



VINTAGE

# I COULD READ THE SKY

TIMOTHY O'GRADY

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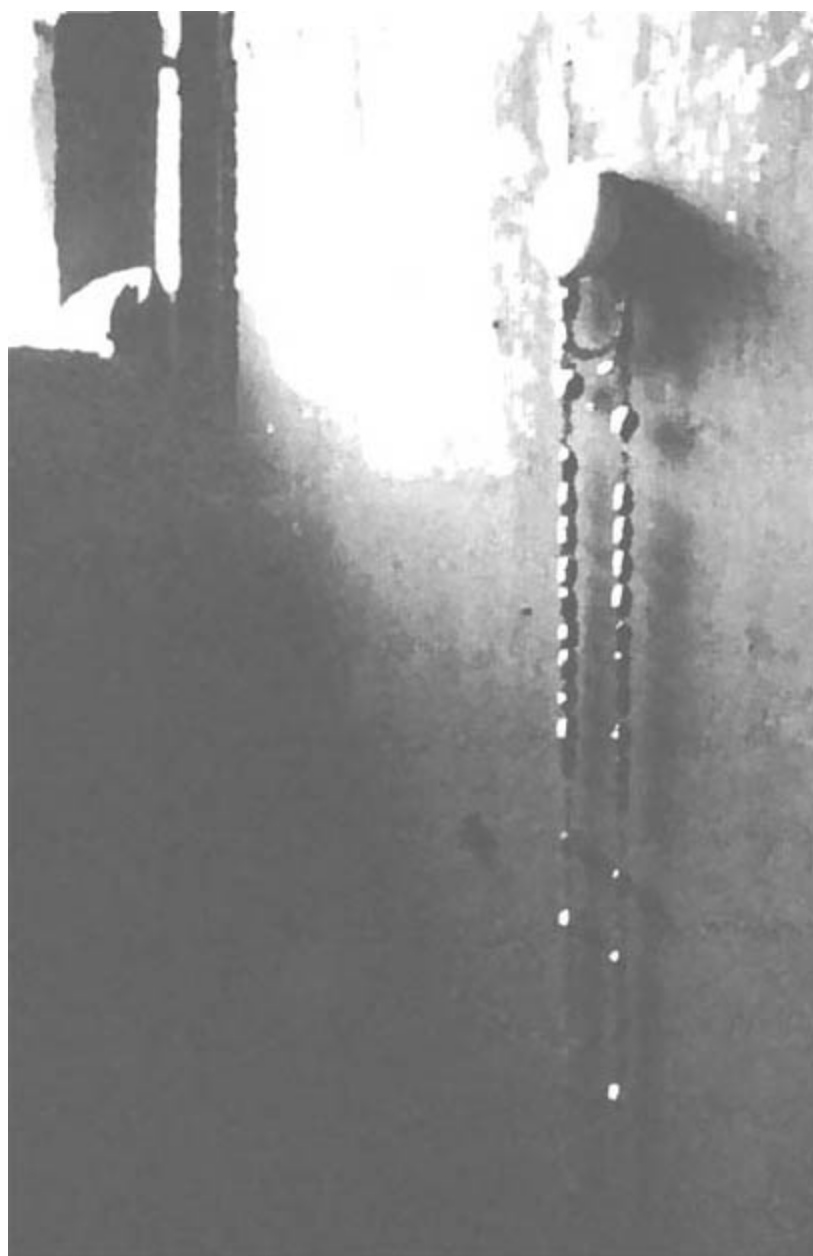
## About the Book

The experience of Irish emigration has never been more lyrically set out than in this novel, beautiful both for its words and for its images. It tells the story of one man's journey from the West of Ireland to the fields and boxing-booths and building sites of England. Now, at the century's end, he finds himself alone, looking back, struggling to make sense of a life of dislocation and loss and one of unforgotten loveliness.

## About the Author

TIMOTHY O'GRADY is the author of the prize-winning novel *Motherland* and co-author with Kenneth Griffith of *Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution* (Mercier Press, Ireland). He was awarded the Encore Award for the best second novel of 1997 for *I Could Read the Sly*.

STEVE PYKE'S photographic books include *Philosophers* and *Poguetry*. His work and installations are exhibited worldwide.



## **I COULD READ THE SKY**

"In this fine and deeply moving novel, Timothy O'Grady resists nostalgia ... [it reads with] all the humour and intensity of a real life honestly recorded, and with the pathos mutability lends the past"

LUCY HUGHES-HALLETT, *Sunday Times*

"The direct symbolism of Steve Pyke's stunning photographs matches O'Grady's text beautifully"

MARY LOUDON, *The Times*

"If the words tell the story of the voiceless, the bleak, lovely photographs that accompany it show their faces ... Fiction rarely gets as close to the messy, glorious truth as do memories and photographs. This rare novel dares to use both"

CHARLOTTE MENDELSON, *Times Literary Supplement*

"There is a power and beauty about this novel"

DAVID HORSPOOL, *Daily Telegraph*

"Richly atmospheric, the vivid and lyrical text and starkly beautiful black-and-white photographs bring feelings and images together like the act of memory itself"

*Irish Post*

"This isn't just another Irish exploration of exile but a little masterpiece in which O'Grady has gathered true experiences, then meshed them into one delicate narration"

ANNE SIMPSON, *Glasgow Herald*

"The text is both minimal and musical, in a way that echoes Beckett"

**COLE MORETON, *Independent on Sunday***

“There are not many books this year that seem to me written with comparable force, depth of feeling and sardonic pride”

**DAN JACOBSON, *Sunday Telegraph***

“What Pyke and O’Grady have done is read our imagination”

**DERMOT HEALY**



## List of Illustrations

Field, County Donegal, 1991  
County Sligo, 1994  
Field, County Donegal, 1991  
Door, County Clare, 1994  
Peat, County Kerry, 1994  
Rosary, County Clare, 1994  
Three generations, Inishmaan, Aran Islands, 1991  
Inishmaan, 1991  
Inishmaan, 1991  
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County Kerry, 1994  
Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, 1987  
Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, 1987  
Mizen Head, County Cork, 1990  
Healy Pass, County Cork / County Kerry, 1990  
Farmyard, County Donegal, 1991  
Peat, County Donegal, 1991  
Horse skeleton, County Donegal, 1991  
Burren wall, County Clare, 1987  
Boundary posts, County Donegal, 1991  
Fields, Inishmaan, 1991  
Burren, County Clare, 1987  
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Sheep gate, Sheep's Head, 1991  
Throwing the bullet, County Cork, 1987  
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Fairground, Edinburgh, 1983  
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Funderland, Dublin, 1981  
Ghost Train, Dublin, 1981  
Circus, London, 1981  
Kilburn, London, 1993  
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Bonfire, Belfast, 1992  
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Shrine, County Donegal, 1992  
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Inishmaan, 1991

Inishmaan, 1991  
Under the Thames, London, 1997  
Under the Thames, London, 1997  
Street race, County Cork, 1987  
Street race, County Cork, 1987  
County Clare, 1987  
Naas Road, Dublin, 1992  
Stairwell, Edinburgh, 1982  
Dublin, 1990  
Father and son, County Clare, 1994  
Bed, Inishmaan, 1991  
Deserted house, County Kerry, 1994  
Deserted house, County Clare, 1994  
County Donegal, 1992  
County Kerry, 1994  
Rosses Point, County Sligo, 1994  
County Cork, 1990  
Wall, Dublin, 1987



“Everything was the stories my father told me about his life ... it was as if he was in the room with me again ... You have put down that feeling of terrible longing that I didn’t think anyone but me remembered”

**EILEEN GALLAGHER, *in a letter to the author***

I whispered: memory hurts wherever you touch it.  
*George Seferis*

In remembrance is the secret of redemption.  
*Holocaust memorial, San Francisco*

*Timothy O'Grady*  
*Steve Pyke*

# **I COULD READ THE SKY**

*With a preface by John Berger*



**Harvill Secker**  
**LONDON**

## Preface

I dare not go deeply into this book, for if I did, I would stay with it forever and I wouldn't return. And then I wouldn't be on this page, as I am now, on this page before the book begins.

Is this a book? A stupid question if ever there was one. What else am I writing a preface to? It's a bastard. It has been made in the dark, as photos are made in a darkroom. It is to be looked at with the eyes shut, not the first time of course, but at all other times when you turn its pages.

Sure, every book, like every blackbird, is different. And sure, when you read here, you hear a chorus behind the talking voice, O'Sullivan and Behan, O'Casey and Synge, Joyce and Jack Yeats (with the hooves of the horses drumming), Beckett and O'Flaherty, they are all here in the dark, protecting with their art the new voice, saving it from oblivion, just as they kept it company when it was alone and wandering.

So what kind of bastard is it?

Every joker knows that making them laugh depends upon timing. It's much easier to make them cry, for sadness accumulates, whereas laughter comes with surprise. Always with surprise. Maybe in the next world it's happily the other way round.

Timing is the skill of playing with silence, of distributing it cunningly, of hiding it so that the listener comes upon it with surprise and delight - like the Russians hide painted eggs at Easter for the children to find. And in a story what is it that silence means? The unsaid, no?

You find the unsaid all the while here. At the top of the page before the lines begin. At the bottom when they're

over. And between the lines, between the sentences. Often too it's marvellously there inside a sentence. "When I lie in bed in the evening I think ever and ever of money and of Kate Creevy." It's the unsaid that makes this sentence go on twisting in the mind. Only the unsaid can dance with a sentence, and here in the dark they dance all the while.

The silence of the unsaid is always working surreptitiously with another silence, which is that of the unsayable.

What's unsaid one time can be said on another occasion. But the unsayable can never be said - unless maybe in a prayer, and God would know that, not me.

Before the unsayable we are alone. And this, I believe, is why stories are told. All stories are roads which end at a cliff-face. Sometimes the cliff towers above us, sometimes it falls away, sheer at our feet. But when a story leads you to the unsayable, you're in company. That and that alone is the comfort.

The unsaid and the unsayable.

Now let's read the pictures. Black and white photos. Why do photographers - among them some of the best - still persist in taking pictures in black and white, when colour film is so subtle and easy and cheap? Is it a penchant for nostalgia? For asceticism? For morality? Black and white, after all, is mightily moral.

I think it happens for another reason. What does painting do - irrespective of its styles? It invites what isn't there to become present. It starts with what can't be seen. Ask any good painter. Painters study appearances in order to get closer to what lies behind them. Visual art is a chase after the invisible.

The advantage of black and white photos is that they remind you of this search for what can't be seen, for what's missing; never for one moment do they pretend to be complete, whereas colour photos do. There are even colour pictures which are more "finished" than life itself!