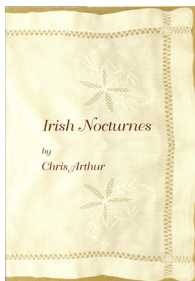


## *Vistas Within Vistas – The Meditative Essays Trilogy by Chris Arthur*



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*Irish Nocturnes*, US: The Davies Group, 1999. 246pp. ISBN 1-888570-49-0.

*Irish Willow*, US: The Davies Group, 2002. 236pp. ISBN 1-888570-46-6.

*Irish Haiku*, US: The Davies Group, 2005. 236pp. ISBN 1-888570-78-4.

A good literary essay presents not only an interesting thesis, but also an effective organization of subtexts which assure a fluent reading. In this sense, regarding the process of essay writing, the reputation of Chris Arthur (Belfast, 1955) is notably increasing, for he is an essayist whose fine perception of essential things and ability to expose these things in a vibrant way combine in the production of beautiful pieces of literature. Arthur has just completed his Irish-themed trilogy of essays composed by the volumes entitled *Irish Nocturnes* (illustrated by Gigi Bayliss), *Irish Willow* (illustrated by Jeff Hall, III) and *Irish Haiku* (illustrated by Jeff Hall III).

In *Irish Nocturnes* the essay topics range from history to death to fear to memory in an attempt to capture things lost in the passage of time. Even though Arthur acknowledges the fickle, ephemeral nature of life and time, he still makes attempts to preserve Ireland's past, with observations and thoughtful, meandering ruminations culled from his own life. As he explains it: "Writing is one of the ways to make a chink in the dark armour with which history is so impenetrably clad, allowing an occasional glimmer of light to illuminate the human story for a moment before it flickers out again" (55). In a way, he also manages to write semi-autobiographical treatises – memoirs without the pretension of self-aggrandizement.

This first book explores living memories, longing, and more-than-fond remembrances of someplace, something or someone – often pervaded by a feeling of displacement. In speaking of the Irish Diaspora, Arthur comments, "We are an adaptable species. We can uproot ourselves if need or opportunity dictates, colonize some new patch of earth [...] But can you ever really feel at home except in the country where you were born?" (239). Indeed, Arthur seems to long for Ireland and his subsequent commentary in whichever nocturne similarly touches upon threads of memory and personal histories, all of which fit in the realm of *nostalgia*.

“Ferrule”, Arthur’s nocturne about the potency and mystery of language, spotlights the highly-specific name for the metal cover on the tips of wooden canes. It is an obscure and even archaic reference, but it highlights his point well: “Language clings to us unshakably, sending its tendrils to creep through us like ivy, finding some purchase in even the most intimate interstices of silence” (21). In “Facing the Family,” Arthur writes of the modern societal trend of knowing little about one’s ancestors; according to a Japanese monk Arthur meets, this shows “a failure to properly confront our own mortality and the essential fact of life’s impermanence” (179). Such an insight increases the number of questions Arthur asks regarding family and family histories, but he never claims to have all the answers – he is content to simply ask questions and leave them unanswered being the reader’s duty to carry his thoughts further.

Even with the occasional misfire or spotty conclusion, Arthur never fails to make his reader think, and think deeply at that. He is best at addressing important issues and then making fascinating and enlightened observations. On one hand, he is honest: “As we grew older . . . we lost heart and entered that dispirited state of mind which comes to believe that there is only one mundane and bounded world to live in” (107). On the other, he is perceptive: “One of the pleasures of adult intimacy involves a swapping of significant places; introducing one’s partner to that secret mapping of the world which holds so much of your story, and being introduced in turn to theirs” (200). It is such commentary and small statements like these that keep the reader interested and impressed.

In *Irish Willow*, Arthur revisits those aspects of existence and humanity that have always fascinated him: time, memory, language and interpersonal connections. In this second round of essays, though, he focuses less on providing social commentary about the religious violence in Northern Ireland than he did in *Irish Nocturnes*. While Arthur can’t avoid speaking about that strife which has so indelibly left its mark on his life, he now seems more interested in existential issues and contents himself to remain in that heady realm of abstract musings and questionings. As he writes, “Patterns. Stories. Meanings. These are what I search for [...]. I try different ways to weave them together, follow different narrative imaginings that might extend their fragmentariness into something more closely approaching a sense-bestowing whole” (14). *Irish Willow*, the final result, is at once more unified and focused than Arthur’s previous anthology

This second book of the trilogy is at its best in those moments that reveal Arthur’s uncanny knack of producing lovely observations, which sometimes are off-topic, but nevertheless potent in their imagery or insight. Arthur ponders the wonders of photography in various essays and deftly captures the simultaneous permanence and transience of the medium: “I can picture *pictures* easily enough [...] but to summon a likeness of the living, moving face, animated by that particular vitality that was so appealing . . . seems beyond the power of recall” (35). Arthur not only captures the paradoxical nature of memory, but goes one step further arguing that a picture is more than just a snapshot, more than just an interruption of light; it’s a slice of time, preserved for our pleasure and wonderment.

Unlike his first collection, *Irish Willow* displays moments of Arthur's underlying humanity which sometimes veer off-track from the point of his essay to reveal a man beneath the writing. In one tortured thought, Arthur reminisces about an old ex-girlfriend of his, lamenting the instability and incapability of his mind to cement his memories of her: "It's sad that a face [my girlfriend's face] once explored so ravenously by my gaze, once traced so lovingly by my fingers, should have vanished ..." (35). Usually open, Arthur reveals in another moment just how ridiculous he finds the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, which he believes originates from fundamental intolerance and deep-seated prejudices: " [...] I realised how many people are trapped in a sarcophagus of rigid beliefs, a terrible caricature of living faith in which the heart and other vitals are ripped out and the semblance of life is only maintained by the embalming fluid of empty ritual motions: church-going, hymn-singing, and other public rites" (84). Here he clearly sheds any academic impartiality and shows rancour and frustration, revealing the depths of his feeling. No longer is the bloodshed of Northern Ireland a topic for essays and musings; now it is a personal matter that continues to plague him without end.

Arthur's style in *Irish Willow* can be characterized by a more ornate diction and by some intense metaphors, a special ability to manipulate language in neatly-packaged phrases such as the "dull ache of finitude" (24) or "dry stone of mortality" (25). In one case, speaking of his father's fondness for the piano, Arthur calls the tragedy of his father's arthritis, "a dissonant duet of suffering" (130). In one other example, we see some of his custom, metaphorical flourishes: "For a while we mark out our little boundaries, till our fields, life comes gently to fruition, we forget the massive seas surrounding every moment, the cold waters of oblivion, the endless duration of space and time that dwarf all our endeavours, swamping them in the end as finitude overwhelms us and our patchwork fields of friends and family, jewel-bright and previous, are engulfed" (105). His imagery, in this case, was a little bit excessive and Arthur himself seems to recognize his excesses, saying essayists try to "[tie] up loose threads more neatly than they're ever tied up in real life" (106).

The final two essays in this collection are the best of the entire lot. "Atomic Education" is clear and more descriptive than questioning. The essay, which comes across as a character study of a social outcast – Arthur's Uncle Cyril – who was nonetheless a misunderstood visionary, provides us with details that let us construct the setting in our minds: Arthur describes his uncle's house and the neighbourhood, thereby giving us a vivid idea of the grimness and uncertainty in Northern Ireland. As a whole, this essay paints a portrait of a remarkable man living among unremarkable people in a time of violence and grief. Arthur then maintains this subtle tone and embarks upon an ambitious, sprawling coda about his father. "A Tinchel Round my Father" holds up well and raises many questions about the mystery of photographs or, more specifically, life itself. Arthur weaves fragmentary stories about his father (which he assembles based upon compelling photographs of his father as a young man), along with those of himself

and even a pair of WWII refugees. The end result makes us question our knowledge of our parents and of the lives that intersect with ours, either with our recognition or without. Arthur effectively preserves time with these final two essays and arguably succeeds in his goal of “approaching a sense-bestowing whole” to the fragments of his life and our own.

At last, in regard to *Irish Haiku*, the third collection written by Chris Arthur, the reading reveals it as the best of the trilogy. In *Irish Haiku* Arthur recovers the tradition of the meditative essay, brilliantly developed by the North-American Transcendentalists before – and it is no coincidence that the book’s epigraph is from H. D. Thoreau. As for the title of the book, it is very suggestive of the extended meditation or contemplation brought by those brief perceptions, those glimpses on the uncatchable, revealed by haikus. The metaphysical quality of *Irish Haiku* is soon revealed in the book’s *Foreword*: “Instead of any words at all, I would rather start with a blackbird singing in a County Antrim garden.” (xi). After that statement, Arthur (addressing the critical reader?) modestly advances a possible interpretative consideration of his own position as a writer: “A blackbird solitary singing should not create any expectations of what comes next, what went before. Like a clear bell in a meditation hall, it just punctuates the silence, focusing the mind on what passes before it now, this moment that will never come again.” (xi).

The whole book is indeed embedded in a Zen Buddhist atmosphere – or Zen aesthetics; it is impregnated by a poetic vision similar to that of haiku-master Matsuo Bashō. Like in haikus, Arthur’s essays try to catch deep and revealing moments, always with a striking directness – a process of clear seeing that triggers a temporary enlightenment.

“Obelisk”, the first essay of the book, is divided into ten interconnected observations that, “in the form of a verbal obelisk”, elaborate a dynamic speculation on Henderson Ritchie’s death; the narrative is sustained by different settings, angles, viewpoints (even movable ones in terms of chronological order). As Arthur remarks: “Beginning at the beginning – the place we’re always urged to start – is, of course, impossible, unless you are content to operate with the most simplistically constricted notion of origins.” (7).

Other remarkable essays of the collection are “Miracles” and “Water Glass”. The first evolves from the tracing back the origins of some words (“otolith” and “begin”, for instance) to show the miracle of meanings fossilized in mysterious words. As Arthur argues: “Within the literal, another voice is always singing. Why are we so deaf to it?” (66). In “Water Glass”, a detailed description of the city of Lisburn, Arthur recreates the ambience of the streets, the history and the gradual transformation of the place and the religious conflicts to which the place has served as a stage. The essay discusses the Zen practice of walking meditation and even ends by commenting on meditation: “But if meditation teaches us anything it is that first sight conceals within its picture-postcard simplicities views within views, vistas within vistas, of a richness and complexity that are utterly remarkable.” (188).

Arthur's essays excel at many levels, principally because they draw from eclectic sources. Many of his essays cite stories or beliefs from Buddhism and Hinduism, creating an interesting mixture of Europe and Asia. The only critical remark I would add regarding *Irish Haiku* is that sometimes in the book Arthur indulges in clichéd sentences: "Every life is embedded in a web of contexts" (33), "We can often learn a lot from errors" (79), "A great deal of our perception, consciousness and communication depends on selection not storage." (91). Anyhow, Arthur's focus on interweaving his own memories and knowledge of Ireland prevents any slippage into banality.

Arthur, whose prose has been compared to Seamus Heaney's poetry, beautifully transforms individual experiences into universal ones; in his texts, as this trilogy proves, the specific cultural milieu of a specific experience opens itself up to acquire extraordinary – metaphysical, critical and historical – dimensions.