

Interview with Larry O'Loughlin

By Laura P. Z. Izarra (1)

With the valuable participation of the historian Salvador Méndez Reyes, I interviewed the playwright Larry O'Loughlin in the virtual space – the inter-subjective, double-way synchronic temporality created by emails nowadays. I first came in contact with his work when I visited the website of 100 More Like These 100morelikethese.com and saw the clip taken from a creative writing workshop given by Larry and Stephen Jones as part of National Poetry Day 2008, organised by Poetry Ireland's Writers in Schools summer programme. His visual image with long white hair and beard reflects the confidence and self-assurance of middle-age experience. His voice of an innate storyteller invites his young audience to get involved and experience vividly the process of writing a play. I also learned that he is a writer for children and teenagers, author of other books and that his social concern and worldview mean that he takes part in international anti child-labour education programmes.

Sending and receiving emails has allowed informal and regular communication, creating the enriching suspense given not any more by the geographical distance of the letter-writing practice, but mainly by time-space. I must confess that I have waited for each of Larry's responses as if it were a story told in episodes (email of 24 June 2009). His answers show the lightness of thought, his lively enthusiasm in sharing stories and the art of constructing them. At one moment, he said with typical Irish humour, 'I do hope that at this stage you are not beginning to regret asking me about the San Pats because, as you will have noticed, I have the Irish habit of talking and talking and talking and ... without ever having mastered the art of brevity – well, perhaps I have that when I am teaching. I will try to make this part less of an opus' (email of 26 June 2009). Certainly, this feeling of expectation for what will come next is the soul of his work and I would like the readers of this journal to experience it also.

In this interview, Larry's play 100 More Like These, a one-man play performed by Stephen Jones, is the focus. It is based on the story of 500 Irish soldiers who deserted the American Army during the three years of the American-Mexican war (1846-1848) and joined the Mexican side where, led by John Riley from Clifden, County Galway, they fought as the San Patricio (St. Patrick's) Battalion. The story is narrated by a fictional character, Tomas O'Byrne from Tallaght, County Dublin.

Lights on!

Laura Izarra (LI): What was the source of inspiration for 100 More Like These? What made you first think of writing a play about the St. Patrick's Battalion?

Larry O'Loughlin (LOL): What brought the San Patricio to my attention was, as I explain on the website, mishearing the very end of an interview with Mark Day on Irish radio around 1997. And the very first piece of research material I acquired was Mark's excellent documentary. If I had not turned on the radio at the very moment, I would never have discovered this story of sacrifice, courage, valour and tragedy. My friend Dr. Ernesto Valdés of the Department of Oral History, University of Houston, Texas, described it as a story with all the romance and pathos of *Les Misérables*.

I am primarily a children's author with 13 titles to my credit. What intrigues me is story: the personal journey/encounter and how characters interact with and respond to any set of circumstances or characters they encounter. For me, therefore, it is of crucial importance that the vehicle and language used to impart or convey the story do not interfere or obscure the story. Think how the beauty of Isabel Allende's prose delivers such powerful stories as *Eva Luna* (1988) and *House of Spirits* (1985), and of course *Paula* (1995). It is the beauty of precision and economy: triumph of story over style. So, the starting points for my work on the San Pats were: (a) to understand the circumstances that

gave rise to the story, and (b) to find an appropriate vehicle for the delivery of that story.

LI: Could you tell us about your creative process? How do you intertwine history and fiction?

LOL: I find the last line of your email (24 June 2009) most interesting and insightful, because 100 More Like These was in fact written and performed episodically. I don't know if you have viewed the full performance on the website but I think that episodic/linear narrative drives the story and builds an empathy between the actor and the audience. I know I tend to use those words empathy and relationship quite frequently, but for me as a writer they are my primary concerns/goals when creating a piece of work. If I may divert from the San Pats a moment, in my first teenage novel *Is Anybody Listening*, I strove to do three things:

(a) describe the life of and build empathy for child carpet weavers (bonded labourers in India);

(b) give some insight and again build empathy for a teen girl/street kid who survived the Candelaria Massacre in Rio in 1993;

(c) tell the story of an Irish teenage girl who was slowly feeling herself alienated from her lifelong friends.

To tell this story with very diverse themes in a way that would not confuse, and would bring my audience to the sense of compassion I wanted to bring them too, without actually preaching at them, I tended to touch that place of empathy: that place where they almost felt at one with the characters.

My device for doing this was the Irish teenager Laura Byrne (who, as I have just noted for the first time actually shares the same surname as Tomas in 100 More). I actually made Laura an empathy who could feel, see, smell and touch everything that my two other characters could (Sanjid in India and Rosa in Brazil – both based on real characters that I found in my research). But for the story to work, I really had to make my readership care about her and what she was going through. So, I had to carefully build up her character, her family, her environment and make her someone we would genuinely like to

know, and someone we would genuinely want to see safe, and once I had done that now we shared her concern, fears, horror and terror at everything that happened to the others. If Laura was not real to us the others wouldn't be either, and we wouldn't really care. So, I unfolded her story episodically to reach and bring us to that point of empathy.

LI: So, if the main elements that you selected from the historical narrative were reinvented in an episodic dramatic way, what were your main thematic preoccupations in building up the story? Are questions of home or the portrayal of failure and loss part of it?

LOL: In 100 More Like These, the story of Tomas unfolds episodically and through him we meet firstly the story of the nineteenth-century Irish Catholic immigrant - a story shared by most immigrants, but particularly those who were Catholic. Secondly, we meet the story of those immigrant soldiers in the American army, and observe the brutality, prejudice and religious repression they encountered and endured. Thirdly, we meet the experience of those who changed sides (Tomas himself changes after the Battle of Monterrey), we meet their love of Mexico, their sense of 'coming home' - finding a new land to love, their sense of pride in and admiration for the courage of the ordinary Mexican soldier and some of the officer class, their sheer frustration with the Mexican officer class and their internecine squabbles, concern with reputation, which leads to an ineptitude in command: something that was quite common in European armies of the period, where the main qualification for leadership was class and social rank, and the major preoccupation was to be seen to outshine one's comrades – and if possible make them look inept so that you would advance at their expense. At the infamous battle of the Charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimea war, when British cavalry were ordered to attack Russian canon, the primary concern among the officer class was not that so many men had been lost but rather that blame should not be attributed to them. Similarly at the Battle of Reseca de la Palma, the second battle of the American-Mexican war, General Ampudia delayed sending the commanding officer General Arista news that

the Americans were attacking (Arista presumed it was a bluff), because it was of as much importance to him that Arista, who had replaced him in command only days before, get blamed for any calamity, as it was that the American advance be halted. Of course, the Mexican forces were defeated and Arista was held responsible. So, Tomas allows the story to develop in that linear narrative way and, hopefully, because he has established a personal relationship with the audience and they have developed an empathy with him (there go those words again), they feel his emotion almost as keenly as he does, and the story becomes something that is alive not a relic of the past. Actually, on that point of empathy, at the stage where Stephen is talking about the San Pats' last battle (Churubusco) he tees the audience up by saying that the only thing that could prevent a Mexican victory this time was running out of ammunition, and then continues 'And guess what, that afternoon that's exactly what happened.' Even though the audience know the outcome of the story before entering the theatre, every time the piece has been performed there is an audible intake of breath at that stage. In one performance, one young boy who was with his father was so caught up in the story that when Stephen said 'And guess what?', he screamed out 'WHAT?' I don't know how Stephen managed to avoid laughing.

I am sorry, I am now straying way off the point and will return to addressing the questions.

LI: Characterisation and the viewpoint of the narrator are crucial in storytelling. It creates the atmosphere and a tight bond with the audience, as your anecdote has shown.

LOL: For me, story works by having a character you care about inserted into a variety of situations, encountering a variety of characters, and seeing how they react. An alternative way of viewing this is to say that it is about someone overcoming obstacles and in the process learning something about themselves: the personal quest of Legend. For Tomas the situations were the events leading to his flight from Boston, his enrolment in the army, his decision to change sides, his participation in every major battle after Monterrey, his court martial, death sentence and eventual reprieve.

All the events described (with the exception of his role in the design of the San Pats banner) are based on actual events that took place during the course of the conflict. What Stephen and I do is create a reaction within a fictional character to actual events, but these reactions have to be consistent with the character as drawn: a twelve-year-old Irish immigrant witnessing what he would have witnessed.

In Irish writing tradition, as in much of Latin story telling, our tales are strongly character-driven. So it is with *100 More Like These*. In the course of his journey Tomas meets a variety of characters - many real (from the U.S. military General Taylor, General Twigg, General Scott, Captain Robert E. Lee, Colonel William Selby Harney, and from the Mexican military, Santa Anna, General Arista, as well as San Patricios including John Riley, James Dalton and Francis O'Connor). He also meets a number of fictional characters created to allow him to develop an insight and understanding of the unfolding events. Because the play and novel were being created as fiction and not history, as a writer I could allow myself some licence in the interpretation of events and the portrayal of characters, but I could not re-write history to change outcomes or alter characters to make them unrecognisable. But again, characterisation and interpretation of historical figures can be subjective, depending on perspective.

Take for example the character of Santa Anna. How does one portray a man who loses a leg in a war and, when he becomes President, for (I think) the third time, has it dug up and buried in a State funeral; who force-marches his soldiers for almost three weeks, gets them to fight a battle which they are commanding, then orders withdrawal because they are exhausted, leaves the field to the enemy, but races back to Mexico City with captured cannon to proclaim a victory: who asks American representatives for a million dollar payment to stop the war, gets ten thousand and then continues the war? My interpretation, having trawled through numerous articles on websites, read of his exploits in books on Mexican history, is of a self-serving, self-promoting aristocrat who put his own reputation ahead of that of his men, pretty much like so many European soldiers and

statesmen of the day (...or indeed any day...). But Many Mexicans I spoke to in Mexico in 2006 hail him as a hero because he 'defended' them against the yanqui [yankee]. Am I fair to him? I think so. Certainly as he appears to me. For others, for example Taylor, Twigg etc., again, I have tried to portray them as I have found them through my trawls through books and articles. Sometimes, if I have put words in their mouths, they are either words actually attributed to them, or words in keeping with the characters as I have perceived them.

When I initially began researching the San Pats, someone gave me a quote attributed to the Mexican leader, General Antonio López de Santa Anna: 'With one hundred more like these men of Riley's I could have won this more.' When I came to write the play I could think of no finer compliment to the bravery, courage and skill of those men and so adapted the quote for my title.

LI: In a one-man (or -woman) play, rhetorical language plays a very important role in constructing the dramatic atmosphere. Playwrights use various strategies to reach a specific tone, some even write entirely in verse. Could you explain to us your relationship with dramatic language?

LOL: The project began life originally as a teenage novel with a third person narrative. When it became a play, the narrative became first person. Because we were now working in the first person and, initially in small theatre spaces (70-100 seats) the storytelling process could become much more intimate, and potentially a much more emotional experience. Our decision to stage the show without props, other than the two boxes on which Stephen sits and the shackles used as example, meant that there was nothing to act as a barrier between narrator and listener. To reinforce the sense of intimacy, we adopted a direct storytelling approach: the time is sometime in the future – perhaps fifteen years – and the narrator is recounting his war and immediate pre-war experiences to a group of visitors to his cantina in Matamoras. The visitors (the audience) have come to enquire about the San Pats. This approach means that the audience and their reactions have now become part of the whole

storytelling process. During the course of the performance, Stephen plays approximately twenty-five different characters, in one scene playing three different characters involved in one conversation – two recruiting officers and Tomas.

SMR: On the historical level, do you think that the Saint Patrick's soldiers supported Mexico because this country suffered an unjust invasion as in Ireland?

LOL: What drew me to this story was that it was a piece of Irish history, that these men were/are part of our diaspora and had a fascinating story and yet, as a people, we were almost totally unaware of them. In the decade since I first became interested in this story, I have met only three other people who have heard of the San Pats. Now, there was a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of their executions in 1999, a commemorative stamp and the unveiling of the plaque/statue in John Riley's home town of Clifden, but it seemed to have passed most people by – me included. There was also a feature film 'One Man's Hero', which premiered here and then passed into obscurity, but the San Pats remain, in the words of one commentator on the play 'the greatest Irish Heroes never celebrated'. I saw these men, thanks initially to Mark Day's film, as having a heroic, romantic passionate story that deserved to be remembered, and not as some heroic failure. In some ways the outcome was irrelevant from the Irish perspective - although for the respective histories of the US and Mexico (both political and economic), the relationship between the two, and US attitudes to foreign policy, the outcome was profound. What was important was the action they took, and the factors that predisposed them to this course of action.

All the research material I used when researching the play were secondary sources. (2) As I have already said, my first piece of research material was Mark Day's film. Shortly afterwards I acquired *The Shamrock and the Sword* by Robert Ryal Miller, Michael Hogan's *Irish Soldiers of Mexico* and Anton Adam's *The War in Mexico*. Adam's book is very much weighted towards military history, with fairly detailed descriptions of battle strategy, weaponry etc.

and while it was to prove invaluable in the writing of the novel/play, in the initial period, I based my research on Miller and Hogan's work which, although their perspectives on the San Pats were very different (traitors versus heroes/soldiers of conscience perspectives) they were clearly in agreement on three major points:

a) The Irish and other foreign Catholics in the nineteenth century did meet a clear anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic prejudice, this prejudice having its roots in Old World hostilities arising from post-reformation Europe and manifesting itself in 'Protestant supremacist/nativist' culture;

b) This culture continued into the armed forces, where the brutality, prejudice and religious suppression visited on Catholic/immigrant troops was almost part of the disciplinary code, that is, the brutality of punishment meted out to foreign soldiers far exceeded that received by native-born soldiers convicted of the same offence;

c) The Protestant supremacist culture plus a perceived need for expansion plus Old World enmities between Britain and Spain plus New World enmities between the US and Mexico post-1836, saw the rise of the belief in 'Manifest Destiny', which saw the imperatives to expand west and south into Mexican lands both in terms of spreading Protestant culture and freeing people from the ignorance of popery.

SMR: Therefore, on the religious level, do you think that one of the causes that made the Saint Patrick's Battalion fight for Mexico was the Catholic faith common to Irishmen and Mexicans?

LOL: The identification of these three strands I just mentioned leads inevitably to three fields of enquiry:

a) The Protestant ethic and its implications for the development of American social/political thought.

b) The experience of Catholic immigrants entering a society forged by this Protestant ethic culture.

c) The relationship between two such diverse neighbouring cultures as the (theoretically) egalitarian, democratic, Protestant America and

the highly class stratified, autocratic/plutocratic, Catholic Mexico. Literally Old World versus New World perceptions: although given a strongly emergent industrial/merchant class plus an embedded plantation 'aristocracy', the egalitarianism/ plutocratic difference may have been more illusionary.

For the first strand, the Protestant ethic and its implications, a couple of general histories of the U.S. on the internet follow particular strands; for example, *Errand into the Wilderness* by Perry Miller (Belknap Press of Harvard University). Miller's book paints a very vivid picture of what those who formed the Massachusetts colony saw as their mission: "This errand was being run for the sake of Reformed Christianity; and while the first aim was indeed to realize in America the due form of government, both civil and ecclesiastical, the aim behind the aim was to vindicate the most rigorous ideal of the Reformation, so that ultimately all Europe would imitate new England." (Perry: 15) "For wee must Consider that wee shall be a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us." (John Winthrop, founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, quoted in Perry: 13).

If the vision of Winthrop and others was to establish a Protestant theocracy (in their case Puritan), by implication it carried with it a view of Catholicism as unreformed, archaic, superstitious, idolatrous and corrupted Christianity. Over the course of the two centuries following the establishment of Winthrop's colony in 1630, these views became firmly part of the Protestant culture and with the growth of the concept of nationhood in the years prior to 1776, and its acceleration in the years after, Catholicism took on a further, sinister anti-national tinge: if Catholics' first allegiance was to a Pope in Rome, how could they be loyal to the State?

This view is expressed frequently in the writing and utterances of such people as Rev. Lynam Beecher (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and Samuel Morse, creator of Morse code and fanatically anti-Catholic (some attribute this to an incident when he was an art student in Rome, refused to take off his hat when the Pope passed by and

had it knocked off by a member of the Swiss Guard).

Second strand: By the mid nineteenth century, this anti-Catholic sentiment had expressed itself in several anti-Catholic incidents, the burning of the Ursuline Convent 1832, and anti-Catholic riots on Broad Street in Boston. The flames were fanned still further by the appearance of Morse's 'Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States', which related the growing flood of immigrants to a papal plan for world domination, with the immigrants being the advanced vanguard of a papal army determined to overthrow the Government of the United States. Beecher's 'Plea for the West' extended this argument by forecasting that the last battle against the Vatican would be fought in the West and that 'the religious and political destiny of our nation is to be decided in the West.'

SMR: How is this historical fact seen in Ireland?

LOL: In Ireland, our view of Boston is of a city that is amongst the most Irish cities in the world: the fact that it is some 3,000 or so miles from this island is just a matter of geographical accident. Yet, as can be seen from above, this was not the experience of the immigrant in the mid-nineteenth century. My challenge as a writer was to explain all of the above without losing my readers or my audience, but without diluting the fact of the reality. In the book (which was of course, three-quarters written when I put it on hold in favour of the play), I achieved this by having Tomas overhear snatches of conversation from three Americans in First Class (Lynam and Morse and the story of Maria Monk and other anti-Catholic propaganda – particularly the piece about the West) and acting them out for his mother and other steerage passengers.

Other books consulted when researching the Boston/nativist element of the story included Hogan's Molly Malone and the San Patricios, Joseph O'Connor's Star Of The Sea, and Marita Conlan McKenna's Wild Flower Girl (all novels), The Great Hunger by Cecil Woodham Smith, Bibles, Brahmins and Bosses: A Short History Of Boston by Thomas H. O'Connor, The Hub: Boston Past And Present by Thomas

H. O'Connor, The Factory Girls edited by Philip S. Foner and Brass Knuckles, Crusade: The Great Know-Nothing Conspiracy by Carelton Beals.

LI: What is that particular story of Maria Monk about?

LOL: Websites used were too numerous to name, but many of them carry reprints of actual anti-Catholic tracts and publications. One particular story, The Story of Maria Monk, tells of a lady who claimed to be an ex-nun who had fled a convent in Canada to escape the debauchery of the priest (they, apparently, used nuns as mistresses, got them pregnant, then baptised the new-born infants before slitting their throats). It was a huge seller in the early 40s and the lady went on a nationwide tour telling her story. Even when it was proven that she was mentally ill and a habitual liar, neither sales figures nor audience attends decline. A 1930s reprint of this book is available to read online at, amongst other places, www.reformation.org. And it is clear from the introduction that despite all that has been said of her insanity, the person writing the introduction still takes her story at face value.

LI: And what other stories dialogue with this one?

LOL: The Ursuline, Broad Street riots material plus the anti-immigrant ethos I wove in and out of the narrative, such as "Think things are bad now," the old lads in North End (the Irish area) use to say "You should have been here in the thirties: nativist mobs burning the Ursuline, anti-Irish riots on Broad Street. This is nothing compared to that, nothing." Maybe so, but hardly a day went by when the police weren't in the water pulling out the body of some poor immigrant who'd gone down to the docks looking for work, been set upon by nativist thugs, beaten senseless, and thrown in the water to drown. And there were still bars around town with signs "No dogs, no black, no Irish" signs in their windows...'

Because of time constraints in the play we - Stephen is also a playwright so he had some input when it came to adapting the book into the play - omitted the elements that took place on board ship and used the information from

that scene a little further on in the play, but still in the opening scene in Boston.

SMR: Is the Saint Patrick's Battalion therefore a symbol of the struggle against the ones in power who oppressed the weak?

LOL: Finally, the above examples could be expanded focusing on the third strand: The relationship between America and Mexico. Think of the statement 'People say, when did you come over? I say, the border crossed over me in 1836' (Marcos Longoria, Head of the TB Eradication Programme, Houston Texas).

Growing up on a diet of John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Gene Autrey, American history was quite simple: the great cowboys tamed a savage land, and that meant freeing parts of it from the nasty, brutal Mexicans. Unfortunately, that wasn't just a view confined to my childhood. That is American history as understood by many Americans (change Mexican to Iraqi and/or Afghan and ask what's changed?) But taken in light of the comment given above to Beecher, Morse, and even the early colonists, one can see that this belief gains it validity from an inherent belief in the supremacy of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. If there is one true religion and race, then by default everything else is inferior and needs to be civilised. This wasn't of course a uniquely WASP view, the conquistadors in Mexico sought a Vatican ruling on whether or not the indigenous peoples were human or not and therefore worthy of baptism, after a year they received the marvellous ruling known as baptism by the sword: if they convert they're human, if not kill them and conversion will follow death.

In the early nineteenth century, Imperial Spain invited American empresarios to establish settlements in her lands north of the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande to Americans) to provide a bulwark against marauding bands of Native Americans and to provide a similar bulwark against the growing United States. To qualify for land grants, settlers had to convert to or be Catholic. Many of those who moved onto the land were what Mitchner in his novel *Texas* describes as "home Methodists", professing Catholicism to get the grants but practicing their own religion

in private. Novels such as Mitchner's and non-fiction works paint a picture of the relationship between the Mexican population of Tejas (Texas) and the settlers as cordial and harmonious. And indeed under the Federal Constitution which gave the provinces a large degree of autonomy in their affairs, there was a fairly cordial relationship between settlers and the Government in Mexico City. In 1836 Antonio de López de Santa Anna, President of Mexico, changed the constitution, making the Government of the country centralist: effectively abolishing provincial autonomy and vesting all power in the hands of central government: even enacting a law which made the carrying of a weapon an act of 'piracy' punishable by death.

Texans, Mexican and American, rose in revolt. Santa Anna's reply was swift and brutal. He destroyed the American force at the Alamo – no prisoners. A few days later the Texan force at Goliad surrendered, but Santa Anna ordered the prisoners executed. With these two acts, he ensured the undying hatred of the Texans. At San Jacinto, when the American force under Sam Houston surprised the resting Mexicans, the battle was over but, according to the audio visual display at the San Jacinto monument, the killing went on all day. As a result of the war, Mexico ceded all rights to Texas and agreed to move her force back beyond the Rio Grande.

Here arose one of the planks that would surface as a 'cause of war' a decade later. The traditional border of the state of Tejas had been the Rio Nueces, but Texas now claimed that Mexico had ceded to it all land as far south as the Rio Grande, a full one hundred and fifty miles south. So, we have a dispute that simmers on. At the same time, America is casting her eyes to the West partially for the reasons mentioned by Beecher and co., but primarily to offer further living room for a growing population and the belief that it was her Manifest Destiny to do so: '...the destiny of North America is ours, ours is the right to the rivers, and all the sources of future opulence and power..' (New York Post, 1803); '...it is the manifest destiny of the English race to occupy this whole continent and display their practical understanding in matters of government and colonisation which no other

race has given such proof of possessing since the Romans' (James Russell Lowell).

To these were added voices saying it was her religious duty to convert the ignorant.

Mitchner's novel *Texas* was invaluable in painting a broad picture of this period, with non-fiction books such as *West*, and interviews with Marco Longoria, ethnically Mexican, but born in what is now the US, despite the fact that his family never moved, my friend and compadre – his daughter is married to my son and we are both grandfather to a little Tex-Mex-Irish grandson – Dr. Ernesto Valdés, University of Houston, and other leading members of the *tejano* community yielded a great insight into this period.

Again, whilst all this is covered in the novel, in the play it has to be reduced to a few sentences, without losing anything. So, when Tomas meets the recruiting sergeants trying to get people to enlist for the war, I give them the line:

'If this war comes it'll only last a few weeks... if that', which allows Tomas to inform the audience. 'As far as I was concerned there was no if about it. From what I'd heard on the boat, America wanted the West, the fact that it was part of Mexico wasn't going to worry them. This was America we're talking about. They'd already tried to but it and been turned down. So, the question was what next. And the answer to that seemed to lie in Texas.

Texas had been part of Mexico until it rebelled in 1836, setting its borders a full 150 miles further than its traditional boundary on the Rio Nueces. Since then, Texas had considered itself independent, but Mexico considered it a state in revolt. No we were all set for war all we needed was a spark.'

And of course to avoid this being seen as too dense it is put in as part of a scene with Tomas going to place a rose in the water for his mother's birthday, she had died on the boat over. So the information is contained in a scene that starts with humour, Tomas buying a flower, and ends with pathos. And in between, Stephen plays no less than six characters.

LI: If the bravery of the Irish soldiers is seen as a symbol of love for freedom, wasn't it an irony

dying in a foreign country for a cause that it wasn't their own?

LOL: In 1691, after the Treaty of Limerick brought the Williamite/Jacobite Wars to an end, many Irish soldiers left the country for service abroad. Amongst them was the soldier hero Patrick Sarsfield. Two years later in 1693, he was fatally wounded at the battle of Landen, Belgium, in the service of the French. His final words are said to have been 'Would that this had been for Ireland.' One wonders how many more of the diaspora died with a similar sentiment on their lips. Certainly John Riley is reported to have said something similar. In the case of the San Pats there is possibly a greater irony in that they were fighting against the same ethnicity and thought process that had been in the ascendancy in their home land. In my play I actually have Tomas remind the audience by quoting John Riley's (or to be more exact, words I put into his mouth) 'these are the first cousins of those who leave our people at home to starve with grass in their mouth. So when we hit them, hit the bastard hard. And when we've won this one, we'll go home and win that one too.' But as a number of San Pats actually stayed in Mexico, I also like to think that Mexico did become 'home' and 'their own'. Again, words I put into the mouth of Tomas's brothers: 'This is our home now. Home and it's free and we'll keep it that way or die trying'; and at another time 'Just like home, only with sunshine.' This is in fact the immigrant experience, some never lose the sense of loss of being an exile, others embrace their new country as home and Ireland as a place where they grew up and many of their family still live. As the son of Irish immigrants to England, I grew up in the West Midlands experiencing both viewpoints: the first from my mother, the second from my father.

LI: Would you say that the story of *100 More Like These* is therefore an allegory of the tragedy suffered by oppressed Latin American countries?

LOL: An allegory for Latin America. Good question, I hadn't thought of that, but inevitably my own perceptions and belief systems will come into influence in whatever I write, either overtly or – more hopefully – covertly. 'The world has enough for every man's need but not

for every man's greed' - Mahatma Gandhi. Whilst the San Pats story is set in Mexico, I believe that the societal models and mores it mirrors are not restricted to Latin America, but are universal. The control of resources vested in an oligarchy or plutocracy or autocracy (be that presidential or monarchic); the exploitation of the majority by that elite, double exploitation of indigenous peoples (not only exploited by the elite but frequently by the non-indigenous lower classes); these national problems compounded by the threat of force or invasion or exploitation by an external force. These themes are universal. Think of any continent and almost any society within that continent and this is history or is - in most cases - their present reality. So, perhaps it is an unintended universal allegory, if that doesn't sound too pretentious.

LI: What was the reception of your play in Ireland?

LOL: The play has been performed a number of times since its debut last November (it had actually been scheduled for 10 September 2007, the 160th anniversary of the executions, but Stephen became ill), and it has received very favourable reaction. We have been invited to take it to the Edinburgh Festival and some interest has been shown in staging it in various parts of America. Its last performance was in April and it is now off the road as both Stephen and I are involved in the new project, *Wanted, The Legendary Stone Mountain Band, Dead Or Alive*, a musical comedy which is about as far removed from the San Pats as it is possible to get. It will be back for a brief tour in mid-September and again in October, and possibly a longer run in New Year, but this really depends on Stephen's schedule as he is committed to working on two new plays in November, with talk of a return for *Stone Mountain* in December.

LI: To produce a play and put it on stage involves many decisions, mainly the selection of the right actor for a one-man play. You mentioned here that Stephen plays approximately twenty-five characters, and sometimes three or six involved in conversation. That is really difficult and requires a great talent and practice in acting. Did you already know

Stephen Jones? Have you worked together before?

LOL: This question is answered with not a little pride: in summer 2001, I was facilitating a creative writing course which was due to run one day a week for six weeks. As these things tend to, it took on a life of its own and ran once a week for six years. Amongst the students that came to these after-school sessions was a fifteen-year-old named Stephen Jones. Even then, he was a wonderful writer. In 2004 Stephen and another student entered university. My advice to them was that to develop their writing, they should involve themselves in the student drama society as both actors and writers: I believe that if someone acts they understand the necessity of developing a character, creating a persona from words on the page, something which is essential in the creative writing process. Of course this comes from someone who could not act if his life depended on it. Neal Richardson got involved in the History and Philosophy Society but Stephen joined Dramsoc and talk about destiny calling! He had never acted before, but from his very first performance in *Twelve Angry Men* it was obvious that he truly was a natural. He also continued his writing and began directing. In one year he won Best Script, Best Actor and Best Director at the student drama awards. He completed his MA in creative writing last year, a year which also saw him have one of his plays given a public reading by *Druid*, one of Ireland's leading theatre companies, and also made history by becoming the first white actor to appear in *Athol Fugard's Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, a play based in a township in Apartheid South Africa. Incidentally, Neal went on to write a non-fiction book about Irish soldiers in World War One, which is now being adapted by him as a stage play which Stephen will appear in and direct in November. And another member from that group, Sean Ferric, has his first play on in mainstream theatre next week.

LI: Could you tell us about your present projects? Are they related with national and international theatre? Where are they set – in a classical or contemporary context?

LOL: Currently I am outlining a project on five Irish women who were in America in the mid-

to-late nineteenth century: one of them, Lola Montez was a courtesan in Germany before becoming an actress in the States, another - Nellie Cashman - was last year inducted into the cowgirl hall of fame, and a third whose name escapes me, lived her life as a man and Civil War veteran. I will probably write it – if I write it – in something like five interlinked stories, all told in snatches rather than continuous narrative. I am also completing the outline of a piece for one man and a karaoke machine entitled ‘The Last Great Karaoke Show’, and making notes for a potential project on four very strong women from Irish mythology who all had a role in the fate of one of greatest mythological figures Cuchulain. These are all theatre pieces and concurrent with them is my work to complete the San Pats novel for teenagers.

But there is also a San Pats-related story that intrigues. All of the Catholic immigrant soldiers in the American Army endured the same prejudice, brutality, repression of religious freedom at the hands, in the case of the Irish, of members of the same ethnic group that oppressed and subjugated them at home. They all experienced in Mexico a culture which in

terms of religion, love of music and dance and expression was so like their own. They were all aware that they were in a Protestant Anglo army invading a Catholic country, an occurrence which had such strong echoes with their own history, yet only 500 or so (the number varies depending on the source consulted) changed sides. Why didn't more of them go?

LI: Many thanks Larry for sharing with us your fascinating stories and work. We wish you great success!

LOL: Thank you so much for all the questions. They really made me think about my work, my techniques and indeed my *raison d'être* in a way that I rarely do. As I mentioned at the beginning of our correspondence, my starting point is usually a story or story idea, followed by an image of a character and then a headlong leap into the writing process until I emerge at the out of the other side of the process with - hopefully - a decent product. So, thank you. This has been an interesting experience.

Lights off.

Laura P.Z. Izarra

Notes

1 Laura P.Z. Izarra is a Professor of English Literatures and Irish Diaspora Literature at the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

2 In another email, Larry wrote: ‘I see I omitted the names of some of the sources on Tex-Mex history; The Tejano Community, 1836-1900 by Arnolde de Leon, Hispanic Presence in the United States by Frank de Varona, Hispanic Texas by Helen Simons and Cathryn A. Hoyt, and Land!: Irish pioneers in Mexican and Revolutionary Texas by Graham Davis. Other books included on various themes are novels, such as Mexico by James Mitchner, Gone For Soldiers by Jeff Shaara, Saint Patrick's Battalion by Carl Krueger, Saint Patrick's Battalion by James Alexander Thom; and non-fiction, The Rogues March: John Riley and the Saint Patrick's Battalion by Peter F. Stevens, Many Mexicos by Lesley Byrd Simpson, History and Legends of the Alamo and Other Missions in and around San Antonio by Adina de Zavala, The West: An Illustrated History by Wards, Ives and Burns. Texas Handbook online is an excellent source for snippets on Texas history, and the US-MEXICAN WAR, 1846-48 PBS HBO Video is an extremely good compliment to Mark Day's film.’