Cú Chulainn by J. C. Leyendecker; from *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, 1911

Blaze of bardic light

A late Victorian visionary from Ireland

SINEAD STURGEON

Christopher Boettcher

THE SHATTERED WORLDS OF STANDISH O'GRADY
An Irish life in writing
288pp. Four Courts. £50.
978 1 84682 785 3

On a rainy day in 1874, a twenty-eight-year-old lawyer perusing the shelves of a library in a country house in Co. Cork opened a book that would change not only the course of his life, but of Irish literary history. Standish James O'Grady had not distinguished himself at the bar, but reading Sylvester O'Halloran's *A General History of Ireland* (1775), which depicted a pre-colonial Ireland of knightly valour and scholarly learning, set the young man on a new path of scholarly fame. Dazzled by this "blaze of bardic light", as he later described it, O'Grady set about writing his own version of ancient Irish literature, and in 1878 he published, at his own expense, his *History of Ireland: The heroic period*. A second volume appeared in 1880. These were works of fiction rather than history, and though commercially unsuccessful their imaginative power was compelling. As recently as the 1960s, Christopher Boettcher notes in his absorbing new book, O'Grady's treatments of heroic legend remained required reading for Irish schoolchildren. Their effect on a new wave of Irish writers at the end of the nineteenth century was pivotal. "Whatever is Irish in me he kindled to life", George Russell (Æ) declared, while W. B. Yeats included no fewer than six of O'Grady's books in his thirty-strong "Best Irish books" list of 1895. O'Grady is often hailed as the Father of the Literary Revival, though he himself was somewhat chary of the movement and its ideals (reportedly, when a pipe burst in his apartment during a visit from Yeats, he threw the poet out for suggesting it was the work of fairies punishing O'Grady for his disbelief; while against the mystic ramblings of Russell he deployed the twin weapons of "bored politeness and sharp laughing mockery").

O'Grady's portrayal of the ancient hero Cú Chulainn, in particular, recreated the legendary figure for the heady nationalism that would soon convulse and transform Ireland. O'Grady was a distinguished guest at Padraig Pearse's school in 1909, where the students performed O'Grady's play, *The Coming of Fionn*. Invited to speak after the performance, O'Grady remarked that "he hoped it might presage a new age in which the young men and women in Ireland would once again lead the lives of free people in the mountains", though what he envisaged by this was very different to the future as it unfolded, in the form of the Easter Rising just seven years later, in which Pearse took a leading role. "When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side", Yeats writes in his poem "The Statues", "What stalked through the Post Office?"

O'Grady had a very different future Ireland in mind, though one that also circled ancient legend. He hoped that his writing would inspire a moribund Anglo-Irish gentry to claim leadership of the country, uniting nobleman and peasant in an idealized neo-feudal society that he later came to name the "Estates of the New Order". He pursued his vision in prolific journalism and energetic engagement in current affairs, turning even the taxation crisis of the mid-1890s – when it emerged that over the course of the nineteenth century Ireland had been overtaxed by Britain to the tune of £250 million – into an opportunity to reclaim heroic Ireland for the aristocracy and exert unprecedented influence in Westminster. O'Grady's vision was, however, doomed to failure, caught as it was between an increasingly radicalized Ireland and an altogether inadequate gentry; indeed his vociferous criticism of the latter led Lady Gregory to describe him, memorably, as a "Fenian-unionist".

Slight in figure, charismatic, passionate and argumentative (Yeats remarked that he "could find quarrel in a straw"), O'Grady remains a paradoxical figure in the maelstrom of late Victorian Irish society. At once dreamily mythic and fiercely contemporary, a romantic unionist and clear-eyed nationalist, he is a political and cultural conundrum. Boettcher's searching study offers "an intellectual biography of O'Grady, the man as well as the writer", revealing just how intimately integrated were his personal and public pursuits. Approaching his tricky subject with sympathy and rigour, Boettcher richly places O'Grady's work in the context of the ideas and events of his day, and provides new insight into an era too often dominated by the narrative of the Revival.

Coming to No Good

The spirited quasi-memoir of a magazine journalist

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Polly Devlin

WRITING HOME
Selected essays
224pp. Pimpernel Press. Paperback, £10.99.
978 1 910258 33 0

Near the beginning of *Writing Home*, the journalist and author Polly Devlin tells us that she was raped as a little girl. For years it was a "millstone" around her neck and she felt "unlovable and unloved". "A deep insecurity is born, a hunger that is never filled, a void that gapes and roils in your life", she writes. "Fear and lack of trust become part of your character." The sexual abuse also left her with trichomoniasis, an infection that made her physically uncomfortable and went undiscovered and untreated until she was a young teenager suffering from anorexia. This is one of the most shocking and heartrending essays in Devlin's new collection, which collates and updates more than forty short pieces written for various publications – including the *Gloss*, the *Guardian* and *Vogue* – since the 1990s. Most of them are deeply personal; together they serve as a spirited quasi-memoir.

Born in 1941, Devlin was brought up as a Catholic in Ardboe, a small rural parish in Northern Ireland. Her mother was a schoolteacher and her father a publican. They were not particularly well off. "Old cotton knickers, darned sweaters, patched sheets" hung on the washing line and "life lay in an old squalid murkiness". Devlin didn't go to university, but at the age of twenty-one she won a *Vogue* writing competition; the prize was an entry-level job at its offices in London, and within six months – "due to a series of sackings rather than to any rocket-like brilliance on my part" – she had become features editor. Soon she was working at American *Vogue* in New York. After meeting and marrying Andy Garnett, a close friend of Lord Snowdon, she returned to the UK.

The politics of Northern Ireland feature prominently here (more so than in Devlin's memoir *All of Us There*, 1982). Growing up as a Catholic in a predominantly Protestant country meant that she was "neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there, neither English nor Irish". Devlin and her family were frequently stopped by the police just to be shown "who was boss". At one point, years later, she remembers sitting at a dinner in the House of Lords near Ian and Eileen Paisley: "I look at them with rage and disdain ... [they] did so much harm to my kind".

The ups and downs of motherhood, animal rights, the environmental impact of bad farming practices, buying Christmas decorations ("July or August is when the cognoscenti seek them out"), and the imbalance between a male writer's existence and a female writer's are among the other subjects Devlin touches on. Mostly, she is a candid and funny companion. In one essay styled as a letter to "Val" (this is her sister, though oddly Devlin never says it), she describes her first months at *Vogue* in the 1960s, surrounded by colleagues speaking "chic talk" and photographers who "are mostly thick as shit in the bottle" (David Bailey "is rude, that's half the point. I think").

Polly Devlin, 1979

She interviews many celebrities, including Bob Dylan ("a bit like Thomas Chatterton, only upright"), Barbra Streisand ("She treated me as though I had been dragged in by the cat") and Hubert Givenchy ("[his] apartment? Be still, my beating heart").

In another piece a sudden downpour interrupts Devlin's bicycle ride with the writer Nuala O'Faolain along the coast in Sandy Hook, New Jersey: "We had brought plastic macs, and Nuala got her head stuck in a sleeve, like a pink condom ... I had got myself lost in a big brown poncho and looked like something DHL had dropped out of the back of a van". When Devlin and her husband sleep outside for a night in the Irish countryside – a long-held dream of Devlin's – their white bull terrier Mona won't stop barking. In desperation Andy "braved the de Borgia-scissoring effect of his camp bed, reached out, grabbed [Mona] and pushed her to the bottom of his sleeping bag, where she hung deep, like a large suspended sausage, over the bottom rail".

Some essays are heavy-handed with literary references (a landscape prompts "an apprehension of the meaning of Keats's great poetic dictum: beauty is truth, truth beauty") and contain a few grammatical and factual errors (the attack on the Twin Towers was not on "9 September 2001"). Despite this, we warm to Devlin and her wry approach to life. "It had been hammered into us", she writes of her Catholic school days, "that if you were brave and confident you were a Bold Girl who would come to No Good. (Thank goodness I came to No Good.)"