16. Remembering to forget: Northern Irish fiction after the Troubles

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Remembering to forget: Northern Irish fiction after the Troubles

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To speak of post-Troubles fiction, or even fiction ‘after’ the Troubles, is perhaps as problematic as it is unavoidable. Nearly a decade since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the political accord for which it paved the way remains fraught and uncertain. And if it can be said with at least some certainty that the war is finally over, then it is equally certain that Northern Ireland’s troubles are not. The latest edition of *Lost Lives* includes entries for 195 Troubles-related deaths in the period after the IRA ceasefire announced on 31 August 1994. Moreover, the very real social and political gains that have followed on from the republican and loyalist ceasefires, the Agreement, and IRA decommissioning have to be set against the now regular disputes over Orange marches, continuing paramilitary activity – punishment beatings, feuds, black-marketeering, gangsterism – and the repeated suspensions of Northern Ireland’s devolved Assembly. Responding to the latter events, the novelist Glenn Patterson observes that in the present political climate ‘crisis management has become indistinguishable from actual government’. Patterson’s misgivings, bordering on disillusionment, have been echoed by a number of critics and commentators upon the faltering ‘peace process’, who suggest that whilst the outward signs of conflict have diminished considerably its underlying causes remain largely unaddressed. For Richard Bourke these causes are to be traced to a fundamental problem of legitimacy affecting all modern democracies, whereby the principle of majority decision is conflated with that of popular sovereignty. As Bourke shows, it was on the basis of this confusion that after partition ‘a form of democratic government was established as an instrument for maintaining Northern Ireland as an undemocratic state’. And by retaining the principle of majority decision concerning allegiance (or not) to the Union with Great Britain, the Agreement is ‘reverting to the problematic principle which provoked the original crisis in Northern Ireland’. Similarly, Colin Graham has recently argued that the language and practice of the peace process is structured in such a way as to
preclude engagement with the issues of identity and cultural difference that have always been at the basis of the conflict. Indeed, he goes on to warn of the dangers of ‘constructing a political process which forgets rather than remembers, which detaches itself for survival, which regards identity, in its widest sense, as a danger rather than as the very substance of the matter’, because without an acknowledgment of this sort Northern Irish society will remain mired in ‘patterns of repression and recurrence’.5

These are dangers to which post-ceasefire and post-Agreement novels are often keenly attuned. Deirdre Madden’s One by One in the Darkness (1996) is set shortly before the IRA ceasefire in the summer of 1994, although it is also haunted by the violence of the 1970s and specifically the murder of the Quinn sisters’ father, Charlie, by loyalist paramilitaries. Towards the end of the novel, Cate Quinn muses on what she feels is the imminent possibility of peace and the accompanying necessity for some sort of memorial to the dead:

She imagined a room, a perfectly square room. Three of its walls, unbroken by windows, would be covered by neat rows of names, over three thousand of them; and the fourth wall would be nothing but a window. The whole structure would be built where the horizon was low, the sky huge. It would be a place which afforded dignity to memory, where you could bring your anger, as well as your grief.6

Cate’s imagined memorial combines the functions of remembrance and catharsis, providing a space for the working out of anger, pain and conflict rather than their repression or deferral. It is, however, a telling instance of the often-noted equivocality of post-ceasefire fiction7 that Sally Quinn’s response to her sister’s imaginative optimism is to ask what makes her think the Troubles are going to end. ‘I’ll believe it’s going to end,’ Sally says, ‘when it ends.’8 Caution against false hope modulates into a rather more caustic form of cynicism in another post-ceasefire novel, Robert McLiam Wilson’s Eureka Street (1996), where Jake Jackson’s sullen meditations serve to undercut naïve post-ceasefire euphoria with the cold facts of low-intensity violence: ‘A fortnight in and only five people had been shot murkily dead and thirty-eight people beaten half to death with baseball bats.’9 Indeed, many of the characters in the novel view the IRA ceasefire chiefly in terms of its economic potential and set about opportunistically cashing in on Belfast’s peace dividend. In this at least, Wilson’s novel is prescient regarding subsequent developments, although Eureka Street also goes much further than One by One in the Darkness in looking forward exuberantly to the post-Troubles future. On the final page of the novel Wilson
writes: ‘It’s a big world and there’s room for all kinds of endings and any number of commencements.’\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, on the basis of this apparent article of faith it may be possible to hazard a broad distinction between the respective orientations of post-ceasefire and post-Agreement fictional trends. For if post-ceasefire novels such as \textit{One by One in the Darkness} and \textit{Eureka Street} can be characterised as \textit{proleptic}, anticipating Northern Ireland’s possible futures with varying degrees of optimism and enthusiasm, then many post-Agreement novels are better described as \textit{retrospective} because of their tendency towards recreating a particular moment in the past in an effort to illuminate the North’s contemporary predicament.

While it should be regarded as neither hard nor fast, this distinction can be illustrated by contrasting Wilson’s expectancy of multiple new beginnings with the more sombre note struck in the final line of Glenn Patterson’s \textit{The International} (1999): ‘We’re powerful people for remembering here, I hope that’s one thing we don’t forget.’\textsuperscript{11} Patterson’s novel is set in Belfast’s International Hotel one Saturday in January 1967, and is narrated retrospectively by Danny Hamilton, an International barman working that day. By locating the events of the novel so specifically in space and time Patterson deliberately invokes a particular historical moment – the inaugural meeting of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which took place the following day in the hotel – only to leave it as an absence in the text. In doing so he allows the larger political and historical ramifications of his context to inform, but not obscure, the central concerns of the narrative, which are bound up with the ostensibly humdrum experiences of working, drinking and falling in love in Belfast in the late 1960s. Consequently, \textit{The International} is much concerned with the themes of memory and forgetting, and Danny’s recollections of pre-Troubles Belfast self-consciously register the distortions and uncertainties that are inherent in the act of remembering:

I wish I could describe for you Belfast as it was then, before it was brought shaking, quaking and laying about it with batons and stones on to the world’s small screens, but I’m afraid I was not in the habit of noticing it much myself. What reason was there to, after all?\textsuperscript{12}

But if Patterson, in spite of the difficulties involved, is concerned to excavate and recover the forgotten or neglected history of the city before its was effectively consumed by its Troubles, then the novel also undertakes a deliberate act of remembrance through its focus upon the absent presence of Peter Ward, another International barman who was murdered by the UVF in June 1966. Indeed, it is Peter Ward’s memory,
rather than that of some spurious age of innocence in the city, that most importantly informs the novel’s tone and procedures, its deft interweaving of fact and fiction. As the novel unfolds it becomes clear that Danny is Peter Ward’s replacement, and his view of events from behind the bar is constantly but unobtrusively inflected by his predecessor’s palpable absence. In the concluding pages of the novel, Danny’s thoughts return to Peter Ward via the announcement on 13 October 1994 of a loyalist ceasefire. The statement of the Combined Loyalist Military Command is read to the press by Gusty Spence, one of three UVF men given life sentences for the murder of Peter Ward. Through the figures of Peter Ward and Gusty Spence – victim and killer respectively – Patterson spans the twenty-five years and more of the Troubles, connecting the events that were initially to foster violence with those that would ostensibly bring it to an end. However, the narrative thus constructed is not one of seamless continuity but of fracture and disjunction, and it is to the lapses and absences in the text of Northern Ireland’s history that Patterson seeks to draw attention:

Peter Ward was a good barman. He was earning eight pounds eight shillings at the time of his death, twenty-five shillings above the union rate.

I can’t tell you much else about him, except that those who knew him thought the world of him. He is, I realise, an absence in this story. I wish it were not so, but guns do that, create holes which no amount of words can fill.13

The injunction to remember with which The International concludes is then also an injunction not to forget, and in this sense Patterson’s novel strives to fulfil what Paul Ricoeur calls ‘the duty to remember’, a duty ‘to keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors. . . . To memorise the victims of history – the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten – should be a task for all of us at the end of this century.’14 Interestingly, though, Ricoeur speculates that there may also be a duty to forget, connecting this positive function of forgetting with the concept of amnesty and concluding that ‘there can be an institution of amnesty, which does not mean amnesia’.15 These speculations upon the non-symmetrical but abiding relationship between memory and forgetting are developed further by Slavoj Žižek in the course of his response to the 9/11 attacks in New York. The ‘true choice apropos of historical traumas is not the one between remembering or forgetting them’, argues Žižek, as those events we are unable or unwilling to remember haunt us all the more forcefully: ‘We should therefore accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember
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it properly. In the aftermath of historical trauma, then, ‘forgetting’ is only an option if precisely those events and circumstances from the past that the society in question would rather repress or ignore are made available for conscious reflection. This dilemma speaks directly to Northern Ireland’s contemporary situation and, as I have already suggested, the issues of memory, remembrance, and forgetting upon which it turns are central to many novels of the post-Agreement period. In this regard, it is worth noting that three recent novels by established writers are each set at a significant historical remove from the North’s current interregnum. Bernard McLaverty’s *The Anatomy School* (2001) is a semi-autobiographical novel of Northern Catholic adolescence and sexual awakening against the backdrop of late 1960s Belfast; Eoin McNamee’s *The Blue Tango* (2001) reconstructs the circumstances surrounding the murder of Patricia Curran at Whiteabbey on 13 November 1952; and David Park’s *The Big Snow* (2002) unfolds its loosely interwoven stories during the unprecedented snowfalls of 1963. All three novels recreate moments out of time from the decades prior to the Troubles but also each refer obliquely to a contemporary situation in which the ‘past-ness’ of the past is yet to be established. For example, MacLaverty’s *The Anatomy School* employs the recurrent image of a man rowing a boat on the river of history, gesturing towards the disaster to come but also allegorising the position of the contemporary Northern novelist in retrospective mode: ‘We are all like a man rowing a boat. We have our backs to the way we’re going. We can’t look ahead, can’t see the future. All we can see is the past behind us.’ Park’s *The Big Snow* and McNamee’s *The Blue Tango* both draw self-consciously upon the conventions of crime fiction, tracing corruption and murder to the heart of the Unionist establishment, and so might each be read as veiled expressions of contemporary distrust concerning Northern Ireland’s governance and political processes. But whereas Park’s characters find their muffled, snow-transformed surroundings both sinister and enchanting, ‘a temporary release from the predictable’, McNamee’s fictional world is unrelentingly noir, its grim investigative rigour and gothic air of elaborate contrivance combining to give a sense of ‘the voices of the past coming through, a subtle, evasive whispering.’

This unsettling awareness of the past’s insistence upon the present is also powerfully apparent in two further novels which deserve more detailed discussion, Eoin McNamee’s *The Ultras* (2004) and Glenn Patterson’s *That Which Was* (2004). Stylistically, Patterson and McNamee could hardly be more different writers. Patterson writes in unshowy, naturalistic and deceptively simple prose that is nonetheless finely attuned to the subtleties of social relationships and historical
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connections, whereas McNamee’s metafictional narratives acquire ‘textual density’ through an ironic tendency towards stylistic excess that not only destabilises its own claims to authority but also gestures to what lies beyond or between the words on the page. Despite these prominent differences, however, That Which Was and The Ultras are texts that each deal centrally with troubled memories – memories of the Troubles that give rise to troubles with memory at both an individual and a collective level. Set in the early twenty-first century, both novels focus upon the processes of reconstruction and recall in order to emphasise the uncertainties and confusions attendant upon any imperative to ‘remember properly’, often highlighting the seemingly irresistible impulse to mythologise what has happened. Both texts also draw self-consciously upon the conventions of the thriller, the dominant form in Troubles fiction, and their detective protagonists can be thought of as inverted mirror images of each other. In That Which Was Ken Avery, a Presbyterian minister, investigates the case of Larry, who believes he is responsible for the murder of three people in a city centre bar in 1976 and claims that his memories of the event have been surgically wiped by elements in the security forces. Avery’s role as amateur sleuth is complicated by his other duties as minister, husband and father, and the events of the novel take place against a backdrop of violent loyalist feuds, the ongoing Bloody Sunday tribunal and prisoner releases that are themselves catalysts for uncomfortable returns of repressed memory and guilt. As one character observes: ‘There are a lot of damaged people walking about this city.’

The Ultras centres upon the figure of Captain Robert Nairac, the Special Forces operative who disappeared near the border in 1977 and whose body has never been recovered. This corporeal void is the narrative ellipsis around which the novel is constructed and which fixes Blair Agnew, a disgraced ex-RUC officer navigating a ‘world of whispered conspiracies, webs of deceit’ in an effort to come to terms with his own part in events he is struggling to understand. Agnew’s ‘unhealthy obsession with the past’ leads him to believe that the seemingly peripheral figure of Nairac, who appears to move at the edge of consciousness itself, has in fact been central both to the British ‘dirty war’ against the PIRA in the mid-1970s, and to the clandestine rivalries and antagonisms between the different intelligence agencies themselves.

As Mark Urban notes, the growing professionalism of the PIRA in the early to mid-1970s provoked a shift of British military strategy towards intelligence-gathering activities and low-intensity operations, and gave rise to several ‘undercover’ units whose operations were ‘hidden beneath an extraordinary web of cover names and secrecy’. This is the febrile world of subterfuge and infiltration that McNamee’s
fictionalisation of real events seeks to explore, and *The Ultras* takes the Four Square laundry and Gemini massage parlour operations as examples of a new, austerely modern logic of warfare: ‘War as subtext.’ But if, on the one hand, the novel elaborates a fairly familiar, though complex, narrative of collusion, whereby Nairac works alongside loyalist paramilitaries and is implicated in the Miami Showband murders of 1975, it is also concerned, on the other, to show Nairac operating ‘in the spaces between organizations’, thereby leading the reader into an ultimately ungraspable labyrinth of conspiracies and collusions, factions and double-deceits, that cumulatively intimates ‘the knowledge of clandestine governance, the dark polity’ lurking behind the façade of democratic deliberation. In this regard, *The Ultras* can be read as an example of what Fredric Jameson calls a ‘conspiratorial text’, because its self-conscious investment in ‘conspiracy culture’ can be understood as ‘an attempt to make sense, albeit in a distorted fashion, of the deeper conflicts which reside not in the psyche but in society.’ Importantly, however, it is not just military and government agencies that are shown to be untrustworthy in *The Ultras*, but also language itself, for the novel’s metafictional commentary and borrowings from literary noir produce an uncomfortable sense that the linguistic resources currently available are ultimately inadequate to the events and situations they are called upon to describe: ‘Agnew knew that words alone were no good. You had to go outside the words. The meanings were unspoken, had not been formed into words.’ In a recurrent device, the meanings of specific words are glossed precisely and compulsively, as if in an attempt to ward off the white noise of disinformation and propaganda that threatens to engulf the novel, and both Agnew and his anorexic daughter Lorna are aware that they are each ‘in pursuit of something coded, allusive’. To this end, Agnew compulsively accumulates documents, files, statements and interviews concerning Nairac’s activities, a ‘lonely blizzard of paper’ that becomes his one reason for existing. However, as Eamonn Hughes has perceptively observed: ‘Agnew is not so much looking for the solution to the mystery surrounding Nairac and his activities, as amassing an archive which is less concerned with fact than with tracking the generation of narrative possibilities.’ Thus, whilst Agnew’s obsessive researches illustrate Pierre Nora’s observation that ‘[m]odern memory is, above all, archival’, his labour of remembering is directed not at uncovering a final and authoritative version of what happened but towards an understanding of how conflicting recollections of the same events come to be produced, and how history and myth become entangled in the narrative constructions of memory.
Memories are not objects or artefacts that can be filed away or conveniently accessed at will, nor are they literal records of experiences. Rather, as the psychologist Martin Conway points out, memories ‘are interpretations of experiences and they preserve what is relevant to the individual at the time of particular experiences and, later, when they are remembered’. Moreover, the disjunction that often pertains between these two distinct time frames – the past of remembered experience and the present moment of recollection – means that memories can be wrong. This problem is engaged by Patterson’s That Which Was, which concerns the partial recovery by Larry, some thirty-four years later, of memories that have apparently been deliberately suppressed from his consciousness by persons unknown, and the difficulties faced by Ken Avery in determining their truth or falsity. In this regard, the novel’s faintly farcical central conceit gestures allegorically to the dangers of political amnesia in post-Agreement Northern Ireland – ‘memories come back to haunt you, even when someone has tried to erase them’, warns Larry. But Patterson’s characters are also a good deal more sceptical than McNamee’s of the value or legitimacy of paranoia in the contemporary period, even as they recognise the enduring currency of conspiracy theories for popular understandings of the Troubles: ‘Someone had once quipped to Avery that Northern Ireland divided into two camps, those who believed conspiracy theories and those who thought they were being put around to make us all paranoid.’ The humorous deflation involved here accords with Avery’s matter-of-fact conviction regarding moral certainties – his favourite biblical quotation is from Romans 14.5: ‘Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind’ – but the obvious difficulties Larry has in following this plain injunction lead Avery to take his fears seriously and so begin to suspect some kind of monstrous cover-up involving everyone from the RUC to MI5. In a sense, then, That Which Was is a secular parable on belief. Avery’s willingness to speak out on Larry’s behalf places considerable strain upon his marriage and his position amongst his congregation, but is driven by his desire to dispel the shadows in which ‘they’ operate. So when Larry is ultimately unmasked as a deluded fantasist Avery’s confidence in his powers of judgement is understandably shaken, but the necessity and justness of his actions are also affirmed:

Avery told the police how he discovered the truth of his car being stolen. . . . He had been played for a fool frankly.

I thought that was part of your job description, one of the policemen said. To give people the benefit of the doubt. No.
In this way, Patterson intimates some of the delicate negotiations of belief and doubt that frame any attempt to relate the present to the past in Northern Ireland, and Larry’s seeming deceit does not invalidate Avery’s conviction that ‘[t]here were difficult truths about the past to be faced’. Indeed, just when it appears to have been established that mental illness rather than official conspiracy lies at the heart of the mystery Avery has been investigating, the novel concludes with an ambiguous textual absence or omission – ‘Nothing’ – that confounds any neat sense of resolution and threatens to put the wheels of suspicion and speculation into motion once more.

What is perhaps most significant about That Which Was, however, is the central importance that the novel accords to the memory of the dead, the victims of the Troubles, and to the memories of the dead that the living try to remember them by. In a memorable passage Avery dreams that, in an effort to balance the release of paramilitary prisoners, ‘the Troubles’ dead were being allowed home for the weekend’ on temporary release from their respective afterlives: ‘The dead were materializing as though from contact with the bus station air. They looked like they had been on a particularly hectic holiday, weary, but full of stories.’ This dream vision of the dead repopulating the city is both comforting and disturbing, suggesting the necessity for a collective work of mourning in a society still gripped by post-Troubles melancholia. What it also intimates is the sense of a collective responsibility to narrate, listen and respond to the stories of the dead. Indeed, Patterson’s fictional impulse towards remembrance echoes Richard Kearney’s affirmation that a key function of narrative memory is empathy: ‘Stories bring the horror home to us. They singularise suffering against the anonymity of evil.’

Even Larry’s false memory of the Ellis’s Bar killings and his erroneous assumption of guilt are apparently triggered by a pathological form of empathy for the dead man and women that is exacerbated by his actual intimacy with them in the moments before their deaths. By singularising suffering, That Which Was also inevitably shows remembering and forgetting to be unusually painful and difficult experiences. When Avery visits the brother of one of Larry’s supposed victims he inadvertently blunders upon the distressing effects of memory’s erosion over time: ‘Doesn’t matter how they died or how you try to keep their memory alive. They sort of get boiled down. They lose their – well, like I say – their substance.’ This secondary form of loss on the part of relatives and loved ones may be inevitable, but it is against the similarly disastrous erosion or erasure of memory in the public sphere that Patterson’s fictional imagination is engaged. In this respect, however, Patterson’s work can be seen as merely part of a larger trend within
post-Agreement Northern fiction, what I have here called its ‘retrospective’
tendency, wherein there is an explicit or implicit preoccupation with
the ways in which the unresolved events of the past threaten to disrupt
or jeopardise those of the present. As Sigmund Freud recognised, the
opposite of remembering is not forgetting but ‘repeating’, the patho-
logical re-enactment of a repressed trauma that cannot be remembered
and so acknowledged.46 Re-membering – putting together the pieces of
a fractured psychological or historical puzzle – is the first step to work-
ing through, and eventually forgetting, the long-term effects of trauma,
whether at an individual or a collective level. If nothing else, the
prominence of the issues of memory, remembrance and forgetting in
recent Northern Irish fictions suggests a recognition of the difficulty
and importance of such an undertaking in all its cultural, social and
political implications.

Notes
1  David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David
McVeA, Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women And Children Who
Died As A Result Of The Northern Ireland troubles (Edinburgh:
3  Richard Bourke, Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas (London: Pimlico,
4  Ibid., p. 3.
5  Colin Graham, “Let’s Get Killed”: Culture and Peace in Northern
Ireland’, Wanda Balzano, Anne Mulhall and Moynagh Sullivan (eds), Irish
6  Deirdre Madden, One by One in the Darkness (London; Boston: Faber
and Faber, 1996), p. 149.
7  Edna Longley, for example, notes the alternation of apocalyptic and
utopian themes in much post-ceasefire writing, describing it in terms of
‘a kind of double indemnity’ whereby writers ‘insure themselves against
false prophecy’. Edna Longley, Poetry and Posterity (Newcastle-upon-Tyne:
8  Madden, One by One in the Darkness, pp. 149–50.
9  Robert McLiam Wilson, Eureka Street (London: Secker & Warburg,
10  Ibid., p. 396.
12  Ibid., p. 61.
13  Ibid., p. 318.
14  Paul Ricoeur, ‘Memory and Forgetting’, in Richard Kearney and Mark
Dooley (eds), Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy
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15 Ibid., p. 11.
22 McNamee, The Ultras, p. 10.
23 Ibid., p. 17.
25 McNamee, The Ultras, p. 149.
26 Ibid., p. 223.
27 Ibid., p. 216.
29 Peter Knight, Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 18.
31 McNamee, The Ultras, p. 73.
32 Ibid., p. 20.
33 Ibid., p. 74.
37 Patterson, That Which Was, p. 49.
38 Ibid., p. 112.
39 Ibid., p. 5.
40 Ibid., p. 265.
41 Ibid., p. 239.
42 Ibid., p. 275.
43 Ibid., p. 107.
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45 Patterson, *That Which Was*, p. 137.