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Horseman, Pass By! review: A French writer's billet-doux to Ireland

The late Michel Déon's insights into his adopted country show a great joie de vivre

Eamon Maher

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I had the privilege of meeting Michel Déon in March 2006, on the eve of a Franco-Irish conference that was being hosted at University College Cork. Déon had been invited to give a keynote address, as befitted someone described in his obituary in this newspaper as the most Irish of French writers. I was somewhat in awe at the prospect of being introduced to a long-standing member of the Académie Française, whose best-known work, *Le Taxi Mauve* (The Purple Taxi), was set in Ireland and made into a film with Charlotte Rampling and Peter Ustinov.

But as soon as we began to converse I was put completely at ease by the relaxed charm and complete lack of affectation in Déon. It reminded me of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal's observation in relation to a similar situation: "I was expecting to discover a writer and instead I had the pleasure of meeting a human being."

This book of essays is an expression of love for his adopted country – Déon and his family moved permanently to Tynagh, Co Galway, in 1988. It also provides many interesting insights into life here. For example, in writing about a local legend, Patrick Joseph Smith, Déon notes the lack of a social hierarchy in Ireland, which is so different from what one finds in France: "I admired the very Irish privilege of being at ease everywhere, being uncomfortable in no situation, an exemplary absence of barriers between people, a social fabric with no class divisions."

While one might question the absence of "class divisions" in the leafy suburbs of Dublin, for example, the statement definitely holds water for the most part.

Déon recounts an amusing anecdote about a postman called Tim, who visits his daughter every year in San Francisco, only to comment on his return that California isn't a patch on Ballinlerreen.

The encounters described in the book show its author to have been a man who appreciated decent food and drink (his meeting with the Irish writer John McGahern at Moran's of the Weir, the Co Galway pub, where they feasted on oysters and Muscadet, provides ample evidence of this), women, good tobacco and making new acquaintances. His zest for life and quirky sense of humour are unmistakable.

It may have been these qualities that enabled him to tolerate the occasional bad-mannered outbursts of Ulick O'Connor, with whom he struck up a most unlikely friendship. After one eventful night out with the temperamental O'Connor, Déon found himself back in a room at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin, from where he observed the Irish capital, with "its crumbling memories and perhaps the reflex of guilt that has haunted it since it recovered its freedom after being so cruel to its writers, artists and heroes".

Déon regretted the passing of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, some of whose remaining representatives he recalls with great fondness. His discussion of the clerical abuse scandals that rocked the Catholic Church is justifiably harsh, with Seán Fortune coming in for particular opprobrium. Local priests, however, are portrayed in a much better light.

One of the distressing vestiges of the Celtic Tiger, in Déon's view, is the prevalence of cars asphyxiating the narrow streets of Irish towns. He muses whether WB Yeats would recognise "his beloved Sligo", such have been the ravages of so-called economic development.

The account of his meetings with McGahern shows a definite empathy between the two writers. Déon mistakenly assumed that McGahern's "sulphurous reputation" resulted from the publication of *The Pornographer*, whereas it was *The Dark* that caused the real problems; the later novel, for all its daring subject matter, was never in fact banned in Ireland.

Déon wonders how *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, McGahern's last novel, can be considered a work of fiction at all, given the close resemblance between the characters described and "any one of my neighbours in Co Galway".

A visit to his home in Leitrim allowed Déon to observe that the desk of light wood where McGahern worked faced the wall, indicating perhaps a determination not to be distracted by the stunning landscape outside the window.

There are in these essays an honesty and a humility that are in keeping with the personality of the writer. In the preface Déon writes that he wanted to record his thanks to Ireland for "its open-mindedness, independence of spirit, its courage, its hopes and its humanity". The debt is more on the Irish than the French side, it seems to me.

Horseman, Pass By!, whose title is borrowed from a line in the Yeats poem *Under Ben Bulbin*, shows the special relationship

between France and Ireland that has existed for centuries. It is pleasing that one of France's most revered writers chose Ireland as his home – just as Joyce and Beckett travelled in the opposite direction – and left behind such a wonderful tribute to the country and some of its people. With luck Déon is now enjoying the fruits of a life well lived in whatever awaits us in eternity.

Eamon Maher is director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies, at IT Tallaght. His latest book, edited with Eugene O'Brien, Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and Beyond, is due from Manchester University Press in April

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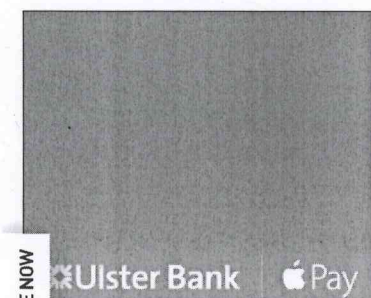
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