

Beyond the Grail

A. Shankland

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An Irish family conflict sets the muse in motion for A. Shankland in *Beyond the Grail*. Primogeniture a customary practice in rural Ireland whereby the eldest son could claim the right to inherit his father's estate ignites avarice and arrogance in Matthew Baird the oldest of three brothers. When his father dies in 1903 in Protestant County Antrim Matthew moves his mother out of the master bedroom and into the carriage house. Then he orders his two younger brothers David and John to "leave and make ye own way." Matthew thus takes sole possession of one the the county's largest and most successful farms. John emigrates to New Zealand and David moves in with his fiancée Jennie and her mother in the nearby village of Ballynure. Jennie soon becomes pregnant; David begins working for a shipbuilder in Belfast and later sails for the United States where he prepares the way for his wife and child to join him.

But while David is away his brother Matthew's sense of entitlement continues to run amok. Having taken David's share of the farm his attention turns to Jennie whose daughter is now a few months old. Matthew brutally rapes and impregnates Jennie; she silently bears his child. She tries to take both children to David in the New World but Matthew shows up aboard the ship in Belfast harbor and claims his daughter Margaret for himself. Jennie and her older daughter Agnes sail for America while Matthew arranges for the care of Margaret in Ireland. Jennie lives and grieves with her secret and with the fear that she will never see her younger daughter again.

Shankland revisits the blight and desperation of post-famine Ireland and his characters come alive through description and dialogue as this compelling drama unfolds. But when his focus strays from points of conflict and resolution and lands on summary of world events and family history that do not serve the central drama Shankland's first novel falters. For example time passes in this multi-generational story sometimes awkwardly or abruptly and some loose ends are never given closure.

Agnes returns to Ireland as a young woman and actually meets her sister Margaret thinking they are cousins. And Margaret told all along that her mother died when she was an infant is trapped in her unknowing until very late in life. The scoundrel Matthew Baird never confronted for his deeds becomes a successful farmer and important loyalist figure in Northern Ireland. The story picks up when Jennie who has raised a large family in the United States makes a deathbed revelation and request to Agnes's son her grandson. Many years later the grandson travels to County Antrim for a meeting with Margaret.

"We are all truly victims of our environment" Shankland observes. Part novel part family history *Beyond the Grail* is an ambitious undertaking that covers eighty years in the life of a good family that has been torn apart by an eldest son who did not know how to be a brother.

JOE TAYLOR (January 9, 2009)

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