

The Winter Guest, by W.C. Ryan

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Irish writer W. C. Ryan sets *The Winter Guest* during Ireland's tumultuous Home Rule fight in the early 1920s. Equal parts historical fiction and murder mystery, *The Winter Guest* has all the required elements of a fast-paced thriller.

The Winter Guest begins on a cold January 1921 evening outside Kilcolgan House on the rugged west coast of Ireland. The crumbling mansion, ancestral seat of the Prendeville family, was built as a bastion "to defend against the people from whom the land was taken." Maud Prendeville, the lord's oldest daughter, and her English friend Harry Cartwright were being driven home from a party by District Inspector James Teevan.

As their motor car approaches Kilcolgan House's gate, Irish Republican Army militia fatally shoot Teevan and Cartwright in retaliation for brutal reprisals carried out against civilians. When the IRA marksmen noticed Maud in the car's backseat, however, they left her unharmed. Despite her family's aristocratic background, Maud had supported the Irish rebellion during the 1916 Easter Rising. Nevertheless, by the time the Prendeville family and their retainers reach the bullet-ridden car, Maud, too, has been killed. The British-controlled local authority maintains that the IRA had shot all three victims.

In Dublin a short time later, Tom Harkin, formerly a Captain in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, received a telegram: "Maud Killed. IRA Ambush. Funeral Imminent. Kilcolgan, Please Come. Billy." Tom and Billy Prendeville, Maud's brother, had served together during World War I in the trenches of France. Before the Great War, Tom had been betrothed to Maud, but she had broken off their engagement while he was fighting at the Somme.

Suffering a concussion in combat, Tom is haunted by flashbacks of terrible battlefield scenes. Sometimes he has trouble discerning reality from the ghosts of his past. Tom now works for an insurance company—a cover for his clandestine activities as an IRA intelligence officer. Anxious to find out who was responsible for Maud's murder, Tom accepted Billy's offer to stay at Kilcolgan House during her funeral services. Maud's father, who had opposed her engagement to Tom ("a solicitor's son and a Catholic"), coolly welcomed him.

Tom's quest to find Maud's killer takes him on an unexpected and dangerous journey. At every turn there are spies and double agents. Tom deems everyone he encounters to be suspicious—even the parish priest. He needs to sort out dueling loyalties and betrayals. But first, Tom must keep his own war-time demons at bay. (Note: *The Winter Guest* is part of Heritage Hills Library collection and Westchester Library system. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 9.)