

2018
SHORTLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL

GERALD
MURNANE

BORDER
DISTRICTS

EXTRACT



Two months ago, when I first arrived in this township just short of the border, I resolved to guard my eyes, and I could not think of going on with this piece of writing unless I were to explain how I came by that odd expression.

I got some of my schooling from a certain order of religious brothers, a band of men who dressed each in a black soutane with a bib of white celluloid at his throat. I learned by chance last year, and fifty years since I last saw anyone wearing such a thing, that the white bib was called a rabat and was a symbol of chastity. Among the few books that I brought here from the capital city is a large dictionary, but the word rabat is not listed in it. The word may well be French, given that the order of brothers was founded in France. In this remote district, I am even less inclined than I was in the suburbs of the capital city to seek out some or another obscure fact; here, near the border, I am even more inclined than of old to accept as well founded any supposition likely to complete a pattern in my mind and then to go on writing until I learn the meaning for me of such an image as that of the white patch which appeared just now against a black ground at the edge of my mind and will not be easily dislodged.

The school where the brothers taught was built in the grounds of what had been a two-storey mansion of yellow sandstone in a street lined with plane-trees in an inner eastern suburb of the capital city. The mansion itself had been converted into the brothers' residence. On the ground floor of the former mansion, one of the rooms overlooking the return veranda was the chapel, which was used by the brothers for their daily mass and prayers but was available also to us, their students.

In the language of that place and time, a student who called at the chapel for a few minutes was said to be paying a visit. The object of his visitation was said to be Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament or, more commonly, the Blessed Sacrament. We boys were urged by teachers and priests to pay frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament. It was implied that the personage denoted by that phrase would feel aggrieved or lonely if visitors were lacking. My class once heard from a religious brother one of a sort of story that was often told in order to promote our religious zeal. A non-Catholic of good will had asked a priest to explain the teachings of the Church in the matter of the Blessed Sacrament.



The priest then explained how every disc of consecrated bread in every tabernacle in every Catholic church or chapel, even though it appeared to be mere bread, was in substance the body of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. The inquirer of good will then declared that if only he were able to believe this, he would spend every free moment in some or another Catholic church or chapel, in the presence of the divine manifestation.

In our school magazine every year, in his annual report to parents, our principal wrote at length about what he called the religious formation of us boys. In every classroom, the first period of every day was given over to Christian Doctrine, or religion, as we more often called it. Students recited aloud together a short prayer before every period of the daily timetable. I believed that most of my classmates took their religion seriously, but I seldom heard any boy make any mention, outside the classroom, of anything to do with that religion. The chapel was out of sight of the playground, and so I was never aware of how many of my classmates paid visits there. However, I went through several periods of religious fervour during my schooldays, and during each such period I paid several visits daily to the Blessed Sacrament. Sometimes I saw one or another of my classmates in the chapel, kneeling as I knelt with head bowed or eyes fixed on the locked tabernacle, within which, and out of our sight, was the gold-plated ciborium filled with the white wafers that we thought of as the Blessed Sacrament. I was never satisfied with my attempts to pray or to contemplate, and I often wondered what exactly was taking place in the mind of my devout-seeming classmate. I would have liked to ask him what he seemed to see while he prayed; how he envisaged the divine or canonised personages that he addressed in his mind, and much else. Sometimes, by chance, a classmate and I would leave the chapel at the same time and would walk together along the return veranda and then through the brothers' garden towards the playground, but for me to have questioned the boy then about his devotions would have been hardly less disturbing than if I had made him an indecent proposition.