

The Broken Boy

Patrick Cockburn

Vintage, £7.99

The award-winning foreign correspondent for *The Independent* is on more native ground with this idiosyncratically augmented autobiography. Cockburn's memories of boyhood, specifically his contracting of and recovery from Polio when he returned with his parents from London to Youghal in the 1950s, expands into two further areas: a general account of the Cork polio epidemic of the time, the last of its kind in the world, and a detailed tracing of a frequently eccentric Anglo-Irish ancestry. Amid moments of implicit humour and anecdotal diversion a beguiling honesty is the keynote, and Cockburn is as forensically detached in everything as he is in his scientific explanation of the poliomyelitis virus. While separate to some degree, the narrative strands are uniformly tightened by the head-on, no-nonsense prose of a natural reporter. In its assiduous avoidance of self-regarding pathos, this memoir is a model example of how restraint in style and expression can increase the value of personal reflection.

John Kenny