Book Review – *The Kick*, by Richard Murphy

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Planter Stock

We're putting off the day they'll pull us down
And fell our prickly monkey-puzzle tree
That lords it over the heather in our garden
Standing up to wind and rain off the open sea.

We love the watercolours curlews paint
With iodine on a quill down a glen's throat;
Deplore the weather's poor mouth complaint;
Wear fuchsia tweed, an ancient ivy coat.

Can't you eat rabbit? Does it make you sick
To find your father's gun-shots in your meat,
Or touch a trout he's caught? You ought to like
Wearing an Eton collar; you look sweet.

All the roots that would pack inside a tea-chest
Came home when we retired from the Far East.

(From Richard Murphy's 1985 collection *The Price of Stone*)

The Kick, a memoir of the poet Richard Murphy, is written without the use of chapters; one scene rolls into another, especially in recounting his childhood, in keeping with the filmic snapshot-like nature of such memories. In his early years, he was brought up by a nanny, whom he describes with as much affection as any close relative, and, at the age of eight, was

sent to preparatory boarding school. Much of his childhood was spent living in different countries to his parents, though he never bemoans this—it was simply how it was.

The narrative of his childhood moves from one location to another. His time in Ceylon, where his father was colonial Mayor of Colombo, contrasts with the wildness of living in Co. Mayo, where he and his siblings ran around barefoot, rode donkeys and raised their own farm animals. This, in turn, is so very different to his time in Canterbury Cathedral Choir School, where he was so homesick for Ireland that he brought with him live shamrock and peat to burn on the fire.

Like a golden thread throughout the story of Murphy's life, the reader can trace the development of his interest in literature, moments that indicate his eventually becoming a poet. We feel like detectives picking up clues, from poems Nanny or his tutors introduced him to, to his first efforts at writing sonnets as a teenager. There is also a thread, through the first half of the book, of Murphy trying to figure out his sexuality, during which we, as readers, are as confused as he is. He reveals details of this exploration in a way that seems more matter-of-fact than confidential. Indeed, throughout the book, the Murphy we are presented with is one who is neither hero nor villain of his own story.

As a young man, Richard Murphy lived in Oxford, London, Greece and Paris (where he attended the Sorbonne), but he was always drawn back to Mayo and the islands off its coast. The allure of a simple and rustic life by the sea could not be beaten by all the literary circles of cities or the exoticism of Ceylon, the Bahamas or Rhodesia, where his parents lived. In later years, as an established poet, he taught in many American universities including Iowa and Princeton, returning always to the west of Ireland for his summers.

One intriguing aspect of this memoir is the insight it provides into the life of the gentry in Ireland. He describes his family when he was a child as, "an Anglo-Irish family, isolated under the aegis of a Protestant clergyman, on a remote demesne in neutral Éire dominated by Roman Catholic priests and threatened by German invasion" (p. 55). His descriptions of the Irish landscape are rich and clear. We get the impression of a man who identifies himself completely as Irish and feels a deep love for his home country and warmth towards its many walks of life.

On account of his colonial background, Murphy could never quite escape being somewhat of an outsider, even in his native country. As an adult, Murphy was known by one of his neighbours as the divorced protestant with the British accent. He paints for us a picture in which he was often viewed by those more 'Irish' than him as the posh, bumbling Anglo-Irish man. It is perhaps this obligatory detachment that allowed his poetry to deeply explore Irish heritage and landscape in both an objective and tender way. Murphy further gifts us

with an insight into the birth of some of his poems such as "Grounds", which he wrote about his divorce, and the "The Battle of Aughrim", which took him years to write and for which he collaborated with Seán Ó Riada who wrote music to accompany it.

Murphy was witness to things that most readers would know only as historical events; he recalls how, in 1940, he and his siblings were made to gather around the wireless to listen to George VI speak to the empire. He tells us of how, on his way to school, he used to cycle past Letterfrack Industrial School, "passing the unfortunate orphans, felons and homeless boys imprisoned [there]" (p. 36). This memoir is not just a history of one man, but of the world in which he lived from the 1920s to the current day. He explains, simply and accessibly, the geographical, historical and political circumstances that surrounded him, such as Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe, Irish Travellers, the Troubles and The Sri Lankan Civil War. Through these explanations, which, for context, are integral to his story, Murphy gives us a history lesson that does not feel like a lesson at all.

The original title of this book was *The Kick: A life among writers* and fittingly so. It is brimming with famous writers—T.S. Eliot, Bowen, Kinsella, McGahern, MacNeice, Ó Faoláin, O'Driscoll to mention a few—brought to life by Murphy's descriptions of his interactions with them. He details the enviable tradition in the 1950s, 60s and 70s of written correspondences, introductions and invitations to fellow artists to come for visits and stay with each other (sometimes for months), in a way that, these days, has been decimated by technology.

Through Murphy, we meet so many poets and are gifted with glimpses into their personalities, along with physical descriptions of them, such as this image of Robert Lowell: "As we talked his arms floated in front of him in a circle like a ring fort with a small gap for words to flow in and out between the fingertips" (p. 284). Phillip Larkin, Douglas Dunn and Theodore Roethke all stayed with Murphy in Ireland, as did Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, into whose lives we get an especially good look. The book is studded with gems of anecdotes about poets, their quirks and behaviours. For example, at Murphy's inaugural reading of "The Battle of Aughrim", Larkin (with whom he had lunch most days during his time in Hull) switched off his hearing aid, fell asleep and snored.

Meeting poets in Dublin in 1950 was easy. All you had to do was "go to McDaid's off Grafton Street and you would find Kavanagh drinking there with his disciples" (p. 113). At the tender age of twenty-three, having just begun work as a poetry reviewer, Murphy did just this. He introduced himself to Kavanagh and, in the course of conversation, asked where he could purchase one of his out-of-print books. Kavanagh said he would get a copy for him and

meet him later that day. Murphy handed over the ten shillings it would cost. He did not see Kavanagh again for five years.

We get the impression of Murphy as a man who often leaned on the side of safety, books and a quiet life when others around him were racking up life experience. During his time at Princeton, "a janitor, who was black", invited him to a party where he "could have whatever [he] wanted. 'Some dudes,' he said, 'dig broads and other dudes dig dudes. Who cares? Come to Trenton, we can drink a few beers and talk a bit of miscellaneous" (p. 281). Murphy did not dare go. Instead, he stayed in his office and reviewed a poetry book. The reader cannot help but think this anecdote is a poor substitute for the story that could have been had he gone to the party. Murphy, however, expresses no regret or any other feeling about it; he just tells it as it was.

Murphy gives only the mildest hints at his emotions surrounding experiences, even traumatic ones such as his father's death. Perhaps this way of writing is in keeping with advice many poets would give, to just say what happened and avoid sentimentality. "My heart sank" (pp. 287), is as much as he says about unexpectedly meeting the man his wife had had an affair with years before. But there comes afterwards the poetic crafting of an image in which he describes the man as sitting, "sandwiched between two married women" (p. 287). Similarly, recounting the interview for his Oxford scholarship at which C.S. Lewis, whom he held in awe, asked him a question, he wrote, "the sofa turned upside down in mid-air with the balding top of C.S. Lewis's head a foot above the floor until the end of my answer" (pp. 80). It is, after all, through showing, not telling, that poets convey their feelings; the memoir may not be so lacking in emotion, then, as it would at first seem.

The Kick is a memoir written in comprehensive detail, packed full of people, places and stories, spanning nearly a century. What at first appears a challenge to the reader—the length and depth of the book—becomes a pleasure as it builds a richly textured and as full a reading experience as possible of one poet's life.

Niamh Prior's work has appeared in journals including *The Penny Dreadful*, *Southword* and *The Stinging Fly*. Her poetry has been shortlisted or highly commended in competitions including The Patrick Kavanagh Award, Cúirt New Writing Prize and The Dermot Healy Award. She was the overall winner of the 2016 iYeats International Poetry Competition. She is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at UCC, funded by a scholarship from the Irish Research Council.

Works Cited

Murphy, R., 1985. *The Price of Stone.* London: Faber.