



Ulster Poetry and the Troubles

A Troubles Archive Essay

Frank Ormsby



Cover Image: Lily among the hats, Micky Donnelly (1987)

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

About the Author

Frank Ormsby was born in Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh in 1947 and educated at Queen's University, Belfast. He has been Head of English at The Royal Belfast Academical Institution since 1975. His three collections of poems are *A Store of Candles* (1977), *A Northern Spring* (1986) and *The Ghost Train* (1995), and he was an editor of *The Honest Ulsterman* magazine from 1969 to 1989. He has also edited *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (1991), as well as a number of groundbreaking poetry anthologies, most notably *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1979, 1990), *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (1992) and *The Blackbird's Nest: An Anthology of Poetry from Queen's University, Belfast* (2006). In collaboration with Michael Longley, he has edited John Hewitt's *Selected Poems* (2007). He received the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry from the University of St Thomas in St Paul Minnesota in 2002 and his fourth collection, *Fireflies*, was published by Carcanet Press in 2009.

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The poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles did not spring suddenly into being in 1968, any more than the Troubles themselves did. Nor did it have its roots in the establishment of the state of Northern Ireland in 1921. Conflict and division in Ireland, including the North, have been reflected in Irish poetry and prose for centuries, beginning with the 'Ulster Cycle' of tales in Celtic mythology, particularly the Tain Bo Cuailnge. In his poem 'An Irishman in Coventry', John Hewitt describes the troubled relationship between Ireland and England as "eight hundred years' disaster/Crazily tangled as the Book of Kells".

The poetry that emerged from that crazy tangle includes the Gaelic laments for the loss of the old native order after the main Plantation of Ireland in the early 17th century, the work of poets associated with the United Irishmen movement in the late 18th century and the early 19th century, the work of the Young Ireland poets and the nationalist verse of the Irish Revival in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. William Allingham's epigram:

Not men and women in an Irish street
But Catholics and Protestants you meet

which has a strongly contemporary ring in its summary of sectarian polarisation in Ireland, appeared in a collection of poems published in 1884. Many of the poets whose work is explored in this survey deal directly with the historical origins of the Troubles, the clash and blend of diverse traditions in the North, the endless interactions, positive and negative, of past and present.

The most significant precursors of contemporary Ulster Troubles poetry are Louis MacNeice (b. 1907) and the group of poets who emerged in the 1940s, most notably John Hewitt (also b. 1907). In 'Valediction' (1934), MacNeice presents Belfast "as devout and profane and hard" and Ireland as a seductive place which is, nevertheless, "inbred" and "violent". The image in this poem of Belfast as "Built on reclaimed mud" recurs in Northern Irish poetry as a symbol of a society with insecure foundations.

Even more influential is MacNeice's booklength *Autumn Journal*, begun in 1938 and published in 1939; more specifically, section sixteen of the poem, an extended reflection on Ireland in general and the North in particular. The themes and images of this section make it a source text for the Troubles poems written after 1968. It refers to earlier Troubles in the York Street area of Belfast during MacNeice's boyhood and addresses, for example, sectarian tension and intransigence, the fear, suspicion and violence that is part of the Irish heritage, the complex, turbulent relationship between Ireland and Britain, the Irishman's love/hate engagement with his country (also a prominent theme in 'Valediction') and the artist's envy of the man of action, with its inherent ironies. MacNeice's reputation as a leading poet was consolidated and his influence, perhaps, assured by the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1966, at a point where an outstanding generation of Northern Irish poets was beginning to emerge.

Two years later, the appearance of John Hewitt's *Collected Poems 1932-67* (1968) brought into focus the work of a poet who had, for decades, explored the dilemmas of those, like himself, who were descended from the English and Scottish settlers who colonised Ulster in the early 17th century. As an art assistant in the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, from November 1930, Hewitt began to engage profoundly with the local historical past, developing, for

example, what would be a life-long admiration for the radical, liberal Presbyterianism of the late 18th century. His verse drama 'The Bloody Brae' (finished in 1938) takes as its subject a "legendary and largely fictitious" massacre of Catholics by Cromwellian soldiers at Islandmagee, Co Antrim in 1642. John Hill, an aged soldier who is haunted by guilt about the murder of a young woman and her child, is forgiven by her ghost but also taxed with having indulged his guilt rather than acted vigorously to promote tolerance in others. Hill is unhappily aware that "whenever the Irish meet with the Planters' breed/There's always a sword between them and black memories for both", but he does have a vision of how "mercy" and "kindness" might have helped unite the different traditions.

Hill also expresses the conviction that his people have established a claim to live side by side with the native Irish, a theme to which Hewitt returns in poems such as 'Once Alien Here' (1942) and 'The Colony' (1949-50). 'The Colony' is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker remembers the violence and injustice of the original colonisation and wishes to make restitution. Again, there is a tentative vision of colonists and natives living in harmony. There is no direct reference to Northern Ireland in the poem, nor is a particular point in history specified.

The approach here (and in a number of other Hewitt poems such as 'Colonial Consequence', 'The Tribune' and 'The Well-Intentioned Consul') encourages broader human and historical perspectives and dramatises the consequences of colonialism and the dilemmas of the liberal conscience. The method may have provided a model for a number of younger poets of how to address the Troubles obliquely. In 'Parallels Never Meet', however, Hewitt is also mindful that such an approach may sanitise the "coarser texture of reality" – another recurrent concern among his successors.

It could be argued that Hewitt's most influential Troubles poetry was written well before 1968. After 1968, his most concentrated response to the latest eruption of violence was the booklet *An Ulster Reckoning* (1971), twenty poems in which the central themes of his earlier poetry re-appear. In 'The Coasters', for example, he castigates the complacency and superficial liberalism of the bourgeoisie who "coasted along" while "the sores suppurred and spread" and may now have to pay the price. A number of other Hewitt poems written after 1968 should be mentioned, most notably 'Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto', urging us to "Bear in mind" the victims and casualties of violence and the 'Postscript 1984' to an earlier poem, 'Ulster Names', which adds place names now associated with atrocities, locations on a "tarnished map ... not to be read as pastoral again".

In 1970 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland sponsored a reading tour of the Province by John Hewitt and John Montague under the title 'The Planter and the Gael', highlighting the extent to which poetry already reflected and explored the predominant traditions. Montague records in a preface to his ambitious, booklength sequence *The Rough Field* how, on a bus journey from Belfast to Tyrone in the early Sixties, he had a "kind of vision, in the medieval sense, of [his] home area, the unhappiness of its historical destiny" which proved to be the genesis of the poem. It is, on one level, a lament for the loss of the Gaelic tradition in Ireland, North and South and also an affirmation of the ways it survives brokenly in place names, folklore and local allegiances. He portrays the remnants of Gaelic culture in rural Co Tyrone, where he grew up, and the incessant interaction of past and present, including the destructive consequences for the native Irish of the Flight of the Earls and the Plantation of Ulster. Montague's awareness of the "pattern history weaves/From one small, backward place" informs a series of elegiac portraits of his rural Catholic ancestry, whose history of dispossession and dispersal parallels in the present that of the Gaelic chieftains who sailed into exile in 1607.

The range and cumulative power of *The Rough Field* is complemented and extended by other Troubles lyrics in Montague's oeuvre. In 'Falls Funeral', for example, the victims are the Catholic children following a child's coffin, who become for Montague "a sight beyond tears/beyond pious belief//David's brethren/in the land of Goliath". The young Catholics in 'Foreign Field' are victims in a rather different way; whereas the Republican sympathiser in the poem shows unexpected gallantry, so to speak, towards the wounded British soldier in his garden, the children who come out to play chant "Die, you bastard!"

Like most of the poets considered here, Montague, faced with atrocity, is frustrated by the inadequacies of "response", how (to quote 'A New Siege') the "emerging order/of the poem" is "invaded/by cries, protestations/a people's pain".

By 1968 a new, sophisticated generation of poets was in place in the North, all (like MacNeice, Hewitt and Montague) university graduates, all beneficiaries of the 1947 Education Act in Northern Ireland. During the second half of the decade, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and James Simmons published their early collections, a creative surge gathering impetus just at the point where the Province was about to enter one of the most violent phases in its history.

Almost immediately these poets were in the public eye and subject to a certain expectation that the Troubles would be their subject. Some of the responses to this pressure are now almost as well known as the powerful poems that would emerge during the ensuing forty years. Michael Longley commented that Northern Irish writers were liable to be accused of exploitation if they wrote about the Troubles and evasion if they did not; he concedes that a poet “would be inhuman if he did not respond to tragic events in his own community and a poor artist if he did not seek to endorse the response imaginatively”, but insists that the artist “needs time to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth”. Heaney also defined the aesthetic challenge in his statement that after 1968 “the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament”. The responsible circumspection embodied in these quotations, the preoccupation with the artistic obligation, the acknowledgement that the relationship between art and politics is to be handled with care, might have proved inhibiting. This was not the case. The poet and critic Seamus Deane writes of the work of Heaney and Derek Mahon as an attempt to “come to grips with destructive energies” and to “demonstrate a way of turning them towards creativity”; he sees these poets as sponsoring “the energies embodied in art which have been diminished and destroyed elsewhere”. This comment might be applied to the work already considered and to the best Troubles poetry of the four decades after 1968, a richly diverse and passionate body of work.

James Simmons, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley were among the poets associated with Philip Hobsbaum’s writers’ group, which flourished initially at Queen’s University, Belfast in the early Sixties. The most prominent writer to emerge from the group was Heaney, in whose second collection *Door into the Dark* (1969) the quest for “images and symbols adequate to our predicament” begins in earnest. The final poem, ‘Bogland’, in particular, portrays the landscape as a repository, preserving aspects of the Irish past, and opens into a metaphorical excavation of a history that is both richly inexhaustible and potentially illuminating.

Heaney’s ambiguously-titled poem ‘The Other Side’ (*Wintering Out*, 1972) catches the tensions that arise from sectarian, political and cultural division and charts a delicate impulse towards mutual understanding, the possibility that the speaker and his Protestant neighbour might (or might not) find common ground:

Should I slip away, I wonder,
or go up and touch his shoulder
and talk about the weather
or the price of grass-seed?

In the same collection, ‘The Tollund Man’ develops Heaney’s recognitions in ‘Bogland’. It draws on his reading of P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People* (1969), about the sacrificial victims of Iron Age fertility rites in Scandinavia, to suggest imaginative parallels between that society’s territory-based religion and aspects of republican mythology and iconography in contemporary Ireland.

These poems pre-figure the two-section structure of Heaney’s *North* (1975), a Troubles-centred collection that attracted widespread discussion, both positive and negative. Broadly speaking, the opening section employs the mythic approach of ‘The Tollund Man’, with a particular focus on the bog people. ‘Punishment’, for example, begins with a portrait of an Iron Age adultress, executed and buried in bogland for having offended against the *mores* of her tribe, then progresses to the tarring and feathering of Catholic girls in Derry for fraternizing with British soldiers. Heaney conveys and confronts his own ambivalence in relation to such punishments, describing himself as an “artful voyeur”, sensitive to what is happening at the centre but maintaining an almost cagey perspective from the periphery. He confesses to a tension within himself between an urge to join in the chorus of “civilized outrage” and an understanding of the “exact/and tribal, intimate revenge”.

The second section of *North* culminates in the sequence ‘Singing School’, an autobiographical record of growing up in Northern Ireland – “Fostered alike by beauty and by fear”, as the epigraph from Wordsworth has it. Heaney chronicles with wry humour his beginnings as a poet in a state where he was one of the beleaguered Catholic minority. In this section, too, the challenges and problems of reacting to and writing about the Troubles are to the fore – first in ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’, an irritated blast against both the formulaic language of politicians and journalists and the “famous Northern reticence”, including the poet’s own. This passionate, formidable, wide-ranging collection ends with the anxious intensity of ‘Exposure’, in which Heaney, now an “inner émigré” living in Co Wicklow, ponders his responsibilities as a poet, vulnerably unsure of the roads he has and has not taken.

In the collections that followed *North* the Troubles continue to cast a shadow. *Field Work* (1979), though it contains

a series of memorable elegies for the victims of violence, including Heaney's second cousin Colum McCartney ('The Strand at Lough Beg'), is much less sombre than its predecessor – indeed, the elegies are a spirited salute to abiding values and vitalities. The central sequence of *Station Island* (1984) finds Heaney once more, as in 'Exposure', weighing his "responsible *tristia*"; on a pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg, he converses with a number of literary and family ghosts, including again Colum McCartney, who challenges him about his responsibilities and priorities as a poet. His cousin accuses him, for example, of having "whitewashed ugliness" in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' and "saccharined" his sectarian murder "with morning dew". The decisive voice in the sequence seems to be that of James Joyce, who elevates creative freedom and adventure over the pull of tribal allegiances.

As the title of his second collection, *An Exploded View* (1973) indicates, Michael Longley's response to the "tragic events in [the] community" became as central a preoccupation in his poetry as it was in Heaney's. Already, in *No Continuing City* (1969), the poem 'In Memoriam' signals that one of Longley's richest sources of inspiration will be the Great War, experienced on a personal and immediate level through the anecdotes of his soldier father who had "looked death and nightmare in the face" at the Battle of the Somme, then imaginatively through the poetry and prose of soldier poets such as Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas. After 1969 his poems of the First World War and the Second World War took on an additional dimension. One of the most compellingly particular and universal examples is 'Wounds' (*An Exploded View*). Here his father's memories of the Ulster Division at the Somme – its courage, its prejudices, its teenage dead – and the fact that his father's death many years after the war was partly a result of his war wounds, modulate into an elegy for specific victims of the Troubles.

Indeed, the focus in Longley's Troubles poems is consistently on the victims and, in particular, on the destruction of domestic and familial securities. In the sequence titled 'Wreaths', a civil servant is "preparing an Ulster fry for breakfast" when he is murdered in his kitchen, a green-grocer is shot serving behind his counter and the ten linen workers slaughtered on their way to work are portrayed as dying among wallets, spectacles and dentures. Like Mahon, Simmons and Heaney, to whom he addresses verse letters in *An Exploded View*, Longley has an affirmative sense of how the human values embodied in poetry, though made perhaps to seem fragile and in danger of being drowned by the "stereophonic nightmare/ of the Shankill and the Falls", nevertheless persist – like the battlefield mice in 'The War Graves', smuggling seeds into the ruins and the celandine in the same poem that "outlasts winter" (*The Weather in Japan*, 2000).

Another vital strand in Longley's work derives from his grounding in Greek and Roman poetry. For example, some of his most powerful Troubles poems are filtered with great artistry through details from Homer, so that they are simultaneously immediate and oblique. In 'The Helmet' (*The Ghost Orchid*, 1995), the bequest of a bloody heritage is all the more terrible for being presented in family and spiritual terms – Hector hands on the helmet to his son and "prays" that the boy "might grow up bloodier than him". The sonnet 'Ceasefire' (*The Ghost Orchid*) portrays Achilles, the slayer of Hector, and Hector's father Priam uniting to clean the body for burial, Priam having made the unthinkable leap:

I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.

The poem catches the painful and chilling dilemmas of victims' families, particularly in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, which made provision for the release of paramilitaries convicted of murder. The complex interweaving of themes in Longley's work is again evident in the way his nature poems, particularly those set in the West of Ireland, often embody a consoling alternative to the conflict in the North. In 'The Ice-Cream Man', for example, about a sectarian murder in Belfast, Longley creates a litany of "all the wild flowers of the Burren" that he has seen in a single day to set against the brutal killing.

The youngest of the poets to emerge at the end of the Sixties, Derek Mahon, ends his first collection *Night Crossing* (1968) with the poem 'In Belfast', in which he asserts that the kitchen houses and "echoing back-streets of this desperate city" demand more than his "casual interest or pity". There is nothing "casual" about his portrayal of his native place in 'Ecclesiastes' (*Lives*, 1972), a controlled explosion of a poem in which Mahon blasts the messianic self-righteousness of Ulster Puritanism, its poverty of understanding and forgiveness and the bleak society it has produced. Already in this poem there is a sense of the divisions and injustices ("close one eye and be king") that will help to precipitate the Troubles and in *Lives* and subsequent collections Mahon makes his own impassioned journeys over the nightmare ground.

Like virtually all of his contemporaries, Mahon calls into question the relevance and effectiveness of art in violent times. The title poem in *The Snow Party* (1975), which has a Japanese setting, juxtaposes the formal domesticities and social/aesthetic rituals of tea-drinking and snow-viewing in Nagoya with the bloody realities elsewhere “in the boiling squares”, and the reader is left to decide whether the “silence/In the houses of Nagoya” represents an abrogation of public responsibility by the poet Basho and his friends or the heartening survival of civilized normalities.

Another complex poem on these subjects is ‘Rage for Order’, where poetry is at first seen as self-indulgent, “a dying art/an eddy of semantic scruples/in an unstructurable sea”, but which ends with the acknowledgement that its “desperate ironies” may be vital to the enterprise of rebuilding.

The gifted generation of Ulster poets who emerged in the Seventies – most notably Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson and Tom Paulin – extended significantly the body of Troubles poetry produced by their older contemporaries. Each grapples with familiar Troubles themes in an individual way and the oeuvre of each includes book-length collections permeated by an awareness of history and contemporary events in Northern Ireland.

‘Lunch with Pancho Villa’, the opening poem in Paul Muldoon’s collection *Mules* (1977), explores the subject of poetic responsibility with acerbic humour. A freely-imagined version of the Mexican revolutionary drinks “untroubled Muscatel”, sneers at the young poet for writing rondeaux while “People are getting themselves killed” and advises him to “look around”, “listen to the news” and “get down to something true,/Something a little nearer home”. The fact that the “stars and horses, pigs and trees” which are dismissed as subject matter by the revolutionary figure constantly in the collection that follows suggests that Muldoon resists such reductive pressures to be, as it were, a war poet, though the poem itself does not dismiss simplistically the revolutionary’s point of view.

Muldoon’s own explorations of the Troubles are richly and thought-provokingly diverse. A number of his poems focus on the potentially malign nature of the factors and attitudes that shape lives in Ireland and elsewhere. In ‘The Weepies’ (*Why Brownlee Left*), a gang of boys who attend the local cinema expecting the usual Saturday western are embarrassed to have their masculine securities shattered by altogether messier human realities; the poem is, on one level, a serio-humorous attack on the “No Surrender” mentality, the macho posturing that blights male development, personally and politically. ‘Anseo’ (*Why Brownlee Left*) revolves around Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward, named after one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, who is constantly punished for truancy, forced initially to cut from a hedge the salley-rod with which the schoolmaster will beat him. He comes to accept his status as victim/martyr, eventually bringing the rod with him “as a matter of course” and even engraving his initials on it. He grows up to be “Quartermaster” in an organisation fighting “for Ireland”, calling the roll of his volunteers and exercising presumably the same kind of authority over them as the schoolmaster did over him. The poem both portrays the glorification of martyrdom in the Irish Republican tradition and suggests that terrorism replicates the kind of oppression it perceives itself as rebelling against.

Among the other distinctive Troubles poems by Muldoon is the macabre narrative ‘The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants’ (*Quoof*), “loosely based on the Trickster cycle of the Winnebago Indians”, in which we accompany the shape-shifting protagonist Gallogly, a terrorist on the run, on his fantastical and nightmarish adventures in the world of Northern Irish violence. In this world, reality and identity are dangerously and often hilariously elusive. The darkly comic elements do not diminish or sanitise the confusions and brutalities and no other Troubles poem makes such extensive and inventive use of media cliché – “exit wound”, “single high-velocity shot”, “legally held shotgun”, “unmarked police car”, “dawn swoop”, “sniffer dog”, “follow-up search”.

In Ciaran Carson’s collections *The Irish for No* (1987) and *Belfast Confetti* (1989) the menacing atmosphere of Troubles Belfast is caught more intensely than in the work of any other Northern poet. Carson’s Belfast is an elusive, labyrinthine city, the maps of which are never entirely trustworthy. It has the solidity of brick and concrete, but it is also a construct of memory and imagination, a city that disappears and renews itself daily. One version exists in the recollections of the Falls Road Club, which meets in the Wollongong Bar in Adelaide, Australia, another in the memory of a man who sets out on a bicycle to visit the streets of his childhood, is kidnapped and interrogated as a suspicious interloper and finds that his life depends on his ability to describe accurately a neighbourhood that no longer physically exists.

The Belfast depicted in these books crackles with tension. In ‘33333’ (*The Irish for No*), for example, the speaker, taking a taxi to the Holy Land area, begins to relax, only to have his security frighteningly undermined: “I know

the place like the back of my hand, except/My hand is cut off at the wrist”.

Another representative poem is ‘Campaign’, which begins with an interrogation and portrays Belfast as an ominous city of assassinations, knee-cappings and bombings, of code-named undercover operations and the confidential telephone, of advanced surveillance technology such as the “lazy swivelling eye” of the security camera and the Telescope Starlight II “Twiggy” Night Observation Device, of the omni-present helicopter, of the bomb disposal expert on TV whose face is in shadow and the victim identified by the teeth marks left in an apple. There is not much room for optimism in this world but neither is relentlessly bleak. The poem ‘Night Out’ (*Belfast Confetti*) depicts a beleaguered kind of normality. A group of people listen to music in a pub while gunfire sounds outside: “So the sentence of the night/Is punctuated through and through by rounds of drink, of bullets, of applause”. In ‘The Knee’ the victim of a punishment shooting takes his young son on his undamaged knee, promising perhaps an alternative, though somewhat precarious future.

Belfast Confetti takes its title from a poem of the same name in *The Irish for No*. The phrase is a slang term for the nuts, bolts and other odds and ends flung by rioters and the poem inventively combines images of violence with punctuation images throughout – an explosion as an asterisk, a burst of gunfire as a hyphenated line. As in ‘33333’, the speaker faces the ordeal of finding his way through a familiar place that is in turmoil and constantly changing. The references to the fount of broken type, the speaker’s attempt to complete a sentence in his head and the riotous punctuation suggest also the constrictions and limitations of writing about the Troubles.

The title of Tom Paulin’s first collection *A State of Justice* (1977) and its opening poem ‘States’, a meditation on the complex organisation of society and the nature of law and order, establish the preoccupations that have earned him a reputation as perhaps the most directly “political” of the Northern Irish poets. As is evident in this and subsequent collections, such as *The Strange Museum* (1980) and *Liberty Tree* (1983), his work too has been deeply energised and coloured by events in the North since 1968.

In poems that range in setting from Northern Ireland to various Muslim and Eastern European dictatorships, Paulin explores the idea of the state as a potential embodiment of law and enlightenment but also, potentially, an instrument of oppression. The locations in the poems are frequently grim, claustrophobic places in which human and political behaviour is dominated by a lethal, self-righteous desire for retribution. In ‘Still Century’ (*The Strange Museum*), for example, Belfast is portrayed as an industrial city in the grip of a crippling patriarchal Calvinism, of attitudes which feed the superiority complex of the “chosen”: “They are tied/ To the shade of a bearded god.// Their dream of happiness is his smile/And his skilful way with the hardest rod”.

The Strange Museum is permeated by a tension between the hunger for an original purity and the impossibility of ever attaining it. There are poems in this collection, such as ‘The Garden of Self-Delight’ and the sequence ‘The Other Voice’, in which the desire for what Paulin called in an interview “a living form that expresses the spirit” draws the poet towards the seductive concept of art for art’s sake, an attraction which is seen as conflicting with the obligations imposed by public events.

One of the apostles of art for art’s sake, the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who is a powerful presence at the end of ‘The Other Voice’, appears again in ‘The Book of Juniper’, in Paulin’s third collection, *Liberty Tree* (1983). Nevertheless, in this book and its successor, *Fivemiletown* (1987) there is a decisive movement back towards the public and political. Taken together, these two collections constitute an intense exploration of Protestant heritage, in both Northern Irish and wider European contexts. *Liberty Tree* is, on one level, a loving quest for the radical, free-thinking, dissenting Presbyterianism (so dear also to John Hewitt) that flourished in the North of Ireland in the late 18th century. Paulin mourns the loss of the protestant enlightenment and what he regards as its debasement in present-day Northern Ireland. This is memorably treated in, for example, ‘Desertmartin’, Paulin’s most ferocious assault on the blighting influence of fundamentalist religions. The “free, strenuous spirit” of the 18th century Presbyterians is described as having changed to a “servile defiance that whines and shrieks/For the bondage of the letter”.

The fractured loyalties of a culture waving a flag it “loves and curses” is a central theme in *Fivemiletown*. The Northern Irish Unionists’ sense of betrayal at the suspension of Stormont and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is sympathetically portrayed in poems such as ‘Sure I’m a Cheat Aren’t We All?’ and ‘An Ulster Unionist Walks the Streets of London’. In the latter, the speaker bluntly defines the “choice” facing Unionists – “either jump or get pushed”. The “defenestration” image is one of a number that links the experience of Northern Irish Protestants to the history of Protestant Europe, particularly during the Thirty Years War. The collection ends with a challenging

longer poem, 'The Caravans on Luneburg Heath', in which the predominant themes are among those which recur frequently in Troubles poetry - the role of the writer (and language) in periods of conflict and the lessons that may be learned from the past.

The focus of this essay has been the Troubles poetry of some of the leading Northern Irish poets from Louis MacNeice to Paul Muldoon. It does not pretend to be exhaustive, but is intended, rather, as an introduction. Readers wishing for a broader picture should turn to the individual collections cited in the text and to the anthologies *The Wearing of the Black: An Anthology of Contemporary Ulster Poetry* (1974), edited by Padraic Fiacca and *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (1992), edited by Frank Ormsby.

In the latter they will find, for example, 'Claudy' by the songwriter and poet James Simmons (1933 – 2001), a ballad about the bombing of the Co. Derry village in July 1972, in which nine people died. It ends with the withering lines:

Meanwhile to Dungiven the killers have gone,
and they're finding it hard to get through on the phone.

The devastating effect of violence on people's "daily round" is approached from different perspectives in Simmons' elegy 'Lament for a Dead Policeman', two interrelated monologues spoken by the murdered man's widow and his sister, modelled on Eibhlin Dhubh Ni Chonaille's magnificent 18th century Gaelic elegy and love poem 'The Lament for Art O Laoghaire'.

Memorable also is Padraic Fiacca's relentlessly dark focus on the Troubles in collections such as *Odour of Blood* (1969), *Nights in the Bad Place* (1997) and *Missa Terribilis* (1986). The milieu of Fiacca's Troubles poems is urban and nightmarish, a world of "bin-lid-shielded battleship-grey-faced kids", of "gelignite in the tool shed/and grenades in the scullery larder", of "genitals roasted with a shipyard worker's blowlamp".

Much more obliquely preoccupied with the Troubles and the interaction of Irish past and present is Medbh McGuckian (b.1950), most particularly perhaps in *Captain Lavender* (1994), which takes as its epigraph a statement by Picasso in 1944: "I have not painted the war ... but I have no doubt that the war is in ... these paintings I have done", *Shelmalier* (1998) and *Drawing Ballerinas* (2001), in which the title poem commemorates Ann Francis Owens, a schoolfellow and neighbour of the poet who was killed in the Abercorn Café explosion in 1972. Book and poem take their cue from Matisse's response to a question about how he had survived the war artistically; he replied that he had spent the worst years "drawing ballerinas". *Shelmalier* approaches contemporary events through the 1798 Rebellion and sits interestingly beside Tom Paulin's *Liberty Tree*, as well as poems with a '98 dimension in Ciaran Carson's *The Twelfth of Never* (1998)

As collections such as *Drawing Ballerinas* demonstrate, the poetry of the Ulster Troubles did not, of course, cease to exist in the mid-nineties as the peace process gathered momentum and a ceasefire was declared. Reference has already been made to the poems 'Ceasefire' and 'The Helmet' from Michael Longley's *The Ghost Orchid* (1995) and one might also mention 'War and Peace' from his 2004 collection *Snow Water*, a poem which juxtaposes Achilles' relentless hunting down of Hector near the stone laundry-cisterns where the women "Used to rinse glistening clothes in the good old days,/On washdays before the Greek soldiers came to Troy." The Troubles continue to surface also in Heaney's work in poems such as 'Keeping Going', part of which describes the murder of a part-time reservist, and part 4 of 'The Flight Path', which recounts a dream of being asked to assist with a carbombing and an encounter on the Dublin to Belfast train in 1979 with an activist who wants to know when the poet is going to write something in support of, presumably, the Provisional IRA (both in *The Spirit Level*, 1996). In 'The Augean Stables' (*Electric Light*, 2001) Heaney recalls hearing on a visit to Olympia of "Sean Brown's murder in the grounds/Of Bellaghy GAA Club" and imagining "Hosewater smashing hard back off the asphalt/In the car park where his athlete's blood ran cold".

Muldoon's collections *Hay* (1998) and *Moy Sand and Gravel* (2002) also circle back in a number of poems to images of violence in the North, including the IRA bombing campaign of the Fifties in 'Unapproved Road' (*Moy Sand and Gravel*). Indeed, Muldoon's poem 'Wire' (*Hay*) records how the raking of a lorry's gears in Connecticut "brought back 'some truck on a bomb run/brought back so much with which I'd hoped to break". Tom Paulin's *The Wind Dog* (1999) includes an elegy, 'The Quinn Brothers', for two children burned to death in a sectarian attack, as well as poems titled 'Drumcree Three' and 'Drumcree Four'. The poems at the start of Ciaran Carson's *Breaking News* (2003) (as well as poems about the Indian Mutiny and the Crimean War) echo and extend his Troubles poetry of the

Eighties and Nineties. Other examples could be added to this list. It would seem that in a variety of ways the Troubles are still in the process of finding, in Michael Longley's phrase, their "imaginative depth".

Of the Ulster poets who have come to prominence since 2000, many have touched on the Troubles and their aftermath, but the conflict in Northern Ireland is not a central concern in their work. A notable exception is Gearoid MacLochlainn (b. 1967), whose bilingual collection *Stream of Tongues/Sruth Teagacha* (2002), influenced by the poetry of Padraic Fiacc and Ciaran Carson, records the experience of growing up among the "war urchins of riot-torn West Belfast", reciting the names of the hunger strikers, wondering what use poetry is "in this last godforsaken relic of the Empire" and full of frustrated yearning for the normality of carefree nights out enjoying music and poetry.

Alan Gillis (b. 1973) is another essentially urban poet whose energetic work portrays an alcohol-and-drugs befuddled Belfast in which violence is never far from the surface. The macabrely humorous '12th October 1994' presents a gallery of paramilitary hard men such as Victor "Steel Plate" Hogg and Frankie "Ten Pints" Fraser, the latter overheard to say: "no, Victor, nobody's going to fucking disband". Equally striking is 'Progress', a forlorn ironic fantasy in which the entire Troubles are reversed – ambulances are imagined leaving the dying "back amidst the rubble/to be explosively healed" and the poem ends with a "shy young man/taking his bomb from the building and driving home". The uncertainty of post-Troubles Northern Ireland, its interim, transitional feel are evident in Gillis's poem 'LaganWeir', where the speaker hears "a dove in one ear saying/look the other way, a hawk in the other/braying self-righteous fury" (*Hawks and Doves*, 2007). 'Laganside', in the same collection, contrasts images of the tall cranes rebuilding Belfast with their "unused elders hung/in sorrow in the dockyards of the east; whether/in sympathy, or saying up yours, I'm not sure".

Leontia Flynn (b. 1974) also casts a mildly sardonic eye over the "new facades on old bath and gasworks" in her poem 'Belfast' (*Drives*, 2008):

Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction.
What was mixed grills and whiskey (cultureless, graceless, leisureless)
is now concerts and walking tours (Friendly! Dynamic! Various!)

The note here is similar to that struck by Sinead Morrissey (b. 1972) in her poem 'Tourism' (*Between Here and There*, 2002), which satirises peace-dividend Belfast's growing popularity as a tourist destination. "Our day has come" the speaker remarks, urging visitors from Europe to "Diffuse the gene pool, confuse the local kings//infect us with (their) radical ideas". Irony is the chosen mode also in 'And They Call It Lovely Derry' by Colette Bryce (b.1970), from her collection *The Full Indian Rope Trick* (2005), in which a group of Catholic and Protestant children from Derry/Londonderry are sent to Florida "to mix for three weeks in a normal society". Their host turns out to be racist and the concert they give on the final night founded on old divisions:

We harmonized on all the songs
but fell apart with the grand finale,
the well-rehearsed 'O I know a wee spot ...'
as the group split between London and Lovely.

Somewhere behind all poetry of conflict there lies a rage for order and a yearning for peace-time values. The poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles is against violence. It embodies the intelligent and emotional exploration of experience and accommodates self-questioning and honest doubts. It is about compassion and tolerance and the need to find positive ways of living our lives. Its impulses are essentially affirmative and healing. It celebrates plurality and resists pressures on the individual to toe particular lines – tribal, sectarian, political. It complements and is complemented by the poetry of our everyday lives.

With this in mind, it must be said that poems "about" the Troubles represent only a fraction, albeit a significant fraction, of the poetry written in Northern Ireland since the Sixties. The poets I have mentioned here (and many others I have not) have, of course, continued to write memorably on all the perennial subjects: birth, childhood, love, marriage, family, divorce, the landscape, the natural world, the city. Their work has been inspired by art, sport, music, the cinema and travel and they have translated poems from a great variety of other languages. They have borne witness to atrocity but found time also to draw ballerinas, to give stars and horses, pigs and trees the attention and reverence they deserve.

Frank Ormsby

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