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The Long Acre

Shining a light
into the Ireland of
a past generation

By PJ Cunningham

To my wife, Rosemary, and my Aunt Es (RIP) – for bringing simple clarity as well as profound understanding to what daily life is all about.

About The Author

PJ Cunningham is an author, journalist and publisher who was brought up on a small farm in Clara, Co Offaly but now lives in Bray, Co Wicklow.

His previous book about growing up in rural Ireland, *The Lie Of The Land*, was published in 2013. Before that in 2001, his book of short stories, *A. N. Other*, focused on rural life as seen through GAA activity in a parish.

Married to Rosemary O'Grady, they have five children.

Preface

Like my last book – *The Lie Of The Land* – the tales in this collection straddle the chasm between the short-story genre and a collections of old tales.

The stories contained in *The Long Acre* focus on the often-heroic struggles within local and ordinary lives as people aspired to a better way in and around the small-holdings of the country.

1

Out Of The Darkness

From the double ditch, bared of its summer coat in a strange preparation for the winter's cold of November, he emerged, his arms fighting to push the brambles away, his face contorted with worry and his eyes furtively scanning over to where I was standing.

“The rustlers have taken them all,” he shouted across, looking and sounding totally crestfallen. “There’s not a beast left in any of the fields or the laneway.”

For a moment his face twitched and I thought he was about to cry. Looking over the 50 yards from where I had been nailing a wooden stake post at the entrance gate, he appeared more like a scarecrow than a human being.

I hurried to where he stood, beside the wire rows of a fence between our neighbours and our land and put my arm around him to comfort him.

“We sold them, Da,” I said gently. “We sold them. Don’t you remember. We got rid of all the cattle bar the cows and a few calves last Monday in the sales.”

“Did The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) we?” he asked, his eyes checking my face to see if I was mocking him or telling the truth.

I felt a rising anger that he was forgetting such things. I was also scared that he was no longer the man who was emphatic about everything, particularly the judgment *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation* (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) part of his own decision-making.

“It was your call,” I stressed. “You said we didn’t have enough fodder for them over the winter so we did what you directed.”

He cowed in *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* front of me, just like I had been a headmaster in school denigrating his work.

Immediately I was suffused with a deep sense of guilt as we both walked in silence towards the car. It was a cold early winter’s evening and dusk was falling rapidly around us.

“God, it is a miserable night,” I said, more to break the silence than to comment on what was already apparent.

“Let’s get home and light a fire and have a bit of supper and we’ll feel better before we milk the cows.”

“I’d love a hot cup of tea,” he said emotionally, as if he was fighting back tears. “It will help get my ould head working right again.”

* * *

Three days later I went to visit him in the hospital. Although I was only 17, I had been forced to take over the farm *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* in the previous 72 hours. With my mother long since deceased and my brother in university in Dublin, I was the only one left to look after him at home.

The shock of listening to him struggle to find reality down the fields had frightened me more than the tales of ghosts or devils I had heard about when a child and ramblers came calling to tell their stories of supernatural existence.

I felt a sense of helplessness watching him stumble *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* to stand upright in life; it was as if sand *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* was shifting below his feet, forcing him to work hard just to keep his balance. I was conflicted between shouting at him to ‘snap out of it’ and wanting to act as a buffer for him against a world he was finding hard to face up to at that moment.

His scrambled state finally convinced me to call the doctor when we got home. He came almost immediately – I had just managed to light the fire, boil the kettle and was wondering if I would begin milking the cows myself when his car pulled up outside the house.

The doctor was a big, The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) well-dressed gentle man who was revered in our family. This stemmed from an occasion some 20 years earlier when my father was weak with double pneumonia and my mother's fear was that his laboured breathing wouldn't get him past the night.

In near-panic, she jumped out of bed and ran to knock on the doctor's door at one The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) o'clock in the morning. On this particular night, the The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) doctor had recently retired to bed, having enjoying the largesse of a dinner party.

With a pyjama-top under his coat and a trousers pulled on over sockless shoes, he met my mother at the surgery door and then accompanied her across the streets to our house, his battered old bag in hand.

He was shocked at how low my father was and took a gamble of a double injection – something my mother surmised he mightn't have done in the cold light of day.

The bold decision had an instant impact and according to my mother within an hour she could see an improvement in my father's demeanour and by morning The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) his colour had returned.

Ever since that night, the doctor had a place of reverence in our household. I felt slightly inadequate as I ushered him into our kitchen, where my father was located in front of a fledgling fire which was smoking the kitchen without catching properly.

I mentioned in the hall, sotto voce, that I was prompted to call him because my father had believed all the cattle were stolen and I told him that my worry was he was 'losing it.'

Then I raised my voice to alert my father that the doctor had arrived. My father greeted him with great warmth by shaking his hand without rising from the chair. The doctor came around so that he was observing him full on.

"What ails you at all? The young lad tells The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) me you're not yourself?"

I had a fear of being fully present as he began talking but was also conscious that I needed to know what he thought of the situation. So like a shadow I tried to retreat behind the two lead actors and The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) be an almost invisible part of the scene.

It was then I heard the front door open and my brother emerged from the outside gloom. I wondered if my Guardian The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2) Angel had sent him as seldom before or since did I feel so

inadequate in a situation. Pointing into the kitchen, I whispered to him about the doctor being inside and *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* the fact that our father wasn't well.

Instantly, he took over by walking into the kitchen, saluting the doctor with a great familiarity – he had been best friends with one of his sons in national school and often played up in the doctor's house when he was younger.

The doctor too seemed relieved to be dealing with someone a bit more senior than me and after enquiring how his studies were going, he gently directed him out towards the back-kitchen area, his big paternal arm enveloping *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* my brother's shoulders.

There they too talked in hushed tones for a few minutes while I stoked the fire and watched my father's face for *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* reaction to what was going on around him. His eyes were downcast and his overall appearance deferential as if he was afraid to look another subject in the eye.

Just watching him there, I felt a pang of great sadness. I felt like hugging him in the hope that the pain he was feeling inside would somehow disappear.

"Now," the doctor said gently as he came back into the kitchen. "You are run down. Badly run down. And your whole system is low as a result. I know you could fight it here at home and come through alright but would you take my advice and go down to the hospital for a few weeks and you'll be right *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* as rain before you know it?"

He looked up at the doctor and his eyes fixed on his face as he spoke.

He glanced across at me before staring into the fire for a moment and then looked up at the doctor again.

"Whatever you say doctor," he said in the meekest of *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* voices. "Whatever you think is best, I'll do," he added in a whisper.

My brother took him to the hospital that evening while I did the chores at home and he also did the visit the next day before having to head back to catch up on his studies and lectures.

On the third day, I arranged to go down with my cousin to visit, having come to *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* terms with a series of 'taboos' I never knew existed in our family.

Back then, every family had a skeleton in the cupboard – ours I told myself at that time was that we had a strain of madness pumping through our veins.

As I was collecting my cousin to accompany me on the journey to Portlaoise, my aunt could see that I was struggling to come to grips with all that was happening.

“Your father is one of the finest and most decent men who ever stood in shoe-leather in this town. If he broke a leg and was in hospital, you wouldn’t feel embarrassed about it. He is, as the doctor said, a bit run down and his mind needs a bit of fixing. That’s all it is.”

I don’t know if I totally agreed with her or not but her words were transformational as far as I was concerned.

I could now explain to myself what had happened and I was relieved that I could look on my father without feeling ashamed at where he had ended up.

In the end, it wasn’t my cousin but my uncle – my father’s brother – who came with me.

Normally, he was a great talker with *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* a propensity to see the funny side of things; which left me a little perplexed after we had travelled *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* for seven miles before *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* he even tried to engage in conversation.

He opened up by asking me how I felt *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* my father might have gone off beam and I told him the story about the cattle which he thought had been rustled.

“Ah, it was much the same the last time,” he said.

“The last time,” I interjected. “What last time?”

“Just after you were born.”

I was just trying to get over what I had witnessed over the previous days when this revelation hit me like a hard punch in the solar plexus.

My uncle could see that I was trying to cope with something that had been withheld from me up to that point. As a distraction I began to open letters which had arrived earlier at our house but which I had not got round to reading.

The last thing I wanted to *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* do was listen to my uncle lift another veil on a *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* past I had *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* no idea existed. I felt opening the envelopes might halt him in his tracks and stop him from talking further. Better still, I thought, if I close my eyes, I’ll be able to pretend I didn’t hear what he had just said.

“It’s life,” he said after what seemed an age, as he put his *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* free hand on my shoulder. “We *The Long Acre: Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation (The Lie of the Land Series Book 2)* all need a bit of minding at some time or other and your father needs it now. Just like the last time. That came about after a tough year when the worry got in on him about all the sheep that were being killed by packs of dogs from the town. I went down to your house to see how he was. He was sitting in the chair beside the fire and the first thing he said to me was: ‘We’ll have to shoot the dogs.’”

The Long Acre Shining A Light Into The Ireland Of A Past Generation The Lie Of The Land Series Book 2

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