

NIALL WILLIAMS

THE FALL  
*of* LIGHT

'BATHED IN POETRY AND  
MOONLIGHT' *THE TIMES*



NIALL WILLIAMS

*The Fall of Light*

PICADOR



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## *The Fall of Light*

'Williams's prose is bathed in poetry and moonlight . . . The novel eddies and flows with the circularity of myth and ritual, and close attention is paid to the land, the seasons, the weather, and to the intinerant communities – and their stories'

*The Times*

'*The Fall of Light* tells the story of the individual members of the Foley family, their eventful lives and their search for each other. Against a carefully drawn backdrop of Ireland before and during the famine, the book is essentially a story of love, loyalty, forgiveness and redemption . . . The voluptuous fecundity of the gypsy women ensconced in languid warmth and flowing milk makes the desperation of an Irish babe starving at its starving mother's breast all the more vivid. We see terrible cold and parching heat, glimses of great wealth and abominable poverty'

*Sunday Independent, Dublin*

'It is the story of this silent mass that Niall Williams tells so brilliantly in his third novel; the great Irish 19th-century narrative, which never was till now . . . The appeal of the novel lies in its sweep, its epic ambition and Williams's rich gifts'

*Guardian*

'Fable-like . . . with a Celticized magical realism [and] sheer power of storytelling'

*Esquire*

The Fall of Light

'This is a novel not like any other – it deserves to be called original. Williams is not interested in character-driven plot. His people are driven by something else entirely, a sort of cosmic passion, a oneness with the universe, the meaning of which they find in the stars . . . the effect is beautiful, like the fall of light itself'

*Tablet*

NIALL WILLIAMS was born in 1958 and lives in Kiltumper with his wife Christine and their two children. His previous novels, *Four Letters of Love* (1997) and *As it is in Heaven* (1999), were both published to critical acclaim and became international bestsellers.

ALSO BY NIALL WILLIAMS

*Four Letters of Love*

*As it is in Heaven*

*For my father,  
who first brought me to the library  
where the stories were*



## *Acknowledgements*

This book is not a history, but several excellent history books published by the Clasp Press of the Clare Local Studies Project were helpful to me in writing it. Among these was *Poverty Before the Famine, County Clare 1835*, and *Two Months at Kilkee, 1836* by Mary John Knott, *Sable Wings Over the Land: County Clare During the Famine* by Ciaran O Murchadha, and *The Stranger's Gaze: Travels in County Clare 1534–1950*, edited by Brian O Dalaigh.

George Harratt's 'Scattery Island: A Guide', gives a true and fascinating account of the history of the island and its buildings. There is a Scattery Island centre in Kilrush, Co. Clare.

My deepest gratitude as always goes to Chris Breen, my first reader, without whose support the story would have fallen into silence. My thanks too to Marianne Gunn O'Connor and Peter Straus who have once again provided guidance and encouragement when my faith in stories weakened – of such support all writers dream.

*Antonio:* What impossible matter will he make easy next?

*Sebastian:* I think he will carry this island home in his pocket,  
and give it to his son for an apple.

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

This is a story that has been passed on. It is a story that begins in the time when my great-great-grandfather was a small boy. It has been told and retold for over a hundred and fifty years. It is not a history. As with all such telling each has added his own colouring, imagined and created details that were otherwise perished. These same were then forgotten or elaborated upon and others still added until the story itself became a kind of airy bridgework linking the living and the dead, the teller and those of whom it told.

It is the story of a family that is mine. Although its figures have grown outlandish in the telling, and dates and times and places been lost to the inexactitude of memory and invention, I recognize them yet. They are the Foleys. They are the ones that lived in this country long ago.

*One*



## I

In an autumn long ago, the Foleys crossed the country into the west like the wind that heralds winter. Where exactly they had come from is uncertain. The family's origins vanish in the lost pages of Ireland's history. There was Francis Foley and his four sons. They rode horses through the night, travelling with all their possessions in rattle-tattle fashion, leading a small cart on which lay a large wooden telescope. The midnight creaking of the cartwheels, and the clattering of the hoofs on the road stirred those who slept on the edges of their beds in thin dreams. The Foleys fled through the fields of Tipperary and across the wide green of all that country until they reached the river. Then they stopped and slept beside their horses beneath the hidden October moon, their breaths misting on the darkness like visions and their eyes in sleep seeing the home for ever lost to them now.

The father did not sleep. He lay back on the cart and unfurled the green blanket to look at the telescope they had stolen from the landlord's house. He ran his fingers down the polished mahogany and up to the brass rim that held the eyepiece. He did not know its history. He did not know it to be one of the treasures of science. For Francis Foley it was simply the means by which to see the parts of the universe he would otherwise not see. It was something which he had taken in an act of revenge. Within it lay the limitlessness of space, the way to feel freed from the narrow confines of the history of his country. For amidst the stars there were no landlords.

Francis looked over at his sleeping sons. None of them was yet out of their teens. Teige, the youngest, was twelve years old. He had a gift with horses. He knew them intuitively. He knew more than men five times his age, and yet in sleep he lay with the innocent posture of a child who curls beneath the canopy of the night certain the skies watch over him with goodness. Finan and Finbar, the twins, were sixteen years, simple and distant and still sharing the one soul. While their father watched them they moved in the blanket of a sour dream, first one and then the other kicking at the same frightening vision as if it were a ball and could fly off across the dark. Tomas, at nineteen the eldest, was not quite sleeping. He was already the barrel-chested, flaxen-curl'd replica of his father. He had the same turn of lip, the same even curve of eyebrow that gave him the handsome expression of one who knows he is invincible. There was nothing from which Tomas Foley would ever step back. He had his father's recklessness, that stubborn indefatigable belief inherited from grandfathers lost that a Foley was as good as anyone and better than most. He no longer slept, but lay and watched his horse sleeping, and when it stirred or a sudden quivering passed along the muscles of its neck, he spoke to it from where he lay on the wet grass until its ease returned and the strangeness of the place was forgotten.

Francis Foley turned from them. He angled himself up in the dark on the cart that held all their possessions in the world. He was a large man in a small time, or so he believed, and his frame made the wagon creak. A tin pot fell free to the ground and the red fox that was circling through the copse of sallies skirted away. The old man did not pay it any attention. His mind was away. He had lifted and propped the telescope at an angle to the heavens and now stretched and lay sideways so he could tilt his head under the eyepiece. Then he looked up into the vastness of space, watching for the clouds to move and reveal the stars where some imagined all lives were explained.

When the boys woke they watched the dawn like a caress, travelling the heavily misted veil of the river valley, and they supposed that they were near the landscape of their new home. Their father gestured them to breakfast, and they stood around the grassy space where they had passed the night and ate hunks of bread. A mist rain was falling softly. Softly the air was moving in opaque windblown patterns that the previous night Francis Foley had convinced himself tasted of the sea. He had never seen the Atlantic. His understanding of the country's geography was that across the plains of Tipperary the land grew more rocky and wild and the population more sparse. He believed that in the west was a place beyond magistrates and bailiffs and agents, a landscape unruly, shaped by sea storms and where, like many a man whose soul was full, he would find a place to live in that was empty.

But he had not calculated correctly. When he squinted into the mist that obscured the width of the river that morning he feared that they were in fact not halfway across Ireland.

'The country is enormous,' he said. He spoke in Irish, his words dropped into the air around his silent sons. 'The map-makers have it wrong. It is a plot. They have drawn the country small to make us feel small.'

He looked at where he wanted the sky to brighten and urged it to do so with the set expression of his face. He wanted the mist to lift and tried to stare it away, then he asked his sons if they could smell the sea.

The twins sniffed the air and smelled the deer that were not far up the river. Teige looked at Tomas, who was angled forward on his horse and like him he pressed his face outward to kiss the invisible. He paused a moment then sat back.

'Is that the sea?' he said.

The old man did not know. The scent of the morning was not bitter as he had expected. Though the small wind came from the west it did not burn the wound in his arm. There was no salt in the air, and although he told his sons this was a



victory, that their discovery of the size of the country was heartening, his spirit fell with the awareness of his own ignorance. The River Shannon, that on the map in the landlord's house where he had seen it was a thin blue line snaking south-westwards to the sea, was that October morning a wide grey swirling torrent whose width was unknown.

'If we follow it we will be too far south. We will cross it,' said the father.

He said it and broke away from the breakfast, as if between words and action there was not the slightest room for hesitation or debate. Not the slightest room in which one of the sons might have said, Father shouldn't we wait and find a bridge? For they knew their father well, and lived in the shadow of him like smaller animals. They could not take the bridge for the same reason that they did not cross the country by its main roads, for the telescope would be seen.

None of them could swim. There were three horses, the great chestnut that Tomas rode, the grey gelding upon whose back the twins sat together, and the black pony of Teige. The cart was pulled by a long-haired mule. In the poor rain-light of the dawn the Foleys rode down to the water's edge. The river ran past them, laughing. The horses caught the flash of the salmon silvering beneath and flared their nostrils and stamped at the bank and were stilled but not calmed by Teige. He dismounted and talked to each of them.

'It is not deep, it is only fast,' said the father, though he could not know and could not see the far bank. He had drawn from the mound on the cart a collection of ropes.

'Tomas!' He called the boy without looking at him. His eldest son came quickly and took one end of the rope.

'There,' the father said and pointed to one of the twisted trees that grew nearby.

Tomas secured the rope. Teige and the twins watched him in admiration. He had a kind of cool expertise, as if nothing in the physical world daunted him. He pulled the rope taut and