

Remembering Not to Forget

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A Review of

Michael Parker, *Northern Irish Literature 1956-1975 and Northern Irish Literature 1975-2006* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007), ISBN: 9780333604151, 386pp, 9780230553057, pp368

When searching for a way to impose a meaningful order upon reality, we rely on memory for 'the provision of symbolic representations and frames which can influence and organize both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves' (Misztal, 13). However, in the aftermath of the Belfast Agreement and the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly historical accounts produced by the media and governmental institutions have been underscored by a pronounced and predominant process of selective forgetting whereby the awkward sectarian complexities of the Troubles have been erased or archived. Hence, as Colin Graham's recent research has documented, a recurrent trope has emerged in Northern Irish culture of 'an ache which notices, knows, but can barely comment on the cauterisation of the dark complexity of the past'; hence, "the difficult and the embarrassingly recent past, or the irritatingly non-conforming present, is archived' (568). Excessive remembrance may lead to madness, but forgetfulness carries its own inherent dangers, and Northern Irish writers and visual artists have consistently guarded against any politically expedient embrace of amnesia. For example, contrary to those who wished to forgive and forget amidst euphoric post-conflict jubilation, the poet Michael Longley weighed in with prudent counsel, arguing that 'amnesty isn't amnesia' and that '[i]n order to make sure it doesn't happen again', he states 'you've got to remember it in great detail. Those who forget history are the ones who are doomed to repeat it: that's very true' (Interview, 35-6). This point is made graphically in Jack Pakenham's large canvas *Lest We Forget* (38-9), painted following the Downing Street Declaration. In his poetic commentary on this painting, Pakenham declares:

In their eagerness for Peace
the dead were all forgotten
the lies were all forgiven
and someone said
'Let's pretend it never happened'

Peace should encourage self-reflexivity, not a negligent wholesale indifference to history. Renouncing the often propagandist reconstruction of the past which occurs in Northern Ireland, Longley

advocates the Cultural Traditions approach, which 'involves a mixture of affirmation, self-interrogation and mutual curiosity. To bring to light all that has been repressed can be a painful process; but, to quote the American theologian Don Shriver: "The cure and the remembrance are co-terminous"' ('Blackthorn' 75-6).

Writ large in Michael Parker's magisterial survey of Northern Irish Literature from 1956-2006 is just such a preoccupation with writers' engagements with memory and the often burdensome legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. The works analysed in both volumes of Parker's study are shown to be alive to the notion that what one designates as 'memory' is produced by contestable systems of knowledge and power; what history and memory produce as knowledge is highly contingent upon the often contestable systems of power that produce them. Poets like John Hewitt, John Montague and Seamus Heaney delve 'into buried cultural resources, salvaging words, narratives, bones and artefacts' (Parker, 163); critiquing established notions of place and identity, they become chroniclers and revisers of history. Parker's exploration of the genesis of post-1940s Northern Irish literature and the impact of such cultural texts is complemented by his acute awareness of the importance of context. Indeed, he is at some pains to present a scrupulously balanced and rigorously researched account of the key historical events which inform the writers' oeuvre, and such scholarship pays off handsomely in illuminating the forces acting upon each author. Here, of course, Parker enters into a key debate regarding the role of the writer in a time of conflict and he presents some of the key arguments on this theme from the 70s and 80s.

Poetry and politics, like church and state, should be separated. And for the same reasons: mysteries distort the rational processes which ideally prevail in social relations; while ideologies confiscate the poet's special passport to *terra incognita*. (Longley, 'Poetry and Politics', 185)

Edna Longley echoes here the sentiments expressed by Conor Cruise O'Brien in the mid-seventies (See Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'An Unhealthy Intersection' 3-8 and 'A Slow North- East Wind', 404-5); the area where poetry and politics overlap is said to be an 'unhealthy intersection'. Art must 'maintain a neutral and unadulterated aloofness from the strategies of political power' (Kearney 13), otherwise poetry would be in danger of becoming rhetoric and propaganda. Literature and politics must, according to Longley and O'Brien, inhabit exclusive realms: 'art' belongs to the imaginative, politics to the real. Yet Edna Longley does acknowledge that the poet must not be an ivory-tower aesthete, s/he has a responsibility to society: 'The price of imaginative liberty is eternal vigilance' (Edna

Longley 'Poetry and Politics' 185). What Parker examines is exactly *what* this 'imaginative liberty' is and why the writer must remain 'vigilant'. While his focus is predominantly on canonical texts, there are some welcome forays into less well-known texts such as Sam Thompson's controversial play about Belfast sectarianism, *Over the Bridge* (1960), Roy McFadden's under-rated collection of poems, *The Garryowen* (1971), John Boyd's moving and polemical play, *The Flats* (1973), and Una Woods' disturbing, but technically accomplished debut novel, *The Dark Hole Days* (1984). Parker adroitly traces the impress on literature of the civil rights movement, gerrymandering, internment, Bloody Sunday and other major events. While Parker's study is somewhat overshadowed in some areas by recent criticism – for example, Tom Herron and John Lynch's comprehensive study *After Bloody Sunday* (2007) contains a more exhaustive and theoretically astute analysis of works produced in light of the atrocities which took place on 30 January 1972, and Heather Clark's *The Ulster Renaissance* (2006) provides a more in-depth and nuanced overview of poetic production in Belfast between 1962-1972 – nevertheless, the two-volume work succeeds in exploring many of the dominant thematic concerns of Northern Irish literature such as the crisis of identity, the effective collapse of the opposition between private and public space, the difficulties in representing violence and 'the ethical choices individuals face, whether to pursue a path of self-advancement or to commit themselves to collective enterprise' (Parker, 143). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Parker's study is his intermittent focus on the differing ways in which historical narratives are used (and abused).

The Orange Order's use of the past has recently come under close scrutiny from Northern Irish writers and visual artists. No longer uncritically lauding acts of remembrance, they question what they perceive to be its inward-looking, self-defeating nature. Victor Sloan's photographs (see, for example, *Walls* (1989)), for instance, explore various aspects of the Protestant marching season. Brian McAvera, describing Sloan's *The Walk, The Platform and The Field* series at the Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart (1986) states that '[t]he predominant tone is sepia, suggesting records of a bygone age. In almost every instance the central image struggles to emerge from a miasma of marks which compress both background and middle ground into foreground. It's as if the images were caught between ineluctable forces' (100). Left alone, the photographs would be realistic depictions of the Orange marches. Yet the artist's scraping, marking and over-painting of his photographs establishes an almost sinister aspect, blocking out the individual personality. One could well argue that the violence done to the images 'pinpoints exactly that sense of costiveness that is the

Unionist political mandate' (John Roberts in Kelly 53). In *No Surrender* (McAvera 75), for example, the 'X' slashed across the banner of a feminised William of Orange indicates Sloan's disapproval. A more oblique, though none the less scathing critique of the Orange Order is to be seen in Rita Duffy's surrealistic *Legacy on the Boyne* (1989). That the 12th of July marches have a religious aspect is indicated not only by the Moses child hidden among the reeds (Kelly 84), but also by the main figure's facial expression: wide-eyed devotion. That this may also convey fanaticism is hinted by the more sinister aspects of the painting. In the centre stands a huge Orangeman holding a ceremonial sword, his sash flowing like the Boyne, carrying off spectral bodies with Munch-like screaming skulls. The man carries the past with him, namely remembrances of the Boyne. Yet the present conflict is viewed as a continuation of the 1690 battle since, on the left of the canvas, flowing into the sash/river, there is a graveyard with open tombs and to the right, a man screams as the tip of the Orangeman's sword hovers perilously above his head. Martin Mooney's 'Bonfire Makers' also provides a wry commentary on Protestant tradition. Describing the rituals of Eleventh Night, the speaker says:

With their nose for what catches, their insinct
for ritual and sense of timing, they
gather it all into the old charred circle,
its birthmark. Then burn it down. (19)

The 'old charred circle' suggests not only continuity, but also entrapment. The lighting of bonfires conflates origin with death: burning the 'birthmark' is not viewed positively. In Glenn Patterson's *Burning Your Own*, Francy Hagan, a Catholic tramp, asks "'D'you know the oldest things for miles around here? The trees. See the one out there? That tree was rooted in the earth long before there was a chapel ever dreamt of. And what do they do? These eejits that are never done spouting about the past? Tip their shite about it'" (216). Less interested in their environment, they chop down trees to use as centrepoles for bonfires. "'Youse never knew — what to waste — and what the fuck — to keep'" (246), he screams at the Eleventh Night revellers, and proceeds to hold a parodic auction, selling off articles from his dump (a symbolic repository for Northern Irish traditions). "'Sick to death always having to take someone else's word for it?" he asks. "Then solve all your problems when you become the proud owner of this very attractive dictionary'" (244). Tradition, he seems to be saying, inhibits individual thought and expression. Dermot Seymour would concur. Two of his paintings, *Allah O Akhbar* and *Who Feels to Speak of '98* portray headless figures: while those in the former wear T-shirts bearing the Northern Irish flag and Arabic

fundamentalist text, the latter wears the uniform of a Protestant bandsman. 'Being a Protestant, for me,' says Seymour, 'is like having no head, in the sense that you are not allowed to think. It is hard to hold an individual thought about anything — without becoming a threat, or a Lundy' (17). Similarly, in *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, Frank McGuinness examines the ways in which Protestants are controlled by tradition. 'I escaped Carson's dance,' states the main character, Pyper, 'I got out to create, not destroy. But the gods wouldn't allow that. I could not create' (56). Though initially the anarchic figure, Pyper reveals how his creativity has been stunted by an enforced relation to the past: 'I couldn't look at my life's work, for when I saw my hands working they were not mine but the hands of my ancestors, interfering, and I could not be rid of that interference. I could not create. I could only preserve' (56). That this is a typical attitude of subservience is explored by John Kindness's exhibition, *A Monkeytown Besieged by Dogs*. In *A Monkey Parade*, he depicts monkeys in Orange sashes bearing a banner which features a monkey, blindfold, riding backwards on a donkey's back. Despite the intertextual sophistication attributed to Kindness by Belinda Loftus, the image attributes to the Orange Order an attitude of backward-looking, servile imitation. Even more reductive are Steve Bell's cartoons for *The Guardian* depicting the Orange marchers as dogs excreting and copulating on the property of a (nationalist) cat. He also pointedly depicts as canine the RUC sergeant called into help: 'Are you going to keep me in this position while that dog shags my curtains in broad daylight?' asks the harassed cat, the answer to which is the predictable 'It's traditional, Sir'. Parker's own take on all of this is far more balanced and nuanced, particularly in his reading of Patterson's *Burning Your Own* and McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster*. Given the high number of politically engaged visual artists working in Northern Ireland, it would be interesting to see if a survey of their work would come to the same conclusions as Parker.

If there were one criticism to be levelled at Parker's study then it would be at its implicit trajectory towards amnesia. Although the titles for the concluding chapters – 'Towards an End' and 'A Longer Road' – certainly do not imply closure, by ending his work with a selective overview of the poetry of Nick Laird, Leontia Flynn and Alan Gillis, there is an implication that the writers have 'moved on' now that 'peace' has broken out in the province. Yet much of the recent cultural production from Northern Ireland retains a marked scepticism towards what Graham terms 'archive fever'. The photographic works of Claudio Hils, Willie Doherty and Paul Seawright are all ghosted by history, preoccupied as they are by that which is unresolved. For example, Doherty's *Ghost Story* (2007), a single-channel video installation with a voiceover by

Stephen Rea, presents a narrative that 'evokes memories of the dead and a sense of loss and foreboding, as their haunting presence is made palpable' (Dziewior and Mühling, 160). More specifically, the speaker's first memory returns to 30 January 1972 and what he witnessed on Bloody Sunday:

The scene reminded me of the faces in a running crowd that I had once seen on a bright but cold January afternoon. Men and women slipped on icy puddles as they ran for safety.... Troops spewed from the back of the vehicle as it screeched to a sudden halt. They raised their rifles and fired indiscriminately into the fleeing crowd....The narrow streets and alleyways that I walked along became places where this invisible matter could no longer be contained. It seeped out through every crack and fissure in the worn pavements and crumbling walls. (Dziewior and Mühling, 162)

Since the Saville Report has not yet been published and the victims' families have not yet received justice, Doherty's work demonstrates how the past still has a perniciously over-arching influence on the present. Similarly, David Parks' most recent novel, *The Truth Commissioner* (2008), imagines what it would be like if a Truth Commission were established in Northern Ireland; rather than achieving satisfactory closure, each character is left haunted by the past, unable to lay their personal ghosts to rest.

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