

# The New Criterion

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## Reading the Gaelic

by Stephen Schmalhofer

After Robert Hugh Benson terrified readers with his 1907 dystopian novel *Lord of the World*, he offered a more optimistic vision of the future in *Dawn of All* (1911). In Benson's daydream, Ireland gains independence, but emigration leaves the island the sole possession of the clergy and Ireland becomes one enormous monastic enclosure. Ireland's real social life moves to her colonies, especially Australia, which is now entirely Irish and Catholic. In his first book, *My Father Left Me Ireland: An American Son's Search For Home*, the *National Review* senior writer Michael Brendan Dougherty is another Irishman in exile. As Dougherty contemplates the ideals of the 1916 Easter Rising, he writes letters to the Irish father who would not rise to raise him.

Dougherty is inspired not by Benson's English fantasy, but by the Gaelic revival of the late nineteenth century and the movement's nationalist poet Patrick Pearse. During the Easter Rising, Pearse read the Proclamation of the Republic: "In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom." Looking forward a century, Pearse imagined Ireland in 2005. He hoped to drain the swamp—literally—by

drying the bogs and warming the island, along with restoring the Irish language. Dougherty's mother, raising him alone in America, spent her scarce time and money on language classes for her son to maintain a linguistic link with home, even humbling herself to request Irish-language books from his estranged father. As a married man, Dougherty resumes his study, sacrificing a new father's most precious resource—sleep—to add nightly a few more words to his Irish vocabulary.

As a personal act of filial piety, this is admirable, and the importance of a language set apart for a particular people and purpose is also obvious for the Catholic Church, whose use of Latin in her liturgy is a mark of her antiquity and endurance. But among the Irish diaspora, the late Australian poet Les Murray's shrug at Sydney's 1798 Irish Rebellion monument in "A Walk with O'Connor" is the more common experience:

At Waverley, where the gravestones stop at the brink,  
murmuring words, to the rebel's tomb we went,  
an exile's barrow of Erin-go-bragh and pride  
in grey-green cement:  
we examined the harps, the hounds, the lists of the brave  
and, reading the Gaelic, constrained and shamefaced, we tried  
to guess what it meant  
then, drifting away,  
translated Italian off opulent tombstones nearby  
in our discontent.

Murray is describing a waypoint on “the Quest that summons all men.” After being “raised in a way that seemed to make [him] an ex-Catholic,” Dougherty, too, eventually found his way back to his Catholic faith. With its personal but not self-absorbed style, Dougherty’s story is a worthy companion to Sohrab Ahmari’s recent spiritual memoir *From Fire, by Water: My Journey to the Catholic Faith* (2019). It is also reminiscent of Carlos Eire’s modern classic *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (2004).

These three boys departed home for America. Ahmari left Iran under the Ayatollah. Eire escaped Castro’s Cuba. Dougherty and his mother were shipwrecked in the exurbs of Putnam County, New York, and he is most interested in men and women “marooned at the end of history.” Their lonely little island was a townhouse complex filled with families blown apart by divorce. “These houses were built to lean on each other because the homes inside were broken.” The green spaces and mechanicals were maintained by hired men in this “architecture of fatherlessness.”

Dougherty succeeds where Timothy P. Carney’s recent book, *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse* (2019), comes up short of the pathos necessary for persuasion. Carney is anxious about the loss of “social capital” caused by church closures. In Dougherty’s crisply edited, nearly jargon-free book, he confesses that his local parish was open but “useless” after his mother’s death in the mid-2000s. Without Dougherty’s frantic efforts to ensure a proper funeral, the Church “would have given us its new ceremony, everyone at the altar dressed in white, like at a hospital, anesthetizing us with a feeling of unearned peace. It would have provided a stranger at the lectern, giving banalities about a ‘better place’ that we all

would have pretended to find consoling.” Dougherty did on his own the work that fathers (and Reverend Fathers) should teach their sons how to do. He arranged a “proper requiem, with a priest dressed in black, music that expressed hope but in the only way hope can make sense, calling out from within a present shadowed by sorrow, grief, guilt, and shame.”

Augustine Birrell, the Chief Secretary for Ireland during the 1916 Easter Rising, compared Edmund Burke and Cardinal Newman; both men took “very broad, common-sense, matter-of-fact views of humanity, and ever had the ordinary man and woman in mind as they spoke and wrote . . . for living bundles of hopes and fears, doubts and certainties, prejudices and passions.” Dougherty amends Burke with Pearse: a society is not just a contract. It exists “in the things that a father gives to his children, or else he is shamed before his father and grandfather and his descendants too.” In his first book, Dougherty has given his children and his readers a great gift; it would be a shame if it were his last.

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