

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Galloway Street

John Boyle

About the Book

John Boyle, son of poor immigrants from the West of Ireland, was born and raised in Paisley. In this acclaimed memoir, he tells the story of his childhood, beautifully capturing the poverty and the rough humour of the streets he grew up in, and the poignancy of growing up Irish in Scotland, never quite sure where you belong.

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GALLOWAY STREET

Growing up Irish in Scotland

John Boyle



BLACK SWAN

*For Stephanie and Sean
who helped me remember*

'Look how absurd I was when I was young' forestalls cruel criticism but it falsifies history . . . Those emotions were real when we felt them. Why should we be more ashamed of them than of the indifference of old age?

Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life*

Foreword

IN THE WINTER of 1993 I went back to Achill Island in the West of Ireland for the funeral of my Aunt Mary. It was a time of some crisis in my life, of confusion and doubt about the way I had chosen to earn a living, about the storm clouds lowering on the horizon of my marriage, about who I was or where I belonged after years of expatriate drift. I was going back to a wild, desolate place that had left its mark on me since I was a boy of ten, when Aunt Mary, returning to Achill after years of exile, had taken me there with her from my home in Scotland for a 'holiday' that was to last an entire summer and one school term.

What was it really that took me back again in 1993?

Aunt Mary was a lifelong spinster who had lived her last years on Achill in willed isolation; the families of her three sisters in Scotland were her closest relatives; it was only right that we be represented at her funeral.

Then there was the question of the will – if there was one. Mary, the sister who had stayed at home to look after their ailing father, Jack Sweeney, had inherited on his death the simple cottage and the narrow strip of land by the sea. There was a long-held understanding among the sisters – and it had been their father's wish – that in the event of Mary's death the place should pass to Annie, the youngest of the four and the last to leave home while he was still alive. Yet Mary was notoriously secretive and perverse by nature; there was no knowing what she would do. Given my boyhood link with the cottage in Achill, I confess the thought had sneaked into my mind that she might even have left it to me. In the event, the old woman surpassed herself and

wrongfooted all of us by willing everything to none of the above, but to someone quite unexpected.

Mary would have enjoyed the family mayhem that ensued.

As it turned out, I took something altogether different away with me from that trip to Achill.

It seemed that every place I visited, every face I vaguely recalled, stirred memories of the time I had spent there as a boy. Sometimes these memories intruded at awkward moments, never more so than when I rose to read a passage from Scripture during Mary's funeral Mass at Achill Sound. I had made up my mind to do this in my own voice, and not in the actorly tones I adopt for commercial voiceovers, only to falter when I started reading: I was no longer sure what my true voice was. Whatever doubts had surfaced to unsettle me, I came to believe that my reading had been sabotaged, and for good reason, by that ten year old boy.

For years I had been tinkering obsessively with reminiscences about my childhood in Scotland, as if some clue might lie there to my present confusion. It did not help, I began to understand, that these events were being recalled and enhanced by the middle-aged raconteur I had become. Now I felt the need to rediscover – truthfully, without embroidery – the boy I had been.

I found only his ghost, of course, yet he has haunted me ever since. He stands on the sidelines of my life, in the shadows, watchful, reproachful. He knows all my anecdotes; he beats me to the punchlines; he is not impressed. *Cummoan*, he says, *ye know fine there wis mair tae it than that.*

For a long time I persisted, writing this memoir in two distinct voices. Why not? I reasoned. Surely each has his story to tell? The raconteur looking fondly back, recalling a sepia-tinted boyhood across the echoes of the years? And the boy who lived it – insofar as he can remember it truly?

Who's to say where truth ends and fiction begins?

We shape our truths to make them bearable. We take our
sad songs and make them better. We grope for meaning.
Much of the time we are lost souls whistling in the dark.

But in our hearts we know where truth lies.

Let the boy tell his own story.

Beginnings

I WAKE UP in the night and there's a big dark shape leaning over me. There's a light coming from somewhere behind it but all I can see is this shadow above me.

Wheesht, it says. Wheesht now.

I think I can make out a face on it but I can't be sure. The funny thing is I'm not even feart, I just lie there looking up at it and after a while it backs away till all I can see is the dark shape with yellow light around it then the door shuts and everything goes black.

In the morning I'm not sure if this really happened or if it was just me dreaming. So I ask my mammy and she says it was only my daddy come to see me from the Army where he's a soldier in the war. And I know it must be true because he's left me new toys, a painted pirate boat one time made out of wood with real cloth sails strung with twine and another time a wooden horse on wheels, dark brown with big light splashes on its back and a long string for pulling looped through a hole in its muzzle.

That's them Gerry prisoners for ye, says my mammy.

Would you be up to them? Making beautiful toys like that out of old lumps of wood that's only fit for throwing on the fire. And they do it for nothin', a wee bit of chocolate your daddy says, or a few Woodbine, that's all they get for it the craitchurs. Ah, them Gerries are the bhoys, I'm telling you. They'll take a bit o' beating, if ye ask me, the same Gerries.

We live in a room in another woman's house, Mammy, Daddy and me and the baby. We are going out somewhere and my daddy is squatting on his hunkers in front of me tying my laces. He's swaying back and forth and this way

and that and there's a queer smell about his breath and all at once he staggers back cursing, still on his hunkers, and nearly falls into the fire. Holy Mother o' God, man, my mammy says in her tight whisper, what will Mrs McFadyen think? The baby starts crying and Wheesht, she says to it, Wheesht now, and I'm feart. But my daddy only laughs and though it's a queer laugh and his face looks slack and foolish and not like him I know it's all right and he comes crawling back to tie my lace.

I am riding on my daddy's shoulders. It's dark and there's no-one else. I am holding on tight under his chin because his breath has the queer smell and he's staggering all over the road. He's singing:

*There was a wild colonial boy
Jack Duggan was his name
He was born and bred in I-ye-land
In a place called Castlemaine*

Once I hear him muttering 'Mother Machree' and I feel his hands squeezing my ankles and his mouth wet on my knee. I can feel his stubble rasping on the palms of my hands and the inside of my wrists and his shoulders swaying and dipping under me.

*He was his father's only son
His mother's pride and joy*

It is a cold clear night and the sky is riddled with stars. Beside us is a low flat wall and a pale stretch of frosty grass then the litup windows of a big square building, a school, I think.

*And dearly did his parents love
The wild colonial boy*

One time it's as if he tries to walk along the wall and he lurches onto the grass and then the world turns and the litup windows whirl among the stars and I'm feart I'm going to fall. But he steadies himself and laughs and mutters, Ye're all right, son, ye're all right, yer daddy's got ye, don't be afeart, and we're back on the pavement again and though I'm still feart I'm excited too, the wild colonial boy riding up there with his head among the stars.

Galloway Street

1945

PLOP.

The Pulley up on the ceiling above the table has washing on it that drips down sometimes onto the oilcloth.

You hear one and wait for the next one, but nothing happens for a while so you forget to listen then *Plop*, you hear it again.

Number 4 Galloway Street is where we are now, in a room and kitchen on the top landing. It's always dim in the back room even though it's got a window and a big wardrobe beside it with a long mirror gleaming in the door then there's the big bed where me and Margaret and Frankie sleep.

The kitchen's much brighter with the fire burning in the grate and the big window over the sink. The table with the wet clothes hanging over it is in the middle of the room and on the far wall there's a big bed squeezed into an alcove with thick curtains where my mammy and daddy sleep. Sometimes in the daytime I hide in there and pull the curtains so it's dark and kid on I'm in a tent in the desert or lost in the deep forest at dead of night. There's a fuzzy purple quilt on the bed that feels funny on my fingers like chalk and I get a wee shiver when I touch it. So I always roll it back and play on the bedspread instead because That's candlewick, my mammy says, It has a nicer feel to it.

At the sink the tap is copper and shiny and curved like a swan's neck and you can swing it this way and that and when you run the water not too fast it comes out like glassy

rope. I like to stand there making the rope loop sideways and back again and looking across at the women in their turbans leaning out the windows blethering to each other or shouting down to their weans in the street though when my daddy lifts me up so I can see down there I get dizzy and feart because we're that high up.

When we get back to our close from the shops my mammy lifts me out of the go-chair so she can put the message bag in it instead and drag it up the stone stairs behind us.

squealbump

squealbump

squealbump

Holding on to me with her other hand, up past the lavvies on the half-landings where the bad smells are, drains and pee, past the Deveney's' house on the first landing, and up to the second where she sometimes stops for a rest though she doesn't like to, she says, because we don't know anybody on that landing. Sometimes I trip and I'd fall but for my mammy holding me up.

Arra would ye watch where ye're going?

She's hissing at me because everything echoes dead loud in the close and she doesn't want the neighbours to hear.

Haven't I enough to do pulling this go-chair and it full of messages without having to hold you up as well?

So I put out my other hand for balance on the inside wall though I don't like the feel of it, all clammy and sad with wee trickles running down it so you'd think the wall was greetin', and on we go up and up *squealbump squealbump squealbump* till at last there's no more sad wall only railings and daylight because this is the top landing and we're nearly home.

My mammy goes and gets baby Margaret in her big pram back from Mrs Higgins, our neighbour on the landing. Mrs Higgins looks after the baby sometimes. She's a nice woman with gingery hair and specs. Her door is dark shiny

wood with a bright brass lock and nameplate and matching letterbox and a fancy doorbell that chimes when you press it. Our door looks brown and scruffy beside it with just the wee nameplate M. BOYLE and scratches round the lock and letterbox and no bell so you have to chap the door.

Arra why would I go paying out money for the like o' that? says my mammy when I ask her. A lot of nonsense is all it is.

But that's not what she says to Mrs Higgins when they're out blethering on the landing.

Isn't that a lovely ring your bell has? she'll say. The Westminster chimes, isn't that what they call it? I might get one like that myself one day, God willing.

1946

Let you be getting up now.

It's freezing cold and the middle of the night and my mammy's standing beside the bed shaking me by the shoulder.

Wakey wakey, she says. Hallo below. You're going to school today, remember?

It's true. My first day at school. St James's. I get out of bed and do a pee in the po that's kept under the bed. I nearly pee the carpet, I'm shivering that much with the cold. The carpet feels damp under my feet but when I step off it onto the linoleum that's even worse, like stone. My teeth are chattering. We go in the kitchen because she's got the gas cooker lit and the oven door open. She's spread my clean clothes on a chair beside it to heat but it doesn't do much good. My vest and pants are cold and stiff when I put them on. My shirt is even worse, it's like ice, like putting iron armour on your bare skin.

I sit down at the kitchen table. The sky outside is black. I'm still shivering. The oilcloth on the table feels cold and clammy and there's wee puddles where the drips from the pulley have splashed out of the tin basin and pots she keeps

there; they're nearly full. She takes them away and wipes the table with a wet cloth and gives me tea and a big plate of porridge with steam coming off it.

That'll warm ye up a bit, she whispers.

We have to be quiet so we don't wake the baby in his cot by her bed or Margaret still sleeping in the big room.

I'm to go on the bus with Porky McNulty from number six, because Patricia his wee sister is in the same class as me. Patricia's her posh name. We call her Rita when we're out playing. She's got a nice face and long wavy hair.

I'm to call Porky by his proper name which is Eugene, my mammy says, or else I'll be in trouble.

Porky, she says, shaking her head. God forgive ye. Did ye ever hear the like?

But Mammy everybody calls him Porky.

Ah well. You're not everybody.

St James's is a big school with thousands of big boys and lassies running about and shouting in the playground. I'm waiting over to the side near the main door steps with the other weans who are there for their first day. Some of the weans standing with their mammies are greetin' but I'm holding it in because of what my mammy said at the bus stop at Caledonia Street.

Ye're a big boy now. Ye're not to be a crybaby.

A tall nun in black robes and hood with a white bib comes out onto the steps. We have to line up in front of her.

Hallo boys and girls, she says. My name is Mother Stanislaus. Welcome to St James's.

Our class teacher is a big stout woman with grey hair tied in a bun. She's not a nun, her name is Miss O'Neill. Her face is old but nice, with double chins.

She smiles at us.

We'll start with something nice and easy, she says. Now. What is a dot? Hands up anybody who knows what a dot is.

Some weans put their hands up and shout, Please Miss! so I put mine up as well. I hope Rita McNulty is looking.

Miss O'Neill asks one after the other but nobody gets it right. Then it's my turn.

Please Miss it's a bump, I say. But that's not right either. I was only guessing. I'm embarrassed but not too much because nobody else gets the answer.

Well, says Miss O'Neill, you can all tell your mummies and daddies that you learned something on your first day. Because a dot is just . . .

She picks up a stick of chalk and stabs it at the clean blackboard. It makes a wee white spot right in the middle of all the black.

A dot! says Miss O'Neill. That's all it is.

We all look at each other. Right enough, it was dead easy.

1947

Who made you?

God made me.

Miss O'Neill is teaching us the Catechism. It's a wee blue book full of questions and answers about Our Lord. We've all got our new Catechisms open at the first page.

Mother Stanislaus is standing beside the teacher, watching and smiling. She's only here for today, she says, because the Catechism is so important for our Catholic Faith.

Learn your Catechism, boys and girls, she says. This little book has the answers to all the questions you might have about God and our religion.

Miss O'Neill reads out the questions and we all chant the answers back.

Who made you?

God made me.

Why did God make you?

To know Him love Him and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him for ever in the next.

In whose image did God make you?

God made me in His own image and likeness.

There's something missing. I put my hand up.

Please Miss!

Yes John, Miss O'Neill says, What is it?

Please Miss, who made God?

Her mouth opens but she doesn't say anything. She looks at Mother Stanislaus. She doesn't say anything either. Then she smiles and so does Miss O'Neill.

Mother Stanislaus comes forward.

Well, John, that's a very clever question and you're a clever boy to ask it. But you see, nobody made God. God made everything. God was always there, before everything else. He is still with us now, and for all eternity. Do you see?

I don't see how God could come from nothing and I don't know what Eternity means but I don't like to say especially after her saying I was clever in front of Rita McNulty. I'm embarrassed because everybody's looking at me.

Yes, Mother.

Miss O'Neill carries on reading out the questions and we all chant the answers.

Where is God?

God is EVERYwhere!

That's the best one because when we say *EVERYwhere!* we're allowed to shout, or near enough, and spread our arms out wide.

When James McGovern spreads his arms out he kids on he's doing a big yawn but Miss O'Neill can't see him because he's hiding behind big Owen Mangan. The boys sitting near him are giggling behind their hands and I'm jealous. I wish I'd thought of that.

But still.

Who made God?

I love Elizabeth McNally. She's in my class at St James's. She's got a nice quiet face with a soft mouth and fair wavy hair and she lives in Blythwood Terrace near the Fountain

Gardens. It's dead posh there, the tenements are red stone not dark and sooty like Galloway Street. I think she loves me back, that's what Helen Murray told me and she's her best pal. The happiest day of my life was Pat Foley's birthday party when we played Postman's Knock and I kissed Elizabeth McNally. When I tasted her mouth I was that dizzy I thought I was fainting. I wanted to kiss her again but they started a new game.

I watch Elizabeth in the classroom sometimes, though I kid on I'm just looking at the pictures up on the wall. There's one I like called Rockabye Baby, a wee baby in its cradle high up in the branches of a tree. There's a rhyme:

*Rockabye baby in the treetops
When the wind blows the cradle will rock.*

I always feel sorry for the baby, stuck up in a tree all by itself. The picture is near where Elizabeth sits and when I look at them it makes me happy and sad at the same time.

*When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
Down will come cradle, baby and all.*

Sometimes she can feel me watching her. A funny look comes over her face and she turns her head dead slow and sees me. Then she smiles at me. A wee shy smile. It's a secret between Elizabeth and me.

I dream it's playtime and all the weans are out in the playground when suddenly I come galloping in on a big white horse like Roy Rogers and Trigger at the Astoria. I'm wearing a big white hat like Roy's and a red bandanna. They all stop and stare at me, they can't believe their eyes. When I get to Elizabeth I reach down dead gallant and scoop her up into the saddle in front of me. Then Trigger rears up and whinnies and paws the air, I pull the reins round and we

gallop away in a big cloud of dust and leave St James's behind for ever.

We're playing a game in the old washhouse out the back of number six, me and Rita McNulty and Agnes Brown and Rita's wee brother, Wee Johnny. The lassies are the mummies making the tea for the daddies coming in from their work. They've got this old pot out of the midden and they're trying to put water in it by scraping it sideyways through puddles but that doesn't work. Then Wee Johnny says, Hey wait a minute, and he takes out his wullie and pees in the pot. The lassies start giggling, but it's OK because Wee Johnny is Rita's wee brother and he's only four. They get very interested in how much he can pee and how the steam rises off it. They put the half-full pot on two bricks and that's the cooker. Not long after that they're looking for more water to make more tea and Wee Johnny's got no pee left so Rita McNulty comes up to me and says, Right, mister, we need mair watter for the kettle. So I unbutton my trousers and out comes my wullie and Rita smiles at me and says, That's fine, and nice and hoat, tae. Ye can turn the tap aff noo. And we sit on bricks stood on end and curl our fingers dead posh as if we're holding china cups and kid on we're mummies and daddies having their tea.

After a while I hear my mammy shouting for me. John? John? Are ye there? she's shouting out the landing window at number four and at first I'm worried I'm going to get a row. But no, she's smiling away and waving at me to come up to the house. Whit's it fur? I shout up to her. But she only smiles and waves. Just come up, she says, I have somethin' to show ye.

So up I go.

When I get there the door's half open but the lobby's empty as if there's nobody in. My mammy must be hiding. I look round laughing, wondering what game she's playing

and what she has to show me, and out she comes from behind the door with a funny wee tight smile on her face. Oh, there ye are. And she shuts the door and hits me a skelp on the back of the head that scatters me on the floor. God forgive ye, she's hissing at me, in the tight voice she has for shouting at us so the neighbours on the landing won't hear her, Ye're filthy. Taking your trousers down and making a show of yerself for all the world to see. In front of wee girls too, and you a Catholic boy. Have ye no shame at all? Holy Mother o' God we're disgraced at ye.

WhydidGodmakeyou?

She's trying to hit me where I am on the floor but she's a stout woman and not able to bend down easily and I'm crawling away as fast as I can to hide under the big bed in the kitchen, so she grabs the brush from its corner and stabs at my back with the bristly head of it and gets in a couple of good kicks in my side with her woolly slippers before I crawl under the bed and lie there bawling in the stoury dark with my heart choking me because I'm a disgrace to the world and I've driven my mammy mad.

Miss O'Neill keeps a wee box on her desk for the Black Babies.

If you have a penny to spare, boys and girls, she says, Put it in the box and it will go to help the black babies.

The black babies live in Africa. They're very poor and they don't get enough to eat. And they haven't got proper schools to go to, like St James's.

They're not as lucky as you, says Miss O'Neill. And you can stop making faces, James McGovern, it's not funny.

She says the White Fathers go to darkest Africa to convert the Pagan. Pagans don't believe in Our Lord. And that's the worst thing of all about the black babies. They haven't been baptized. It's not their fault, they don't know any better, but they can never go to heaven. They go to Limbo.