

Ordinary Men in an Abnormal Society: men and masculinity in David Park's fiction

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The overwhelming majority of social scientific research that has addressed the subject of masculinity in Northern Ireland has focused on political violence. In addition, a major focus of the contemporary novel in Northern Ireland has also tended to be on masculinity's close relationship with the Troubles and their aftermath. Indeed, recent years have witnessed an upsurge in crime thriller writing that could legitimately be described as 'Troubles nostalgia' or, some might even say, 'Troubles pornography'. This was arguably true of Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man* and *The Ultras* and is undeniably true of more conventional examples of crime fiction by Sam Millar and Adrian McKinty and also by Stuart Neville whose fiction is located in post-conflict Northern Ireland but conflict remains at its heart. The police, private detectives and paramilitaries are the central male characters. As will become clear in this chapter, therefore, it should perhaps come as no surprise that, in her otherwise astute assessment of masculinities in the contemporary Northern Irish novel, Caroline Magennis makes no reference to the work of David Park whose focus is arguably more universal. Yet it will be argued that Park's work speaks directly to her major concerns far more than most, if not all, of the work she examines.

Between 1990 and 2012, Park produced a body of work that deals with the lives of ordinary men (and, less extensively, ordinary women) against the backdrop of sectarianism and civil unrest but without allowing this context to take over the narrative completely. In *Stone Kingdoms* alone is the main protagonist female. Indeed, Park has received praise for making visible, in that novel and elsewhere, 'the marginality, vulnerability and eccentricity of women in phallogentric culture' (Kennedy-Andrews 224). Given that the focus of this essay is on

fictional representations of masculinity in Northern Ireland, however, and also in light of the fact that much of the action of *Stone Kingdoms* takes place in an African country on the brink of civil war, it is considerably less relevant to the discussion that follows than Park's other work.

This essay argues that Park reflects more accurately than those writers preoccupied with the Troubles, the experience of most men who lived in Northern Ireland during those years.

Drawing upon Park's fiction and also upon personal experience of living in Northern Ireland from 1978-2003, I illustrate and examine how ordinary concerns were constantly played out against the backdrop of an abnormal society.

Huyssen claims that 'one of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key cultural and political concern in Western societies, a turning toward the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity' (Huyssen 11). Memory itself can best be understood as a social activity inasmuch as 'the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society' (Halbwachs 51). Thus, according to Johnson, 'the concept of social memory has been linked to the development of emotional and ideological ties with particular histories and geographies' (Johnson 294). 'Together', as Hoelscher and Alderman argue, 'social memory and social space conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities – and the often – rigorous contestation of those identities' (Hoelscher and Alderman 348).

Memories bind us to particular places. As de Certeau comments, 'there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not' (de Certeau 108). The stories that intersperse the following reflections on Park's fiction represent an invocation of emotions that are now indelibly associated with a particular place – Northern

Ireland – during a particular time period – 1978-2003. These stories are written in the first person and are intended to emphasise the ways in which Park’s work conjures up memories and evocations of my own exposure to his key themes.

De Certeau likened the reader of a novel to a renter in recognition of the manner in which s/he makes texts ‘habitable’ and, in so doing, ‘transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient’ (de Certeau xxi). Reading David Park (or should that be ‘renting David Park’?) summons up countless memories of the twenty-five years which I spent in Northern Ireland. These memories do not always overlap exactly with the contents of Park’s fiction. What they share, however, is an idea of people, mainly men, doing ordinary things albeit in a context in which abnormal events were taking place – usually at a distance but on occasion more immediately.

As Ken Edwards suggests, in another context, ‘the starting point is the first person, that arbitrary signifier for the whole concatenation of processes and functions that we call the self’ (Edwards 8). However, Coser suggests with specific reference to Maurice Halbwachs’s work on collective memory, ‘when it comes to historical memory, the person does not remember events directly; it can only be stimulated in indirect ways through reading or listening or in commemoration and festive occasions when people gather together to remember in common the deeds and accomplishments of long-departed members of the group’ (Coser 24).

My telling of these stories situates me in many respects as a *flâneur* of my own past. When the events described unfolded, I was intimately (and emotionally) involved in the action, a member of the crowd. Now I write as an idle wanderer through my own uncertain bank of memories. The standpoint is male, as is true of so much *flânerie* (Bairner, 2006a). Furthermore, it is the perspective of someone who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in a working-class family in a coal-mining area of Scotland. West Fife in those days was a place which was

strong on solidarity but far less at ease with sociability, especially amongst its male population. Miners stood apart from each other in pubs, lost in their own thoughts. Conversation was limited and silences were long. When asked how he was keeping, the local miner's stock answer was, 'You see it'. The flatness of writing that characterises the stories which make up the bulk of this essay no doubt reflects this particular brand of masculinity. Men were uncomfortable with expressing their emotions. In the Northern Ireland that I first encountered as a teenager, things were little different although my own excitement was palpable.

Before it all began

The Big Snow is set in Northern Ireland in the early 1960s, six years before the start of the Troubles. The snow itself is a major feature of the feelings of claustrophobia which envelop both the rural and urban settings. As Park describes, the concerns of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were minor in by comparison with what they would become.

Each time the outer door of the barracks opened, the draught made the fire smoke. It didn't matter how tightly they wedged the inner office door closed, or jammed the lock with cardboard, there was still a regular puff of grey smoke which seeped silently into the corners and crevices of the room (141)

It was in the 1960s that I travelled to Northern Ireland for the first time. My parents and I sailed on the now long-discontinued Glasgow to Belfast ferry service which glided smoothly past the early signs of the construction of the QE2 before taking on board cattle at the head of the River Clyde. We stayed in Newcastle, County Down, with its beautiful location between

the sea and the Mourne Mountains. We walked in the mountains, visited the world-renowned golf course, and enjoyed the seaside amusements. On that score at least it was little different from previous holidays spent in Scottish resorts such as Dunoon, Rothesay and Ayr. But my father was advised by our landlady which pubs he should and shouldn't go to - advice that appeared to be based solely on her local knowledge of the religion of the regular clientele. She also expressed her fears about her son who had joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Although it was a time of relative peace, the fact that Sam was a Protestant living in a predominantly Catholic town could, she explained, put him in danger. It felt as if something would happen sooner or later, that the walls were closing in, that a big snow was about to envelope even this most picturesque of towns.

In *Oranges From Spain* (1990), a collection of short stories, Park addresses the Troubles directly in 'Killing A Brit' as will be discussed later. Elsewhere in the collection, however, the events that are described could have happened at any time in Northern Ireland's history as a distinct political entity. 'The Catch' tells of a boy leading his band during a Twelfth of July Orange demonstration and executing the perfect catch.

The world turned, and turned again, and then suddenly in his right hand he felt the mace clasped cleanly and perfectly, and in his ears he heard the clamour of the crowd as cheers rose from their throats like a flock of doves released to open sky. He closed his eyes and felt the mace nestle snugly in his hand like the small hand of a loved one (62).

This has little or nothing to do with sectarian politics. It is about male pride and the fear of failure.

In another story, 'The Martyrs Memorial', a direct reference to the church on the Ravenhill Road in Belfast where Ian Paisley established his Free Presbyterian Church, the main focus is

on the still-born relationship between a Protestant boy and a Catholic girl. The boy's mother utters the sort of words that must surely be familiar to most who have lived in Northern Ireland before and during the Troubles. 'We must love them individually', she says, 'even though we hate their religion' (43). Having seen his first film and kissed his first girl, these words brought a smile to the boy's face. But the convent where the girl goes to school had always seemed 'really creepy' to him. The Protestant martyrs such as Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer presumably died for something. The mutual misunderstanding that acts as a barrier between the young couple would become an unbridgeable chasm for many. Indeed, not long after my first visit to Northern Ireland, mutual understanding became even harder to achieve once the Troubles had begun. No matter how intense the violence became, however, people went about their own business.

Doing your job

In *The Rye Man* (1994), John Cameron returns to his childhood to become headmaster of his old primary school and memories of events from his past begin to haunt him. His opening speech is warm and comforting.

'Today, I'm the new boy in school and it feels a little strange, but in some ways I'm not really a new boy at all, because quite a long time ago, on a bright September morning just like this, my mother brought me through the same school gates you came through and delivered me into the hands of a very strict lady called Mrs Winters, the infant class teacher' (8).

His stated desire was for 'a school where people show care and consideration for each other' (8). He remembers playing cricket with the father of one of his pupils. Beyond the

playgrounds was a grassy area and beyond that ‘open fields, hedgerows and on a clear day, the Mountains of Mourne’ (8). Once he had been ‘a small town hero’ (29). But Education for Mutual Understanding loomed and with it the distinct possibility that his reputation would suffer. ‘I’m all for mutual understanding’, he nevertheless informs Liam Hennessy, the Principal of Holy Cross, the local Catholic school (38). But he has another pressing matter to attend to, a leak in one of the classroom roofs that will cost money to repair. In addition, his thoughts keep returning to the incident that had made him a local hero, his discovery of a small boy who had been imprisoned in a barn - ‘Hair smirched and sodden with shit... Completely naked, the raised ridges of his ribs pushing through his skin’ (88) – the victim of a kind of cruelty that is perhaps beyond all understanding and certainly wholly unrelated to the civil unrest which provides the backdrop to many of the novel’s unfolding events.

John Cameron has witnessed the consequences of violence. He has tried to wrestle with the problems of a deeply divided society. Ultimately, however, many of his most serious concerns are bound up with having to confront the stresses involved in being a good educator. As Samson (2012) notes, Cameron is ‘a newly appointed head teacher who is overwhelmed by his own sense of failure and the deadening culture of common assessment instruments, and tiers of entry, and external assessment resources’.

Schooling was inevitably affected by the Troubles and continues to be heavily influenced by the interests of the two main communities in Northern Ireland. Cameron is criticised for his willingness to engage with Education for Mutual Understanding, not least by one of his school governors, Mr Gourlay, who launches into ‘a rambling treatise about the fallacy of worshipping the Virgin Mary, the blasphemy of the mass and various theological criticisms of Catholicism’ (146).

During my years as a lecturer in the University of Ulster (formerly the Ulster Polytechnic), I watched with interest the ways in which relationships developed between Catholic and Protestant students, many of them encountering the other sort for the first time. At one level, here were indications that bringing members of the two warring factions together could indeed work. More troubling, however, was the realisation upon meeting some of these young people a couple of years or so after graduation that they had remained in touch only with their co-religionists.

However, the divisions were never solely rooted in religious and national identity differences. In far more universal ways, the relationship between education and social class has often been almost as divisive in Northern Ireland. How do men, and particularly educated men, deal with the challenges that this can create?

Education, class and masculinity

In *The Light of Amsterdam* (2012), a university lecturer, Alan, goes to Amsterdam with his son for a Bob Dylan concert in an effort to improve their relationship. This father and son narrative is set alongside a mother and daughter story with Alan becoming involved with the mother of a bride-to-be on a hen party trip. For the educated man, there are two distinct challenges – how to deal with his son and how to relate to people, specifically women, who lack his education. As if to prove to himself that he as an ordinary working-class Protestant man, for example, he remembers watching George Best play at Windsor Park in Belfast but precisely what is it that he remembers?

The heady, sweet-sour, swirling narcotic of nicotine and beer? The collective howl and roar of a predatory, almost exclusively male crowd, a fierce living creature

swaying on the terraces, anticipation bursting from its throat every time he touched the ball? The fear in the eyes of those who had to mark him as foot on ball he struck his matador pose, signalling them forward to their public humiliation? (2).

Football, that commonly used route for boys to attain manhood, had been part of his life but increasingly so too had been art. However, having told Karen, the mother of the bride, next to whom he sits on the outbound flight, that he teaches art, he immediately senses the distance that this might cause between them.

He felt a need to remove any remoteness his job might have created. 'My father always wanted me to be a painter and decorator. He was probably right – I'd have made more money, that's for sure' (124).

As is regularly highlighted in Park's writing, the need to fit in and not draw attention to what made one different – national identity, religion, educational background and so on - was a feature of daily life for many men.

Package holidays and weddings always presented their own challenges. Sitting beside the pool in Ca'n Picafort, I am accused of being standoffish for not wanting to get involved with the working-class Belfast families that are staying in the same apartment block. Then I become friendly with two of the men, both IRA volunteers, as it turns out, with the slightly unfortunate names of Tom and Gerry. Now I stand accused of acting the silly fool for getting too close to the sort of people that I should avoid. At weddings too the question was how friendly to be with other guests particularly those from the other side, not necessarily in this instance a reference to the religious divide. Fail to mix and you're a snob. Mix too freely and yet again, you're playing the fool.

The difficulties that such very ordinary personal encounters created were only distantly related to the Troubles. But so too were many of the acts of violence that took place in the same era.

On violence

As suggested earlier, Park does not ignore completely the violence that was linked directly to the Troubles. However, although the representation of the murder of a British soldier in 'Killing a Brit' in *Oranges From Spain* not only addresses such violence, it also highlights the extent to which this became a norm in certain parts of Belfast, thereby highlighting the banality of such acts of violence.

There as a soldier lying on the pavement outside the butcher's shop. His helmet had been taken off and his flak jacket flung open. A soldier on his knees cradled the wounded man's head in his lap. Splatters of blood stippled the shop window and a rivulet of red seeped down the pavement towards the gutter. Near by on the pavement a bottle of milk lay broken (21).

Yet needless to say, the paramilitaries were always there at least in the background, more prominent than that for some people at certain times in their lives. In *Swallowing the Sun* (2004), Park tells the story of Martin who, having survived a violent past, rediscovers his former paramilitary connections and the version of masculinity which these entail, when tragedy strikes his family with the death of his gifted teenaged daughter, a victim of taking drugs simply to fit in with the crowd. Martin passes an entry 'where twenty-five years earlier, as a member of a Tartan gang, he gave a kicking to a Taig who'd ventured to shops that were outside his own territory and in his head he hears the screams and whimpers of the boy, the

clack and clog dance of their boots on the ridged concrete as they swarm about him in a competitive flurry of arms and legs, eager to be able to claim later that they were the warriors who inflicted the most damage' (106). As he seeks vengeance for the death of his daughter, however, he tells one of his former brothers-in-arms, "“We were never soldiers... We were just kids with our heads full of crap. And if we believed anything, it was that we were protecting our people”" (232). For Martin, that ultimately has to mean protecting the memory of his dead child. But there were always other young men with 'heads full of crap'. Their acts of violence often fell somewhere between the Troubles and 'ordinary' criminal behaviour. In the penal system of the time, those offenders without any paramilitary connections were labelled ODCs ('ordinary decent criminals') regardless of the seriousness of their crimes.

I had walked along that stretch of road beside Belfast Lough at night numerous times. On this particular occasion, however, as many people later told me, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Looking back, I prefer to think that it was my attackers who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were five of them. As we passed, walking in opposite directions, one of them muttered something and the next thing I knew I had been pulled to the ground. Then the kicking began. It seemed to last for a long time but was probably over in a few seconds. I was left on the ground bleeding profusely from wounds to my face and head. Later in court, suggestions were made by the prosecution that the accused had paramilitary connections. The less sensational version was that they were simply wrong'uns who had asked for a litany of other offences to be taken into account. It wasn't a Northern Ireland thing. It wasn't a sectarian thing. It could have happened anywhere to anyone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

On other occasions, the violence was even less directly linked to the Troubles even though it may have had political undercurrents.

A ska band is due to play upstairs in a city centre pub. The Redskins, a group of skinhead football fans with left-wing views are going. One of them tells me when I arrive that there is sure to be trouble later. Is he warning me that it isn't safe for me to be there? Or is he simply wanting to establish his credentials as a man who knows his way around? The truth when it emerges is neither of these. During the final number a crowd of skinheads from a different part of the city are on the dance floor. One gives a Nazi salute. The Redskin whom I had thought was either concerned for my welfare or eager to demonstrate his own street wisdom asks if he can have my empty glass. I hand it to him and, in a second, it is flying through the air, landing and breaking on the head of one of the right-wing skinheads. Blood flows. Some people start to panic, others to enter the fray. Talk about self-fulfilling prophecy.

More remarkable still is the fact that the lives of the real men of violence could be marked by the mundane and, in the end, by pathos.

I met Billy when he had already served around fourteen years in Long Kesh. He was a well-respected member of the Ulster Volunteer Force who had once led a campaign to get bigger sausages for the inmates. It was Billy who looked after me when I started to lead discussion groups in the various H Blocks in which most paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland were housed. He was a slight man who had studied for an Open University degree and a postgraduate diploma whilst inside. None of this could hide the fact, however, that he had been given a life sentence for shooting a workmate in the head, ostensibly in revenge for an IRA bomb in Belfast City centre. His victim was a Catholic. About three years later, Billy was released. I met him a couple of times on the outside and noticed that the confidence he had exuded in prison had gone. He looked like someone who was both out of his time and out of

his depth. Some months later I received a phone call telling me that Billy had hanged himself, His suicide note made it clear that whilst he had been in Long Kesh, he felt that at least he was being punished for the awful thing that he had done. Freedom had brought this to an end and he had reached the conclusion that he no longer deserved to live.

Billy wrote, 'I was involved in something that is often described as 'the troubles' and I took Michael Fay's life. I wanted to do it. I was so sick of hearing about the big, bad Protestants and living every day with what the other side were doing that I grew to hate with a passion. My mind became diseased. The moment the gun went off that day on 18 November '82, it was too late' (cited in Taylor, 1999, 9-10).

Many died young as a direct result of the Troubles. Many more were simply growing old.

On ageing

Karen, the mother of the bride to be, in *The Light of Amsterdam*, works in a care home for the elderly but worries about her job security.

The home was completely full so it was always a question of waiting for someone's estate to be eaten up by the cost of residence or for a death to give admittance. She'd never had any complaints about her work. And then she thought that it was possible the cleaning had been farmed out to some new private company who would bring in their Polish and Lithuanian workers to do the job for half the money and be grateful for the work (41-2).

When she had first come to work there she had thought that it would be 'full of kindly old souls' (47). But she had come to see things very differently as the time had passed.

...while it didn't cater for those with dementia or serious illness and was clearly at the top of the price range and offering some independence of living, now she thought of it as a home of the bitter, the unhappy and often the deserted. Nothing ever satisfied... (47).

The homes for the demented are the worst. The inchoate sounds, the smells, the overwhelming sense of old people cheating death against their will. Jimmy is sitting there with no apparent knowledge of who we are. He starts to cry. He has shit himself and all that we can do is get him to a toilet and try to clean him up. A walk to a cafe down the town is now out of the question. Betty's sheltered housing across the road from the Falls Park is altogether different. She has her own small, tidy apartment and can use a communal area downstairs if she wants to. She doesn't but admits that the other residents are OK, much better than in the nearby home to which she'd initially been destined. The old men there had all got drunk on Christmas Day, she says, and the peelers had to be called. They're a bad lot, she goes on, although by now it's no longer clear if she's referring to the old men or to the RUC. She's good value for stories about how Belfast was before the Troubles and about growing up in rural County Down. I suggest that we should visit her more often but her own blood relatives insist that she's a selfish old woman who just wants attention. But don't we all?

Describing how old people begin to stop 'managing' Patrick McGuinness (2014) writes,

suddenly, when their children or grand-children decide it's time to move them to an old people's home where these things will all be managed for them, they decline fast or die, or decline fast *and* die – either just before going into the home ...or just after reaching the home (79).

Only a small percentage of the dead were victims of the Troubles. Young and old died in various ways and their passing was marked by age-old rituals.

On death

In *The Light of Amsterdam*, through its central figure Alan, Park relates the story of George Best's funeral, not quite a Princess Diana moment but arguably the closest Northern Ireland had been to such an event with the possible exception of the funeral in 1981 of IRA hunger striker, Bobby Sands.

He wondered again why he had come and felt a sense of confusion edged with embarrassment. It had the same uncomfortable feeling of emotional meltdown, the collectively generated hysteria of sentiment that had prompted all his joyful cynicism about Diana's farewell (2).

'The whole city was a giant wake', Alan recalls (p. 4). Alan 'was glad that it was raining, glad that it might disguise the tears that had started and he was desperate to prevent (p. 3). Why was he crying?

Perhaps it was for George, perhaps it was for the past. For everything that gets lost, for all the things which you should have taken more care' (3).

He goes to a bar to watch the official ceremony televised live from Stormont. The service itself was 'characterised by incongruity' (Bairner, 2006b, 303) – 'suffused as it was with the modern cult of stardom and the ancient tribal cults of Ulster' (Appleyard, 2005). Moreover, as Walker commented at the time, 'Belfast is not a city noted for forgiveness' as soon became apparent in the reaction of one man in the bar where Alan is watching the events unfold (Walker 5).

...it was not a city where reverence ruled easily and soon there was a commotion further down the bar when some hard-bitten cynic, who somehow had already

managed to drink too much, suggested George had wasted his talent and it would have been better if someone else had been given it, someone who would have taken better care of it (p. 4).

In an earlier novel, *The Healing* (1992), a more humdrum funeral, at least in the context of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, is referred to in the words of a newspaper caption.

‘THE WIDOW OF MURDERED UDR SERGEANT THOMAS ANDERSON COMFORTS HER TWELVE-YEAR-OLD SON SAMUEL AT THIS MORNING’S FUNERAL’ (p. 14).

As Samuel and his mother begin their new life in the city, Samuel is left with the booming words of the family’s Pastor

‘And as Father we bring before You this grieving family we beseech your Holy Spirit to minister unto them in this their hour of deepest need’...’Give them the grace and strength to bear their heavy burden. Take way this thorned crown and let them know Thy peace which if the peace which passeth all understanding’ (p. 9).

Most funerals, of course, had few, if any, political overtones. These were the ones with which the overwhelming majority of men were most familiar.

Funerals were regular events and all the more significant because of the various rituals that surrounded them. Not for most families the modern Scottish tradition – the body taken to the Cooperative Funeral Parlour and then to the crematorium to be turned into ashes and dust. Job done. Here instead, especially in Catholic homes, the coffin is situated in a prominent place in the biggest room in the house and various people, frequently almost total strangers, file past and offer their well-worn comments – ‘She looks just like herself’, ‘God love him, he looks well’ and so it goes on. Then the reception of the remains as the body is welcomed back

to the deceased's parish church and finally the funerals themselves. A young girl with a congenital heart condition. A small white coffin and two relatively old parents who had lost their only child. Then I am one of the pallbearers taking my turn to shoulder the much bigger coffin of an elderly woman through the streets of a market town. A few years later, her son-in-law, in life a man with republican views now saluted by members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary as his coffin is driven to the cemetery on the outskirts of the same market town. A father of a large family, some of them still very young. Sad, pale faces as they take their final leave of their father on the Last Day. The burial ground on a hill looking over the city. 'Hasn't he got a great view from here?' – a sentiment to be repeated time and again at Cemetery Sundays to follow.

These were ordinary deaths. However, as Kennedy-Andrews notes, Park demonstrates in *The Healing* that even death as a direct consequence of the Troubles was regularly abstracted from its immediate context. Thus, the characters in *The Healing* 'belong to a community which views the Troubles not in political or historical terms, but as the manifestation of a metaphysical and social malaise' (Kennedy-Andrews, 2003: 163-4).

Conclusion

To return to de Certeau. places are haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence which one can invoke if one cares to. Park does not ignore the fact that from the 1960s until the 1990s, Northern Ireland was an abnormal society relative to most of Western Europe. In addition, as Sansom (2012) argues, 'the legacy of his Protestant evangelical upbringing is obvious everywhere in his books'. Park succeeds, however, in avoiding what Richard Deutsch described as the 'narcissistic provincialism' of much Northern Irish fiction, particularly that which is obsessed with the Troubles (Deutsch 150). As Park himself has

observed, ‘one might argue that the trouble with the Troubles was not that writers made it their subject, but that it made them its subject’ (Sansom). For Park, ‘the Troubles had a deadening impact...It damaged creativity’ (Samson). To avoid provincialism and address more universal themes, Park does not even need to take his characters to foreign locations as he does in both *Stone Kingdoms* and *The Light of Amsterdam*. Even in those novels that are set exclusively in Northern Ireland, whilst the Troubles provide a backdrop, their presence is similar to their presence in the lives of most men who lived through those times. They could not be ignored. From time to time, indeed, they intruded directly in people’s lives. At other times, however, they receded into the background as concerns about family and work, took centre stage. As a consequence, Park is able to transform what Kennedy-Andrews (166) describes as ‘exhausted provincial clichés and pietistic, complacent or nihilistic narratives’. Even in *The Truth Commissioner* (2008) which is arguably Park’s most political novel to date, the post-conflict lives of the leading characters, whilst deeply affected by the Troubles and their respective roles during that period, are heavily influenced by more universal concerns – fathers’ relationships with their daughters, marriage, the evolving cityscape, the ageing process and so on. Indeed, according to Sansom (2012), the extension of Park’s sympathy to the Other is particularly marked in this novel.

Unlike Magennis (2010), Elmer Kennedy-Andrews in his examination of fiction and the troubles, does discuss Park, with a particular focus on *The Healing* and *Stone Kingdoms*. In many respects, however, Park’s work gives more support than most to Magennis’ (143) aim ‘to disrupt notions of a hegemonic Northern Irish masculinity, based on violent conflict and hyper-masculine sectarian rhetoric, as the only option available to Northern Irish men’. It is ironic that in a review of Glenn Patterson’s (2104) novel, *The Rest Just Follows*, Stuart Neville (2014), himself a purveyor of fiction that focuses largely on sectarian violence, observes with reference to the Troubles, ‘However Belfast was viewed through those

turbulent decades, all but a small number of its residents spent their days in much the same way as the rest of the UK's populace, concerned more with keeping food on the table and a roof overhead than with politics and warfare'. Whilst Patterson may well have done much to reflect this fact, David Park is the true, albeit often ignored, master when it comes to describing the lives of ordinary men, and less frequently women, obliged to live in far from ordinary times. Or is this simply a renting of his work, to use de Certeau's term, by someone who experienced the ordinary far more than the abnormal during his years in Northern Ireland? One thing that is irrefutable though is that, in Park's work, masculinity is presented as complex, fragile and uncertain.

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