

## Praise for *The Law of Dreams*

“*The Law of Dreams* is an artfully woven tale of mythic scope brought to vibrant life through the author’s unique perspective and craft, and through the complex and morally heroic character of Fergus O’Brien.”

— Governor General’s Literary Award Jury

“This is a top-notch historical novel: dramatic, wincingly violent, tender and extremely well-written.”

— *Guardian*

“[Behrens’s] prose style is elegant, often poetic, in contrast to the unforgiving and violent world Fergus inhabits.”

— *Quill & Quire*

“A lengthy yet surprisingly fast-moving story, *The Law of Dreams* is sure to establish this Canadian writer as a serious literary talent . . . Behrens’ use of crisp dialogue clearly conveys the fear, the longing and the unbridled hope of a young man teetering on the brink between starvation and salvation. But it is in his economical narrative that Behrens truly shines.”

— *Winnipeg Free Press*

“Behrens has fashioned a paean to the strength of the human spirit that illuminates a piece of history . . . absorbing historical fiction.”

— *Booklist*

“If the novel were judged solely on the language, precise and poetic in a way that cuts into the heart like a razor, no one could deny Behrens’ brilliance. But for those readers sometimes left a little cold by the technical virtuosity of lyrical Canadian novelists like Anne Michaels or Michael Ondaatje, it’s worth pointing out that Behrens can also spin a wild yarn. *The Law of Dreams* is a novel with as much craft as art, an adventure tale as epic and gripping as a modern Dickens.”

— *Montreal Mirror*

“Stunningly lyric . . . a work of richly empathetic imagination that reminds us once again of how powerful historical fiction can be in skilled hands.”

— *LA Times*

“In scope and subject, Behrens’s work recalls Liam O’Flaherty’s epic novel *Famine* . . . but Behrens’s language also has a visceral rhythm, and his similes meld the humble with the lyrical.”

— *The New Yorker*

“In the vividly imagined life of Fergus O’Brien . . . Peter Behrens tells a story that has to resonate with North American readers, no matter how their ancestors came to these shores.”

— *Toronto Star*

“Behrens’ use of language can transform how you see things . . . a thrilling novel that draws you back again and again.”

— *Courier Mail* (Brisbane, Australia)

“[T]here is much in Peter Behrens’s *The Law of Dreams* to excite admiration . . . including richness of invention, elegance and surprise in the writing, and sharp and forceful dialogue.”

— *Literary Review of Canada*

“This book is a beautifully written, poetically inspired tale of heroism, love, yes and sex, and the triumph of the human spirit over murderous greed. It’s a long road that Behrens makes shorter with many a surprising turn. *The Law of Dreams* is one great book.”

— Malachy McCourt, author of *A Monk Swimming*

“Behrens has fashioned a beautiful idiom for his book, studded with slippery archaisms and mournful, musical refrains.”

— *Newsday*

“This is the novel as experience, a book to be lived.”

— *Canadian Literature*

“Peter Behrens’ debut novel about ‘the great hunger’ [evokes] the great concluding line of WB Yeats’ epic poem, ‘Easter 1916’: ‘A terrible beauty is born.’”

— *USA Today*

## The Law of Dreams

# THE LAW OF DREAMS

*A Novel*

PETER BEHRENS



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*Beannacht.*

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*For Basha Burwell*

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Again, traveler, you have come a long way led by that star.  
But the kingdom of the wish is at the other end of the night.  
May you fare well, *compañero*; let us journey together joyfully,  
Living on catastrophe, eating the pure light.

Thomas McGrath, "Epitaph"

*Éist le fuaim na habhainn, mar gheobhiadh tú bradán.*  
If you want to catch a salmon, listen to the river.

## Prologue

## The Irish Farmer, Perplexed

ALONG THE SCARIFF ROAD, heading northeast toward home, Farmer Carmichael rides his old red mare Sally through the wreck of Ireland. The cabins are roofless, abandoned. He encounters an ejected family at a crossroads and hands the woman a penny, for which she blesses him, while her children stare and her man, a hulk, squats on the grassy verge, head sunk between his knees.

Saddle creaking, still four miles from his farm, Carmichael rides along a straight, well-made highway, the pressure of changing weather popping in his ears and the old mare between his legs, solid and alive.

Owen Carmichael is a lean but well-proportioned man. All his parts fit together admirably. He wears a straw hat tied under his chin with a ribbon, a black coat weathered purple, and boots that once belonged to his father. His town clothes are in a snug bundle behind his saddle. Looking up, he sees clouds skirl the sky, but along the road the air is mild, with a slight breeze out of the west, and he has not been rained upon since he started this morning. He often watches the sky. It provides a vision of cleanliness, of possibility, of eternal peace.

Sensing a flicker in the mare's pace, he lowers his gaze. Studying ahead, he sees a pile of rags humped in the middle of the road.

The mare gets the stink first, begins to flare and whinny, then Carmichael sniffs death, sour and flagrant on the light wind.

He gives her rein and nips her with his heels, pushing the mare into a steady, purposeful canter. He steers her wide around the pile of flapping rags. There is a white forearm stiff upright and a fist and a crow perched boldly on the fist. More birds are hopping furtively in the grassy ditch . . . if he had a whip he would take a crack at them . . .

Upwind, the stench evaporates. Carmichael halts the mare, swings down. Clutching reins in one hand, he bends to pick up a stone. He takes aim and fires at the crow but the missile flies past its target, clatters on the metaled road. The bird hesitates then beats up into the air, cawing lazily, circling the corpse, and Carmichael.

Depressed, anxious, he remounts and continues homeward.

He has been to Ennis to see the agent who manages the affairs of his landlord, the sixth earl. Remembering the interview causes Carmichael's back to stiffen. He hates it all — the pettifogged transaction of legal business, the rites of tenantry, the paying of rent, the dead smell of ink.

He himself is a man for the country, for the scent of a field and the promising sky. He has the hands for the red mare, a strong-willed creature. He paid too much for her, twenty-five pounds, but it was long ago, and he has forgiven himself the debt.

He had been glad to get clear of Ennis, those awful streets pimpled with beggars. Wild men and listless women sheltered beneath every stable overhang, the women clutching infants that looked raw, fresh-peeled.

The fifth earl's sudden death, in Italy, of cholera, had revealed encumbrance and disarray, legacy of a profligate life. Now the affairs of the infant heir are being reorganized on extreme businesslike principles.

"Meat not corn. Beef and mutton is what does pay," the agent had explained. "That mountainy portion of yours — sheep will do nicely up there."

Flocks of sheep and herds of Scotch cattle were being imported.

"I have sixteen tenant families living up there," Carmichael protested.

"Too many. Can't be work for all of them."

"There isn't," Carmichael admitted.

"Get rid of 'em," the agent said briskly. "Ejection. That portion ought to be grazed. You'll have to graze, indeed, if you expect to meet your rent. Whatever sort of arrangement you have with them, it gives no right, no tenancy. You don't

require the hands but two or three weeks in the year. You can get hands at wages and not have them settle. You'll have to move them off."

Carmichael has spent his life watching, coaxing mountainy people, and he knows them. The peasants are peaceful, in fact sluggish, if only they have their patch, their snug cabin, their turf fire. They breed like rabbits and content themselves with very little, but if you touch their land, attempt to turn them out, they get frantic and wild.

"If I throw them off they'll starve."

"And if there's blight they will starve anyway, sir! The only difference being, you shall starve with 'em, for you'll be paying the poor rates on every blessed head! No, no, rid yourself of the encumbrance. There's a military in this country, thank the Lord. If you've whiteboy troubles we'll set a pack of soldiers on them. Sheep, not people, is what you want to fatten. Mutton is worth hard money. Mutton is wanted, mutton is short. Of Irishmen there's an exceeding surplus."

A brass clock ticked on the mantelpiece. The ashes of yesterday's fire had not been swept from the grate. The agent had previously begged Carmichael's pardon to eat his dinner of bread and cheese. Crumbs of wheat bread on his desk. Waxy yellow cube of cheese.

Soldiers were no good. No protection on a lonely farm.

"Whoever ejects them — people like them, mountain people, cabin people — stands to get himself killed," Carmichael heard himself saying.

Was he afraid? Fear had always been his goad, a spur. He'd always thrown himself passionately at what he feared most.

"Oh dear," the agent drawled. "I was assuming you would be eager to incorporate the mountain to your —"

"It's shoulder bog," Carmichael said sharply. "Good for nothing but mountain men and their potatoes."

It wasn't fear, no. He wasn't afraid of whiteboys and outrages. It was a sense of hopelessness he felt. There were too many of them. He had always been too generous, granting too many conacre arrangements as his father had before him. Now there were dozens of wild people living up there toward Cappaghbaun, dug into the mountainy portions of the farm that they'd overrun. They'd woven themselves into his land like thistle.

"Sheep," the agent said. "Scotch cattle and sheep."

“I can’t get ’em off.” Carmichael heard the weakness in his own voice and it disgusted him. It reminded him of his own tenants, their various cadging pleas.

“Is there blight in your country?” the agent asked. “I heard there was. Is my information correct?”

“On the mountain they haven’t lifted a crop yet. So it’s too early to tell.”

“But there is blight around Scariff, yes? Lands along the river, yes? Leaves standing black?”

“Yes.” He’d seen it that morning.

“Then they will suffer it on the mountain,” the agent declared with satisfaction. “There ain’t no dodging. Without the praties, if they linger, they will starve. I tell you, one way or another you will be clear of those people. Overpopulation, sir, is the curse of this country.”

And it is the truth.

ANOTHER MILE closer to home, and Carmichael finds himself riding alongside a turnip field. There is not a man in sight, but females in cloaks and little naked children are scattered across the flat field like a flock of seabirds blown off-course by the wind.

Owen Carmichael tries to fix his vision upon the straight, well-made highway. He tightens his knees and nudges the mare a little quicker. He will certainly be home in time for his dinner. Afterward he will inspect his early cornfields to determine if the crop is ripe for cutting.

Women close by the road straighten up from their scavenging to stare.

He has no cash and cannot meet the poor rates on paupers breeding like rabbits and overrunning his farm. No, he cannot possibly.

Ejection, ejection.

The agent’s voice, flat as paper. “Any investment, Mr. Carmichael, must show a decent rate of return.”

A woman calls out in a language Owen Carmichael has heard all his life but does not understand. Instead of ignoring her, he makes the mistake of turning his head, and instantly there are a dozen or more paupers closing in on the road, a tide of females with gray mud on their legs, holding up naked children screaming with hunger.

\* \* \*

THAT EVENING, inspecting his field of ripening wheat, plucking a stalk and pressing the grains out onto his palm, he tastes one on his tongue. Cracks it between his teeth.

Then opens his hand.

Light and dry the pale grains are, wholly ripe, practically weightless.

In a second, the casual wind has swept them away.