

# *Mediating Extremes – A Journey of Rediscovery in Chile*

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this article is to explore the healing capacity of travel, as exemplified in the travel account, Between Extremes. It also analyses how landscapes and locations have been mythologized, converted into sites of exilic exploration, Patagonia particularly. These sites then become places to enable the recovery of self and identity.*

*Between Extremes* (1999) by John McCarthy and Brian Keenan is a travel book born out of personal tragedy and suffering, and reflects the friendship that survives that trauma. The response of two men to the people and landscape of Chile and their voyage from an imagined landscape to the reality of Chile highlights the capacity for renewal inherent in travel for those who open themselves up to it. Both men respond to Chile and engage with the Chilean people and the trauma left by Pinochet and through this try to overcome their own experiences of being “*desaparecidos*”. Delving into the ghosts of their own past and that of those who have travelled before them reveals the highly intertextual aspect of travel writing and its predilection for creating and mythologizing place. It is within these contexts that I frame this paper and indeed which frames the journey of these two men.

In December 1985 Brian Keenan left his Belfast home to teach in the American University in Beirut, despite the unstable political situation and the potential threat of kidnapping. He assumed his nationality would protect him. Even though he came from a loyalist, Protestant background he carried an Irish passport, something his family only found out after his kidnapping.<sup>1</sup> But on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1986 he was kidnapped by Shiite fundamentalists and for the subsequent four and half years he was beaten, tortured and terrorised whilst confined in a series of tiny four by four cells until his release in August 1990.

His captivity was partially mitigated by the fact that he was not alone all this time, as barely a month after his capture an English journalist John McCarthy (ironically covering the hostage stories in Beirut) was himself kidnapped and put in a cell with Keenan. Throughout their captivity these two very different characters, “an Irish, working-class Socialist from Belfast and an English ex-public school boy and international journalist” as Keenan puts it in his preface to his account of the experience

in captivity, *An Evil Cradling* (1992), went through four years of blindfolds and beatings, despair and repeatedly dashed hopes. Nonetheless they managed to forge bonds of friendship that sustained them through horrific experiences.

Both of them later tried in their own way to capture in writing their experience of captivity. The aforementioned *An Evil Cradling*, later adapted for a film entitled *Blind Flight* in 2003, and John McCarthy's book *Some Other Rainbow* (1993), which was co-written with his girlfriend of the time, Jill Morrell. Like both men, the books are extremely different. Keenan intellectualises the experience and gives an in-depth and honest record of his descent into madness, the ghosts that visited him and how he coped with the knowledge of his frequent journeys into insanity and back.<sup>2</sup> McCarthy on the other hand, gives a much more straightforward, chronological account of his ordeal which is written in alternating chapters (as is *Between Extremes*) with his girlfriend narrating what it was like to be the one left behind with no knowledge of whether John was alive or dead and desperately trying to get disinterested governments involved. The joyous occasion of Keenan's release in August 1990 was overshadowed by the fact that John McCarthy would have to survive alone for a further six months.

## Genesis of the journey

Denied their freedom of movement physically, they embarked on mental journeys and planned these travels together. Their captors gave them random reading material, such as an encyclopaedia, Freya Stark's *Beyond Euphrates* and *National Geographic* magazines. They may have been hoping to taunt them with these images of the outside world, but instead they added impetus to the idea of travelling within and outside their minds. These texts and pictures suffuse the perceptions of the two captives and their imagined travels leading to conversations which McCarthy describes as going "on mental voyages that happily compensated for the physical journeys we were denied by circumstance" (McCarthy 130). Using their sparse resources, they built up an itinerary and travelled all over the world and through those well-worn pages found a vent for the claustrophobic restrictions in their lives. In his memoir McCarthy writes "We [used] the encyclopaedia to make plans, taking ourselves out of that room to beautiful, exotic places, places full of joyful freedom, sailing oceans, crossing mountain ranges and doing something worthwhile" (347). When they lacked sufficient information about a place they simply invented the details and created imaginary landscapes, one of which was Chile. Their "mindscapes" inspired the idiosyncratic dream of starting a yak farm in Chile, proving that their sense of humour had not been unduly affected.

It is not difficult to see what attracted two prisoners in a four by four cell to the vast expanse of Chile and of Patagonia in particular. Patagonia has long been a draw for travellers and its landscape has been frequently narrated, though its depiction varies from the enthralling by Darwin, animistic by Hudson or full of eccentrics, immigrants and exiles as seen in both Bruce Chatwin's, *In Patagonia* (1997) and Luis Sepúlveda's

*Patagonia Express* (1995). It is hard to have an unmediated view of its landscape or travel an unknown path. In fact, Patagonia has become an almost globalised destination, forming an essential part of a worldwide travelling circuit.<sup>3</sup>

Their account opens with the oft-cited passage from Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* in which he meditates upon the strange fascination that Patagonia continued to exert on him, despite the fact that he could only describe it in negative terms:

[...] these plains are pronounced by all wretched and useless. They can be described only by negative possessions; without habitations, without water, without trees, without mountains, they support only a few dwarf plants. Why, then ... have these arid wastes taken so firm a hold of my memory? (Darwin 374).

This sentiment is later echoed by Paul Theroux in his classic travelogue *Patagonia Express*, when he calls it a "nowhere place".

But far from being a "nowhere place", for Keenan and McCarthy it is in fact, a "somewhere" place with a specific agenda, though one predicated on it being the end of the world and as far as possible from their place of incarceration. In discussing peripheral zones Peter Bishop makes the point that peripheral places are often used as an imaginative escape and in fact lend themselves to fantasy making (Bishop 7). The fantasy making in question was an essential tool in preserving their sanity and a strategy for the continued survival of their identities. At the beginning of *Between Extremes* they recount a conversation in which they discussed the merits of starting a farm in Patagonia and they make a promise that when they were released they would visit Chile and see about realising that dream. Their mental journeys to Patagonia mediated between the harsh reality of life in captivity and what they hoped awaited them after. This mediation thus becomes a form of resistance and bolstered their faith in life after captivity; and fulfilling those plans and dreams would be a way of regaining that freedom denied them for so long. It is this experience which sets the basis for how they travel in Chile. Ostensibly they are looking into the yak farm, but in reality they are looking to see how they have dealt with life "outside", if it has changed them and if the bonds of friendship still hold. McCarthy notes at the beginning of the journey "I wonder to what degree, if any, we may have lost the ability to read each other's feelings and react in tandem to situations" (32).

It becomes a multi-layered journey, not only in time but also back in time. They will once more be confined to small spaces (train compartments for example) but this time it will be on their own terms. This time they have chosen to be in each other's company. They are aware of the travellers who have gone before them and they discuss the various ones they have read "as if trying to fit ourselves into the appropriate mould" (33). Keenan sums up his ideas on the purpose of travel writing as having to "engage the reader with a new and imagined present [...] to convey the essence of an incident or a place rather than the fact of it" (33), reminiscent of Lawrence Durrell who notes that we should "travel with the eyes of the spirit wide open, and not too much factual information" (Durrell 160).

It took them five years of being “home” to fulfil the plans they had while captured and it speaks to the strength of Keenan’s convictions that he went to Chile despite the fact that his wife was pregnant with their first child. The initial need and hunger for travel which had drawn him to Lebanon, now drew him to the imagined country of their incarceration. The five years gave them ample time to find out more about Chile, its history and its other visitors. They travel with a desire to investigate how the Chilean people have dealt with the ghosts of “*los desaparecidos*”. Coming from their position as former hostages it is important to them to find out how people overcome experiences such as theirs. This is possibly a topic most travellers to this region are interested in, as the Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman notes “It is difficult to evade certain topics in Chile, and the disappeared constitute one of them” (Timerman 131).

They are preoccupied with Chile’s past and travel with preconceptions about the Pinochet regime and people’s reactions to it. They constantly question the people they meet about what it was like for them during the regime though they are restricted in their interaction with many Chileans, as they don’t speak Spanish. Nonetheless they get a sample of the population (tour guides, taxi drivers and some wealthy friends of friends) and they are taken aback at the responses they get. Their first guide mumbles what feels to them to be an automated response about “the crisis” but refuses to be drawn on it. This contrasts with the pragmatic approach of the taxi driver in Calama who states that “Sure many bad things happen [...] but when you’re hungry you don’t care who gives you bread” (114).

Enzo, another of their drivers, responds that although everyone knew it was a bad time, “the country’s so spread out and there are so many views it all just gets passed over somehow” (151). Let the past stay in the past seems to be the common reaction. Whilst they find little in the way of denial of their history, they get a sense that people are not yet ready to face it. Timerman also believed that “the vast majority went about their everyday business, tied to routine like sleepwalkers. The Chileans call this form of evasion ‘submarining’. They want to slip by unnoticed, like submarines” (Timerman 2). Towards the end of their journey McCarthy mulls over the experience and notes “We came here with predetermined attitudes to Pinochet’s regime and, while these have not changed, our growing understanding of Chile has brought about a more subtle appreciation of how the ‘military period’ came about [...]” I have to ask myself whether we are stuck in Chile’s past more than the Chileans (380). He effectively upends the stereotypical representation of place as timeless, and portrays the Western traveller as the one mired in their own preconceptions of time and space.

In *Between Extremes* Keenan and McCarthy alternately narrate their travels and experiences, with McCarthy writing in the present tense giving us a more immediate tone, leading us to believe we are gaining access to unedited views. It feels as if he is writing on the move, and in fact Keenan comments on the fact that McCarthy was constantly writing on his Psion. Keenan, on the other hand, writes in the past tense, giving the impression of having digested the experience first before serving it up to us. McCarthy’s laconic, investigative style contrasts with Keenan’s introspective, evocative

and earnest one. However, McCarthy's journalistic background and style make him inaccessible at times, though he is an engagingly honest man. He desperately wants "to be the perfect traveller, seasoned, rugged yet with a certain élan". In effect, to emulate Bruce Chatwin. But all he feels is "slightly daft. How can one be adequately equipped in a country where you can move through every conceivable type of terrain and climate?" (94). So we are left feeling that Keenan is more "knowable" as his soul-searching gives us access to his inner thoughts.

### **Ghostly companions**

Although Brian Keenan is physically travelling with John McCarthy, he also has spiritual companions. He travels with the ghosts of Pablo Neruda and Bernardo O' Higgins, whose company he hopes will help him understand Chile and his own need to explore both physical landscapes which he believes "are a mirror of, or perhaps into, our inner landscapes" (43). He feels that Neruda's poetry will help mediate the land for him and help him interpret the signs he finds on the journey. He values signs and believes spirits leave messages and clues for him to follow. For example, upon his release he was given a copy of Neruda's *Canto General* and this was the first sign for him that the Chilean journey was one that had to be made and that Neruda had been chosen as his spirit guide. The figure of Bernardo O' Higgins is also a compelling one for him as he identifies with his fight against colonialism, his betrayal and above all, his ultimate exile from Chile. Keenan writes "I have always believed all of life is a journey and felt myself to be a perpetual exile" (83). The theme of exile finds resonance in many of the connections in the narrative as well as connections between his two Chilean heroes in Neruda's poem about "Bernardo O' Higgins Riquelme" all of which lead him to believe in the predestined nature of their journey. Not only has much travel of the writing been predicated on the notion of exile but the critic Casey Blanton notes that most writers see themselves as exiles and that "part of the darkness of their books comes from their tendency to portray a world full of exiles, even a world exiled from itself" (Blanton xiv). Keenan's notion of what it is to be an exile is inextricably linked to those who went before him and their exilic state.

It is clear from the moment of their arrival in Chile that ghosts and spirits will have a major part to play in this narrative. Keenan has a brief encounter on the plane with a Chilean woman who he believes could be Isabel Allende, whose novel *The House of Spirits* John McCarthy is reading. When he looks for her to compare her picture with the one on the dust jacket she has disappeared. Whether she was a ghostly apparition or not, for him it is a sign and he reveals "that was one of the reasons I came to Chile, to find my own particular house of spirits" (28). When people hear the reason behind the trip they are astounded. Here are actual "*re-aparecidos*", proof that people can return from whatever hell they were in and people respond to them with a variety of emotions, from disbelief to openly crying.

So what resonance does Chile have with the imaginary landscape they had concocted while incarcerated? At first sight it would seem very little. Their initial reaction to the landscape is disbelief. They are dumbfounded by what they find. Upon travelling into the mountains, they are engulfed in a heavy fog but, writes Keenan “the captive imagination had not conjured the Andes in this way: anxious, heavy breathing in a bank of fog” (64). As if responding to their confusion, the fog clears and suddenly they are confronted with a landscape they had expected. This may be literary artifice; nonetheless they receive their first clue that their imagined land may have been more invention than fact.

## **The Atacama**

The desert proves to be a challenge for both of them. It brings out a primeval response in them, both writers react to the space and solitude of the desert as an anathema to captivity. But it isn't totally trustworthy, as it contains too many paradoxes for it to be a secure environment. Looks are deceiving and hard surfaces can be soft and vice versa. For McCarthy it exerts the same draw as it did for Darwin, this place of negative images enthralls him. But its absence, its “desertedness” makes both of them uneasy and there is no inclination to celebrate its emptiness. Having themselves been absent for so long, the *idea* of unbounded space seems to have had more sway than its actuality.

They visit various mines, one of which is Santa Laura. This name resonates with wistfulness and romance for Keenan. The reality is “a crumbling mine in the desert” (99). A nearby graveyard invokes the ghosts of the people to come and tell their stories to him which he calls “the chorus of the dead”. The ruins and the surroundings won't allow them to rest. There is an echo of Neruda's sentiment here when he visited Macchu Picchu “En la soledad de las ruinas, la muerte no puede apartarse de los pensamientos” (Aguirre 14). The mines come to represent, as they do in many cultures, the suffering of the people and the degradation of the landscape. McCarthy concurs “Although the landscape is often harsh it actually looks malign only where man has disturbed the surface; his leavings from the mines or diggings look squalid” (109).

As they travel on however, Keenan's response to the desert is that of a smothering abyss. He lashes out with melodramatic fury because he feels “the landscape is perversely the opposite of all natural laws and totally antipathetic towards human needs” (119). He experiences extreme disillusionment with the desert. For him it was to be a place of almost sacred association. It was to have induced a spiritual, meditative state: “Where was this magical desert that had illuminated the mind of the mystic?” he cries (136). He turns to Neruda for help in understanding the Atacama but he cannot reconcile Neruda's poetry to the landscape, finding the imagery too rich and sensual for the environment he is observing. He becomes furious with what he sees as the deception of writers such as William Thesiger and T.E. Lawrence whose travel writing had narrated and even created the myth of the desert as a place of inner enlightenment, meditation or spiritual awakening. Their creation was flawed in Keenan's eyes. He rages at the inanimate desert, and as he gets increasingly

frenzied it becomes an adversary for him: “This environment was ugly and hostile, a lamentable landmass that would give no respite to my loathing of it” (136).

The darkness Blanton referred to is prevalent throughout this section of the book. The *mindscape* of Patagonia, the “nowhere place” was to have been a blank page onto which Keenan as an exile, traveller, explorer and writer would inscribe his self and identity in order to recover and renew his own sundered self. His disillusionment with the desert gives way to despair and melancholy as later on they travel through the mountains to the Valley of the Moon. Keenan reads Neruda’s lyrical *100 Love Sonnets* which he applies as an antidote to the barren and harsh landscape. However, the desert can’t be written off so easily. Soon after this it serves up another surprise when they stop off at an oasis which acts as a sanctuary and balm to Keenan’s frayed nerves and through its beauty McCarthy realises that “although we had imagined great vistas, desert plains and mountains in captivity, the reality is far, far greater. What we are seeing could not be dreamed”. The paradoxical landscape “is beyond anyone’s most fertile imagination”. They could never have hoped to feel the range of emotions the scenery would provoke in them. “Excitement, happiness, awe and even fear were likely enough but not that they should come all together and create a more profound feeling” (148). The desert had not finished with Keenan however. His muse had not abandoned him; it was waiting in the Valley of the Moon.

At first he believed it was another trip to a “hideous nowhere”, betraying his frustration at having to follow an itinerary which obsessed McCarthy. Upon looking at the sand dunes they were to climb he realises “I was looking at that imaginary desert I had wished for [...] in this hard, brutal land I had found a feminine soulscape” (154). He feels he has gained entry into the landscape which triggers memories of his youth and a play he had once performed in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, about the conquest of Peru and now the darkness lifts and he can begin the process of recovering memories and his sense of identity.

## **The Andes**

By the time they get to The Andes they have been joined by a photographer friend, Tom Hickman, who serves to remind us that they are writing a commissioned book. This landscape has resonance with Keenan because both Neruda and Bernardo O’ Higgins had to make the same journey. In 1949 Neruda had traversed it while escaping into exile after falling foul of the President Gabriel Videla (whom he had helped into power). He wrote a series of poems vilifying him in *Canto General*, one of which is explicitly titled “González Videla el traidor de Chile”. O’ Higgins had used this route after the defeat at Rancagua in 1814 when he went to Argentina to get away from the Imperial forces. Here the landscape reinforces the reality of exile as: “the physical scale of [it] such vital parts of Chile’s identity, must enforce the sense of cruel finality for the exile” (224).

Peter Hulme puts forward the idea that “difficult, occasionally arduous conditions betoken a seriousness of purpose” (92). By striving to push through the physical limits and boundaries they may also overcome their past and present fears. At one stage Keenan seriously considers turning back as the dizzying heights and constant terror wear him down but feels it would be a betrayal of both John’s friendship and of the communication and understanding he feels he has with Neruda and O’ Higgins. If they had persevered, and the landscape had not beaten them, then he too would go on. The multi-layered element of the journey is reinforced when the trek starts to trigger memories of Lebanon and Keenan compares it to being in prison “Fear and tedium are something we constantly have to deal with, increasingly I resort to the same strategies in the saddle as I did on my prison mattress” (240). But now instead of reading psalms he reads Neruda’s sonnets, in English of course. Around the campfire in the evenings he talks to McCarthy and the others in the group about how they deal with their fears. The final “conquest” of The Andes is transformed into a therapeutic device. They say they feel like God “perched here where the mountains pierced the sky, [having] made the journey of our captive imaginings into a reality”. They later referred to the experience as “overcoming fear and terror and recognising them as ghosts from the past and shunning them” (250). They are appropriating and retrieving their own past, which Keenan immediately tries to capture into a “memorium” and feels guided by Neruda into writing a poem:

*I have infiltrated the stone walls of icons  
and ice ages  
I have stood in the blitzkrieg and the broadside  
of elemental siege  
I have known the neck of Pegasus grow numb  
beneath the stone cold impress of the night  
I have felt raw muscle in man and beast  
quiver in every ascent  
But I know the end of the gallop in the  
footless mist  
For me there is no God but this  
The end long spine of stone and light  
and the advent  
Of the beast man taking eagle flight (254).*

## **Patagonia**

Patagonia reveals the deepest level of intertextuality in the narrative, as the accounts I mentioned earlier attest to. Keenan himself acknowledges and outlines a history of travellers to the region, a kind of meta-travel writing, and indeed its effect upon literary history from, Melville to Swift and Poe and on to Hudson (353). Alison

Russell observes that “intertextual references offer more than background material or points of comparison; they illustrate the ability of language to travel or move through space and also reveal a post-modern concern with issues of authority and ownership as they relate to both language and land” (Russell 94-5). Neither man claims authority or ownership over the land or its description as Keenan recognises that “it would be pointless to argue who came nearer the truth [as it] is only one’s experience of it” (353).

They take turns to read a book called *A Happy Captive*, which describes the journey and landscape they are passing through, through the eyes of Spanish hostage of the Chilean Indians. An altogether different account of a time in captivity, they nonetheless revisit the past and present through the passages written in 1629. Their time on board the boat to Patagonia, though serving to cement the friendship, also shows the ending of past habits which symbolized captivity, as Keenan spots a game John and he used to play whilst captive, but makes no move to touch it. Upon disembarking they find the son of a Croatian immigrant is their guide and he is vaguely reminiscent of a Chatwin creation. They receive a huge shock upon beginning this part of their journey, as they had not been expecting the sheer size and grandeur of the place “The landscape of Patagonia dwarfs even the giant scale of Chile that we have already seen” (322). On viewing the pampas their absurd yak farm fantasy is exposed. They are humbled by nature and the ability of the people they meet to survive in such isolated conditions. The solitude of life there is not something repellent however, but something which needs to be acknowledged, as Keenan notes “aleness is not a dreadful place once we understand how to be with ourselves on our own” (326).

Their encounter with Alfonso Campos and his wife Isabel brings their literary journey and ghostly connections almost full circle. They own an estate in the middle of the barren landscape of San Gregorio. Their experience of the place and by extension the owners “With the atmosphere of a museum, a place embalmed in time, stubbornly refusing to accept the imperatives of modernity” is one of nostalgia (339). Alfonso is desperately trying to revert the estate to its former size pre-Allende, to reorder history. In an ironic twist to the tale he is also, proudly, the grandson of Gabriel Videla who had exiled Neruda in 1949. He refers to Neruda as a “lousy Stalinist!” As if this connection were not enough, his wife Isabel had written her thesis on O’ Higgins and had some very disparaging remarks to make about him to Keenan, who found her attitude strangely comforting as she substantiates the mental image he had of his travelling companion. He reads O’ Higgins refusal to marry into the colonial establishment as confirmation of his rebel nature, like Keenan himself “surrendering to the dictates of no-one but his own experience, a rebel, a lover, an outsider to the end” (340).

Their trek through the cordillera of Torre del Paine both realises and ends their fantasy of a yak farm and with its loss the journey has truly ended. After riding for a few hours they emerge into a small valley and their telepathic connection still holds through as both of them immediately recognise the farm they had imagined in captivity. But it arouses mixed feelings of sadness and of endings. Keenan writes that “it was not just that this was the end of our Patagonian trek, it was also the end of the dream that had

sustained us”. By letting that go, they had to face a new future and relationship based on something other than that now obsolete fantasy. They are no longer in survival mode and neither is their relationship. This journey reinforces acceptance of this change. Their therapeutic exploration of their past, to their present rediscovering of each other and what the future holds for them leaves us with a sad but hopeful view of their relationship. We sense that through this multi-layered journeying they have come to terms with the fact that as independent, free men who are no longer responsible for shoring up the mental and physical health of his fellow hostage, they can still be friends, even if the landscapes they will now be exploring are divergent ones.

## Notes

- 1 His family had to deal with bullying and antagonism because of this (Maguire 28).
- 2 See Clare Blake’s excellent essay for a detailed analysis of *An Evil Cradling* and the strategies he used for survival.

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