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Memory and Belonging: Irish Writers, Radio, and the Nation

When Seamus Heaney accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, his address in Stockholm, “Crediting Poetry,” made explicit a connection between radio and literature in Ireland. Heaney’s charming evocation of the earliest intrusion of the outside world into the small secure world of his farmhouse childhood in County Derry begins and ends with the radio as sound. When he refers to “an aerial wire attached to the topmost branch of the chestnut tree,” we immediately recall the emblematic chestnut tree in the poem “Clearances,” and the deft transition from radio to literature is complete.

Heaney specifically links his earliest radio memories in “Crediting Poetry” to World War II, a time which brought enormous advances in technology—nearly all of which, incidentally, were aural: sonar and radio, radio telegraphy and telephony, and radio itself. In his address, Heaney quickly progresses to a discussion of the basis of most aural communication—spoken language. As the radio dial spun, foreign languages flickered to life, as dialects of his own language which, he suggests, offered—“a stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds”:

Then, as years went on and my listening became more deliberate, I would climb up on an arm of our big sofa to get closer to the wireless speaker. . . . There was so much going on in the kitchen, I had to get close to the actual set in order to concentrate my hearing, and in that intent proximity to the dial I grew familiar with the names of foreign stations, with Leipzig and Oslo and Stuttgart and Warsaw and, of course, with Stockholm. I also got used to hearing short bursts of foreign languages as the dial hand swept round from BBC to Radio Éireann, from the intonations of London to those of Dublin. . . .¹

In his earlier essay, “Feeling into Words,” Heaney concentrated more on the local and outlying, remembering the recitation of lighthouse names in northern seas.

For one reason or another, words as bearers of history and mystery began to invite me. . . . Maybe it was stirred by the beautiful sprung rhythms of the old BBC weather forecast: Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Shetland, Faroes, Finisterre.²

1. Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1995), p. 10–11.

2. Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” in *Preoccupations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), p. 45.

Sounds, shaped into exotic words, suddenly emerge from a realm that has thus far been inchoate. Radio listening, for Heaney and for generations raised on radio, was, then, primarily an imaginative act, which would come to figure in their later creative undertakings. Their experiences echo that of a ten-year-old boy who had just seen his first television broadcast. The boy, expected to rave about the new medium, instead said that he preferred radio because the pictures were better.

In 1924, two years after the implementation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) began broadcasting in Northern Ireland. Radio Éireann, or rather, 2RN, its forerunner, started up less than two years later, as one of the earlier projects of the newly established Free State, and was established in part as a response to the presence of the BBC. Irish national broadcasting, like the BBC, was a governmental undertaking that was to remain a monopoly for decades, until the Radio and Television Act of 1988, which established the Independent Radio and Television Commission and paved the way for privately owned stations. There were, of course, the two intervening decades from the 1960s to the 1980s of “pirate” radio, which, to a limited extent, had threatened that monopoly.³

As successful as Radio Éireann was to become, it was always in a lopsided competition with the BBC, which was to become and to remain for decades the most developed broadcasting system in the world. Radio Éireann did, however, create a national listening nexus in the new nation that displaced, to some extent, regional and local Irish concerns. By offering national news, national sporting events, weather forecasts, and agricultural programming, Radio Éireann had a far greater unifying effect on Irish listeners than print media had ever had on Irish readers. When the national broadcasting mechanism was set in place, Ireland’s middle-sized towns could often still be depended upon to produce at least one, and in some cases two, weekly newspapers, which tended to divide readers by party affiliation, livelihood, and socio-economic class. Radio Éireann listeners all over the country heard the same news and listened to the same entertainment programs. Thus national media referents emerged for the first time—an important element in nation building for the newly established Free State.

Ironically, Douglas Hyde’s inaugural speech on Dublin 2RN may not have been as inclusive as he had intended. Hyde’s speech on January 1, 1926, which he began in English, was meant to welcome the Irish diaspora. But when he

3. Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: RTÉ, 1967) pp. 2–15, *passim*; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (FY 2–15).

moved to address the at-home audience, he announced his intention to switch to Irish: "This much I have said in English for any strangers who may be listening in. Now I address my own country" (FY 24). The Irish portion of Hyde's broadcast would have been comprehensible to relatively few listeners at home. The effect of Radio Éireann as a unifying force within the country was always more an ideal than a fully achieved reality. Much of the country could receive BBC broadcasts; those parts beyond the Shannon were often beyond its reach. Most of Ireland's population, however, fell within the BBC's range, so that much of the populace of the new state could and did listen to the "Beeb."

Irish radio memory often fuses the two broadcast services regardless of the political sensibilities of the household. The BBC's news services, even early in its broadcasting history, were comprehensive in ways with which it was difficult for Irish radio to compete—particularly later during World War II or the Emergency, as it was called in the neutral Free State. Also, part of Radio Éireann's initial brief to encourage Irish-language broadcasting and to produce traditional music and cultural program could work against it at times. Neither objective was ever as universally appealing to Irish listeners as was assumed it would be by those in policy-making positions. Despite these limitations, Radio Éireann, like all radio in this era, had little competition other than newspapers, and listening to the radio, unlike reading the newspaper, was an instantly shared experience. Newspapers in households were often read by more than one person, frequently from cover to cover and, at times, aloud. The radio enjoyed a different status and was situated in the home like a prominent piece of household furniture, much as televisions and personal computers were treated when they were each later introduced into private homes. Radio ownership in Ireland, whether because of novelty, need, or the cachet involved in owning a set, spread very quickly, despite licensing fees (FY 49).

Early radio listening required concentration, as poor reception was a fact of life, as Heaney so vividly remembers. The radio also linked generations who brought different reactions and requirements to the experience. Long after radio's introduction, radio listening also continued to be something of a ritualized practice, as the device was turned on at certain times of the day or week for specific programs, and family schedules fell into an established rhythm. Listening to the radio in the early years was not "the thing you do while doing something else," as an American marketing expert recently described it. Early listeners focused all their attention on radio listening, unlike today's listeners, who hear radio in their cars, in elevators, in doctors' offices as background noise that only occasionally impinges in a lasting or meaningful sense.⁴

4. Clea Simon, "The Web Catches and Reshapes Radio," *New York Times*, 16 January, 2000, Sec. 2, 1.

The earlier ritualized experience of radio listening may account for the vivid quality of early radio memories, particularly in memoirs of childhood. Fifty years or more on, it is not unusual—indeed, it is a recurring phenomenon—for people who grew up with radio to recall with precision what they listened to, as well as when and what their immediate and lasting reactions to a specific broadcast or series of broadcasts were. The clarity of these memories attests to the power of the aural faculty. Listening, after all, was historically a more highly developed skill than it is in the present age. Reliance upon memory to process and to store information about one's history and culture, which was imparted orally, was a necessity before the advent of mass literacy, and extended to some degree into the beginnings of the radio age. The Irish writers of Heaney's generation have absorbed and stored radio memory, and have implemented it in different and often indirect ways.

Nowhere is this practice more vivid than in the work of the playwrights who are Heaney's contemporaries. Fintan O'Toole, in a recent column in the *Irish Times*, responds to a readers' poll of favorite Irish plays of the past century. In his assessment of the results, he emphasizes the role of evocation in Irish drama. Writing in this case about the playwrights emerging in Ireland in the 1980s, O'Toole makes connections between the power of evocation and the problematizing of national identity. The premise is applicable to both the earlier and later plays discussed below in which radio memory occasions powerful evocation.⁵

Radio memory in Ireland has distinctive features that unite people who share memories of it, even though these memories are highly selective and subjective. If you were not brought up in Ireland, you would not know what "Athlone Calling" means, nor would you experience the start of recognition evoked by those words.⁶ The interplay between radio, which is a remembered medium, and literature, which is in the process of being created, is inextricably connected with the writers' need to define Irishness for their own age. Defining Irishness, however, is never a simple matter. Radio memory appears in contemporary Irish plays as both positively or negatively evocative. It is possible that radio's evocative force is best employed when it provides the creative germ of a play, rather than when it is made to serve other, more ideological, imperatives.

Tom Murphy's play *Sanctuary Lamp* (1976) presents the story of a disenfranchised circus strongman. The play is loosely based on the playwright's

5. Fintan O'Toole, "Play for Ireland," *The Irish Times on the Web*, Features, 12 February, 2000, <http://www.ireland.com>.

6. "Athlone calling" was the "station ident" for 2RN, later Radio Éireann, which named the site of the earliest transmitting station along the Shannon.

memories of Jack Doyle, a famed Irish boxer. Boxing matches were among the first sporting events regularly broadcast on Irish and British radio.⁷ Radio broadcasts of Doyle's bouts, and of his voice in interview, helped to form a heroic image, a figure larger than life, in the minds of boys and young men in Ireland—images that superseded the reality of the boxer's genuine achievement, and which made his ignominious death all the more poignant (*FY* 41). Nowhere in *Sanctuary Lamp* is Doyle or radio mentioned. We have only Murphy's word on the underlying power of his radio memories of this Irishman who made it onto the world stage and who, years later, inspired a very different character for the Irish stage.⁸

When, in Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1984), the audience hears the voice of the Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli sing "O Paradiso" from Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, or "Tu Che A Dio Spiegasti L'Ali" from *Lucia di Lammermor*, the device used to produce the sound on stage is a phonograph.⁹ Recordings of Gigli, the most recorded tenor after Caruso, were staple fare on music programs on both BBC and Radio Éireann. It would have been through radio that Murphy first became familiar with what are obviously beloved recordings, as the Murphy household—and, later, the flats the playwright inhabited as a young man—would have been unlikely to have included the luxury of a phonograph or a collection of opera recordings. These recordings haunt and motivate Murphy's central character, called "The Irishman" in the *dramatis personae*, but simply "The Man" throughout the text.

The Gigli Concert is a testament to the power of evocation and of memory. The Irishman unfolds a tale of a brutal childhood, and a necessary distancing from his past. He is a contemporary of his creator, and has rejected the negative influence of both his father and his elder brother who functioned as father after the former's death. The Irishman, born into the new state, has become a success by its standards, yet has an emptiness of spirit that he has attempted to fill by closely identifying with Gigli, even proffering at first a curiously Italianate biography. In this ersatz identity he has continued to function until the time of the play, which is a time of intense personal crisis. In the play's arresting final scene in which the only other fully-developed character—significantly, an Englishman—achieves the Irishman's dream, to sing like Gigli,

7. Thomas Murphy, *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1976: Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1984), p. 26.

8. Murphy has discussed his extensive use of notebooks he kept for two years prior to the writing of *Sanctuary Lamp*. Entered in these were reminiscences about Doyle's career, including broadcast bouts and interviews, and Murphy's chance encounter with the boxer years later in England. Synge Summer School, Rathdrum, County Wicklow, July 7, 2000.

9. Thomas Murphy, *The Gigli Concert* (1984: Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1988), p. 66, 68.

the arbitrary distinctions of personal and national identities are, if not eradicated, then rendered irrelevant.

Irishness defined against Englishness is not, however, a matter that is usually disposed of so subliminally. Rather, it is usually played out in contexts that are overtly political, even if Irish playwrights argue, finally, against political limitations. Such is the case when Tom Kilroy, Murphy's contemporary, makes radio central to *Double Cross* (1986), in which the range of wartime aural markers earlier noted by Heaney come alive on the stage. Irishmen Brendan Bracken, Winston Churchill's Minister of Information, and William Joyce, who broadcast Nazi propaganda, forge new and non-Irish identities for themselves. They issue and receive direct challenges to these identities on stage by the medium of radio. Here, the cozy fireside wireless that generously spilled language into Heaney's straining ear is employed in its more serious role as news provider—and, more ominously, as purveyor of propaganda. Old enough to remember Lord Haw Haw's distinctive voice, Kilroy explores the chimera of universality that radio listeners thought they had experienced—thus, two minor characters in the play, journalists, discuss the effect of radio listening:

ACTRESS: Each morning each person seemed to have a different story of what Lord Haw Haw had said the night before.

ACTOR: Two people in the same room before the same wireless would report two different versions of what had been heard.¹⁰

This apt exchange contextualizes, in an explicitly dangerous conjunction, the subjective essence of the medium in question. It is this high degree of aural subjectivity—a private communion within a public context—that lies at the heart of radio's productive intrusion into the consciousness of Kilroy and of subsequent generations of Irish writers.

Double Cross, not incidentally, also problematizes the concept of patriotism and its obverse treachery as subjective matters. In its final scene, Kilroy's character Lord Beaverbrook—based on the influential newspaper magnate of the era—has become involved in the mystery of the confused identities of both Bracken and Joyce, and he visits the latter in prison. Beaverbrook is intent on investigating what might be called the underbelly of national identity, arguing that where national allegiance enforces patriotism, one must logically anticipate what he calls the alternate but “profound fidelities” under which the traitor must operate.

The requirements of national identity and its limitations figure prominently, as does the power of radio memory in Frank McGuinness's *Someone*

10. Tom Kilroy, *Double Cross* (1986; Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1994), p.61.

Who'll Watch Over Me (1992). McGuinness's Englishman, Irishman, and American held captive in Beirut, are each portrayed as distinct national types, but they know full well the value of shared memory that accrues *in extremis*. The captives use various media in English to interact, films and television included, but McGuinness begins the play with a version of the BBC's long-running radio program "Desert Island Discs," itself an imaginative exercise in choosing aesthetic and other tools for survival in isolation. The program's rules must be explained to the American, who has a different set of radio memories—or who, in effect, speaks a different radio dialect. McGuinness also has his captives "replay" numerous radio and television broadcasts of famed horse races and other sports events, such as tennis matches, while his insistent use of a voice-over of Ella Fitzgerald singing "Someone To Watch Over Me" is haunting, and is a recording that was a longstanding favorite on both British and Irish radio.¹¹

McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* focuses on the nationalities of the three men on stage, and each of them "conventionally patriotic in the normative mode of his country."¹² They have been placed in danger specifically because of those nationalities in an age of international terrorism. The solace they derive from remembering a safer period in their lives is conveyed largely through radio memory. McGuinness, however, finally propels the play past national distinctions, and toward his signature appeal to the power of the human spirit, which has no such limitations or boundaries.

Brian Friel, with a somewhat older radio memory, took radio memory a step further on the stage in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) when he used a radio, not only as his central prop, but gave it a "face" and a name—"Marconi." Marconi, the radio, is very much a character in the play—a member of the Mundy family; and, of course, the inventor's own genealogical and geographical connection to Ireland is imbedded in the consciousness of Friel's Irish audiences.¹³ Marconi brings international dance tunes and world events to the

11. "Desert Island Discs" featured a weekly celebrity—often a film star, politician, athlete, or artist—who was asked to supply the names of ten pieces of music of any type which he or she would wish to have along if stranded on a desert island. Celebrities were also asked to explain why the choice of music was sustaining or inspiring to him or her. In addition, featured guests were asked which book, apart from Shakespeare, the Bible, or a dictionary, they would want along on their desert island experience.

12. Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), p. 169.

13. Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937), the Nobel prize-winning physicist and developer of wireless telegraphy, performed early transmitting experiments along the Irish coast in Counties Antrim, Donegal, Cork, and Dublin. His mother, Annie Jameson, was a Dubliner of the distilling family. There is now an Irish heritage museum in honor of Marconi in Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin,

isolated village of Ballybeg in County Donegal, and into the Mundy home, broadcast all the way from Dublin, a place nearly as remote to the Mundy sisters as Gerry Evans's Wales or Civil War Spain or Fr. Jack's Ryanga. Soon the stability of that radio era will be disrupted and the world will impinge on the lives of the Mundy sisters with devastating results.

Friel begins the play with the adult Michael's monologue, which opens with his memory of the arrival of radio in the house when he was seven years old:

When I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me. We got our first wireless set that summer—well, sort of a set; and it obsessed us. And because it arrived as August was about to begin, my Aunt Maggie, the joker of the family, suggested we give it a name. She wanted to call it Lugh after the old Celtic god of the Harvest. But Aunt Kate—she was a national schoolteacher and a very proper woman—she said it would be sinful to christen an inanimate object with any kind of name, not to talk of a pagan god. So we just called it Marconi because that was the name emblazoned on the set.

And about three weeks before we got that wireless, my mother's brother, my Uncle Jack, came home from Africa for the first time ever.

... And when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, these two memories—of our first wireless and of Fr. Jack's return—are always linked. So that when I recall my first shock at Jack's appearance, shrunken and jaundiced with malaria, at the same time I remember my first delight, indeed my awe, at the sheer magic of that radio.¹⁴

The adult Michael is remembering childhood perception, so it is not surprising that the radio memory takes precedence over Fr. Jack here. It is recalled first that Fr. Jack arrived three weeks "before" the radio—not that the radio arrived three weeks after Fr. Jack. The child Michael, an exact contemporary of his creator, claims that the radio obsessed them all, and indeed we see the sisters' preoccupation with the new machine. But it is the boy who experiences that "first delight," and it is Michael who finds Marconi "sheer magic." It is Michael who is remembering the scene with such intensity.

Like other vivid uses of radio memory on the contemporary Irish stage, its intrusion in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is coupled with a questioning of Irish identity. The Irish, pagan name Lugh is rejected for the foreign Marconi, making unanimous the rejection of, or alienation from, Irishness among the male characters. Gerry Evans, the Welshman, goes off to Spain (albeit to fight on the side of the Spanish Republic) and Fr. Jack has rejected both Irishness and his faith—or rather, they have been rendered irrelevant by his prolonged

not far from where one of his coastal transmitting stations was located. There Marconi lived for a time with his Irish wife, Beatrice O'Brien, daughter of Lord Inchiquin (FY 12–13).

14. Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber, 1990), p.1.

stay in Africa. When he returns to Ireland, he argues for the superiority of Ryangan rituals and mores, finds local censoriousness regarding the very “practical” system of polygamy baffling, and bemoans there is but one love child in the house, as such children bring good luck.

Critics have tended to credit the distaff side of the cast in *Dancing at Lughnasa* with providing Michael with a securely Irish identity, but this view bears reexamination. Despite the celebrated primal Irish dance sequence performed only by the women, Chris has contracted an exogamous marriage, Kate loses her Irish government-funded job, Agnes and Rose—victims of de Valéra’s economic policies—go to England never to return, and Maggie marvels over Bernie O’Donnell’s twins because they are Nordic. Even that quintessentially Irish dance moment itself, brought to us by means of the radio, is described in the stage directions in less flattering and positive forms than it is usually portrayed on the stage. As Marconi plays “The Mason’s Apron,” Friel describes the women thus:

The movements seem caricatured . . . and the almost recognizable dance is made grotesque because . . . instead of holding hands, they have their arms tightly around one another’s neck, one another’s waist . . . the women are consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves.¹⁵

The scene ends in silence with only “short bursts of static from the radio.”

In a lighter vein, there have been equally comic radio markers used as shorthand to knowing Irish theater audiences, which are quite incomprehensible to outsiders. Hugh Leonard’s *The Patrick Pearse Motel* (1971), when a revisionist and postmodern exercise ahead of its time, uses a real off-stage nemesis for a fictional television broadcaster in its cast. Leonard’s character, the ambitious James Usheen, is tormented by the idea of his competitor Eamon Andrews, whose reputation was secured on Irish radio early in its broadcasting history, and who was the genuine toast of the airwaves before losing pre-eminence to Gay Byrne. For the audience outside Ireland, the joke is there, and it works; but not with the same resonance experienced by those who grew to adulthood soothed by Eamon Andrew’s dulcet voice and his unchallenged celebrity status among a nation of listeners.

In Martin McDonagh’s recent hit *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), aging singles Maureen Folan and Pato Dooley come home tipsy from a party and try not to wake her elderly mother, Mag, for whom Maureen is caregiver. They hear the radio in the kitchen playing Delia Murphy’s iconographic rendering of Francis Waller’s ballad “The Spinning Wheel,” a song that conveys a version of the forty-year-old Maureen’s predicament. In the sung version, a

15. *Dancing at Lughnasa*, pp. 21–2.

young granddaughter escapes through a window to her waiting lover, after using a clever ruse to fool her granny into believing that she is still spinning in the corner. Eventually granny fades to sleep or, Pato and Maureen wonder, is it to death? In McDonagh's postmodern take on this ballad, however, it is the granny who is given to ruses, neglecting to convey invitations and burning love letters in order to assure her future happiness, or so she believes. The song is eerily replayed in the final scene of the play, after Mag's murder by Maureen. The play's postmodern edge is intensified by having the song played as a belated birthday request on Radio Éireann. The request is sent by Mag's two absent daughters, who also get the birthday wrong, making their mother—now dead—a year older than she was.

McDonagh's apt choice of song, played on a radio with poor reception, does much to displace a sacred cow of Irish national identity; Mag can easily be seen to function as the antithesis of the Shan Van Vocht. Mag's earlier exchanges with Ray, Pato's kid brother, if we view them as an antic take on Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, are structurally different from other scenes in the play in two particulars. The radio is not played when Ray, two generations younger than Mag, and one generation younger than Pato and Maureen, is on stage. Furthermore, all his referents are television-based, and most of them not Irish. He and Mag lack a collective media memory and show little sense of shared cultural identity.

The beginning of the end of shared and assured radio memory has usually been pinpointed in modern literature as occurring with the introduction of television, but few contemporary writers have given serious consideration to the liberating, as well as the corrosive effect, of pirate radio on Irish radio memory. Playwright Bernard Farrell is the exception. His 1983 play *When Moses Met Marconi*, revived recently at Andrew's Lane in Dublin, was originally a collaborative effort staged for inter and leaving certificate students. In 1983, there were no licensed radio stations in the country other than Radio Éireann. Local stations then often operated openly and without licenses but, as Farrell makes clear in his play, the operators of such stations were aware of their precarious position. Farrell's play also addresses issues new to Ireland: broadcast media being revenue-dependent on advertisers, and the delicate balance necessary to maintain independence and quality programming while fulfilling the needs of advertisers, catering for public taste and, at times, testing public tolerance.

When Moses Met Marconi brings us into the recording studio of Radio Active. The staff includes "DJ" and manager "Bobby Bold," aka Sean Delaney, Justin Day (Eamon McGovern) and the offstage voice of Wolfman Moses (originally howled by Tom Hickey and loosely based on American disc jockey

Wolfman Jack). The closed, shabby, and limited ambiance of Radio Active takes a decided turn when Sean hires Nuala Ryan in the hope that a female presence on air will boost ratings. Nuala not only boosts ratings, but also puts the activist into Radio Active, producing magazine programs dealing with such sensitive issues as family planning, zoning permits, and workers' rights.

When Moses Met Marconi, like McDonagh's play, is concerned with the depiction of the waning role of Radio Éireann in Irish life. Alice Ryan, Nuala's hopelessly genteel and demodé mother, still listens to Radio Éireann. However, duly proud of her new broadcaster daughter's position, she rings a friend to urge her to listen to Radio Active—"459 meters, Mary, it is near where Radio Éireann used to be."¹⁶ In fact, Radio Éireann is still there, but even in Alice's consciousness, its preeminence is beginning to fade. Here again, as in McDonagh, none of the comforting collective memories present in other plays that use radio as the means of accessing the past and reenforcing Irish identity are present in *When Moses Met Marconi*. But Farrell, whose forte is to train a bead on subtle shifts in the Irish psyche, shrewdly presents the changes in Irish society and definitions of what Ireland is and who the Irish people are.

Radio memory in recent Irish prose can also be used to comic effect, some of it lighter than others. Roddy Doyle's beloved and heroic Rabbinette family from his Barrytown trilogy are the exasperated owners of a much abused dog, Larry Gogan, named for the ubiquitous Irish radio compère of the 1960s and 1970s. Both Larry Gogans, it seems, are always there—often when they could be done without. Unlike such other earlier and revered Irish radio personalities as Eamon Andrews and Gay Byrne, who have been treated with considerable respect and fondness in recent Irish writing, Larry Gogan is fated by Roddy Doyle to appear and remain in Irish fiction in the form of a household pet.

A more informing instance in contemporary prose fiction of radio's imprinting on the national consciousness and on its writers—and also of the warring forces of cultural evolution on Irish listeners—occurs in Patrick McCabe's early novel *The Dead School*. Here, a contemporary writer explores, and perhaps explodes, the myth of innocence that radio memory often tries to represent. The novel focuses on generational strife in Ireland, displays a striking awareness of the effectiveness of radio in Ireland at pushing the limits of public tolerance for social change, and at times, threatening social upheaval. The novel's protagonist, Raphael Bell, the principal of a highly successful national, or primary, school in Dublin, came of age in the new Republic. A true believer, Raphael has as his nemesis one Matthew Dudgeon, who arrives as an

16. Bernard Farrell, *Then Moses Met Marconi*, in *Three Team Plays* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1988), p. 119. The title of the play was subsequently changed to *When Moses Met Marconi*.

ill prepared and destructive teacher at his school. Raphael, increasingly tormented by what he sees as an onslaught of degeneration and slack application of standards, finally erupts when his favorite radio program, “The Walton Programme of Old Favourites”—with its signature introduction, “if you sing a song, DO sing an *Irish* song”—is threatened with extinction by the coming vogue. Instead, he hears a fashionable talk show host flippantly discussing intimate apparel with reckless disregard for the proprieties of Raphael’s generation:

The topic tonight was ladies underwear. The sort they wear for their boyfriends or husbands. It was the word “bra” that rooted Raphael to the spot. He felt as though someone had slapped him right across the face. . . [he] might as well have been shouting “Are you listening out there, Mr. Bell? Did you hear it? You didn’t? Then very well. I’ll say it again, just for you. Haha! Come on now everyone. BRA! That’s it! BRA!”¹⁷

The end of the age of innocence, the age of radio, is significantly pinpointed by McCabe in this novel, just as the degenerative age of television is ushered in.

A recent postmodern use of radio memory in poetry occurs in Paul Durcan’s “Glocca Morra” in which personal identity, Irish identity, and ersatz Irishness collide at a particularly vulnerable time in the poet’s life as he stands beside his dying father in the hospital:

But I stood my ground
At the foot of his bed
While the transistor radio,
Like something hidden in a hedgerow,
Went on with its programme—
Rosemary Clooney crooning
“How are things in Glocca Morra?”¹⁸

The poem also recalls a now derelict hotel of the same name they had visited. “Glocca Morra,” imported as it is from Broadway, juggles complex levels of Irishness among the generations. These include the poet’s daughter, to whom the poem is addressed; the persona of the poem, who is Durcan himself; and the memory of his father, a judge, who atypically experienced a sense of glee at not having to pay a license fee to the Irish government for his own transistor radio. Finally, Durcan succumbs to the radio’s version of Irishness as a means of finding peace in a time of grief: “Whatever things are like in Glocca

17. Patrick McCabe, *The Dead School* (New York: Dial, 1995) p. 138–39.

18. Paul Durcan, “Glocca Morra,” in *A Snail in My Prime* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 159–60. “How Are Things Glocca Morra” is a number from the 1947 Broadway musical *Finnian’s Rainbow* by Burton Lane and E. T. Harburg.

Morra / I'm sad we're not going to be there together any more."¹⁹ Durcan's poem can be used, in a sense, as a pivot to move the reader from an awareness of radio's general intrusion into the consciousness of the writer to examine specifically Irish radio's intrusion therein.

Taking her cue from Brian Friel, Medbh McGuckian uses Marconi's cottage in far off Ballycastle, County Antrim, both to situate and to title a recent collection of poems. Critics ever since have suggested that the poet, like Marconi, may be sending forth Morse code-like signals to us from the periphery. With its female figures isolated, or isolating themselves, from lovers or nuclear families, McGuckian's fractured present looks to the iconic clarity of the isolated cottage of the past—radio days—as a symbol of a more fixed time. McGuckian does not wish to return there in her life, but it is a focal point of the imagination for the poet, a white background against which, she tells us, she pins the bright reds and blues of her contemporary poetic experience.²⁰

McGuckian's collection *Marconi's Cottage* contains nothing quite so obvious as a radio, but "The Invalid's Echo" includes the words "ears" and "sounds," as do so many other poems in the volume, along with frequent references to listening and voices. In "The Cutting-Out Room," which features one of McGuckian's uncomfortable interiors, she hears ". . . your voice, / A strange swoop of sound, / as from / A room above a shop. . ."²¹ None of these recurring aural references would seem to have more than the usual sensory applications, if it were not for McGuckian's title, and for our historical awareness of Marconi's cottage in Ballycastle as it figures in the history of the development of radio.

In a more traditional application of radio memory, John Montague offers one of many exploratory poems about his own past, his troubled childhood, and his troubled relationship with his father. Here, in adulthood, he meets his father returning to Ireland by boat at Cobh. As they return home to the North, he writes

We drove across Ireland that day,
lush river valleys of Cork, russet
of the Central Plain, landscapes
exotic to us Northerners, halting

only in a snug beyond Athlone
to hear a broadcast I had done

19. *A Snail in My Prime*, p. 160.

20. Kate Newmann, "All Sorts of Untils [Rev. *Marconi's Cottage*]," *The Irish Review*, 12 (Spring-Summer, 1992), 173–74.

21. Medbh McGuckian, *Marconi's Cottage* (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1991), p. 33.

How strange in that cramped room
The disembodied voice, the silence

After, as we looked at each other!
Slowly our eyes managed recognition.
'Well done', he said, raising his glass:
father and son at ease, at last.²²

There continues to be a growing specificity to radio allusion in contemporary Irish poetry, including references to local radio personalities, signature tunes, call names, and advertising jingles that are exclusively Irish and need glossing for those English-speaking readers who grew up outside the country or outside the listening range of Radio Éireann or the BBC. Consider the opening stanza of John Ennis's poem "The Years":

Waking to the clatter of hot-plate, kettle
And pan, knives and forks on the table,
The strains of Handel's *Water Music*
Jubilant above the sizzling bacon
The poised voice of the BBC
Announcing the Store Cattle Market
I'd hear him off down in Leth
Rattle the grate of the Auburn range
Free of ashes, top up the Winetown
Fire for my college-cycling breakfast,
Switch the wavelength back to Athlone
Then he'd move out into the darkness,
Be swallowed up by the sheds.²³

Here the "poised voice of the BBC," tied to Handel's *Water Music*, is "jubilant," but the bustling kitchen soon turns to the hard business of keeping the fire lit in the range. It is here that the dial is turned, simply, back to Athlone. Soon, the father in the poem disappears into the Irish rural dark to begin a typical day—far from the BBC and Handel. Both local and Irish memory is fused with broader cultural elements in a single morning's domestic routine.

Issues of Irish identity, allegiance, and both the authority and the subjectivity of radio can be a lethal mix. Thomas McCarthy's "Counting the Dead on The Radio, 1972" uses the persona of a young boy, perhaps without a father, whose parting advice included the warning that writers "played games with being Irish" and that the family should only trust "The News." Significantly, the

22. John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1995) p. 169.

23. John Ennis, "The Years," in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Anthony Bradley (1980; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 374–75.

first section of the poem ends with this family—like others we have seen—tuning into the BBC. McCarthy then clarifies the authority conveyed by the radio’s “voice”—during a rather *noir* tea party consisting of mother, son, and elder brother ominously smeared with blood after playfully killing a rabbit in the garden. When the family tunes in they find

... we can barely comprehend what the radio says—
Something has happened up in the North; it has ruined
the Taoiseach’s weekend. Adolescent soldiers
have gone wild. Peace shouldn’t be fatal like this.
Lemon rind stick to my mother’s throat.
She throws up in an effort to understand. I say
*Mama, a whole regiment has been attacked
by a Catholic priest waving a blood-stained
handkerchief. That’s what the radio says, . . .*²⁴

What they remember the radio saying, particularly in childhood, and the fragility and power of those memories both informs and haunts what contemporary Irish authors write. Radio memory is being pressed into service in today’s writing, like a national personal identification number which calls up strains of national consciousness and reverberates to an identifiyingly Irish wavelength.

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24. Thomas McCarthy, “Counting the Dead on the Radio, 1972,” in Frank Ormsby, ed., *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1992), p. 114.