

# 100 YEARS OF JOHN BRODERICK

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On the 30th of July 2024,  
celebrating what would have been  
John Broderick's 100th birthday.



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WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL  
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

Artist Credit  
**Harry Kernoff**

“That such a book was written at all in the 1960s is astonishing. That its author should have been from the Irish provinces is a little short of miraculous.”

**David Norris, 2004**

From the forward of the 2004 publication of *The Waking of Willie Ryan*

“The centenary of Athlone writer John Broderick’s birth has afforded Westmeath County Council and the Arts Council the very welcome opportunity to celebrate a writer who has contributed so much to the people of Athlone.

The *Waking of Willie Ryan* reprint, audiobook, and pamphlet, along with the One Town, One Book initiative will help to ensure that the work of this important Westmeath writer reaches a contemporary audience. These initiatives, along with the invaluable John Broderick writer’s residency series are encouraging steps which, thanks to Broderick’s generous bequest, help us to nurture the literary and artistic life in Athlone and Westmeath.”

**Jacqueline Finney**

Director of Services, Westmeath County Council

“Following his death, the writer John Broderick bequeathed his estate to the Arts Council for ‘the benefit and enhancement of the Arts in Athlone’. As custodian of the bequest, the Arts Council works in partnership with Westmeath County Council to ensure Broderick’s wishes are fulfilled and his legacy as a writer and generosity for the people of Athlone is sustained, is remembered, and his substantial body of work can come to life for a new generation of readers.

The Arts Council welcomes the publication of this pamphlet and the reprint of John Broderick’s *The Waking of Willie Ryan* on the centenary of John Broderick’s birth. The works of John Broderick have regrettably fallen out of print in recent years and the centenary has provided a renewed opportunity to examine the legacy of Broderick’s acclaimed work, to rightfully reinstate him as the household name in Irish literature he deserves to be, and bring his work to a contemporary audience.”

**Maureen Kennelly**

Director, The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

## FOREWORD

**BY LAURA MCCORMACK**

ARTS SERVICES COORDINATOR, WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL



**John Broderick was born in Connaught Street, Athlone on 30 July 1924. Over the course of his lifetime, he authored 12 novels. Among his most well-regarded works is the novel for which this pamphlet serves as an accompanying text, *The Waking of Willie Ryan*. In the novel *Willie Ryan*, a gay man now sixty years old, returns, unrepentant, to his hometown after twenty-five years in the insane asylum where his family had him committed.**

Following his death in 1989, Broderick bequeathed his estate to the Arts Council for “the benefit and advancement of the Arts in Athlone”.

Over the past number of years, this generosity has led to the creation of a writer’s residency in Athlone, which has to date been awarded to writers Annemarie Ní Churreáin, Martin Dyar, and Keith Payne. Each of these writers spent considerable time with Broderick’s writing during the periods spent in his hometown of Athlone. It was fitting then that the selection of the text to be reprinted on this landmark year be entrusted to them.

Twenty years have passed since the publication of a biography by Madeline Kingston (*Something in the Head, the Life and Works of John Broderick*) and the re-



issuing by The Lilliput Press of *The Pilgrimage* and *The Waking of Willie Ryan* in 2004. These texts helped to renew the energy around Broderick's works, which had seen a decline in readership since the mid-1970s. The centenary of Broderick's birth has now provided the Westmeath Arts Office and Arts Council the opportunity to celebrate John Broderick's life, work, and legacy in 2024.

In 2004, David Norris wrote that *The Waking of Willie Ryan* was published "Before revelations about clerical sex abuse, the acknowledgement of the horrendous abuse of children at State institutions, the Bishop Casey scandal, the X Case and the release of real figures concerning Irish abortion had exposed the reality of subterranean sexual activity in Ireland."

In the intervening years, two landmark referendums on gay marriage and abortion rights have taken place in Ireland. The religious atmosphere of the country and attitudes towards the Catholic Church have again shifted enormously. The context in which readers will come to John Broderick's work in 2024 then is vastly different not only to the cultural landscape of Broderick's 1960s Ireland, but also to the social and political life here in 2004.

In marking the centenary of Broderick's birth, it was important for us to explore contemporary responses to his work. The pamphlet you are reading constitutes a renewed engagement with Broderick's writing, his contributions to the Irish literary canon and his significant contribution to LGBTQ+ fiction in Ireland.



“  
*What verses that I write  
Now that I am middling old  
You may sell them for your favours  
For the heart grows bold*  
”

- John Broderick 1924-89

From the unpublished collection of 'Prison Songs'  
written for the character of Hugh Ward (*The Fugitives*)

We hope that in future, *The Waking of Willie Ryan* reprint, audiobook and accompanying pamphlet will serve as important archival documents, demonstrating an active engagement with the work of John Broderick in 2024, a writer whose boldness in the 1960s was, as David Norris wrote in 2004

Broderick, which was included in manuscript form in the library collection Broderick donated to the Aidan Heavey Library in Athlone.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the continued engagement with John Broderick and his works in his hometown of Athlone. The local energy surrounding Broderick's works since his death in 1989 has continued thanks to the work and generosity of individuals in the John Broderick Committee and John Broderick Society. We would like to acknowledge in particular the contributions of the late George Eaton, his wife Pat Eaton, Gearoid O'Brien, the late Mel O'Flynn, Siobhan Bigley, Deirdre Collins, and Carmel Duffy.

“  
*LITTLE SHORT  
OF MIRACULOUS*  
- DAVID NORRIS  
”

The pamphlet contains new essays from Annemarie Ní Churreáin and Dr Michael G Cronin, along with an unpublished poem by John



Credit: Barry McCall

## ANNEMARIE NÍ CHURREÁIN

Annemarie Ní Churreáin is a poet from the Donegal Gaeltacht. Her books include *Bloodroot* (Doire Press, 2017), *Town* (The Salvage Press, 2018), *The Poison Glen* (The Gallery Press, 2021) and *Ghostgirl* (Donegal County Council, 2023).

Her books have been shortlisted for the Shine Strong Award for best first collection and The Ledbury Hellens Prize for best second collection. Ní Churreáin is recipient of the Arts Council's Next Generation Artist Award, The John Broderick Award and a co-recipient of The Markievicz Award. Ní Churreáin has held literary fellowships in the U.S. and throughout Europe. She is the poetry editor at *The Stinging Fly* magazine.

## A GUIDE ACROSS TREACHEROUS WATERS

BY ANNEMARIE NÍ CHURREÁIN

**John Broderick was a writer of prickly truths. *The Waking of Willie Ryan*, first published in 1965 (republished by The Lilliput Press in 2004 and 2024), is among his finest stories. Willie, a gay man who has escaped the asylum after 25 years, is coming home to die 'in the middle of the great central plain of Ireland' and in the presence of the people who were responsible for his incarceration.**

It's a confronting portrait of religion, family dynamics and desire. When a white hen strays out across the opening lines, narrowly missing a car, an Ireland that exists somewhere on the outer edges of living memory swerves back into focus. Willie, now a snow-haired man, stands on the cusp of his homecoming, in pitiable wonder, clasping a single leaf between his palms.

Sex, power and the closeted lives of ordinary people are Broderick's touchstone themes. His worlds, often pocked by jealousy and betrayals, reveal the toxicities of a deeply troubled society. Broderick's circling of desire, particularly homosexual

desire, offers an unflinching critique of lives and relationships mired in the hypocrisies of the Catholic Church. Unsurprisingly, Broderick's contentious plots earned him a reputation as—and I quote here David Norris—"an awkward customer of 1950s literary Ireland". It's a delightful profile, given Broderick's beginnings as the only child of the proprietors of Broderick's Bakery in Athlone. It stirs the question of what the young Broderick observed as he lingered at the customer counter? What did he learn there about interactions, transactions and what people will do to get what they want?

Willie is coming home to die but Willie's brother and sister-in-law, well-to-do parishioners, are reluctant to welcome the elderly man back into the family fold. To do so, would be to stir up the ghosts of shame, secrecy and guilt. "The mental asylums are Ireland's awkward institutions" writes Brendan Kelly, Professor of Psychiatry, reminding us that unlike mother and baby homes, or industrial schools, the asylums did not fall under the control of religious orders; they were often State-run and locally

*“Any backing away from the consequences of the truth, any compromise, any fear of what may happen to you as a result of what you will write, and you will never achieve anything worthwhile”*

*- John Broderick, 1924-89*



funded. Willie's story spotlights the asylums, originally built to treat mentally ill people, as places used by families to offload non-conforming or 'problematic' relatives. In the absence of records to understand the full degree to which queer people in Ireland were impacted by such cruelty, *The Waking of Willie Ryan* functions as an alternative record. It holds a space for untold histories.

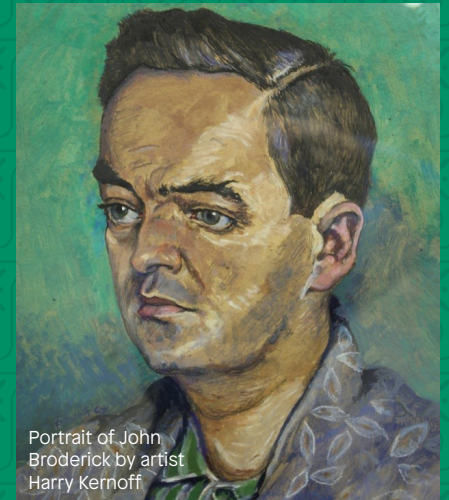
"Every family has its crosses," says Mrs O'Neill but Willie is not actually mentally ill. Willie is merely aged and frail as a leaf beneath the burden of trauma. It is Chris, Willie's nephew, who eventually takes him in. It is Chris who washes his uncle's feet in an act of almost unbearable, biblical tenderness. Willie's homecoming is both of its time and, sadly, almost two decades ahead. In 1982 the first AIDS case was diagnosed in Ireland and so began the tragic homecomings of a generation of gay men who were forced back into their boyhood bedrooms, to die in

the same family homes from which they had once fled. Willie and his co-characters embody the pulsing culture of stigma and anxiety that clouds queer experience, and the stilled body, the body at ease, is a rare thing in a Broderick story. The characters' dialogue, seldom unaccompanied by some incidental action, captures bodies living in nervous and restless realities. When Willie confronts Fr. Mannix, the Catholic priest who helped his family incarcerate him, an ominous deal is struck. To die at home, Willie must first redeem himself by agreeing to receive Holy Communion at a special Mass in Chris's home. Painfully, Willie can only be accepted back through this public, collective spectacle. As an agreement that seeks to purify and rehabilitate the homosexual man, this spectacle carries with it the scent of today's so-called "reparative" or "conversion" therapy.

"It's horrible to think of anybody dying without making their peace

with the Church," Chris ponders the weight of sin. Broderick himself was an enthusiastic subscriber of the Catholic Church, though the mixed-up morality around sexuality vexed him. Still, religiosity, religious ritual and religious symbolism is stitched carefully into the lining of his characters, wounding and embellishing their lives. In fact *The Waking of Willie Ryan* unfolds over fourteen chapters, with subtle nods throughout to the imagery of the fourteen Stations of the Cross. Willie eventually gains the upper hand in his epistemological battle with Fr Mannix when he admits that he has received Holy Communion without first making Confession, purposefully committing an act of sacrilege. It's a sour victory, further soured for the reader by Willie's use of the word 'vice' to describe homosexual sex. Speaking to the priest about Roger [Willie's former lover], Willie says "...I never wanted it, not with him anyway. It was he – how would you put it? – seduced me. Yes, that's how you'd put it. I hated it; but I did it because I loved him."

"We [novelists] are sometime accused of turning up stones for the sensational purpose of revealing the maggots underneath" writes Broderick in an essay, signalling the only sensible view that it is not the job of the novelist to behave. Similarly, it is not the job of fiction to be "right" or "good". *The Waking of Willie Ryan* was carved out of a phobic era when queer love was,



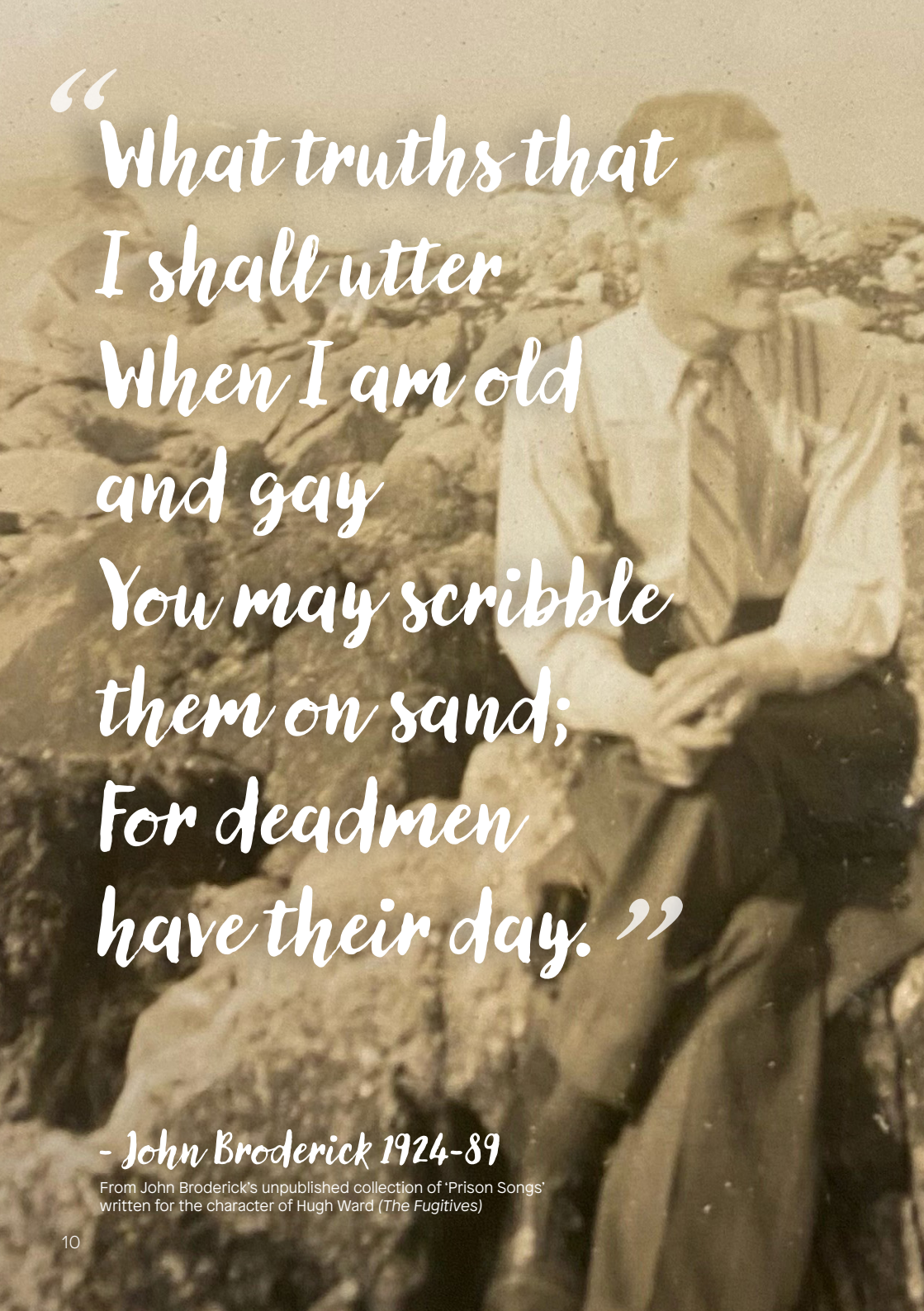
Portrait of John Broderick by artist Harry Kernoff

often, the source of ridicule, disgust or fear. It is not shocking that some of the literature arising out of this climate and atmosphere is, at times, discomfiting, contradictory and stuffed with conundrums. Broderick's writing invites complex questions, and a challenging dimension of his fiction includes his depictions of the lives of women. Actually, it has been argued that the majority of Broderick's women are, in essence, men. Like men, Broderick's women pursue sex in bodies that thrive magically outside repercussion. Perhaps this magical thinking could be excused as simple naivety if it were not for a curious tic more akin to wilful misunderstanding—and maybe even jealousy—that raised its head publicly and most famously in his scathing reviews of his brilliant peer, the award-winning novelist Edna O'Brien.



John Broderick with his mother





“What truths that  
I shall utter  
When I am old  
and gay  
You may scribble  
them on sand;  
For deadmen  
have their day.”

- John Broderick 1924-89

From John Broderick's unpublished collection of 'Prison Songs' written for the character of Hugh Ward (*The Fugitives*)

Who is Willie Ryan in the flow of Irish queer history? And what would Broderick make of Ireland in 2024? *The Waking of Willie Ryan* was published in 1965 and promptly banned. It was the same year that Roger Casement's body was returned to Ireland. Casement, an executed 1916 rebel, is the alleged author of the 'Black Diaries' that continue to hold him at the centre of a long-standing controversy over his sexuality. In his graveside speech at Glasnevin Cemetery, Éamon de Valera declared "we claim him and we are glad to have him back among us". In 1974 the first Dublin Pride march, comprising 10 people, departed from the Department of Justice on Dublin's Stephen's Green to the British Embassy on Merrion Road, to protest archaic Victorian legislation criminalising intimacy between men in Ireland. An erosion of the silence and invisibility around queer lives gradually ensued. In 1993 the long legal battle, taken by David Norris to the European Court of Human Rights, resulted in the decriminalisation of sexual activity between men. Additional legislative jigsaw pieces dropped into place and, finally, in May 2015 the Republic of Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same sex marriage as mandated by the results of a referendum.

"Gone, gone," laments Willie's tearful brother. "When all is said and done he didn't get much out of this life.

Not even a wake". Broderick's body of work predates many of the waves of social change in Ireland that have led to equality for queer people. It also predates most of what we know today about clerical abuse, the mistreatment of women and children, and institutional scandals. *The Waking of Willie Ryan* is forged out of the heart of the country; out of Broderick's feeling for Athlone - a heartland town named for Luain who is said to have guided people across treacherous waters before the first bridges were built. Flowering among the cacophony of queer literary voices in Broderick's wake are voices like those of Colm Tóibín, Emma Donoghue and John Boyne. Paul McVeigh's *Queer Love: An Anthology of Irish Fiction* (Munster Literature Centre, 2021) demonstrates the breadth of that cacophony. In that same year Paul Maddern's *Queering the Green: Post-2000 Queer Irish Poetry* (Lifeboat Press) was published. Strictly speaking, Athlone is not the exact geographical centre of Ireland but it's close by the ancient ceremonial site widely considered to be the country's symbolic centre and the burial ground of the Goddess Ériu. In more ways than one, Broderick—the self-styled laureate of the midlands—was at the centre of Irish imagination, though he referred to himself simply as "a provincial". "The writer is the last free man" he mused "for he is essentially a private person, and no one ever knows what he is going to say next."





## DR MICHAEL G CRONIN

Dr Michael G Cronin is Lecturer in English at Maynooth University. He is the author of: *Impure Thoughts: sexuality, Catholicism and literature in twentieth-century Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2013), *Sexual/Liberation* (Cork UP, 2022) and *Revolutionary Bodies: homoeroticism and the political imagination in Irish writing* (Manchester UP, 2022; paperback: 2024). The latter was awarded the Robert Rhodes Prize for Best Book on Irish Literature 2023, by the American Conference of Irish Studies.

# WILLIE RYAN: HISTORY & QUEER HERESY

BY MICHAEL G CRONIN

**Willie Ryan is a queer character. He shared a loving, intimate relationship with another man, and was punished for it. Willie Ryan is also a queer character. An enigmatic figure, disruptively challenging his society's values.**

Incarcerated in an asylum for twenty-five years to cover up the “scandal” of his relationship with Roger Dillon, Willie’s experience is emblematic of generations of Irish queer men punished by the law. After 1923 the Irish Free State (and later the Republic) kept on its statute books the crime of gross indecency inherited from the Westminster Parliament. This law criminalised all sexual contact between consenting adult men and would remain in force in Northern Ireland until 1982 and in the Republic until 1993. Famously, a prominent early victim of the 1885 law was, like John Broderick, an Irish writer – Oscar Wilde.

The coercive effects of this law extended beyond those men actually charged in court. Just as powerfully, criminalising homosexuality created

a whole atmosphere of shame, anxiety, guilt and fear encompassing the desires and intimate lives of all queer people in Irish society.

In *The Pilgrimage* (1961), Broderick captures the terrible effects of that repressive atmosphere. Most tragically, Tommy Baggot commits suicide after being investigated by the police. Challengingly, Broderick’s novel reiterates the moral corrosiveness of this atmosphere. In his fiction, queer men are not just “innocent” victims but are impelled by the contortions of surviving this repression to harm others. Mitchell, Tommy’s lover, blackmails other queer men. Driven to repress their homosexual desires, Michael and Stephen are violently sadistic in their sexual encounters with Julia.

In *The Waking of Willie Ryan* (1965), Willie is not charged with any crime or found guilty in court. Ironically, if he had been found guilty of gross indecency he would have been free many years sooner; the maximum sentence was two years. Instead he is confined by his family in an

“  
*What poetry I wrote  
When I was young and wild  
You may chatter on the streets;  
For the heart's a child.*”

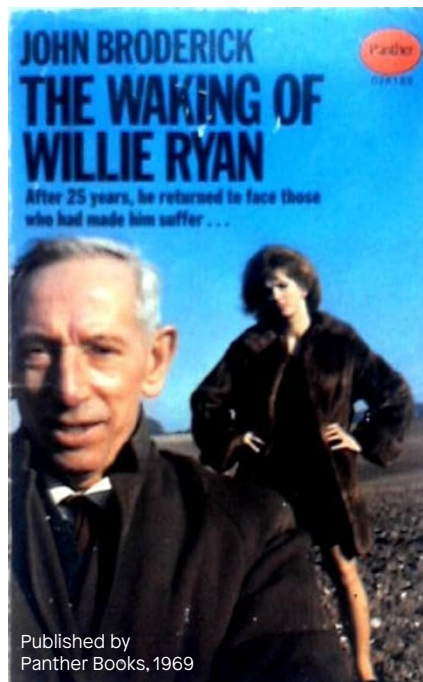
- John Broderick, 1924-89

From the unpublished collection of 'Prison Songs' written for the character of Hugh Ward (*The Fugitives*)

institution supposedly dedicated to “helping” rather than to punishing. As such, Willie’s story is emblematic of queer men in twentieth-century Ireland but also of those many other Irish people – especially working-class women and children – unjustly ensnared in what has been described by the cultural historian Jim Smith as an “architecture of containment”.

That architecture encompassed the physical infrastructure of Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Homes, Industrial Schools and other institutions where those breaching “respectability” in post-independence Ireland were confined, punished and kept out of view. This physical architecture of containment was inseparable from an ideological “architecture” – ideas, values and assumptions – through which those institutions were administered and normalised.

Since the 1990s, documentaries, statutory reports, testimony by courageous survivors and remarkable pioneering work by the activist-historian Catherine Corless, have challenged Irish society to confront the unfathomable suffering and systemic abuse endured by those incarcerated in the institutions. In that context, *The Waking of Willie Ryan* has little to contribute to our understanding of that history. For instance, we learn little of Willie’s experience in the asylum. For insight on that, we could turn to Broderick’s



fellow Athlone writer, Hanna Grealley. Her remarkable memoir, *Bird’s Nest Soup* (1971), recounts in vividly disturbing detail real-life experiences like Willie’s. Traumatized by her time as a nurse in London during the Blitz, Hanna endured almost twenty years “forgotten” by her family in St Loman’s Hospital, outside Mullingar.

Irish society has been openly confronting this history in recent decades, but that does not mean the institutions were not known about before then. Rather, Irish society was always in a neurotic condition of simultaneously knowing and not knowing about these things; a state of ignorance that was

always willed. How else could it be? The architecture of containment was funded and managed by two powerful institutions – the State and the Catholic Church – and comprised a dense, country-wide network of physical buildings as well as social, financial and professional relationships.

Here is where Broderick’s novel is important. Firstly, that a novel addressing this topic was published in 1965 incontrovertibly proves that institutionalised abuse was known about. Secondly, the novel captures not so much a society where these abuses happened but a society in which these abuses were rationalised and justified.

Unusually among Broderick’s novels, *The Waking of Willie Ryan* lets the characters speak for themselves. Reading the novel you will notice the prominence of dialogue. The narrative is a series of conversations between two or more characters,



interspersed with descriptions marking the passage of time from Autumn to Winter through lyrically evoking the landscape.

Through the various conversations, we gradually learn the story behind Willie’s incarceration by his brother and sister-in-law. In the version offered by Michael and Mary they had to act because of Willie’s worsening drunkenness and volatile behaviour, culminating in an attempted assault against Mary. However, we learn that their neighbours suspected another motivation; with Willie in the asylum Michael was sole heir to the family farm.

In his account Willie confirms that greed was partly Michael’s motivation, along with ensuring that Willie never spoke about Michael’s sexual abuse of him when they were younger. However, the primary cause was an unspoken conspiracy between the family, local priest and police to cover up Willie’s relationship with Roger, and Roger’s relationship with another younger man. In this conspiracy, Willie was sacrificed to protect Roger’s reputation as a prosperous landowner and generous donor to the Church. In other words, Broderick’s novel reiterates that coercively policing conformity to Catholic “sexual morality” in twentieth-century Ireland was always about protecting the status quo; it was about sex and gender, but also property and class.



Our first view of Willie, just returned from the asylum, is through the eyes of Mrs Whittaker. Driving by, she notices a solitary figure standing contemplatively beneath a large beech tree. Unaware of her presence, he was “holding out his hand to catch a leaf...fluttering to the ground, changing colour in the dappled shade from red to purple, until it rested on his palm, light and yellow as a brimstone butterfly. The stranger covered it with his other hand, touching it as gently as a blind child fondling a doll.”



John Broderick with his grandmother

Willie is associated with that unworldly innocence we habitually ascribe to children. Moreover, the image of a blind child associates Willie with vulnerability and powerlessness. But it also gestures to a central theme in the novel; Willie's rage against hypocrisy and perception of the truth hidden beneath the appearance of respectability. Willie's “blindness” to convention allows him to “see” the actual workings of this society more clearly.

The opening also associates Willie with nature. Those recurring lyrical evocations of the countryside are not just providing “colour” but are symbolically important. Like childhood, nature indexes Willie's sincerity and moral integrity, in contrast with the inauthenticity and hypocrisy of society. The novel sets up a striking symbolic contrast that we can now read through an ecological lens. Willie contentedly inhabiting the natural environment as intrinsically valuable for itself; Michael and Mary – grasping after ownership of the farm – dominating the natural environment as a “resource” to be exploited.

The leaf is poetically evoked as a work of art; movement and colour, and the butterfly simile suggesting a creature whose beauty is wholly decorative and “useless”. This contrasts with the next chapter, where we first meet Michael and

Mary. A table laid for tea is described: “the Crown Derby cups, the silver kettle, the Carrickmacross lace”. Unlike the poetic language describing the leaf, you will notice that this is just a list – a very functional form of language. Along with the brand names, that listing conveys that in this household the spontaneous, instinctive human gesture of hospitality has been replaced by ostentatious consumerism and the ritualised performance of hospitality demanded by social respectability.

Broderick's description of Willie evokes paintings of St Francis of Assisi; most famously, Giotto's fresco ‘St Francis Preaching to the Birds’. Throughout the novel Willie is figured through various forms of religious iconography. Martyrdom; he suffers for his belief in the value of honesty and friendship. Resurrection; he returns inexplicably from the death-in-life of the asylum. Prophecy; he uncannily foretells his own death.

Oddly, Willie never confronts Michael and Mary. They are not forced to account for their conduct, and there is no sense of justice being achieved, or even sought, by Willie. Instead the novel focuses on his conversations with Fr Mannix, and the sudden revenge Willie enacts on the priest for the relatively minor role he played in the conspiracy years before. After a mass in the family home, Willie tells Mannix that he received communion without

first attending confession, feigning religious conformity so that he would not be returned to the asylum.

From a secular perspective, Willie's confrontation with the priest is perplexing and Mannix's reaction hysterically overwrought. To grasp the emotional depth of Mannix's dismay the secular reader must temporarily “believe” that taking communion as Willie does is profoundly sacrilegious. There is a similar demand placed on the reader at the end of *The Pilgrimage*. Its final chapter is just one sentence: “In this way they set off on their pilgrimage, from which a week later Michael returned completely cured.” This ending requires the reader's emotional assent to a miraculous cure as objective fact.

This is a paradox of Broderick's fiction and may explain his relative lack of enduring popularity. His fiction develops an uncompromising critique of the Irish Catholic Church as an institution of social control, and of the puritanical piety, hypocrisy and repressive conformity endemic in the Catholic middle-class world depicted with such surgical precision. At the same time, the novels draw on religion rather than politics to coordinate that critical perspective. The novels distinguish between religion as institutionalised dogma, and religion as a radicalising structure of feeling.



Willie strikes at Mannix's Catholic faith from the perspective of a believer rather than secular unbelief. We can read Willie as a homosexual, but Broderick's novel is more invested in Willie as a heretic. Medieval heretics repudiated Christian faith from within rather than without; claiming access to a more profoundly authentic faith rather than asserting a lack of faith. To put this another way, while Willie is queer he is also quare, which is less a fixed identity than a provocative, disruptive, irreconcilable style.

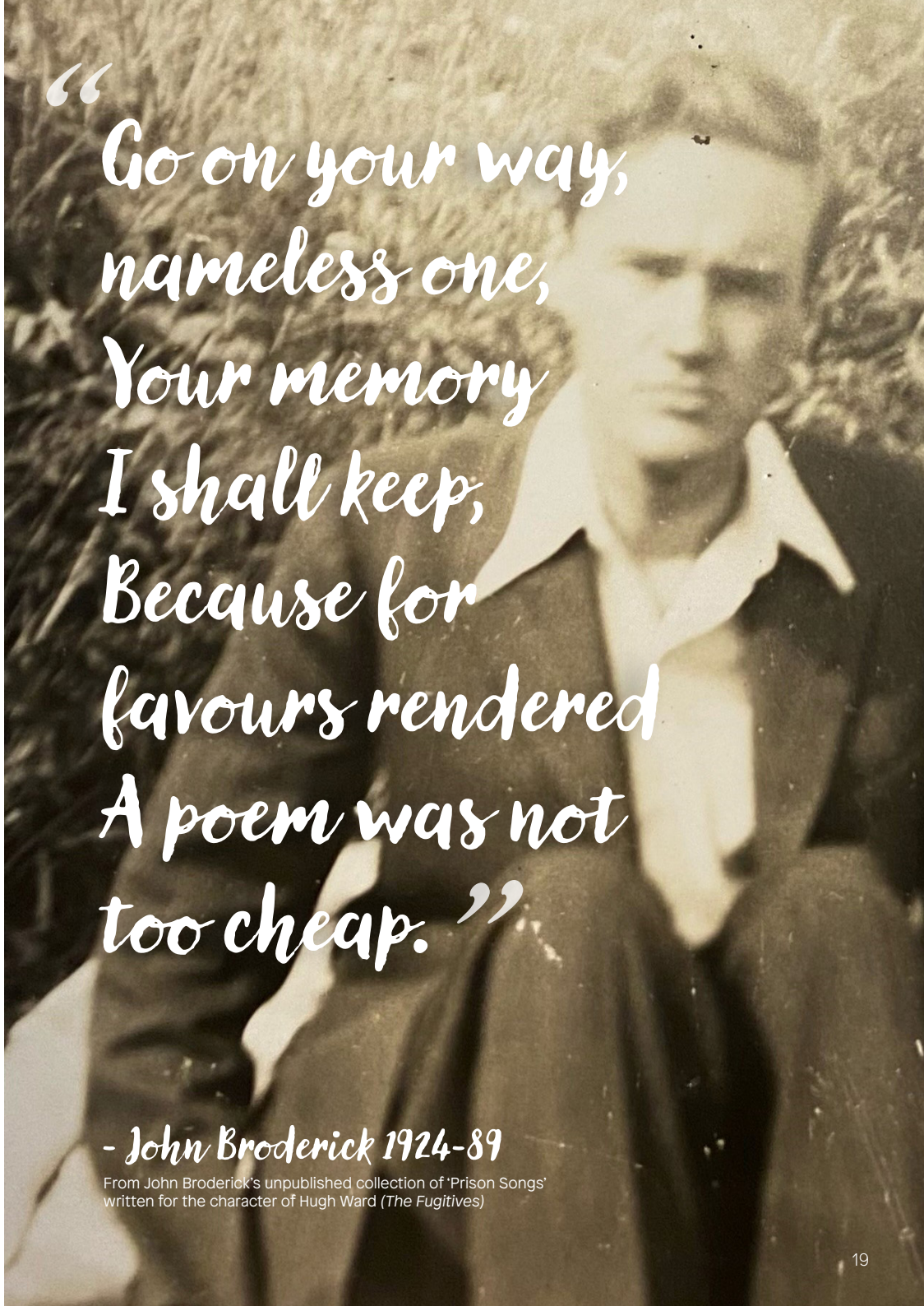
One of the challenges of reading the novel as a gay man is that Willie never stakes any claim to justice, much less to any recognisable conception of sexual freedom. Like Stephen in *The Pilgrimage*, he is profoundly committed to a celibate ideal of homosocial friendship founded on emotional and spiritual connection. For Willie, this idealised image of male friendship is an unrealisable vision of freedom.

At first Broderick's novel seems optimistic about the next generation. Willie's nephew and his girlfriend, Chris and Susan, are warmly affectionate to this hitherto unknown uncle. This suggests that like him they aspire to a more honest life. Susan's sexual spontaneity with Chris, and her pleasure in his physical beauty, reiterates her rejection of repressive puritanism. But heterosexual triangles abound in Broderick's fiction, and

Chris chooses the more conformist Kathleen. Unlike Susan, Kathleen is not from a "suitable" well-off family so Chris's parents disapprove. But Mary soon recognises that Kathleen's combination of pious hypocrisy and ruthless self-interest will police Chris's conformity to the status quo. Ultimately, the novel is not hopeful that the future will be that different from the past.

Reading *The Waking of Willie Ryan* in Broderick's centenary year reiterates the enormous social changes in Irish society during the sixty years since its publication. Credit for that transformation, especially the relative freedom of women and queer people today, goes to the feminist, lesbian and gay liberation movements that emerged in the 1970s to fight strenuous battles.

But the novel provokes us to reflect on how much has fundamentally changed in the values governing our society. Mary Ryan's Crown Derby cups and Carrickmacross lace might now be a Smeg fridge and Bang and Olufsen television. Would Willie Ryan's perspective be any more welcome? Or would he still be a heretic?



“Go on your way,  
nameless one,  
Your memory  
I shall keep,  
Because for  
favours rendered  
A poem was not  
too cheap.”

- John Broderick 1924-89

From John Broderick's unpublished collection of 'Prison Songs' written for the character of Hugh Ward (*The Fugitives*)





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