

## “Invention gives that slaughter shape”: Irish Literature and World War I<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:*

This essay deals with a number of works by poets, playwrights and novelists who tackled the theme of the Irish participation to World War I. The crucial point was about the divided loyalties of Irish soldiers enlisted in the British Army at a time when Ireland was at first fighting for Home Rule and later, on Easter 1916, engaged in a hopeless but decisive uprising. Can literature change the world? Yeats invited the poet to remain disdainfully silent in time of war but, notwithstanding this, was forced to deal with its painful consequences because of the death of Major Gregory, son of his dear friend Lady Augusta. Sean O’Casey had a totally different approach to the theme, using the theatre to create a collective response to its futility. Some decades later Frank McGuinness in one of his most successful plays maintains that “Invention gives that slaughter shape”. Francis Ledwige who died on the Belgian front, the only Irish “war poet”, gave “shape” in his poems to his own divided loyalties to Britain and Ireland, becoming years later a source of inspiration for Seamus Heaney, trapped in the Troubles. The second part of this paper examines novels by Iris Murdoch, Jennifer Johnson and Sebastian Barry who have considered an effort of recollection to tell fictional stories set in those ominous years in order to overcome the “collective amnesia” (Boyce 1993, 189) that tried to exorcise the deaths of so many Irishmen who fought during World War I wearing the “wrong” uniform.

*Keywords:* Amnesia and Recollection, Irish Literature, Loyalties, World War I

<sup>1</sup> This enlarges on and updates “L’Irlanda e la Grande Guerra: dai campi di Battaglia alla memoria”, published in *Variis Linguis. Studi offerti a Elio Mosele in occasione del suo settantesimo compleanno* (2004).

For seven years I taught at the University of Verona. At the time, I used to spend my weekends in Asiago, a town at the heart of one of Italy's World War I battlefields. Asiago was the first Italian town to be laid waste by Austrian bombs in 1916, while the Plains of Asiago and the rural area around Vicenza were evacuated during the so-called Austrian *Strafexpedition*<sup>2</sup> against the Italian army. The sad memory of all this is still very much alive among the population of that area. A treasure-trove of literature – both poetry and fiction – is based on those events. I have often asked myself, “What would we know now about that war if the poets and writers who experienced life in the trenches, even died in the mud there, had not voiced their despair in their verse, in their stories?” We would have been left with the works of the historians alone, but not with the cry, the pain, even the excitement before the battle of those who lived back then, between 1914 and 1918. Writers are well aware that they cannot change the world, so much so that Yeats invites the poet to remain disdainfully silent:

I think it better in times like these  
 A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth  
 We have no gift to set a statesman right; (Yeats 1967, 175)

but poets – including the elitist Yeats, as we shall see later – know that their words can give shape to another world, that of the imagination, to a world seeking to bestow some sense on life and on death, by denouncing the utter madness that war is, because poetry is ART-ful and HEART-ful: full of the art and the heart of men and women. The playwright Frank McGuinness expressed this concept in a play we shall discuss later:

Invention gives that slaughter shape. (Mc Guinness 1986, 9)

A hundred years after the ominous year of 1916, I decided to provide an outline of the literature produced in Ireland on the topic of World War I, because the Ireland of today, with its tensions and partitions, is due also in part to the thousands of Irish soldiers who fell in that war wearing a British uniform. We might say that it is the story of what it feels like to wear the wrong uniform, seeing that Ireland was England's first colony, and, at the time of the Great War, a country fighting for Home Rule.

<sup>2</sup> “*Strafexpedition* (Punitive expedition), was a counteroffensive launched by the Austro-Hungarians on the Italian Front on 15 May 1916, during World War I. It was an unexpected attack which took place near Asiago in the province of Vicenza, then on the Italian side of the border between the Kingdom of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the Fifth Battle of the Isonzo (March 1916). Commemorating this battle is the Asiago War Memorial” (*Wikipedia*).

It is a strange story of amnesia and recollection. As we go back over a hundred years of Irish poetry, theatre and fiction, we shall notice that there has always been a strong link between that particular period and the present in an Ireland where literary works concerning this topic continue to appear down over the years.

The apparently scanty amount of Irish literary works featuring the World War I, a catastrophe which tragically marked the beginning of the twentieth century, has often been explained by the fact that Ireland lay on the geographical margins of Europe, far removed from the battle fronts of the Great War. This answer is not satisfying, if we consider that, although the levy was not compulsory, the numbers of Irish soldiers in the British ranks are rather staggering. Some 210,000 Irishmen fought in Flanders, on the Somme in Picardy, on the shores of the Mediterranean and at Gallipoli on the Dardanelles. The fallen numbered 27,000. Although the impact could not have been inconsequential at that time for a country with a population of around 4 million, the experience of the Great War failed to acquire the epochal political and emotional value it did in Great Britain, in Commonwealth countries as distant as Australia. Only recently have the critics investigated more closely, and rightly so, what George Boyce called "collective amnesia" (1993, 189).

If a knowledge of historical setting is useful when deciphering most literary texts and seeking to identify their deeper motivations, a knowledge of history is essential when examining the literature produced in Ireland. It is no accident that Stephen Dedalus – James Joyce's alter ego "as a young man" – says that he wants to wake up "from the nightmare of Irish history" in order to forge "in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race". The history of Ireland is perceived as a nightmare, an obsession that not even "collective amnesia" can rid people of<sup>3</sup>.

How did "the imagination give shape to the slaughter of the war as well as to the British bloody retaliation to the 1916 Easter Rising"?

Some comments about the uprising of Easter 1916 made by two soldier writers are very poignant. Tom Kettle wrote bitterly: "These men will go down in history as heroes and martyrs, and I will go down – if I go down at all – as a bloody British officer" (Lyons 1983, 293). Kettle died on the front in September 1916.

Francis Ledwidge, whom we shall discuss in greater depth later, in June 1917, wrote:

I [...] am not without hope that a new Ireland will rise from her ashes in the ruins of Dublin, like the Phoenix, with one purpose, one aim, and one ambition. I tell you this in order that you may know what it is to me to be called a British soldier while my country has no place amongst the nations but the place of Cinderella. (Qtd. in Curtayne 1972, 180)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Note on Historical Background* at the end of this essay.

Ledwidge died in Belgium in July 1917.

Provision of a historical excursus in the Notes at the end of this essay was deemed necessary as a background against which to read some works by Irish poets, playwrights and novelists who dealt with the theme of the Great War. Despite the above-mentioned scarcity of literature produced by Irish writers who were directly involved in the Great War or wrote about it afterwards, there exists a small though significant production regarding the Great War penned during the conflict and in the years immediately after it. The topic continues to be dealt with today. This more recent production is the fruit of reflection and of memory. It is interesting, in fact, to see how memory, narration and plot elaborated by artists, have manipulated history and chronological events, and, in doing so, have succeeded in influencing the present, without “changing history”, by enhancing awareness of what happened.

Let us begin with the aforementioned Francis Ledwidge, who died in 1917 at Ypres on the Belgian front and whose work may be justly considered war poetry, even if he treats war in demurely antiheroic tones:

There in the lull of midnight gentle arms  
Lifted him slowly down the slopes of death,  
Lest he should hear again the mad alarms  
Of battle, dying moans and painful breath. (Ledwidge 2014)

A poor Northern Irish Catholic, Ledwidge was self-taught. Influenced by Gray, Goldsmith and Keats, initially he revealed a flimsy, decorative and conventional vein, so much so, that some of his works were included in the second volume of *Georgian Poetry*, a five-volume collection of poetry, edited by Edward Marsh and referring to verse composed between 1911 and 1922, that is, during the first half of the reign of King George V. His friendship with Lord Dunsany, which allowed Ledwidge to access the castle’s richly endowed library, permitted the young Francis to develop an authentic interest in the country’s local history, its ancient legends and folklore. As a result, he took part, though he remained very much in the background, in the *Celtic Revival* movement. Assuming an instinctively distant attitude towards the nebulous atmosphere of the *Revival*, Ledwidge created what might be defined as *poetry of place* – akin to the *dinnseanchas* or lore of place, characteristic of the old Gaelic culture, where even fields had their own names and traditions – anticipating Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney, something that was appreciated by Beckett who, in an essay entitled *Recent Irish Poetry*, 1934, frankly admitted that the poetry of Ledwidge had “what all modern nature poetry [...] has, a good smell of dung, most refreshing after all the attar of far off, most secret and inviolate rose” (Deane 1991, 246). Following a disappointed love relationship and on Lord Dunsany’s advice, the poet joined the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in 1914. The sudden death of the woman he loved and of friends like Thomas

MacDonagh and James Plunkett in the 1916 Easter Rising darkened his voice with morbid thoughts like those expressed in his "Lament for MacDonagh":

He shall not hear the bittern cry  
In the wild sky, where he is lain,  
Nor voices of the sweeter birds  
Above the wailing of the rain.

Nor shall he know when loud March blows  
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,  
Blowing to fame the golden cup  
Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor,  
And pastures poor with greedy weeds,  
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn  
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads. (Ledwidge 1919, 206)

The ability of the dead to listen to the sounds of life is a dominant theme in war literature, as is remembrance linking the living and the dead.

Another very significant poem by Ledwidge is entitled simply "Ireland". With extreme gentleness, it touches on the issue of the relationship between those who chose to enlist and Ireland, as well as their loyalty towards their native land. Like James Joyce, this young Northern Irish poet, in "voluntary exile" and unknown to the intellectuals of his time, sang of ancient gods and heroes, while he was ready to die to save what he believed to be the more genuine soul of Ireland and find a way of his own to forge the "uncreated conscience of his race", at a time when he was unable to answer the call to arms of Easter 1916 because he found himself estranged and alienated on a far-off, foreign battle field:

I called you by sweet names by wood and linn,  
You answered not because my voice was new,  
And you were listening for the hounds of Finn  
And the long hosts of Lugh.

And so I came unto a windy height  
And cried my sorrow, but you heard no wind,  
For you were listening to small ships in flight,  
And the wails of hills behind.

And then I left you, wandering the war  
Armed with will, from distant goal to goal,  
To find you at last free as of yore,  
Or die to save your soul.

And then you called to us from far and near  
To bring your crown from out the deeps of time,  
It is my grief your voice I couldn't hear  
In such a distant clime. (Ledwidge 1919, 243-244)

Aware of the intersecting games of memory that characterise Irish history, we are not surprised to discover that Seamus Heaney, a Northern Irish Catholic poet like Ledwidge, closes *Field Work* of 1979, the collection where he deals more directly with the theme of the conflict in Northern Ireland, with an elegy entitled “In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge” which starts with a description of one of the numerous monuments to the fallen of the Great War who were natives of the towns and villages of Unionist Ulster, the monument near the seaside promenade in Portstewart (figure 1) where he used to “dander” (Northern Irish English for “walk, stroll”) as a child with his aunt Mary:



Figure 1

I think of you in your Tommy's uniform,  
 A haunted Catholic face, pallid and brave,  
 Ghosting the trenches like a bloom of hawthorn  
 Or silence cored from a Boyne passage-grave. (Heaney 1979, 60)

Memory and the conciliatory words of the fallen poet are accompanied by Heaney's recollection of his young aunt who grazed the cows, before reaching the crux of the matter, i.e. the political confrontation between the Irish and the British which is denounced, while Ledwidge is significantly referred to as "our dead enigma":

In you, our dead enigma, all the strains  
 Criss-cross in useless equilibrium  
 And as the wind tunes through this vigilant bronze  
 I hear again the sure confusing drum

You followed from Boyne water to the Balkans  
 But miss the twilit note your flute should sound.  
 You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones  
 Though all of you consort now underground. (60)

For Heaney, sixty years after the events, it is important to recall and celebrate the fact that the contrast and the differences of belief and of political credo between Ledwidge and his unionist brothers-in-arms, "the true-blue ones", were reconciled after death.

For William Butler Yeats, the most important Irish poet of the beginning of the twentieth century, the world conflict does not seem to have any interest other than the fact that its cruel violence deprived Ireland of some of her best men, first and foremost Major Robert Gregory, the only son of his dear friend Lady Augusta Gregory.

Yeats's aloofness from the things of the world, so adamantly stressed in the lines quoted here, underline two characteristics of his personal philosophical, artistic and political evolution in the years during and immediately following the Great War which emerge from the collections of his poems from *In The Seven Woods* of 1904 to *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* of 1921. The first factor is the "de-Anglicization" of his work, his conscious detachment from the English literary tradition and his subsequent attempt, with the Abbey Theatre, to revive the Irish native culture; the second factor is the elevation of the subjectivity of artistic experience above the objectivity of the masses in society, which became real in his cyclical, symbolic system of human history, *A Vision*, begun in 1922 and published in its definitive version in 1937.

The death of Robert Gregory, shot down by mistake by friendly fire on the Italian-Austrian front and buried in the cemetery of Padua, deeply touched

Yeats in his private life. With the help of the kind director of Padua's foreign cemetery, I found Robert Gregory's grave (Figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3

The deprecating “bloody flippancy” – as Yeats defined war – snatched from his affection<sup>4</sup> and from Ireland one of the country's most promising creative minds. Robert Gregory had already proven his worth as an artist and painter of theatrical scenery. Furthermore, for Yeats, he was the reincarnation of the perfect Renaissance man skilled “in the liberal arts and in the hunt”. When the young pilot's inconsolable mother, Lady Augusta, and his wife Margaret asked Yeats to write some verse to celebrate his memory, he tried to write something like what Spenser composed in honour of Sidney.

<sup>4</sup> “There are several passages in Yeats's 1910 Diary which show that he envied Robert Gregory his lack of introspection. Gregory would neither ‘turn away to think’ nor ‘constantly analyse’ what he had done nor ‘have little life’ outside his work” (cf. Jeffares 1984 [1968], 252). “[Yeats's] relationship with Robert Gregory had never been easy. He had periodically expressed impatience at the younger man's casual and dilettante approach to projects such as sets for the Abbey, while Gregory's wife, Margaret, nourished a certain antipathy towards Coole's perpetual summer guest. In later years [Yeats] came to appreciate Robert's distinction as a landscape painter and to see in him something of his mother's qualities – but they never really had got on. There was also the difficulty concerning the manner in which Robert met his end. By early 1918 feeling in Ireland was setting hard against the endless war; this would be sharply exacerbated by the government's move towards imposing conscription in Ireland that autumn. Since the executions of 1916, opposition to the British war effort had spread widely even among political moderates, while the tone of nationalistic propaganda was vitriolic. These feelings were not shared by Robert Gregory; his views had long been anti-Sinn Féin and he seems to have fully supported the war effort, joining the Royal Flying Corps with alacrity early in the war” (cf. Foster 2003, 118).



The result, "The Shepherd and Goatherd", turned out to be one of his least successful compositions (Yeats 1967, 153)<sup>5</sup>.

To the sacrifice of his young friend Yeats was to dedicate three further elegies, all of which require, in-depth attention: "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" and later, going back to the theme from a new perspective, "Reprisals".

In the first poem mentioned here and dated 1918, the name of Gregory, present in the title, is practically eclipsed by the list of "friends that cannot sup with us". "All, all are in my thoughts to-night being dead". Only in the sixth strophe, still without specific reference to his name, the major is introduced and compared to Sidney, "our perfect man", "soldier, scholar, horseman". Nothing is said of how or where he died. The war he fought appears irrelevant with respect to his death. "A thought of that late death took all my heart for speech" (Yeats 1967, 148).

His conviction of the absolute value of subjectivity, of the unique and perfect individual, as opposed to the amorphous, brute masses, brings Yeats in "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" to give voice directly to the dead hero in a Futurist-like crescendo risking exaltation of the war machine and energy, in apparent contradiction with his conviction of the mindlessness of armed conflict, something which is rebalanced by emphasising the ambiguity of an Irish hero killed in a war which is neither his nor that of his fellow Irish men and women:

Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor. (Yeats 1967, 152)

The political sense of Robert Gregory's death within the scenario of Irish history is presented in "Reprisals", 1920, a poem refused by *The Nation* because vetoed directly by Lady Gregory. It appeared posthumously in *Rann. An Ulster Quarterly of Poems*, as late as Autumn 1948. This poem is practically an anomaly for Yeats's *corpus* as the nerve of its assertion is so strong and unembellished. The theme of the poem is so controversial that it is of great significance:

<sup>5</sup> "Gregory is pastoralized into a Virgilian landscape, his paintings becoming 'sorrowful, austere, sweet, lofty pipe tunes'. The fact that he was unprepared to take over Coole (though it was technically his possession since his twenty-first birthday) was put in a laboured way that cannot have been welcome to his wife (or his mother)" (*ibidem*, 119).

Some nineteen German planes, they say,  
 You had brought down before you died.  
 We called it a good death. Today  
 Can ghost or man be satisfied?  
 Although your last exciting year  
 Outweighed all other years, you said,  
 Though battle joy may be so dear  
 A memory, even to the dead,  
 It chases other thought away,  
 Yet rise from your Italian tomb,  
 Flit to Kiltartan Cross and stay  
 Till certain second thoughts have come  
 Upon the cause you served, that we  
 Imagined such a fine affair:  
 Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery  
 Are murdering your tenants there.  
 Men that revere your father yet  
 Are shot at on the open plain.  
 Where may new-married women sit  
 And suckle children now? Armed men  
 May murder them in passing by<sup>6</sup>  
 Nor law nor parliament take heed.  
 Then close your ears with dust and lie  
 Among the other cheated dead. (Qtd. in Jeffares 1984, 300-301)

The ideals and the hopes of the Irish enlisted in the British army had been wiped out by the violent, merciless reprisals of the Black and Tans which targeted defenceless civilians. Only in this case, in the last line of the poem, does Yeats place Major Gregory within a multitude, that of the “dead, cheated” by England.

Another episode, however, reveals Yeats’s inability to understand and accept war as a collective endeavour where the single subject is absorbed by the masses when the collective effort overrides individual inclinations. Yeats’s philosophy of life and art could not cope with O’Casey’s political approach either. A committed socialist, Sean O’Casey, born John Casey, was the first Irish playwright of note to write about the Dublin working classes.

When, in the summer of 1928, Sean O’Casey submitted his new play *The Silver Tassie*, a tragicomedy in four acts, to the directors of the Abbey Theatre, he was told by Yeats that his drama was pure propaganda full of the author’s

<sup>6</sup> “On 26 October [1920] the news of [Terence] MacSwiney’s death came to Gort: Ten days later Ellen Quinn was shot dead outside her front door in Kiltartan, from a military lorry passing by, a baby in her arms. This horror struck deeply home. The murdered woman was the young wife of Malachi Quinn, one of a well-known Gort farming family [...]; the killing was utterly random. After a huge funeral and angry demonstrations, an official ‘inquiry’ applied some unconvincing whitewash” (*ibidem*, 181).

personal political ideas and the notions of a writer who had no direct experience of the Great War. Furthermore, O'Casey was told by Yeats, the play and the plot lacked a leading character. O'Casey's answer is worth reading:

Was Shakespeare at Actium or Philippi? [...] God forgive me, but it does sound as if you peeked and pined for a hero in the play. Now, is a dominating character more important than a play, or a play more important than a dominating character? In *The Silver Tassie* you have a unique work that dominates all the characters in the play. That work is the war it self. (Qtd. in Kilroy 1975, 116)

The first and last two acts of *The Silver Tassie* are set in the Dublin slums and centred around the character of Harry Heegan, a young proletarian football champion who with his team had won a silver cup, known as *the silver tassie*, before enlisting and going to war. When he returns from Flanders, paralysed and having lost Jessie's love, he destroys the silver cup in a moment of fury. The second act is set at the front. The body of an unnamed soldier is carried off stage using expressionistic techniques recollective of Brecht's epic theatre. In a further effort at depersonalization, in an attempt to create a theatrically choral experience, O'Casey indicates war songs to be sung by the best singers in the cast "irrespective of the numbers allotted to them as characters". Here are the stage directions:

The chants in the play are simple Plain Song. [...] There are three parts in each chant: the Intonation, the Meditation and the Ending. [...] The soldiers having the better voices should be selected to intone the chants, irrespective of the numbers allotted to them as characters in the book of the play. (O'Casey 1950, 3)

What really bothered Yeats was O'Casey's theory whereby the only fault attributable to private soldiers and NCO's, the sons of proletarians, was their failure to understand that the war they came to fight was that of the middle-classes, promoted by cowardly politicians like the "Visitor" who runs away from the trenches at the first burst of artillery fire. O'Casey's soldiers, because they belong to the lower classes, do not use RP but speak in sundry local varieties of English such as the *slang* of the Dublin slums, London *cockney* and Scoto-English. All and every notion of Nation is cancelled among the ordinary rank and file and replaced by the focal idea of belonging to the same proletarian class.

In 1986, almost sixty years after O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, Frank McGuinness, a Northern Irish Roman Catholic, one of the most important Irish playwrights of the last generation, revisited the issue of the Great War from a point of view quite unlike O'Casey's. McGuinness too tried out new theatrical techniques in an attempt to stage the human tragedy generated by that conflict as far as the social texture of his country, Protestant Ulster, was concerned.

*Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is a complex and ambitious work. McGuinness, in a three-part play (“Initiation”, “Parings” “Bondings”) plus a prologue (“Remembrance”), describes the meeting on the western front of eight recruits belonging to the 36<sup>th</sup> division (Ulster). He portrays the development of bonds between four pairs united, two by two, on the basis of religion, sex, home area and common history, aspects which emerge clearly only on the eve of the morrow’s attack, when these bonds are about to be put to the test by death and projection towards eternity. Once again, the theme of memory is central here, since the play was written exactly seventy years after the battle of the Somme. The narration, based on the remembrance of the only survivor, now an old man, is featured in the prologue. Pyper, like some latter-day Ancient Mariner is obliged to reiterate his own story along with that of his comrades-in-arms because repetition is the only way he has to bestow expression and significant shape on their experience.

I do not understand your insistence on my remembrance. [...] I am not your military historian. [...] Invention gives that slaughter shape. (McGuinness 1986, 9)

McGuinness, like O’Casey, chooses to stage his view of the period in tragicomic, at times even farcical, tones recollective of Charlie Chaplin’s cinema. His characters’ gestures and lines are repeated mechanically until they lose all meaning. Outlandish versions of the two great events, which inspired the contrasting ideologies of Irish unionists and nationalists, alternate. These two events are the Easter Rising of 1916 on the one hand and the Battle of the Boyne on the other, which ominously anticipate the battle the characters are about to fight and lose<sup>7</sup>.

As in O’Casey’s play, which started with an excited suffragette announcing an immanent apocalypse, McGuinness’s drama begins with a prayer, a hymn invoking God, in keeping with the arrogant conviction of Calvinistic Presbyterians that they are the Lord’s Anointed, the repositories of truth. But that belief is put to the test, challenged, and questioned, to great dramatic effect, by Pyper’s doubt-ridden prayer, his last interrogative invocation to the “Protestant God” “to ponder” and look down upon his soldiers who are approaching sacrifice, and save them, but only “if he is just and merciful”:

God in heaven, if you hear the words of man, I speak to you this day. [...] If you are a just and merciful God, show your mercy this day. [...] Lord, look down on us. Spare us. – Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme. I love their lives. I love my own life. I love my home. I love my Ulster. (McGuinness 1986, 79-80)

<sup>7</sup> See *Note on Historical Background* (*infra*, 254).

So far, I have dealt with poems and plays by Irish authors, which bring to light important differences between these two literary genres. While poets like Ledwidge, Yeats and Heaney addressed private, controversial feelings of personal loyalties, playwrights such as O'Casey and McGuinness staged plots and characters, well aware they would arouse the open political reactions of their audiences. They were fighting against general amnesia and trying to restore a more compassionate memory of the facts. Synge expressed a similar conception of the different genres as follows:

Lyrical art is the art of national adolescence [...] mature drama [is] dealing with the deeper truth of general life in a perfect form and with mature philosophy. (1962, 350)

Now I intend to take into account a series of novels set in or around 1916. Fiction is the art of telling stories. In our case, we are dealing with the narration of a long-gone past crafted by writers of more recent times who aim at deciphering, if not undoing, the knots of a chaotic present.

The novels we shall take into account often use the epistolary or diary form to give voice to living or dead characters, a device by which the workings of memory can be investigated.

In 1965, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, celebrated with great rhetorical emphasis in the Republic, Iris Murdoch published *The Red and the Green*.

In an essay on Murdoch written by me some time ago, I asked, "To what extent have writers of more recent generations been aware of the peculiar use of Irish materials Murdoch made in the mid-1960s? [...] I am convinced that in the case of writers of the 1970s and 1980s it was not a conscious influence, but reveals how anticipatory Murdoch's Irish novel was" (de Petris 2016, 269).

Born in Dublin in 1919, the daughter of a Belfastman, Iris Murdoch was always proud of the fact that she was the bearer of so many Irish traditions.

Significantly, in *The Red and the Green* Murdoch gave voice for the first time to the clash between the two nations, British and Irish, but in the fundamental last chapter of the novel, set in 1938 and centred on the issue of transmitting historical facts to future generations, Frances's tall son, who holds that "each country tells a selective story creditable to itself" (276), while echoing Yeats's "terrible beauty", ironically criticises the petty offspring of that "beauty" (202).

Notwithstanding what Jennifer Johnston has to say about Murdoch's Irishness (de Petris 2016, 267), I think that there are echoes of Murdoch's 1965 book in those of her own novels set in the same historical period.

In these novels Jennifer Johnston<sup>8</sup>, like many writers of her own and the younger generation, like William Trevor (1928-2016), John Banville, or Aidan

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Johnston, born in Dublin to Irish actress and director Shelah Richards and Irish playwright Denis Johnston, deals in many of her novels with the decline of the Protestant ascendancy.

Higgins, renews the theme of the Protestant ascendancy's Big House, so dear to prestigious writers like Elizabeth Bowen, allowing me to return to the issue:

For the many fans of her work, Johnston's skilfully constructed novels, with their elegant economic realism and tight storylines, constitute a distinctive and sophisticated voice in Irish literature. Writing about the impact that Johnston's debut novel *The Captain and the Kings*, had on him, Dermot Bolger recently described how he loved the book for "its sparse intensity and intimacy and how the simplicity of the writing belied the complexity of her characters". (Leavy 2017)

In this novel, published in 1972, the protagonist, Prendergast, lives in a run-down big house in present-day Ireland, obsessed by the memory of a brother, more gifted and brighter than himself, who died in the trenches.

But it is with *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, published in 1974 and recently translated into Italian for the Fazi publishing House, Rome, that the theme of the Great War becomes a metaphor of the present-day Northern-Irish tragedy. *The Times Literary Supplement*, in a review cited on the cover flap of the English edition, states that in this novel Johnston reveals "a special talent to distil and refine the whole tragic-comic experience of Ireland at war".

This book tells the story of the enlistment in the army of two boys, one, the heir to a large ascendancy estate, destined to be an officer, the other, a private soldier, a stable-lad, who wants to exploit his military experiences at the front in order to learn how to use weapons to serve the national cause, once he returns home. It is also the story of an impossible friendship, of a heart-breaking love relationship which binds both of them to their far-off mutual homeland. The diary which the book contains is that written by the Anglo-Irish officer, and which ends before he is shot for high treason and insubordination. In addition to the two young men, the portrait of the two aristocratic Anglo-Irish parents is memorable: the father, a country gentleman committed to improving his property, convinced, like Yeats, that war does not concern Ireland and the cruel mother who asks her son to enlist to defend the king and the kingdom, to gain that confirmation of virility she failed to obtain from her husband. The plot is as follows:

Johnston moves the setting of the novel from the initial background of a rural estate, to the battlefields of Flanders during the First World War. The possibility of communication across class or religious divisions is usually explored in Johnston's novels through two lonely individuals, and in this instance the protagonists are both male.

Alexander Moore, the only child of parents in a loveless marriage, grows up lonely and friendless on his family's estate in Co. Wicklow. When he befriends Jerry Crowe, a stable hand who works on the estate, his mother forbids all interaction with Jerry because he is socially inferior. When Jerry enlists in the British Army because his family needs the money, Alec impulsively enlists too.

Alec's action is prompted by his mother's revelation that his father is someone other than her husband. In the trenches the two friends are separated again by class

and now also by rank. They are commanded by Major Glendinning, a ruthless officer who shares Alec's mother's belief in the class system. When Jerry is tried and convicted as a deserter after leaving his unit to search for his father, Glendinning orders Alec to command the firing squad. In an act of mercy, Alec privately kills his friend and he in turn is arrested and condemned to die. (Leavy 2017)

It is interesting to see that in many of Johnston's novels the arms test is meant as an ordeal imposed on those with homosexual tendencies.

In her latest work, 2002, enigmatically entitled *This is Not a Novel*, Jennifer Johnston returns to the topic of the decadence of a rich Anglo-Irish family by relating its story from the World War I to the present. In this case too, Harry, the son of the Big House, by his death on the Belgium front pays for his homosexual inclinations. His niece Imogen, the narrator and keeper of her ancestors' memorabilia contained in some old trunks, discovers that her great-grandmother, before committing suicide, put three poems by Francis Ledwidge to music to honour her dead son Harry's memory.

The most interesting aspect of Johnston's work is the constant and obsessive reference to unavoidable memory, represented by the metaphor of the echo which recurs throughout the pages:

We echo and re-echo down the years. (Johnston 2002, 22)

'Echo: a repetition of sounds, due to the reflection of the sound waves by some obstacle'. A down-to-earth and rather boring statement in the OED about a charming and somewhat romantic phenomenon. (35)

The "not-a-novel" is a sort of impossible message which Imogen addresses to her brother Johnny, whose death, suicide maybe, during World War II, Imogen refuses to accept. Johnny is an "echo" generations later of his great-uncle with the same homosexual inclination, the same inability to handle competition or conflict. Both characters hold the value of heroism at bay.

Teresa Casal writes thus about this theme in a very perceptive article:

Personal relationships take precedence over public displays of heroism and conventional notions of masculinity are interrogated. (2017)

Imogen waits and hopes for the impossible return of her brother in a manner that echoes her great-grandmother's behaviour. Her feelings are echoed in Ledwidge's last poem, "Little Boy in the Morning", which Harry's mother set to music before she took her own life:

He will not come, and still I wait.  
He whistles at another gate  
Where angels listen. Ah, I know

He will not come, yet if I go  
 How shall I know he did not pass  
 Barefooted in the flowery grass? (Ledwidge 1919, 150)

In the novels by Johnston considered here, there is also constant attention to style and form. In *This is Not a Novel* the author seems to identify initially with the narrator:

This is not a novel. I want to make that perfectly clear. Normally when I set out to write a piece of fiction, I invent a setting, a landscape, a climate, a world, in fact, that has no reality outside the pages of the book, and into that world I insert my characters. (Johnston 2002, 1)

Obviously this is not true. We soon realise that the narrator is, in fact, in a nursing home and that what she writes is “a hopeful message sent out into the world, like a piece of paper in a bottle dropped into the sea; my hope being that my brother Johnny, somewhere in the world, I believe, may read it” (1). We find out later that Johnny cannot read his sister’s message because he is dead, having drowned himself in the sea. For Johnston, memory seems to be an antidote to the present, a hypothesis contradicted by fact. Johnston infuses a sense of inconsolable sorrow, akin to that in Ledwidge’s last lines, into all her work and into her interpretation of the history of Ireland.

Once again, the artist Johnston reiterates and rewrites the history of her country in an attempt to interpret the present. Speaking of the chances of reconciliation lost between the first post-war period and the present, as well as of the futility – or rather – the negativity, of heroism which, in war, is often nothing more than a trick of fate, the writer in a recent interview, stated:

The First World War was a pivotal moment in Ireland. All our history had come to a head and I really believe that if “Our Heroes” had held their hands, the island would be now a whole unit, peaceful and not all those thousands of dead. (Qtd. in de Petris 2004, 201)

Sebastian Barry follows a path quite different from that of Johnston. The history of his own family recurs in almost all his works. He does not try to exorcise it, but seems willing to re-live it in his works with a view to understanding it. This makes the audiences who attend performances of his plays or the readers of his novels feel they are directly involved in his stories.

Barry was born in Dublin in 1955, the son of architect Francis Barry and actress Joan O’Hara. He had a Catholic upbringing and belongs to a not so rare sector of Irish society: a Catholic loyalist family, which served the state both at home and in the colonies, only to find itself displaced in the Ireland which fought for Home Rule at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for independence in



the 1920's and struggled to find its autonomous national identity which soon degenerated into *republican* nationalism tinted with Catholic bigotry. The interwoven themes of divided loyalties and reassuring family bonds is at the core of two works that ought to be read *vis à vis*: the play *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) and the novel *A Long Long Way* (2005). The protagonist of the play is Thomas Dunne, inspired by James Dunne, Barry's maternal great-grandfather, who was the last Catholic chief superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police between 1913 and 1922. He oversaw the area surrounding Dublin Castle during the 1916 Easter Rising and up until the Irish Free State takeover in January 1922. His only son, Willie, the protagonist of the novel, is a very young Irish soldier, a private, who, in 1916, is entangled in a web comprising the battlefields of Belgium and the conflict raging at home between the loyalists and the nationalists.

The play opens in a psychiatric home in 1932, where Thomas Dunne is raving incoherently as he relives moments of his career and memories of family life with his three daughters<sup>9</sup>, Annie, Maud and Dolly. But his delirium is haunted in particular by the ghost of his only son, Willie, killed in World War I, who appears as a 13-year-old child wearing the uniform once donned by his 18-year-old self.

The following line anticipates the moment in the novel when Willie, unable to become a policeman because shorter than regulation height for the job, enlists in the army to please his demanding, though dearly beloved, father and reach "bloody manhood at last":

A soldier's doesn't always make a good policeman. There is too much – sorrow – in a soldier. (Barry 1995, 16)

To give this sorrow shape, Barry embarked on a novel, where the previous play is summed up as follows:

Willie's father's world passed away in the coming upheavals. In the upshot, he lost his wits and died a poor figure indeed in the County Home at Baltinglass. (291)

Dates are relevant here. After the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, in the relatively pacified Ireland of 2005 and approaching the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, Barry, until then mainly known as a playwright, pub-

<sup>9</sup> *Annie Dunne* is the title of a novel written in 2002. The novel *On Canaan's Side* (2011), tells the story of past and present emigration. Lilly Dunne, one of the three Dunne girls, runs away to New York with her lover Tadhg Bere, an auxiliary police officer belonging to the reviled Black and Tans. In 1922 they flee to New York and then move to the "glittering Canaan" of Chicago, where Tadhg is murdered. The crucial event that spurs Lilly, now in her eighties, to write her diary is the loss she experiences when her grandson trapped in the Gulf war commits suicide.

lished the novel *A Long Long Way*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Dublin International Impac Prize, was nominated Dublin's One City One Book choice for 2007 and, that same year, translated into Italian by the Instar Libri (2007). The novel was an immediate and extraordinary success and was even included in the "Great War Literature Educational Study Guides".

The fact that the novel was dedicated to "Roy Foster, in friendship" is important here. Foster's *Modern Ireland* published in 1988, had transformed Irish historical writing by giving an incredibly balanced reading of Irish history up to 1972, though it has been attacked as "revisionist". We might also define *A Long Long Way* a "revisionist" novel in that it contradicts a one-way interpretation of Irish history while it foregrounds its complexities.

The end of Part One of the novel is a crucial epiphany that explains the irreconcilable breach between Willie and his father. In fact, during a period of leave that Willie is granted during the Easter holidays, the young soldier helps a man roughly his own age who is dying having been shot by the Metropolitan Police under his father's command:

When it was time to get some kip, [...] Willie noticed that his uniform was badly stained with blood. It was the blood of that young man dying. Willie scrubbed his face at the basin provided and he tried a few scrubs at the cloth. There were instructions in his soldier's small-book for the cleaning of khaki. [...] But he had no yellow soap and he had no ammonia. He tried again in the morning but in the main he carried the young man's blood to Belgium on his uniform. (Barry 2005, 97)

As in the previous quote, the novel reaches an apex of elegy and epic availing itself of a highly performative and poetic language, blending elements of poetry and theatre into the narrative, so that the reader is brought to feel and understand what the World War I meant and what all war is: a terrible waste and no beauty.

There is a cinematic quality in Barry's writing. He uses a language fit for cinema being a gifted, poetic scriptwriter as well as a great artist. His experience as a playwright is important here. One should ask why his writing career ranges between poetry, theatre and fiction, while keeping in mind what we said previously about the differences existing between the literary genres. Laura Barber describes Barry's achievement in *The Long Long Way* as follows: "With disarming lyricism, Barry's novel leads the reader into a hellish no-man's land, where the true madness of war can only be felt and understood rather than said" (2005).

This is, perhaps, why his novel *The Secret Scripture* (2008) was brilliantly turned into the script of the beautiful film by the same name directed by Jim Sheridan in 2016 and featuring a stunning performance by Vanessa Redgrave. The same might be done with *A Long Long Way*.

But a writer's words weigh differently on the stage and on the page.

The novel, *A Long Long Way*, is an epic in the Greek sense: "a word embodying a nation's conception of its past history". In it, in fact, in years when a solution to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which that had seen the "two nations" opposed to each other for over 30 years, seemed possible, Barry chose an omniscient narrator, whose distance from the facts, conveys a sense of objectivity and creates in the reader the impression of finally *being told the truth* about life in the trenches and of his/her own historical past.

The technique of contemporary cinema based on special effects, such as that employed to portray the mustard gas attacks, is extremely clever, evocative and shocking. What matters if the poisonous weapon was not being used as yet by the German army in 1916! "Was Shakespeare at Actium or Philippi?":

The gas boiled in like familiar ogre. With the same stately gracelessness it rolled to the edge of parapet in then like the heads of a many-headed creature it toppled gently forward and sank down to join the waiting men. These excellent gas masks instantly lost their excellence [...] The evil gas lay down in the trench like a bedspread, and as more gas came over, it filled the trench to the brim and passed on then in its ghostly hordes to the support lines and the reserve lines, ambitious for choice murders. (Barry 2005, 111)

On the other hand, the author writes an elegy, "a song of lamentation" for the ordinary folk who died in that inexcusable war.

Many critics have praised the skilful use of metaphors which abruptly interrupt the realistic narration of facts, like a sigh of relief offsetting the terrible conditions men experienced in the muddy trenches, facing fear and pain, facing sorrow due to the death of comrades, or like a punch to the reader making him/her feel the horror and degradation that may not be represented in any sanitised form. But there is also an anti-heroic vein of humour.

The technique here reminds us of that used by Mario Monicelli in *La Grande Guerra*, that 1959 masterpiece of Italian neo-realist cinema, where scenes of comic relief and even of coarse humour ignite and explain the unexpected camaraderie between the two protagonists, while, at the same time anticipating, by way of contrast, the end featuring the tragic and heroic deaths of the two anti-heroes, ordinary men of no importance.

An anonymous reader describes the death of Willie Dunne with the following words:

Our young protagonist was born in "the dying days" of an old century, mewling his way into a stormy night that was neither spectacular, nor noteworthy. In these words, Barry presages the manner in which our young man will find his way out of this life. (Online Source)

By way of conclusion, we need to spend a few words on the significant use of music throughout the novel. On several occasions Irish songs, tunes and jigs appear to provide relief and escape of some sort. In the end, however, music will be the indirect cause of Willie's death:

Then he heard singing from the German section. He found he knew the tune well, though the man was singing in German. Perhaps he was singing now in an ironical frame of mind, for the song was “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht”. Silent night, holy night. [...] The voice was as simple as the river, it seemed to Willie. It came from the throat of a man who might have seen horrors, made horrors befall the opposing armies. There was something of the end of the world [...] The end of many worlds. [...] Could they not all be holy? Could God not reach down and touch their faces, explain to them [...] the purpose of their long sojourn, the journey out to a foreign land that became a sitting still among horrors? [...] There was no road back along the way they had taken. He had no country, he was an orphan, he was alone. So he lifted up his voice and sang back to his enemy, the strange enemy that lay unseen. They shared a tune. [...] A single shot marked its own note in the easy dark, hushing the busy owl. (Barry 2005, 289)

I shall end with the lyrics of the song of war and lost love that gives the title to the novel which deals with Paddy / Willie’s homesickness, Molly / Gretta’s betrayal and Willie’s letter of forgiveness to his father “returned with Willie’s uniform and other effects, his soldier’s small-book, a volume of Dostoevsky, and a small porcelain horse” (291):

“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”<sup>10</sup>  
(original version by John McCormack, 1914)

Up to mighty London  
came an Irish lad one day,  
All the streets were paved with gold,  
So everyone was gay!  
Singing songs of Piccadilly,  
Strand, and Leicester Square,  
'til Paddy got excited  
and He shouted to them there:

It’s a long way to Tipperary,  
It’s a long way to go.  
It’s a long way to Tipperary  
To the sweetest girl I know!  
Goodbye Piccadilly,  
Farewell Leicester Square!  
It’s a long long way to Tipperary,  
But my heart’s right there.

<sup>10</sup> “‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’ is a British music-hall song written by Jack Judge and co-credited to Henry James ‘Harry’ Williams. It was allegedly written for a 5-shilling bet in Stalybridge on 30 January 1912 and performed the next night at the local music hall. Now commonly called ‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’, it became popular among soldiers in the First World War and is remembered as a song of that war” (*Wikipedia*).

Paddy wrote a letter  
 To his Irish Molly O', Saying,  
 "Should you not receive it,  
 Write and let me know!  
 If I make mistakes in "spelling",  
 Molly dear", said he,  
 "Remember it's the pen, that's bad,  
 Don't lay the blame on me".

It's a long way to Tipperary,  
 It's a long way to go.  
 It's a long way to Tipperary  
 To the sweetest girl I know!  
 Goodbye Piccadilly,  
 Farewell Leicester Square!  
 It's a long, long way to Tipperary,  
 But my heart's right there.

Molly wrote a neat reply  
 To Irish Paddy O', Saying,  
 "Mike Maloney wants To marry me,  
 and so leave the Strand  
 and Piccadilly, Or you'll be to blame,  
 For love has fairly drove me silly,  
 Hoping you're the same!"

It's a long way to Tipperary,  
 It's a long way to go.  
 It's a long way to Tipperary  
 To the sweetest girl I know!  
 Goodbye Piccadilly,  
 Farewell Leicester Square!  
 It's a long, long way to Tipperary,  
 But my heart's right there.

*Extra wartime verse*

That's the wrong way  
 to tickle Mary,  
 That's the wrong way to kiss!  
 Don't you know that over here, lad,  
 They like it best like this!  
 Hooray pour le Francais!  
 Farewell, Angleterre!  
 We didn't know the way to tickle Mary,  
 But we learned how, over there!

*Notes on Historical Background*

To fully understand the above essay it is important to revise the background to the fatal years between 1914 and 1916 and recall some historical facts.

The Act of Union of 1800 and the dissolution of the Dublin Parliament brought about the complete political subjection of Ireland to London. The more or less foolhardy revolts that followed one another during the nineteenth century were abortive. Moreover, the nineteenth century was marked by a horrific famine (1845-1848) which reduced the population of the island by one third as the result of death due to starvation and disease or to emigration. The tragedy of the poor – the mass of Catholic peasants – was followed by the anxiety of the rich – the elite Ascendancy Protestant land owners of English origin. The latter did not feel properly represented by their MPs in Westminster while the movement for land reform – the so-called Land League – was growing stronger and stronger. Under Charles Stewart Parnell a party was born – the Irish Parliamentary Party – which tried to push a bill for Irish Home Rule – that is, political-administrative autonomy – through Parliament. Late Victorian efforts to pass the bill were rocambolesque. It suffices to recall that Parnell died of a broken heart.

In 1912, Parnell's successor, John Edmond Redmond, presented a revised Home Rule bill, which was violently contested by the Unionists of Ulster led by Sir Edward Carson and staunchly supported by Lord Randolph Churchill, the father of Sir Winston. The clash led to the creation of a loyalist paramilitary group called the Ulster Volunteer Force to which Redmond, in a last-ditch attempt to balance the forces in the field, opposed the Irish National Volunteers committed to the nationalist cause.

In September 1914, the Home Rule Bill was passed, but its implementation was suspended until the end of the war which had just started and which most people believed would be over by Christmas that year.

Redmond continued his battle for a constitutional resolution of the Irish question but his efforts were overridden and rendered redundant by the tragic events of 1916. On Easter Monday 1916, in fact, in the middle of the war, a revolt broke out in Dublin under the leadership of a group of poorly equipped and isolated intellectuals. But the violent English retaliation, the summary shooting of its leaders without a fair public trial, provoked the affirmation of more radical nationalist ideals. When the war ended in 1918 there was no further mention of Home Rule. The 1918 general elections were held in the United Kingdom on Saturday the 14th of December 1918, immediately after the armistice that put an end to World War I.

It was the first election in which women over the age of 30, and all men over the age of 21, could vote. Previously, all women and many poor men had been excluded from voting.

The election was also noted for the results in Ireland which showed clear disapproval of government policy. The Irish Parliamentary Party was almost completely obliterated by Sinn Féin republicans, who refused to take their seats in Westminster but set up instead the first Dail in College Green. This led to the Anglo-Irish War, notorious also for the special task force, the Royal Irish Constabulary Special Reserve popularly known as Black and Tans, the British government brought to Ireland to defeat the rebellious nationalists. About 7,000 Black and Tans served in Ireland between 1920 and 1922. More than one-third left the service before being disbanded, along with the rest of the RIC, in 1922 when the Irish Free State came into being. The nickname Black and Tans arose from the colours of the improvised uniforms they initially wore composed of mixed British Army khaki and RIC dark green uniform parts. As previously stated, the Black and Tans became infamous for their attacks on civilians and civilian property. They were sometimes confused with the Auxiliary Division, a unit of former British RIC officers, so that the term Black and Tans is frequently used to cover both of these groups.

In 1922, in fact, the Irish Free State was recognized as consisting of twenty-six counties, while six of Ulster's nine counties, chosen on numerical basis with a view to creating a Protestant majority in the area and following a farcical referendum, remained within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Partition angered not only nationalists but also unionists from Ulster's remaining three counties as well as those living in the rest of the island. The partial independence granted by the Treaty to the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State was opposed by the radical republican Sinn Féin fringe and its armed wing, the IRA. In 1923, a kind of armed ceasefire was established by the leader of the IRA, Eamonn De Valera. From 1937 to 1949 the new state adopted the old Gaelic name of Eire and in 1949 it left the Commonwealth altogether to become a fully-fledged Republic. The bloody consequences of the partition of Ireland filled the daily news reels with reports of terrorist folly until rather recent times when, in 1998, the Good Friday Agreement, a kind of joint power-sharing venture between the Irish Republic and the UK, ushered a long period of peace into Northern Ireland and granted a degree of autonomy to the Northern Irish parliament which meets at Stormont Castle, Belfast.

In 1914, British army recruitment of Irish soldiers led to conflicting feelings of belonging and loyalty among members of the two groups competing for the island: the Unionists and the Nationalists. The fact that the recruitment drive was supported by the leaders of the two opposing groups is significant. John Redmond invited the Irish Nationalists to enlist to defend Belgium, attacked by a military power like Germany "for the defence of the sacred rights and liberties of small nations, and the respect and enlargement of the great principle of nation-

ality” (qtd. in Hennessey 1998, 82)<sup>11</sup>, a principle of nationality which England would be no longer in a position to deny to the “Small Nation” Ireland after its citizens had been sacrificed while wearing a British uniform. On the other hand, the leader of the Unionist faction, Dublin-born Sir Edward Carson, famous also for having represented the Marquis of Queensbury in the famous trial against Oscar Wilde, encouraged Irish Unionists to fight to defend their place within the British Empire, to show their loyalty to the British Crown, repelling the very idea of Home Rule, which had just been ratified by the Westminster Parliament.

There was no conscription, therefore enlistment was voluntary. “In addition, there were already over 20, 000 Irishmen serving in the British regular army and they formed part of the British Expeditionary Force, which travelled to Belgium in August 1914, taking part in some of the earliest battles and the Christmas Truce” (Lawrance 2008, 65).

Knowing how things went after 1922, and having witnessed the effects of the civil war – the Troubles – which, resulted, over a period of thirty years, in 3,000 victims in a population of just over six million, we can agree with Winston Churchill who, in a famous speech after the Great War, said:

Great Empires have been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed [...] but as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. (Brearton 2000, 6)

This means that the Irish question after the Great War remained one of Great Britain’s unsolved issues.

In the English consciousness, the Great War meant an irreparable breach with the past, the destruction of every political, ethical and cultural institution of the pre-war period. For the Irish, on the other hand, the World War I is important because, notwithstanding its “planetary” significance, it also played a decisive role in redefining the problems which had existed before it broke out and which continue to exist on the agenda of the Irish political scene to the present, especially after the 2016 Brexit and the general election of June 2017 in the UK.

To have a clear understanding of how and why this can have happened, it is necessary to look once again at the facts of history, in particular 1916.

On 24 April, Easter Monday 1916, nearly one thousand volunteers who had broken away from Redmond’s Irish National Volunteers, occupied strategic buildings in Dublin and proclaimed the Republic from the steps of the General Post Office. Five days later having surrendered to the British forces

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to see James Connolly’s view on Redmond’s political approach to the world, and more generally to a form of partition of Ireland in the chapter dedicated to the socialist leaders’ writings in Deane 1991, 718-733.



to protect the civilian population, the leaders of the rising were shot, following summary court martial.

Three months after the Easter Rising, on 1 July 1916, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division (Ulster), comprising almost entirely Ulster unionists, was annihilated. Two thousand dead and 3,000 injured, these were the Irish victims of that first day of what was called the Battle of the Somme, the "Caporetto" of the British army. There was hardly a family in Belfast or in villages all over Ulster which did not count a relative among those dead. Even today the annual July and August Orange parades commemorate those dead. They are remembered especially during the marches held to celebrate 12 (1 in the Julian calendar) July, the anniversary of the defeat of the Catholic Stuart King, James II, by his Protestant Dutch son-in-law William of Orange (William III of England) during the famous battle on the banks of the river Boyne in 1690.

Almost 94,000 Irishmen, enlisted in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division (Ulster), in the 16<sup>th</sup> Division (Irish) and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division (Irish), during the Easter week of 1916, found themselves fighting on the western front wearing the same uniform as that of the British troops engaged in Dublin in repressing the rebellion. It is easy to understand the contrasting feelings events in Dublin roused in their hearts: the realisation of the Nationalists was immediate and heart-breaking; the Unionists, on the contrary, spoke of treachery and sabotage, of a vile action against a country committed to a holy war.

The expression "the 1916 heroes" still conveys different values depending on whether to pronounce it is an Irish nationalist or a unionist. For the former the heroes are the dead of Easter 1916, for the latter those of the Somme.

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