‘Time thickens, takes on flesh’ — The Other West

Patrick Joyce

St Mary’s Roman Catholic Cemetery, Kensal Green, London. Image via Wikimedia Commons, by Justinc

This essay is one of the series that will make up a book, *The Children of Freedom: a History of My Times*. It follows 'The Journey West', *Field Day Review* 10, 2014

To recall the words of W. G. Sebald as he surveyed the graveyard of Piana, dwelling as he does on the meaning of peasant death in an earlier Corsica,

> *In the urban societies of the late twentieth century, on the other hand, where everyone is instantly replaceable and is really superfluous from birth, we have to keep throwing ballast overboard, forgetting everything that we might otherwise remember: youth, childhood, our origins, our forebears and ancestors. ... Soon, we will be left with a present without memory, in the face of a future that no individual mind can now envisage, in the end we shall ourselves relinquish life without feeling any need to linger at least for a while, nor shall we be impelled to pay return visits from time to time.*[1]

My photograph is of St Mary's Catholic Cemetery in west London's Kensal Green. It is here that my parents are buried, here where they await the resurrection of the body promised by their faith, and with it the final journey west. They wait alongside some 170,000 others of their religion, mostly Irish peasants in origin, buried in the cemetery since it was established in 1858. Crowded together in life, they are crowded together in death, for the area of the cemetery is only 29 acres. They are not like the dead peasants of Piana. In life they and their like were the unregarded, and they are so in death too: in 1992 the ground level of the southern part of the cemetery was raised, the dead now piled upon the dead, the older, no longer tended graves removed. Kitty and Johnny Joyce survived this turmoil but this fate will no doubt come in time. This expectation is not for those in the mausolea and catacombs of the socially exclusive north-east quadrant of the cemetery; inequality in death, as in life.

Graveyard in Clonbur, with *Teampall Bhreandáin* in the foreground. Author's photograph.

In life the harshness of the emigrant's existence, and so too in death, for the cemetery is a desolate place, trammelled by the Great Western Railway on one side and the Grand Junction Canal on the other, a giant gasworks looming in the distance, factories and apartment blocks abutting on its different sides. My mother Kitty's family are buried in the tiny churchyard at Kilmokea on the Great Island in Wexford's extreme south-west; my father's in Ross Hill burial ground outside the local village of Clonbur in Galway. Both burial places are to be envied by the city dweller, places each of exquisite beauty and peace, the River Barrow flowing in the distance in one, the mountains of Joyce Country cradling the other, in the centre of which is the ruin of *Teampall Bhreandáin*, part of which is early Christian. Piana and these places come together, the dead remembered as part of life's ordinariness. The Irish

1 W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo* (Penguin, 2006), 34–35. Cited at more length in Patrick Joyce, 'The Journey West', *Field Day Review* 10 (2014), 71–72.

way of death, in Ireland: the graves are visited and tended over the decades. In Clonbur there are frequent masses when families 'go on the grave' to remember. The sons of Paddy Kenny, who is one of the three figures in Koudelka's great photograph *Irlande 1972*[2], are amongst the biggest men in the parish, and so have the honour, when requested, of digging the graves of their friends and neighbours. No one digs a friend's grave in St Mary's. The burial places there are mostly untended, the children of the dead scattered to the great reaches of outer West London and beyond. It is too far to make the journey, though kin are not forgotten, but communion with them is difficult, sometimes impossible. They linger for a while with us but it is difficult for us to linger with them.

St Patrick's Catholic Cemetery, Leytonstone, east London

The Catholics, until recently mostly Irish, lie close to those not of their faith in the neighbouring All Souls Cemetery, opened in 1832, and modelled upon *Père Lachaise* in Paris. The All Souls dead are less crowded together than those in St Mary's, the city of the dead reflecting the city of the living, for in All Souls a quarter of a million dead luxuriate in the relatively open spaces of seventy-two acres. The east London Irish dead share the fate of those of my west in St Mary's, buried as they are in the equally crowded St Patrick's in Leytonstone on London's east side. The two great Catholic cemeteries frame on either side the inner London that first saw the immigrant waves as they broke on the city.

2 See 'The Journey West', 60–61.

The faithful turn out of Our Lady of Sorrows, Desborough St, Paddington, 1952. Desborough St was located in a particularly blighted area off the Harrow Road, nearer to Paddington Station than Ashmore Road. From Bernard Green, 'Portrait of a London Borough', a personal photo album of Paddington compiled *ca.* 1952, in Westminster City Archives.

The All Souls and St Mary's dead share however a similar destiny, the graves untended and mostly unvisited. The new city way of death of the nineteenth century, and of our present, embraces both places of burial. Each have their roads and intersections, each their individual and private plots and monuments like little houses strung along these roads. All in the new 'garden' format of the early nineteenth century, the country transposed into the overcrowded city. In All Souls, 550 lives recorded in Britain's *Dictionary of National Biography* meet their end here, and no less than 500 'members of the British nobility'. The Catholics cannot hope to compete, and while they have their notables these are few and idiosyncratic.[3]

My parents' after-history, and that of their like, is not however one of despair, for, as in life, they are among their own in death. Just as their passing was marked by their Church and their countrymen and women, so too was their coming prepared for, as was mine, and that of the generations before me. It is still the way. We recall the words of Walter Benjamin, 'Our coming was expected on earth. … There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one'.[4] Our road was mapped, our coming expected, our sins prepared for. My father Johnny Joyce's funeral procession left from the Church of Our Lady of the Holy Souls, in Kensal New Town's Bosworth Road in January 1963, its destination St Mary's in Kensal Green. We mourners travelled up the Harrow Road, which Ashmore Road enters a little further to the east. From the house at number 11 where we lived, into the road before it, then to the house of God, and at last via other roads to the grave. The house, the road, the grave; the constituents of what I have earlier named 'Galway space', that space now come to London in different form, 'Joyce Country in the city, *Dúiche Sheoighe i Londain*'.

In 1858, when it opened as part of one of the first great municipal cemeteries of Britain, the cure of Saint Mary's was in the hands of the Reverend Francis J. Kirk. In the eight years that followed the opening of the new cemetery, Kirk claimed to have personally officiated at most of the almost 14,000 Catholic burials there. His claim is probably correct. The number of burials is substantiated in the cemetery records, and there were precious few Roman Catholic clergy on the ground in 1858 to do the job if he did not. In 1850 there was only one Catholic church proper in the nine miles between Bayswater and far flung Harrow-on-the Hill. This colossal total of the dead was largely made up of those who had fled the recent famine in Ireland. Writing almost half a century later Kirk reported that what he called the better class of funerals occurred in the morning, whereas the afternoon saw the real rush. It was then that 'order and decency' were not so easily maintained. On Saturday he might have between eighteen and two dozen funerals. He wrote as follows, 'A very large number of the poorer class of funerals at that time were those of emigrants from the West of Ireland, all speaking the Irish language'.[5] Money for burials was collected on the day of the funeral itself, when the streets heard nothing but Irish. Because, as Kirk puts it, 'grief is dry', public houses such as 'The Case Is Altered' and the 'King William' — fabled names in my 1950s childhood — although situated opposite the Protestant not the Catholic cemetery, were regular stops along the *Via Dolorosa* of the mourning Irish. In Kirk's day, as he reports, the children of the emigrant Irish, as a century later, grew up in ignorance of their parent's first language.

3 Among them the notable female impersonator of his time Danny La Rue; alongside him two Cardinals, Manning and Wiseman; Sax Rohmer, the creator of Dr. Fu Manchu; and Prince Louis Lucien Bonaparte.

4 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, 1973), 255–56.

5 Francis J. Kirk, *Reminiscences of a Oblate of St Charles* (London, 1905).

It was men like Kirk who had prepared the way, he as much as any man. In 1858 he began his labours with the Bosworth Road flock. He was a man who, before his conversion, had first forged his considerable ministerial will as a Church of Ireland cleric in the County Wexford of my mother Kitty.[6] The Holy Souls, opened in its present form in 1882, reflected the special relationship that existed between it and the cemetery, and so with the dead. In the early days the revenues gained from officiating at the cemetery came back to Holy Souls. The dead souls funded the souls of the living, ultimately ours. Margins again, Irish Catholic ones, the dead never far distant from the living even here, Ireland a culture of the in-between. There was however a class system at the Holy Souls, as everywhere else in London. Kirk wrote in 1902 that all Catholics in the country could share in the devotions of our Lady of the Holy Souls, for the mortuary lists are open to all, funds permitting, and around Bosworth Road in the 1850s and for a long time after funds did not permit. For four shillings one could go on the permanent list, for the yearly list it was a shilling, and £25 bought you a marble tablet in the church.

Little did we know in my childhood that we immigrant Irish children were also offspring of the sixteenth-century Catholic Counter Reformation, a late flowering of what Kirk in his time called the 'Second Spring'. He was appointed by Cardinal Manning, the founder of the Oblates of St Charles, the model of which was St Charles Borromeo, who was born in Milan in 1538. Of noble pedigree, Borromeo had, in good Counter Reformation fashion, a mission to serve the 'populace' while being unwaveringly subordinate to Episcopal authority, eventually in this case as it turned out, himself, for he became this authority himself. Kirk was an Oblate, one who offers.[7]

Booth's late nineteenth-century survey of the London poor describes those who, like Kirk, offered:

> *The priests live as poor men among the poor. Their food is simple, their clothes are threadbare; they take few holidays. They live from day to day; if they have a shilling in their pocket no one in want will ask in vain. Abstemious and self-restrained themselves, they are yet lenient judges of the frailties that are not sins, and of the disorder that is not crime. This kindly gentleness is all the more uncompromising in denunciation or more prompt in interference. It is said that the voice of the priest or the presence of the Sister will quell any disorder; but the trouble recurs.*[8]

The Oblates proper were in fact usually socially superior products of the English public schools and Oxbridge, though Kirk took his degree in Dublin at Trinity. Then, as later, the higher reaches of British society were drawn as bees to the flower to what would later be known, erroneously, as 'Notting Hill'. One early figure of this will to serve was Father Douglas Hope, Eton and Christchurch, and a cousin of the Marquess of Queensberry, whose brother funded the St Vincent's Boys Home. Douglas gave his life to St Vincent's in the Harrow Road. The home lay but a few hundred yards from Ashmore Road. Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902 edition) records that 'On the further side of Harrow Road there is an intensely crowded population of the poorest description', mostly Irish Catholics. This was

6 Francis J Kirk, *Some Notable Conversions in the County of Wexford* (London, 1902).

7 Alan McClelland, 'Changing Concepts of the Pastoral Office: Wiseman, Manning and the Oblates of St Charles' *Recusant History*, volume 25, number 2, 2000, 218–37.

8 Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London. Volume 3: Religious Influences* (London, 1902), 243–44.