Film which began as an Echo story to screen at Cork Film Festival

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ECHOFEATURES

THE SATURDAY short story

A Day For The Fire

This week's short story was written by Maurice O'Callaghan. It is the title story of his present collection which is in all major bookshops now

"'Tis a day for the fire sure enough," he said. He came forward with his whiskey glass in his hand. He stood with his back to the fire and took a sip.

"No doubt about that," I said slowly.

He was a neat balding man, dressed in a dark suit, no tie. He didn't look like a farmer: salesman maybe, hard to tell. I was eating a ham sandwich and drinking coffee. I had dropped in for a quick snack before going back to the farm. I parked in the yard outside. The wind was blowing long and cold from the north east, had been blowing from that side for a month or more, like a Foehn or a Santana; made you feel uneasy.

He stood there slowly sipping, throwing looks at me. I sat and munched and read sentences of the *Cork Examiner* between bites. He was probably trying to find an opening to make conversation and I didn't feel much like talking. And the big, empty, cold barn of a bar-room didn't exactly fill you with Christmas cheer. Especially the carpet. It had some kind of faded, multi-coloured pattern on it, with plenty of dust and beer stains and a smell like a left full of mouldy oats. But the fire was big and hot and cheerful, like a red giant in a deserted galaxy.

"Twouldn't be a big effort to stay here for the day, right enough," says he, "that fire would tempt you."

"Oh, 'tis brass monkey weather alright," I said, and went on reading. He was probably trying to figure out what I did: didn't look like a farmer although dressed like one. What the hell could I be? He looked inquisitive: "They say that bleddy wind blows straight across northern Europe from Latvia or Moldavia or some bleddy place, and the first high ground it hits is Nottingham, England."

"Fancy that," I said.

"Ever hear the bate of it?" He was half chuckling to himself at the thought: "Course if you look at the map you won't find any mountains 'til the middle of England — th' Appennines."

"What about the Urals?"

"Ah, no, they're farther east, tis th' Appennines are the first."

"You mean the Pennines," I said, "the Appennines are in Italy."

"Christ, are they?" He looked a bit taken aback, regarding me leaner still. He hummed to himself, looked into the fire, shifted on his feet and hetsaved like a hen with an egg. I capitulated eventually: "Quiet enough around here."

"'Tis faith," he said eagerly.

"I suppose everyone is out working," I ventured.

"Well, the way I see it, there's no shortage of work today, for any fella that's inclined to work." He spoke like the men of the south: a pleasant, thick-vowelled, sing-song lilt, with plenty of purchase on the r's. My accent had lost most of its southern trace but I slipped in easily to the accent whenever I returned from far away. I was at home in these parts.

"Are you from Dunmanway?" he asked.

"No," I smiled, "from here, a few miles westalong."

"You don't sound like it," he said.

"I've been gone for twenty years," I said, "but I'm from here alright."

"Humph," he gave a sideways shake of his head, took a long slug and ordered another whiskey from the barman who came and went a ghost.

"...where are you from yourself?" I asked.

"Farther side."

The whiskey and the fire were warming him and I more relaxed as well. He had a pleasant, open face; hard to pin him down age-wise. Except he was maybe ten or twelve years older than myself. "Would you be Crowley?" he asked. He slipped up on you like a sidewinder with the questions.

"Crinnigan," I said.

"Anything to the Crinnigans of Towerhill?"

"Cousins, I'm from Shanaoaddra."

"I know it well," he said, "many's the bad day I spent up there, and the worse night. There's the world wide of water up there, there is so, the world wide of it."

"There can be," I said.

He sat on a chair and faced me, getting eager: "Course I had mighty nights up there too, in Grady's place, and Dan Driblin's. No shortage of a drop of the crathur in them houses. Yerra what, whiskey and porter, the finest. I knew all the characters: Jerry 'here-at-home, Tipperary, John Barry — I knew them all; spent a lot of days up there on the hill, nights too. I did faith."

And so did I. Days when the wind blew over Thodies from Carrauhill, full of the warm south. Spring evenings when Charlie Jordan's lilting tenor floated up the eastern lane as he drove his cows to milking: "It's now or never, come hold me tight, kiss me my darling, be mine tonight."

Lazy sundown evenings as the crisp crack of a hurley ball echoed across the field from Jamesies, and I up a tree like a sailor on a top gallant to see if Sean and Seamus were out to play. And my mother at the beehives and my sisters romancing all along the blackberry roads in the fiery light, being chased by the boys of summer.

"Water is a divil," he was saying, "a pure whore if you don't know how to handle it."

"What?" I asked from the fields of memory.

"Hard to find it and hard to hold it."

"So that's what you are, then," I smiled, "a water diviner."

"I'm not faith, devil the water diviner, Christ no, boyeen, I'm a grant-man."

"Ah," I exclaimed, "I'd never have guessed."

"Hard to tell with a fella sometimes, what he does, or what's on his mind for that matter." I nodded, drank my coffee and said: "So you know these parts well?"

"Yerra what," he said, "Kilmichael, Clonakilty, Rosscarbery, Skibbereen; I know every boreen in West Cork."

"'Tis a grand old spot," I smiled.

"Divil a grander," he said, "sure there's no better country in the world if a fella had the work to stay at home."

"There seems to be plenty of work around at the moment," I said.

"You can be sure of that," he said, "plasterers, carpenters, bricklayers are getting a pound a block. My own fella was out foreign; he came back. He says 'tis better here than Australia."

"Your fella?" I enquired.

"Son a' mine," he explained, "he spent th years in Australia and things were good th But he came back."

"So, Ireland must be doing better th Australia," I suggested.

"By all accounts," he said, fondling his gla and gazing suddenly into the fire. He shifted on his seat and moved a little closer to me. "Course he always was a home-bird. Even though he liked to travel, he liked it better at home."

"I was the opposite," I said. "I'd never ask to come home. In my twenties I spent several years in America; never ask to come home."

"There you are," said my friend, remotely, and continued: "The bleddy fella could turn his hand to anything: bricklaying, plastering, plumbing; and no shortage of women neither; yerra what; batin' em away he'd be."

"He must be a good looking man," I said.

"Straight as a ramrod. Finest man in this part of the country. And another thing: a great man under the high ball, don't he talking; hit it left or right, a ground hurler. Play anywhere: midfield, full back, centre half-forward, go through iron he would." He drank again and said: "He's dead since, too." He said it so matter-of-factly it didn't sink in.

"Who's dead?" I asked, puzzled.

"My fella," he said.

"You mean your son?"

"He did away with himself about two months ago. Only twenty-seven. He used shotgun."

The patterns on the dirty carpet seemed to grow more grotesque. The dull boom of trucks on the street outside was suddenly louder. The barman hovered out of hearing like a ghost. My coffee tasted flat. He cradled his whiskey gla and rubbed his balding pate with his fr hand.

A HUNDRED MILES FROM CASHEL

The short story we ran two weeks ago, on October 29, called *A Hundred Miles From Cashel*, was attributed to the wrong author. It was actually written by Maurice O'Callaghan (pictured), author of today's short story. *A Hundred Miles From Cashel* will feature in Maurice's new collection of short stories coming out next year. Maurice's present collection, *A Day For The Fire*, is a bestseller and is in all major bookshops. Maurice also directed the international feature film *The Broken Harvest*, which was shot in Cork and will return shortly to RTE screens.

"The fire was big and hot and cheerful, like a red giant in a deserted galaxy."

ROBERT O'SHEA chats with writer and director Maurice O'Callaghan from Newcestown about his latest film offering The Lord's Burning Rain, which was first published as a short story called A Day For The Fire in the Evening Echo in November 2005

IT'S not every film at the Cork Film Festival that begins life as a story in the *Echo*, but that is the case with Maurice O'Callaghan's *The Lord's Burning Rain,* which will receive its world premiere as the matinee in the Opera House this Sunday at 2pm.

O'Callaghan hails from Newcestown and this is his second feature film, coming after his debut, *Broken Harvest,* was the closing film at the festival back in the mid-1990s.

Why the long gap?

"My children were young so I concentrated on writing instead. You can write in a solitary space, whereas with a movie, well, it's a big undertaking," says O'Callaghan.

"Even with this movie being low budget, it is a sacrifice. Not that writing isn't, just you can do it while the kids are in the other room."

That writing led to a book of short stories and, more recently, the sweeping historical novel set during the wars of the 1920s, *In Their Dreams of Fire.*

The short story that his new film is based on comes from the former collection, *A Day for the Fire,* and was published by this newspaper in the middle of the last decade.

The film is set in 1960s west Cork (it was shot around Ballydehob, Coolkelure outside Dunmanway and in the Shehy mountains) and follows a 17-year-old boy as he travels alone 40 miles home on a horse his father has just bought.

O'Callaghan compares the boy's journey to the one Telemachus made in search of his father during Homer's *Odyssey*.

"I am transposing the events surrounding the Trojan War to the War of Independence in Ireland. The film is an allegory."

O'Callaghan studied under screenwriting guru Robert McKee when he lived in Hollywood and explains: "Most of those courses begin with the Greeks and how they invented storytelling as we know it now.

"At the start of the trip the boy meets a Protestant farmer and the man gives him poteen."

Following this episode, the tale takes a surreal turn — thanks to that hard liquor — and after the boy and horse pass a memorial to Kilmichael, they ride into a flashback scene from the guerilla war that took place 40 years before.

"He hallucinates these battle scenes that had been described to him vividly by his father, a veteran of the struggle. It is a sort of trip down into Hades, if you will.

"He then meets a gypsy women, who, after attempting to steal his horse, seduces him, which also recalls the odysseys made by the epic heroes."

This role of the gypsy siren is played by Caroline Morahan, formerly an RTE presenter, who for the past four years has been pursuing an acting career in LA.

She is not the only recognisable face, with *Fair City*'s Jonathan Ryan and Jon Kenny of D'Unbelievables fame taking roles.

In the starring role is O'Callaghan's son Harry, who had to endure a tough nine months before the film wrapped this Easter.

"We only had cameras rolling for maybe six weeks over that time and, as Harry was doing his Leaving Cert during the year; we had to fit the shoot around him and the weather.

"Then he fell of the horse. He was all right but we had to pay a visit to Bantry Hospital to make sure his back was OK."

Not that the director was overly concerned with resting a good chunk of the responsibility for carrying the film on one so young, adding: "My father was the same age as my son is now when he fought the Black and Tans at Crossbarry."

"All my stories are set in west Cork; I tried to write about experiences in America but my publishers said they felt forced and that my best work came from my roots"

The Lord's Burning Rain was filmed in various locations around west Cork.

The director had made a similar journey on a horse as the protagonist when he was a child and it was passing the Kilmichael Memorial then that he got the inspiration for his story.

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The title *The Lord's Burning Rain* is a biblical phrase that in the film hangs as a sign in the kitchen of an old man: It orders man to repent or face God's wrath.

"I wanted this to be a new exploration of the relationship between the two sides in west Cork.

"My mother's side were Protestants who became Catholics and that is the history of west Cork. This is an attempt to pull back some of those layers and reveal the tensions at the time, to also shine a spotlight on the killings of Protestants in the Bandon valley, the pogrom that occurred and its reverberations."

O'Callaghan considers himself more a writer than a film-maker, but he prefers the process of the latter.

"What I love about film-making is working in a team. I enjoy making films more but I may very well be better at writing."

The Lord's Burning Rain team included another family member,