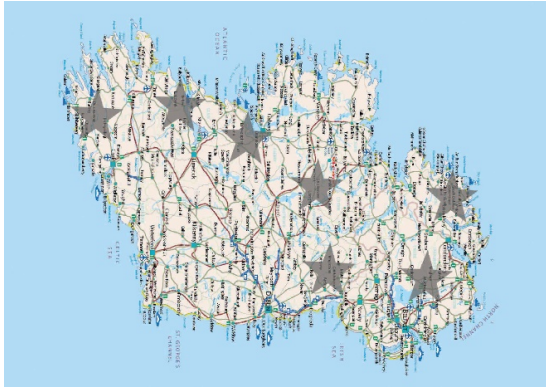


Roger Palmer, *Following the Starry Plough*

Source Photographic Review, Summer 2016, Issue 86



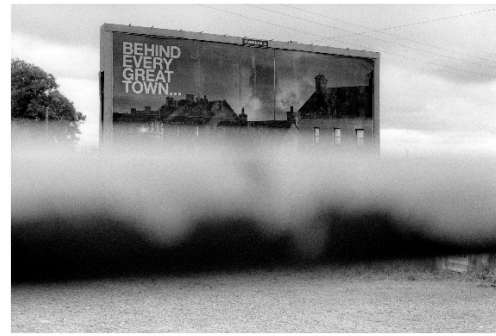
The Starry Plough has long been a symbol and rallying point for socialism in Ireland. The flag has taken various forms and has been flown at numerous different rallies, marches and funerals by all shades of opinion on the left. It embodies the idea that workers in a free Ireland would be in control of their destiny, 'from the plough to the stars', as they say. Roger Palmer's photographic series, *Following the Starry Plough*, uses a version of the flag designed in the 1930s for the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), consisting of seven white stars set amidst a blue ground. The seven stars are transposed onto a map of Ireland and designate areas for Palmer to visit and photograph what he finds therein. The journey takes him from the south west of Ireland up through the midlands and ends in the northern counties. His photographs can be viewed as a reflection upon the historical hopes and aspirations of Irish socialism set against his visualisation of the present.

Each star is represented by two contrasting photographs and so a tensioned narrative characterises the journey. One image in the first set captures an advertising billboard that is whitened by the glare of sunlight. The hoarding fractures the continuity between the row of houses. This is

paired with a run-down petrol station and local eatery now offering little for the weary traveller. A second set contrasts an image of a disused boat set amidst windswept overgrowth with an image of a large advertising canvas held taught by steel cable in marked contrast to the loosened barbed wire fencing before it. The illustrated image promises an exotic destination via the advertised airport. The broken promises of a global economy are held to account before the court of a local economy visualized in ruins. The final set of images pitch the artisanal mastery of an old derelict house against the bling-like pointing of an Orange Hall. The grid in the foreground keeping the photographer at bay in this final image is echoed in the grid upon which a loyalist myth is to be erected and re-erected year in, year out.



The visual motifs are consistent with Palmer's previous photographic projects over the years. His eye is drawn repeatedly to advertising hoarding promising ideal living amidst banal, underdeveloped space. It is drawn to painted murals, figuring aspirations and moments of repose in contested townscapes. Signage is a regular point of focus. Their orders and definition are undercut through aged surfaces, by a confusing array of competing signs, or, by the photographer isolating signs from their immediate context. The result is a disorientating and fragmented terrain full of diminished intentions to control. Palmer dwells on ill-defined spaces between here and there where the journey predominates. Rail tracks, open roads, overgrown paths, ships and trucks hold a promise of elsewhere. Shadows and reflections become strong determining elements in Palmer's compositions. They take on a formal solidity in the framed shot where the transitory is everything.



The traditional framing device of a foreground element overflows into the main composition. Overgrown branches, metal grids, railings and barriers repeatedly overstep their role and intercede between the photographer/viewers point of concern. Palmer consciously figures his placement (and ours) amidst this terrain. We are witness to that between aspiration and actuality, between the transitory and restlessness, between the incessant and resilience. Herein lies the pathos and tragedy of the work. A world is pictured where inhabitants are buffeted by forces and subject to circumstances beyond their control. It is the recurring theme in *Following the Starry Plough*. If resilience to be found, it is of a questionable sort – whether it be the predatory instincts of the fox or a dogged patriotism.

The tragic was also quickly ascribed to the Starry Plough. The Irish Citizen's Army (ICA) was set up from within the ITGWU to protect its strikers during the Dublin Lockout and unveiled the flag the following year. It was flown in the 1916 Rising but its presence did not go uncontested. The playwright Sean O'Casey, for one, was a founding member of the ICA, and would criticize their role in the Easter Rising, believing socialism's alliance with bourgeois nationalism would not be in its long term interests. O'Casey's play, *The Plough and The Stars*, laments the Rising as a tragedy of disunity and unintended consequence. In more recent times, various socialist republican groupings during and after the Troubles would stake a claim to the legacy of the Starry Plough. The various splits and feuds between them were often brutal. Today, a statue of James Connolly now stands before a sculptural rendition of Starry Plough across from Liberty Hall, the original headquarters of the ITGWU and the ICA, and

now the main office of SIPTU, a major trade union in Ireland. The point to be made here is that the Starry Plough is underwritten by a complex and contested history. And even as an enduring symbol of workers' rights, it too, like the signage in Palmer's work, is prone to a diminished sense of control. An increased precarity in the workplace, a shrinking percentage of unionized workers and an intensified sense of ahistorical individuality testify to challenging times for the left.



If there is hope, it lies in the redeeming properties of a formal, crisp reflective aesthetic. The pleasure of Palmer's work is to be found in recognizing an acute eye for composition while constructing a landscape charged with meaning as intriguing as it is contestable. As he journeys through the terrain, he frames himself as witness to grander social and historical forces. Yet there is the sense that this is not enough. As a lone figure of resilience, he too is of the questionable sort. I sense Palmer wouldn't have it any other way.

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