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Piece Dealing With Sorj Chalandon's Award -Winning Novel About the Northern Ireland Conflict : an Irishman's Diary

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An Irishman's Diary

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FOR professional and personal reasons, I am always interested in writers who have a foot in both French and Irish culture. It is commonly accepted that Paris exerted a significant influence on the blossoming art of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, which might well have stagnated had they remained in a Dublin that for Joyce was synonymous with paralysis.

Similarly, for a number of years around the turn of the millennium, the “enfant terrible” of French letters, Michel Houellebecq, lived on Bere island, off the west coast of Cork and situated part of his 1998 Impac-winning novel *Atomized* in Connemara.

More recently, the former Northern Ireland correspondent of the French newspaper *Libération*, Sorj Chalandon, has written two autobiographical novels about his close friendship with the senior Republican Denis Donaldson, who revealed in 2005 that he had been working for over 20 years as a British agent.

My Traitor, first published in French in 2007, describes how a young French violin-maker, Antoine, during a trip to Belfast in 1977, embarks on a blind love affair with the Republican cause, which he associates with the suffering of the people, encapsulated in the haunting music and landscape of Ireland. The dream begins to unravel when Antoine discovers that his hero Tyrone Meehan is, in fact, a traitor. Was everything that happened between them a lie then, he wonders? He will never get a satisfactory response to this question.

Last May, Sorj Chalandon gave a keynote address in Lille at the annual conference for Franco-Irish Studies and became very emotional when describing the heartache he endured on discovering that his friend Denis Donaldson was not the man he appeared to be. Chalandon's latest novel, *Retour à Killybegs* (Return to Killybegs), was awarded the prestigious Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française in December of last year and is a superior novel to *My Traitor*, in my view, because of the way in which it provides the background information that is necessary to understand the character of Tyrone Meehan. It opens with a Prologue, written on December 24th, 2006 from the Meehan family home in Killybegs where Tyrone escaped after the press

conference called by the IRA at which he admitted his treacherous behaviour. He reflects on how difficult it is to know the full truth about any human being: "Nobody has ever been in my skin. If I speak out now, it's because I am the only one in a position to tell the truth. Because after my passing, I can only wish for silence".

He goes on to recount his childhood in Killybegs, where his father, an IRA veteran of the War of Independence, made the life of his wife and children a misery through physical abuse and financial recklessness. In the best Irish tradition, he spent most of his time and money in the local pub, where he regaled the customers with rebel songs and farfetched stories. When he died, his wife was forced to move to Belfast with her six children to join her brother Lawrence Finnegan. Belfast during the second World War and its aftermath was a place where Catholic families were being burnt out of their homes by their Loyalist neighbours.

Tyrone Meehan, like so many other Catholics, joined the IRA and became an unlikely hero when he and his friend Danny Finley resisted an attack on their street by an armed Loyalist mob. What Tyrone failed to reveal to his admiring Republican friends was that he had accidentally shot Danny dead. Unfortunately for him, however, this information came into the possession of the security forces who used it on his release from Long Kesh to persuade him to work for them.

The hunger strikes that would result in the death of 10 Republican prisoners had begun at this stage and it seemed as though Margaret Thatcher would never yield to what she considered "terrorist demands", no matter what the cost in terms of loss of life and human suffering.

Chalandon is dexterous in recounting the various stages in his hero's downfall. As the peace process takes root, Tyrone consoles himself with the thought that his work is achieving something worthwhile, that his betrayal is saving lives. But deep down he knows that he is living a lie, that his friends will eventually see him for what he is. His older brother Séanna, who ends up in the New York police force, summed up his frustration with Ireland thus: "What has she done for us, tell me? . . . We spend our time behind bars and when we come out, we are met with more misery. But who hears our cries? What country is there to defend us?"

In the end, Tyrone can appreciate the validity of these words. Betrayed by the security forces some years into the peace process, he lives out his last days in a cottage in Killbegs awaiting the assassins he knows will come.

It is somewhat paradoxical that a French journalist should have been the one to write such a perceptive narrative of the Northern conflict. It is clear that Chalandon has an emotional investment in what he is writing about. He identifies with Tyrone Meehan, but also with the violin-maker Antoine, who is brutally told on one occasion by his mentor: "That I was playing at war . . . That I was a friend of Ireland's, comrade, a brother, but that here (in Belfast) I was a bystander." His alter ego Chalandon was no mere bystander, however, and by writing *Retour à Killybegs* he has made a noteworthy contribution to Ireland's understanding of its own history.

Retour à Killybegs has not yet been released in English translation.

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