

OTHER PEOPLE'S COUNTRIES

A Journey into Memory



Patrick McGuinness

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Disarming, eloquent and illuminating, this meditation on place, time and memory, could only have been written by a poet, or a novelist, or a professor. Happily, Patrick McGuinness is all three, and *Other People's Countries* is a marvel: a stunning piece of lyrical writing, rich in narrative and character – full of fresh ways of looking at how we grow up, how we start to make sense of the world.

This book evolved out of stories the author told his children: stories about the Belgian border town of Bouillon, where his mother came from, and where he has been going three times a year since he was a child – first with his parents and now with his son and daughter. This town of eccentrics, of charm, menace and wonder, is re-created beautifully – ‘Most of my childhood,’ he says, ‘feels more real to me now than it did then’. For all its sharp specifics, though, this is a book about the common, universal concerns of childhood and the slowly developing deep sense of place that is the bedrock for our memories.

Alert and affectionate, full of great curiosity and humour, *Other People's Countries* has all the depth and complexity of its own subject – memory – and is an unfashionably distilled, resonant book: unusual and exquisite.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Tunisia in 1968, Patrick McGuinness is the author of *The Last Hundred Days*, which was longlisted for the 2011 Man Booker Prize, shortlisted for the 2011 Costa First Novel Award and won the 2012 Wales Book of the Year Award. His other books include two collections of poems, *The Canals of Mars* (2004), and *Jilted City* (2010). He is a Fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford, where he lectures in French.

Also by Patrick McGuinness

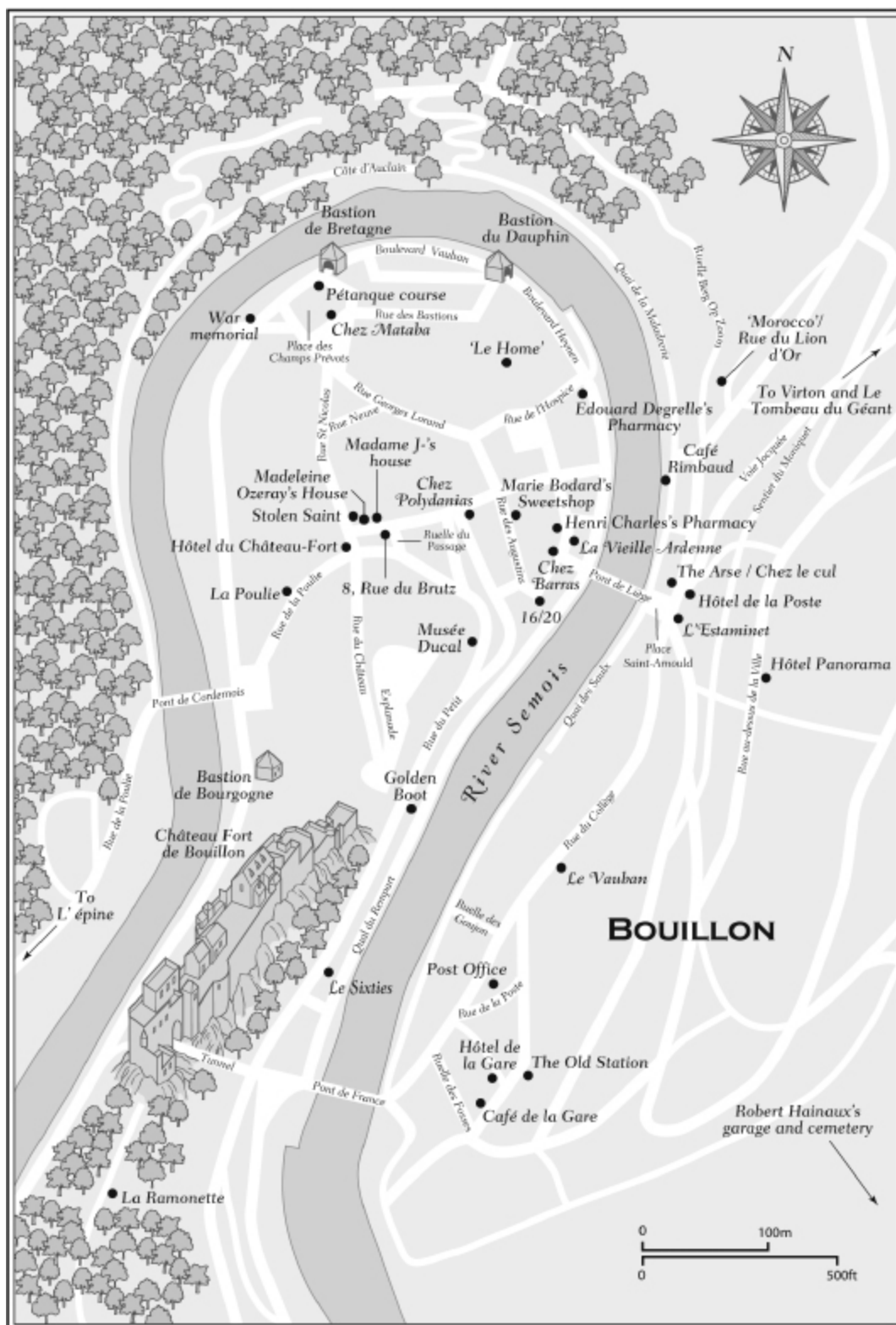
POETRY

The Canals of Mars

Jilted City

FICTION

The Last Hundred Days



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(The list does not include the living)

The Lejeunes, the Nicolas, the Bourlands and the McGuinnesses

Lucie Lejeune, née Nicolas, dressmaker, *couturière*, grandmother (1920-99)

Eugène Lejeune, 'Le Dènn', *ferronnier*, metalworker, grandfather (1914-83)

Monique Lejeune, mother (1942-2002)

Kevin McGuinness, father (1938-2004),

Collette Lejeune, aunt, teacher in the *école communale* (1944-87)

Paul Nicolas, great-uncle (1916-82)

Marie Nicolas, née Pierson (1918-2001)

Albert Nicolas, great-uncle (1912-96)

Emile Nicolas, great-uncle died in the fire of Bouillon (1911-44)

Julia Bourland, née Nicolas, great-grandmother, hotel chambermaid (1890-1975)

Elie Nicolas, great-grandfather, forest warden, husband of Julia Bourland, father of Lucie Lejeune (1890-1958)

Eugénie Bourland, great-great-aunt, sister of Julia, mother of Victor Adam (1885-1971)

Lucie Bourland, great-great-aunt, seamstress (1889-1951)

Victor Adam ('Pistache'), father of Guy and brother of Nanette, executed by the Gestapo (1913-44)

Emile Lejeune ('Emile Picard', 'Emile la petite'), carter,
great-grandfather, murdered in 'Le Maroc' (1882-1924)
Olga Lejeune, great aunt (1918-2000)

The Bouillonnais

Léon Degrelle, Belgian fascist leader (1906-94)
Edouard Degrelle, brother of Léon Degrelle, died aged
twenty months (1902-4)
Edouard Degrelle, pharmacist and Léon Degrelle's brother,
assassinated by unknown resistance members (1904-44)
Robert Hainaux, garagiste, bon-viveur and Fiat car salesman
(1935-2007)
Marcel Hanus, 'Le Cul', 'L'Queu' ('The Arse'), café owner
(1924-83)
'Mataba', Gaston Maziers, café owner (1906-84)
Maurice Pirotte, Bouillonnais poet and centenarian (1913-
2013)
Madelaine Ozeray, actor (1908-89)
Godefroid de Bouillon, Crusader, King of Jerusalem (c.1060-
1100)
'Trois gants', ubiquitous but ineffectual gendarme, real
name Jules Antoine (1918-2003)
Marie Bodard, sweetshop owner (1903-89)
'Zizi', or 'Zizi Pan-Pan la Galette' (Louis Albert), Bouillon's
most libidinous man and a Bourland on his mother's side
(1934-2011)

Visitors, Tourists and Passers-through

Rimbaud, French poet and *Ardennais* (1854-91)
Verlaine, French poet and *Ardennais* (1844-96)
Baudelaire, French poet and reluctant traveller through
Belgium (1821-67)
Simone Signoret, actor (1921-85)
Gordon Jackson, actor (1923-90)

James Robertson Justice, actor (1905–70)

Jack Warner, actor (1895–1989)

Louis Jouvét, director (1887–1951)

Cardinal Mazarin (Giulio Mazzarino), Italian cardinal and French statesman (1602–61)

For Osian and Mari, so they know where they come from

Other People's Countries

A Journey into Memory

Patrick McGuinness



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

*Allez, tais-toi, dit le paysage.
Come on, shut up, says the landscape.*

PAUL DE ROUX

First there is memory, its sleights of mind;
then comes forgetting: the traitor betrayed.



DOORS AND WINDOWS OF WALLONIA

BEFORE TELEVISION BACKLIT them with its haunted blues,
its gauze of voice over voice, dubbings of *Dynasty* and
Dallas,
there were firesides filtered through net curtains, shadows
pulling free from shadows. The furniture didn't furnish,
it loomed; heavy as cannon, it boomed darkness.

After closedown, after the trembling not-quite-stasis
of the *RTB* testcard, the blue glow lingered,
fizzed against mosquito nets, caught the flypaper garlands
with their incrustation of bluebottle and *mouche à merde*,
the banal shitfly with his coalface glitter.

That was the house's pulse, a comatose cellar-beat
to which my grandmother, Bouillon's only dressmaker,
pedalled kilometres of stitching, threaded her needles
seven to seven in daylight that took all day to die.
Her only books were swatches; she held them up

to the daughters and widows of Wallonia
fresh with their ideas from Brussels, of *haute couture*,
their cut-outs from *Paris-Match*: a small-town catwalk
of Deneuves along a corridor of Stockman mannequins
stuck with pins, stained with oil or grease, and for me then

(for me still) so oddly sexual with their tapered waists,
the perfection of their closedness. My face at the window,
I'd watch
her busy sparrow-jerks inside the darkness that fleshed her
out,

and smell the last-but-one all-day *pot-au-feu* that held its
own
against the clashing scents of factory-owners' wives.

But the body that stayed caught in the full-length looking-
glass
is mine, my drowning childhood pulling down, and these
days
nothing – least of all my whole life – flashes by. Only the
empty
mirror gives me back that time, and the lace curtains,
more air than lace, are sieves for shadows to pass through
light.

Each time I breathe I breathe it in, that sublimate of all
that's gone.

Essence of Indoors would be the perfume, if they made it.

MARIE BODARD'S SWEETSHOP

THIS SMALL DARK monochrome shop on a thin cobblestoned street with a pavement the width of a dustbin in the Belgian border town of Bouillon has become a legend in my children's bedtime. It feels more real to them than ever it felt to me, clouded over as it is in a mist of imperfect recollection and wishful thinking. Even at the time, when I was a child visiting it every day, I felt as if I was remembering it. Or that it was someone else's memory I was hosting, incubating it like a kind of surrogate. And as with so much of that childhood, I seem to remember not the things themselves but the memories of the things, as if the present I experienced them in was already slowing up and treacling over, fixing itself in a sepia wash. My children don't know that feeling yet, so telling them about Marie Bodard's sweetshop, filling it in, is like colouring in a black-and-white picture. Actually, since there were never really enough sweets to call it a sweet shop - 'magasin d'bonbons' described, in truth, its function rather than its essence - I find myself putting in most of the sweets too.

Like most shops and workplaces in Bouillon, it was really just someone's front room, where they sat, smoked and ate and watched TV, gliding around on fat felt slippers, and sold what they made or cooked, gutted, chopped or topped and tailed. The baker's across the road had their oven in the back of the house, their shop at the front. In the evenings they'd roll their sofa and armchairs in front of the bread-oven and gather around what was left of the day's heat. And it was a particular kind of heat you got in the baker's in the