

*BOOKING PASSAGE**Thomas Lynch*

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Anyone who has ever spent a St Patrick's Day in New York will know only too well the allegiance that Irish-Americans have to the country of their ancestors, and how exuberantly that loyalty is put on display. Witnesses to such behaviour will open memoirs of the Irish-American with caution; will the country within be observed through green-tinted spectacles as the grassy land of Hollywood movies, of horses and carts, of pigs in the parlour and milch cows in the bed, or will it be something less familiar but more realistic, less cinematic but a little more truthful, a chronicle more faithful to the original text?

Previous readers of Thomas Lynch, a funeral director from Milford, Michigan, know better than to worry about such liberties being taken in his recollections of life as an Irish-American; in his previous books of essays, he has written about the business of death with honesty and humour and taken us into this morbid world with neither sentimentality nor the cold distance of one who has seen it all and then some and he's done it with the skill of a born writer, perhaps with a simple philosophy in mind: he writes it as he sees it.

Lynch's relationship with Ireland, and particularly with Moveen, a town at the edge of West Clare, extends through his ancestry but came alive for him in 1970, when he visited a distant cousin, Nora Lynch, in the cottage of his great-grandfather – then hers, and soon to be his – and has grown in the decades since when he and his family have divided their time between Michigan and Ireland. *Booking Passage*, a series of essays exploring the relationship of Irish-Americans to their home country, and his own relationship in particular, opens with the death of Nora, an occasion which brings the author back to the cottage for the funeral and wake, along with 'the brother' who, in a moving scene, unexpectedly finds the occasion to be an almost overwhelming one. Indeed, so strong are the aches of loneliness he feels when separated from the land he loves by an impediment as large and wide and wet as the Atlantic Ocean that he briefly considers amputating a finger and planting it in the soil of Clare.

A variety of scenes from Lynch's time in Ireland are related – 'the every-so-often Yank who writes and walks and is related to the old woman, dead with years now, who lived here too' – from his earliest days as a hotel porter in Killarney to his many trips back over the course of a lifetime. While his head may be in Michigan, his heart is in Moveen, and he is not afraid to draw out the hypocrisies of the country, considering how we as a nation both invite them and react against them. Two sections in particular find the reader cheering Lynch on; the first relates to a land dispute, recounted in a long letter to Sile DeValera where he tells of how a rightful owner has been disinherited of his land 'by the stroke of a pen, in a folio in Dublin thirty-three years ago', while the second concerns a chance encounter with a young priest who, with his quick ignorance, calls Lynch's second (and happy) marriage into question as his first

came to an end through a divorce rather than an annulment. (This scene, which builds slowly but surely towards what can only be called a frank exchange of opinions, holds wonderful suspense and there will be few readers who won't sympathise with the author's desire to land a blow against the younger man's insolent face).

Early on in this memoir, Lynch recalls a pair of in-laws, of whom it was said 'they had great music but never quite got rhythm'. The same cannot be said of his prose, which contains the melody of one and the dynamism of the other. Throughout, it's the quality of Lynch's writing that draws the reader in. He has no need for the modern trickeries of nostalgic or commercial memoir, nor is he interested in appealing to a certain type of American or Irish person who longs for a re-imagined Ireland that perhaps never existed in the first place; rather his is a purely honest and thoughtful voice which recalls the tradition of the 'seanachaoi', sat by the fire, reminiscing not from the head but from the heart, with prose that trips from the tongue and makes us, his audience, so engrossed that we fail to notice when the coal fizzles out and the candles burn low.