

The Hurley Maker's Son: A Memoir

Patrick Deeley, 2016

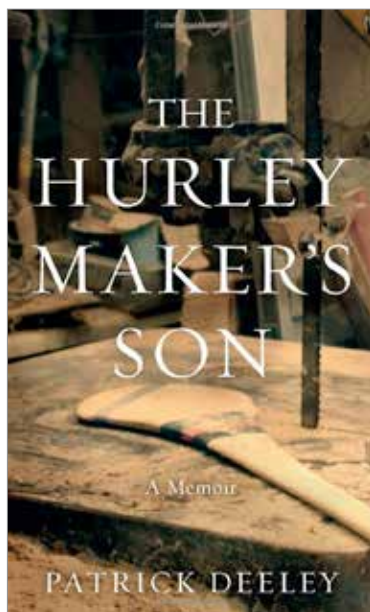
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Patrick Deeley is not the first author to try and make sense of a life that begins in an idyllic but at times harsh environment and ends in the inevitable leaving of place, family, friends and innocence. However, his journey from rural childhood and adolescence to urban adulthood has a number of ingredients that mark it apart from other memoirs exploring similar themes and terrain.

Life on a small farm in the townland of Foxhall, east of Loughrea, Co. Galway in the 1950s and 1970s is vividly captured by Deeley but it's the allure of the woodland that shapes his father's, and ultimately, the author's life. Like many small farmers, his father Larry had to work outside the farm to subvent the family income and his road less travelled led him to hurley making and carpentry.

But Larry Deeley is more than a hurley maker. Unlike most hurley makers who source the raw material, now invariably harvested in European forests, Larry lives and breathes

hurley ash from tree selection and harvesting in the forest to the sawing, planing, shaping and sanding in the sawmill and workshop. He is at one with his craft, from start to finish.

Patrick Deeley describes the sights, sounds and smells of this cycle of events as it unfolds each time his father wins a contract from the Forest and Wildlife Service to purchase a stand of ash. The main actors, led by the hurley maker himself, swing into action with their machinery, muscle and occasional mayhem. The strolling players include the author's uncles, brothers and a near neighbour, the menacing Paddy Joe McHugh—aka “Strong”—who provides devilment and muscle.

They act out their roles in the woodland, sawmill and workshop, but we learn in the opening chapter of *The Hurley Maker's Son* that the curtain has come down for Larry Deeley in his final tragic act. The author is on the Dublin to Galway train ruefully reflecting on a note, dropped in to his Terenure bedsit, which urges him to return home as his father has had an accident. Well aware of the inherent dangers in felling ash trees, he fears the worst.

He learns the circumstances of his father's death from his brothers Simon and Vincent. Over familiarity with his work, coupled with pressure to get the job done, led him to take an uncharacteristic risk when cutting through a felled tree to free it. But “the upper section of the tree lurched, striking him on the left temple before he could step back”. This all took place in an era before health and safety; before helmets became mandatory not just for the hurley ash harvesters, but also for the hurlers who wielded the finished camáns.

He also learned from his brothers that it was a week when nothing seemed to go right. The hurley maker's wife Mary “the chief farmer in the family” reminded him that the barley was overripe and should take precedence over the hurleys. But the rains came so they headed for the wood at Moore near Athlone where chainsaws gave trouble and felling was difficult. The hurley maker liked open well-thinned woodlands but, “the trees at Moore were rooted close to one another and in their reach for light, they had grown unusually tall.”

His father was conscious of the continuum in good forestry practice. The author portrays him as a craftsman and forester conscious of sustainable forestry long before the term was coined. We learn this in the poetry of Deeley's *Groundswell: New and Selected Poems*. In “Woodman” he describes his father at work, carefully selecting the right ash trees for hurley making while keeping an eye on what is left behind, for future selection.

And he satisfied himself he was leaving at least a dozen trees for
each tree he felled.

The years of his apprenticeship sprouted afresh at Woodlawn as
dusk silenced work...

His father passes on his knowledge of wood to Patrick and his siblings, mainly through work but he also took time to explain the characteristics of different timbers

He explained that wood is made of fibres and these are perforated with many tiny pores through which it breathes and sweats. In fact we could smell the sweating and breathing wood around us. ‘Ash has hardly any smell,’ he continued, ‘and oak is generally mild, though it can be sour as cat’s piss. Larch holds a small whiff, but the tar-and-turpentine smell of the lovely Scots pine – aah, that’s the dominant one.’

While the woodland and its associated crafts are central to the book’s narrative flow, the landscape of the Foxhall Callows acts as a spiritual and topographical counterpoint. Unlike the forest, it is wetland and virtually tree-less, but its flora and fauna exert a strong hold on the young Deeley even when his ill-tempered school teacher dismisses the local callows as “a miserable bit of old marshy ground” compared to the River Shannon Callows.

The death of his father releases a rich set of emotions in Deeley as he retraces his formative years spanning his primary school experiences followed by secondary school in St. Brendan’s, Loughrea. Young Deeley was bright and in today’s environment would be regarded as an exemplary student. But in the overly strict school environment of the 1960s and early 1970s, he was regarded as troublesome at times, when even the slightest misdemeanour was punished.

Career opportunities were limited when Deeley left school. He acknowledges that he didn’t have the required skills for carpentry and hurley making and had no desire to enter Tynagh Mines, which was then a major but unsustainable employer in the area.

Various experiences during his youth pointed towards teaching and in 1973 he was accepted by St. Patrick’s Training College in Drumcondra, Dublin. He began his teaching career in De La Salle National School, Ballyfermot where he was eventually appointed principal. Deeley also began to cut it as a poet, mixing it with writers such as John F. Deane, Pat McCabe, Gabriel Rosenstock, Conleth Ellis and John Ennis.

While much of the book revolves around his father, other male relatives and friends, Deeley was fortunate in having two strong women by his side. His practical mother saw the potential in him and insisted that he would “receive a secondary education irrespective of the costs involved”. Judy Carroll, his girlfriend and later his wife, encouraged his writing and persuaded him to send his first poems to the visionary David Marcus, editor of “New Irish Writing” in the now defunct *Irish Press*.

This book is part celebration and part lament for a way of life which is rapidly fading from the rural landscape. Even the very ash trees that features throughout are now under threat as the deadly ash dieback disease – caused by the fungal pathogen

Hymenoscyphus fraxineus – casts its silent deathly shadow over the ash woodlands and hedgerows of Ireland and the rest of Europe.

Near the end of *The Hurley Maker's Son*, Deeley stands “in the derelict yard of his childhood” where he finally comes to terms with his father’s tragic death:

I saw that the tragedy had come almost in the nature of a gift
from him to me – of another life, an alternative to his. I accepted
the gift that still came, and the fact of his death.

The author wanted “his life back, but writing poems about it was as close as I could get,” he says. Which is why poetry matters, especially when a life is thrown off kilter. The memory of his father and the land of his father lives on in Deeley’s poetry, and now it has been recaptured in prose with dignity, poignancy and humour in this accomplished bitter-sweet memoir.

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Wicklow

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