



Irish Nocturnes

by

Chris Arthur

Irish Nocturnes

Magda Velloso Fernandes de Tolentino

ARTHUR, Chris. *Irish Nocturnes*. USA: The Davies Group, Aurora Co, 1999.

The word *nocturne* reminds us of nightly wanderings, soft music, nostalgic dreams – and that is precisely the effect the selection of texts in this book conveys to the reader.

The book presents a collection of narratives about Northern Ireland; the author nostalgically weaves his memories of family and country in such a way that he tells the story not only of his own part of the Emerald Island, but of the whole of it and, in its wake, the history of humanity itself. The *nocturnes*, as he calls them, are presented in a form that gives rise to the question of how to call them – chapters, episodes, excerpts, articles, essays or – perhaps – sketches?

In each of these – shall we say – sketches, the author takes aspects of everyday life which induce him into remembering his childhood, and from the reflections about such everyday pieces and experiences he metaphorically traces history back to the beginnings of mankind, building, as he goes, his own perception of the development of his county.

In the first narrative, for example, through a description of linen, he goes back to the time man first started to manipulate the fibre into what was later to become Ireland's great marksmanship, the linen that is not only part of Arthur's memories of infancy, but in a broader way the fabric every foreigner pursues when visiting the country, either in its primitive form or turned into tablecloths, carvers (as the one Arthur uses as a starting point for his reflections) and handkerchiefs, plain or embroidered, the pride of the Irish. He uses linen as a metaphor, both of the fabric of language and of the development into civilization.

In the same vein he metaphorises other objects, as the ferrule he describes in the second essay, whose sound is indelibly carved in his memory, but which is used here to depict part of the culture of the time of his youth in Belfast. But it is also the instrument through which he is telling of the wounds of war, as well as dating his remembrances and reminding the reader that such things as he is describing took place at a determined time. He does not simply include the ferrule as a subject for one of the *nocturnes*; in

order to introduce it he rambles about the acquisition of language which, all things considered, would seem to have nothing to do with the subject in hand.

In all the *nocturnes*, he rambles around the Northern part of the island, going from town to town and from place to place, picking one aspect here, another aspect there, from Lisburn, where he lived as a child, to Belfast, to the castle at Antrim, with all its historical allusions, to Ballinderry, Londonderry and so many other specific places around Belfast. In the "Kingfisher" episode, he maps different parts of Ireland even though, when he describes the bird, he owns at having seen it first in Armagh. But the bird is the pretext he uses for describing a bombing he witnessed in his town of Lisburn, and this description stands out in building his picture of the Ireland of his childhood, in all her struggles, throughout difficult times, to make her own history.

The first words of "Invasions" gives the tone of the whole book: it starts with *Often, without warning and for no reason I have ever been able to detect, my thoughts are invaded by some segment of the past*. The whole book is constructed with segments of the narrator's past which invade his thoughts at pointed times. What makes his remembrances most interesting is the fact that he no longer lives there. As in so many cases, distance sharpens the senses of the exile, and he often sees more acutely the things he no longer contemplates at first hand.

The last sketch dwells painfully on the plight of the exile, which is a poignant aspect of Irish history, mainly in the nineteenth century, but even before that. This last *nocturne* reflects on the difficulty the Irish faced when leaving the land, as the land itself was so ingrained in their beings as to make them feel lost and deprived of identity when obliged to leave it, never thenceforward finding themselves at home again either elsewhere or back in their homeland.

The author describes his own leaving as a different experience from those who had to leave home to make a living elsewhere, and we, as readers, notice his endeavour at depicting his wanderings away from Northern Ireland in an unromantic way, perhaps trying to make sense himself of his dealing with the Mother Country, as he calls it, and in an attempt at positioning himself as a human being.

The book *Irish Nocturnes* is well worth reading. Beautiful, poignant, his mapping of Ireland, though not all encompassing, is thoughtful and deep. The language, straightforward at times, lyrical at others, leads us on in an easy and fluent reading, sharply goading us into sharing his remembrances and his musings about himself and his relationship with Ireland.