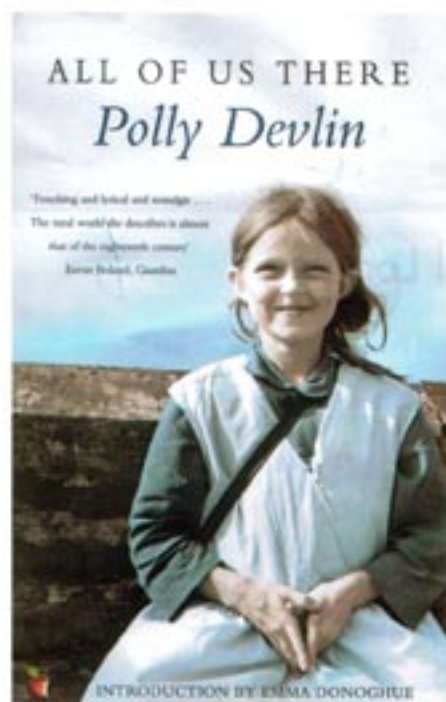




Childhood memories of rural Tyrone

Paul Harron reviews *All of Us There*, Polly Devlin's poetic memoirs of her childhood years, recently reprinted in paperback.



All of Us There was originally published in 1983. Some twenty years later, Virago Press has categorised it as a Modern Classic, published it in paperback for a new audience, and provided a good, solid Introduction by Emma Donoghue, suggesting that this is the kind of book that might be 'studied' as well as read at leisure. For these are not quaint, pretty memoirs about rural Ulster; through these pages Polly Devlin explores a range of deep preoccupations: sisterhood, gender divisions, social status, politics, institutional religion and superstition. Donoghue states, "...this is a slim book, packed hard with insights. Devlin is writing for herself, but not in some bland, scrapbooking spirit. Instead, she is wrestling with a question, a puzzle: was her childhood heaven or hell, blissfully sensual or bleakly backward, the best of times or the worst?" Should this sound a little daunting to some, don't be put off: this is a beautifully written, wistful book – the searching produces potency and insight.

"You've come far"

Polly Devlin's name will be well-known to many. Personally, I remember her being spoken of in hushed, slightly star-struck tones by other members of staff when I worked on Saturdays and vacations in a rural antiques shop near to where I lived which she occasionally frequented on her trips 'home' from England to Northern Ireland. Once she was out of earshot from the sales desk, colleagues informed me that she had grown up on the other side of Lough Neagh and had gone on to enjoy a glittering career as a journalist with *Vogue* and *American Vogue* and as a writer of several novels. I should say that there was no sense of envy in these gossipy revelations and we all found her more than pleasant to deal with (which couldn't be said for every customer) and very un-grand. But, in fact, my colleagues had sold her slightly short – she also wrote for the *New Statesman* and the *Evening Standard* and received an OBE for services to literature in 1993. Her biography describes her as an author, journalist, broadcaster, film-maker, art critic and

conservationist (hence the visits to the antiques shop, I suppose).

This is a strong list of achievements for anyone, regardless of background, but – as *All of Us Here* makes clear – Devlin grew up in the remote Tyrone townland of Ardboe, next to Lough Neagh, in the 1940s. It was a rural place, dependent on the land and the lough, and, at the time, without telephones or electricity and possessing little modern technology – just a few cars and a big, practically unused air force aerodrome which cut up the parish drastically. Devlin describes the setting as "ramshackle, almost mediaeval ... with its own distinctive bonding, tribal mores and manners". Her career path from this to the heady, fast world of features journalism in London and Manhattan was, therefore, untypical to say the least. Even more so within the political context of Ulster at the time, for the Devlin family was also Catholic, albeit a Catholic family with some 'mixed' heritage and, while apparently fully observant, comparatively liberal outlook. Devlin writes acutely about the indignities of feeling 'second class' and the associated frustrations as she was growing up. She recalls her sense of isolation, humiliation and anger at being categorised for her religious background even when she had grown up and started to 'make it' as a journalist in one particularly nauseating incident featuring Lord Brookeborough at a dinner party. Writing a story for a magazine, Devlin had been placed next to him and he had been apparently charmed by this attractive young 'Polly' throughout the evening until he asked her her surname. "Devlin," I said, looking at him... The name could only be that of a Catholic... 'Devlin,' he said and fell silent. And then he turned back. He said, 'You've come far.' And turned away, nor spoke to me again that evening. I sat winded, my anger bubbling under my stricken heart."

Poetry

The Brookeborough incident calls to mind lines from Seamus Heaney's poem *Whatever You Say Say Nothing*: "Smoke signals are

loud-mouthed compared to us; Manoeuvrings to find out name and school, Subtle discrimination by addresses With hardly an exception to the rule". While Devlin does not quote these lines herself, she does quote several other Heaney poems elsewhere in the book and its title is taken from his poem *Mossbawn: The Seed Cutters*, lines she says which have "worked their stealth". Heaney, it should be added, is Devlin's sister Eiram's husband, and Devlin includes many of Eiram's memories in the book too.

Devlin is connected to the poet through family ties but also through similar preoccupations with the rural landscape and interest in the Northern Irish psyche (or multiple psyches perhaps) and through obvious love of language. Devlin's written style is poetic and nuanced. The book therefore requires some concentration to read – sentences can be long and highly descriptive – but, like Henry James's writing, say, the complex sentences reward perseverance, revealing subtleties. She 'paints' visual images through words. The physical landscape, with the Ardboe Cross, the farmland and Lough Neagh with its slimy eels, is revealed as beautiful and even magical. She recalls: "And what I unequivocally love about our childhood is its physical and sensual quality. The orchards, the haystacks, the rampars, the green flaxholes, the sound of balers rising and falling in the air, the sound of iron wheels on gravel behind the horses, the smells from everything." Elsewhere she says: "we are so much a part of the earth's growing things that we feel like grain, and hardly brush away the seeds of grass or hay that cling to the corners of our mouths, so much are they a part of our own texture".

Family and society

Devlin's use of her sister's insights into supposedly shared experiences is clever. It illustrates how no two people's recollections of an event are the same – each person will remember the same passage of time or set of circumstances differently. She concludes: "Memory is so biased, retaining only what it chooses, recalling the incident that will bolster the idea you need to have to retain your current idea of yourself, distorting incidents to give your past the particular significance you have already endowed it with..."

Devlin is not sentimental. While obviously a close family, the connections between sisters are competitive, hierarchical and occasionally suffocating; the differences between

genders are marked. Of the children she notes: "the order of birth is of the deepest significance and influence in our destiny, and that particular rank moulds the habits of the bearer". She talks about being "ensnared in family", and for all its benefits, growing up within a large family in that place at that time, makes life complicated: "...I know that anxiety lies at our centre, and unspecified guilt, a legacy of the hurry of sisters and of our religious upbringing, and inherited too from our father, and from our mother. Her inclination to sadness and panic was diverted into practicality and endemic anxiety, as a counterpoint and balance to her husband's nature; he embraced melancholy with a voluptuous sentimentality."

Devlin also gets angry sometimes. She resents how her form of institutional Christianity emphasises the significance of life as "a vale of tears" over redemption and

Ireland the spoken and sung word has had to carry everything that painting, sculpture, scores, books, libraries, the museums and acknowledged repositories, the fruits of centuries of encouraged and open culture, carry in other countries."

Devlin is particularly good at quoting the language of the place. She describes the speech of the family's kitchen helper, Ellen: "the underarm is an oxtter, fallen is couped, and opposite is fornenst; the words for quantities are different too – a few objects are called a lock, a few more are a wheen, and we all know the fine difference between such quantities. Wind is pronounced wynd, tea is tay, a broody hen is a clocking hen. She never tells us to stop doing anything; she demands that we quiet it, and if anyone doesn't hear her injunction, or pretends not to, she enquires if they are deaf." Brilliantly captured as this is, Devlin surmises that this

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joy, and that a "crippling ethic of modesty" prevails in the country (probably regardless of religious denomination I would argue). "Exuberance was viewed askance and a belief, however tentative, in one's own importance in the scheme of things needs be crushed since that was conceit, pretension, delusion or, more often than not, all three at once." From this, it is easy to see how she so wholeheartedly embraced the contrary fashionable world of *Vogue*.

She also sees strange violence and harshness in the actions of adults that is reflected in the oral legacy: "Our childhood is riddled with stories told by adults who sometimes laugh as they tell them, although in that laughter we recognise pain – the pain of desperation that underlies most Irish humour. The black mixture makes for an irony that is cruel and crippling in its hardness, yet susceptible to corrupting sentimentality." She talks about the potency of language in Ireland and how "when oral communication carries a whole heritage and becomes the only way to bequeath a culture to your descendants, then it must needs be the art of a nation. In secret

language is probably now lost to everyday English, which is I think (and hope) not quite true. I spent my early childhood in rural mid-Ulster some thirty years later in the 1970s and regularly heard all of these words in common usage – despite the vast social and economic changes in recent decades, my guess is that this language prevails yet in some quarters. Perhaps Devlin's assumption indicates something else, too. I had assumed that my childhood was spent in a world now lost, but I hear many resonances with that of Devlin's despite the passage of time – perhaps things do not die out as quickly or as completely as we assume.

All of Us There is a remarkable set of recollections and musings – the book is tender and aggressive, lyrical and precise, revealing and strangely private, simple and deep in almost equal measure. Above all it is an insightful mirror on Ulster rural life, on the realities of living in families and on the process of growing up and moving away.

All of Us There is published in paperback by Virago Press (ISBN 1 84408 044 7). ■