

## A BRIEF ANCESTRAL MEMOIR

### PART ONE

I can see it: the site of my family home in a great oak forest on the incline of a hill.

In spring the sun brought light to the recesses of understorey, especially beneath a mossy root-covered outcrop that caused the slope to dip sharply, creating a shaded habitat for a large thicket of holly. On the outcrop would one day stand the north-facing gable and front door of the house where I grew up.

A blackbird's rustling through dead leaves, gone the blood-red berries. A short distance away a pounding stream, swollen from the long-winter's rain, birdsong echoing, the annual migrants' return, chiffchaffs first among them busily making their nests in the brambles on the forest floor; overhead the cooing of woodpigeons, wings clattering. Animals are stirring too, as small as the pigmy shrew, as large as the bear, her roar competing with the waters of the stream. The forest was still open to the watery but lukewarm sky, as new buds began to cover the branches from the largest bough to the tiniest twig.

In the stillness of summer the canopy created a sultry darkness, midges flitting, glinting on penetrating sunbeams, insects humming until sunset when the horizontal shafts of light cut through the vegetation and gild the trees gold. Not long the bat would leave its roost to catch straggling gnats and an owl's shriek send tiny mammals scurrying. After nocturnal hunting and fleeing, through a chink, the morning star and a sliver of crescent moon against a cyan sky shows dawn has come, promising a sunny day to the creatures in the treetops. Below daylight more speckled, until greyness covers all, the distant rumble of thunder bringing raindrops pattering on to flat palm-like deep green leaves, crinkling sound floating to the ground.

Acorns hit with a plop the cushion of leaves as autumn passed. And the red squirrel hurriedly buries them, food for winter. The leaves turned russet and yellow. A new layer of humus, composting and warm, would build as each leaf lost its hold, floating to the earth below. Over the treetops the night is crisp, icy

and clear: sapphire with a twinkling firmament of stars and silent passage of meteor showers.

In winter the place was open to the heavens. Down the hill was visible the bay and peninsula with its rugged cliffs. The day frosty, sky clear, a boar would rummage for food, its grunts competing with the rumble of the stream back from the trickle of summer. That night a creamy full moon casts eerie shadows into the depths, now the world of nocturnal creatures not hibernating until spring. The howl of wolves – not far – breaks the silence of the night. By morning the sky had quietly clouded, dry cottony snowflakes falling. All became white but for the red holly berries and the breast of a feisty robin. The forest was still and crystalized. After mid-season a subtle lengthening of the day, nothing more, no other signs yet. Spring was coming around again.

I see such a spring day, standing here: a hunting party passing, carrying the carcass of a wild boar tied with thick twines of hazel vine to the shaved trunk of a sapling tree. Wet underfoot the downward descent is slippery, where something precious is easily dropped.

I know that crepuscular canvass, I have seen many beautiful sunsets – those crisp colours of winter dusk. The reds, pinks and violets of the approaching dark are framed between the open shutters of the church window, an icy breeze passing through into the ambient light of the nave: tallow candles splutter wildly yet stay alight. In that half-light and silence – to the traveller standing there – there still lingers an anxiety: before embarking on a sea journey the following day. And this is not the right season for travel. It is his first time to these parts, yet as he gazes upon the evening sky he has a sense of recognition: a known scene – familiar. Mesmerized, he approached the tall west gable windows, his leather footwear crunching on the floor of reeds. Before him was an array of angelic colours, which brought a spiritual calm unique and indescribable in words – beyond any human tongue.

Waking from his trance-like state he steps over the threshold and into the black night, anonymous graves beneath long dewy grass that is quickly crystalizing to frost, and imagines cold bony fingers beneath the earth grasping sacred pieces of quartz. And the physical object becomes connected to meaning.

One winter night I looked out upon the island, which was silhouetted beneath a near-full moon. The scene was still and silent. I thought of the bones buried out there. On some similar night, thousands of years past, living beings had slept contentedly, the waves lapping soporifically against the rocks. As the moon rose higher, it cast a silver shaft of light across the sound to the shoreline and rock where I was sitting, symbolizing that connection to something greater than the symbol, reminding me: the symbol must not be confused with what it symbolizes, by trying to tangibilize the intangible.

The Mesolithic tribe had observed and noted the phases of the moon, white with darker shades like a smoothed stone found by the shores, which changed over time yet returned to a fulsome shape, cyclically constant, as if a unseen force invisibly chipped away at it, making it smaller until it eventually vanished, leaving only the chert-black sky and sprinkles of milky white specks of mica for stars. They observed the diurnal rhythms, with the rising of the sun from beyond the sea to the faint-glowing embers before night and sleep. The rhythms of nights and days turned into the rhythm of seasons, each transit of the lunar-cycle notched, counting to the Gathering on the island near summer's end, a time of festivity, time to put off worries of harsh winter to come, and enjoy, comforted in memories of summers past.

The Gathering was also an occasion to exchange ideas, trade hides and rarer more valuable stone, admire some polished stone axe or arrowhead from encroaching tribes. It was a time to discuss exploration of new hunting grounds – possible threats – and protect those hunting grounds still held. Extended family and smaller tribes came together – often put aside deadly differences – to commune in story, music and feast. Initiated boys and girls would meet up and marriages agreed.

At night around the fire a shaman puts on the sacred stag's head, with its stone-like staring brown eyes and sharp twisted antlers, jumps across the flames of the fire and disappears. This makes the children cry out, more in excitement than fear. Around the fire the world is safe from all those fears unseen. The youngsters look up. The stag has gone: only visible the sparks, dancing and leaping like stars into the night.

The adults understood the vagaries of life – of death. In the darkness, beyond the dancing flames, the hissing and sparking hazel branches, lay the remains of

loved ones, silent but always with them, person and soul residing in the memories of the living. There were those around the hearth bereaved since the last Gathering, particularly painful with the loss of a child. Those memories were real and tortuous: the son or daughter suddenly limp and cold after a feverish struggle, gently offered to a shallow pit, the shaman chanting, praying over the bodily remains and covering them in sacred white-tailed eagle feathers, calling on the good spirits unseen, that dwelled in everything animate and inanimate, to take the soul on its journey to the Other World. And in the smoke haze veiling the moon, one of them might see a shadow of that great bird pass.

Then, with a thud on the soil the mighty stag returns, awakening the children from their mesmerized trance.

I can see a large stag – sharp powerful antlers, strong chest and neck, deep reddish-brown hide – in a clearing on a cold, misty autumn morning. Its bellow echoes through the woodland, its breath steaming the icy air. In the rising sun he battles to keep control over his does. Each rutting season there is a buck challenging him for supremacy. Their antlers lock: clattering, heaving and scraping of bone on bone shatters the peaceful tranquillity of dawn.

There was a first time the stag was spotted, like a mysterious other-worldly apparition. But there was a contradiction: the creature was also very much of the physical world. The tribe came to observe the majestic, mystical animal, peaceful and serene as he gracefully moved through the scrub, powerful and dangerous. The beast ruled its kingdom with those huge sharp antlers, and would use them on any humans who trespassed upon his domain. His strength defeated rival male deer and protected his herd from packs of wolves. The tribe came to fear and revere that great stag. The feared and revered could kill: so the feared and revered would have to be killed. Explanation of the contradiction was also a contradiction: it still left two separate parts, where there should only be one. The head became an object of veneration and proof of the stories told about it; whether or not it lost its life in combat with a super human warrior or was found already dead, from old age or killed by a younger challenger. Once that blood-covered stone knife had sawed through hide, tissue and bone to sever the deer's head division had been created.

September 7<sup>th</sup> 1397 holds a rare and mystical connection for me: day, date and lunar phase align. But I see no moon. And the rain falls relentlessly out of the

dark night, flooding the muddy puddles. A baby cries somewhere, from one of the gable fronted houses. It is a plea that is quickly soothed, the only sound now the splashing rain. The new born, wrapped in swaddling, is now at his mother's breast – safe, secure and loved. In some way he knows this is true, as if recognizing it as the feeling: that warmth, which existed before time. There is nothing simpler – truer. The infant is too young to have learned this, is not conscious of it as a memory; the feeling is from before memory.

Opposite the dwelling is the high whitewashed wall of the graveyard. The wooden half-gate, with a simple cross at its centre, stands open, as if awaiting a returning ghost. The church bellcote is visible, set back from the boundary wall. I continue along the single-street village, a place I am familiar with but seeing too how it differs. Many of the buildings are derelict and roofless, thresholds as gaping holes or with squeaking doors hanging desperately to hinges. It is almost half a century since Death cut through here with his scythe. All is silent again, except for the rain, the baby's pleas satisfied he is sleeping once more.

I come to the place I desire, that cabin that always had the welcoming bushel over the door, favourite haunt of local peasant and sailor alike. But it is ominously silent: no laughter and song, no fiddle playing. A narrow path leads down the side of the building, with its overgrown herb and vegetable plot, passed the shuttered window, to the doorless entrance peeping out beneath the eaves of the sagging thatch roof. The interior is dark. To the right, a vat lies on its side, presumably the same one the widow ladled out ale from: a taste sweet with added herbs and spices – so welcoming. The cabin was always warm, in the winter months a smoky coal fire glowed happily in the centre of the room, and steam would rise off wet mantles. The place is otherwise empty, tables and benches gone. I can take in no more, backing out and continuing on my way.

The end of the street narrows, two large dwelling houses stand like pillars facing one another. Silently I pass between them, and the village is no more. Ahead of me a brown track disappears into the pitch black. On my left a joining road climbs up the hill beside a wattle fence of the adjoining burgage plot. Then I am startled by a dog barking somewhere, surprised I had not raised canine hackles before now. Fearful of hue-and-cry I decide to follow that upward path passed the fencing, where snorting and clucking suggest a pig and hens have also been woken. Luckily no human voice has been added, yet.

The wattle ends, replaced by open meadow, separated from the track by a deep ditch, the stubbled soil now fodder for grazing cattle. To my right are open fields, arable land the last of the autumn harvest just gathered in and stored for winter. The steep meadow suddenly ends, meeting another ditch separating it from thick woodland. The cultivated land and track continue on into nocturnal wilderness. I note the rain has stopped and the clouds clearing to reveal what could be the full moon, or as near as could be: it hangs over towards the west, light beaming down upon that piece of land, farmed around that jutting boulder, the place where one day my family home would stand. The feeling is of something outside of time and process. The cycle of our celestial satellite is in permanent motion, but the connection and feeling elicited from sighting it at any stage is one of unshifting permanence.

There's an account of an ancestor who came to Dublin in 1487, a young kern in the service in his Yorkist Anglo-Irish overlords. He was present at the coronation of Lambert Simnel, pretender to the English crown, and would soon sail across the sea to fight the Tudor enemy. But the Battle of Stoke Fields would confirm the warnings of fear and disillusion against the pretences of bravado. Time might have clouded some recollection, still the young man said he never forgot the horrors of that battle – recalling as if yesterday, even into his final days. The feeling held precedence over time or sequence.

He was a stranger in the city of Dublin, soon to set foot off the island to a foreign country. I can see the historic day, for concerned where lives would be changed.

Standing by the market cross under a cloud-covered night, summer or late spring by the warmth, there comes a series of delicate chimes – the hour of midnight. They come from a clever new contraption on the tholsel, a means to keep track of time. Beside the hand is a moon with the face of a man on it: something always to fascinate the child. In the fading toll came back the gentle creaking of the weathervane, the night calm and sultry. But there come shouts somewhere down the dark streets, other kerns fighting with locals outside a tavern perhaps. Normally the city gates are shut to keep the native Irish out, now the native soldiers are billeted inside the walls. At first light the gates would be opened again, and so the traveller could continue his journey.

Although earlier that day the great bells of Christ Church thundered and reverberated through the city, announcing a new king. With the cathedral doors swung open a giant of a man emerged carrying a boy upon his shoulders, the congregation flooding out in pursuit. The child wore a brass crown, and was dressed in a long velvet-red robe. He smiled triumphantly in the sunlight as the crowd cheered, competing with the bells.

On a sunny morning – a Saturday – cogs will line up in the bay, waiting to carry off their cargo of soldiers, archers and javelin throwers. The vessels will be brought to the haven by a clear night bathed in moonlight – omens good – but in other ways vision obscured. A victorious force will leave from the same place, that August weather inclement.

Things change and things stay the same. A walk in the meadows and field around the village before dawn on a warm midsummer night, spinneys of trees and hedgerows silhouetted against a sky lightly toned in grey cloud. The ground underfoot I have walked before – will walk. Cows moo, their bells jangle, and before long the farm workers will arrive to round them up for milking.

The previous night not long after dusk, and a fiery sunset, clouds began covering the stars and a rising full moon, just like the one seen seven years previously. The night becomes still and sultry, but no rain falls. The smell of the cowpats is pungent, not something I associate with this place. The pattern and rhythm I feel. A pocket watch tells me the time, just after three-thirty. Soon it will be getting brighter for the dawn chorus to begin. And where else to make for but the hill overlooking this world? But there too, near the Dolmen, at the summit of the hill commanding view of bay and island, eastwards to dawn's horizon clouds obscure the brilliance of a new day.

Later, back on the dry mud track into the village, the clouds have cleared, the warmth of the day opening up the cerulean skies. Ahead, I see for the first time while also sensing it as a memory, the sight of the glowing orange sun rising up between the ragged ruins of two castles which once guarded the entrance to this once-important sea port.

It's a warm, overcast murky afternoon in July. It threatens to rain, or the clouds to break and sunlight blast through in long silvery shafts. The plain beyond is

green and wooded, scattered with open fields, cone-shaped thatched homestead just visible in the distance. Near the beach at the tip of the bay, in the shadow of forested Bray Head, a funeral rite is being performed. Around the graveside the mourners are performing their libations and rituals for the dead laid out in quickly, yet reverentially, constructed cist graves.

When unearthed to the sky on a similar day hundreds of years later – just like the day I picture it – the grey clouds brought with it the sound of waves breaking sleepily on shingle. Over that time the sea had dug its way deeper to the graves of those dead Romans. The labourers working for Lord Putland, constructing a new gateway to his estate, reported that the skeletons quickly turn to dust on exposure to the air, oxidized copper coins leaving faint hints to their era, one clearly from the reign of Trajan: the Caesar who oversaw the greatest expansion of the Roman Empire, but beyond which it would expand no farther, the final cost of deifying the human and humanizing the divine. And Trajan's image carried moral authority on this base metal, traded through the Known World to this farthest western isle. He was born on the day the full moon began to wane. An emotive connection for me, but a more profound one for those interring the remains of their comrades, and within sight of that imposing ringfort. In ritual copper is as valuable as gold. The connection allows me to see: the simple, meaningful, ritual of placing coins on the mouth and eyes of the deceased – custom to the hinted, the evoked – the shades no longer trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead.

I recognize the topography, but not the period. The trees stretch up the slope through the grey evening mist. The faint image of the stone grave is just visible on the summit of the bare hill. It was only a spot. If standing beside it the monument was taller than a grown person, made of standing stones with a larger boulder atop that looked like a bird about to take flight. It was a landmark, of ancient meaning and permanence the memory tells me, witness to a long-gone race, and to which myths of the descendants could find no easy place. There was once believed to be bones of kings inside, though they were long gone, and nobody knew anything about those royals who had once ruled there. Some tales said this was a magical site, one of many along the backbone of the mountains stretching away into the horizon. They also ruled the island. It was a place of trade in valuable metals – gold, copper and tin – carried out on the isle's natural promontory fort overlooking the open sea. It now also traded in a stronger metal

that came from the vast bogs, and could cut through flesh and earth with equal efficiency.

Today that hill is the preserve of the dead, memories and ghosts that can only be imagined; imagination that can only come from truth. On this Samhain Eve, as the grey light fades behind thick cloud, festivities are about to start – to last through the night and into the dawn. Many amphorae of wine will be opened and barrels of ale consumed. The stomach rumbles at the smell of beef roasting, blended with the aroma of olive oil. There's a crackling spitting noise along with the comforting smell of woodsmoke – the warmth of the hearth. The oak gates are barred to the night, the entrance that welcomes the blazing morning sun in summer.

The eyelids of darkness flicker and close. Nothing visible now beyond the earthen ramparts, except the faint yellow glow of gorse: link to summer gone and spring to come. This is the time worlds come together, a union of past present and future. Looking in the direction where the day sets for a glimmer of light from the fort on the rock above the shore, where other family members begin their festivities. But nothing can be seen in the blackness, leaving only the imagination. There comes a faint sound – possibly imagined – of waves crashing against rocks; then a closer sound: a haunting melody, strings that with each pluck brought back memories to the immediacy of standing here. The celebrations had begun, all one in the feast – ruler, retainer and slave; all needed protection from the night. The sound of cattle lowing nearby reminds that no rustlers would be out on Samhain. And the cows could well protect themselves against wolves, those predators that pay no heed to ghosts. But the sheep are in the pens within the fort, otherwise easy prey. They bleat excitedly, as if joining in the music

The ringfort occupied the shore's edge, a rocky and windblown place, not the great fertile plains filled with cattle and fields of golden wheat and barley. But those ancestors had a long tradition of exploiting the trade that came from contact with the empire: salt and native dogs for coins of silver and gold; also humans in neck chains and manacles.

Armies sweep in, drive out or enslave those already settled on the land. Those invaders forced into new conquests after suffering defeat themselves. This tribe has taken the role in this barren place – yet rocks have made them wealthy. Such riches have passed along this now-silent track, from the shore opposite the

island where deals are struck, passed here and into the innards of a giant monster. For many a foreign trader this is a land of darkness and fear – where the sun finally sets.

The battlements give a view of the wooded hillside that meets the meadows beside the path linking to the open fields. Winter, the sun has sunk behind the grey veil. The path is empty, the labourers having finished their daily seasonal chores. The encroaching night brings with it a calmness, only interrupted by a tumbling river and occasional calls of farm animals.

The visitor to the tower is assured of its security during darkness. The sturdy oak door is barred with a solid drawbar, and the machicolation overhanging the entrance a deterrent to anyone trying to force entry. But a wooden door without a yett is a cheaper measure for the price of added protection. Still, a grate will not stop asphyxiating smoke if a fire can be set, climbing its way up the spiralling stone stairs to the living quarters above.

Inside the doorway to the right, is the ground floor chamber, white washed with plaster-wattle undercroft, and full of valuable merchandize: vats of wine, bags of spices and salt.

Attackers can come down those slopes under cover of the forest. Or they came from the west, through the meadows and scrub. In the night their approach may not be easily seen: the security of a castle does not secure the hinterland around, if the stone fortress itself is not assailed. Perhaps word of approaching crown troops might drive them away. The line between march and shire was forever shifting, no permanent security guaranteed. Although all sides believe fate will ultimately decide in their favour. Not if they could see what I see. This castle, and its sister on the facing side of the street – which themselves had replaced the dwelling houses belonging to rich merchants – add further stratum to the passing of time. The passing of the years would come to record this spot as a gateway to a walled town with seven fortresses.

From this high point I look to the horizon to where sky meets the sea, dulled in the grey afternoon, and think of a similar one – then and today: a rich Roman villa near Segontium, where life's so certain and comfort so real. Food is being prepared for the evening meal, I can smell fish being cooked in olive oil and

freshly baked bread. The shutters are wide open, the air is heavy but for a faint breeze – perhaps for thunder. In the shaded interior wall mosaics are visible, depictions of Greek mythology. One in particular I recognize, the legend of Theseus, which I recall from my own childhood picture books: his slaying of the Minotaur, most cunningly using a ball of string so he could find his way back through the labyrinth where the half-man half-bull creature dwelled.

Then, a drop of rain recalls me to the present. Moments later, the precipitation now a downpour, I am sheltered by the trees. Another image comes to mind, even farther east – the Teutoborg Forest – a wet, early September day, and how one General Varus overlooked the importance of heeding warnings as he led his legions to their doom. Arrogance ensures something vital is eventually overlooked.

The little church on the island has a roof, of wood or thatch. Its walls are the grey dry stone seen today. The island is little different, except the absence of the Martello tower. And there is no granite harbour below me, blasted and chiselled from the hill behind me. Instead I stand upon a natural boulder which creates a sheltered inlet, with a small beach that I recognize, joining a narrow sandy path up through grass and furze, over the slipway yet to be constructed.

A strange bleating from the water, like a sheep but a sharper pitch, a line of young deer are being swam across the sound from a cog anchored between the island and the harbour. The frightened creatures, corralled along with oars by men in hide-covered coracles, make their way – as prodded – to the cove. On dry land the wet shivering deer, all roped together, are met by other men carrying hazel rods, with which they begin whipping them – the long journey not over yet.

A short distance up the pathway a stout bearded man in a brilliant-red robe with black trimming around the collar sits atop a white horse. Holding the reins with one hand he clutches a rolled parchment in the other. Behind him are more horsemen: chain-mailed, helmets with protective face plates. They are well armed: upright lances against their hips, sheeted swords around their waists and shields strapped on their backs.

The herd now begins its journey, following a well-worn track, up through the rocky terrain until the land plateaus to reveal a small village of simple thatch

and wattle dwellings and a small church standing in its centre. Plumes of smoke rise from the hearths, being gently swept inland by a sea breeze. An old woman in a black shawl and soiled white wimple is leaning on a broom at one of the doorways, her surly weather-beaten face watching the procession. A few children playing on the rugged road are excited by this stampede of animals through their little world. As quickly, the community would return to quietness again.

As the afternoon progresses the party bringing the herd of deer comes to a river, the bank opposite steep, the water between them shallow but flowing with speed. And there's a gentle breeze. It is a place of memory – I know well – giving it importance before any importance could be attributed to the recollection. The river, where the animals are now drinking, is guarded by a moat and bailey. Before long the herdsman, on instruction from their feudal master in the red robe, are moving the deer to the other side, and forcing them up the steep slope; up to the landmark that enthralled with the excitement of every journey: a feeling I know from childhood trips along that route – landmark I can place, in the ones I will come to know – the boundary wall of an estate and the quaint gate lodge at its entrance.

The soil of the fallowed ploughland is wet and in near darkness, that evening in early October. A slanted tree, now bare, stands on that landmark outcrop. I step up beside it, look west – hypnotized by the scene: the line of the horizon in gloom, beneath clouds of deepening blue and a streak of evening gold. There is a connection with the vista and one far away to the east: Lepanto, and the sea battle off its shore that pitted the Holy League against the Ottoman navy; the latter defeated and the former rejoicing in the glory of victory.

The division of the Mediterranean will be decided, but not definitively the Turks' decline and fall. That would come later, and eventually, as it does to all. For the victors, their prayers were answered. Or so they thought. Everyone – victor and vanquished – need to recognize the true motives of their invocations. The powers making up the Holy League had their own private novenas. And these secret prayers of the heart would squander victory. Venice had come seeking help from the rest of Christendom when Cyprus was seized from it by the Ottomans. But the differences would deny permanent victory: the battle yes, but not the war. Ultimately it is the interests of power among allies which leave

alliances without a prayer. Don John, the Austrian commander of the league's naval fleet, sailed his own furrow. Finally, the doge made peace with the sultan, eager to resume trade with the still-prosperous Turkish Empire, commerce having always been its foremost concern.

The scene of the setting sun mesmerizes me. A cool wind caresses my face. A bell peels, from the fine church in the village, with its ancient Celtic nave and medieval chancel, which rang out for matins and vespers throughout the centuries, and now too for Catholics, Old English and Gaelic of the locality, on the orders of the incumbent Anglican curate. The church is surrounded by seven castles rising against the northern and eastern skyline, statements of the Dublin merchants who protect their interests and the local marcher lords who challenge them. The chime fades and I am gradually left with silence of the moment, from beyond the senses, and as the final light disappears, the whole world falls into darkness, gone the ancient place of prayer and the seven castles.

Two of the seven original castles had disappeared by that September day in 1759. But ruins, in their pathos, tell more than when they stand strong, citadels against challenges to power – statements of presumed unassailability.

A stranger on a black horse arrives as a cloudy evening settles into dusk, arriving at the entrance to the village, where once stood two of the fortresses, like gate towers commanding caution for anyone who might have a mind to trespass. Now, they are nothing more than ivy-covered piles of stone. What remains of one has been incorporated into the walls of a labourer's cabin.

The man is in a brown linen frock coat and black cocked hat, and a satchel over his shoulder. The horse is carrying a hefty, leather pack saddle. It appears the visitor might be planning an extended stay, that he has come to this place for a purpose. And this village seems dissonantly appropriate to his mission: it is poor, but once enjoyed great prosperity. He has knowledge of the place, not just found it by chance – it has that sense of place, identity. Of their former glory, the castles are functioning but dilapidated. The one he's seeking is in use as a tavern called *The Red Cross Inn*.

Inside he will find warmth and companionship. The vaulted, smoke filled ground floor room is lined with benches and tables, and a small wooden bar at the far side. The tavern is full of farmworkers and fisher folk, drinking out of

pewter tankards and puffing on clay pipes. There he will find some social mingling for the evening before he must undertake his task, imbibing in the local ale but perhaps not the landlord's cellar of wine, a man in a stained apron quickly and skilfully opening and reclosing the plug on a barrel behind the bar, as he replenishes jugs.

But his mission is for the following night. He sees a moon rise and shine through the mullioned window. Candles are lit, fusing the tobacco smoke with a buttery light. The fire, in the added hearth, has now being lit as the evening gets cooler. A smell of cooking from somewhere suggests an evening meal is about to be provided.

As the night progresses he will hear stories, of how the dead are buried after darkness in the ruined churchyard only a short distance from *The Red Cross Inn*, and which he would be able to glimpse from the sleeping quarters overhead. There will be ghost stories: when after the revelry of the wake, the mourners make their way to the desolate graveyard, the gloom of the lichen-covered headstones, and grassy anonymous plots, throwing up sights and shadows of deceased generations. All the sadness and grief, the fear, and through alcohol aided imagination the grieving sensed they were in the presence of a reality beyond their comprehension – allowing them ritual and irreverence, prayer and poteen.

The visitor enjoying the storytelling had his own haunting spectres to face on the following night.

I recognize the waxing gibbous moon rising from a cushion of cloud on the sea's horizon. Day is settling into night and gas street lamps will soon be lit. It is late July 1914, but one particular young man's life is waning. A sailor in the Royal Navy, his ship would soon leave its base in Harwich, England. The ancestor of my wife was a petty officer on board the scout cruiser, HMS *Amphion*. He would be among the first to die in World War One – the first Irish man. The ship had set out in search of German minelayers only hours after Britain declared war on the Kaiser, the night of August 4th. Joseph Pierce Murphy met his demise two days later when the *Amphion* hit one of those enemy mines.

The other vessels in the flotilla came to its assistance, including destroyer HMS *Linnet*. On board that ship was one of my ancestors, a gunner by the name of Michael James McLoughlin. In history there are links to what happens in the past and what happens in the future.

The beginning of 1760 was relatively mild, although the north easterly winds could be bracing and the seas around the island choppy. Farther out a merchant vessel, her three sails billowing, struggles to make it to safety of Dublin port. It is a connection I feel with an occasion on this spot, an unseasonably cool August day in 1999: I walk with my young son over the rocks and gorse of the hill, near the crumbling demesne walls of what had been Loftus Hill House. In the bay tall ships sail towards the Poolbeg Lighthouse, gathering for the maritime festival that brings back the past in physical form.

I had already come to suspect that there was a pattern to history, though had not yet found the proof of it, that the certainties of the new millennium regarding humanity's future were as transient as the confident certainties of bygone ages.

February 1760 brought news that a continental war had found its way to these shores – like so many. Pirates and privateers always liked this coastline, including Francois Thurot, who could serve state or self with equal ease. In the pay of the French government he gained hero-status there for his daring capture of Carrickfergus Castle, which he held for almost a week. But the man-of-action can gain even greater stature should he become a martyr. Thurot even won respect of the Britain for his bravery, after he was killed by the Royal Navy off this coastline, following the abandonment of Carrickfergus.

Cannon fire breaks through the rustic quiet, a rumbled muffle. For a moment the birds seem to stop singing and listen. The sound waves also carry human voices: cheering and music – a brass band playing. The cattle in the field continue eating what grass remains, flicking their tails against irritant flies. The land usage here has now changed from tillage to pasture. The strips of plough land had been without the boundaries of hedgerows, giving unencumbered view of Dublin Bay below.

While once long and thin this field is now square, entrance through a wooden gate with stone circular pillars. The hedgerows lend a sylvan intimacy, but the

whitebeam have now lost their early-summer cream flowers and the red berries will not ripen till autumn – next month – rich source of food for birdlife through the winter. Tall oak and ash trees hug the skyline from place to place along the native perimeters. Standing where I do, upon that ancient protrusion of rock, amongst the grey cowpats and golden ragwort, I can glimpse Howth but not the waters between.

There would be a clear, unhindered view from the hill above this gently sloping farmland. Plumes of smoke, partly concealing a ship, could be seen down in the harbour. A person with a hand telescope would make out dignitaries on the deck of Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*, and mariners in blue uniforms working around two cannons on the stern. It would be a very modern sight: a sailing ship with riggings and masts, but driven by a steam engine that turned two paddles either side of the hull, but like olden day vessels constructed of wood. In every other way the vision would be a glimpse of tomorrow – focus on the future in its finality, or how imagination would have it.

“Queenstown Tavern” is inscribed in gold lettering over the door. It’s a venue I would come to know as *The Club*. It is dark, near midnight, sounds of chatting and laughter joined with the clinking of glasses carries through the air. Through the whorl glass windows I make out human forms at the tables and sitting at the bar. The night is cold, cloudy but dry. From somewhere, fireworks shoot into the sky and explode, celebrating the end of a year and beginning of a new one – a new century.

There is also a deep silence, hidden behind the boisterous noise of revelry: silence of the dead. The yard behind the establishment is a morgue, where the local deceased are prepared for burial in St Begnet’s cemetery. On the dying light of that Sunday sawing and hammering could be heard, a coffin being made for Monday’s funeral. But coffin makers need their rest too. Perhaps quiet is the greatest respect and solemnity of mortality.

Another firework breaks my reverie, reminding me where I stood, where I would come to stand many times as a young man, almost a century later. And at the end of the next century – ending one millennium, beginning another – I would be looking to tomorrow with the trepidation of what came before: what from our past repeatedly dictates our future. Probably no one inside the Queenstown was dwelling much on the worries of their lives, pushing problems

to the back of their minds, with help of alcohol at least. Poor folk would put aside concerns, in their own country or abroad, just as would the wealthy in their big houses secured by their high walls.

I walk away, leaving the human sounds behind me, fading. I walk over the cobbled roadway towards the entrance to Carrig-na-Greine estate, the granite pillars with wrought iron gates closed firmly to the world, no doubt a New Year's Eve party going on inside its lavish dining hall. Peering through, I recognize the gravel drive, which travels past the gate lodge then swings around a large outcrop of rock to the house. The building would one day be a primary school, where I would spend my earliest years of learning.

I have a vision of a memory not yet born: warm autumn sunlight dancing on my eyes, the sea glimmering like pearls.

A young, earnest poet visits Dalkey in the mellowing days of peace, late August 1939. Alighting from the train he makes his way out of the station and follows Station Road into the centre of the village, Castle Street. He has come here after looking up family members in Rathcoole, County Dublin, before he travelled on to Cork to meet up with a cousin.

From his writings it seemed the world weighted heavy on his shoulders. He experienced one world war, and now seems certain to witness another. The sleepy village gives no sign of approaching conflagration. The cobbled street, with its quiet tram tracks, is without movement. He looks up towards the meadow rising above the village to a hill with a building on its summit – ‘the castle on the hill’. Cows eat off the stubble in the mowed fields. The warmth of late summer enters his chest, he feels the connection with this place. He knows of another hill, also near a deep blue sea. There is a recognition: that sense of place, which is of the place but still not it – what the link realizes, the feeling. The bright sun-drenched day is far removed from the black roiling clouds of war, for which he seeks the symbolism that can wish it away. An image enters his mind: climbing up that hill, as a full moon arose, to the heights where his soul can soar.

Noting two ancient castles, he concludes the town was once of some importance, and he wants to learn more of its history. The two fortresses, one inhabitable the other derelict, have a pathos about them. They were built in an

age of greater power, but equal turmoil. Those who erected them thought their endeavours would be as long-lasting as the mountains; but power, though proud, is passing. He reflects on the broader pattern of history, that wars of the past never brought peace to last – nor will the one coming. For a moment he envisions the lands of his ancestors who he had been visiting, and is filled again with that magical image: a lake with a young woman standing by its shore, remembering a sweetheart that time has forgot.

He steps through a gate into a field, watched by a forlorn donkey. On his right is the Church of the Assumption, which he denotes to be a Gothic style built during the previous century. Its high square tower dominates the skyline, across the main street, beyond high wall and tall yew trees, her Celtic ancestor – the roofless church of St Begnet. He reflects that he would as happily pray in the ivy-clad walls of that ancient saint as in the fine modern church with its fan-vaulted ceiling and multi-coloured stain glass windows. But all that he would explore later. On the precipice of great conflict, he thinks about the constant cycle of wars over two thousand years, and yearns – no more. He leaves that field over a stile, across the railway bridge, into a long meadow and passed the sullen staring cattle.

The meadow ends with a ditch and rampart, which he clambers up, on to a narrow path through brambles with rich ripening blackberries. Brushing his way through he comes to a clearing, on the left a redbrick wall, while the path continues its way on the right through long overgrown grass until it comes to a road. On the far side is an entrance gate, Summerfield House. Our poet follows the road upwards until arriving at a junction with another road. Cunningham Road it reads on the green sign, also in Irish as *Bóthar Chuinneagáin*. Opposite it is a pasture field, meeting copses of trees and overgrown hedges in the distance. Leaning on the gate our traveller sees clouds gather from the mountains to the west, and a veil of rain creating a rainbow: a natural phenomenon and still symbol of something else, a connection with this landscape.

I see that scene, and my own early memory of the seeing the rainbow, and the feeling it brought, light piercing water droplets revealing the colours of the spectrum: colours that bring a whole tapestry of connections and memories, not only bending and bouncing.

But the poet must leave the picturesque field arced by its rainbow, and continue his ascent to the hill he first saw from the village.

As a child, talk of the old turnpike road that ran out from Cork city – the narrow road arched with ancient deciduous trees, a lush canopy in summer months – struck me, at the time, with a feeling as something deeply magical: it captured the imagination of the moment, and retained its place in my memory. It's something my brain recorded as important – meaningful – and would become apparent many years later. Time would produce the context: those feeling as a boy, the connection with the ancestors and my writing of those memories today.

On the night of May 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> 1798, rumours of rebellion spread, as the moon began to rise over the Dublin to Cork highway. Rebels with their pikes began to assemble silently under its half-light. Just outside the village was a turnpike gate, beside a humble cottage, the small farmer had the task of collecting the tolls on stagecoaches travelling the road. And every night the mail coach came through, its approach signalled by the clatter of hooves and call of the post horn. The gatekeeper with his lantern standing by the turnpike would then see the glittering lamps of the carriage through breaks of the hedgerows.

Thundering down, the driver pulled the four sturdy horses to a grating halt. As the transaction took place the guard on the back with his blunderbuss and pistols stayed alert to the shadows beyond. But for the most part of that night the rural scene was idyllic, a quiet serenity. Although the nervousness of the passengers suggested an unease at the silence, which threatened a violent reality. And on they would travel, through that peaceful bucolic landscape to their fate.

A tradition arose, a myth about a rock that could talk and foretell the future, giving a cryptic message about the false harvest moon, the lunar occurrence more usually in the month of September rather than October, a significance I would later come to recognise. No one could locate where this place was, presumably where the ancestors lived at the time.

I picture a scene, near a still lake at dusk – a manmade royal island at its centre – and I hear a sound, a wading bird or a banshee perhaps, or may be the talking magic rock muttering. As the setting sun pours its molten light on the water surface I notice the bulrushes swaying gently, in full flower, their dark spikes

glinting like spears – a similar memory from Lady's in more from recent years or the enchanting artificial island on the lake in Blackrock Park. Mixed in is the soft sound of lapping at the lake's edge.

The myth is a legend from the ancient past. Over time the narrative changed. The story of the stone changed. Tradition spoke instead of a prophet who would come at some time in the future, another of a prophet from the pre-Christian era who could predict the downfall of kings.

The second tavern, *Sign of the Ship*, is smaller in size. Its upstairs rooms with their wooden shutters command a view of the sea and any vessels coming into the sound. The signboard over the narrow doorway to the former fortified castle depicts a four mast Carrack. And it creaks in the slightest of breezes, hanging from its rusty iron bracket.

The creaking follows me as I walk through the common after a dinner of mutton and claret. The wind is unseasonably strong, and from the sound of waves the shore is not far. The gorse shines yellow in the darkness, and rocky granite outcrops stand sentinel against the grey sky. Bleating sheep flit on ahead of me, nervously running to the cover of the wild common. But the sea is nearing, with it the smell of the salt air.

But that low shriek, or creak, cannot leave the ear. It carries even to that small sandy cove. Across the water is the island, home for the season to grazing cattle, and its one site of human impermanence: its abandoned church. Out beyond is a smaller isle called the Muglins, home to colonies of kittiwakes and gulls. Also, fastened in chains on the rocks, are the decomposing bodies of two pirates, creaking in the swell of the waters, eventually to be broken and drowned with those other ancient bones out there in the deep. Their fate is told in the tavern, tales of pirates and smugglers the authorities want to make example of.

It was said that the town was once protected by a curtain wall connecting the seven castles. But centuries passed and accounts became obscured, by whom and when they were built. Centuries on it was suggested they were constructed by Ostmen or Danes, on the thinking that Viking Dublin held sway over all this hinterland. Others suggested they were constructed on the orders King Henry II. Only five of those fortresses stand, as hostelries or stables, billiard room or private dwelling. Once it seemed they protected the goods landing and leaving from this shoreline, when this place was of such commercial importance.

But the castles speak to the imagination and create a narrative, a literary connective which serves the need to form the whole story. No dates are

inscribed in the stonework, material hewn from the surrounding land, to indicate their origin. Yet there is a tale, more frustrating the need for answers, of a piece of timber discovered in the floorboards of one, carved with strange and indecipherable markings, and a long time lost if true or false.

Where better to hide a parchment manuscript, with a message from the past for its discoverer in the future?

I can share the disquiet and unease when news arrives of war brewing across the sea in Europe, one which has the signs of spreading throughout the entire world – engulfing all. Aix-la-Chapelle held the prophetic warnings: warring factions never satisfied – where even the victors are not contented, even if they could be clearly identified. The struggle for power goes on, alliances switching one hundred eighty degrees to suit. But modern war, like the tentacles of that sea creature, the giant kraken, spread everywhere, capable of devouring everyone: no one can escape it.

August 12<sup>th</sup>, there would be a waning gibbous moon, the final full moon of the summer. And the crops in the fields are mostly gathered in, with the farmers working late into the dusk, until the very last light has gone.

Yet the conflagration embroiling humanity carries on, bitter ironic contrast to this peaceful scene, where a field of blood is cooling with the onset of night, with the groan of the dying not the rhythmic swish of the scythe.

There, the dark was not allowed to hide the scene of despair: lightning revealed the victors pillaging and killing any surviving and injured enemy left stranded. The rainless thunder reminded the victor and vanquished alike of the terrifying noise that had possessed that day. And a defeated king would sit that night in a peasant's cabin, while around him his soldiers lay wounded and dying. He knew in that moment he had to retreat or be captured and possibly killed by foes no more than brigands, what he had always feared for his kingdom and for his person.

An ancient tomb sleeps, and a memory dreams. In natural wilderness, which rules, in a realm of bramble and weed, something has been lost but not its recollection. That memory I share. That place I once dropped off at on the way to another sacred site of long-dead kings, where the confidence of destiny was as solid as stone.

The builders of the slumbering mound buried parts of their artwork inwards, away from the eyes of the living: unseen, only for the eyes of the unseen. And for viewers of Newgrange, the greatest mystical attraction was the very mystery of not knowing what lay beneath the mound: dark chthonic underworld of mysterious deities. And what is more meaningful than concealing from human view that which seeks to convey the ultimate, the all-embracing – the unseen?

AE Russell got a sense of past, present and future as one. He appeared to have some insight into the solstice rituals once carried out by the forgotten civilization. On the shortest day the sun would flow like molten gold up the passage to the chamber, lighting up the abstract nature of the Neolithic religion, in the form of the iconic triple spiral. This action allowed the living to glimpse the realm of the eternal, and the bones of their dead ancestors who now also dwelled in the other world.

Art and imagination can see a truth not visible to the mere collection of facts. Facts which can be challenged, altered, interpreted in the pursuit of gaining victory of one's own ideas, power in the concept. Facts can become lost, then rediscovered. Fiction always remained created. Russell either made up something that happened to be true, or learned it orally in his lifetime. Yet there is no other record of it.

The civilization that build Newgrange disappeared and stone turned to metal. A bronze culture made that sacred place the centre of its own religious practices. And while workers in metal they built their shrines in wood. They maintained their ceremonial position in front of the passage doorway, guarded by that great stone carved with cryptic, hypnotic spirals: of a truth the mind can only guess. But that had become the old, replaced with the new. Yet wood rots, to be replaced with monuments of stone, the natural material once more. The tribe constructed a circle of giant boulders around the ancient mound, standing like sentinels as if to hold in the ghosts of an old race. They also retained the cosmic knowledge and solar observations passed down by the now-dead civilization – went further. Not only did one of those standing monoliths cast a shadow up the entrance stone on the shortest day of the year, another stone cast a shadow on the same spot at the spring and autumn equinox. A third stone, lining up with the other two, marked the longest day of the year, creating a linked shadow at sunrise. But civilizations and knowledge are lost. And in this case lost for centuries, only to be discovered by imagination and the sensing of unity: past, future and present. And in that can be discovered, ritual might change but meaning does not: and that rituals come from meaning, not meaning from rituals.

The young man is speaking with an elderly gentleman by the black wrought-iron gate to the old cemetery, in the still afternoon sun of late August, asking about the origins of the two castles. History is important to him, especially now as the world stands once more on the precipice of conflagration – as if one great war had not been enough. As a local historian, the older individual can answer his questions. Once it was thought that the castles were erected by Danes as the town's name, Dalkey is Norse, a direct translation from the Gaelic word *Deilginis*, *Deilg* meaning thorn or dagger and *Inis* island. The Annals of the Four Masters describe it as *Dun-Delginnsi*, 'Fort or Dun of the Island of Thorns'. Other speculated they were built by Saxons trading along the coast. This argument was supported by the discovery of a hoard of Saxon coins in the vicinity. Others disputed this, instead arguing the fortresses could have been built by King Henry II, as part of his conquest of the entire island of Ireland. Frustratingly, there was no way to determine the age of the castles as none had any inscription as to the date of their construction. There were originally believed to have been seven, all but two of them having been destroyed by the mid-nineteenth century. He had in his possession an intriguing vellum manuscript that had been found in one of the fortresses when it was being demolished. The antiquarian author, James Gaskin, in his book *Irish Varieties* published in 1869, mentions the discovery. He records that a local, Mr John Hilton, now long dead, told him of the find. He thought there must be something sacred, mystical, about the castles – somewhere to bury messages for future generations: from the dead to the living, with warnings. Another writer, Peter Wilson, publisher of *Wilson's Almanack*, in a description of Dalkey about a hundred years before Gaskin, spoke of a piece of oak timber that was discovered in one of the castles. It had strange markings, presumably by human hand and having some meaning to the person who made them – symbols that could no longer be deciphered, so the message had expired, and with it any meaning it once had. But imagination and creativity can often help when applied correctly.

The bay is clear from the cliffs of the gouged out hill, on that night in early August. Visible, ten vessels, all strewn with glittering lights – scene of serenity, and perhaps calm reflection: something I recognize, even with the passing of a century and a half. The lighthouse on the East Pier of Kingstown Harbour flashes its beam to them – a beacon. But as I turn by head south towards Bray Head my eyes are instead guided to the dark fertile Vale of Shanganagh, now silently sleeping. There among the copses and fields lies concealed Loughlinstown Workhouse, a grim place holding a sorrow I share. Not even the moon sitting over Maulin can illuminate that landscape with cheer. For that institution carries for me a living memory of loss: a blonde woman's body on a

cold mortuary slab, in that institution had by then changed from workhouse to hospital. Like in the final month of 1847, on the nineteenth day and a Sunday, snow crunches on the roads and hedges of the world beyond its boundary walls. Drifts of powdery white, blown by the cold lips of a winter's wind, gather against memorial stone to those within who would perish to fever and cholera; no sign to their fate but the cushions of snow in the dying days of 1847.

I see him standing among the headstones in the graveyard of St Begnet's Church, now many years later, and see his thoughts: he is remembering a conversation with a man more than twenty years before, who spoke proudly of his young son – who he said was destined to become a king, so fine outstanding a boy he was. And on the south facing wall of that ancient church was the memorial to that very child: 'This stone was erected by the Mr Murtagh Dempsey of the City of Dublin in Memory of his affectionate son Hugh Dempsey...who departed this life April 7<sup>th</sup> 1790.'

The summer warmth bakes his back as it does the stone memorial, perhaps some heat seeping down to the bones of a young man swaddled in his shroud. He did not have a long life, but local custom has it he did become a king, although no title was carved on his headstone, marking such an event.

He reflects on the job of the stonemason, the arduous physical task of carving words to posterity. But the lichen, wind and rain erode all that: all they need is time. He thinks of the tavern where he stayed, now closed as an imbibing emporium. He would have no reason to cross its threshold, take that manuscript back from its hiding place – if not already discovered and destroyed – a thought that makes him despair, and he quickly banishes it. He hopes fate will guarantee its preservation, perhaps discovered in an age with people travel around in hot air balloons and steam engines. A reason he wishes to see that document again, to amend certain of his words.

From the village of Clontarf I can view, as he did, the two hills of Dalkey and Killiney and the island on the southern tip of the bay. The calm sea is bathed in a sheet of silver light allowed by the sun breaking through the thick cloud of that spring day. That global conflict that had spread across the continent and colonies had come to an end, three years earlier, with the Treaty of Paris. He had feared it could have been the final apocalyptic war to engulf all mankind in the biblical battle of Armageddon. But it proved not to be.

Some years after he completed his writings he revisited the location that inspired the account prophesying the coming times of despair. He did not know why it was such a special place. He did recall that he had looked across the waters from Clontarf before making that first sacred journey in 1759. He had seen that island and headland basking in the sunshine, and decided that was his destination. There was no rational reason for his decision, yet it made sense – a ritual carried on the assumption of some greater knowledge, which the ritual could not explain and only accept.

On his return visit he sought out somewhere to hide his manuscript. Its future discoverers might find something useful wisdom about the past: and finally, maybe, change the course of history, breaking an endless cycle of wars and destruction. Years of reading and reflection had led him to the conclusion that it was power that motivated people, but that power was an illusion. He concluded that the answer had to be found in something other than power: but not powerlessness. Later, something happened that would change his mind on that last point. While a visitor in Clontarf he attended a soiree where he got talking to a man who was speaking pridefully about his young son – a clever lad with much prospects for his future life: that he was so great that one day he would be a king.

There was something familiar about this conversation, the theme at least. The man and his wife had lost a number of children. When a lady mentions the demise of his other children his face registered fear and he shook his head at the thought. His face was that of a priest with a crucifix trying to banish the Devil himself. He would hear nothing of any such suggestion, immutably fixed on the idea that this living child was destined for greatness – the highest power under God. And whilst the boy was in a family of wealthy merchants, they were not blue blood.

Sparkling sunlight shone through the sash windows, as clouds over the bay began to break. That island – as he had seen it years before – was illuminated, as if a beacon. It brought the memory back to him. Yet there was also a connection with what the ambitious father was telling him, strangely feeling a connection with the future not the past or the present. It seemed this father's fear of powerlessness – forces that snatched the lives of his children – convinced him power was real. In that moment, as the chatter around became distant, and with the deepening of thoughts, it became clear only powerlessness can be real, the answer being to define that and discover the truth lies beyond it.

I dreamt of a place I recognized, though it had changed, standing in that oak forest I earlier described: site of my childhood family home. The woods climb

upwards, and I stand before a mossy boulder that is covered in veiny tree roots. Above, I make out the shape of a threshold in a holly-clad gable wall. Clambering up, I step through, finding myself deeper inside the native forest: winter trees piercing the open sky, all silent but for a cawing crow and the faint murmur of a stream.

I experience that feeling, the one which inspires, and precedes the knowledge that gives answer: the source of the question. I had a vision of this scene when in its natural state, as humans were about to step in. And I remember it when was bricks and mortar, tiled roof and windows in wooden frames; fixed certainties growing up. The vision of tomorrow: return to natural sylvan environment, where a traveller might discern that the forest forms the shape of the crumbling wall and a doorway into a long-disappeared building. Sometimes a ruin can give a better insight into the totality of truth. And while that scene is of a future, it is also the starting point – not of time or sequence. The feeling evoked is the beginning and the conclusion: providing the logic that reveals reality. Such an intense, clear experience that the future is not going to turn out the way we expect shatters other deeply held assumptions about history.

The conclusion, coming first, is the experience of what is real – what IS – the only way to see that power is an illusion: its opposite real. What IS lies beyond the imaginations and narratives we create, though which can help us to discovery, and also beyond the richness and hintings of symbolism found in object, custom and ritual. What IS cannot be explained by the limitations of anthropomorphism, by which humans attribute their own characteristics, as well as supernatural ones, to objects – animate and inanimate – and (perhaps arrogantly) to convey the divine in human form. In that woodland scene can be witnessed the meaning of the soul, existing in a feeling – one – anywhere and everywhere, experienced individually and collectively.

The feeling – looking from the future to the past – starts with the doubt that the future is unrolling the way we think. That brings into question the belief that ideas are what motivate people, unite or divide them.

The feeling – the soul, the divine – is the only thing true. The feeling is of the soul and the feeling is reality. Everything else, its dichotomy, is false – the notion power is real is false. There is nothing else, because everything else is disproven: leaving only what IS. Only that which IS provides the enlightenment to ask the questions – from beyond intellect – that perhaps historical ‘reality’ is not as we think it. The inverse, the conclusion, allows the question, provides the basis for the logic.

## PART TWO

The past can tell us the future, as I have discovered. It can be broken down in three headings: ideology, dichotomy and teleology. People insist wars are fought over ideas, which are what unites or divides them. And these differences of ideas create dichotomy. There is a deep insistence based on this logic that humans can predict, or determine, how the future will unfold: every side imagines the outcome it desires. When it comes to war they are incorrect. All conflicts are about power, manifested as interests, a three part struggle: gaining power, retaining power and regaining power. Ultimately every empire faces the war it is trying to avoid – its own terminal collapse. All have seen power as having permanence. But that requires the ability to fully control reality, the very definition of power. But humans are unable to do that, as history clearly demonstrates. People think power is real: it is illusion.

If the binary approach is still insisted upon and applied – and with power proven to be illusion – the only logical conclusion is that powerlessness is real. That demands the question: what is powerlessness? Not a desirous state admittedly. How does powerlessness feel? What's the opposite feeling? What is that a feeling 'of'? Powerlessness is not the desired state. But its opposite is power, which is not real, so desired state has to be discovered elsewhere. What is desired is a state without opposite, or antonym, contradiction or contingency. Those who, catastrophically, think power real, masquerading as ideas, also seek a state without an opposite – but the false one. So, a true state can only be discovered by accepting powerlessness as the starting point for discovery.

Everybody agrees that no one wants to be in that dark state of powerlessness: in its worst form an existential threat to life itself, denoted by a single word – fear. That is the feeling not desired.

The feeling (awareness) of powerlessness is exactly the same for the person who thinks power is real as it is for the rare person who recognizes power as illusion. We cannot see reality if we cannot see that power is illusory, and powerlessness real.

What *IS* is all there is. Everything which stems from the falsehood that power is real is itself a falsehood, because they are predicated on power being real. All ideas grow from this misconception. We cannot see what *IS*. Logically, what *IS* cannot be random, and cannot be seen relatively as it has no opposite. It precedes powerlessness (the feeling of) and is the desired state – known state.

The feeling can only be truly grasped in the context of memory, past present and future becoming one. It is not dictated by time or sequence. The original experience is the same feeling as the recollection of it – known – the truth that is

everything. Meaning cannot be found without that connection, which reveals the feeling of unity and harmony. And while we can know the feeling, we are also aware semantically that it is a feeling *of* something: moving us one step away from it. Metaphor, image, imagination, logic, language, symbolism and ideas are secondary – secondary to what *IS*. What *IS*: beyond anthropomorphism, which conceives it in human or animal form, the animate or inanimate. Logically everything comes from and goes back to what *IS*.

The feeling is known, though not necessarily intellectually, as intelligence can claim power is real, so ‘knowledge’ does not in itself automatically illuminate the truth. How does the awareness that power is illusion come about? It probably would have been harder to discover that if the atom had never been split. It is a case where the most intelligent pave the way for the most simple.

The feeling *IS*, stark contrast to the disharmony of its opposite: power. A person does not have to be intelligent to be aware: a sense of unease, anxiety of things being out of sync – that events can only get worse. People know the state they want to be in: but most just choose the wrong path to find it. To find the right route is not to be chosen for that task, which is reducing the divine to our own limitations, rather finding it is facilitated. And talk of destiny and identity in terms of the divine falls into the trap of anthropomorphism: the two terms are too often associated with power – not truth – making destiny and identity uncertain. Neither destiny or identity are what *IS*. Logic, empiricism and imagination can illuminate the divine: proof that power is illusion, powerlessness real and preceded by predication, beyond symbolism and anthropomorphism. The fool can grasp something the genius cannot: nonetheless, reason is the window frame through which the imagination can see.

The feeling can be experienced through the rhythms of life. Yet it is not confined to time, process or sequence. And sometimes the final words can be the beginning.

### PART THREE

Growing up my life followed a rhythm, continuity of cycle.

My earliest memories are now ethereal fragments: a sprig of holly being placed around the crib, smell of Christmas tree pine needles, excitement of the season, associated many years later on seeing the deep-green and red of the ibex in the bare winter woodland. Memory and moment met. Picking a piece of flint from the pebbles on the beach I recalled an overcast summer’s day, with a warm

gentle breeze on my cheeks and hair, watching my toy wooden yacht, blue with a creamy canvas sail, wobbling on the sand-rippled pool. A gossamer memory, that's location is stubbornly clear – Shanganagh River – one stream of memories on its passage to the sea.

Following summer house martins readied for their long flight south, squeezing in and out of their mud nest beneath the eaves, at the very apex of the family home, my father saying they would soon migrate to the Sahara because the winter here was too cold. That place excited my imagination: deserts and sand dunes, the thrill of adventure and journey. It was farther away than the imagination; farther away than the church steeple beyond the trees on the horizon, which so often hypnotized my gaze.

A full moon might summon memory: white muslin on pastel-blue sky. From next door's garden I see it on course over the roof of the house, bringing the words of the nursery rhyme – 'the cow jumped over the moon' – a serene twilight not marred by the werewolf's face. The other children play on, shrieking and laughing in the shadows.

The crescent moon could have the face of an old man, sleeping – the Man on the Moon – a picture from a book, then the real image of a waning moon floating on the dawn skyline moments before the horizon begins to burn gold to the dawn chorus. Some mornings woke in shaded grey. Through my bedroom window I saw a black cat slink along the garden wall, jump into the shadows among the bushes – the cat grave – and I imagined it a feline-ghost returning to its earthly burial place before full light.

'Run inside, the sky is on fire.' Frightened I obeyed my older siblings. The huge sky was red. I ran through the front door, away from the darkening gloom to the comfort of artificial light and the grown-ups. The memory would remain, its significance only revealed over time. Many sunsets would pass: from summer dusk, disc like molten iron sinking into the distant Liffey, to watery winter rays peeking over the mountains late afternoons. On clear mornings so many times a paling moon, fading to the brightening day.

I met her for the first time on a mild spring afternoon, the sky a milky-grey. I met her again the next day. She looked the same: beautiful. On the second day she came into my garden and beauty woke: then I saw. The moment she spoke I fell in love. And I knew the moment. I knew what it was by how it felt. My blood flowed warm, radiated from my chest, my mind clear and calm, all

became one: past, present and future; unity and beauty of the symbol. Language to explain it was as elusive as grasping air: knowing its importance was like grasping a rock in the hand, real. The feeling was reality, truth – desired state. All-embracing, it defied the childishness of my words. But at age nine I woke from dream to reality. Love revealed reality's deepest, inimitable meaning.

Dressed in a stylish white belted trench coat, her blonde hair, pale alabaster-like face in perfect symmetry, descriptive language and interpretation added in later years but the essence of the experience was there. The memory of that moment was of another memory – foretelling and recollecting as one – when even younger, seeing the picture: she lay on the ground as dead, flowing fair hair and white nightdress, her blueish eyelids closed, frozen without a flicker, the arrow piercing the medallion that lay across her chest. Not so important sequence, explanation of first or second memory, but the blending of experience into the one. And with that the future: I swore I would marry her one day. Often child's play is the projection of the adult in the making.

I never saw school as the path to adulthood. I began my academic trudge when nearly five, in the beginning of September that year. On that first day I sat at the desk in my short trousers, legs dangling not reaching the polished oak floor, and I scribbled shakily with my large yellow crayon. The classroom window looked out upon a glimmering sea. Rays of sunlight danced on my eyes and I hardly heard a word said. Mostly daydreamed from that day on. But I would come one day to draw a large lone tree, dark trunk and twisted branches, on its own on a barren landscape. I could not take anything in, tables or reading, as I moved to enter preparatory school. In Willow Park the kindly old priest opened the book and asked me to read from the start: first word 'the'. I saw the letters, not the image, they had no meaning. 'Have you sawdust in your head?' shouted one teacher as he tugged my ear for not knowing my Gaelic.

My mind lay elsewhere, in those pictorial histories and among ancient tales of myth and legend. The children of Lir story left an empty sadness in my chest the first time I heard it read in class. Four siblings turned into swans by a spell. They had the bodies of the birds, beautiful snow-white feathers, but the hearts and brains of children. For nine hundred years they lived among the reeds on choppy lakes and flew over storm-swept coasts. Their father, heartbroken by the spell cast on them by their stepmother, came and visited his children by the water's edge every day. Then, one day he did not come – nor any day after that. The hundreds of years passed; often the graceful creatures, singing mournful

songs, circled the castle where they had lived, but never saw their father. Their old home had become derelict and overgrown. It was a cold and lonely life, sad because the memories still lived inside their swans' heads. They dreamed of the time the curse would pass. And one morning they heard a church bell, and knew the sign. They stepped on to dry land for the last time. As they did they began shedding their feathers and their webbed feet turned to human feet with tiny wrinkled toes. Standing there, grey, bare and shrivelled were three shivering old men and an old woman. A hermit monk, who witnessed this, spoke to them, and they told him their tale. As they sat dying he baptized them. The holy water was cold but refreshing, the end to the many long winters of icy rain – completion of journey.

On cold winter mornings before class I trod the gravel path underneath the bare horse chestnuts, kicking the piles of the previous year's dead leaves, remembering that autumn: older boys throwing sticks to dislodge conkers or climbing the boughs to shake the stubborn quarry from their branches. From the sides I watched the contest to find the champion, each shiny-brown conker on a string taking turns to shatter or survive. Those boys were the modern-day heroes of legend, older than me and bolder: Cuchulainns, that hero who with superhuman strength could kill several combatants at once, but had not heard the full prophecy; or warrior Fionn MacCool, having tasted the salmon of knowledge, confident that was all to know.

I had felt such a warm flush of pride once in my first term of preparatory school: two boys chased me across the muddy playing fields to fight, catching up on me I turned to punch back. They stopped, one said to the other: 'He's a good fighter'. I walked away as if victorious, destiny on my side that moment, all the knowledge I needed. I saw a pale arm rising from the lake catching the sword. I saw the glint of the blade and its power to transform the weak into the strong. I could play the warrior: fighting a battle in armour, slashing and thrusting, in victory plunging my Excalibur into the grass. Next morning, looking out my bedroom window, through the misty dawn saw the stick – still standing – monument to my victory. It felt good to win.

But victory on my playing field would be fleeting. Imagination and reality were not one. A bigger boy could make the stomach churn in fear, shoving and punching. There were limits to imagination – the real world – and only in the mind could strength count for nothing. I felt the different emotions but did not

understand them: power and powerlessness, feeling of triumph feeling of fear. Different realms intertwined. I lived in one: fell back to the other.

In my final year of preparatory school teachers could highlight some achievement: history. The icons of history, memories of those lavishly illustrated Ladybird Books, linked the passage of human time to my own imagination, sequence and event blending into wholeness. And I had lavished over those images: from the dawn of civilization, monoliths of Stonehenge; Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian Knot; Cassivellaunus submitting to the conquering Julius Caesar; William the Conqueror being crowned at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day; Robert the Bruce studying the tenacious spider spinning its web; Oliver Cromwell on his white horse, leading his army of roundheads; to Napoleon defeated on the field of Waterloo.

From my early teens the symbols of history, symbols of identity, became the validity for my anger and righteous outrage. The logic gave invulnerability and historic continuity. Purpose gave that sense of belonging. I came to love my country, its culture and centuries-old struggle for freedom, a struggle only partially won. At parades and demonstrations my heart leapt to the beating of the drums, watched through the heads of the crowd the flags sailed past: the green white and orange tricolour, the Fenian golden rising sun on a green field, the orange-on-blue sunburnt emblem of those ancient Fianna warriors, the starry plough banner of Connolly's citizen army.

The past came to life, giving the means to shape the future and my imagination the narrative to see destiny. Standing beside the Stone of Destiny on that sultry cloudy summer day I saw: the circumference of distant horizon clear to the commanding eye of some ancient high king. Overhead wheeled mythic crows, black against gunpowder grey. Not far, the Boyne, flowing silently as if listening, coming from ancient beginnings then the tide carrying its waters back again towards the deep cavernous origins. It had heard industrious chipping of stone on stone, the clash of metal as descendent clans fought over territory, the thunder-like rumble of cannon and musket when foreign war came to home soil. To me it was continuous flow, even the eerie mounds – overgrown and dark – held forces that could arise and help snatch victory from centuries of defeat.

Patriotism became the icon – the ideal. The rebels of 1798 rose for freedom to be brutally crushed by grape-shot and pitch-cap. And so was extinguished the hopes of equality and liberty from across the Atlantic and continental Europe.

The pathos of those hopes lost in exile to St Helena, the destination of many vanquished in battle. A century two decades after, revolutionaries rose again – part of another war between foreign states – this time their blood sacrifice was rewarded in a world of shifting power and devoted to the rapture of martyrdom.

It was as if I, in part, could contribute to the dream of creating the ideal, and with it the ecstatic feeling of being able to change the world to a chosen design. But there was an ambiguous emotion: to smash and preserve an image, an icon both revered and reviled bound up in that one feeling, to uphold tradition of the past yet unfold a dream of a future free of it. The emotion was most often felt, almost imperceptibly, when differences found a common ground: a unity, if only fleeting, but a hint divergence had something shared. My admiration for the personal conviction and courage of Thomas More or a fiery Savonarola was equally inspired by the revolutionary zeal of *Communist Manifesto*.

But a dream that wants above all the bodily force to make it reality eventually becomes disillusionment when circumstance and chance are elements beyond control of imagination. My own unsuitability clearer, I floated to the world of poetic reverie, but struggled with words as if I were trying to sculpt image from rock with my nails. Action did not seem my calling: nor did words. Yet somehow narrative, and linking, would become my form.

Coming to the end of my teenage years I looked back to the start of that life phase. At thirteen I dreamed of a future with her, my first love. Four years earlier than that, in pre-pubescence, the entrancement and rapture of her face, the racing heartbeat and warmth coursing through my veins with a feeling so sweet I could almost taste. The sunniest of day became even more radiant. And the greyest of day was infused with brightness, even rain could not dampen happiness. But the feeling was always carried as a secret hope. One – that if exposed, as it was – showed up what youth fears most to be revealed: self-conscious insecurity, low self-esteem. I had to hide from the realizing of hope: run from what I most desired. As an adolescent I could not compete with other males for her affections, her beauty beyond my reach, her choice so sweeping. On the pedestal of my mind, I found reasons I did not ask her to be my girlfriend in my thirteenth year, as I was arcing from boy on the journey to manhood. From the nascent sexuality of the nine year old I passed to the physically matured teen, though with a gaucheness and deep-seated unhappiness, chasing other girls with the dual-standard that should be abhorrent to the professed idealist. I could not see it: I could not face a pain even deeper

than what I already felt; that surfaced momentarily only to be repressed. I was not totally without good qualities. They should have been driving me – they weren't.

By eighteen I realized I had chosen fear of rejection over reality of rejection, not gambling on the slimmest hope of love reciprocated. A letter attempted and torn up – words inadequate prospects slim. I had lost that childhood dream of one day marrying her, of family and parenthood, grandparenthood and old age: continuity and unity in life and death. I could have become what I was capable of being, and been content with that. Instead I watched from the sides, as she too moved into full adulthood, our silent paths diverging after years unspoken. And so I idealized her. I would see her pass, the pretty flowing fair hair of a Laura or the cold aloof beauty of a Beatrice to freeze tongue and limb.

As a new decade dawned the red sky on fire threatened once again. And once again I took shelter inside. A terrifying reality was looming, which chilled me to the bone. It was a shadow that I grew up unaware of and never much bothered my consciousness in adolescence. But this was a threat so utter in devastation, with no ultimate dream-world sanctuary for my fear: nuclear war. Crushed by powerlessness, my craven mind sought to limit its implications through writing: making sense, concatenating, bringing comfort and resolution – a dark future illuminated by the dim glimmer of the past – quest for answers in philosophy and history that could bring order out of chaos. I was trying to make sense out of personal loss and the very imminent prospect of total destruction through war: the first seemed so globally insignificant yet immense to me, the second incomprehensibly terrifying. I'd started trying to reconcile the painful personal emotions with the survivalist fear of extinction. Love and human mortality, not just on the individual but species level, consumed all my finite artistic energy. Wanting love, wanting to live: both were beyond my control. I could not find any comforting answer for loss of the first and prospect of losing the second.

I recorded thoughts in my green cloth-bound hardback notebook. In those sketches an old man with a push cart piled high with charred and torn books, travelled through a barren wilderness, having salvaged what he could after the nuclear apocalypse, trying to retain something of the past in the hopelessness of the present. The old man was a symbol, of what I was not clear. But was I the narrator? Or was it the old man? Was he to speak through me or me through him? The question confounded me: the conceit, simple enough, would come to overwhelm me. In this context the narrator had to be omniscient, but I was not: I

could not speak through him and he could not through me. I had not the wherewithal to be the one spoken through or speaking. And so this work, to have been my magnum opus, would get no further than the handwritten pages in my notebook.

But I persevered, outlined the character who was to be the oracle, the authority on all I wanted to know, from the Ionian philosophers to the splitting of the atom. I imagined his progress: wandering through that wasted landscape with only a lone carbonized tree silhouetted against a corpse-grey sky. Onwards he pushed toward some unseen destination. I gave him a mind, but only a mirror of my own. He had experienced great sorrows, lost loved ones, and spent his time picking at rubble for pieces of writings – philosophers, artists, scientists. But the story could not be told from tattered fragments. I felt, like this “creation” must have, a deep loneliness at my own prospect of being displaced by the maelstrom of war. His metaphorical journey would be presumed by the reader as thematically holding out hope. Yet I was little able to cope with the reality of the world I was in, and would certainly be submerged by the future one I was trying to write about were it to occur.

Still, there emerged a setting, a place hoped to bring calm in the vortex of destruction: the hill near where I grew up. It was where I increasingly came, on a summer night a place of serenity and reflection. I would make my way up the path through the woods. If clear, with a moon, my course was illuminated: the hushed nocturnal world bathed in silver. At the summit, the twinkling lights of a sleeping city lay below. The elevation brought some peace, my mind at ease to think. And I was looking down on the world, as if it might give me some perspective on the meaning of existence, and my role in it. I imagined the narrator might arrive at this spot, pushing his cart up the incline, whether the end of journey or yet one more peak to climb. The view to meet him, the burnt-out landscape below. I thought, perhaps he was from this place too – a shared emotional affinity. He can survey that scene of desolation: yet the knowledge he carries is supposed to be the real hope, the answer to despair.

Having created him, I had to develop him more. The hero could be a wandering prophet around the village warning of the impending war that few seemed perturbed about. He could be the strident seer, with followers. He could be the reticent, shy individual, with the feeling of hopelessness that peace movements could change the fate of the world. He could be distinctive, eccentric: on his shoulder perched his pet dove. Or he could have no such traits, nor a need to

project any. A solitary reader, he began piling up books in his bedroom, getting ready for the day. That continued search for books in the black post-apocalyptic world a link to the past: and a fair-haired woman he loved – now ashes and memories.

Other characters joined me on the hill, but wisp-like were carried away on the soft warm summer breeze, leaving me alone. Often the old wise man left me too, alone with the monumental task I had chosen for him: the story abandoned by its voice. Those ethereal characters on the hill would have had their stories told, wound into the plot and message of the book. True-life personae were among those fleeting ghosts, as were creations of the imagination. I then wished to summon great figures from history, perhaps with doubts about the old man and his cart of wisdom. They could answer questions I sought, how humanity had come to the edge of the abyss. Yet no answer could have given succour.

Ultimately the task was failed by limits of language and intellect, though perhaps glimpsed by imagination. Although imagination can create illusion and escape, which are unreal, certainly if the purpose is to face up to some catastrophic reality and either resign to it or redact it. I could not take over the task from the old man since I could only achieve fragmented knowledge: I could achieve no more than the disordered, extant volumes in his possession, which had come out of my mind. Yet vainly, I was trying to record for posterity what he symbolized as the ultimate fate of humanity. And the most likely result would have been a turgid tome, without insight or essence.

Fortunately humanity's fate was not to be decided by this crisis. The control of life and death was beyond me: for now my life – as of millions others – was spared. I was reprieved the self-appointed task of writing about cataclysmic events that were emotionally, intellectually and artistically overwhelming. Ultimately overwhelming, because I was without the essential guide – the invisible narrator.

Almost two decades would pass before I would revisit, in the last year of the millennium. Those two decades had been a mixed experience: happiness and pain. I had moved on and was happily married, but that was marred by the cruel hand of chance: our first child being stillborn. A human-size funeral plot bought for a baby-sized white coffin, fitted neatly into a ledge. We said goodbye to dreams unrealized – ours and his – and watched him placed by the gravedigger

into the sandy limestone soil of Shanganagh that July day, not far from the beach and its clay cliffs. The seasons passed in that place, and the crystals on the granite headstone glinted equally in the low sun of winter as the height of summer. One day the following December, something caught my eye on the ground by the memorial: the broken, hollow, spiny shell of the horse chestnut fruit. The tree's bare branches stretched over the wall from the adjoining church grounds, which I had not noticed in full leaf in the earlier summer days, warm sunlight filtering through.

Within two years we had another son, not a replacement but a fulfilment and equally cherished, who brought happiness and life where there had been sadness and death. And I would not fail him. Infant hope gave birth to new hopes, or old ones revived. I bonded with him the moment I saw him, a perfect baby with a shock of dark hair. I saw him before his mother did, who was still recovering from the emergency caesarean. It would that night before she would see and hold him. Later that November evening I visited them. First I went to the cemetery to spend some moments with my first born. But it was a place of darkness, cold and lonely: the hospital was brightness, warm and happy.

Though premature, our new child grew up healthy and strong, the protectiveness of our love an invisible blanket. Yet anxiety lurked. But I replaced it outwardly, attributing my son with near invincible quality, protected from cruel randomness by a strength within himself. While I always sought to protect him growing up, I could not contemplate any ill becoming him, driving such fears deep inside so I could ensure control of destiny. I read to him and took a keen interest in his development, a desire to enable him do anything with his life. I encouraged him towards a love of knowledge and science, spent autumn evenings searching the skies for meteor showers, identifying planets and constellations. Summer days were spent near the stream searching sticklebacks or in spring collecting tadpoles to watch grow into frogs. In the woodland he would identify and draw flora such as the umbellifer giant hogweed. At moments there would be the chance to catch the colourful flitting kingfisher. On winter or rainy days I would take my young son to the library and he would soak up all the illustrated books on dinosaurs, nature and the sciences for children.

I worked as a journalist and continued my creative writing. My historic fiction was more that sense of oneness: connecting past and present in one sentimental continuum. The everyday lives of the dead fascinated me – real people. They

were like family. Through this I became engrossed in my own family history: the sacred act of ancestral worship, reverently seeking out their stories to be told. Their memories were real and with me. I set myself the task of tracing the genealogical trees of my parents' maternal and paternal lines. I became, like an astrologer mapping the movement of the stars, wedded to the constellation of day, date and lunar cycle converging in harmony. I read up on the new science of genetics and its application to researching family history. I recorded family stories, the earliest that stone figurine found in the garden of our home. My mother, cleaning the mud off the artefact, put it on the window sill to dry, only moments later to return and see it vanished: suspected, the stealth of an opportunistic thief.

In the box on my family history there were voluminous documents to read, on top a slim volume of poetry, *Thoughts in Print*, by Patrick J. McLoughlin, a second cousin of my father. Published during the Second World War, one poem seemed to reflect the portentous gloom of its author and the times:

#### WAR

*Once more the rumbling wheels of war, and battle starts again.  
Once more must sacrificial blood flow on the world in vain?*

*Great retribution will be sought when Nemesis shall hold  
Her last assizes here on earth for crimes long untold.*

*Of every state she will demand: 'Why has thou sought to bleed  
Thy youth and men upon the field, for ever for thy greed?'*

*E'er blindly must a soldier fight, for to him is obscure  
The greater issues there involved, the things that might allure.*

While I empathized with his sentiments, fifty years on the 1990s was a period of peace – hope. The future looked unassailably bright. There were wars, but faraway, and it was hard to think those foreign conflicts, while many and bloody, could come to disturb the idyll of my own personal life. While I did not believe history had ended I was confident it posed no imminent danger to my generation, the next, and many more to come: most precious to my young son.

But all was to change.