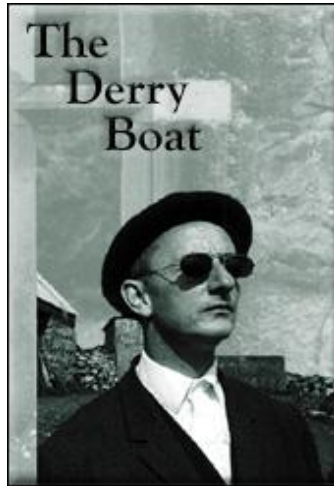


Keeping Memory Afloat: Little John Nee's *The Derry Boat*

BY BETH PHILLIPS



*Remember your kin.
Early mornings and cold fingers
Stooped here with heads full of memories,
of fields from Arranmore to Ayrshire.
(Nee, *The Mental* 20)*

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The personal history of Little John Nee closely reflects the tribulations of migratory labourers in Ireland's northernmost county of Donegal. To discuss his work without profiling the artist would be specious. Glasgow-born but no Glaswegian, Nee is a playwright, songwriter and musician whose cultural nexus is Donegal-entrenched. Though currently residing in Tuam, County Galway, Nee considers Letterkenny, Donegal's cultural centre, his hometown. His family relocated from Glasgow to Letterkenny when he was twelve. The northwestern Irish county provides the setting for the majority of his plays, several of which straddle the North Channel. His multi-charactered solo performances based on local lore foster an audience identification process, promoting a deeper sense of Irish heritage.

Though he is moored in the past, Nee's conversation percolates with ideas for new work. Professionally he is peripetetic, preferring to tour rather than adopt a permanent venue. As a young man Nee left Donegal to explore London, squatting in abandoned buildings. Construction work, poetry, punk rock, Rastafarian culture and Krishna Consciousness vied for his time (Delap; Nee 'C.V.'). He developed an eclectic metropolitan sensibility balanced by a profound connection with rural Donegal, cultivated as a child when he spent summer holidays with relatives. Nee is a self-made, modern-day *seanchaí*:¹ he fosters the oral tradition of Ireland's itinerant storytellers who taught and entertained with hearthside performances based on history and legend. His unique performance style utilises drama, song and physical comedy, and is exemplified by his critically lauded and best-known work, *The Derry Boat* (1999) (Spiers; Fotheringham; *Scotsman*).

I was fortunate to attend a revival of *Derry Boat* in October 2010 at An Grianán Theatre in Letterkenny, where Nee was serving a six-month appointment as artist-in-residence. The play casts a wide referential net while particularising an erstwhile migratory situation familiar to many Donegal families. It redefines shifting communal borders in and between the Irish communities of Donegal and Glasgow. *Derry Boat* was inspired by the conditions of Irish migrant labourers described by Donegal writer Patrick MacGill in *Children of the Dead End* (1914). MacGill's novel memorializes the 19th- and early 20th-century's Donegal tatie hokers and navvies² squeezed among cattle on the boat from Derry to Glasgow in search of seasonal work. Nee's play stokes the local collective memory of these times. The playwright speaks of how 'older people in their eighties and nineties ... come up to [me] afterwards and

¹ The *seanchaí* were mostly itinerant storytellers who helped preserve the ancient Irish oral tradition. The *seanchaí* served a crucial communal function at a time when formal schooling was reserved for clergy.

² 'Tatie hokers' are potato pickers. 'Navvies' are unskilled labourers.

tell their stories[,] ... validating their experiences ... this particular information is dying with these people' (qtd. in Delap). *Derry Boat* thus reactivates and preserves a cultural memory on the brink of annihilation. The piece revivifies the indivisible histories of the Glasgow Irish and Donegal communities, embodied by Nee himself.

Nee draws from his own recollections of the Donegal summer holidays he enjoyed while his family still lived in Glasgow. Early in the play, Nee re-enacts a rough crossing on the boat from Derry to Glasgow. The scene echoes the Glasgow to Derry trip he experienced with his mother when he was five: sailing down the Clyde from Glasgow to Donegal, the cows on deck, the sense of confinement, the lapping sea, early morning arrival into Derry Port ('Personal Interview'). Nee's childhood memories meld with and transform collective reminiscences of the Donegal community. Thus *Derry Boat* acquires its own credible discursive veracity, with '... various elements spark[ing] acts of recollection and preserv[ing] memory' (Ó Cruaíoch 13). Stories told by familial ancestors coalesce into communal history aided by the theatrical experience provided by Nee.

The play relates the saga of four generations of O'Donnells, a surname endemic to the region. Nee embodies all twenty characters, emphasising the physical connection between generations. With music hall timing and sight gags, he supplies both the comic relief sought by tragedy and the tragic support on which comedy relies. In Scene One, the top half of the front door abruptly swings open, revealing the upper torso of Shughie O'Donnell, who then kicks open the door's bottom half.



Figure 2: Photo by, and courtesy of, Little John Nee.

He proceeds cautiously, wearing sunglasses, an ill-fitting black suit, and a pork-pie hat. Carrying a pistol and a battered suitcase, he could be an IRA operative or a common thug contemplating the rubble of his ‘ancestral home’ (*Derry Boat 1*). Brandishing the pistol Shughie yells, ‘Freeze Motherfuckers—legs in the air!’ He is threatening the resident woodlice. But he quickly subverts the audience’s expectations. Referring to the pistol, he confesses, ‘I don’t know how this thing works. I have been trying to figure it out all morning.’ Then, ‘there is some people around these parts and they say the only good Woodlice is a dead Woodlice, but not me. Not Cosmic Hugh, the Ghandi of the Gorbals. I used to be a woodlice once myself’ (1). This passage illustrates a device typically employed by Nee. In contemporary dress, at the ruins of his great-grandparents’ Ulster cottage, the Glaswegian Shughie mentions woodlice, the cosmos, and Ghandi, whose Hinduism implied belief in reincarnation. This time/space warp is a set-up for time travel: Nee effectively ‘reincarnates’ twenty people across generations.

‘Cosmic Hugh’ then launches into an irreverent parody of Dominic Behan’s incendiary anthem, ‘The Patriot Game,’ which memorialises an IRA border incident.³ Nee’s version begins, ‘Come all ye young Woodlice and listen to me ...’ (1).

‘Woodlice’ can be inferred as a reference to tenement dwellers, an analogy drawn out

³ Behan’s song begins, ‘Come all ye young rebels, and list while I sing ...’

later in the show. The ballad is expertly sung in traditional *sean-nós*,⁴ reflecting the O'Donnell family's ancient roots. Nee's delivery fluctuates between deadpan and satirical. By song's end the audience is in rustic Donegal circa 1910. A blackout punctuates the transition, then a spotlight comes up on a doll-size house in the midst of a shower produced by a watering can. Nee recites: 'Once upon a long time ago in the land of Tir Connell,⁵ there was a lovely wee house ... full of O'Donnells' (2). A fairy tale mode is thereby introduced with the simplest of devices. In describing 'the widow O'Donnell and her thirteen assorted ... children' (2), Nee, as Shughie, explains: 'They lived on a boggy piece of ground. It was worth nothing and cost them everything' (2). This dark moment is undercut by a visual joke: Nee lifts the tiny cottage and pours the 'rainwater' off its underlying, sodden brown doormat representing 'the boggy piece of ground' (2). Illusion and sentiment are instantly dispelled with laughter. Nee's next character, a British officer, has the benefit of entering a transitional space that allows the character to make his own singular impact.

This rapid-change, music hall approach enables Nee to slip out of the stage world and address the audience directly, much as a *seanchaí* would engage a group gathered around a communal hearth. Throughout, Nee utilizes mundane props in unexpected ways. A piece of frayed rope metamorphoses into a cow and a ship's deck; a bottomless oil drum becomes a mineshaft. At times the audience is invited to participate. During the crossing scene, Nee invites the audience to imitate the cows:

Well, the cows all sing on the Derry Boat ...

All together now, the bit everybody is waiting for – chance of a
lifetime.

⁴ *Sean-nós* literally means 'old style.'

⁵ Tir Connell was formed into Donegal during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

After me everybody:

‘*Moooo, Moooooo*, the Derry Boat.’

God, you people have no shame whatsoever! (5).

The playfulness of such communal exchanges can serve to encourage the emotional engagement of younger generations with experiences of their forbears, both in the past time of the narrative and within the present performance.

But Nee’s flippancy in darker moments risks trivialising the subject matter, and his preference for playing to the Donegal sensibility puts his work in danger of parochialisation. For example, there is a momentary allusion to the Famine in the play. Nee, as the widow O’Donnell, moans for food for her starving children. Nee reflects,

... that’s a thing [an Irish audience] know I’m doing, about the Famine
... a really touchy subject ... because *we’ve had it up to here* with the
Famine.... in a sense I’m making light of it, but the funny thing is that
we [emphasis added] can laugh at it, but [an outsider] *can’t* [emphasis
added] – we’re in a place where we can make fun of it, but we don’t
disown it, either. (‘Personal Interview’)

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Rugged treatment of tender material suggests an internalisation of the Donegal terrain. Regardless, as an American, I was dismayed that the mention of an historic event arguably tantamount to genocide invited and provoked laughter. Targeting a specific regional audience risks deflection of broader, more universal identification.

Common to many nations, however, is the experience of emigration. Like many emigrants, *Derry Boat*'s principal characters are rarely where they feel they need or ought to be.

Grandad as a young man is forced to emigrate to Glasgow to make a living. Later he becomes delusional, believing he and Shughie are headed

for the promised land while walking around the block. Shughie's expected girlfriend never arrives, and Shughie is continually thwarted in gaining various destinations by vagaries of plot. While the situations are essentially comic, they have tragic potential.

Circularity and closure are finally achieved when Shughie arrives back at the O'Donnell shack, which, in fact, he has never left. He has been carried along by shades of his cultural past. Shughie's memory becomes the connective element; he completes his own immigration cycle by reclaiming his ancestral roots, as has the playwright himself.

On the other hand, Grandad, the first O'Donnell in Glasgow, is deracinated, his sense of identity permanently shattered: 'You couldn't mention Donegal to Grandad, it's all Israel with him. He never left the house, just sat there reading the bible with his one good hand' (18). Grandad, too, craves



deliverance from the Gorbals, but his Donegal childhood had no resemblance to Shughie's bucolic idyll. Grandad is isolated, stranded in past events, cut off from both the Glasgow immigrant community and his origins. Scars of destitution, eviction, migration, the death of a child, his wife's madness, and World War I are still raw. Grandad has, as Shughie puts it, '...finally gone chop suey. They are going to stick him in the mental hospital' (19). Thus Donegal and the Irish community represent health and authenticity, whereas Glasgow is the 'Sledgehammer of the Sovereign' (6).

But Nee spills no Republican venom in *Derry Boat*; he strives to reflect the perspective of an increasingly non-sectarian community. By the early 1960s, the social effects of tenements levelled to give way to non-Irish newcomers in Glasgow's predominantly Irish Gorbals district were both negative and positive. The Catholic community, mostly from Donegal, were now scattered. Sectarian lines were blurred, and the community became more integrated (Gallagher 234). Nee recalls, 'We ... would get involved in chases with the nearby Protestant schools, some of [which] our friends would attend' ('Email'). *Derry Boat* redefines shifting communal borders in and between two locales.

In *Derry Boat*, Nee presents historical fact in a fictive, dramatic construct through the lens of personal memory. Neither his intentions nor his methods are academic; he seeks to entertain. While comic exuberance and abundance of detail occasionally undermine the narrative thrust, Nee involves the audience dramatically in an exploratory journey of a fraught political past. The commonality of a divided and diasporic community is thus reweven into the fabric of the collective memory. With the storytelling tools of a *seanchaí* and a busker's spontaneity, Nee offers

audiences resolution in the present moment by means of a multi-layered theatrical experience.

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