

great-grandson of an earlier Thomas Lynch, who immigrated to Michigan in the 1890s, Lynch began investigating his Irish roots as a young man in the 1970s. His increasingly close relationship with a distant cousin led her, in 1992, to bequeath him the family homestead in Moveen, County Clare, where he now spends as much time as he can: "I count . . . thirty-some crossings in thirty-some years between my home in Michigan and my home in Moveen. I owe to both places my view of the world, my sense of myself, whatever I know about life and times."

That knowledge is conveyed through an intimate voice and persuasive prose. The book starts out as a way for Lynch to "reconnect" his family with its Irish origins, through his "chronic, acute, and likely terminal" obsession with his Irish identity. And indeed, we are treated to a thoroughly researched account of Lynch family history. "Can the bigger picture be seen in the small?" he asks at one point, and, though no single Irish immigration size fits all stories, the Lynch saga is a convincing synecdoche.

Lynch's book is especially strong where he passionately analyzes contemporary Ireland, with a sharp-eyed focus on the transformation of the Catholic Church's place in Irish life. "Since 1970," he writes, "everything here has changed. Ireland has gone from being the priest-ridden poor cousin of Western Europe to the roaring, secularized Celtic Tiger of the European Union." "For the first time ever," he adds, "the Irish have to contend with the perils of too much rather than too little."

This process of secularization, he argues, has spelled doom for the church. Lynch expresses incisively the outrage of many Irish Catholics, in both Ireland and the United States, over the "self-inflicted" blows—the sex scandals above all—by which the church has lost its way. But what hits home most forcefully is an encounter with a priest who tells Lynch that his second marriage, performed in a courthouse, "has no standing in the eyes of God." The priest, "giving out with the cant of a mind colonized by years of clericalism," typifies a church that just doesn't get it.

Lynch writes with perception and feeling about traditional Irish music (though, in his homage to the great concertina player Elizabeth Crotty, he erroneously suggests that she

composed such classics as "The Wind That Shakes the Barley"), and, as might be expected, he is always interesting and authoritative on the subject of death. Perhaps the best line in the book comes from a neighbor who, instead of expressing grief at news of a friend's death, proclaims, "Fair play to Patsy. . . . He's that tough job behind him, so."

—TERENCE WINCH

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**AN AMERICAN THEATRE:**

***The Story of Westport  
Country Playhouse.***

By Richard Somerset-Ward. Yale Univ. Press. 304 pp. \$39.95

The Westport Country Playhouse is one of the nation's most venerable summer theaters. Through the doors of the old barn, still standing in an ever more expensive part of Connecticut, has passed a virtual history of 20th-century American theater. A battery of stars has appeared on stage there, and many a play has had its world premiere. Over the years, interns have included Tammy Grimes and Stephen Sondheim. Great theater minds have run the place: Lawrence Langner, patent attorney and theatrical visionary; James McKenzie, producer who always managed to find a way; and today, Joanne Woodward, who arrived on the scene in 2000, at ex-



actly the right time. Under her regime, the theater has undergone a major and much-needed renovation. As I write, the Westport Country Playhouse is about to open for its 75th season. May it have as exciting a future as it has a rich historical past.

The story begins with the redoubtable Langner, who founded the theater in 1931. The relationship between Langner and the Theatre Guild, the organization he started in 1919 with his wife, Armina Marshall, has been fairly well chronicled elsewhere. But Richard Somerset-Ward, the former head of music and arts programming for the BBC, establishes Langner as a truly memorable figure in both patent law and theater. Who knew that Langner was responsible for the National Inventors Council, which was run by Charles F. Kettering, a prolific inventor whose name is now most commonly associated with the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research? Or that Langner was behind the Connecticut Stratford Shakespeare Theatre? All this is well documented here, and it's fascinating.

Somerset-Ward tells wonderful stories about the Westport theater's early years: skunks in the venting system, housewives aggressively recruiting subscribers without

knowing what the shows would be, a mid-western intern mistaking the J. C. Penney in the Westport phone book (the man himself) for the store where she could buy tires, productions that provided the inspiration for not one but two of America's great musicals (*Okla-homa!* and *My Fair Lady*). You feel the ups and downs of summer theater, especially on a stage that started life in the countryside but became more and more easily commutable from Broadway. It's a marvel that the place is not only still standing but is poised for a whole new life.

While this book is loaded with facts and photographs, it's a pretty clunky read. Somerset-Ward seems determined to recount what he considers the most important factoids of each season at the playhouse, leaving the reader to slog through some not-very-interesting stories to get to the wonderful ones. There are also sidebars, biographical sketches, and other asides, some of which run on for pages.

But despite my reservations, I'm glad *An American Theatre* is with us. Institutions such as the Westport Country Playhouse are rare these days, and it's good to have a comprehensive history of this very important one.

—THEODORE S. CHAPIN

## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### *IN THE COMPANY OF CROWS AND RAVENS.*

By John M. Marzluff and Tony Angell.  
Yale Univ. Press. 384 pp. \$30

Sociable, brash, noisy, curious, deceitful, intelligent, garrulous, territorial, thieving, technologically advanced—does this description remind you of anyone? Crows and humans share large brains, complex socialization schemes, impressive vocabularies, and other attributes. They also share something else, according to John M. Marzluff, a professor of wildlife science at the University of Washington, and writer-artist Tony Angell: a long history of interconnection and mutual benefit. The authors' systematic exploration of this history is handsomely complemented by dozens of Angell's pen-and-ink drawings.

When prehistoric humans first learned to hunt, crows and other members of the corvid

family (including ravens, magpies, and jackdaws) probably began sticking close by, hopping and flopping around the kills, ready to carry off scraps. Other scavenger birds, nature's sanitation department, also congregate around humans, but none so attentively as crows. Seagulls and pigeons don't come as close, for instance, or observe our behavior as intently as do crows.

While crows have watched us, we've watched them too. Their funereal plumage, merciless gaze, and ghoulish habits have often suggested macabre connections, and they were once widely believed to transport souls to the afterworld. Yet corvids are also folk heroes, the artful tricksters in both Native American stories and *Aesop's Fables*. In 15th- and 16th-century England, crows were considered intelligent, resourceful, and responsible citizens, "legally protected from destruction because of the janitor-