



Matt McGuire

Literary perspectives: Northern Ireland

Shaking the hand of history

Critic Matt McGuire continues Eurozine's Literary Perspectives series with a focus on Northern Ireland. While the Northern Irish literary tradition is closely bound up with the experience of sectarian violence, he writes, contemporary poets and prose writers defy the assumption that "the troubles" are all there is to the country's literature. The attempt to deal in literary form with the ideological baggage of Northern Ireland's past is combined with an exploration of identity in the twenty-first century.

At the negotiations of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, British Prime Minister Tony Blair commented, "I can feel the hand of history upon our shoulder." Ten years later, with the Northern Ireland Assembly finally in business, it would seem that the hand of history moves more slowly than many would have imagined. Of course, there was a certain irony underlying the Prime Minister's statement. For if the force of history was being invoked to unlock longstanding rivalries, there is a real sense in which history itself has always been the problem in Northern Ireland. Dates figure prominently in the local psyche — 1690, 1798, 1916, 12 July, Easter week.¹ Northern Ireland can be seen to enact Stephen Dedalus's famous pronouncement in *Ulysses* (1922) that history is a nightmare from which one must try to awake.

For the critic Edna Longley, one of the North's residual characteristics has been its unhealthy obsession with the past. In a society keen on remembering, Longley argues, a little collective amnesia might not be a bad thing. As Northern Ireland takes its first tentative steps into the new millennium, negotiating the nightmare of its recent past remains part of terrain for the next generation of local writers. Having said this, recent literature might equally be identified by the vigour and bravura with which it denies stereotypical expectations of what Northern Irish writing ought to look like. In terms of recent writing from the North, "Shaking the Hand of History" is suggestive of a double movement: coming to terms with what has gone before, while at the same time breaking free from ideological baggage.

In the past, poetry has generally been seen as offering the most sustained and meaningful form of literary engagement with the troubles.² The North has bucked the contemporary literary trend whereby it is the novelist (Amis, Rushdie, et al.) that enjoys celebrity status. If Heaney, Longley, and Mahon set the ball rolling in the 1960s, the 1980s saw the emergence of Muldoon, Carson, and McGuckian, poets writing in the wake but also against the current of much of what had gone before. Decades of critical acclaim would suggest that if the troubles were bad news for Northern Irish society, the same might not necessarily be said about its poetry. A more thoughtful view might point

toward the raised stakes for art in lieu of the failure of official narratives to make sense of the situation. Poetry is after all a special form of utterance, capable of articulating a kind of truth that remains obscured, elided, and unsaid within other forms of discourse.

In recent years another generation of poets have begun to make their voices heard with increasing definition and vitality. Born during the 1970s, writers like Alan Gillis, Leontia Flynn, Nick Laird, Sinéad Morrissey, and Colette Bryce grew up amidst the everyday turmoil of the conflict in the North. One must be wary of offering misleading generalisations here. A diversity of approach and a plurality of themes necessarily makes any sweeping statements about this body of work conditional. Coming to the fore after the Good Friday Agreement, this poetry disproves pejorative readings of Northern Irish writing as prurient or derivative, with the poet extracting the lyrical moment from the unfolding chaos of the troubles. As early as 1994, Francie Cunningham asked: "now that the ceasefire has been announced, what will happen to all the Northern Ireland writers? Where will they go for all their materials?"³ Such worries evince a certain critical reductionism, an intellectual laziness, or what might be known locally as "a short-cut to thinking." Meditations on political violence have never been the sum total of Northern Irish literature.

Somebody, Somewhere (The Gallery Press 2004) is the debut collection by the Belfast born poet Alan Gillis. Gillis's work delights in defamiliarisation, provoking the reader into reconsidering what we thought we once knew. It celebrates the inevitable entropy of post-millennial culture where Yeats, Rilke, and Celtic myth rub shoulders with Elvis, Guinness, and Star Wars. The opening poem of the collection, "[The Ulster Way](#)", takes its title from the 900km scenic walk one can take along the Northern Irish border. The poem begins by rejecting the kind of natural idealisation that the Ulster Way has come to symbolise.

This is not about burns or hedges.
 There will be no gorse. You will not
 notice the ceaseless photosynthesis
 or the dead tree's thousand fingers,
 the trunk's inhumanity writhing with texture,
 as you will not be passing into farmland.

The rhythm of the poem evokes Gil Scott Heron's "The revolution will not be televised" in its incantatory dismissal of the great outdoors. It can also be read in terms of a disavowal of the rustic imperative that belies so much Northern Irish poetry of the past.⁴ The sacred cow of Northern Irish poetry, Seamus Heaney, and poems like "Digging" and "Mossbawn", perhaps spring to mind. The influence in Gillis's poem is Black Poetry or the Beats more than it is the Belfast Group. The poem's metaphysical descriptions of nature revel in a sense of mimicry, as they renounce tired and clichéd perceptions of the North.

If "The Ulster Way" invokes a walk, a "way" of travelling, it also suggests a "way" of seeing that is peculiarly local. To follow the path along the Ulster Way is to re-trace a border of sorts. Similarly, the organic inevitability embedded within certain strains of local poetry can be seen to shore up and delimit the possibilities for thinking and writing about the North. Gillis's poem is celebratory as it reveals the contingency of such ideological boundaries. It seeks to tear up many of the allusions/illusions that define comfortable constructions of Northern Irish experience. The poem demands we revisit and rethink accepted literary mythologies, that we begin over, unencumbered by

the weight of a familiar, yet exhausted, rhetoric — "All this is in your head. If you walk / don't walk away [...] There are other paths to follow. / Everything is about you. Now listen." In a final reckoning, perhaps this is the real "Ulster Way" — challenging, contesting and contending, activities that seem remarkably appropriate in a Northern Irish context. *Somebody, Somewhere* offers a series of answers to the demands set down in "The Ulster Way". Its preoccupations are with an urban, technologised landscape, with music, and with the decommissioned individuals of twenty-first-century Northern Ireland. In doing so it releases the North from misreadings as an anomalous space, reconnecting it to a whole series of narratives that define twenty-first century experience.

A similar sense of iconoclastic revisionism is present in much of Nick Laird's debut poetry collection *To a Fault* (2005). "Remaindermen" addresses a sense of estrangement, a spiritual distancing from those who would stay behind, and stay comfortable in the heavily fortified positions of Northern Irish politics.

There are others who know what it is
to lose, to hold ideas of north
so singularly brutal that the world
might be ice-bound for good.

Someone has almost transcribed
the last fifty years of our speech,
and has not once had the chance
to employ the word *sorry*

or press the shift to make the mark
that indicates the putting of a question.

A reaction against such entrenchments is one source of the readiness with which contemporary Northern Irish writers embrace notions of fluidity and flux. In-between spaces become a refuge in a self-reflexive and highly self-aware poetic. Imprisoned in the deep freeze of old prejudices, Laird's "Remaindermen" echoes Yeats's "Easter 1916". Agreements have been signed, history has moved on, but for some the word "progress" remains anathema. The title of Laird's collection, *To a Fault*, draws on the colloquial expression — "generous to a fault". His poetry inhabits the space where the binary oppositions of conventional morality cease to reassure, where black and white merge into shades of grey, and the world reveals itself to be more complex and braided than tribal identities permit. From his hospital bed, a recently kneecapped⁵ victim looks out of a window as two cranes slowly turn over Belfast. As the rebuilding of the city begins, they offer a silent benediction on the lives of those below.

In Northern Ireland, perhaps the most prevalent and practical method of escaping the hand of history has always been simply to leave. Emigration remains a significantly under-examined aspect of the conflict. A heightened sense of other places is present in the writing of this new generation of Northern Irish poets. Alan Gillis currently resides in Edinburgh, Derry-born Colette Bryce has lived in London and now Dundee, while Nick Laird's journey has been from Tyrone to Rome, calling at Oxford and London along the way. The effects of such dislocations can be traced throughout much of the poetry. The title poem from Colette Bryce's second collection, *The Full Indian Rope Trick* (2004), is a meditation on disappearance, on the overwhelming desire to escape the claustrophobia of small town life. In Derry's Guildhall

Square, a miraculous vanishing act amidst a crowd of shoppers signals a journey that is as much spiritual as it is physical.

There were walls, bells, passers-by;
then a rope, thrown, caught by the sky
and me, young, up and away,
goodbye.

Goodbye, goodbye.
Thin air. First try.
A crown hushed, squinting eyes
at a full sun. There
on the stones
the slack weight of a rope

coiled in a crate, a braid
eighteen summers long,
and me ---
I'm long gone,
my one-off trick
unique, unequalled since.

Although a part of the troubles narrative, to journey and discover other places is not a peculiarly Northern Irish phenomenon. Such themes constitute a new globalised existence with mobility part of the fabric of contemporary Western life.

This kind of journeying underpins much of Sinéad Morrissey's work. Born in Portadown in 1972, Morrissey lived and worked in New Zealand and Japan before returning to Belfast. The Japanese influenced "Goldfish" playfully inhabits the terrain of the Zen koan, the voice of the poem "coming to rest in the place where closing eyes is to see". The poem "In Belfast", about the poet's return home, is clearly marked by such experience. The return is depicted by way of a tranquil, dispassionate and conditional response: "I am / as much at home here as I will ever be." In a similar vein, Leontia Flynn's *These Days* (2004) is replete with the kind of sensitivity and balance that refuses to be coerced by the magnetic force of familiar perspective. Industrial estates, family life, and alcohol are the raw material of the "everyday epiphanies" that constitute Flynn's work. Her writing is equal measure humour and insight, continually displaying the most remarkable deftness of touch. "FOR STUART, WHO ACCIDENTALLY OBTAINED A JOB IN THE CIVIL SERVICE" is a case in point.

I have it in my diary as May the 6th
And a beautiful evening. We walk in silence
Back to my house. There are condolences;
Sitting round as though we are at a wake,
Somebody mentions Kafka.

You explain about your mother.
For now, I tell you, just for now ...
The evening light and a spark, fallen
From your cigarette butt into the woolly jumper
Over your truculent heart, quietly dying.

In contrast to poetry, the Northern Irish novel has enjoyed a far less distinguished reputation as a literary genre. Patricia Craig's introduction to the

anthology of Ulster prose, *The Rattle of the North* (1992), was part caveat, part apology: "[I]t is well known that conditions in the North of Ireland, from Plantation times on, were never sufficiently settled to foster literary activity, and that the development of the novel, in particular, was consequently retarded."⁶ If the novel is historically linked to narratives of national imagining, as Benedict Anderson argues, then we might not be surprised that it has failed to flourish within the volatile and contested terrain of the North. If the Northern Irish novel has been irrevocably compromised there is another genre, one often overlooked, that offers an alternative form of literary engagement. It is of course the short story. We might recall the Irish writer Frank O'Connor, himself a virtuoso of the form, who argued that the short story was most prevalent in societies confronted by instability, fracture, and distemper. The critic Charles E. May offers a useful context for reconsidering the short story and its relevance to contemporary Northern Irish fiction:

Although there is some justification for the common claim that the short story as a distinct literary genre began in the nineteenth century, the wellsprings of the form are as old as the primitive realm of myth. Studies in anthropology suggest that brief episodic narratives, which constitute the basis of the short story, are primary, preceding later epic forms, which constitute the basis of the novel.⁷

Far from being secondary, the short story is more accurately seen as a primary form of narrative. It is a narrative distillation. With its condensation and tendency to focus on a single event, the short story bears remarkable likeness to our own everyday communication. It has a sense of immediacy, a certain democratic tone if you will. It is this elliptical nature that makes the short story fundamental to any understanding of the lived reality of the Northern Irish troubles. Since the 1970s, Bernard MacLaverty has continually brought the aesthetic possibilities of the short story to bear on the everyday realities of Northern Irish experience. Part of the original Belfast Group of the 1960s, MacLaverty's latest collection *Matters of Life and Death* (Cape 2006) contains "On the Roundabout", what the author has described as probably the last story he will write directly relating to the troubles.

Seamus Heaney famously referred to the sectarian loyalties of the North as a set of "anachronistic passions". The phrase implied a culture that had somehow been left behind by history. The North had fallen from the path of progress and become trapped in a cycle of distrust and mutual destruction. This sense of entrapment is captured in MacLaverty's story "On the Roundabout". It begins with the most quotidian image — a husband, wife, and two small children driving back into Belfast. Told from the perspective of the husband, the narrative has a casual, colloquial tone. As the family nears the roundabout at the end of the motorway, they see a hitchhiker being set upon by a gang of UDA men. In a disturbing turn of phrase, someone produces a hammer and "whacks the guy hitching in the face with it". Seized by panic and anger, the father mounts the kerb and drives at the men. He bundles the hitchhiker into the car as the men stand back laughing. In the back of the car the hitcher falls in and out of consciousness. There is black blood in his mouth and "a hole the size of a ten pence piece at his temple". The father speeds round the roundabout and takes the man to the nearby hospital.

Here, MacLaverty takes the most normal day and watches it suddenly transform into a horror scene. The concise and candid description of MacLaverty's prose gives these moments a nauseating intensity. At the

hospital, the father attempts to give his name but the doctors and nurses are not interested, nor is a nearby British soldier. The thought of facing the UDA across the witness box cools the father's rage: "We know your registration, we know your whole family." A few weeks later a letter appears in the newspaper from the hitchhiker, thanking the "Good Samaritan" who had helped him that night. The narrative ends: "wasn't that good of him? To tell the story."

"On The Roundabout" becomes a symbol for the sense of metaphysical entrapment, the perpetual cycle of violence that defined the North during the troubles. At the hospital this kind of violence has become so commonplace that there is no place for the detail of individual narratives. The troubles have become a one word phrase that elides individuals and the specificity of personal experience. "On The Roundabout" is a story about stories. The moral significance of telling these individual stories is asserted. To merely say "this happened" is fundamentally important and becomes itself a response to the violence. Perhaps this helps to explain why one of the most popular texts to emerge out of the troubles is a book called *Lost Lives* (1999). As the title suggests, it is the individual stories of the 3600 men, women, and children who lost their lives during the troubles. Eschewing the usual politicking, it seeks to provide a record, a testimony of sorts, to the victims of the conflict. In a similar fashion, Bernard MacLaverty's work is a crucial part of the artistic response to the violence in Northern Ireland and as such demands further and extended scrutiny.

When asked about what things were like living through the troubles the poet Ciaran Carson replied: "I've lived in Belfast all my life and I still couldn't tell you a fraction of what's going on. All I can do is tell you stories."⁸ To continue to tell stories, whether in the form of prose or poetry, remains a fundamental part of attempts within Northern Ireland to shake the hand of history. With eager anticipation we continue to watch as this process unfolds.

¹ 1690 — The Battle of the Boyne, between the deposed Catholic king of England James II and the protestant William of Orange, ending in victory for the latter; 1798 — The Irish Rebellion, defeated anti-British uprising; 1916 — Easter Rising, anti-British Republican rebellion in Dublin; 12 July — date of the Battle of the Boyne, commemorated by Northern Irish Protestants; Easter Week — date of the Easter Rising, commemorated by Northern Irish Catholics — ed.

² "The troubles" — the colloquial term for the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland — ed.

³ Francie Cunningham, "Writing in the Rag and Bone Shop of the Troubles." *The Sunday Business Post*, 11 Sept 1994, 24.

⁴ Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland Since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror*, Hampshire: Ashgate 2005, 84.

⁵ "Kneecapped": the standard "punishment" carried out by the IRA or UDF on informants and others, involving shooting the victim's kneecap — ed.

⁶ Patricia Craig (ed.), *The Rattle of the North: An Anthology of Ulster Prose*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press 1992, 1.

⁷ Charles E. May, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 1.

⁸ Ciaran Carson interviewed by Rand Brandes, *Irish Review*, 8 (1990).