Some Priestly Depictions in the Work of John Broderick

Eamon Maher
Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License
Some Priestly Depictions in the Work of John Broderick

Eamon Maher

The Athlone novelist John Broderick (1924-1989) produced a varied and uneven oeuvre in the period between the publication of his first novel, *The Pilgrimage*, in 1961 and his death almost 30 years later. A respected reviewer with *The Irish Times* and other outlets, Broderick's outspokenness in relation to some of his literary contemporaries meant that controversy was never far from his doorstep. For example, he was not an admirer of Seamus Heaney whom he considered a superb politician who was lionised by the London literary establishment as 'a lame Northern Catholic', a sort of 'Irish agricultural Rupert Brooke.' Of Edna O'Brien, he was even less charitable, saying she was 'a bargain basement Molly Bloom.' Whereas the views expressed in relation to Heaney and Edna O'Brien are clearly wide of the mark, the high regard in which he held Kate O'Brien was definitely justified and he admitted that the French Nobel Laureate François Mauriac was the only influence of which he was aware. Broderick could be very sharp with those he did not respect, but equally he was exceptionally kind to aspiring young writers, helping to promote their careers through positive reviews and introductions to influential people. He was never afraid either to point out what he considered to be flaws in Irish society, sparing some of his most vitriolic comments for the legacy of 1916.

Here is what he wrote in an article first published in *The Irish Times* (14 April, 1979) entitled 'A Curate’s Egg at Easter':

> How many children growing up thirty or forty years ago confused the risen Christ with the Easter Rising of 1916? And the Church made no great effort that I can remember to redress the balance. Now of course, it is somewhat different: more and more people have come to think of Pearse and his men, if they think of them at all, as pretty dim figures; and how many nominal Christians now really believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Given the circumstances in which so many middle-aged people like myself were brought up, it is surprising that we believe in anything at all.

It is important to be mindful of the strong positions that Broderick adopted in order to gain a better understanding of the things that meant most to the writer. A conservative in matters of faith, he often berated the poor quality of sermons provided by Irish priests and felt that many of them betrayed a certain lack of reverence when it came to the Eucharist. Many of his views reveal a romantic personality at sea in a world dominated by modernity, a world in which tradition is no longer respected. He believed for example that the changes wrought

---

1. 'At Bay in Bath', Interview with John Broderick by Michael Murphy, in *The Irish Times*, September 3, 1985.

3. It was undoubtedly the classical prose of Kate O'Brien and Mauriac that endeared them so much to Broderick.

4. For example, his friend, the well-known critic Patrick Murray noted that Broderick would often begin his diatribes on the changes in the liturgy introduced by Vatican II with the comment, 'Before the Mass was abolished.' Murray has written the definitive article on Broderick which appeared in the Winter 1992 issue of Éire-Ireland under the title 'Athlone's John Broderick.' The quote about the Mass is on page 27.

5. 'A Curate's egg at Easter', p.171.

Some of Broderick's most ill-advised outbursts were at times fuelled by his problems with alcohol and his homosexuality. Like his friend Julien Green, the well-known French-American writer and member of the Académie Française, Broderick's strong religious beliefs made it difficult for him to come to terms with his sexual preferences: the classic confrontation between the spirit and the flesh is a constant trope in his novels. He strongly considered becoming a priest for a number of years and at one point even went so far as to discuss the practicalities with the Professor of English in Maynooth College, Father Peter Connolly. It is probably fortuitous that nothing came of this discussion, as John would have been far too forthright in his opinions to survive for long as a diocesan priest. Also, being born into a well-to-do family that had a successful bakery in Athlone meant that he did not need to worry if his literary endeavours were financially viable or not: hence, writing was a hobby as much as a career for Broderick.

Because of his fascination with Catholicism, it is not surprising that priests feature regularly in Broderick's novels. Some, such as the rugged and sexually active Fr Tom Moran in An Apology for Roses (1973), resemble caricatures more than well-rounded characters. The two depictions I wish to deal with in this article, however, are sympathetic and credible constructions and they unveil Broderick's obvious insights into the life and ministry of a priest.

The Waking of Willie Ryan, first published in 1965, tells the story of how the eponymous character is placed in a lunatic asylum after his family discover that he was having a homosexual affair with a local man called Roger Dillon. Willie's refusal to conform to the dictates of Catholicism—he stops going to Mass and the sacraments at a young age—means that he is viewed as a danger to the good name of his family, who run a prosperous business. With the complicity of the parish priest, Father Mannix, Willie is forced to spend years in a mental institution where he stands out because of his sanity. At the beginning of the novel, Willie escapes from the asylum and ends up staying with his nephew Chris, who will not allow his parents to compel the now elderly man to return to the asylum and end his days cut off from his family. Chris is unaware of Willie's past and his attempts at getting his parents to speak about the reasons for his incarceration all those years before only elicit vague comments about his uncle's lack of religious fervour, as if
that in itself justified the treatment meted out to him. Chris’s father Michael had, in fact, sexually abused Willie as a child and his mother Mary’s sole concern is to protect the family name from the potential scandal that Willie’s return could give rise to in the community. Mary is far from happy with the way the Catholic Church is going: ‘They have no use for anybody now except the working class that they can ride roughshod over. It’s a different proposition with people like us, and they know it.’ 6 She cannot understand how Father Mannix can spend so much time playing golf and bridge and how he can afford to be driving around in a Mercedes.

Father Mannix is somewhat uneasy when he learns that the Ryan family plan to organise a Mass in Chris’s house to show the world that Willie has recanted and returned to the bosom of the Church. The priest is dubious as to the sincerity of this gesture, which he discusses at length with his former parishioner. He asks Willie if he is a complete pagan or if he actually has regained his faith. Even though he knows he has not long to live (he suffered a heart attack a number of years previously), Willie proclaims that he is not afraid to meet his Maker:

‘Despair is a terrible thing’, insisted the priest, leaning forward and stabbing his knee with his forefinger. ‘There’s nothing worse.’
‘No Father, nothing worse.’
‘It’s death in life, it’s awful.’ Father Mannix’s voice rose and cracked with emotion. (129)

One has the impression from his exchanges with Willie that the priest is somehow seeking his own spiritual comfort in the struggle to save the other’s soul. There is a strong hint also that Father Mannix may be uncomfortable about what happened to Willie in the past and the role he played in his committal. He struggles with Willie’s unbelief and strives to make him see how he committed mortal sin through his relationship with Roger all those years ago:

‘We both speak the same language and you know it. You know also that no Catholic ever gives up his religion except for personal reasons. And lack of communication is never one of them. […] Roger Dillon realised that in the end’. (The Waking, p.161)

Mannix was not privy to all the facts of the case and that the affair between Willie and Roger continued long after Roger appeared to have repented of his ways. After the Mass has taken place (a sacrilege in the eyes of the priest who is aware that Willie’s outward conformity is a mere mask), a heated exchange ensues between the two men. Father Mannix claims that Willie’s action has served to mock God: ‘God, God, God,’ said Willie […] ‘You all talk about Him, the whole lot of you. I’m tired hearing about God. He’s a convenient excuse for the hypocrites to
Willie's opinions matter more to Father Mannix than those of his other parishioners. Father Mannix is at least humble enough to regret his past failings and to see that he was merely a pawn in the Ryans' plan to remove a problematic family member from their midst. Broderick demonstrates awareness of how a priest can succumb to the temptation of a comfortable existence to the exclusion of any consideration of the consequences of his actions. In the end, the priest is left bereft of his real friends in the parish and is even disdained by Mary Ryan for the emotion he displays at Willie's grave: 'I never saw a priest to act like that, swaying and muttering like he was going to fall in, and nobody could hear a word he said. You'd think he was drunk, the Lord save us.' (238) This is the same woman whose own husband has serious issues with alcohol and who feels no remorse at the shameful treatment meted out to Willie. Father Mannix is at least humble enough to regret his past failings and to see that he was merely a pawn in the Ryans' plan to remove a problematic family member from their midst.
by the extent to which Willie shows up his lack of discernment and priestly inadequacies. Such things are hard to accept after a lifetime of pastoral service.

The Trial of Father Dillingham has as its main character another priest who is forced to review his role within the Church. This time, the problem surrounds the publication of a controversial tract about original sin, Faith Without Guilt, that is considered to be at variance with Church teaching. The Prologue, which unusually appears at the start of the novel, contains an Irish Times review of the book which the then Fr Dillingham published under the nom de plume of Mark Denison. Discussing the evolution of original sin, the reviewer notes: 'The dogma of some vague, unspecified fall became the cornerstone of a vast theology of sin and redemption. The Catholic Church developed the idea, played down the humanity of Christ for many centuries, and laid an undue emphasis on fear and guilt.'

Following the negative reaction by many influential Church members to the opinions expressed in his book and the threat of sanction by Rome, Jim Dillingham takes the decision to leave the priesthood and goes to live in Dublin in a flat that has a strange array of tenants, who become his friends. There is the homosexual couple, Eddie and Maurice, a retired opera singer known as The La, who is also a kleptomaniac, and Eddie's sister, Grace, a woman to whom Jim was attracted before becoming a priest and who remained a supportive presence in his life. While clearly disenchanted with the Church, Dillingham never actually took the step of becoming laicised and still earns a living from his various writings, the latest of which, we are told, is 'a study of the Catholic Church throughout Europe, the dissension within its ranks, the effects of the changes on the clergy and laity, weakening faith and the possibility of schisms and national churches in the various centres of Christendom' (41). In spite of living in what could be described as a 'bohemian' house, Jim has not strayed far from his intellectual interest in Catholicism. Also, his friendship with this disparate group of people has taught him to be more tolerant of human failings. In particular, the 'unnatural and unmentionable love' (65) between Eddie and Maurice is portrayed in a subtle and sympathetic manner and it is when he is encouraged by Eddie to help his lover to reconcile with God before his death that Jim Dillingham discovers that he has never fully left the priesthood. Maurice's puritanical nature prevented him from accepting a Church that could not find a place for people like him. Knowing he was on the threshold of death, he made his feelings plain to Eddie: 'I don't want immortality and all that shit. I don't believe in it, and I never believed in it less than I do now.' (67) His co-tenants see Jim Dillingham for what he is. For example, Eddie remarks to
Grace: ‘Naturally, he’s a priest. Scratch him and you’ll find the same old answers.’ (82) On hearing of the death of his former friend from the seminary, Tom Geraghty, who had revealed the true identity of Mark Denson to the Bishop, Michael Hurley, Dillingham finds the wounds of the past being re-opened. During a visit from the recently retired Bishop, he discovers however that Hurley had never pursued the matter of the suspect publication, which now is most likely completely forgotten in Rome. This opens the possibility of Dillingham’s return to the priesthood:

Beyond the dogmas, the hierarchical institution, all the accumulated trappings of an ancient tradition there was something else; deep, mysterious, inevitable, which was gradually filling his consciousness as the brandy warmed his bones. Something stark, yet tender, pertinacious and all-pervading. (103)

The importance of the priesthood in the life of Jim Dillingham is evident from these lines. In a way, he never ceased being a priest and his sympathetic Bishop never lost hope of his returning one day to the fold. Hence, the visit by Michael Hurley serves to prompt Dillingham’s reassessment of his life and to give consideration to his former Bishop’s invitation to join him in South America, where he plans to spend a few years in ministry. Before that, however, there is the encounter with Maurice who, we are told, ‘had never accepted himself. And he was bringing his hatred of the God that made him to the edge of the grave.’ (118) In a way that he cannot quite comprehend, Jim finds himself taking on the role of comforter to the dying man: ‘Don’t worry, God is merciful. So long as you trust him. It was amazing how often it worked; wonderful the solace of seeing the body accepting the dread mystery of dissolution in reconciliation.’ (117)

In the end, Jim manages to bring peace to Maurice and, by extension, to his partner Eddie, who had hoped for some sort of spiritual resolution. Maurice breaks the last barrier which separated the ex-priest from what he had left behind, from the ‘faith’ he had always possessed and the vocation which had continued to burn in him. He becomes a channel for grace when Eddie calls on him to forget himself for once and minister the last rites to Maurice:

Jim bowed his head at this rebuke, reminded of a Mystery he would never understand, and for the first time in many years raised his hand and was conscious of the power that was still in him. Eddie remained kneeling as the words, which Jim only knew in Latin, sounded quietly in the silent room. They came back to him, as if he had said them only yesterday. (148)

There is a touch of Bernanos in these lines, with their evocation of
the unique power of the priest to act as a dispenser of divine grace. Broderick had a keen appreciation of the ability of priests to transcend their human frailties and bring comfort to those suffering from doubt and resentment. Patrick Murray offers an excellent assessment of the novelist's depiction of priests:

John Broderick invariably tries to understand the man behind the priestly role. His priests are never simple types or caricatures. The problems and tensions between their priesthood and their humanity are explored, often sensitively, and sometimes with delicate irony. The human weaknesses never disqualify them from Broderick's sympathy.8

There is a lot more that could be said of Broderick's priestly depictions, but I hope that this short article will at least inspire readers of *Spirituality* to discover, or rediscover, the work of a much neglected novelist who had many insights when it came to religious practice in small town Ireland. John Broderick is definitely someone who should

---


---

**The Giant Pagan**

Peadar O’Callaghan

The writer is a priest of the diocese of Cloyne, Ireland.

It has become necessary for me to write down my early memories. If I neglect to do so for a single day, unpleasant physical symptoms immediately follow. As soon as I set to work they vanish and my head feels perfectly clear.71 (Carl Gustav Jung at 83).

At times I regret not having dragged myself away from the rivers, hills and fields of my childhood and turned up at the parish school-house more often than on my own three days of 'compulsory attendance' to hear the good Brother announce that the school was to be shut down for Christmas, Easter and the summer holidays.

If only I had stayed put I might have learned about ancient figures like King Tut and his fabulous stuffing and all about the fascinating things found in his tomb. But I believe 'compensation'—a wonderful concept of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) has often rescued me from ignorance of these matters by providing experiences closer to home. In this article I revisit one such experience and 'attempt' an interpretation of it employing ideas and concepts developed by Carl Jung.

Over half a century ago while I was still a child the skeletal remains of a very tall man were found in a stone-lined grave dating back hundreds...