceful people towards heinous deeds. It is eventually decided that this is some kind of werewolf and its activities are, through the etymological connection, a metaphoric extension of the incipient disease of *lupus* that afflicts Patricia with headaches and contortions. As in all good gothic tales, irresolution is involved: the projected nightmare of the werewolf is physically experienced by various townspeople but it never actually materialises.

Essentially about an elemental battle between good and evil, health and disease, the tale's fable quality would be more effective if things were more succinct. Deane could have done without the weighted forecastings of doom in his theological passages ('Evil's in our nature') and the schoolroom discussion of lycanthropy ('The men say the wolf is the devil's dog sir'). Also, the repeated equation of the beast's howl with the banshee somehow robs the horror of its unfamiliarity.

While comedy sometimes sits uneasily with the sonorous themes here (the whole thing nearly dissolves in pure farce when the monster is referred to as 'the abominable bogman'), Deane is obviously on a spree, employing outlandish character names and writing dialogue in a heightened local idiom. There is some standardised monster-mash carry on ('something approached across the soft sucking surfaces of the moor') with even a good old-fashioned beast hunt towards the end, complete with clubs, pitchforks and silver bullet. Clipping along at a ferocious pace, this is, overall, convincingly unreal stuff.

John Kenny.