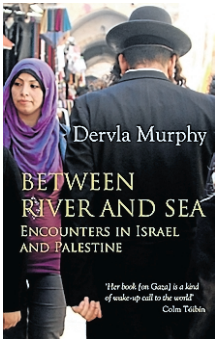


Dervla Murphy

After more than 50 years of travel, a legendary Irish writer is calling it quits. BY ROSAMUND BURTON



“Weeds,” says Dervla Murphy in her deep, melodious voice, in what sounds like a mixture of mild irritation but also delight at the carpet of forget-me-nots covering the courtyard of the Old Market. This collection of stone buildings hidden away behind iron gates up a cobbled laneway in Lismore, County Waterford, is the home of the legendary Irish travel writer.

Murphy has lit a fire in the main living area. It’s not something she would usually dream of doing, she admits, even though the Old Market has no heating, but she has a guest staying. We don’t linger in the warmth, but walk back across the courtyard to her study. While I wish I’d worn several more layers, Murphy is unfazed by the cold.

I first met Murphy with my parents in 1981, soon after we moved to Lismore, and it was the start of a long friendship. She and her daughter, Rachel, then lived in a bungalow on the outskirts of town. Much to my delight at the age of 18, Murphy dispatched me on her bicycle to Maddens Pub to buy her some beer. Not only did I share the name Roz with this bicycle, but also Murphy had cycled on it from Dunkirk to Delhi. Her first book, *Full Tilt* (1965), was about that journey, and the start of her travel writing career.

Fifty years later her 24th book, *Between River and Sea*, has been published. It is about the three months she spent in Israel and five on the West Bank between 2008 and 2010. She stayed in basic accommodation and travelled mostly on foot, by bus or in shared taxis, and with her innate curiosity she engaged whomever she could in conversation. Spending time in Palestinian communities and Jewish settlements, she had stones thrown at her by both Israeli and Palestinian children.

In 2011 she obtained a permit to enter the Gaza Strip from Egypt, and her experiences there were to be the concluding chapters of this book, but that trip became a book in itself, *A Month by the Sea*, which was published in 2013.

The impulse to travel in her late 70s to Israel and Palestine, she explains, “was rather like in 1976 when I suddenly felt that I should go to the North of Ireland and write about that”.



ANOTHER THING

On her first cycling trip in 1963, Murphy travelled with one change of underwear and a .25 automatic pistol.

Dervla Murphy says she hasn’t given up on writing, but is not discussing the topic of the next book.



“A sort of guilty feeling that this is something that’s so complicated and nasty and I really preferred not to think about it.”

Her first visit to the region in 2008 left her devastated. She didn’t want to think about, let alone write about her experience. She continued to read about the situation, and the full bookshelf beside her writing desk and an additional row of books on a nearby table indicate the extent of her reading. The more she read, the more pointless it seemed to her to write another book on the subject.

However, several friends urged her to write it, saying she had made her name as a travel writer, and people would read her book who wouldn’t read a book written by a historian, sociologist or theologian. “So that’s actually why I overcame my reluctance to write about the truly harrowing experience,” she says.

She paints a vivid picture of the dire living conditions in the slums of Balata, the largest refugee camp on the West Bank, in which 25,000 Palestinians live on one square kilometre of land. She describes the narrow laneways and alleys that have never seen sunlight, as family numbers increase and the only way to build is up. She experienced the long delays at checkpoints; saw the denial of access to land that has been farmed by the Palestinians’ ancestors for thousands of years and many instances of imprisonment without trial.

Murphy says in the foreword that her sympathies lie with the Palestinians. She is not anti-Semitic, but admits to “being anti-political Zionism, therefore anti-Israel as the state is at present constituted”. She describes “political Zionism” as the movement founded in the

A novelist finds himself in a poet’s losses

REVIEW BY GIG RYAN

“Surely there is an element of mortal panic and fear underlying all works of art?” Elizabeth Bishop wrote testily in defence of her first mentor, Marianne Moore.

Moore had much earlier flagrantly rewritten one of Bishop’s most notable and biographical poems, *The Moose*, a rewrite Bishop ignored.

Colm Toibin seeks an equivalent mortal panic in Bishop’s own poetry in this small introduction to the work of the woman who lived from 1911 to 1979.

Toibin identifies this as childhood loss of parents, and Bishop’s subsequent dislocations. He describes poems novelistically, almost mimicking their atmosphere, in a way that can seem overdrawn, even peripheral, but this is an intense empathetic engagement, a dual

psychological reverie, rather than a strictly literary monograph.

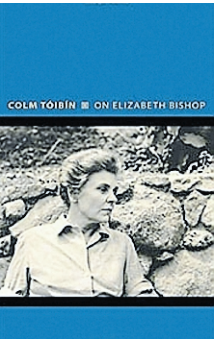
The writers Toibin first admires write out of, but not about, a central loss, and he observes the connections between himself and Bishop: Bishop’s father died when she was an infant, Toibin’s when he was 12, and Bishop’s mother was committed to psychiatric care when Bishop was five, not to be seen again. As Toibin notes when visiting his native Enniscorthy: “I had not thought that this world was something I could write about. It belonged to me so fundamentally that I saw no drama in it; also, it was a place of loss, and I was ... in flight from loss.” Along with Bishop, he also tangentially peruses absence in James Joyce’s *The Dead* and later in Thom Gunn’s poetry.

Bishop subscribed to T. S. Eliot’s view that art’s progress must be “continual extinction of

personality”, and her turbulent life’s events (a CIA-backed military coup in 1964 in Brazil, where she then resided, suicides of two lovers, alcoholism) are not branded in her published work. Eliot’s and Bishop’s poems in fact throb with personality, but not with overt self-revelation.

“Description was a desperate way of avoiding self-description,” Toibin writes, but the same could be said of most art. The common assumption is that Bishop’s poetry is veiled in mourning but her most regally descriptive poems are always arrowing in on the elemental chaos, or even jagged humour, within relationships, particularly familial ones.

Writing in an era of confessional poets Bishop restrains, rather than evades, the personal, and her slick, often violent imagery is as charged as the younger Plath’s. Her



CRITICISM

On Elizabeth Bishop

COLM TOIBIN
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS,
\$39.95

1890s to settle European Jews as colonists on Palestinian land.

However, Murphy is also quick to point out that there are many Israelis helping the Palestinians. She mentions a group of Israeli women who stand at checkpoints.

“The fact that they are standing there, and they are Israeli citizens, makes things a bit easier for the Palestinians passing to and fro. They won’t be exposed to as much scorn, jeering and ill treatment from the soldiers.”

Murphy is adamant that, despite numerous discussions about the two-state solution, the Israeli Government has never had any intention of giving approval for an independent Palestinian state.

“All the discussions about the two-state solutions have been used by the Israelis as a screen, and behind the screen they are simply extending the settlements.”

The answer, she believes, is a one-state solution, and she says that younger Palestinians, who have given up hope of an independent state and an end to military occupation, are starting to consider this idea.

Murphy has lived in Lismore her entire life. Her father was the county librarian. Her

“All the discussions about the two-state solutions have been used by the Israelis as a screen ...”

DERVLA MURPHY

mother suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis, and Dervla was their only child. Aged 14, she left school to look after her invalid mother, and was her full-time carer for the next 16 years.

With her characteristic eloquence and honesty, Murphy wrote about this challenging early period of her life in her autobiography, *Wheels within Wheels*.

It wasn’t until the age of 30 when her mother died (her father had died 18 months earlier), that Murphy set out to fulfil a dream she had had since she was 10, and cycled to India.

As a single mother, Murphy took her daughter Rachel, born in 1968, to India, Balistan, Peru and Madagascar. They travelled together to Cameroon when Rachel was 18, and in 2005 took Rachel’s three daughters with them to Cuba.

Never afraid to express her opinions, Murphy faced threats after the publication of *A Place Apart* (1978) about the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. In the 1980s she spoke out against nuclear power in *Race to the Finish?* In the ’90s she travelled to Africa, writing in *The Ukimwi Road* about the impact of AIDs she witnessed when cycling from Kenya to Zimbabwe, and in

“Her slick, often violent imagery is as charged as the younger Plath’s.”

depictions of poverty in Brazil must also have surprised readers when her third book, *Questions of Travel*, was published in 1965.

Poems proceed from observation to reflection, such as the domestic roosters that gradually unfold into Peter’s denial of Jesus in *Roosters*. Along with consummately rendered verse forms, this is what makes them so mesmerising, destabilising, and often baffling. “The quarrel with ourselves,” as Yeats put it, sparks in Bishop’s tightwired tug between the observer and the observed.

Ostensibly about one object or action, the fish, the armadillo, her poems branch into less

Visiting Rwanda, the country’s genocide atrocities.

Her relationship with her publisher, John Murray, was always close and Murphy describes “Jock” and Diana Murray as having been “like parents” to her. I remember in my early 20s going to supper at their home in Hampstead, when Murphy was staying with them. Murray elatedly told Murphy about the recent birth of his grandson, referring to him as Octavius. This newborn was the eighth John Murray and destined to run the family-run enterprise, which since its foundation in 1768 had published authors such as Jane Austen, Lord Byron and Charles Darwin. But he did not follow in the family footsteps and the business was sold to Hodder Headline in 2002.

“It was such a contrast to the family firm – this colossal impersonal multinational,” Murphy says.

When the author was writing about Cuba, Stephanie Allen, who had been at John Murray, realised she was deeply unhappy with the new company structure. Allen was working at Eland and suggested her publishing house would be happy to bring out the Cuba book. Eland had been set up to produce reprints of

travel books and *The Island that Dared* (2008) was the first book they published as an original.

After more than 50 years of travel, Murphy says she is going nowhere. She is deeply saddened by the death from cancer in February of her son-in-law, Andrew, and *Between River and Sea* is dedicated to him. Also, she says: “I’m worn out with my emphysema, which leaves me so short of breath, that really I can’t cycle or swim any more. So I just have to resign myself to the fact that at 83 I quieten down and make the best of it.” She hasn’t given up on writing, but is not discussing the topic of the next book.

For me, time spent with Murphy over the past 35 years has been an untold gift. Partly it is being with someone who finds unmitigated pleasure in a walk with the dogs, a swim in the river, or an evening of beers, but also that I always come away with a new viewpoint on a country, political situation, or the environment. With her anti-consumerist stance and simple living at home or abroad, her passionate interest in social issues and firm moral stance, and her lifetime of writing and travel, she truly is an inspiration.

Between River and Sea is published by Eland Books at \$39.99.

controllable depths that hover upon hierarchies of power and unintended, sometimes tragic, consequences.

Each poem is a startling adventure that resists any cinched decipherment, many beginning as conversational, cautious with qualifications, corrections and questions.

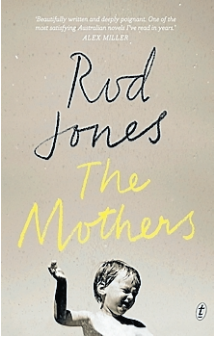
Bishop’s “reticence”, as Toibin calls it, is composed of both precision and constant elusive mobility. Perhaps most famously in the villanelle *One Art*, she preys on her omissions, making the unsaid, the implied, the slippery subtle core of the poem.

Toibin transfuses himself into Bishop’s work, in similar fashion to his inhabiting of Henry James in *The Master*, but here the portrait becomes difficult to distinguish from the author’s accompanying self-scrutinising revelations.

His insistence that he and Bishop both replace religious faith with a then faithless language, and his insistence on the centrality of unspoken sorrow, are a little too superficial.

Single mum’s disgrace is repeated over decades

REVIEW BY ANDREW FUHRMANN



FICTION
The Mothers
ROD JONES
TEXT PUBLISHING,
\$29.99

Rod Jones’ sixth novel, his first in more than a decade, is a family saga spanning four generations of up-against-it Australian women. It dramatises the struggle of young mothers who get no help from the world and it also shows how a mother’s love and determination teaches what the heart is and what it feels.

We begin in 1917, in a park in Footscray. Alma has just been turfed out by her ratbag brute of a husband to make room for a new woman. She has nowhere to go. Eventually she finds shelter with a local widow and her handsome 20-something son.

But trouble is never far away. Soon Alma starts showing. The father, of course, is the handsome, feckless 20-something. Marriage is a non-starter and the neighbours are gossiping, so Alma is again sent packing.

Life is tough for these working-class mums, forced to jump from one place to the next, for one reason or another. The men are fugitive company, always in the background or on their way out. And it’s not just a problem of money. Shame is the real killer.

“You cannot imagine how much it would pain me to see our family’s disgrace on public display,” the widow says as she shuts the door on Alma.

And so it goes, through the decades. In 1952, a woman called Anna meets a broad-shouldered footballer. Only much later, left to languish in a Salvation Army home for unmarried mothers, does Anna finally accept that her man has done the dirty on her. It’s all a question of what the neighbours will think. And paranoia becomes doctrine with the Salvos. The home’s matron declares unequivocally that God hates pregnant girls.

At times *The Mothers* reads like a museum novel of life in Melbourne’s inner-city suburbs, north and west. There’s a rich load of local history here, with the brand of every cigarette noted, the contents of every headache powder recorded. And we’re always headed for the Hotel Australia in Collins Street or loitering out front of the Grand Theatre in Paisley Street or slaving in the Olympic Tyre and Rubber Factory in Cross Street, haunting places that have long since vanished.

But behind the surface branding and the verism, one

“*The Mothers* can in part be read as a response to Lawrence’s theory of the devouring mother.”

can also sense an ever so subtle gesture towards the sacred. For Jones, there is still the glim of holiness in every maternal determination; and if there is such a thing as fate, it’s in the life experience that links his mothers.

The child that Anna is compelled to put up for adoption is called David. By 1975, the child is a man and his girlfriend is pregnant. Will he stick by her?

There’s a tantalising D.H. Lawrence parallel here. For a start, *The Mothers* can in part be read as a response to Lawrence’s theory of the devouring mother. It offers a vision of motherly love that is empowering rather than crippling to the growth of feeling in a young man, as something that completes rather than consumes him.

More than that, as with Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, Jones’ *The Mothers* appears to be a version of the author’s own family history dressed up as fiction. Like David, Jones is adopted, studied history at university, briefly worked as a teacher and completed his first novel while holidaying on a Greek island.

And yet, as with Lawrence, you wonder where fact and fiction blend. As a boy, David attempts suicide, and he later grows into a young hothead, lobbing bricks at the US embassy and threatening to shoot Sir John Kerr. He also treats his pregnant girlfriend pretty shabbily – until he sees the light. After such scathing self-portraiture, what forgiveness?

But wherever the line falls between real-life action and its shadow, between the teller and his tale, Jones has done something unexpected. He has uncovered a magnanimity and generosity of spirit that has not been seen in his novels before now. *The Mothers* is not as dramatic or brightly coloured as his long-ago works, such as *Julia Paradise* or *Nightpictures*, and it is not quite as brilliant; but it is more assured, more mature. It has a depth and weight that feels far more like the authentic quick of life.