

Grotesquely Free, Though Ruled by Symmetry

Richard Murphy, *Collected Poems*. Gallery, £25 (hbk), £13.95 (pbk)

"Tropically sensual behind puritan desks": such is Richard Murphy's description of native children "chanting hymns" at the school his father established for the children of the workers on his tobacco farm in Southern Rhodesia in the 1950s. The dichotomy is startling and captures the essential conflict at the heart of Murphy's work, the struggle between order and nature, between cultural demands and the inner life, a dichotomy the reader can now explore, as a piece, in the *Collected Poems*. The work produced here spans forty years and brings together the major collections, *Sailing to an Island* (1963), *The Battle of Aughrim* with "The God Who Eats Corn" (1968), *High Island* (1974) and *The Price of Stone* (1985). Just a small selection from *The Mirror Wall* (1989), a collection inspired by Sinhalese songs of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, has been included.

In a note in the back of the *Collected*, on the long poem "The God Who Eats Corn" (about his father), Murphy refers to his father's paternal grandfather who "emerged from ignorance and poverty in Ireland through the Carlow village school of which he became the master in 1840". "Carlow Village School" from *The Price of Stone* pays tribute to this schoolmaster who struggled through repression and famine to educate himself and his pupils. The voice of the schoolhouse addresses the poet:

Much as you need a sonnet house to save
Your muse, while sifting through our foetid pits
Of blighted roots, he needed my firm, grave
Façade, to be freed from bog-dens and sod-huts.

Such symmetry he gained from me, you got
By birth, given his names. Twenty poor scholars,
Birched if they uttered Irish words, he taught
To speak like you, faults notched on wooden collars.

In order to win liberation from "bog-dens and sod-huts", the school-

master had to turn towards the “grave/ Façade” of the schoolhouse to support his mission. Over one hundred years later, Murphy’s father waged a similar war against ignorance and oppression and built his school at a time when “the policy of white settlers was to keep Africans ignorant in order to ensure a supply of cheap, submissive, manual labourers. Laudable, but the younger Murphy cannot rest easy, he cannot dumbly accept the constraints of “puritan desks” on the free spirit, the “lean bodies” of children “chanting hymns”. Throughout his work, we can see variations on this theme of the struggle between the free self and the demands of external order, explored both at sea and on dry land, but with little resolution.

Even though he was born into a world of privilege, that of the “big house” Anglo-Irish, in Co. Galway, (the blurb on the back of the *Collected* claims he was born in Co. Mayo) it is evident that, in fact, Murphy’s is a very mixed heritage and the personal and cultural battles we see fought in his poetry have echoes down through the generations of his family right back to 1840 and before. He spent five years of his childhood in Ceylon where his father served with the British colonial service. Murphy senior later succeeded the Duke of Windsor as Governor of the Bahamas until his retirement in 1949 when he moved to Southern Rhodesia. There he deputised in governing roles as well as setting up his tobacco farm, “the young plantation of his old age” as it’s called in “The God Who Eats Corn”.

Murphy was educated mainly at a prep school in Dublin (Baymount Preparatory School, Dollymount) before attending Canterbury School, where he sang in the choir, Wellington College (Berkshire), where he began to write poetry, and Magdalen College Oxford where he studied under C.S. Lewis. He then spent some time at the Sorbonne, ran a school in Crete for about two years and worked for an insurance broker in London, while living on and off in the West of Ireland. He returned to Ireland full time in 1955 and lived for a time in Co. Wicklow. When Murphy and his wife, Patricia Avis divorced in 1958 he found himself drawn to the west of Ireland once again, where, in 1959, he bought a Galway hooker, the *Ave Maria*, and spent his time living the life of the seafarer, fishing and ferrying, and drawing on the power of the sea to create metaphors of self-exploration found throughout his early work.

In this early work, Murphy goes sailing, in a struggle to uncover personal, poetic and cultural structures he can inhabit with some degree of comfort. In these poems, his preoccupation is largely to do with self-identity and his own particular place within Irish culture. There seems to be a strong imprint of inherited guilt in his work, but this comes more to the surface in the later work from 1974. By 1963, he had published *Sailing to an Island*, which included “The Cleggan Disaster” (winner of a Guinness poetry award in 1962). Set off the

west coast of Ireland in 1927 (the year Murphy was born), “The Cleggan Disaster” is a strong narrative poem evoking, with compelling accuracy, all the violent, unrelenting threat to life and limb a full-blown storm at sea can hold for the crews of small boats. The poem, in Murphy’s own words, “celebrates a fisherman who survived by holding on to his nets instead of giving up the struggle.” Pat Concannon, who sailed in the *Ave Maria*, and was also a survivor of the Cleggan disaster, said of the poem, “What you’ve said is true. And it’s well put together”. Murphy had done his homework, having sailed from Spiddal to Cleggan by night to help him imbue the poet’s consciousness with the practicalities of the experienced boatman.

Following the poetic and psychological initiation of *Sailing to an Island* and the attempts to liberate himself from his Anglo-Protestant background and escape into what he perceives as the imaginative freedom of the “truly Irish”, as he referred to it in the *Listener* in 1963), Murphy turns to the historical events of the battle of Aughrim on which he holds irreconcilable viewpoints, illustrative of his dual sense of his own origins and allegiances. *The Battle of Aughrim* (commissioned by the BBC Third Programme) brought him recognition as a poetic voice of the tail end of Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, albeit shot through with the alienated taint of a “truly Irish” sensibility. Even though the framework of this four-parter, divided into “Now”, “Before”, “During” and “After”, is historical, and sometimes awkwardly so, for example with the inclusion of “St. Ruth’s address to the Irish army”, Murphy’s main preoccupation is, again, a search for self-justification in a world where the trappings of his immediate ancestry, the Protestant Ascendancy and “big house” experience have all but disappeared. No matter how much he strives to escape into a freer place, he is compelled to acknowledge that he is the slave of two conflicting drives, the Ascendancy drive to govern and the “truly Irish” drive towards what might be called free expression and the natural world. The poem “Patrick Sarsfield’s Portrait” describes Sarsfield as “great-uncle in the portrait’s grime”, and also refers to the “kindred enemy” fighting on the Williamite side whose victory led to two hundred years of Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. While this exploration of Murphy’s place within two cultural traditions, the Anglo-Irish and the “truly” Irish, set against the backdrop of a physical and historical landscape looks at the origins and effects of colonialism in Ireland, it is also a meditation on repression we see repeated in “The God Who Eats Corn” and later, in poems from *High Island*.

Between *The Battle of Aughrim* and *Care* (originally published in a limited edition by Cornamona Press), Murphy produced *High Island*, which concentrates on a subjective exploration of his childhood years lived amid the luxuries of a Sinhalese colonial lifestyle, juxtaposed with the hardships and deprivations experienced by the Travellers he has

patronised (in the best sense of the word) in adulthood, in Ireland. In placing these two extreme worlds side by side, Murphy examines his perception of the paralysis of social privilege and the freedom exclusion from society can bring, a latter-day equivalent to the conflict between the Ascendancy and the “truly Irish” found in the earlier work. So even though he has moved from the metaphors of self-discovery at sea or the superimposition of a conflicting sense of self onto the battle field of Aughrim, his personal obsession—how to stay true to oneself and the impulse towards freedom, while having an inbred and ingrained drive to impose (Ascendancy) order on (“truly Irish”) chaos or freedom—remains unresolved.

The poems “The Writing Lesson” and “The Reading Lesson”, both from *High Island*, illustrate this point. In the first poem, the poet is remembering back to his socially privileged but frustratingly disciplined childhood where the external world was filled with exotic promise, “a flowering temple tree” and “a coppersmith perched on a branch:/ Crimson feathers, pointed beard” while life in “the compound” was one of control:

His finger smells of rubbings out and sharpened lead.
 She’s teaching him to write.
 The table stands in little bowls of fluid
 To keep down cockroach and termite.
 Above them sags a ceiling cloth
 Stained by civet cats prowling on the roof.
 A punkah fans them, while he copies *God is Love*.

The child, at his writing lesson, is struggling in the heat. “What are words made of?” the poet asks, remembering. “Squiggles, dots, lines.” And a few lines later, with reference to the call of the coppersmith (so called because of its single metallic note) he asks:

Is it bored? Is it learning?
 Why can’t it make a sentence, or break into song?

Why must there be such denial of free expression, he’s asking. Why can the child not be free to escape to “the breakwater” or “the Officer’s beach”? Why must social privilege mean such spiritual entrapment? The sentiment here harkens back to the notion of language and the right to expression being strangled by the oppressor in *The Battle of Aughrim*.

The story I have to tell
 Was told to me by a teacher

Who read it in a poem
Written in a language that has died.

(2. Before—"Legend")

Murphy's view is that learning (the oppressor) imposes limitations on the boundless world of the child and of the imagination, a metaphor for the suppression of the "truly Irish" by the Williamite conquerors, which forced a living culture underground. In a world of possibilities, the imposition of the limits of language forces the world of the imagination into a straitjacket of words.

The second poem, "The Reading Lesson", expresses once again, but in more subjective terms, Murphy's sense of a divided sensibility with regard, not only to his ancestral roots, but to the value of cracking the literacy code and learning to imprison the imagination within the confines of language and the written word. This poem, about one of Murphy's Traveller charges, exposes the impossibility of unlocking the mysteries of literacy to the free mind and questions the wisdom of his own drive to do so. On the one hand, the poet worships freedom while on the other he is compelled to ensnare it.

Fourteen years old, learning the alphabet,
He finds letters harder to catch than hares
Without a greyhound. Can't I give him a dog
To track them down, or put them in a cage?
He's caught in a trap, until I let him go
Pinioned by "Don't you want to learn to read?"
"I'll be the same man whatever I do."

Among the fifty poems in the sonnet sequence *The Price of Stone*, Murphy deals with specific details of his personal life while also voicing political awareness in the monument poems. In some way, the whole sequence is quite awkward and uneven, its strength lying in the enforced formality of the sonnet form onto the exploration of a personal world. This choice of form again reflects Murphy's preoccupation with imposing Ascendancy order on "truly Irish" chaos as expressed in "Carlow Village Schoolhouse".

Murphy has no Aghrim anymore, no historical backdrop against which to place his explorations of self in both a personal and a cultural context. He has only the poetic form itself to support him. The poems in *The Price of Stone*, each spoken by the voice of a monument or building from either Murphy's private mythology or the public domain, address the poet, producing a work of what could be termed architectural ventriloquism. In "Georgian Tenement" for example, the decay of an old order is witnessed in the rotting away of that symbol of empire, Georgian architecture which replaced much of medieval Dublin with the setting up of the Wider Streets Commission in the

eighteenth century. In “Red Bank Restaurant”, the sense of betrayal, coupled with a sense of guilt at the breakdown of his marriage, is examined, while in “Gym”, one of the most interesting poems, a seedy underworld, “Grotesquely free, though ruled by symmetry”, raises further questions of Murphy’s place within an Irish cultural or social context of the mid- and late twentieth century. There is the suggestion here that, in fact, Murphy’s sense of dislocation from a recognisable social or cultural milieu springs not only from his ancestry but from a more deep rooted sense of subterfuge through necessity. In his review of *The Price of Stone* for the *TLS*, Bernard O’Donoghue suggests that the poem “Convenience” conveys the “embarrassment, ludicrousness and seriousness of sexual consciousness.” From my reading, I suggest that “Convenience” and a second sonnet, “Gym”, express an even deeper anxiety, that of sexual difference in a society as rigid as that of Murphy’s childhood which always chose rule, order and conformity over freedom of life, limb and longing.

In the *Collected Poems*, the reader uncovers not only a poetic struggle to find a place of belonging culturally, but also a struggle to forge a place which will permit a “truly Irish” freedom to express the inner self. Murphy has published only occasional poems since *The Mirror Wall* (1989). Instead he is concentrating on his memoir *The Kick*, which will appear during 2001. He has left Ireland altogether and now lives full-time in Durban, South Africa. Do these changes suggest a defeat or a triumph? Maybe we’ll need to look no further than *The Kick* for an answer.