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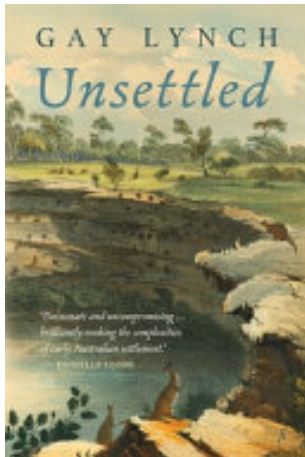
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**TEXT Review**

**Unsettling histories of the Irish in Australia**

*review by Brigid Magner*



Gay Lynch

*Unsettled*

Ligature, Balmain NSW 2019

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*Unsettled* is an Irish settler-colonial novel which follows a family from Galway to South Australia in the 1850s. Author Gay Lynch is preoccupied with the psychological baggage and apocryphal stories carried by these Galway Lynches to Booandik country, near modern-day Mount Gambier.

Lynch is an associate in Creative Writing and English at Flinders University whose first novel, *Cleanskin*, was published in 2005. *Unsettled* derived from her PhD, which was

awarded in 2008. Lynch's PhD also generated a scholarly monograph, *Apocryphal and Literary Influences on Galway Diasporic History* (2010). 'Apocryphal stories' Lynch argues, 'attract creative writers like me who want to dig up stories that already exist, like turf; then we watch them flare, creating new truths out of possible lies' (115).

The novel's protagonist, Rosanna, comes from a busy, overcrowded Irish household near Gambierton, described as: 'two wattle and daubed rooms lined and pegged with bullock hides, a thatched roof and a stone chimney, box furniture wobbling on an earthen floor' (8). With her mother, Rosanna shares the burden of looking after a large family, including an ailing baby. She seeks escape from this environment with her Booandik friend Moorecke. Even though Irish Catholics were themselves marginalised by the English, they were white settlers on unceded land nevertheless. They were not in the same position of Indigenous peoples they encountered. Nevertheless, Rosanna's kinship with Moorecke allows Lynch to explore the progressive dispossession of Booandik people during this period.

In fact, Moorecke is an almost constant presence in Rosanna's mind. The novel begins with Rosanna worrying about the turn in the weather and the consequences for her friend's wellbeing: 'If Rosanna has a winter cough, Moorecke's must be worse and dangerous for a *Booandik*' (1).

Their relationship has changed since Moorecke's marriage to an older man and the loss of her young child. This leaves Rosanna feeling nostalgic for this early intimacy:

How long has it been since Rosanna woke in full moonlight to the whump of possum-skin drums, the tapping of sticks, the rise and fall of singing? Once, smelling roasting bustard, she had crept between the trees and hunkered down at. Distance to watch Moorecke seated with young women at the *murpenas*. Why had she not been paired with one of the *moorongal-ngara* who stamped a half-second behind the beat through the camp dust round the fire, spears quivering at their young shoulders, goanna fat and ochre glistening on their skin? (11)

Due to her formative association with Moorecke, Rosanna is hyper-aware of threats to the Booandik people by the encroachment of farmers. She notices that many of them had disappeared in the years since the Lynches arrived from Ireland.

The settlers increasingly find minor excuses to drive them further away. The first chapter opens with the death of a bullock belonging to a local farmer with a spear in its neck. Rosanna's first thought is whether it's been killed by Moorecke, causing her anxiety because she knows the power of their neighbour William Ashby only too well. When Moorecke later borrows a special dress from Rosanna's employer Mrs Ashby's wife, it threatens to trigger off a violent skirmish.

As Frances Devlin-Glass argues in *Tinteán*, Rosanna fits to a tee the prototypical ‘new Australian girl’, anti-imperial and anti-feminine, which became popular in the character of Miles Franklin’s Sybylla and in the young adult novels of Mary Grant Bruce (Devlin Glass 2020). Like Sybylla, Rosanna is frustrated by the limited roles she is allotted, as a carer to siblings and as a poorly paid servant to Mrs Ashby. She is a talented horse racer, but her prowess goes unrecognised while her brother Edwin’s achievements are celebrated, despite his compulsive gambling and dubious dealings.

Edward Geoghegan’s historical play, *The Hibernian Father* (1840) is used intertextually as device to offer an artistic diversion for Rosanna, and indirectly to her sensitive brother Skelly who also reads it. Geoghegan is known for writing the first tragedy for the Sydney stage. His obituary records that he ‘was a dramatic author of no mean order, and his pen has contributed considerably to the scanty stock of genuine colonial dramatic literature’ (Obituaries Australia 2010-2020). The main character in *The Hibernian Father* is a father who, as Galway mayor, feels obliged to execute his own son for allegedly murdering a Spanish rival in love.

Lynch draws attention to the archetypal aspect of the tension between fathers and sons, particularly the tale of Cuchulainn killing his son in the stories of the Ulster mythological cycle. In *Unsettled*, the eldest son Edwin is judged to be a criminal, but the family denies this dark tradition and chooses to support him. Meanwhile Rosanna and Skelly are less favoured and struggle to find independence from the homestead, without the advantages Edwin enjoys.

Rosanna becomes aware of the Galway story when the visiting actor George Sutherland first tells her about Geoghegan’s play, leading to readings and frankly described erotic encounters in the Ashby’s barn. George later drowns in the wreck of the *Admella* which Gordon eulogised, rather inaccurately, in his poem ‘From the Wreck’. This tragedy, and Gordon’s title, recently reappeared with the publication of Jane Rawson’s speculative novel *From the Wreck* (2017).

Rosanna, who has a talent for witnessing inauspicious events, watches the foundering ship from the shore:

Appalling enough to see a vessel, mostly obscured by the rising swell, and so stricken upon the reef that the mast and sail have been ripped asunder; but, most distressing of all, a man runs along the deck, his hands thrown in the air in wild gesticulation (260).

This tragedy has a counterpoint in the betrayal of Skelly at a Catholic monastery. After being recommended by Father Tennison Woods, a family friend and associate of Gordon’s,

Skelly joins this Monastery to study etymology. Its large collection of specimens provides a pretext for a monstrous priest to violently assault him. Skelly's haemophilia, figured as a pathological sign of Irish predispositions, proves ultimately fatal.

The poor luck of Rosanna's family brings to mind the suffering of the Finch family in Lucy Treloar's *Salt Creek* (2015) set in the Coorong (Kurangk) region. Like Lynch, Treloar drew on family history as well as detailed place-based research for her novel. Peter Pierce observes that Treloar took her portrait of the Finch patriarch from prominent South Australian John Barton Hack who had many failed schemes and misadventures (Pierce 2015).

Rosanna's family, while far from perfect, is far more anti-authoritarian and rebellious than the downcast Finchs. Her parents are not stereotypical 19th century elders, who fail to forgive their son when he commits a crime. Her mother Eilish, while grief stricken by the death of a baby, does not conform to the cliché of the martyred mother. She has an unschooled intellect and fighting spirit like Rosanna herself. Like Hester Finch who worships *Jane Eyre*, Rosanna has encounters with literary culture which open up new horizons. Gordon, who recurs throughout the narrative, is depicted as an aloof, distant figure with a refrigerated manner who mutters to himself while riding which accords with many extant descriptions of him.

Rosanna catches the eye of Gordon, who made no secret of his interest in good-looking girls in real life. he wrote to his friend Charley Walker about a pretty woman, 'I certainly tried it on strong but without success; not that I meant Matrimony' (Lynch 2010: 193). In Lynch's novel, Gordon flirts with Rosanna but she is preoccupied with George the married actor.

After riding her family's champion horse Lucifer all the way to Melbourne, Rosanna embeds herself in the theatrical environment that her dead lover George once inhabited. This brings her back into Gordon's orbit, if briefly. Lynch contrives an improbable meeting between them at Brighton beach, shortly before his death by suicide. Gordon is a diminished figure, who complains of headaches derived from riding accidents: 'My constant companion, pain.' (386) Rosanna thinks that the 'inside of his head is likely scrambled, the result of falling from horseback.' (386) Thinking about Gordon's legacy, Rosanna worries that her own story will not be remembered. (386) Notwithstanding her evident bravery and passion, it's likely she will leave little trace in historical records.

Lynch observes that this book was originally prompted by a desire to reinscribe Lynch women in history, to imagine their hidden back-stories and analyse their lack of agency in family narratives. In her PhD research, she sought to understand why girls disappear from many family stories, right up to the present time, and how representations of Irish girls and their sexuality can be contested.

In her published PhD, *Apocryphal and Literary Influences*, Lynch asks: ‘As a creative writer, teacher and researcher, rather than the family genealogist, what do I owe the living and what do I owe the dead?’ (140). She argues that she has attempted to unify Lynch stories, particularly the apocryphal, and offer an alternative history. *Unsettled* operates on the level of the family but it also makes multiple offerings Australian literary culture. Firstly, it’s a contribution to the literature of South Australia. Secondly, it’s reminiscent of Australian pioneer sagas by Nancy Cato and Eleanor Dark that explore the experiences of female settlers in challenging environments. Yet Lynch extends the range of the female characters in these sagas, endowing Rosanna with a lively erotic life and sense of agency that is unusual in earlier texts. Finally, Dianne Hall suggests that we might be able talk of a discrete tradition of Irish-Australian literature, running from Frank the Poet, via Joseph Furphy to Vincent Buckley, Tom Kenneally, and Thea Astley (Hall 2020). While challenging certain aspects of Irish settler culture, Lynch should surely be counted among these illustrious predecessors.

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