

## LETTER FROM...

## Athlone

Just after seven o'clock on a wet Friday evening in the chapel of Athlone's Franciscan friary, and the memorial mass is in full swing. As the serving boys dart back and forth behind the altar, and the puffs of incense rise skywards to the vaulted ceiling, the Bishop of Clonfert (who bears an almost supernatural resemblance to Sir Alex Ferguson) advances on the pulpit to pronounce his homily. The Bishop has privately let it be known that he will speak for exactly eight minutes, "not seven and not nine". In the event, timed by any wristwatch, he coasts home in eight minutes forty-five seconds. Outside, rain falls slantwise over the mutinous Shannon.

Smack in the centre of the midland plain, halfway between Dublin and Galway, Athlone isn't an obvious destination for the English traveller in Ireland. Thackeray, who came this way in 1842 when he was researching *The Irish Sketch Book*, left a single, sniffy paragraph, the gravamen robbed from a contemporary guide-book: "old, inconvenient, ill-built and ugly". (To do him justice, Thackeray did concede that an artist might have found some suitable subjects for his sketching pad.) A century and a half later, this borrowed judgment clearly rankles: intending to use it in tomorrow's conference address, I soon discover that the chairman has it marked down for his own prefatory remarks.

John Broderick, whose death ten years ago the mass and a host of other weekend events commemorated, spent most of his life in Athlone, which features as the "Bridgeford" of his novels. Back at the Prince of Wales Hotel, hard by the site on which the instigators of the 1691 siege of Athlone met their end, courtesy of some more English visitors, a poster shows him caught on the steps of the capacious family house he finally abandoned in 1979 for a ten-year exile in England. Immensely well turned out, trademark fob-watch dangling across his shirt-front, he looks curiously resigned. In fact, as every Athlonian met in the course of this two-day junket is quick to point out, the decade spent in Bath was a disaster: a lonely man making himself lonelier, spending his last months in a wheelchair far away from a place he loved but could no longer bear to inhabit.

Though half a dozen of his twelve novels are still in print, it is difficult to believe that Broderick (1924-89) has much of a reputation in the United Kingdom. In Ireland, cautious respect – the *Irish Times* is marking the festival with a half-page feature – comes mixed with the reminder that for much of his writing career Broderick was a national scandal. *The Pilgrimage*, which he insisted was the first Irish novel about homosexuality, was banned by the Censorship Board on its appearance in 1961, while the huge success of *An Apology for Roses* – 30,000 copies sold in the first week of publication back in 1973 – probably had something to do with the salacity value of its contraceptive-wielding priest. According to the chairwoman of Saturday night's dinner, the two books most regularly read by torchlight under blankets at Irish boarding schools in the early 1970s were *An Apology* and *The Girl with Green Eyes* by Edna O'Brien.

Ten o'clock the next morning finds a sixty-strong crowd grouped on a windy corner in Irishtown, where the road bends round to a new-fangled shopping development, for the street-naming ceremony. It's a peculiarly eclectic gathering: Rotary Club grandees, town councillors, "the feller from England" (myself), the Bishop again, to whom elderly men deferentially raise their hats, brightly plumaged old ladies. A searing vision in bright orange turns out to be Mrs Mary O'Rourke, the local TD, and Minister for Public Enterprise. As the traffic skids by and the file of early-morning

shoppers threads its way past to Dunne's department store, on whose forecourt we assemble, the stone plaque is unveiled and "John Broderick Street" slides into local topography. "The first street named after a twentieth-century writer anywhere in Ireland", someone proudly announces.

As the range of local lustre and éclat on display perhaps suggests, Broderick's reputation in Athlone went well beyond his novels. The Brodericks owned the town's bakery, which John himself managed for a time in the 1950s and 60s – a useful defence, he maintained, against the hostility that his attacks on money-grabbing small-town snobbery would otherwise have provoked. A district librarian who had written a novel such as *The Waking of Willie*



John Broderick

Ryan (1965), in which an outraged family and a disapproving priest collude in the incarceration of a homosexual on the grounds of his "madness", would have been drummed out of his job, he often claimed. As one of Athlone's largest employers and ratepayers, Broderick was too big a fish to offend.

One always suspected from Broderick's novels – especially late-period works like *The Flood* (1987) and, posthumously published, *The Irish Magdalen* (1991) – that "Bridgeford" was a lightly disguised portrait of his home town. There's an ominous familiarity, consequently, about the grey squares, the grim Angevin castle and the twin Catholic churches; and the fields of pasture in *The Flood*, sold to a visiting Englishman without the rider that they are under water for three months of the year, are apparently a stone's throw away if I want to go and see them. Back at the Prince of Wales ("The Duke of Clarence" between hard covers, everyone is keen to emphasize), a series of papers ransacks the various formal compartments of Broderick's career: the poet Des Egan on his complex relationship with Athlone; the former *Irish Times* Literary Editor, Brian Fallon, on his critical work, the historian Patrick Murray on the early novels. Limbering up for a faintly presumptuous half-hour on "Broderick's Last Years", based on some letters exchanged in the late 1980s, I haul out the Thackeray quote to muted yet indulgent laughter.

Such public performances as Broderick allowed himself in press interviews and on RTE always gave the impression of a vain, touchy

man, never afraid to advertise his personal problems (he nearly died of alcoholism in the early 1970s) and animosities in print and on air. There were famous rows with Edna O'Brien, whom he described as "a cut-price Molly Bloom", and legendary drunken TV appearances. Curiously, or perhaps predictably, the Broderick who emerges from these *éloges* is a wistful, lonely figure – bisexual, mother-fixated, forlorn amid the tart remarks and the literary jousting matches. Speaker after speaker talks of his "otherness", his sense of "rootedness without belonging" (Patrick Murray's phrase), which encouraged the foreign jaunts (as a Paris habitué in the 1950s he knew Hemingway, made friends with Julian Green, rang Beckett's door bell but, according to myth, couldn't be bothered to wait), but always brought him back to Athlone and what he diagnosed as the "claustrophobia" of its narrow streets. Even the satirical assaults on Catholicism turn out to be the laments of an old-fashioned religious conservative who deplored Vatican II and the end of the Tridentine mass as much as he disliked the hypocrisies of "respectable" middle-class Irish churchgoers. The greatest moment of Broderick's life, it appears, was to bask in the presence of Pope John XXIII.

*The Pilgrimage*, the wellspring of the notoriety on which his local reputation rested, is a good example of the complex relationship Broderick pursued with the society and the institutions he was supposed to be mocking. Julia Glynn, its central character, convent-reared but with no strong religious feeling, is an insatiable man-eater married to a building contractor crippled by arthritis. Sexually unsatisfied by both bed-bound Michael and a younger man named Jim with whom she takes up, Julia transfers her attentions to her husband's manservant. Matters reach a head on a pilgrimage to Lourdes. "How nice that John's written a good religious book", the Athlone nuns were supposed to have remarked when the novel's title became known. And yet in many ways this is an accurate description of Broderick's intent. *The Pilgrimage* ends with the words, "In this way they set off on their pilgrimage, from which a week later Michael returned completely cured." According to several contributors to the post-seminar discussion, no irony was intended.

The formal proceedings end with a twenty-year-old tape of Broderick on RTE: dandyish, delphic – there are some wounding examples of his gift for deadpan repartee – canvassing his decision to leave Ireland and the literary schemes that took up the last decade of his life (*The Flood* and *The Irish Magdalen*, both derided by Irish critics, were the first instalments in a projected trilogy of 1930s Athlone life). As literary celebrations go, this one is unexpectedly moving, mostly because of the resolute ordinariness of the participants – a roomful of book-fancying Rotarians talking about some fairly obscure novels – but also because of the odd humility of the subject. Of the countless Broderick anecdotes wheeled out over the course of the weekend (what Broderick said to Cardinal Daly, Broderick turning up drunk at local jamborees), the best takes in a visit to his old school sometime in the late 1960s. Encountering a pair of youngish staff members, Broderick cross-questioned them on their teaching responsibilities. At the end of this considerable interrogation, one of the teachers timidly shot back, "And what do you do?" "Ah," the visitor mused, "What do I do? I *bake buns*." Here beneath the soft midland rain, amid the rattle of provincial teacups and the whirr of the tourist buses heading west, in the place that simultaneously enticed and repelled him, Broderick and his books seem effortlessly alive.

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