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A NOVEL

Not the Same Sky



Evelyn Conlon

A story of Irish famine girls brought to Australia

Wakefield Press

Not the Same Sky

Evelyn Conlon is a novelist, short-story writer and radio essayist. Born in Ireland, she lived in Australia for a number of years. Her last novel *Skin of Dreams* was shortlisted for Irish Novel of the Year. The title story of her collection *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* was performed at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival. She is a member of Aosdána, the fellowship of honoured artists in Ireland, and lives in Dublin.

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Not the Same Sky

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*Dedicated to
Leon, Juliette and Lorcan*

PROLOGUE

2008

Joy Kennedy was standing in her pine kitchen, looking out at the surprised spring morning wondering if she wanted her life to change. This was something she did quite often. She knew she should stop, and she did try, because waiting for things to change eats up the bit of time we've got. Always wanting to be someplace else makes nonsense of being here. She wanted to stop whizzing about so much and planning ahead. She wanted to keep her hand on the earth.

It may have been her job that drove her to rearrange the truth of her life continuously, all that dealing with death. Although it was not really direct dealing, just the words of it. But words can be tricky things. Take *contúirteach*, meaning dangerous, which she'd just heard on the radio. There's a ring of foreboding about it, or so we think, but maybe that's only because we know what it means. Maybe if one went up to an Inuit or a Senegalese and said the word they'd take their own meaning from the sound, and instead of saying, ah yes, very, they would laugh uproariously, gurgle like a drain, throw their arms out and say the equivalent of thank you, thank you, that was unexpected. The other might glare, step back, and make warily for the door, like one would at an alcoholic's party when the sound of dissent and dramatic outburst suddenly turns itself up for no apparent reason.

Joy was preparing to leave for work. She was proud of her job – it certainly gave her an initial edge on the competition

for conversations at parties. While people introduced her by name, she knew for a fact that as soon as she turned her back to throw her coat upstairs on the bed they'd say, 'She's the stonemason who does the gravestones.' She'd heard the hiss of the words wafting up after her.

Joy wondered if the air outside was as pleasant as it looked from the warmth of the room, or if maybe it was sharp and bitter. That's all she had to worry about really, small things, not much. Her life was settling into itself. She did not need the letter that was dropping through her letterbox.

'There's a letter for you,' Oscar said. 'It's from Australia.'
'Australia! I don't know anyone there. Do you?'

Oscar and Joy had just moved in together and were delighted by the new intimacy, made even more interesting by the fact they still didn't know everything about each other.

The letter had an embossed logo at the top, directly in the middle of the page, drawing the reader's attention. She read it, becoming more puzzled with each sentence.

Dear Joy Kennedy,

We, the friends of the Memorial Committee, are well progressed in our initial stages of having a memorial built to the 4414 Famine Orphan Girls who were shipped here to Australia between 1848 and 1850. There can be disagreement about the precise number but not by much. I'm sure you know all about them, but we've included some reading material and some short statements from descendants of theirs just to update you. We will be making an estimate soon of the number of descendants, in the region of a million as you can imagine. Our committee is contacting you because one of our members suggested that it might be both interesting and appropriate to have a mason from Ireland working on the piece if and when

we get the go ahead. On searching through a list of masons, I hope you don't mind me remarking that your name came as a surprise. It seemed doubly appropriate to approach you to see if you would have any interest in doing some work for us when the time comes. We'd be delighted if you would at least consider getting in touch so perhaps we can discuss the issue further.

Signed on behalf of the committee,
Simon Kennedy.

PS. And maybe we are related?

Joy read the letter again, her eyes wandering to the embossed logo as they were meant to. She then read it out loud to Oscar. 'I've never heard of them, have you?'

'Don't think so. No. No, of course if I'd heard of them I'd remember.'

'Gosh, what a strange letter. Australia. Funny I've never had any desire to go there. Have you?'

'No. Not really. Well at least not that I've thought about.'

'Well, that means that you haven't.'

She took the atlas down from the shelf. 'Look at that. Would you look at that, it's far.' She ran her finger down the page. 'I mean I knew it was far, but ...'

If you wanted change, wanted to be someplace else, this was it.

CHAPTER 1

1848

If Matt Dwyer thought about himself at all it was not in terms of being either a good or a bad man – he simply tried to be just and fair in the dealings he had to negotiate as an Irish servant of an English Crown. This was not always easy. He went to his cabinet and took out the sheets of paper that had arrived yesterday. Lists. He peered at them. It would be nice to be able to afford spectacles. Still, the handwriting was distinct enough and clear enough in its orders. The potato failure of 1848, following on from 1846, flowing on from 1845, with the nervousness of 1847 in between, would be known to every school child eventually. Matt thought about these things in the future tense, it made the present more bearable. Facts, dates, numbers dead, numbers emigrated. There would be children who would want to be boatbuilders when they heard the news, who would know they could make better ships than those that were at this minute struggling out at sea. There would also be children who would want to be statisticians, politicians, revisionists, farmers, or rebels. Or perhaps singers, as if making music out of the facts could undo some of the damage.

In other places 1847 was much as expected – crops grew quickly, people were fed, commerce continued apace, astronomers found new galaxies, and operas were performed. In America a newspaper rolled off a rotary press, but what had that to do with the price of bread? In Edinburgh a new

baby boy was born and named Alexander Graham Bell, and if Matt had known that, he would have wondered what that had to do with the price of bread. And a man called Charles Strutt translated a book, but what had that to do with the price of bread, and who was he?

The potato famine caused hunger before it caused starvation. Hunger: a desire for, or lack of food. Any strong desire. But this hunger was not a desire for, let's say, Pernod with ice, olives, lobster bisque soup for starters, a taste of dry wine, duck à la plum for main course, a good strong purple burgundy, glazed custard, a plate of three cheeses, a port, a brandy, a liqueur, or a coffee. This was a slow gnawing feeling, one that centred first in the stomach, stayed there for days, weeks even, and then grew bigger, even when appeased with a little food.

It radiated to the senses. All one could hear was the clanging of saucepans, the washing of pans, the kicking over of buckets in haste to get the cooking started. All one could see was field upon field of profuse food and tables buckling in the middle with the weight of all that was cooked. All one could touch, especially at night in dreams, was food on a plate – touch it to make sure it was there, touch the potato so it mushroomed out into dry, sweet, beautiful froth. All one could smell, everywhere, outside, inside, was the overwhelming odour of food cooking, the odour of raw food about to be cooked, the odour of neighbours' food, the odour of food on the road, the odour of food eaten. And finally taste. A little flick of the taste spots on the tongue, salt, sweet, hot, cold, savoury; a mouthful, a mouth full, and all taste blossoming into one satisfied swallow, a rainbow in the mouth, disappearing slowly down to the stomach, where the whole dream had started.

When hunger had filled all the senses and dried them brittle, the imagination left – it could not bear itself and was now as good as dead without nourishment. Nourishment: the giving of food so that hunger does not assault the stomach and senses, thus killing imagination with a final hammer blow.

After hunger comes starvation, being in continuous want, the suffering greatly from hunger.

And after starvation comes death, which precedes being dead by a few seconds.

Hunger and starvation might be a solitary matter, a thing known to one person, not a disaster. But when hunger is happening all over a place, when people look at each other and know that the other person is also hungry, then it's a state of famine. What we do not want to know is that while famine infers extreme scarcity of food, this may not always be the truth. Famine could be extreme scarcity of food getting into mouths, not extreme scarcity of food in fields; in other words, food being taken away, stolen, used to pay debt, in the middle of the night, used to feed faraway armies, causing extreme scarcity of food going into mouths and leading to a person being able to read his neighbours' eyes.

The resulting slow chaos grew worse until this hunger could no longer be ignored. In London many people spent time thinking about what to do. This may have included deciding to do nothing, or deciding what not to do, or deciding to put these thoughts to the back of minds, where they could not interfere with London life. It may have included the promise to re-visit the facts a year on, to check the progress of death and hunger, checking also the strain on public funds. It may have included a continuous desire that when the facts were re-visited, all would have sorted itself

out. It may have included a lot of worry. Or it may not.

The response did include the making of these lists, which were now in Matt's hands. He would have to think about the journey he was to make and how best to deliver these papers. The background provided to him, in the elegantly slanted black ink, had been sent to help him explain at a local level how this scheme was perceived. It was time he made arrangements.

CHAPTER 2

In the previous year, Caroline Chisholm had come to London from New South Wales, where she had chosen to put her blessed life down among the people who had tripped and fallen into one of the holes littering the setting up of a faraway colony. She had seen many things, far more than her outward appearance would suggest.

When Caroline James from Northampton accepted the proposal of marriage from Lieutenant Archibald Chisholm she did so with the stipulation that she be able to continue her philanthropic work, rather than sew and narrow her eyes. She had already spent six years in India doing such work before she and her husband went to Australia, no doubt a bright posting. But she was soon horrified by the condition of the young migrant women unable to get jobs. She saw them skulking on the streets, trying to pretend they were not, and if a woman could not get a job, there was only one other way to get food.

Caroline wore a blue dress with a high-necked collar the day she went to see the Governor of New South Wales. He did not want to meet her, but was doing so in the hope it would stop her intrusive insistence. Good Lord, the woman had even written to his wife. Sir George Gipps was surprised by the blue dress and Caroline's clear eyes, not to mention her handsomeness, which he tried to not let distract him. She drew a picture of the streets for him: migrants arriving

off boats into a city with no work and no help being given to them by the people who had allowed them to come. She spoke of dusk horrors, sparing no sensitivities. If at moments he felt annoyed – it was because he too took a carriage home – he knew something of the city. But Caroline's facts and figures finally swayed him. She wanted a home for girls who were forced to live on the street, and she wanted a registry where workers and employers could meet. She was a practical woman.

George Gipps thought about this practicality and about how much it was needed in this place. It was true that small changes could help move things along more smoothly. While he was thinking of this, although still distracted by the neck of her dress – I suppose you'd call that a silk bow – he said yes. So Caroline got both her wishes. And even if on her first nights in the quarters provided she had to lure and poison rats, shaking as anybody would, they would not run her out of these rooms, because if they did, her project would fall into a hole. She was convinced they thought the rats would change her mind, but she had no intention of falling for that one.

She wore a dark dress the second time she met Sir George Gipps, yet somehow the staidness of the colour managed to burst into a red collar. Sir George couldn't see how it did, but he noticed it nevertheless.

Caroline Chisholm was good at overall pictures; she too could think into the future. She became concerned about attracting suitable female emigrants, female domestics, to come to a place where they were truly needed. Scottish, Welsh and English girls did not appear to want to come in the numbers required, and if they weren't being caught committing crimes, they could not be forced. Yet there was

such a scarcity of these domestics, a famine you might say, that Caroline could see trouble ahead, and she was dedicated to notions that would erase trouble for this colony, which she was determined was going to offer a better home to so many.

Earl Grey had not *made* tea nor had his father, but he had imported tea from India. He had sat in an office and organised ships that sailed the seas with cargo upon cargo of tea. He had moved ships on maps. He had made sure there was another ship to follow as soon as the wake of the last one had spread back into the ocean and swallowed into the flatness of the sea. He was good at getting ships back onto the ocean fast, at solving the everyday problems of dozens of decks at the beginning, middle, and end of sea journeys. If he wasn't, he was good at getting men who were. He too was dedicated to the notion of the colony.

Earl Grey's and Caroline Chisholm's thoughts collided, making one thought. And that thought collided with what had come to the surface of a government's worry: what to do about the Irish workhouses filling up with female orphans, or girls unable to be cared for at home. They were flocking into workhouses at an alarming rate. They were young, scared and hardened with fright, and they sat there becoming a burden.

In London a second collision of thought occurred, making a ripple that could be heard growing into a solid idea. The futures of the girls in workhouses around Ireland were taking a possible shape. They knew nothing of this.

Caroline Chisholm came to London to talk to Earl Grey. Outside the House of Commons two members of parliament debated the ideas that were being bandied about. They spoke quietly. One of them approached the topic with an academic gesture, smiling slightly, as a boy might who was playing with a ball where he shouldn't. The second showed signs of

agitation, further aggravated by the waving hand and the smile.

‘But if they are sitting idle in workhouses and we are paying for that, surely it behoves us to think of a better solution than their continued useless sitting there. Even you must see that.’

‘Is it not a dangerous precedent to pick up orphan girls in their vulnerable state, unable to put up a fight, and ship them to our colony simply because we need domestic servants?’

‘Females to bear children, don’t forget that. And wouldn’t it be a better place for them to do that, better than where they are now, where the likelihood of a happy outcome is limited. At this present time I mean of course,’ he added hastily, as he saw the frowns gathering before him.

‘But I am concerned about the moral implications of such a plan.’

‘And what would you have us do, my good fellow. Do you have a better solution in that worried mind of yours? We are, after all, assisting them to stay alive.’

‘We could try feeding them in their own homes.’

‘Balderdash. The crop has failed, again. Haven’t you heard the news? Failed repeatedly.’

‘But there is other food being grown there, shipped out to pay rents and such like.’

‘What do you suggest we do about that? Allow an entire region to renege on its rent? Do you suggest that we no longer feed our armies in India and other places?’

‘For the time being perhaps. Yes. About the rent I mean. Surely we can get food for the army elsewhere.’

‘But if you allow one or more who have not paid their rent to stay in their houses what would you say to the person who has paid? Should you tell him that he must continue while

his neighbour doesn't bother?'

'I think that most people will want to pay their rents, for their own security and peace of mind, if not from good will.'

'Enough. This discussion is for the history books, waste of time having it today. It will solve nothing. No more than your knotted brows will. I believe my man is waiting for me. Good day.'

There was work to be done. A plan had to be agreed. An argument had to be made foolproof, so that the doubters, the downright against and the lazy or unconcerned, could all be brought into line. Ships had to be made available, perhaps pulled off more lucrative routes, but it would pay in the end. Ships had to be made seaworthy, new ones might have to be built, but they could later be diverted to more immediately profitable use. Public servants had to get excited, go to their clubs and then home, not telling their wives in case the spilling of the half-made plan might scupper the whole. Wives would have to feed their husbands, so that each day the imaginations of these men could stretch a little more to allow the plan to grow. Non-scrupulous men had to be contacted, and scrupulous men had to be talked to. And surgeon-superintendents had to be found so that the cargo would arrive alive.

And so the plan was made. God made the world and the public servants made the plan and it was agreed upon down to the last nut and bolt, so the lives of girls in workhouses made a leap forward into what they would be.

The plan was put into action. It looked well thought out, neatly written on the papers that were passed around. These contained the ships and their dates, with four of the embarkation dates not yet agreed. This was a pity because it gave the sheet a lack of symmetry, but surely that would not

destroy the appeal of this worthy scheme. Even the numbers were already meticulously decided.

Ship	Embarkation date	Port of Arrival	Date of arrival
<i>Earl Grey</i>	June 1848	Sydney	6th October 1848
<i>Roman Emperor</i>	July 1848	Adelaide	23rd October 1848
<i>Lady Kennaway</i>	September 1848	Port Phillip	6th December 1848
<i>Inchinnan</i>	November 1848	Sydney	20th February 1849
<i>Ramilis</i>		Adelaide	24th March 1849
<i>Digby</i>	December 1848	Sydney	4th April 1849
<i>Pemberton</i>	January 1849	Port Phillip	14th May 1849
<i>Inconstant</i>	February 1849	Adelaide	7th June 1849
<i>Lady Peel</i>	March 1849	Sydney	3rd July 1849
<i>New Liverpool</i>	April 1849	Port Phillip	9th August 1849
<i>Elgin</i>		Adelaide	12th September 1849
<i>William & Mary</i>	July 1849	Sydney	21st November 1849
<i>Lismoyne</i>	August 1849	Sydney	29th November 1849
<i>Diadem</i>		Port Phillip	10th January 1850
<i>Panama</i>	October 1849	Sydney	12th January 1850
<i>Thomas Arbutnot</i>	October 1849	Sydney	3rd February 1850
<i>Derwent</i>	November 1849	Port Phillip	25th February 1850
<i>Eliza Caroline</i>		Port Phillip/ Geelong	31st March 1850
<i>John Knox</i>	December 1850	Sydney	29th April 1850
<i>Tippoo Sail Saib</i>	April 1850	Sydney	29th July 1850
<i>Maria</i>	March 1850	Sydney	1st August 1850

County	Number to be sent	% of total number
Tipperary	519	12.43
Cork	381	9.13
Galway	246	5.90
Down	173	4.14
Limerick	164	3.93
Dublin	160	3.83
Wexford	157	3.76
Antrim	151	3.62
Fermanagh	151	3.62
Waterford	148	3.54
Londonderry	135	3.23
Westmeath	123	2.94
Mayo	122	2.90
Kerry	117	2.80
Clare	113	2.71
Leitrim	111	2.66
Tyrone	106	2.54
Longford	101	2.41
Meath	101	2.41
Monaghan	97	2.32
Donegal	96	2.30
Kilkenny	87	2.09
Sligo	83	1.99
Cavan	75	1.80
Offaly	71	1.70
Roscommon	71	1.70
Laois	65	1.60
Kildare	60	1.40
Armagh	57	1.40
Wicklow	53	1.30
Carlow	52	1.20
Louth	29	0.70

The speaker who introduced the tables read them out. The numbers sounded arbitrary, this very reason making them indisputable. The member of parliament who had frowned so much on the steps was silent. In the face of such organisation, what could he say? Another member of parliament two seats behind him had digested the numbers quickly, and in order to stop any accompanying images that might have come into his head, whispered, 'I don't think I'd fancy sailing on the *Inconstant*.' Everyone around him laughed, except the member who maintained his frown.

In total there would be over 4000 girls aged between fourteen and twenty – seventy-two per cent aged between sixteen and eighteen – dispatched within two years. There would be a Government Dispatch Reel number for each ship.

There was no more time for debate. There had been debates on what to do about this problem before, and these had an infuriating habit of coming up repeatedly in the *London News*. There were two strongly opposing views as to what should be done – that which said we cannot interfere with the market, and that which said we must.

People on both sides aired their positions loudly because they meant them, while others gave spirited addresses because they loved the polish and history of this oratory, this fine form of speaking practised in Ancient Greece.

'Surely you don't believe that?'

'Perhaps not in its entirety, but how did I put it forward do you think?'

There were others in between these opposing views who looked to the proponents of either to convince them. Debates also took place closer to the actual disaster. In halls in Ireland, men turned up to shout their anger while they still had it, to

whisper their despair when that was all they had left, and later to stay silent and merely observe.

But now there was an actual plan worked out on paper.

That was how Matt was reading this list, with the beautifully slanted hand. Some of the ships had already gone, but more girls were still needed, and it was his job to find the cargo for the *Thomas Arbuthnot*. It was suggested that he make his first visit to County Clare – there were plenty of girls there.