

For three years, Polly Devlin wrote a column for this magazine. Now her pieces are being published in a collection called *Only Sometimes Looking Sideways*. Her long-time friend

SUZANNE LOWRY met the writer again.

Photographs by CAROLYN DJANOGLY.

I KNEW Polly Devlin long before I met her; indeed I had an almost superstitious interest in her. We were about the same age and were bonded, without introduction, by the fact that we both came from a place then scarcely known to the outside world, variously called Ulster, Northern Ireland or the North of Ireland. (It may seem incredible now but I recall a post office clerk in London in the early sixties asking me was Belfast in Germany).

Polly and I would also recognise our birthplace as "Norn Iron" a transliteration given in a recent Ulster-English dictio-

nary which attempts to decode the impenetrable accent of the province for the foreigner. In *Only Sometimes Looking Sideways*, a collection of her articles for IMAGE, Polly recalls doing the same for an Englishman wanting brown bread for breakfast in the Europa Hotel in Belfast but puzzled to be offered a great speciality called *weeden brayed*. It is an exile's hilarious pleasure to come on such gems far from home, warming soul with laughter and memory of a place that can be so sullen, downputting yet so rich in humour and crack.

ONE *of our* OWN





In the early sixties, Polly and I were both journalists but in different firmaments. While I began as a trainee reporter on the *Belfast Telegraph*, Polly was already a beacon of light on the metropolitan horizon, a golden creature who had been transported by her own magical gifts from Tyrone to London and had made good, very good. Winner of the *Vogue* talent competition, she worked first for that magazine in London and in New York for the legendary Diana Vreeland who had noticed her "prooise" in a profile of John Osborne and later asked her to seek out and interview the swan-uppers of England among other walking rarities.

Back in London she became a columnist with the *Evening Standard* and thereby one of an elite group of women writers of that decade whose image and opinions were spread like layers of silk across the crude mattress of newsprint. Polly moved among stylists and inventors of the age; her mane of blonde hair, doll-like features and marvellous eyes were emblematic of the times. To me, writing up the Hospital Authority min-

utes in Belfast, she was a creature of impossible glamour, yet I knew her, she was from here, a kind of sister.

Polly says now that, in those early London days, she was timid and naive, filling the page but utterly ill-equipped by experience to do so, working mostly to hidden male-dictate. She recalls London journalism of that time – and indeed still – as mostly

"blokes writing about blokes" in the grip of what she calls the "Martin Amis syndrome".

After a time she withdrew into family life in Gloucestershire with her husband, Andy, and three daughters, always writing but less for public consumption. Like some literary Rapunzel in the tower room of her Elizabethan house, she was every day scribbling (even on the walls), reading, annotating, enriching her extraordinary mind and illuminating anyone who had the luck to talk with her. Ireland 41

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haunted her and she found herself in a perpetual dual life "unable and unwilling to bridge the gaps between the parallels".

In a sense she has bridged them. She had produced two books about her childhood, *All of Us There* and *The Far Side of Lough*, in my view among the most important books to come out of the North in recent years; she wrote a novel, *Dora*, and made films and television programmes. She was awarded the OBE. She has collected – and incurably still collects – curtains, pictures, porcelains, dogs and dog ornaments, *objets trouvés* and *perdus* rooted out from all corners of Ireland, Britain and France. Her houses in London, Dublin and Somerset are treasuries of beauty and evidence of her inspired maddened dementia. She campaigns for the preservation of countryside with passion and is taking a degree in French literature and planning a life of the Great Hugh O'Neill. Polly Devlin is one of the wildest and most civilised and civilising people I know.

We met at last in the late seventies when I was editing the *Observer's* Living section, having recently relinquished the editorship of the *Guardian* women's page, which I had relaunched as *Guardian Women*. These were heady times, when we thought we had the blokes rattled and, one evening, we of the monstrous regiment – including Jill Tweedie, Katharine Whitehorn, Carmen Callil – were gathered in my Islington basement flat for an encounter with the American feminist, Marilyn French, author of a novel called *The Women's Room*. Ms French was droning on about what an unreconstructed hopeless bunch British women were, when Polly, whom few of us knew in the flesh, arrived breathless and (she says now) a touch apprehensive.

When someone in the company asked her why she by then had written so little, she pleaded writer's block; I promptly begged her to try to break it for the benefit of *Observer* readers. This she did in a series of magnificent articles about human relationships. Later she wrote for me again, reviewing art exhibitions for the *International Herald Tribune* in Paris.

Apart from being a much adored friend, few writers have given me, as an editor, more pleasure to read. Her writing flows but is also dense and bejewelled, thanks to her extraordinary command of the English language. Yet the block and the diffidence lurk always, fighting to stem the flow. "Did you really want it?" she would maddeningly ask when I'd call on deadline day about a piece long-commissioned. Once assured there was indeed a gaping hole in the paper waiting for her words and no others, they would be written, Mozart-like, in an hour or two, almost without fault or correction. As an erudite and meticulous sub-editor at the *Herald Tribune* once remarked of one of her pieces: "You could skate on bits of that".

She thus finds writing very easy and at the same time very difficult. As the Auden title of this collection suggests, she writes almost furtively and can be easily deflected. "A great deal of my time is spent successfully avoiding writing," she writes. "Rejection had the ultimate credibility for me."

Polly confirmed to me that writing for an Irish audience had been an unusually happy experience, that she felt safer and freer and confident she'd be taken seriously if not solemnly by readers. She was at home and it showed. Reading these essays is therefore a delight. Not least because the author is writing with freedom and élan, humour and erudition, well at ease far from the blokish crowd that might mock a fine phrase or clever conceit such as Auberon Waugh and others have done in the past. Removed too from the kind of politically correct women's journalism she equally eschews. Here she comes into her own, writing of, as she says "causes not cases".

Polly, one of five sisters and a brother, grew up in Ardboe on the shores of Lough Neagh. She began writing with a neat piece of plagiarism when, at the age of six or seven, she stole a poem. It ran "Little Miss Riding Hood/Went

into the Wood/To take her Grandmother/Some very nice food", and had been composed by her older sister, Marie. Polly was deeply praised for the effort and Marie's claims to authorship ignored. Did she not feel some guilt about this outrageous act? "I felt *only* guilt," she told me, "but I have always thought it significant that, although both of us have grown up to be writers, Marie married a poet, Seamus Heaney."

The IMAGE pieces mix humour with a sense of wonder. In one, we find Polly and Andy lying out under the night sky in their beautiful wild meadow in Somerset on uncomfortable folding beds, like a pair of medieval effigies surrounded by incorrigibly barking dogs. One is reminded of Wilde's quip to Robert Ross that "all of us are in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars". Polly writes to entertain but also as part of a search to find or hold on to things that are lost or endangered.

Witness her hymn in praise and defence of the hare, the evocation of the future oak forest of 8,000 trees she and Andy have planted with an 18th-century stone urn at its centre and – perhaps most of all – that wondrous wild meadow they have saved: "It is a field of such beauty that people fall silent when they walk into it ... a multi-coloured medieval tapestry or the background to a Botticelli painting, striped, flecked, spangled and eyed like a peacock. You wade through swards of purple and spotted orchids, brush past vermilion scabious, skyblue cornflowers, yellow vetch, trefoil, knapweed, briony, cowslips, greenweeds, timothy, sedges, vetchling vernal grasses, creeping-bents and thistles, clovers and saxifrage, through 80 varieties growing in a prodigal muddle ..."

About Ulster, she writes with utter authenticity laced with anger, humour and a passionate romanticism. Her experience at the hands of the police make one shudder but it is her evocations of the Ulster tone and character that best bring me back to a place beyond people's capacity to imagine, let alone understand, and even into an arena of hope.

Polly tells of learning only English history at her Catholic school; in my Protestant one 50 miles away, it was the same. Ireland was scarcely touched on although we gleaned a great deal about India. I recall my headmistress stating it would be impossible to teach Irish history until an unbiased account of it could be written. One happy by-product of 25 years of terrorism and counter-terrorism has been that the history of Ulster is being written, over and over again in many ways and with many biases and many voices and Polly Devlin's is an important one of them.

We don't talk much about Ulster but we both in our separate – and sometimes differing ways – know it and are interlocked by it. Polly is rightly proud of her ancestry as a member of the Devlin sept; standard bearers and hatchet men of the O'Neills, the Gaelic conquerors of Ulster. I tease her by claiming that my name is as ancient as hers, that it goes back to the Picts, expelled or assimilated by her lot.

Which brings me to my favourite story in the book: that when Polly went to change a pair of faulty boots in Bond Street, the smirking insolence of the manager and his refusal to help triggered an ancestral rage usually safely buried in quiet gentility.

With one sweep, she unscrewed the shop's computer equipment and threw it at him. When he called for the police, she threw the telephone too and stormed out.

The manager, poor wee skitter, and his pasty, London salesgirls, could not have known they had the Tyrone equivalent of Boudicca in their shop. Polly would have told them had they pleaded such incomprehension, "Well, yez know now." And we would have rolled among the broken glass, helpless with complicit laughter.

IMAGE readers can get a copy of *Only Sometimes Looking Sideways* for the special price of £5.99 (incl p&p) by credit card or cheque from The O'Brien Press, 20 Victoria Road, Rathgar, Dublin 6. 01 492 3333.

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