

'Gone Are the Leaves' by Anne Donovan

Review by Christopher Nicol

The casual reader might be forgiven for thinking that with her latest novel, *Gone Are The Leaves*, Anne Donovan is setting out to explore a set of novelistic possibilities far removed from those of her *Buddha Da* of 2003 and *Being Emily* of 2008. In setting terms, gone is the backdrop of latter-day Glasgow; in its place, pre-Reformation Scotland. The streets and tenements of Maryhill give place to wooded landscapes surrounding the castle in which Donovan's heroine, the seamstress Deridre, first meets the somewhat nebulous central male character, an unusually gifted boy soprano, Feilamort.the tcofl st

far from the tree when it comes to her central preoccupations. The chief of these is her love of the Scots language. According to Donovan herself, it was coming upon the word *feilamort* in *The Scots Thesaurus* that triggered her imagination. Her linguistic discoveries she shares with circumspection with the reader. which might prove too challenging for twenty-first century readers is by and large avoided; where accurate decoding may fail us, onomatopoeic and alliterative charm takes over:

Last nicht he sang and the sound of angels rang through the great hall, like a flocht of siller birds swooping and diving. Lintie and throstle, feltie and laverock, cheetle and chirm and chirple.

Also linking this novel to her earlier work is the strong strand of interest in the life and work of the creative artist, whether it be in the radiant embroidery of Deirdre or in the vocal virtuosity of Feilamort. Their uncomplicated dedication to their art and each other marks them out sharply from the political, social and sexual machinations that drive those around them. There is an attractive stillness and peace around them when compared with the surrounding noisy reel o bogie which swirls around their young lives. Told from various perspectives, a technique also employed in *Buddha Da*, this novel, like the earlier one, leaves us speculating as to the durability of the final peace of this vulnerable pair in a highly predatory world.

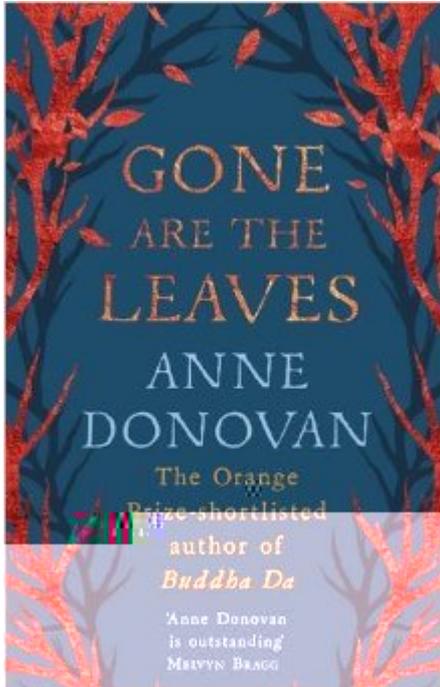
Much more ambitious than her earlier works, this is a filigreed fantasy whose poetic wordsmithing is its chief delight. At times, it features elements of a universal tale of love, nature and art set against darker forces. At others, a more narrow vision creeps in. Deirdre mistrusts the beauties of the sunlit paradise of the south. Trees, whose reality and symbolism dot the text, realise this doubt:

The leaves above us were still spring but, bonny as they were, they werena like the trees at hame. Their roots didna go deep doon intae the earth [] These trees could be plucked out and replaced at a whim []

Donovan, too, appears to share Deirdre's mistrust of things non-Scottish. The plot is driven by destructive foreign factors: the self-serving ambition of the laird's frivolous French the heartless manipulation of the Mediterranean Duke; the sinister intrigues of Monsieur Garnet; the amoral actions of Senor Carlo. The

corrupting foreign influences are finally thwarted by the steadfast Deirdre and the redoubtable, Scots-speaking Sister Agnes. The trees at home, attractive as Donovan makes them, cast long, somewhat chauvinistic shadows.

[Gone are the Leaves by Anne Donovan](#) is published by Canongate Books,



2014. The casual reader might be forgiven for thinking that with her latest novel, *Gone Are The Leaves*, Anne Donovan is setting out to explore a set of novelistic possibilities far removed from those of her *Buddha Da* of 2003 and *Being Emily* of 2008. In setting terms, gone is the backdrop of latter-day Glasgow; in its place, pre-Reformation Scotland. The streets and tenements of Maryhill give place to wooded landscapes surrounding the castle in which Donovan's heroine, the seamstress Deirdre, first meets the somewhat nebulous central male character, an unusually gifted boy soprano, Feilamort. The rough beauty of these Scottish woods, in turn, gives place at one point to an exotic

Mediterranean chateau, a cross between the Monaco of the Grimaldis and the King's Landing of the Baratheons, a setting which draws out a sensuous sunlit brilliance in Donovan's prose.

In terms also of narrative, Donovan appears to be embarking on strange new territory. Feilamort, a French orphan boy and gifted singer, appears at the castle to entertain the lord's wife. Deirdre and Feilamort are drawn to each other but plans are soon afoot to castrate Feilamort to retain his exceptional talents. Before the lad is whisked off to continue his career abroad, their relation deepens and Deirdre, destined for the life of a nun, falls pregnant. But Feilamort is not the simple lad he appears to be, one whose complicated family connections provide the plot with its motor energy.

From even such a brief summary as this, it is clear that we seem to be as far as we possibly could be from the world of Jimmy McKenna and Fiona O'Connell. Examined more closely, however, we see that with Donovan the apple never falls far from the tree when it comes to her central preoccupations. The chief of these is her love of the Scots language. According to Donovan herself, it was coming upon the word feilamort in

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