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No Church for the Poor – *Angela's Ashes*

EAMON MAHER

Born in Brooklyn in 1930, Frank McCourt was brought by his family to Ireland when he was four years of age. He made the return journey to the United States when he was nineteen. His first book, *Angela's Ashes*, published last year, is a tour de force of confessional writing. It has evoked much reaction, some hostile (especially in his home town Limerick, where some people consider his account exaggerated and unfair), a lot more which was highly laudatory. It won for its author the highly prestigious Pulitzer Prize and was voted book of the year by *Time* magazine.

Angela's Ashes is the work of a mature man who has ruminated over his childhood in New York and Limerick for the best part of fifty years. It is a powerful, hard-hitting book which is impossible to ignore, whether you love it or hate it. The hunger, the cold, the smell of the chamber pots that are emptied in the latrines in the morning, the pain of growing up with an alcoholic father who rabbits on about dying for Ireland while neglecting his wife and children – all these are wonderfully captured through the eyes of a perceptive child, an artist in the making.

What is it about many Irish novelists that they need to leave their native land before writing about the experiences that happened to them there? Joyce is the obvious example. According to Augustine Martin, 'For Joyce Ireland was, among other things, the old sow that ate her farrow; a country dedicated to the banishment of her artists.'¹

I don't presume to place Frank McCourt in the same literary category as Joyce, but this latest Irish literary talent shares with his illustrious predecessor a strong sentiment of exile. He was an outsider in New York because his parents were Irish; an exile on his coming to Ireland because of his 'Yankee' accent and strange ways. More important than any geographical or sociological

1. Augustine Martin, 'Inherited Dissent: the Dilemma of the Irish Writer', in *Studies*, Spring 1965, p. 1.

exile, however, is the feeling, so palpable in *Angela's Ashes*, of a spiritual, metaphysical malaise that convinces McCourt that he doesn't quite fit in anywhere. His parents were misfits, his brothers also, but none felt his marginality as strongly as the chronicler of his deprived youth who created, or recreated, *Angela's Ashes*.

To my way of thinking, it doesn't really matter if all the events recounted in this book are true or not. What I hold on to after reading it is a feeling of revulsion at the suffering endured by the McCourt family in the Limerick of the 1940s. The smell of the lanes, the black faces of the coalman and the gasworks employees, the sinister and constant presence of the river Shannon and its perceived capacity to spread fever and death, the kindness and cruelty of the inhabitants of Limerick, were all vividly conveyed to me by the text. Despite my incredulity with regard to certain events (especially the feverish affair the narrator allegedly engages in with a consumptive young Protestant girl, or his 'warm' welcome to the shores of America by the lady from Poughkeepsie at the end of the book), which, in my opinion, smack of a desire to 'spice up' the narrative, I remain convinced of the validity of McCourt's testimony. After all, he is writing from memories of fifty or sixty years ago, and the writer may be highly selective in choosing material that suits his main thesis.

AN UNCARING CHURCH?

The theme I focus on here is the portrayal of the Catholic Church as an institution that was uncaring with regard to the plight of the poor. McCourt's criticism is particularly virulent when he remembers how he never saw a priest darken the doorstep of his house, or that of any of the other houses in his area. Whereas nowadays in the poorer areas of our towns and cities religious practice is very low, in the 1940s representatives of the Church were still the object of much prestige and influence – they would have been accorded respect anywhere, especially among the poor who were very devout. The Catholic clergy never went hungry, unlike the vast bulk of their parishioners. But, in criticising the priests of the 1940s, is there not the risk of applying today's norms to a diametrically different situation? It was believed by many in the 1940s in Ireland that poverty was good for the soul, that all the pain you endured should be offered up to God. And then, of course, it has to be remembered that not all

the representatives of the Church were self-centred, materialistic, full of their own importance. McCourt does describe, for example, the kindness of a Dominican priest, to whom he often went to confession:

I wonder if the priest is asleep because he's very quiet till he says, My child, I sit here. I hear the sins of the poor. I assign the penance. I bestow absolution. I should be on my knees washing their feet. Do you understand me, my child?²

This was not the reaction of a worldly, functional priest. If anything, this particular Dominican has a strong Bernanosian quality, with the emphasis he places on the poor being the privileged ones in God's eyes. While I accept that there were several abuses among the Catholic clergy and religious during his childhood, I feel that McCourt is most comfortable when highlighting defects, when describing the hopeless hardship and despair he and many like him had to endure, in part as a result of the Church's neglect. Because,

for all that it was a highly influential institution during the 1940s in Ireland, the Catholic Church could not be held responsible for all the inequality that existed in the period after Independence. The new Free State was too

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busy thinking about survival to set about eradicating hunger and injustice. Most of today's social services are provided by the State. In the 40s and 50s, if the Church didn't run the schools and the orphanages, nobody else would have bothered to do so. It is natural that, now as we approach the end of the second millennium, we feel horror at the conditions many people had to endure five decades ago. But let's not forget that in the 1940s conditions were different. Sanitation as we know it was rare. Small wonder then that so many people died of TB and typhoid: the miracle is that others survived at all.

When reflecting on his past in Limerick, Frank McCourt's anti-clericalism is possibly the result of his personal disappointment at the Catholic Church's abandonment, real or imaginary, of himself and his family. He might also be buying into the

2. *Angela's Ashes*, Flamingo, 1997, p. 208. All subsequent references are to this edition; and page numbers are given within the text.

stereotypical vision conceived by Joyce, a writer whose antipathy towards the Church I have never properly understood. The opening page of *Angela's Ashes* announces the approach that will be adopted by McCourt throughout his book:

It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (p. 1)

ANOTHER DICKENS ?

It cannot, and should not, be denied that McCourt was subjected to a great deal of trauma and humiliation during his childhood. He mentions 'the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for 800 long years' (p. 1), as being the main sources of his unhappiness. Nevertheless he does point out that, as a writer, this unhappy childhood has been worthwhile. You can't write well about experiences and feelings you've never lived through.

McCourt is probably at his best when depicting black, desperate situations and in this the comparison with Dickens is probably apposite. The recapturing of his childhood vision, the simplicity of the language, the childlike reactions to incomprehensible happenings, the humour, are all fine artistic achievements. I do not doubt McCourt's many literary talents, no more than I deny

Religion recurs as a constant theme because of the dominant role it played in virtually everyone's life at the time.

his right to portray the Catholic Church in the negative light he does, but I do at times call into question his objectivity and fairness. He captures wonderfully the grasping middle-class shopkeepers who try to cheat the people who come to them with their

Vincent de Paul food coupons – these same shopkeepers see themselves as upright, devout Catholics, the pillars of society – the fire and brimstone sermons given by the Redemptorist priests during retreats; the warmth of the churches compared to the harsh cold outside, the sweet smell of incense that permeated them; the feelings of guilt and unworthiness that were instilled in people with regard to sexuality; the blind acceptance of pronoun-

ments that were handed down from well-fed priests in pulpits or when they visited schools.

Religion recurs as a constant theme because of the dominant role it played in virtually everyone's life at the time. The clergy were so powerful largely because of the relative ignorance of the majority of the people when it came to philosophy or theology. Neither were the Irish diocesan clergy themselves exposed to a challenging training in these areas in the seminaries. The people were happy to let the priests do their thinking for them and there weren't many who challenged the Church's line on anything. The following description of how the priest prepared the boys for their First Holy Communion is a classic of its type:

He shows us how to stick out the tongue, receive the bit of paper, hold it a moment, draw in the tongue, fold your hands in prayer, look towards heaven, close your eyes in adoration, wait for the paper to melt in your mouth, swallow it, and thank God for the gift, the Sanctifying Grace wafting in on the odour of sanctity. (p. 134)

You can get a genuine glimpse into the child's reaction to this 'trial run' from these lines. The image of the 'Sanctifying Grace wafting in on the odour of sanctity' is quite special. First Communion and Confirmation were big events in the child's life and needed careful preparation. It didn't matter whether you were rich or poor as these sacraments were available to all, provided one underwent the correct training. Afterwards, despite the dire warnings from teachers, it was off to collect money to mark the occasion. McCourt is evenhanded in his depiction of these events.

A MOTHER'S HURT

His hurt is obvious, however – and especially that of his mother – when he writes about how he was refused permission by the sacristan to train to be an altar boy. His mother has no doubts as to the reasons for this rejection:

They don't want boys from the lanes on the altar. They don't want the ones with scabby knees and hair sticking up. Oh no, they want the nice boys with hair oil and new shoes that have fathers with suits and ties and steady jobs. That's what it is and 'tis hard to hold on to the Faith with the snobbery that's in it. (p. 167)

What hits her even harder is the subsequent refusal by the Christian Brothers to allow her son to attend their secondary school, in spite of an excellent reference from his teacher in Leamy's (Primary School). She comments on how this is the second time that the Church has slammed the door in her child's face.

Angela has quite an ambivalent attitude to the Catholic Church. She possesses some of the resignation and piety that were widespread among Irish women of this period, but there are times when she rebels against the accepted norms. For example, when her husband suggests that it is her duty as a Catholic to

submit to his sexual needs, she is heard to say: 'As long as there are no more children eternal damnation sounds attractive enough to me'. (p. 246)

While the author has obvious sympathy for his mother's plight, it didn't really suit his purposes in this book to confine himself to dealing with how this woman lived through such events and survived.

This is a spirited reaction from a woman who should be the real focus of this book, were we to believe the title, that is. What she had to endure was probably more harrowing than the suffering of any of her offspring: the death of

three of her children; her total neglect by her husband; the mortification she is subjected to by some representatives of the Vincent de Paul; her moral bankruptcy when she sleeps with Laman, in whose house they are forced to move after the father absconds to England and fails to send any money home. While the author has obvious sympathy for her plight, it didn't really suit his purposes in this book to confine himself to dealing with how this woman lived through such events and survived. His shock at seeing her begging in front of the church is, in his own words, 'the worst kind of shame' (p. 288).

It is also clear that he feels great resentment towards her when he realises that she and Laman are 'at the excitement' (p. 340) in the loft of the house of the latter. At thirteen years of age, such revelations leave their mark. In fairness to McCourt, he has mentioned in interviews that he needed to 'tell the full story' about his mother and the choices her life forced her into making. He was particularly shocked that his mother should have sex with Laman; he felt bitter at their father for leaving them, at society for

placing them on the margins of civilised living, at the Catholic Church for abdicating its responsibility to the poor.

All in all, he had a lot with which to reproach people and institutions. Mrs Spillane, an elderly woman to whom young Frank delivers telegrams, sums up the view of many people at the time when she says:

There they are, the priests and nuns telling us Jesus was poor and 'tis no shame, lorries driving up to their houses with crates and barrels of whiskey and wine, eggs galore and legs of ham and they telling us what we should give up for Lent. Lent, my arse. What are we to give up when we have Lent all year long? (pp. 371-372)

How objective is this view, I wonder. My thesis is that Frank McCourt has a relatively clichéd view of Ireland, one that has become firmly etched in many people's minds, that sees this island as an intellectually backward, unsavoury, depressing, priest-dominated, nostalgic country which constantly looks back bitterly on the pain inflicted on it by the English, and which blindly accepts the dictates of the Catholic Church.

TOO JOYCEAN A CATHARIS ?

Part of the massive appeal of *Angela's Ashes* is probably a direct result of the surge of interest that has been generated this past decade around the globe, and especially in North America, with everything that has to do with Ireland and the Irish. McCourt, an Irish immigrant in America, was well-placed to write a memoir that would strike a chord with a wide audience. What was born out of his cathartic evocation of his childhood, *Angela's Ashes*, is a brutally frank and exquisitely written book. I don't necessarily find every single aspect of it fair or objective, but that doesn't prevent me from being awestruck at the power of a number of its pages. When reading it, I was often aware of sharing the hunger-pangs being felt by the protagonists, their desolation and despair, their dignity in the face of adversity.

McCourt has achieved much fame for *Angela's Ashes*, and deservedly so. However, I wonder to what extent his vision has been obscured by the years that have elapsed between when he lived through the experiences and when he finally got to put them in book form. Could it be – and I am only asking the question – that he has been unduly influenced in his portrayal of

Irish society by James Joyce, for whom he admits a particular predilection? Augustine Martin noted in 1965 that for more than sixty years the Irish priest had been lambasted from every conceivable angle, and he warned:

The artistic consciousness that accepts the formal and technical lessons of Joyce must be careful not to take over uncritically Joyce's fierce irrational anti-clericalism.³

I feel that McCourt would have done well to heed this warning. He dwells very much on the negative aspects of religion, on the authoritarian and worldly priests who were at total variance with the Gospel's message of humility and poverty. I don't subscribe a conscious desire on his part to describe events in a different light to the way they were in reality. But not everyone from a poor background had a similar experience of the Church as McCourt. One has only to consider Criostóir O'Flynn's account of his childhood (*There Is an Isle – A Limerick Boyhood*, 1998, Cork, Mercier Press) to realise that there are two sides to this as to most stories. I hope that the positive aspects of the wonderful *Angela's Ashes* aren't ruined by a sensational and exaggerated sequel. I say this because of my unease at the last pages of the book, which added nothing to the overall effect. The story should have ended when the hero boarded the ship for America and I wonder if it will be possible to maintain the pace and intensity of his first work in any sequel. We'll have to wait and see.

3. 'Inherited Dissent', op. cit., p. 15.

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