



# Prose Literature of the Troubles

## *A Troubles Archive Essay*

Patricia Craig



**Cover Image: Chris Wilson - *Quiet Influence***

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# About the Author

**Patricia Craig** is a critic and author. Her most recent books include the *Oxford Book of Ireland* (OUP 1998), the *Belfast Anthology* (Blackstaff 1999), *Brian More: A Biography* (Bloomsbury 2002), the *Ulster Anthology* (Blackstaff 2006) and a memoir, *Asking for Trouble* (Blackstaff 2007). She has contributed to many periodicals in the UK and Ireland, and is a regular reviewer for the *Irish Times*, the *Independent* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

## Prose writing

### Preface

Northern Irish writing over the last forty years has been dominated by the Troubles, for good or ill. The subject is, indeed, inescapable and overwhelming - and as with everything else, its effectiveness in literature depends on the quality of the individual imagination brought to bear on it. Many outstanding prose writers have come to the fore during this period (along with many more of the second, or the third, rank). Not all of them are covered in this brief survey, whose comprehensiveness, or otherwise, is determined by its length. I have tried to suggest some fundamental themes, motivations and approaches to Troubles writing, and this, of necessity, has entailed a rigorous selectiveness. Within its short compass, though, I would hope, in this study, a good range of styles and achievements is at least adumbrated. I have concentrated on fiction, by and large, but some, I hope relevant, non-fiction gets a look-in too. The authors in question are, for the most part, local, but not in any limiting sense. They have all in their own way contributed to the enlargement of present-day literature.

### Things Fall Apart

"Sixty-nine the nightmare started", James Simmons wrote in his poem 'The Ballad of Gerry Kelly' (1974). He wasn't overstating the case, as the brief burst of liberal euphoria engendered by the Civil Rights movement gave way to apprehension and despair. True, we'd already had intimations of the carnage to come, via such works as the playwright Sam Thompson's expose of bigotry in the Belfast shipyards (*Over the Bridge*, 1958), and John Montague's very pointed story, 'The Cry' (in *Death of a Chieftain*, 1964), with its focus on sectarian intimidation and various kinds of pusillanimity. And Glenn Patterson, in his collection of articles and reflections on Belfast idiosyncrasies, *Lapsed Protestant* (2006), mentions an incident in 1966 involving the shooting of four young Catholic barmen foolhardy enough to do their after-hours drinking in a pub off the Shankill Road - and foreshadowing an ominous future. (Patterson's novel of 1999, *The International*, was inspired by this event.)

But, for a time at least, it had seemed as if the ameliorist impulse in the North of Ireland would win out over atavistic savagery. What happened instead is well known: the marshalling of lethal forces, consolidation of the "sectarian divide", unleashing of all those forms of passionate intensity deplored by Yeats. You can pick out key events in the runaway drive to disaster: Burntollet, Bombay Street, Bloody Sunday; the Abercorn; McGurk's Bar; Oxford Street Bus Station. But it's only with hindsight that the inevitability of the cataclysm becomes apparent - and you might claim further that literature, thoughtful, satirical, engaged or dispassionate literature, is the place to seek out the most compelling insights, the firmest understanding of the elements of our local derangement. If it offers no solutions, a work of literature can at least suggest a way of making sense of the Troubles.

We're on our way to Derry.  
We shall not be moved.

This refrain of Civil Rights marchers, as everyone knows, was the cue for an attack with cudgels, crow-bars, rocks, stones, pitchforks, fists and feet, anything to batter the liberal campaigners on the road to Derry into panic and submission. The People's Democracy, a radical, largely student body, had organised this idealistic trek from Belfast northwards in protest against continuing injustice and discrimination. The time was January 1969, the place Burntollet Bridge on the outskirts of Derry city. Frances Molloy, in her novel *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985), describes the outcome of the ambush by loyalist opponents of the "effin' popish scum" in search of social justice:



After our wounds had been cleaned up an' the whole area thoroughly searched te make sure that nobody was left lyin' behine dyin', the wans of us that were still able te walk or limp, set off again thegether on the road te Derry, singin' a different song, an' wavin' blood-stained hankies above our heads on sticks ....

Molloy's narrator Anne McGlone, born in 1947 in a Catholic part of Co. Derry, turns her own and her family's vexations into the stuff of comedy, without relinquishing an iota of the serious intent that underlies her sardonic and disabused, vernacular account of Northern Irish, pre-Troubles adversities. With its culmination in the Burntollet onslaught, this novel, for all its wryness and dryness, suggests a society on the verge of eruption.

It's a view endorsed in some measure by Caroline Blackwood, though in her book it's boredom rather than disaffection that sets a riotous dynamic going. "Can there," she wonders in her essay 'Memories of Ulster' (1973), "be a boredom so powerful that it finally acts like an explosive?" All right, you can tax her with a touch of glibness here; but the question is valid in so far as it relates to a stagnant, Protestant, Sunday-sermonising, chained-swings aspect of Ulster which made its own contribution to the coming maelstrom. An ingrained fear of Catholics and their prodigious breeding capacities was a feature of this unappealing outlook – which indeed had its counterpart in the type of Catholic indoctrination that equated all varieties of Protestantism with heresy, brutality and corruption. As these two miserable forms of prejudice filtered down to street level, you got complementary "songs of cheerful hatred", like the one quoted by Eamonn McCann in his brisk, level-headed and partly autobiographical study of the causes of alienation and unrest in the North:

...We will kick all the Protestants out of the way.  
If that won't do  
We'll cut them in two  
And send them to hell with their  
Red, white and blue.

In *War and an Irish Town* (1973), McCann (born 1943) gives a generalised picture of a Bogside upbringing in Derry, and the sort of Catholic schooling not geared to promote an integrationist ethic. But his emphasis falls on the causes of Partition, in-built rottenness in the State of Northern Ireland, and socialist opposition to Stormont. The history of sedition in the North, indeed, goes right back to the founding of the state in 1921 - and a novel like Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* of 1996 (to take that example) powerfully evokes a past filled with the noise of shooting, police cordons, IRA gunmen, burning buildings, hidden stashes of weapons, Bogside's gathered in the streets singing rebel songs .... Move forward fifty-odd years and a similar disruption, once again, is all around; only now it's people in the streets of Derry choking on CS gas fired by the Army, explosions, glass shattering, soldiers shot by snipers, petrol bombs, the smashing of batons on riot shields. "The police felt memories of the 1920s warfare in the streets stir as if it had been yesterday", Max Hastings wrote in his *Ulster* 1969 (1970).

## The True Terrain of Nightmare

Conditions in the North of Ireland during the period between 1921 and the mid-1960s had made it inevitable that something had got to give. But few could have predicted the ferocity of the upheaval, or its thirty-year duration. Those caught in the thick of it, including writers, tended to look back to the causes of the conflict (as we've seen), as well as finding elements of their subject-matter in its appalling excesses. What had fallen apart was not a just or an equitable society. Historical deadlock was to blame - but if nationalist aggrievement and loyalist intransigence between them had left small ground for liberal beliefs to flourish, you still had liberal voices raised in bitterness, disbelief, the blackest of black comedy or sheer humanitarian outrage, as the worst of the shambles got under way. Belfast, in *Silver's City* (1981) by Maurice Leitch, has become "the true terrain of nightmare", with doorstep executions carried out in the presence of screaming children, whole ravaged, burnt-out districts, scenes of bloody devastation following an explosion. Leitch's subject here is Protestant terrorism, graft and corruption, and his approach has less to do with realism as such than with a kind of heightened rendering of fear, pain and confusion. It is nightmarishly effective.

Ronan Bennett's fine novel *The Second Prison* (1991) - a kind of mirror-image of *Silver's City* - focuses entirely on republican terrorism and its scope for treachery and betrayal. There is no background of political thinking or

idealism here, just clandestine activity, imprisonment, suspicion and internecine horror. This novel is beautifully constructed and narrated with dispassion, whether it is set in an actual prison, or in some seedy area of Belfast or London. It generates an atmosphere of darkness and menace, with its police informers, its fraught activists and implacable protagonist. From its opening sentence, with a group of "hard men" gathered on a street corner in Belfast, *The Second Prison* evokes to the full the conditions the Troubles have brought about - an abnormal world, in which everyone is driven by a deadly purpose. "Nothing good can come of life or the people in it" - this bleak reflection of Bennett's narrator Kane suggests the loss of hope attendant on indigenous deprivation, or depravity. Bennett's title refers to the prison of the past, more potent than any physical incarceration - the historical past, tending towards the terrible present, or the past of the individual implicated in appalling events.

Protestant terrorism, Catholic terrorism. In his book, *The Secret History of the IRA* (2002), Ed Moloney describes the effect on Gerry Adams of coming face to face with the smouldering wreckage of Bombay Street off the Falls Road on the morning of August 16th, 1969, after a loyalist mob had achieved its purpose. He quotes Adams's comment that "what particularly incensed us was that Bombay Street was burned despite the presence of British troops who had been deployed around the area some time beforehand." Many people would date to this moment the formation of the Provisional IRA and all the ensuing slaughter and mayhem. The bitter slogans which appeared on walls around this time - "IRA - I Ran Away", for example - acted as a spur to the mustering and streamlining of defensive forces in nationalist areas, and the eventual determination - as Adams has it in his book *Falls Memories* (1982) that "things [would] never be the same again". And we know the outcome of that avowal.

Anne Devlin's classic story about the making of a terrorist, 'Naming the Names' (in her 1986 collection *The Way-Paver*), has its heroine, Finn, recalling that night of turmoil in August 69, the blazing houses in Bombay Street and Conway Street in the Lower Falls, her grandmother's among them; and the old lady, cut and bruised, being carried to safety by a neighbour. Finn's subsequent actions cannot be explained without reference to this violent event. A year or two into the 1970s, her grandmother's rescuer recruits Finn to the Republican cause. In the story's present, the young woman employee of a second-hand bookstore and IRA volunteer is undergoing interrogation by the RUC in connection with the murder of a judge's son. Within its short compass, 'Naming the Names' raises all kinds of compelling issues, the integrity or otherwise of reinforced loyalties, lapses of conscience, reprehensible choices, historical inevitability. It also works as a kind of elegy for the ruined streets of the Falls, whose names make a biting refrain. Pressed over and over to identify her Republican associates, Finn's response is to enumerate instead the lost, seminal places:

Once more they came for the names, and I began: "Abyssinia, Alma, Balaclava, Balkan, Belgrade, Bosnia", naming the names: empty and broken and beaten places. I know no others. ...Conway, Cupar, David, Percy, Dover and Divis. Mary, Merrion, McDonnell, Osman, Raglan, Ross, Rumania, Serbia, Slate, Sorella, Sultan, Theodore, Varna and Ward .... It is not the people but the streets I name.

Incidentally, Gerry Adams's *Falls Memories* celebrates the life, and the history, of these same streets, before arson and redevelopment did away with them. This book is an engaging exercise in re-creation - but you have to wonder how Adams managed to write it without the faintest undertone of inexorability, or intimation of atrocities to come.

For a denser and more dynamic appraisal of this distinctive locality, it's necessary to turn to Ciaran Carson's electrifying work *The Star Factory* (1997). Part scholarly hotch-potch, part inscrutable memoir, *The Star Factory* takes the Troubles in its stride along with many other aspects of the transfigured city (transfigured in the author's hands). During "one of the IRA's interminable bombing campaigns" of the mid - 1970s, Carson recalls, a regular occurrence was the evacuation of shops and offices in the city centre in response to a telephoned warning. As they stood in the street, outside the danger zone, released employees probably relished the sudden break in the tedium of the working day. And, occasionally, when the warning proved genuine (Carson says), the crowds on the periphery of the event became "spectators of an imminent display of property - destroying pyrotechnics", with an eventual view before them of the whole of Royal Avenue frosted with broken slivers and fragments of glass. A surreal vista.

Aside from the obvious fear engendered by these assaults, a frightening thing was the way the populace became acclimatised to destruction and disruption, with the people of Belfast, in particular, acquiring a blasé attitude to the bombings, or, at best, a kind of "London blitz" resilience, a refusal of intimidation. Some sickening incidents, though, could not be shrugged away, such as the one envisaged by Robert McLiam Wilson in his novel *Eureka Street* (1996): "The boy told him that there'd been a big bomb down the town and that forty people had been

killed." The sorry catalogue of real-life atrocities - the Abercorn, Oxford Street Bus Station, La Mon House Hotel, Claudy, Ballykelly, Greysteel, Omagh, Enniskillen - found a place in fiction and memoirs, as well as in plays and poems.

Not all of these massacres were the work of the IRA, though that organisation's increasing mastery of destructive techniques had turned it into a conspicuous force for annihilation in the modern world. What had started as a campaign for social justice, or an ideological struggle, had quickly become something else – and how, as Malachi O'Doherty wonders in his book *The Trouble with Guns* (1998), can Republicans justify to themselves the chaos, deaths and mutilations resulting from their actions? The answer, he says, is simple: in the eyes of the IRA, the bombs and assassinations are a product of historical circumstances and not the responsibility of any individual. This disengagement from reality, indeed, is not peculiar to one side only. O'Doherty, in sardonic mode, goes on to consider the case of the loyalist terrorist "Basher" Bates, who claimed he would never have taken a meat hook to a Catholic if political pressures hadn't driven him to it.

There are those who would argue that violence and sectarian depravity on both sides amount to a shameful distortion of the high ideals prevailing in the past, citing 1916 and all its surrounding glories, for example, on the Republican side; or, on the other, the signing of the Covenant in 1912 and its implications for Ulster Protestant integrity. Others, more cynical, might view the supposedly pristine ideologies and their degraded versions as part and parcel of the same deadly intolerance going back centuries. The journalist Kevin Myers, for instance, in his memoir of 1970s Belfast, *Watching the Door* (2006), comes out against what he calls "the sanitised narrative", the narrative of historical events, particularly as it relates to the traditions of Irish Republicanism. It's a kind of *volte-face* on his part though, as he started out with the usual liberal sympathy for the underdog (as personified by the Catholics of the North). It took prolonged exposure to the badness of Belfast to get the Republican-fellow-travelling leanings knocked out of him.

Myers was based in Belfast through the darkest phase of the Troubles, the slaughterous Seventies; and his profession took him hotfoot to the scene of every atrocity, every place of perdition. The experience was soul-destroying. At the same time, the constant edge of danger produced an exhilarating effect - and Myers seems to have had few qualms about setting himself up as a target, and then ducking out of the consequences of his rash behaviour. With his Republican friends, his English accent, his Army and RUC contacts, he appears to be a prime candidate for extermination from every quarter – and indeed he can't set foot in a pub but someone promptly sends out for a gunman to come and shoot him. However, as his subtitle, 'Cheating Death', suggests, a word of warning is always whispered in the ear of the doughty reporter, enabling him to effect a getaway via a back exit. He actually proves as indestructible as Bulldog Drummond.

What you gain from *Watching the Door* is a sense of the atmosphere of mad, bad Belfast, distilled through a catalogue of contretemps and amours and life-threatening predicaments. A lot of Myers's book is cast in a mode of black comedy, terrorist imbroglia or bedroom farce, as the author blunders from one set of maddened paramilitaries to another. Prodigious drinking, swearing - "Fuck away off" - killing and copulating goes on the whole time. Ulster puritanism, it seems, as ordained in the past by every variety of authoritarian religious system, has gone the way of the city's fabric, as Belfast's commercial centre is rocked by one explosion after another. In these wild days, a kind of sexual free-for-all, long unimaginable, has come into existence.

## Utter Chassis

In *No Bones*, Anna Burns's novel of 2001, fast sex as a prelude to the carrying-out of an atrocity has become something of a commonplace, along with nine-year-old drunks, bomb-toting schoolgirls and playground shootings. Ardoyne, in which the novel is set, is Catholic (well, nominally Catholic) and Republican and makes no bones about it. *No Bones* depicts a world in which grievances are proclaimed from the rooftops and retaliation is a way of life. With its episodic structure and colloquial expressiveness, the book is geared to make an impact. Among other things, in its deadpan way, it details the psychological consequences of endemic instability. Faced with on-going bedlam, it implies, what can anyone do but retreat into anorexia, turn murderous along with everyone else, or opt out of the whole thing by swallowing rows of stripfoils? Burns's protagonist Amelia Lovett (seven when the Troubles begin in 1969) is fully *au fait* with Ardoyne enormities. It is not the best place to grow up in, with people hardly able to see what's going on around them due to the blood from variously inflicted head-wounds dripping into their eyes; when your best friend may get herself blown to pieces on the way to a disco; and neighbourhood delinquents are given their orders to turn up to be kneecapped in Logue's old bar-room at seven o'clock sharp. "I did warn youse, youse pack of eejits."

*No Bones* is a brave attempt to impose a rueful outline over hair-raising events, as local pandemonium runs its course. What we have is a schizophrenic society, confidently rendered, with Amelia in the thick of it. As the Troubles get into their stride, the Ardoyne schoolgirl finds herself collecting rubber bullets with one hand, while trying to write a "peace poem" with the other. "The trials of a youth troubled by the Troubles": this phrase encapsulates the novel's subject-matter, even though it occurs in the preface to a different book, Mary Costello's *Titanic Town* (1992), subtitled 'Memoirs of a Belfast Girlhood', and falling somewhere between fact and fiction. Is it a novel or a memoir? As with other works (Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* comes to mind) the distinction is somewhat blurred.

The book begins: "For years we slept with only a withered mattress between us and the floor. It was not an orthopaedic thing, posture was not a consideration. Father had dismantled the beds as a security measure, in case we'd get a bullet through the window." Costello's narrator Annie McPhelimy is establishing from the outset the tone she intends to go on with: bright, sardonic, wry and disabused. Her book assesses the early years of the conflict in West Belfast in terms of wrecked nerves and restricted social activities. "Violence alone enlivened my girlhood", the narrator tells us, "for I was allowed out only to go to school and mass." The setting is Andersonstown, with the Troubles in full swing, the nights resounding to the jangle of bin-lids alerting the neighbourhood to the Army's presence, and wounded soldiers littering the streets, to be treated with a spot of humanity - or not, as the case may be. The McPhelimy household, like many another at the time, is fuelled by valium. The well-named *Titanic Town* (we all remember the fate of the Belfast-built liner) depicts a society proceeding towards chaos - or chassiss, as the local pronunciation has it.

At the same time, various "peace initiatives" are being mooted, in one of which Annie's mother Bernie McPhelimy is a prime mover. The trouble is, you cannot work for peace in Andersonstown (we're still in the 1970s) without being pilloried for disloyalty to the Republican cause. You will find yourself excluded from the warmth of Republican camaraderie as extolled by Sally Belfrage in her book *The Crack* (1987). "... Despite the fact that I am allegedly in the thick of terrorist gangsters, and certainly armed troops, I feel safer than on my own street in London," she says. "It is a community with everyone known and accounted for, and even if you have no specific role you belong to someone who does." And: "Leaving Andersonstown invariably felt like being orphaned." Well! You might say this is carrying empathy to an extreme.

In *Titanic Town*, the peace-promoting activities of Bernie McPhelimy lead to a mob attack on her home, and the consequent removal of the family to another part of the housing estate. But before they leave, the IRA sends in a detachment to sleep on the living-room floor as a safeguard against further harassment. The reason for this is that the Provisionals themselves have used the doughty Bernie to carry their demands for a ceasefire to the relevant government ministers at Stormont. So there you have the McPhelimys - intimidated out of their home for being insufficiently Republican, and at the same time under the wing of the Provisional IRA. Such contradictions and complications have often defeated the understanding of non-native commentators on the Irish question.

The syndrome of outsider bewilderment in the face of indigenous antics is encapsulated in John Morrow's novel of 1982, *The Essex Factor*. Morrow's central character, the unfortunate Sidney Perkins, is an English MP sent over to Belfast on a fact-finding mission. The epigraph to the novel, from Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*, includes the following sentence: "All was vague, contradictory and unaccountable"; and so it proves for Perkins who is met on his arrival at Aldergrove by a clergyman issuing a cryptic invitation: "I say we ... head for a hot Bush without delay." Into the MP's head comes an image of lunatic religions and burning bushes, but this is not the most significant of his misapprehensions. Like poor Essex, Sidney thinks prophetically at one point, they'd have his head - or its equivalent in political leverage, in peace of mind. This is Ireland for you, exposing you to all manner of frightful twists and emergencies. At the climax of the action Perkins is caught up in a full-scale riot in the back streets of Belfast (colourfully renamed Blight Street and Hungry House Lane), and - in total defiance of his role as an "observer" - is filmed in the act of passing ammunition to a petrol-bomber.

What Morrow calls "the mood of jovial hysteria" overtaking hospital staff as more and more casualties are carried in - this mood extends to the narrative as a whole, with its madly charged repartee, its paradoxical collusion and chicanery on an exorbitant scale. The *Essex Factor* embodies the same upsidedown logic, alterness to the comedy of Ulster incorrigibility and askew aplomb as George A. Birmingham's novel of 1912, *The Red Hand of Ulster* - but the mood is bleaker, more attuned to local, sectarian and governmental enormity.



## Blighting the Landscape

One of Northern Ireland's most lucid and accomplished authors is Deirdre Madden, whose fiction of the Troubles depicts a world in the grip of psychic contagion, with bereavement, suffering, guilt and blame making a focal point. "Everybody was afraid now. People were being abducted and killed; sometimes shot, sometimes beaten to death or mutilated with knives." Madden's characteristic evocation of a low-key, pervasive malaise is punctuated now and then by the singling out of a particular atrocity: the sectarian murder of the heroine's twin brother in *Hidden Symptoms* (1986); the wrongful shooting of the father of a family in *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) (mistaken for his brother, an IRA sympathiser). A native of Toome, Co. Antrim, Deirdre Madden understands the deadly effect of terrorism, whether loyalist- or republican-initiated, on all the small rural communities scattered about the North.

In 1945, the novelist Benedict Kiely, in an excess of tentative post-war optimism, wrote a book about the partition of Ireland called *Counties of Contention*. At that time, Kiely sensed the presence in the North of "new ideas ... generous ideas" which, he felt, might contribute eventually to a felicitous resolution of the "Six-Counties" problem. His short novel *Proxopera* (1977) is a withering testament to the foolishness of nurturing any such sanguine expectations. Dedicated to the "Memory of the Innocent Dead", *Proxopera* thereby endorses Deirdre Madden's point, in *One by One in the Darkness*, about the wrongness of assuming that every murder victim somehow had it coming to them. But Kiely's angry novella, a bitter departure for a writer more commonly associated with a celebratory approach and stylistic exuberance, is designed to highlight the terrorist atrocity in an atmosphere of dismay and loathing. "Not even the Mafia thought of the proxy bomb. Operation Proxy....[P]roxopera for gallant Irish patriots fighting imaginary empires by murdering the neighbours."

This reflection passes through the tortured mind of Kiely's protagonist Mr Binchy, as he drives his car towards the centre of a town in Co. Tyrone, with a bomb in a creamery can loaded behind him. This - like Brian Moore's *Lies of Silence* (see below) - is a hostage-situation novel. Mr Binchy's actions are determined by the fact that his family is in the hands of IRA gunmen. But even before the ultimate calamity strikes, the retired schoolmaster is dismally conscious, in the new, atrocious circumstances which constitute reality in the North of Ireland, of everything around him being perverted and polluted. A familiar lake has yielded up a decomposed Catholic corpse; an assassination squad of a different political stripe has been at work here. These morons - Kiely places all terrorists, all destroyers of congenial, everyday life, under this heading - "these morons have blighted the landscape, corrupted custom, blackened memory, drawn nothing from history but hatred and poison." Elsewhere - in his other profoundly anti-terrorist novel, *Nothing Happens in Carmincross* (1985) - Kiely wonders at the work of "freedom fighters" coming down to the action of blowing the legs off girls in cafes.

"It's a policy they have now," says a character in Bernard MacLaverty's *Grace Notes* (1997), contemplating the wrecked main street of her home place. "Blowing the hearts out of all the wee towns." And: "It's our own kind doing this to us" - the gallant upgraded IRA. These comments, though, are incidental to the novel's main theme, which has to do with escaping the past. MacLaverty's best-known piece of Troubles fiction, the novel *Cal* (1983), on the other hand, concerns the state-of-mind of a reluctant and remorseful accomplice of killers, the driver of the getaway car following the doorstep shooting of a member of the RUC.

Cal is a nineteen-year-old, unemployed Catholic (his only job, in an abbatoir, he stuck for a week), living with his father in a dismal, Protestant housing estate somewhere in south Co. Derry. These mundane facts help to tone down the somewhat improbable Montague-and-Capulet situation which develops as Cal falls in love with the murdered policeman's widow, and - eventually - acts to save the library in which she works from going up in flames. Alerting the authorities to the presence of a fire-bomb, averting an act of futile destruction and vandalism, turns Cal into an informer, if you look at the thing from one point of view. But the boy's unenviable position is that he is beset from all sides - menaced by neighbourhood Protestant hoodlums who threaten to burn out himself and his father, the last Catholics on the housing estate (a threat soon carried out); put under extreme pressure by his old school associates to participate in Republican activity and warned about the probable outcome whenever he demurs; looked at askance by the Security Forces and tormented by qualms of guilt. And all he wants to do is lead a normal life, preferably with the dead policeman's widow and her child. It won't happen: the sectarian murder, and Cal's part in it, have blighted his prospects, wrecked his peace of mind, and put his life in jeopardy. This is the story of someone unwillingly caught up in local and tribal viciousness - a slightly older version of Jennifer Johnston's rueful Derry schoolboy Joe Logan, in *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977), whose attempts to live unexceptionably in the Bogside are scuppered by on-going street provocation and infamy, and his brother's Republican carry-on.

## Plots and Counter-Plots

The whole Troubles syndrome, with its scope for undercover activity, startling revelation, fanaticism and high drama, lends itself to a particular genre: the thriller. Northern Irish thrillers were not slow to appear, from Gerald Seymour's *Harry's Game* (1975) on, some of an execrable quality, but most efficiently devised and carried out, if a bit uncertain in atmosphere.

With *Lies of Silence* (1990), his seventeenth novel, Brian Moore turned to the thriller form to depict a "moment of crisis" in the life of his central character, Michael Dillon, manager of a Belfast hotel and - like Mr Binchy above - unwilling conveyor of an IRA bomb. His home invaded by gunmen, his wife held captive, Dillon has his diabolical instructions: to drive the bomb from North Belfast to his hotel near Queen's University, and leave the loaded car in his usual parking place - whereupon his wife will be released unharmed while innocent tourists, along with the bomb's main target the Rev. Alun Pottinger, will be caught in the blast. If, on the other hand, Dillon acts to avert a bloodbath, his wife - the wife he was about to leave in any case - will pay the price. This is Dillon's dilemma, and his decision, with its outcome, makes for a powerful and engrossing sequence of events, inexorably unfolding.

*Lies of Silence*, as well as being an "entertainment" (in the Graham Greene sense), makes a vehicle for the author's views on Northern Ireland's "accursed systems" (to quote the nineteenth-century novelist William Carleton); systems that have fostered the loyalist "not-an-inch" mentality along with nationalist disaffection, bigotry on both sides and the current climate of consciencelessness, outrage and devastation. He has created, in Dillon's wife Moira, a spokeswoman for Catholic opposition to the bloody tactics of the refurbished IRA - while the narrative view makes clear his understanding of the part played by segregated education in engendering a terrorist stance. *Lies of Silence*, though, for all its virtues, did not go down well with certain critics who judged Brian Moore to be inadequately attuned to conditions in the "new" Belfast (as opposed to the hidebound city he'd left as a young man in 1943), as well as allowing the thriller framework to impose a certain thinness of characterisation. Nearly every critic, though, was struck by his portrayal of a minor player in the drama, a repugnant little priest, who comes to Dillon apparently full of concern and good advice, but actually bearing a death threat from the IRA.

Eugene McEldowney originally located his 'Inspector Megarry' mysteries in Belfast; and his second novel in the series, *A Stone of the Heart* (1995), concerns a planned abduction and the involvement in it of a young car thief gullible enough to believe he is acting in the interests of his degraded community. Getting the Brits out, his mentor tells him, building "a decent society where people will be treated with some human dignity instead of being kicked around like dogs"; this is what the IRA is all about. And never mind if every variety of terror tactics is a vital part of the process. If McEldowney's title comes from Yeats, his objective is to show, along with Louis MacNeice, that "none of our hearts are pure", that everyone in the North of Ireland must bear some responsibility for the shambles resulting from wrong turnings, misguided principles. "Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking" (MacNeice, again).

It is, in part, a matter of inheritance - and *Inheritance* makes an appropriate title for Keith Baker's novel of 1996, in which a striking revenge motif is the mainspring of the plot. Oddly enough, the clash in that book is between honourable and double-dealing members of the RUC, with no front-line IRA involvement. A retired police officer apparently loses his life in a fire in Donegal, and at the same time his housekeeper dies in Co. Down in another supposed accident. These incidents herald the novel's drift towards wholesale slaughter, which rises to a crescendo in the final pages. Set in a post-Troubles future, *Inheritance* deals with reverberations from the dangerous years of horror, implacability and collusion - reverberations resounding in the life of the RUC officer's London-domiciled son.



## Aftermath

With the ceasefires of the 1990s, and the Good Friday Agreement, a sort of peace, hedged around with all kinds of caveats and lapses of implementation, gingerly returned to Northern Ireland. But the Troubles didn't go away at once, either in fact or in fiction. As a character puts it in Glenn Patterson's Belfast novel of 2004, *That Which Was*, "There are a lot of damaged people walking about this city." And among them are those in the grip of paranoia, as well as the ordinarily lame and halt, survivors of explosions, shootings or punishment beatings. Patterson's central character, a well-meaning Presbyterian cleric named Avery, is accosted by one of the former, a middle-aged man claiming responsibility for a pub shooting back in the 1970s ("The Northern Irish Seventies were one long horror story.") He also claims to be the victim of medical intervention to make him forget his past misdoings - which are now returning in flashes of memory to unnerve and torment him. Mad or not? It is Avery's mission to establish the truth, to determine "that which was", while legacies from the years of violence include not only persisting punishment squads, pipebombings, joyriding, drug-dealing, robberies, brawls in bars and so on, but also a general miasma of guilt and obfuscation in relation to every sore remembrance from the past.

With a good deal of recent Northern Irish fiction, the emphasis falls on petty criminal, rather than ideological, aspects of the Troubles. Nick Laird's *Utterly Monkey* (2006), for example, a lively contribution to "contretemps" literature, has a bag containing fifty thousand pounds in used notes, illegally acquired and intended to fund a terrorist operation, as one of its motifs. The book is also about the way the past cannot be dispensed with, however one's circumstances alter. (A more insouciant version of Ronan Bennett's *Second Prison*.) Laird's central character, Danny Williams from "Ballyglass" in Co.Tyrone, has turned himself into a London lawyer, albeit a dissatisfied one - when the arrival on his doorstep of an old schoolmate heralds the eruption into Danny's life of a certain amount of shadiness and confusion, with loyalist yahoos, guns and a bomb plot entering the picture.

Rather more serious in intent, and taking into account the shaky structures and uneasy alliances fostered by the current calm, is David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* (2008). This compelling novel, insightful and audacious, envisages a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation operating in the new Northern Ireland, in which government ministers of deeply antagonistic persuasions are acting in concert to preserve the hard-won peace. The "truth" about one particular incident, if it emerges, may undermine their efforts and restore the old brutality. Park's subject is the aftermath of war, and the way in which the residue from dreadful deeds spills over into the present. At the centre of the story is a single act of violence, evoked in a prologue, whose repercussions form the substance of the plot. Park has taken one of the "Disappeared", a fifteen-year-old inept informer and delinquent named Connor Walshe, and made of him and his bad end the pivot on which certain crucial events will turn. Put simply, it boils down to a conflict between the need to confront the most terrible episodes from the past, to bring them into the open; and the opposing need to move on, to establish new, and sanitised, social conditions. It offers no easy solutions.

Truth, expediency, remembrance. John Hewitt, in one of his poems, cautions against thoughtless utterance of "that loaded word, remember", suggesting instead a more dispassionate way of commemorating casualties of the Troubles, "bear in mind these dead". The phrase makes a title for Susan McKay's sterling retelling of some terrible incidents from the thirty-year debacle. Her book evokes not only the unimaginable awfulness of the deaths in question, but also the ruined lives of those left behind. It is, in a sense, a corollary of the monumental *Lost Lives* of 1999 (by David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David McVea), which specifies every Troubles victim; *Bear in Mind These Dead*, on the other hand, by concentrating on a smaller number of atrocities, gains a harrowing momentum as each appalling story unfolds in its own way. Both these books point up the realities behind the circumstances activating the imaginations of innumerable novelists and short-story writers - whose take on the Troubles is, at best, illuminating, idiosyncratic, compassionate and constructive.

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