

Book Review: *The Rock of Achill*

Modern-day Achill Island is a tour operator's dream: located in County Mayo, it is the largest of the Irish isles and is still exquisitely remote – as far west of Europe as it gets, in fact; it is clothed in mountainous emerald terrain, where sheep still meander purposelessly across roads and pathways; majestic cliff-faces stoically withstand the perpetual pummelling from a pugilistic Atlantic Ocean; the remains of the village of Slievemore magically transports visitors back to the pre-famine era of booleying. In short, this secluded spot on our planet is ideal for those who wish to be mentally and spiritually ferried to a magical, mystical world that is far removed from modern everyday life. It is a place where one can disappear into another realm; an abditory. An inspiring location, it is the perfect setting for a book which centres round a good old-fashioned quest narrative, with a generous splash of romance and fantasy thrown in for good measure. Such a book is *The Rock of Achill*.

Backdrop can be such a vital component of a novel; it can add richness and context that galvanizes the narrative. In this case, the plotline is permeated by an authentic relationship between character, history and landscape. In the early stages of this epic novel, the reader is invited to experience the 'sliver of sea that separate[s] Achill from the rest of Ireland' and imagine the unalloyed sense of peace and isolation. Jim Sheehan evokes a sense of the island and the lives of its inhabitants being as one: the 'rocks themselves echo the church bells'. Achill represents a heritage worth fighting for, which is exactly what Donn – the novel's young protagonist – determines to do. In a sense, this book is a love letter to this remote corner of Ireland, expounded with a passion to rival the actual love letters that pass back and forth between Donn and his sweetheart, Bridget.

The significance of mysticism is evinced in the Prologue. Expect to encounter fantastical beings and events from the outset: a stag morphing into a spinning prism, a rabbit transforming into a woman, a giant bird killing a stag. The Prologue serves as an insight into the cultural history of this land of 'maligned refugees and rogues'. The naked woman adorned with green ribbon could stand as a symbol of Ireland itself. As a reader, I was also struck by the predatory aspect of nature, a reminder of the struggle to survive in such a rugged, and sometimes hostile, environment. Before the novel even begins, the reader has shared something of the collective heritage and beliefs of the inhabitants of Achill.

The opening chapters seamlessly incorporate this sense of heritage and legacy; three generations are alluded to – seventeen-year old Donn, his father Lorcan, and his grandfather, from whom Donn seems to have inherited his indomitable spirit and mettle. The family 'thread' is introduced. This is the dawn of the nineteenth century – a century about to bring much struggle to the island of Ireland; a century that requires a saviour on behalf of the Irish in order to salvage all it holds dear, a theme which resonates throughout *The Rock of Achill*.

The first few chapters set the stage for the main drama that ensues. First of all, Donn encounters the 'regal presence' of Cathal O'Ruair, lord of a land controlled by foreign invaders. With the prospect of retaining his beloved stallion and reclaiming the land of his forefathers, Donn accepts Cathal's challenge to undertake a long and arduous quest, encompassing a litany of far-flung lands and freighted with challenges both real and wondrous. The second pivotal moment is Donn's first meeting with Bridget, which speaks of immediate connection rather than clichéd romance. At first sight, Donn is arrested by Bridget's presence and is 'disarmed by her eyes'. She has a Gorgon-like impact on Donn, who is rendered 'motionless'. This is the embryo of a relationship that is to prove the anchor that keeps Donn tied to his homeland as he battles pirates, knights, rebels and more in locations across the globe in the years that follow.

Throughout Donn's Odysseus-like quest, the motif of the letter provides connection between the two lovers and lends structural coherence to the narrative. By alternating chapters between Donn and Bridget, Sheehan conveys a constant juxtaposition of quotidian life on Achill and the exotic and sometimes dangerous endeavours of the protagonist. The reader is never allowed to forget that Achill is at the heart of Donn's mission; Achill is where both personal history and hope for the future reside. Interestingly, the etymological origins of the names of the beau and his inamorata are laden with symbolic meaning. The name Donn is thought to mean 'the dark one' (as in god of death) as well as 'chief' or 'noble' – it is little wonder that in modern folklore this god of death is said to haunt the land on his white horse. Likewise, Bridget's name represents her role in the tale: it means 'power, strength, vigour, virtue' and has the alternative meaning of 'the exalted one'. She is certainly exalted in Donn's eyes and provides the stabilising force that keeps him rooted to Achill. The letters are the mainstay of this connection and act as an invisible cord, so when Bridget goes a month without a letter this signals a very real possibility of disconnection on both a personal and geographical level. Will Donn return with 'ambition's thirst...quenched'?

As a rule, I am not a fan of romantic fiction – or fantasy fiction, come to that. But this book is not as simply defined as that. The romance, fantasy and history combine as vital ingredients in the integrity of the story. In that sense, I'm a convert. And I am most definitely a fan of luxurious prose, of which *The Rock of Achill* is a fine example. Every word, from the first to the last, is carefully crafted and weighted with nuance. To understand Ireland, as this writer does, one must grapple with its folklore and history. Anything else is a 'false reality'...