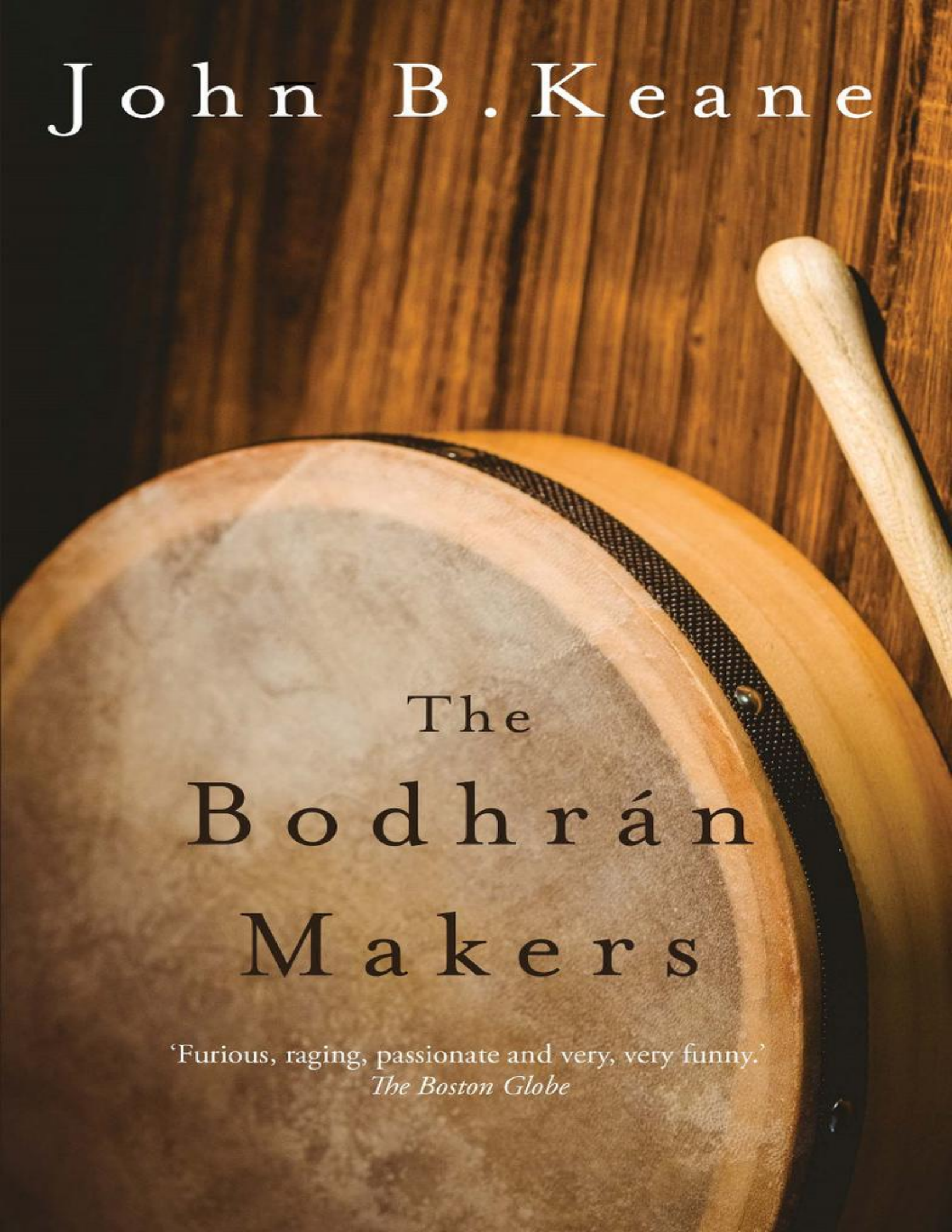




John B. Keane

The
Bodhrán
Makers

‘Furious, raging, passionate and very, very funny.’
The Boston Globe

Praise for

THE BODHRÁN MAKERS

‘This powerful and poignant novel provides John B. Keane with a passport to the highest levels of Irish literature.’

The Irish Press

‘At once a rueful elegy to a vanished spirit and a comic celebration.’

Publishers Weekly

‘Furious, raging, passionate and very, very funny.’

The Boston Globe

‘Told with a vigour and vivacity which keep the attention riveted.’

The Irish Times

‘Sly, funny, heart-rending ... Keane writes lyrically; recommended.’

Library Journal

‘A riveting read.’ *Belfast Telegraph*

‘A tale that goes straight to the heart – the heart of the reader as well as the heart of the matter. Keane gets beneath the skin of Irish culture, past and present, and provides a view tourists will never see.’

The Bloomsbury Review

‘A thorough, pained, loving account of a lost world – with the novel itself an act of cultural survival.’

Kirkus Reviews

THE BODHRÁN MAKERS

John B. Keane

BRANDON

To Elaine with love

Bodhrán (bow'rön): the first syllable is pronounced as in the *bough* of a tree, the second syllable as in *drawn* without the *d*. The bodhrán is a shallow, single-headed drum of goatskin which resembles a tambourine but is larger; it is played with a small stick called a cipín, or else with the hand.

Contents

Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Foreword
Preface
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

About the Author

Copyright

Other Books

Main Characters

Canon Peter Pius Tett – he rules the presbytery with an iron hand and expects to rule the lives of everyone in the parish in the same way.

Donal Hallapy – desperately poor, he moves between Dirrabeg and Trallock, a strange but generous man driven to rebel.

Nora Devane – the Canon's eyes and ears, she has an uncanny ability to smell the slightest whiff of potential scandal.

Fred and Minnie Halpin – proprietors of the Bus Bar, a haven of relaxation from the tensions of the town.

Monty Whelan – a thorn in the Canon's side, he teaches at Dirrabeg school but shows a marked reluctance to bow to the Canon's authority.

'Bluenose' Herrity – his hands are no longer steady but he is still the best bodhrán maker of them all.

The people of Dirrabeg live in dread of 'the clan of the round collar' until the Canon goes too far and provokes a revolt.

Foreword

BY CONOR KEANE, SON OF THE AUTHOR

THIS BOOK IS of a time and a people now long gone, and it could well have been called *The Last of the Bodhrán Makers*. The extraordinary men and women who inhabit these pages and live in the fictional townland of Dirrabeg were as real to John B as you and I. All that is portrayed here is based on real people and, to a lesser extent, real events – confabulated into extraordinary characters and a remarkable tale by a gifted storyteller. Prepare to read about the interaction of the clan of the round collar with the begetters of wren dances and porter balls, of an Ireland little remembered, of a noble people and an era that should never be forgotten.

When my late father's first play, *Sive*, rocked the Irish theatre world in 1959, two men-of-the-road were essential to the unravelling of the play's sinister plot. When the tinker duo Pats Bocock and his bodhrán-wielding son Carthalawn pranced onto the Irish stage, this Kerry version of a Greek chorus unleashed pagan memories and heralded a revival of bodhrán making and playing that continues to this day.

Sive was the first time the vast majority of Irish people came into contact with the bodhrán. The now near-ubiquitous percussion instrument was in its death throes in 1959. In some corners of the land, the country people's drum was hanging on by its goat's skin.

Writing in *The Irish Times* in its series *Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks*, Fintan O'Toole said of *Sive* that its 'mix

of melodrama and myth was a cocktail so powerful that it blew the head off a country that was tired of a stifling orthodoxy’.

O’Toole continued: ‘What gives the play its raw power is that this sociological drama is fused with Keane’s “pagan” worldview, in which the forces of darkness and of light, the devils and the angels, are at war. The force that Keane unleashed on the Ireland of the late 1950s was one against which it had no protection, because it came not from the new ideas of urban intellectuals but from the depths of a dying tradition.’

Welcome to this Ireland, the land inhabited by the bodhrán makers that a young John B first encountered in rural North Kerry. Here he found the raw material for the bulk of his work that he forged into this book and plays such as *The Field*, *Sharon’s Grave* and *The Year of the Hiker*, in particular.

John B loved these people with all his heart. *The Bodhrán Makers* is a homage to their beliefs, customs and idioms, but above all, to their ability to eke out a living from meagre resources in 1950s Ireland, all the while remaining true to those from whom they came and where they came from.

It seems this appreciation was shared by the people of Ireland, as *The Bodhrán Makers* sold well over 100,000 copies when it was first published by Steve McDonogh of Brandon Books in 1986.

Finally, it has to be recorded that *The Bodhrán Makers* is also a tribute to John B’s great friend, and often co-conspirator, Sonny Canavan of Dirha West, Listowel, who passed away on 28 April, 1977. Sonny Canavan has been described as the Antonio Stradivari of bodhrán makers, but for the people of North Kerry he was, and always will be, the last of the great bodhrán makers.

Preface

THOMAS CUSS TURNED carefully off the main road and drove slowly through the open countryside of Dirrabeg. He parked the Mercedes next to a five-bar iron gate. The gate opened onto a spacious roadside field of sixty-one acres. The field in itself was marginally larger than the entire home farm from which he had just driven.

‘We’ll count separately,’ he told his seven-year-old grandson, ‘and see if our figures correspond.’

Tommy Cuss stood on the uppermost bar of the gate, a hand on his grandfather’s shoulder, eager eyes working in conjunction with silently moving lips as his gaze moved swiftly from bullock to bullock.

‘Sixty-seven,’ he shouted triumphantly, awaiting his grandfather’s tally which always took longer than his. Tom Cuss smiled and continued with his count.

‘You have a good head,’ Thomas Cuss conceded at the conclusion; ‘sixty-seven is right. Let’s go on now and count the others in the next field but let us give more time to it because now we’ll be taking stock of yearlings and two-year-olds. They might not stand still as obligingly as these sober chaps here.’

The grass in the seventy-two acre, second field was fleecier and of a richer green than that of the first. The cattle had only begun their grazing the day before. At the rear of both fields were eight-feet-high turf banks no longer in use. These ran parallel with the roadway and enclosed the acreage, vast by local standards, in a long green rectangle.

Grasslands, turf banks and a blackthorn ring-fort astride a small uncultivated hillock accounted for the total domain of Dirrabeg.

‘There were people and houses all along here one time weren’t there granda?’ Tommy Cuss turned to his grandfather hoping he would dwell awhile for the umpteenth time on the poverty-stricken but colourful lifestyles of the smallholders who had resided in Dirrabeg when Thomas Cuss had been a young man.

There was no sign now of human habitation, no paths or byroads nor trace of the high whitethorn hedges and deep dykes which once divided the tiny fields. The remains of Dirrabeg National School, roofless and crumbling, were the last visible testimony to a vanished community.

Thomas Cuss did not indulge his grandson at once. He remembered only too well the humble abodes and the colourful characters. It had taken him twenty-five years and countless thousands of borrowed pounds as well as sleepless nights and constant anxiety to raze the dwellings and outhouses before reclaiming the soggy cutaway which had once supported the scraggy cows of the Dirrabeg smallholders.

Thomas Cuss had no qualms of conscience after the exodus of the early fifties. He had paid a fair price for the cutaway and there had not been a solitary smallholder who had not wished him well. The one thing to which he would never accustom himself was the mortifying silence imposed by the broad tract which he had reclaimed.

One

‘CAN I COME to town with you?’

Donal Hallapy applied the finishing touches to the clamped sods which towered perilously above the confines of the assrail before answering. Between the shafts the Spanish mare arched her rump uneasily.

‘There’s too much snow,’ he replied, not unkindly, ‘and anyway there won’t be any shopping.’

‘Not even the pub?’ his eleven-year-old daughter asked, prompted by her mother who stood behind her, hidden by the dark interior of the kitchen.

‘Not even the pub,’ he answered patiently. Trust his beloved spouse to come up with one like that, using the innocent child to throw out her barbs.

‘Go on now,’ he addressed himself to the mare, ‘you’ve carried heavier in your time.’ The animal started slowly, carefully, picking her steps along the snow-covered dirt passage which led from the house to the by-road. She paused uncertainly at the junction where there was a steep incline, awaiting his guidance.

‘Look,’ Hallapy told the eleven-year-old, ‘I could be late. I have business to settle but I’ll bring you something and for God’s sake tell your mother not to wait up for me.’

‘She has no such intention,’ young Katie Hallapy echoed the wifely sentiments coyly. At the top of the incline he took the reins in his hands and flicked them gently. The mare strained at the ancient harness, her rear hooves failing to find purchase. He draped the reins over

the hames and seized the back shafts in his powerful hands.

'Hup girl,' he shouted, lifting and pushing with all his strength. She responded gamely. Between them they managed to power the ponderous cargo, intact, onto the by-road.

The clamp had swayed, even shuddered, but not a sod had moved. He smiled grimly, remembering his father.

'You'll remember me, you son of a thatcher,' that worthy had once told him as they sat drinking at a wren dance. 'Whenever you build a clamp on an assrail or start a winter reek you'll remember what I taught you.'

Others might not agree but his friends would boast that when Donal Hallapy clamped turf it stayed clamped. The narrow bog road which led from the house to the main road was covered with freshly fallen snow as were the many turf reeks. As yet it had made little impact on the heather-covered boglands. There was the faintest impression of white, no more. It would need several inches to envelop the heather. The surrounding hills were white and so would the roadside fields be white as he proceeded to town.

The town: it was a bad time of evening to make the four-mile journey. Darkness was beckoning and the main road would be slippery, not that he worried for the safety of the turf-load. The mare could take care of herself but there would be cars and lorries to contend with and it wasn't the widest road in the world. Still there was no frost, at least not yet. With such a heavy load the mare, for all her experience, would not be able to cope, not with frost. He tightened the sugán rope which bound his heavy black coat and turned down the tops of his Wellingtons.

His thoughts turned to his brother-in-law. Damnatory phrases turned over in his mind: a useless, good-for-nothing, rotting drunkard; a dirty, foul-mouthed corner boy; a craven, cowardly wife-beater. His sister would

deny this last but Donal knew she was often at the receiving end of a drunken punch.

He found none of the many descriptions of his sister's husband to be even remotely adequate. He wouldn't be trudging to town now if the wretch had seen to his winter firing. Donal's sources in town had revealed that there wasn't a sod of turf in the corrugated iron shed at the rear of the house. The children were being sent to bed the minute darkness fell and made to stay there until morning. At school the older ones would find heat at least and they would be out of their mother's way while she scrubbed and polished for the better-off townsfolk. It was that or starvation.

'God knows she don't deserve it,' he spoke to the mare, 'and God knows before she met him she was never cold and she was never hungry. By Christ we always had spuds and cabbage and milk and we were never without a flitch hanging from the ceiling. No money, maybe, but full bellies and a warm hearth. I'll kill the bastard. Some night I'll kill him!'

The mare's ears twitched. They were on the main road now and she was finding the level surface to her liking; it was almost free of snow thanks to the traffic. What compounded his brother-in-law's all-too-numerous transgressions was the fact that he too was responsible for Donal Hallapy's not being on speaking terms with his wife.

The day before he had encountered a neighbour of his sister's on the by-road near the house. The man was a council worker, Moss Keerby, an honest-to-God fellow who had hired out a cob and rail for the day to bring home some of his turf. Moss had produced a packet of Woodbines and the pair had retired to the lee of a tall reek for a chat.

'What's new in town?' Donal posed the question after they had pulled and inhaled the first drag.

‘Good few home from England. More expected before Christmas.’ Moss Keerby dragged on his cigarette, awaiting further questions. None came. He spat loopingly into the roadside grass. This act was followed by a long silence, Donal waiting for news of a more personal nature, unwilling to press for it. He had hoped that Moss Keerby would go on. ‘Dammit man, how’s Kitty?’

‘Kitty’s fine and so are the children but there isn’t a sod of turf in the shed. There’s no sign of your man either. I haven’t seen him since Thursday.’

Donal digested this unexpected piece of news for some time. Then he proffered his verdict.

‘Thursday was dole day. I daresay he drank the money as usual and went to bed.’

‘I don’t think he’s in bed. I think he’s gone.’

‘What do you mean gone!’

‘I don’t know,’ Moss Keerby continued cautiously. ‘Maybe off somewhere on a booze. Maybe one of his trebles came up and he’s laying it out somewhere.’

Donal shook his head. Trebles, he well knew, came up occasionally but never his brother-in-law’s. He was too greedy.

‘Tell Kitty I’ll be in as soon as I can with an assrail, tonight if possible.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Moss Keerby assured him. After they had parted Donal turned into the milking of his four cows. The yield was slight, just sufficient for the household needs. All four would be calving in the spring. As he drew upon the ungenerous paps his thoughts turned once more to his brother-in-law and he remembered one of his last conversations with his father as the old man lay dying in the crowded main ward of Trallock General Hospital. The older man had seized the younger by the coat sleeves with a surprisingly strong grip.

‘Whatever you do, Donal, you must never beat him up. Kitty will turn agin’ you and the children will turn agin’

you. You hear me now. No matter how sorely you're tempted you're not to strike him.'

'All right, all right. He'll suffer no harm from me.'

'You promise now.'

'I promise Dad.'

In the kitchen of the tiny thatched house he transferred the milk from the tin bucket to a muslin-covered enamel one which his wife Nellie had placed on the table.

'Not much,' she observed, 'not near enough to make a gob or two of butter.'

'I'll bring butter from town,' he said. He didn't have to turn round to observe the change of expression on her face. Her lips would be pursed silently in disapproval wondering what new emergency precipitated another of his all-too-frequent trips to Trillick.

'I have to take a load of turf to Kitty,' he explained without turning round.

'Again!' The word was full of rebuke.

'Again,' he said. 'She hasn't a sod and your man seems to have gone off on some kind of shaggy.''

'Willie is it?'

'Yes dammit. Willie. He disappeared on dole day. God knows where the wretch is by now. Willie Smiley.' He repeated the name contemptuously. 'What a monicker for that big, blubbery, misbegotten bastard!' His clenched fist smote the table in rage and frustration.

'And no doubt you'll take her a fine clamped rail?'

'Well, I might as well do the thing right as I'm doing it at all. She'd do as much for us.'

'I don't begrudge her. You know that.' Nellie Hallap moved to the far side of the table and faced her husband: 'But for heaven's sake, Donal, that's six rails since September. The boys want new boots. Katie wants a pair of shoes. I haven't had a new stitch of clothes on my back these three years. Those rails of turf would fetch the

money we need. Christmas is only ten days away and I haven't a copper.'

'Don't worry woman.' He raised a consoling hand but she turned away.

'There's more rails,' he comforted.

'There isn't all that much left. I've seen the reek and 'twill no more than do us till summer.'

'Ah there's a handful still in the bog. I always keep a trump for the last play.'

'I have no butter.' She refused to be comforted: 'And I have no margarine and I have no dripping while Vincent De Paul is off to town with the makings of good money.'

'We'll fry bread with bacon lard and we'll throw down a few eggs while we're at it. We never died a winter yet woman.'

Silently she set about preparing the supper, unwilling to be party to his banter.

She hadn't bid him goodbye before he left. She had, however, spoken through their daughter which meant that all lines of communication were not severed. There had been times when she had withdrawn absolutely into herself. Most of their fallings-out had to do with his kindness to Kitty; the rest were generally over money. Sometimes there would be enough but mostly it was the rarest of commodities in the Hallapy household. She liked to dress well but there was never enough money for new clothes, at least not for her.

'It's as if you were rearing two families,' she once fumed when she surprised him as he filled a bag from the potato pit in the haggard at the rear of the house. He had to concede that she was nagging with good reason. The pit was nearly run out at the time. Worse still he had selected the best of its dwindling contents, not for his own household but for another. He acknowledged this perverse streak in his nature for what it was - love of his father's family, the first family to which he had belonged.

However, he knew he had been less than fair to his own in this particular instance and he had been somewhat less liberal since then.

Beside him the mare plodded slowly but surely townwards. Whenever traffic approached from front or rear he signalled his presence with a small cycle lamp. He was relieved to enter the well-lighted suburbs of the town. On either side there were well-built, fashionable bungalows and ornate two-storey residences, all with well-groomed gardens and lawns to the fore with intricately designed wrought-iron gates opening onto neat doorways. Houses and surrounds had the signs of professional care. The area was known as Hilliew Row and in truth there was a fine view of the Stacks Mountains to be had from every select abode.

'This is where the money is boy,' he addressed the words to himself. 'There's Phil Summer's, the accountant's, seven bedrooms they say, and here now is Doctor O'Dell's, five bedrooms only but antiques to burn or so Nellie his wife told him. Rare antiques and every imaginable labour-saving device. There's Mickey Munley's, the bookies.' No one of his acquaintance had ever set foot inside the house but if rumours were anything to go by the place was a veritable palace. 'A good scholar Mickey! Almost as good as myself that couldn't even finish my national schooling!'

He turned the mare to the left before reaching the main thoroughfare, Healy Street, which hosted the town's chief business houses until it ended in the town square. He looked at his watch: twenty minutes to seven. The journey had taken an hour and fifty minutes, well outside the mare's average.

The street in which he now found himself, Carter's Row, was the town's secondary thoroughfare, an amalgam of small businesses and trades, housed mostly in modest two- and three-storey residences.

All the shops were closed except one. This was Faithful Ferg's, the soubriquet bestowed on the ramshackle greengrocery, crockery, newsagent, bacon and provisions store of Fergus Whelan, who closed only when the bell of St Mary's Catholic Church in the town square called forth the midnight hour. Neither did he close on Sundays, although he did make one small concession to the Sabbath by seeing to it that only the side door was used.

When taken to task by Trallock's venerable parish priest, Canon Tett, about his Sabbatical activities he had explained with a tear in his eye and a shake in his voice that his conscience bound him to serve the needs of any man, woman or child who might require a loaf of bread or a quarter stone of spuds on a Sunday.

The canon had lowered his priestly head and over the rims of his bi-focals surveyed the unlikely paragon dubiously. Ferg's gaze had remained steadfast and when he had thrust a five pound note into Canon Tett's hand with the injunction that he might pray for the holy souls, not merely of Ferg's immediate kin but for the souls of all the faithful departed, the subject of Sunday closing had been suspended there and then.

'Whoa girl!' The mare drew gratefully to a halt, her neck craned forward, her hooves spread wide the better to distribute the dead weight over her tired body. Donal fumbled in his fob pocket and found what he wanted underneath his watch. There were two half-crowns and three florins, a total of eleven shillings. His features puckered as he went through some elementary mental arithmetic before entering the shop.

'How's Donal? You're out a bad night, boy.'

Donal knew from the smug intonation, especially contrived for the benefit of the several shawled female customers who stood waiting to be served, that Faithful Ferg knew exactly what had brought him to town.

'I'll take two pounds of sausages, Ferg.'

‘Two pounds of sausages. That will be two and fourpence.’ Ferg advertised the sum loudly and wrote the amount into a large jotter under his hand on the counter. This was to intimate that the customer was free to back off if the price was not right or if the requisite amount of cash was not forthcoming.

Ferg never filled an order unless the money was first laid down on the counter and it had to be the exact amount to the nearest halfpenny. All requests for credit were greeted with stentorian guffaws during which he would hold on to his side as though he were about to burst. Sometimes he would rest a hand on the shoulder of the customer nearest to him in order to sustain the outburst.

‘I’ll take two large pan loaves and a quarter pound of butter.’

‘Two large pan loaves, two shillings, quarter o’ butter ninepence. That it?’

‘That’s it for that order. What’s due you?’

‘Five shillings and one penny.’ Ferg raised his head from the jotter, placed both hands palms downwards on the counter and stared solemnly at the space between his hands. A huge smile lighted his thin features when the money appeared on the spot where he had been staring. He scooped up the coins, placed them in the till and handed Donal one shilling and eleven pence in change. From beneath the counter he selected a used cardboard box. Bread, butter and sausages fitted snugly as though to a prearranged measurement.

‘Now,’ Donal rattled his remaining monies in the fist of his right hand, ‘a second order and you’ll secure this one with twine as I’ll be taking it home. Let there be a half pound of butter.’

‘Half pound of butter, one and a tanner.’

‘Threepence worth of gallon sweets and one small barm brack.’

Faithful Ferg pursed his lips at this latter, unexpected inclusion but made no comment save to announce that the amount of the item in question was 'one shilling and three pence.'

'Ten Woodbines. I'll carry those in my pocket.'

'Ten Woodbines, one and twopence,' came the mechanical voice from behind the counter. 'All told that comes to four shillings and tuppence.' At once he assumed his usual posture, not budging until the money was paid over. He dispensed the order quickly and held his pencil over the jotter awaiting further instructions.

'That it?' he asked.

'Just one more thing.' Donal produced a small, handstitched canvas satchel from inside his shirt.

'Put sevenpence worth of oats into that will you.'

Another merchant might have smiled or even laughed at the meagre amount but not Faithful Ferg. Sevenpence worth of good quality oats was a rare treat for a donkey. He lifted his long, spare frame across the counter with a well-calculated vault. He thrust the wooden-handled tin scoop deep into the oats but the amount he withdrew belied the depth of the thrust. He tossed it on the scales-scoop, withdrew another smaller scoopful and sprinkled part of it over that already on the scales-scoop until the seven-penny worth balanced with the weights he had laid out beforehand. He selected several grains, placing them on his palm where he examined them closely before transferring them to his mouth.

'Best food for man or beast is your oats, Donal my boy!' Donal hardly heeded him. His thoughts were taken up with his remaining finances. He had altogether expended nine shillings and tenpence. By all the powers that be that should mean that there was exactly one shilling and tuppence left in his fob. In his trousers pocket there were five coppers which left him with one

and sevenpence which was the price of a pint of stout. First things first, however.

‘Go on, girl.’ The mare needed no further spur than the oats bag which he shook tantalisingly close to her now-twitching ears as she moved off to take another left-hand turn of her own accord into a narrow laneway of small, single-storied houses, many of them thatched with straw, more roofed with sheets of corrugated iron while a privileged few were covered with slates.

The mare halted without bidding at a small, thatched dwelling at the end of the laneway. The whitewashed front was composed of two tiny windows at either side of a narrow door without lock or knocker. Here lived Kitty Smiley *née* Hallapy, only surviving sister of Donal and wife of the runaway Willie Smiley. There had been two other sisters and a brother but all three had succumbed to the ravages of tuberculosis in their late teens.

Donal gently kicked on the door with his wellingtoned right foot. In his hands were the cardboard boxes and oats bag. The door opened immediately to reveal a small, neatly kept kitchen whose chief feature was a Stanley Number 8 range which gleamed from constant polishing. A bare electric bulb hung from the ceiling. The door was opened by the eldest of the seven Smiley children, Tom, a likeable, easy-going lad in his thirteenth year. There were two other boys in the family and four girls. The girls had arrived after the boys, year-in year-out, unfailingly. The youngest was three-year-old Josie and after that there had been one miscarriage. At the table sat the two younger boys and the oldest girl Sophie. There were some schoolbooks in evidence. The children looked pinched and pale but Donal guessed it wasn’t from study. He placed the boxes in a corner, retaining the oats bag.

They had leaped about him as soon as he entered. To them he spelt affluence, the gift-laden, wealthy uncle from the prosperous countryside beyond the cramped

world of their laneway. None, if they were asked, would be able to recall a time when he had arrived empty-handed.

‘Where’s the rest? Where’s your ma?’

‘Out working,’ Tom answered. ‘The girls are in bed.’

‘Have you had your supper?’ He had not failed to notice that each pair of eyes was directed every so often towards the cardboard boxes.

‘No supper yet,’ Tom informed him. ‘We’re waiting for ma.’

Donal went to the doorway. ‘Go on, girl,’ he called to the mare. Immediately she turned at the side of the house and followed a path to the turf shed. Donal returned to the kitchen.

‘You proceed with your studies,’ he cautioned. ‘I’ll heel the rail into the shed. I won’t be long. We’ll eat when I come back. Meanwhile one of you could be laying the table and cleaning the frying pan.’ There were joyous whoops as he left by the back door to heel the rail. He was followed by Tom. He undid the belly-band and withdrew the pins from the top of the back rail. Lifting the front shafts he heeled the load into the shed while Tom leapt gingerly into the base of the cart and kicked the remaining sods into the shed.

Tell me,’ Donal said as he tied the oats bag over the mare’s head, ‘was it a treble?’ His nephew nodded.

‘And was it much?’

‘It was but I don’t know exactly how much.’

‘Did he give anything to your mother?’

‘No.’

‘To any of you?’

‘No.’

‘Any idea where he’s gone?’

‘They say England.’

‘Who says?’

‘They all say.’

‘Do you miss him?’

‘No.’

‘The others?’

‘No. They were too much afraid of him. How could you miss someone who beats you for nothing and beats your mother for nothing?’

‘You’re the boss man now, Tom.’

They sat on the heap of sods, listening to the mare munch her hard-earned grain. Outside the cosy confines of the shed the snowflakes, increasing now in density, drifted noiselessly past. From the house came the excited outcries of the children. The back door opened. Mary and her two brothers came barefoot to the shed and departed, silently, with armfuls of turf.

It did not take Donal long to become aware of another sound. First it was no more than a gentle sobbing. Then there came a succession of semi-strangled, almost inhuman cries. Donal found it difficult to accept that anything so piteous could emanate from one so young but then he thought: thirteen years of anguish seething under a moryah carefree surface! If the boy didn’t weep and weep his fill he would scarcely have been human. That kind of woe is better out than in, he thought. He would give him his time, sit with him till the final gasp of wretchedness had been wrung out of his system.

The mare had finished. Now she was nosing the corners of the satchel for the last remaining grains. There was silence in the shed. Donal decided to sit and wait. The mare threw the satchel from her head and snorted. She was ready for the road. She would wait awhile yet.

‘Come on away in, Uncle Donal.’ Donal was pleased the suggestion had come from his nephew. In the kitchen all was in readiness. Cups and saucers covered the bare boards of the table; there were neither plates nor side

plates. A bright fire burned in the Stanley and the frying pan sat atop the main ring.

While the sausages hissed and spat in the heated pan Donal and Tom cut slices of bread and buttered them from the quarter-pound pack. So intent were all with the business in hand that nobody noticed the back door ajar and the silent figure standing there. It was Kitty Smiley. Without a word she loosened her headscarf and then, suddenly, pressed it to her eyes as the tears came. Instantly they were all around her but before they had time to express concern or show care she was herself again. She pointed to the range.

‘Turn the sausages somebody, don’t they burn.’

Donal hastened to the pan and shook it energetically so that the browned undersides of its contents were plainly visible after the upheaval. Just then the remainder of the family came racing in from an adjoining bedroom wearing only their long nightshirts. They were the younger sisters, Kathleen and Maura and the three-year-old baby of the family, Josie.

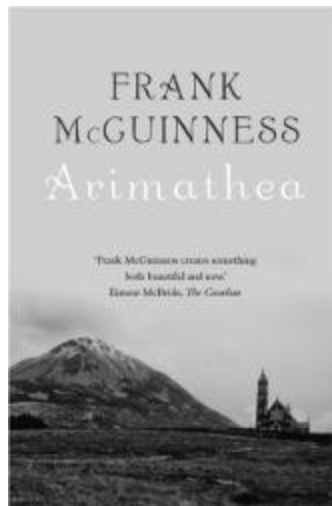
‘I declare to God,’ Donal exclaimed, ‘that’s hearing for you. They knew the sausages were being turned!’

The family ate ravenously. Donal joined in but Kitty would eat nothing.

‘Mrs O’Dell insisted I have my dinner,’ she explained. ‘I’ll always be fed where I work. It’s these I’m worried about.’

Donal took note of her drawn face. He was always pleased to see that she retained her good looks: that was some consolation.

The house consisted of two bedrooms and kitchen. In the parental bedroom there was one bed and a cot where Josie still slept for want of better. The other three girls slept in one large bed in the second bedroom while the boys slept on two mattresses on the kitchen floor. These



ARIMATHEA

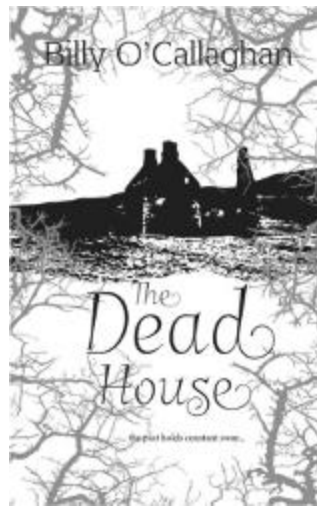
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THE DEAD HOUSE

Billy O'Callaghan

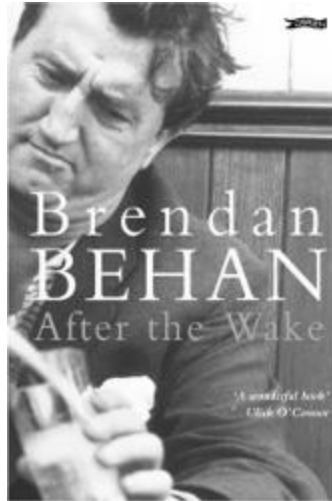
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