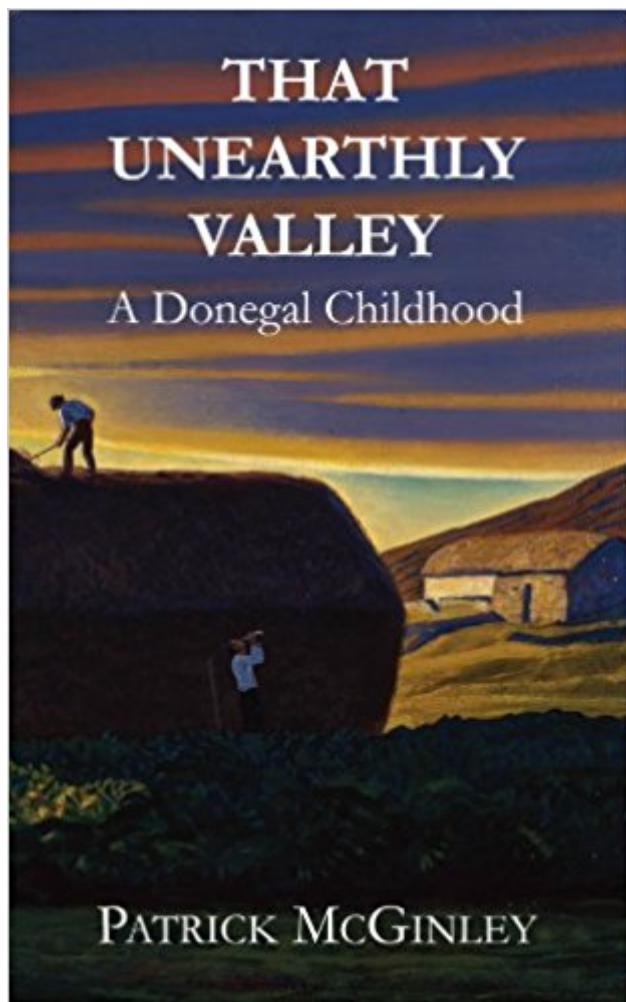


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That Unearthly Valley: A Donegal Childhood



Synopsis

A canny, loving portrait of a 1940s/1950s rural Irish upbringing. McGinley tells of growing up in the back of beyond, an isolated, seaside village marked by a generosity of spirit and true sense of community, wherein he first encountered such mysteries as crab toes, family, sex, death, and school, along with a larger-than-life local curate, Fr James McDyer, a radical socialist in a Roman collar. McGinley also deftly describes a number of other illustrious blow-ins to the Glen, from the renowned American painter Rockwell Kent, to Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, and British composer Sir Arnold Bax.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An inspiring text and a must read for anyone agitated by McGinley's obstreperous novels. --Irish Literary Supplement

In Bogmail and Foggage, Patrick McGinley sent up the Irish (could he or it be otherwise?) murder mystery genre. He scooped dollops of encyclopedic wit and mordant satire into these entertainments. A later saga proved more somber and meditative, the Irish Civil War ending as The Lost Soldier's Song, while The Trick of the Ga Bolga updated a mythic showdown around his native village of Glencolmcille, on the blustery coast of Donegal. This novelist left the Glen for boarding school around 1950, but he never departed from this glacially carved, prehistoric, bleak, jagged yet lovely landscape in his memory. The topography of the terrain cuts from the Atlantic. "For me, the Glen is a place that encircles and embraces. From it there is no going forward: it is always the end of the journey. It grips the imagination and holds it captive in a way that a place on the road to

somewhere cannot." (5-6) The spare, assertive, yet calm way in which these sentences unfold mirrors Patrick McGinley's craft, and perhaps his verbal dexterity and mental formation in the last generation raised somewhat bilingually in this Donegal enclave, one of the westernmost territories where the Irish language tries to cling to a fabled settlement of Stone Age dolmens and early Christian monuments. His memoir begins set in this dramatic setting, summing up deftly the power of craic in the village pub, the flavor of fresh fish, the lingering superstitions, and the ambiguous charisma of Fr. James McDyer, who accelerated the remote parish as if from the early 1800s to the end of the 1900s within two decades. By then, young Patrick was about to leave for Galway and a scholarship at a teacher training school, followed by studies in English and Irish literature at the university there. He soon gave up the classroom for the boat to London. Yet, he admires his stolid, but wryly funny, family and neighbors of Killanen townland, and *That Unearthly Valley* memorializes, not with sentiment but clarity, their hold on his imagination. He regards school with mixed enthusiasm. He admires Irish history, even if the assigned textbook after 1169 makes it "like supporting a football team that never won a match." (114) He scrutinizes the patriotic cant and discerns the deeper, less apparent meaning in a land where the authority of the Church roused peasants to boldness and futility, qualities that *The Lost Soldier's Song* would convey movingly. Unsurprisingly, the tensions of mid-century Ireland that offered few opportunities for the restless thinker and assertive teacher hastened his departure for England. The second half of his account takes you through his education and the perspective that widened his insights beyond the Glen. Near his conclusion, he reflects on the inevitable change, deepened by his early awareness of mortality: "Life is a dance leading ultimately to the dance for which there is no word in English," he reasons, but in Irish there may be none either. (301) With the capitulation of parlor storytelling and the lived links to oral tradition, the craic that enlivened Bogmail and Foggage, and the lore reverberating in *The Trick of the Ga Bolga*, echoes across farms now given over to silage and white bungalows speckling the boreens. Patrick McGinley acknowledges frankly the gains and losses that the Glen's popularity as a holiday or retirement destination have brought to an electrified, globalized, and increasingly homogenized culture that has replaced the fading but lingering Irish-language heritage, its agricultural implements and recreated cabins now part of Fr. McDyer's folk museum down the road from the center where I studied Gaeilge, Oideas Gael.

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