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## *Nothing Quite Like it*

Alexandra Poulain

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## REFERENCES

Nicholas GRENE, *Nothing Quite Like it, An American-Irish Childhood*, Bantry, Somerville Press, 2011, ISBN 978-0-9562-231-59.

- 1 Among the host of Irish memoirs which have appeared in recent years, Nicholas Grene's *Nothing Quite Like It* sounds a very distinctive note. Subtitled *An American-Irish Childhood*, the book captures the reminiscences of the boy who arrived in Wicklow from his native Illinois at the age of five in the early 1950's. What makes this familiar enough story of a childhood in rural Ireland unlike any other is the unusualness of Grene's identity status (he is hyphenated 'the wrong way out', and describes himself, with characteristic humour, as "an Anglo-Irish, American, Polish Jew") and the relative eccentricity of his family. Both his parents, whom he recalls with fond admiration, were intellectuals and academics, his mother a philosopher who studied with Heidegger and wrote one of the first books in English on his works, his father a Professor of Classics who taught six months a year in Chicago, and spent the rest of the year farming in Wicklow. In an Ireland where "to be Protestant [...] was not to be Catholic", Grene came to be raised as a Protestant fortuitously, after refusing to face the humiliation of returning to the local Catholic school where he failed to button up his stiff corduroy trousers on his very first school day, and insisting on making a fresh start at the Protestant school instead.
- 2 Grene's voice as he recollects his boyhood's years is unique and unforgettable, combining a passionate sense of place, based on an intimate understanding of and fierce attachment to the land, the family farm, the local people and practises, with a tone of amused distance, as if he had always retained something of the intrigued outsider. Several chapters are dedicated to his life on the family farm in Ballynaclash, and recapture his memories of "the house", "the men and the village", "farming", "Friends and relations" in vivid, minute detail. A full chapter is dedicated to the epic operation of "Thrashing",

another to the evocation of Tom Cullen, pillar of the Clash community and Grene's mentor in all things agricultural. Other chapters focus on the successive stages of the young boy's education, and draw a humorous, often less than flattering portrait of himself as a temperamental, bellicose boy and posturing young intellectual: first at Ballinatone National School, then as a boarder at Drogheda Grammar School (where he was underfed but initiated into the joys of hockey and inspired by his unorthodox maths and Greek teacher JR Pope), finally at Belfast Royal Academy when his mother became a Senior lecturer at Queen's after divorcing his father. The final chapters chart his eminently educational but rather burlesque experiences as a kibbutznik in the summer of 1964, and an *au pair* on a French farm in Cholet the following summer, as well as his arrival as freshman in TCD (where he is now a Professor of English).

- 3 The book is beautifully designed and features many pictures of the young Grene and his family, the house in Clash and the locals, the schools and their prominent teachers. As we read on, it feels as if has opened the family album for us and lets us leaf through it at leisure, passing amused comments as he watches over our shoulder in friendly intimacy.

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## AUTHORS

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