

SEPTEMBER 1913

A delightful piece reflecting on the memories, stories and spirits connected with an abandoned national school building dated 1913. The author can hear the children playing and the reader can also sense the children and the teachers who spent their days in this "ghost school". The writer skilfully evokes all these with great imagination.

ADJUDICATOR, FERGUS MULLIGAN

Eileen Gillen

THE SCHOOLHOUSE sits on a bend, a long l-shaped bend in the road. It sits lonely now, its gardens a jumble of weeds and gravel. In the window, on the deep ledge, stand a tumble of terracotta pots looking out through a white lace of cobweb like a string of dead puppets. An air of abandon permeates all around. Time goes about her business.

A large bell hangs under the gable facing the road, its greening copper skin showing its age. It has presence and authority this bell, and hangs proudly despite the silence. Rain drips rhythmically onto the ground below. The engraving on the stone giving the school name and founding year are illegible from my bike. I dismount and walk over. Nervousness comes over me. What tale is in this place? Kilcoosey NS September 1913, the plaque reads. My mind is immediately taken to the Yeats pounded into me at school. How fitting, September 1913, it could be now; Romantic Ireland is surely dead and gone.

"They have gone about the world like wind,"

This is a ghost school. The years of children squealing in its yard are long passed. Nature's silence remains. Successions of schoolteachers with their clipped tones and neat chignons; gone, leaving their trace in minds long scat-

tered. Chalk dust no doubt gathers in musty waves on the once gleaming wooden floor. The blackboard is no longer black, the gloom of emptiness cloaks it. The fire grate is lonely for the dampen sods of turf carried by the children from the surrounding bogs. For what was there here only bog and hills and the endless mist.

Thoughts of little heads being filled with the joy or dread of school arise, of slaps of the cane on cold, bare knuckles or of the withheld praise that might have seen some small child blossom. What master of learning ruled here?

Rounds of ring-a-rosie sound in the yard at lunch making the cows in the field opposite turn their languid heads to stare before returning to the endless chewing of their day. Who chewed their pencil in this school? Who passes this place with love? Who passes with terror? Who fled this place never to return?

I cannot know, not being from here. I came with the Tiger, I am alien to this place. I am part of the wave that increased the population here for the first time since famine days. Living here but not belonging, not really. I have no history here, no blood. I didn't spill my ink here leaving a stain for generations, I didn't carve my initial on the under-

side of the desk seeking a childish immortality. I didn't learn my abc here, I didn't listen with awe to the tales of the Fianna and the Tuatha De Danann and scratch my head in puzzlement at long division and fractions. I didn't rub the cold from my arms here or smell the damp rising from gabardine. I didn't treasure my jotter here, I didn't smile in ghostly sepia photographs here. I didn't day dream to the endless turns of the goldfish about his bowl or the clouds moving across the Leitrim sky. I didn't wash my wasp sting with vinegar as the Summer waned here, I didn't stain my grazed knee with ruby red iodine.

Some child did. Some child of this land spent years of his life under the naked light of learning in this now forgotten place. Was he happy? Did the tolling bell delight him? Does this building hold his spirit? How many countless faceless spirits does this building now hold? I close my eyes and hear their echoes. Was this place a beacon of light in the endless cold days of war? Did young hearts learn of freedom here? Did they live long lives?

Is this noble building happily retired or does it yearn, in the Spring, for the squeal of little saplings, fresh from the yard with the sound of birdsong in their hearts?