



the View from the Outside

A Troubles Archive Essay

Feargal Keane



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About the Author

Fergal Keane, OBE, is one of the BBC's most distinguished correspondents, having worked for the corporation in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Asia and the Balkans. He has been awarded a BAFTA and has been named Reporter of the Year on television and radio, winning honours from the Royal Television Society and the Sony Radio Awards. He has also been named Reporter of the Year in the Amnesty International Press Awards and won the James Cameron Prize and the Edward R. Murrow Award from the US Overseas Press Association. He writes a column for *The Independent* and articles for many different publications. His books include *The Bondage of Fear* (Penguin, 1995), *Season of Blood* (Penguin, 1996), winner of the Orwell Prize, *Letter to Daniel* (Penguin/BBC, 1996) and *Letters Home* (Penguin, 1999). *A Stranger's Eye*, which accompanied his television series, was published by Penguin in 2000. His memoir *All of These People* was published in March 2005 by HarperCollins.

Educated in Ireland, Fergal now lives in London with his wife and son, Daniel.

the View from the Outside

There is a poem by the guiding spirit of Ulster writers, the late John Hewitt, which might act both as an affirmation and a warning for all societies ruptured by division. Certainly I have found myself quoting it to friends in South Africa, Rwanda and other fractured societies. In 'Neither an elegy nor a manifesto' Hewitt offers his verse "for the people of my province and the rest of Ireland" but it takes little imagination to see it as a universal prayer, and, in the last line of this verse, an urging to humility:

Patriotism has to do with keeping
The country in good heart, the community
Ordered with justice and mercy;
These will enlist loyalty and courage often,
And sacrifice, sometimes even martyrdom.
Bear these eventualities in mind also;
They will concern you forever:
But, at this moment, bear in mind these dead.¹

These dead. As Hewitt injunctioned, I bear them in mind: the dead whose murders I reported on back lanes in South Armagh, hands bound and bodies lacerated by beatings and lighted cigarettes; the dead whose murders I *heard*, rumbling with the shock waves of the car bomb across Belfast, or those who died walking their children to school, or making their way home from the pub, or stepping outside their barracks to receive a pizza delivery. Forgetting is not a choice when you have become embedded in a place. The land in the north-east corner of the island of Ireland will always make an unequal claim on my heart. I came of age there as a reporter of conflict, but also in a far deeper sense, as a citizen of a broader community, those we might term broadly as the "civilized."

My friend Michael Longley developed on this theme with his great poem 'All of these People' in which he describes the interlocking lives of the Belfast community in which he lives. It is a poem that negotiates the sorrows of the troubled years, but offers us the mitigation of individual example. It caught my attention first because of a reference to a murder I had reported on during my time as a correspondent in Belfast. On the night of October 11th 1988, two gunmen walked into the ice cream shop on the Lisburn Road and murdered the owner's brother, John Larmour, who was helping out behind the counter. He became the subject of Longley's poem 'The Ice Cream Man' in which the writer addresses his young daughter who had known the flavours he sold by heart.

Longley returned to the Larmour murder for 'All of These People.' I quote the poem in its entirety here because the message underpins everything in which I have learned to place my faith, whether in Belfast or the Balkans or Rwanda:

Who was it who suggested that the opposite of war
Is not so much peace as civilisation? He knew
Our assassinated Catholic greengrocer who died
At Christmas in the arms of our Methodist minister,
And our ice-cream man whose continuing requiem
Is the twenty-one flavours children have by heart.
Our cobbler mends shoes for everybody; our butcher
blends into his best sausages leeks, garlic, honey;
Our corner-shop sells everything from bread to kindling.
Who can bring peace to people who are not civilised?
All of these people, alive or dead, are civilised.²

The idea of civilisation came to mean for me something beyond fine buildings, great works of art and music, the rule of law, all of the things by which it is usually signified. It was an attitude of mind which quietly resisted the atavistic claims of tribe and which, in the darkest of times, ensured that Northern Ireland did not descend into sectarian bloodbath. What was it that stopped Northern Ireland becoming Bosnia? The slick political pro will tell you that it was the British Army and high walls. I cannot accept that security alone prevented a descent into all out civil war. Nor was it simply an instinct for self-preservation which held both sides back from the ultimate conflagration. It was deeper than that.

What I saw as an essential decency prevailed and I found it in homes from the Falls Road to the Fermanagh borderlands, among people of all and no faiths. The phrase "civil society" is of some use here; not merely in the accepted use of the term to describe civic groups who campaigned for their communities, or journalists and writers who helped keep leaders accountable, but in its literal sense too. There were so many who were "civil" or "decent" or whatever word once chooses to describe an attitude of grace towards others.

It was reflected in the writing of the Troubles. Whether they stayed – like the poets Longley, James Simmons or the novelist Glenn Patterson – or left – like Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Deane and Brian Moore – there was a linking sensibility. It was expressed as a love of place and people but never a love that was exclusive, or which advocated the exceptionalism of any community. It rejected easy labels for a rigorous intelligence that relentlessly sallied forth against the poisonous politics of the absolutists; whenever the cultural commissars of green and orange barked their notion of what constituted "correct" writing there was always an acerbic voice to cut them down to size.

The great writing that emerges from conflict always pays heed to the narrative of the individual conscience. In his novel *Lies of Silence*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1990, Brian Moore examines the dilemmas of the citizen enmeshed in violence not of their own making; like the best of the writing of conflict, Moore's is alive always to the ambiguities of the human condition, man and woman pressed by larger forces and the competing claims of their own natures.

Moore once wrote: "Belfast and my childhood have made me suspicious of faiths, allegiances, certainties. It is time to leave home."³ But the particular writer's eye he fashioned in Belfast, that seemingly paradoxical way of looking at things, which Yeats in 'The Fisherman' described as "cold and passionate as the dawn", was to define his fiction until the end.

I would understand any artist who, faced with the dead of the Kingsmills massacre or the mangled corpses dumped by the Shankill Butchers, retreated permanently into the themes of the pastoral, attempting an aesthetic insulation against the blood and screams of daily life in 1970s Belfast.

But the ones who mattered understood Louis MacNeice's prescription for the poet as "able bodied, fond of talking, a reader of newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions." There were no ivory towers to stand alongside the Orwellian watch posts of the military. This doesn't mean that writers like Longley or Heaney became utilitarian or one dimensional in their poetry. Far from it. What gave the writing such power was the eclectic nature of its settings, the richness of language rooted in nature and place, and the broad range of its preoccupations. My point, I guess, is that nothing they wrote ever seemed irrelevant to the situation at hand. Longley's lyrical evocations of Carrigskeewaun were frequently the comfort I needed at the end of a violence filled day.

The writer reminded me, explicitly or elliptically, of the gladder mysteries of existence, the poetry of love, all part of the counter-weight against the immense presence of the Troubles. In 'Poet in the Attic' Medb McGuckian evoked the tenderness that is always within reach:

I can take anything now, even his being
away, for it always seems to me his
writing is for me, as I walk springless
from the dressing-room in a sisterly
length of flesh-coloured silk⁴

Although they would surely eschew such a definition, the writers became spokespeople for the "silent majority" in whose names the gunmen and the purveyors of hate claimed to speak. It is surely significant that the Troubles failed to produce a single major writer who might be described as a propagandist for either tradition; there was no Ulster D'Annunzio⁵ or Knut Hamsun⁶ to offer artistic succour to extremism.

The poets and novelists had much work to do, countering cartoon caricatures of what it meant to be from Ulster. They presented, in the words of the Stiff Little Fingers song, an 'Alternative Ulster.'

I remember feeling a sense of outrage while driving from the south to the north and hearing on the radio a Government minister from the Republic describe Northern Ireland as a "sick society." How on earth would he have known? Had he ever lived here and experienced the pain and pressure of thirty years of conflict, he would surely have spoken differently. Sadly the default position of many south of the border and also in Britain was a kind of puzzled hurt at the behaviour of the barbarous tribes of Ulster.

They were all sick, the conventional wisdom went, and nobody could make a sensible diagnosis. I can't remember how often I heard the expression "sure they're all mad up there" bandied about among otherwise thoughtful people in the south, not to mention the stereotyping in Britain where there was a generalised dismissal over centuries of the Irish as a race of drunks, charmingly mad or congenitally violent, or a blend of all three.

As Paul Brady sang in 'Nothing but the Same Old Story':

Living under suspicion
Putting up with the hatred and fear in their eyes
You can see that you're nothing but a murderer.⁷

We live in different times now. The Irish are celebrated and feted. But the wounds are still raw. I would learn later on in Africa and the Balkans that the predilection to write off entire countries or communities is a universal human weakness. And it was my experience in Northern Ireland that prepared me for what I would face in South Africa as it erupted into violence in the early 1990s and made me ready, inasmuch as one could ever be ready, for the disaster I witnessed in Rwanda in 1994.

The example of the two places, and their links with what I had experienced in Northern Ireland are instructive, not least in the challenges they posed to writers. In South Africa I found a society whose dynamics I could readily understand, and whose literature and leading writers echoed the notions of civilisation that had formed for me in Belfast.

That is not to make a direct comparison between Northern Ireland and apartheid era South Africa. There simply was no comparing the sufferings of any community in Northern Ireland with the scale of injustice perpetrated against the black majority in South Africa over hundreds of years, an injustice codified in law and enforced by the most ruthless security apparatus in the world. The Ulster protestants were not the Afrikaners, and the Catholics were not the blacks, or vice-versa, however vigorously some in both communities grasped at the mantle of victimhood, or however much some observers wished to cast its conflicting entities entirely in the mould of victim, oppressor, saint or sinner.

At this point I must shout a loud "hold on there!" to myself. In not comparing, one is still comparing. One enters the

realm of the politics of relative comparison which are always misleading and frequently dangerous, cul-de-sac of the imagination where the writer's prejudice cannot help but be exposed. Just as it mattered little to a man from Soweto that his living standards were higher than a citizen of the Congo, so too was it of small consolation for the resident of a gerrymandered constituency in pre-Troubles Ulster to be told he had more freedom than the people of, say, Burma. Nor did it make much sense to tell a border protestant farmer who lived in fear of the IRA that his lot was, on the whole, rather better than that of a farmer in Bihar, India at the mercy of ruthless landlords and bandits. You live where you live, with the fears and oppressions of that place.

So understand that what I am comparing here are not the literal daily realities, but the similarities of theme, the shared tensions and emotions, the abiding dynamics of fear which propel divided societies to their worst excesses, and lastly but most importantly, the unifying balm of hope.

When I first read Seamus Heaney's 'The Ministry of Fear' I was a young reporter a few months in Belfast. I had experienced being stopped at a checkpoint by part-time members of the UDR and subjected to a tense and uncomfortable half hour in which the issue of my accent and religion hung between us as an unspoken but powerful divide. They had the guns and the power and they did not like me. Heaney describes a similar encounter:

And heading back for home, the summer's
Freedom dwindling night by night, the air
All moonlight and a scent of hay, policemen
Swung their crimson flashlamps, crowding round
The car like black cattle, snuffing and pointing
The muzzle of a Sten gun in my eye:
'What's your name, driver?'
'Seamus ...'
Seamus?
They once read my letters at a roadblock
And shone their torches on your hieroglyphics,
'Svelte dictions' in a very florid hand.

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear.⁸

And yet, and yet. I could respond with relative equanimity. I had not grown up beside these boys. We did not share the same streets, nor did I have any hoard of memories in which they or their forebears played the role of oppressor. They were an irritation which my middle class, expensively educated southern background allowed me to shrug off. I had grown up with the smug assurance borne of living among people who had the same faith and whose identity would never be questioned.

As for those protestant soldiers' view of me? I was an outsider and for all the bellowing of loyalist leaders about the evil Republic from which I came, their true battle wasn't with me or my kind. I was not one of those who might target them for death on their way home from work, or shoot them dead in front of their children. Me and my kind were not ever truly part of a conflict made terrible by its intimacy, a war in which the bullets all had names on them.

But it left me acutely conscious of the power of fear. Fear of the other, of the man who would take your place and deny your being and your culture – these became the defining topics in my own journalism in Africa. In South Africa, I came to love the work of the Afrikaans poet, Antjie Krog, who addressed the dilemmas of her own people – surely among the most stereotyped in the world – in poetry that was unsparing in its critique of racism, but written with intelligence and compassion. In her poem 'demonstration lecture' she describes a protest by black students outside the school where she is teaching:

A tremor moves through my heart
Students run from classrooms
Hurl slogans personnel ordered to the staff room
Police on their way
I who fear nothing
Stand totally numb

Filled with the icy terror of being unknown
Wall-less white and hated.
Radio orders barbed wire
In the casspirs I see the faceless outline
Of each marksman a child's body
Is loaded onto a jeep to bleed or die between boots.⁹

In Krog's "icy terror of being unknown" we can hear the voice of anybody who has ever been singled out on the basis of race or religion or gender. In that moment you are truly "unknown."

Although her black contemporary, Mongane Wally Serote, expressed the anguish of his people as they fought the state, and each other, he addressed the bloodshed as a cataclysm which consumed all of South Africa's people. There was no exceptionalism here:

Blood, no matter how little of it, when it spills,
Spills on the brain – on the memory of a nation –
It as if the sea floods the earth, the lights
Go out. Mad hounds howl in the dark; ah now
We've become familiar with horror.¹⁰

Yet both Krog and Serote lived to see a free South Africa, as the novelist Andre Brink put it, "a country for which the future was as yet uncircumscribed." Like Krog he grew up in rural South Africa among the strict Calvinists of the Dutch Reformed Church, his father a magistrate who faithfully kept the law according to the precepts of apartheid. Brink would go on to write some of the most insightful fiction about the growing crisis in South Africa, giving voice to an alternative idea of Afrikanerdom which occupied a space where language could be a common bond between white and brown. In one of his most beautiful novels, *An Instant In the Wind* he tells the story of a love affair between an escaped slave and a white woman he rescues in the wilderness. It ends with the lines that I have frequently quoted to myself, always when some public event in Ireland or Africa, or any of the places I care about, makes me feel the temptation to despair. "Such a long journey ahead", Brink wrote, "Not a question of imagination but of faith." The mind can always, if it chooses, picture the right future but too often we lack the belief to see that it is realised.

There are strong echoes of this in the writings of the late Father Andre Sibomana, a Rwandan Hutu priest and human rights activist, who shunned the extremism of the country's leaders. Sibomana stood for no tribe or group but for humanity alone.

He was one of Michael Longley's "civilised" men. Persecuted and ultimately attacked by both sides in Rwanda's ethnic crisis, Sibomana's health gave in and he died four years after the genocide in which he had struggled so hard to save lives. His writing was direct and appealed to the better instincts he felt sure were concealed in the hearts of his countrymen.

"Determination is the key to success," he wrote. "You don't need many resources to make your voice heard when you are defending a cause you believe to be just."¹¹ For the writers I admire, whose work I carried with me to the war zones of the world, there was a unifying ideal which was forged in my own consciousness in Belfast: truth should be spoken, but it must be the truth of human complexity, compassion and generosity, the truth of pain and love, not the partial truth of the partisan, or the big lie of the demagogue dressed up as truth. The writer has no place in the company of such people or words.

Feargal Keane

End notes

- 1 *The Selected John Hewitt*, edited by Alan Warner, Blackstaff Press, 1981.
- 2 From *The Weather in Japan*. Cape Poetry, 2000.
- 3 Cited 'Cool Prose Craftsman' in *Socialism Today*, Issue 36, March 1999.
- 4 'From the Dressing Room.' Medb McGuckian. *Selected Poems*. 1997.
- 5 Gabriel D'Annunzio, 1863-1938, the Italian poet and novelist who became a propagandist for fascism.
- 6 Knut Hamsun, 1859-1959, the Nobel Prize winning novelist who collaborated with the Fascist Quisling government in Norway during World War 2.
- 7 From the album *Hard Station*, 1981. Hornall Brothers Music.
- 8 From *North*. Faber and Faber. 1975
- 9 *Down to My last Skin*. Antjie Krog. Random Poets. 2000
- 10 *Time has Run Out*. Mongane Wally Serote. 1982.
- 11 Cited Page 9 *Hope For Rwanda*. Andre Sibomana. 1999.