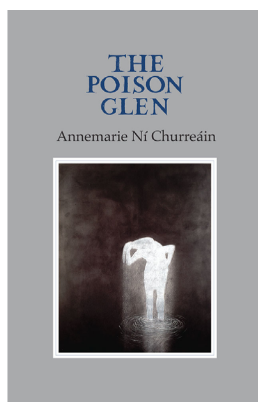

Annemarie Ní Churreáin. *The Poison Glen*. Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2021. 72 pp. ISBN 978-1-91133-814-7 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-91133-815-4 (hardback)

Annemarie Ní Churreáin returns to the literary scene with *The Poison Glen*, a poetry collection which continues the thematic lines she initiated in *Bloodroot* (2017), intertwining Irish landscape, history and legend. The collection consists of forty poems in which different voices and places alternate, unearthing stories of silenced mothers, helpless poor families and their foundlings, while simultaneously exposing both the intolerance of the Irish patriarchal society that prevailed until the end of the twentieth century, and the rottenness and negligence of religious and state-funded institutions, namely Mother and Baby Homes, industrial and reformatory schools.

Ní Churreáin's collection proves to be a necessary revision of a not-too-distant past, since some of the establishments explicitly mentioned in the poems have been active until the last decades of the twentieth century. In fact, the Irish government has very recently made amends through the constitution of two commissions in charge of enquiring into the irregularities committed in places of this nature: the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, which published its final report—The Ryan Report—in 2009, and the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, whose report came out at the beginning of 2021. The conclusions reached by both recognized, among other faults, the malpractice of such institutions—frequently overcrowded and in poor conditions, which led to high mortality rates—and also, especially regarding industrial schools and reformatories, the physical and emotional abuses that went unpunished and which are now exposed and denounced by the poet in this book.

The title *The Poison Glen* refers to a valley in County Donegal, so called because according to legend, in that hollow lay the Irish mythological figure of Balor, wounded in his poisonous eye and thus killed at the hands of his own grandson Lugh. Balor, knowing his fate beforehand, had tried in vain to impede it, first by isolating his daughter Eithne in a tower in Tory Island and then by ordering to kill her three children. Thus, the title captures the essence of a collection aimed at bearing witness to concealed and violent

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aspects of Ireland's past by symbolically standing for the persistence of memory through landscape—"Memory is a curse // that keeps on flowering" (27).

The opening poem, "A Villager Speaks of Eithne", already refers to this legend by focusing on the figure of the isolated mother deprived of her children, as well as on the importance of remembrance and retelling to finally do justice, thus setting the tone of the whole work: "It is written here among the heather rocks and electric eyes: / *She was not her father's animal. / She was not her husband's prize*" (11). In addition to this, Ní Churreáin offers other poems versing on that Irish legend throughout the collection, giving voice not only to the traditional main characters of the story, namely Balor and Lugh, but also to the silenced female characters involved, as is the case with "Eithne's Mother Speak" and "Eithne Speaks of Her Father".

The poetic voice assumes therefore the role of an "eyeless witness" (21) to speak on behalf of those whose stories had been kept secret, of those women whose names were changed upon entering the institutions and of those nameless infants who were buried there in mass graves: "In their honour / I can never again be silent" (15). These inconvenient truths were hidden by religious congregations and families alike: parents confined their pregnant daughters in Mother and Baby Homes due to social prejudice and the organizations were responsible for not registering births and forging adoption signatures. In "The Peacock", a family does not even want to recover their daughter's body, dead in childbirth: "The body was a symbol they would not concede" (56).

Throughout the collection, the emphasis on seclusion and concealment is reinforced through the physical descriptions of the places, through their stone walls and darkness, "In a locked-up state, in a landlocked county" (56). It is through visiting the spaces that the author is able to delve into their hidden histories, with "The Screaming Room" serving as a paradigmatic example by referring to a specific isolated room at Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home into which the women who screamed during childbirth were secluded. Even though the walls might have concealed the sounds, as the poem points out, "It reeks in here of the secrets of the earth" (15).

Ní Churreáin does not limit herself to disclosing dark sides of Ireland's history, but also poignantly criticises those responsible. The longest poem of the collection, "The Foundling Crib", whose title refers to a baby hatch installed in the Foundling Hospital of Dublin where around 200,000 children were abandoned, revolves around the poor economic situation of many families who could not possibly take care of their children—"They carried / dying bodies on their own dying bodies" (19)— and the hypocrisy of

some authorities and philanthropists who profited from that situation—"What obedient servants hunger makes of us in every faith" (18).

In this vein, the author also ironically underlines the maltreatment to which children and adolescents in industrial and reformatory schools were subject. The poem "Boy 462" bitterly concludes that in those places run by religious orders and aimed at educating and enlightening, "*Light was not part of the job*" (36). Furthermore, Ní Churreáin masterly presents a rich variety of poetic forms, some of which parody the structures of religious texts, thus accentuating the ironic tone. Such is the case in "Creed", where the beliefs in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting are substituted by "the naming of sins, the resurrection / of *all the children of the nation cherished equally* / and in the eye-witness everlasting" (12).

The last poems of the collection resolutely offer a hopeful look into the future—"Say aloud, *Never again will you be stolen*" (62)—especially through the final image of a lighthouse in which the village mothers have symbolically gathered to offer light and protection: "We keep the light for safe return" (65). Therefore, Ní Churreáin, with this ending, encourages women to make themselves heard. The poet presents a well-informed and beautifully crafted work that is able both to denounce the concerned authorities and to commemorate the victims, thus serving as a powerful literary revision that condemns the past while simultaneously relieving its burden.

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