

Ulster: My Search for its Spirit of Place



Inspector Celcius Daly stared through the windscreen at the border landscape. The round hills loomed, black and foreboding. The remnants of a British army watchtower were still visible, a shard on the horizon. Daly wondered would he ever lose that prickle of anticipation that signalled he was about to enter disputed territory.

He rolled down the window and listened to the sound of birdcalls and flowing water, trees and boggy fields suffused with a sense of peace. He would have got out for a walk, but a sudden rainstorm kept him confined to the car. The horizon darkened as the rain drummed the roof, the windscreen wriggling with the distorted shapes of trees. The horizon changed again as the sun broke through.

A strange feeling preoccupied Daly. He sat in silence. He did not know what had overcome him, but he felt as though the landscape still held secrets. What was it about the little road, dwindling through bogland and forest, now brightly shimmering in the aftermath of the downpour that felt so alien? As though when the rain had stopped he had somehow crossed an invisible border, and was already in the country he had booked a flight for. He felt far away from everything. This was the true foreign country, he realised. Not the country on the other side of the border, nor the one he was due to fly to, but this landscape that was his own, so familiar from his childhood, but made strange by the hundreds of reconciliations, the countless little acts of truth-telling, the search for disappeared bodies like Mary O'Sullivan's, the unravelling of cover-ups and secret betrayals.

This was the foreign country that he and his fellow citizens were coming to after a long journey, to rebuild lives darkened by the Troubles. The notion gave him a strange lift. That he and his neighbours might finally find refuge here, like asylum seekers in the landscape they had always carried inside themselves.

*From **TRESPASS**, due to be published by Head of Zeus in November 2016.*

Although I write contemporary crime fiction with heavy shades of noir, my books are motivated by a quest to understand the spirit of place in post-Troubles Northern Ireland. Sometimes the most unexplored landscape – as deserving of attention as any far flung destination – is the terrain closest to home. I wanted to take on the landscape I had grown up in and loved, and do justice to its beauty. I also wanted to pay tribute to the spirit of the

people who inhabited it, and who underwent an extraordinary situation during the Troubles.

Being Irish, landscape for me is much more than geography. It's a part of my collective identity. It's also a window into the soul of a country and its troubled history. From the outset, I wanted to create a landscape that would communicate the emotional action of the plot and the looming sense of threat. I also wanted it to be recognisably Irish. I take a guilty pleasure in drawing the reader's attention to the strangeness of the Tyrone landscape, making them shudder at a gruesome-looking blackthorn tree, a rotting cottage, or a treacherous bog. I wanted readers to feel the dark gravity of the border countryside, its interlocking parishes of grief, its mesh of twisting roads, the sense that out there amid the blackthorn thickets and swirling mists, loose bits of the past are still wriggling their way through the shadows.

The Northern Irish landscape I know and love has its own geography of moods, an interweave of darkness and light, which I find constantly mesmerizing. I'm not sure if my descriptions bear any resemblance to what is actually out there, or if anyone else notices what I see. Perhaps they are more a reflection of a region of my mind. The settings always come first for me, shaping the characters and plots. At heart, I'm a thwarted poet and my muse is Tyrone – its gurgling bogs, its frozen thickets of thorn trees, its mists swirling in from Lough Neagh.

Since childhood, I've always wondered what makes the Ulster landscape so mood-enhancing and mystical. For a start it must be one of the most fickle landscapes on these islands because its terrain and weather change so often. How often do you find yourself out walking or driving and in the blink of an eye, you see an old view in a new way, and your thinking and mood changes, or is enhanced dramatically. It's as if you've crossed an imaginary border, the point at which rain or mist begins, or the wind suddenly picks up, and animates the trees, or the sun breaks through the evening sky and bathes everything in light. This is the point at which you feel bewitched, or – as Patrick Kavanagh would have said – you've entered fairyland, another more mysterious country within the familiar folds of the fields you've always known. The magical or mystical thing about it is that those moments are unbidden. They are epiphanies that come unannounced and give you an emotional connection with the landscape. I've tried to capture these 'border moments' within *Border Angels* and *Disappeared*, as well as the sequel *Silence*, which was published in November. This is why my detective character, Celcius Daly, keeps getting lost in the landscape he's known all his life.

I was especially drawn to Lough Neagh. It's the largest freshwater lake in Western Europe, but it must be one of the most unappreciated vistas on these islands, a void in the interior of Northern Ireland. Its water level sank about fifty years ago, removing it from the view of local roads and vantage points, so that might be one of the reasons for its hidden nature. In winter, it's often shrouded in fog, adding to its air of being withdrawn into itself.

It felt like a place accessible only to the imagination, and I thought it might be a useful metaphor for the hidden stories of the Troubles, the amnesia that has been operating in the midst of life here after the Troubles,

the void at the heart of the peace process, the plight of victims and their quest for justice, the unsolved murders that have been quietly removed from view.

A lot of Irish crime fiction seems to be based on the belief that the genre functions best in an urban setting. However, the rural landscape I'm trying to describe is as richly textured as any cityscape. The border backdrop of my books is not a vast and unpopulated wilderness. It's a landscape compacted out of the generations that went before, and full of their mysterious presence; a claustrophobic stage into which too many competing tribes have been crammed, where the past lies cheek by jowl with the present, and where every thorn tree or rock has its own ghost, its own dreadful story to tell.

*As well as the best-selling series of crime novels featuring Inspector Daly, **Anthony J Quinn** has published two historical novels *The Blood-Dimmed Tide* and *Blind Arrows* set in early 20th Century Ireland.*