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Rethinking the Historiography of
Civil Rights in Derry: Memory as Resistance
in Northern Ireland 1922-1969

by Margo Shea
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I'd to use my time on this multidisciplinary panel on writing and resistance to do something I rarely do – which is to step back for a moment and look at my own writing process and more importantly, about the debates and issues that surround, inform and complicate that process. So this morning, I set out to do several things. First, I want to talk about memory – specifically how scholars of history and social and cultural memory have turned around the stale debates about popular memory and the construction of Irish identities and how this matters for studies of cultural and social memory in Northern Ireland.

Next , I look at how the Troubles complicate historical interpretations and memory work. Finally, I make the claim that Catholic nationalist memory in Derry offers new insights into the genesis of the Troubles.

Barry McMonagle was twenty-four years old, an aspiring amateur photographer, when the civil rights movement got under way in Derry in the late 1960s. Looking back on his experiences documenting the movement and the outbreak of the Troubles, he said, “What a heady sense of change there was then in the trembling Derry air, what a tumult of ideas and bright-seeming glimpses of a different future beckoning. What was said then was

‘Everything’s changed. Nothing will ever be the same again.’”¹ To explain this sense of overwhelming rupture, McMonagle recounted Derry Catholics’ sense that after decades of stalemate, something perceptible had finally shifted in their city’s political culture. A spaced opened; from it poured pent up frustrations at city authorities whose policies had long marginalized the political voices of the city’s Catholic and nationalist residents. “There’s a story, probably made up but possibly true, of a ten-year-old girl hurling a stone down Rossville Street at the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and shouting ‘I’ve waited 50 years for this!’ Everybody will have known what she meant.”²

At first glance, this story is a good example of the problems with Irish memory. It’s probably made up but possibly true. And you’ve got a very young girl with a very old memory. Historians rightfully hold suspicions about memory, which elides and masks as much about the past as it reveals. Memory is dynamic, fluid, always changing. It is promiscuous, subjective and extremely impressionable. Far from being unconcerned with the truth, memory digs in deep, seeking a different truth. No wonder historians are flummoxed by it. A constantly moving target, with no concern at all for evidentiary veracity. This is all no doubt very familiar ground to you, as are the discussions of history and memory in Ireland and Northern Ireland that situate them oppositionally as opposed to dialogically. For so long, there was an insistence that history -- with its tests for veracity, its impartiality, its complexity – must engage in pitched battle with the “feel-good happy-clappy therapeutic refuge” of popular memory.

¹ Barney McMonagle, “Introduction,” *No Go: A Photographic Record of Free Derry*, ed. Adrian Kerr, (Derry: Guildhall Press, 1997), 1.

² McMonagle, “Introduction.”

For such a long time in Irish historical writing, memory was associated with a reified nationalism and credited with shaping a teleological reading of the Irish past that led directly from homogenous, heroic Celtic mists directly to Irish independence and a deeply conservative state influenced heavily by Catholicism. The first generation of trained academics saw revisionism as the sword with which to fight the “mental war of liberation from the servitude of myth.”³ Revisionist perspectives on Irish historical writing still permeate much thinking about memory. Consider for example, Mark McCarthy’s 2005 description of historical interpretation before revisionism. “Myth and myth-making were mixed in equivalent sizes in nationalist history...[which] lacked a proper analysis and was laden with the notion of colonial blame...subordinating historical fact to the nation’s cause.”⁴

As an aside, I would just say that finger-pointing claims of the essentializing dangers of “popular” history and memory can obscure some important issues. So much emphasis on teleologies overshadows salient genealogies. It matters that part of the colonial project included erasures of Irish language, histories and cultural productions and that these shrunk the scale and scope of understanding of the island’s history. Depopulation in the 19th century through famine and emigration meant the further loss of cultural inheritances. Meanwhile, official histories celebrated the union of Ireland and Britain, masked the subordinate role of Ireland and de-emphasized perspectives on the past that did not highlight the benefits of both Anglicization and modernization.

³ Nancy Curtin, “Varieties of Irishness: Historical Revisionism, Irish Style,” *Journal of British Studies*, 35/2 (1996), 195.

⁴ Mark McCarthy, “Historico-Geographical Explorations of Ireland’s Heritages: Towards a Critical Understanding of the Nature of Memory and Identity,” in *Ireland’s Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity*, ed. Mark McCarthy (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 5.

As Guy Beiner argues (and Joep Leersson) beautifully, memory, fragments embedded in songs, stories, folklore and the Irish language itself kept highly localized narratives of ‘hidden Ireland’ alive throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The derisive claims of “invention” overlook the project of repair so central to the nationalist histories of the early twentieth century.

Recently, we’ve worked our way out of this conceptual prison surrounding “the problem of Irish memory.” We transcend circular debates about the utility and nature of history vs. memory by placing remembrance within an historical context. Some really sound historical scholarship, complete with concrete discussions of actors, agency, participation and the dialectics between cultural production and reception by a broad range of citizens has gone a long way in making memory a part of history instead of its delusional twin, in making the production of memory a legitimate and even important area for historical study.

At the same, it’s been proven exceedingly useful to study the memorial imaginary. By excavating the rich quarries of remembrance work, it has become possible also to unearth valuable beliefs, assumptions and desires held by people who otherwise might leave only vague historical footprints of their cultural and intellectual experiences. Because memory is fundamentally a creative act and memories are always changing to respond to and to suit current exigencies, it has been shown that through memory, we might be able to understand more clearly how a group people have understood and shaped who they saw themselves to be, what was important to them, what ideas and influences, what lessons from the past bolstered their identities in the present and shaped their vision for the

future. We can also learn much by paying close attention to what people choose to forget or to silence.

NOW --- here are three major complications in the understanding of memory in Northern Ireland --- one is the way the Troubles haunts other memories. It is the break, the rupture, the moment around which all other events and histories are traditionally placed by historians – There is before civil rights and there is after. And what happened before really pales in comparison to what happened after. The second is the framing of Northern nationalists in traditional historiographies of Northern Ireland. The general assertion is that Northern Catholics' sense of Irish nationalism was on life support by the late 1950s. Historians argue that the IRA Border Campaign of 1957-1962 failed largely from lack of support; they further suggest that the idea of a united Ireland simply failed to incite Northern Catholics or to ignite their imaginations. The beginning of the Troubles at the end of 1968, as a result, is often described in cataclysmic, incendiary terms. Violence 'erupted,' the result of a 'highly explosive mix' of circumstances.⁵ Battle lines led to "insurrection."⁶ Historian Roy Foster refers simply to the late 1960s as the time "the whirlwind struck."⁷ On the flipside, Paul Bew suggests that the motivations for the '68 generation were "engulfed in cobwebs." In *Making Sense of the Troubles*, McKittrick and McVea refer to post-partition Northern Ireland as an utterly "static society."

But there is also the issue of the effect of the Troubles on historians, particularly when it came to nationalism. After '69, historians became warier than ever of attributing

⁵ Mari Fitzduff and Liam O'Hagan, "The Northern Ireland Troubles: INCORE background paper," published at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/incorepaper.htm#green>, accessed July 2, 2007.

⁶ Adrian Kerr, ed. *Perceptions: Cultures in Conflict*, (Derry, Guildhall Press, 1996).

⁷ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, (New York: Penguin, 1988), 582.

nationalist intentions to their Northern Catholic historical subjects. As Nancy Curtin explains, the belief that nationalist mythology fed radical militant republicanism in Northern Ireland made historians reassess their participation in public discourse about the past. Feeling queasy about their possible collusion with militant republicanism, historians wondered if nationalist /republican histories “affirm(ed) the men of violence and polarize(d) the two communities in the north beyond reconciliation?”⁸ Under these circumstances, identifying and highlighting the importance of widespread nationalist sentiments in the North prior to the Troubles looked dangerously like aiding and abetting terrorists.

Finally there is a deep and important preoccupation with the issue of divided and divisive memory in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Memory work has been framed problematically, as articulating parallel, oppositional narratives about the past for Catholics and Protestants, calcifying difference and providing safe cocoons for separateness, nurturing polarities instead of facilitating convergences. Conceived as such, it is a barrier to a post-conflict public culture that makes room for difference. Gerry Slater of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland recently echoed a widespread misconception that contemporary historical consciousness is somehow exceptional when he stated, “the present-day reality is that the two communities have projected versions of history that strengthen community identity at the expense of reinforcing stereotypes and myths of ‘the other side.’”⁹ Jonathan McMaster (2008), of the Irish School of Ecumenics, critiqued the role of memory when he queried:

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Gerry Slater, “Archives and Division: The Northern Ireland Experience” Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies (LUCAS) 7th Annual General Meeting on Wednesday, 16 February, 2005 at 5.30 p.m.

Must the remembering forever divide us? Must we live forever with the sectarianisation of memory, the exclusivity of commemoration? Or can we find ways of inclusive remembering, of entering into each other's chosen traumas, of walking through history together? ... Can we move beyond our victor/victim categories, our zero-sum politics....into a different future, a shared future based on compassion, justice, equality, diversity, interdependence and peace?

The implication -- of course -- is that different versions of the past A. are only projections, B. are relatively recent projections at that AND C. they stand in the way of equality, compassion, shared understanding – a shared public culture. Thus, the big challenge for new traditions of remembrance involves establishing shared interpretations of the past that can crowd out and overshadow the contradictory ones. But -- as desirable as inclusive remembering seems, substituting a painful and controversial divided histories for a defanged version *will not build* a peaceful post-conflict society. That's why I argue that before a shared historical consciousness can emerge in Northern Ireland, citizens must first share their historical consciousness.

When I began this project many years I go, I really just wanted to refute the Gerry Slaters -- I wanted to destabilize the memory industry that had cropped up at the end of the Troubles by showing that every generation had valued and precious memories that shaped their identities and brought themselves into being as a community.

I was looking for cultural identity, not Irish nationalism. But I found a deeply embedded Irish cultural and national identity in Catholic Derry that was strong and flourishing at the turn of the 20th century, strong and flourishing at the creation of the Northern State, strong and flourishing in the Hungry Thirties, strong and flourishing in the supposedly static and contented post war years. It wasn't obvious. But historians and everyone else has tended to really minimize the significance of the Special Powers acts to

squelch anything explicitly Irish, explicitly nationalist really between the 30s and the 70s, even into the 80s.

This gets at methodology. Expressions of memory were embedded in speeches, newspaper accounts, travel writings, oral accounts of familiar ghost stories and children's rhymes, a plethora of commemorative events, letters to the editor, souvenir booklets, obituaries, church sermons, street festivals, protests, religious celebrations, documentary films, the content and rhetoric around the annual feis, debates over monuments, oral histories, personal accounts and transcripts of radio programs. Often fleeting, fluid, performative and embodied, these activities of memory did not inform on their own so much as they stand together, each a small dot in a constellation of Catholic Derry's cultural and political experience.

In Derry, Catholics utilized collective remembrance before and after the establishment of the border to nourish a shared sense of Irish national and cultural identity. Remembrance work changed over time, as Derry's Catholics re-crafted their ways of understanding themselves in response to social change -- both within their community and as a response to Unionist hegemony. While often depicted by both journalists and scholars as isolated, reactive, self-deprecating and politically myopic, the Catholic community in Derry had long created outlets for articulating its identity by invoking memory.¹⁰ And that led me to an argument that civil rights and the early Troubles weren't the rupture they initially appear to be. That actually the civil rights movement and the

¹⁰ For more on traditional depictions of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, see the following sources: Marianne Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster*. See, especially, Chapter 11, "Catholics in Northern Ireland 1920-2000", Sabine Wichert, "Nationalism in the Northern Ireland Conflict," *History of European Ideas*, 16/1-3 (1993), 110-111, Desmond Murphy, *Derry, Donegal and Modern Ulster* Derry, Aileach Press, 1981, Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 227.

passions it aroused can be seen as an extension of Catholic community life in the city, instead of a break from it.

So I just chose three sources to share with you --- from 1929-1939 – the deep center of the black hole of “*nothing’s happening*” in nationalist Northern Ireland.

1. Take the Golden Jubilee of St. Columb’s College in 1929.

In the sermon delivered at a special mass to bless the 50th anniversary of Derry’s only secondary school for Catholics, Bishop O’Kane remembered the original mission of the school, contextualizing its opening by offering a bleak description of the options available to young Catholics from the northwest on the eve of its founding in 1879:

It was undertaken at a time when our Catholic youth...had no place to turn when their primary education was completed, except the Protestant High School or the poor substitute for a school conducted by a single teacher in a common farmhouse...bearing the obvious mark of inferiority, recalling the hedge school from which condition it had only just emerged.¹¹

At the celebration and concert in the Guildhall following the mass, there was an awkward moment, the toast to nation. When it came time to raise their glasses to their country, toastmaster and alum District Justice L.J. Walsh examined all of the options available to him. First he proposed, rhetorically, that there was no nation to drink to, that the suggestion was a joke because “There is no Ireland. The Ireland that we knew was rent in twain.”¹² In that case, to which Ireland were they supposed to toast? Was it to “the portion in which the children of the ancient Irish race and Irish nation are trampled under

¹¹ “High Mass in St. Eugene’s Cathedral,” *Derry Journal*, November 6, 1929.

¹² “St. Columb’s College Jubilee Celebrations,” *Derry Journal*, November 6, 1929.

by ...an Ascendancy?” Or was it the other part, “which at times seems so callously indifferent to the fate of its Lost Province?”¹³

Walsh urged his audience to stay the course, to remain committed to the idea of a united Ireland:

What God has joined let no man put asunder. It will take more than an Act of Parliament to sever the Irish nation, and what Cromwell failed to do, Craigavon will not accomplish. We will yet win through to freedom and political unity! I give you the toast of “Our Country, Our Ireland!”¹⁴

St. Columb’s Jubilee reflected both the hopes and worries of Derry’s educated Catholics through memory-laden reflections. They had achieved much through the establishment of the secondary school and were proud of the caliber of students the college had produced. At the same time, the Depression, coupled with partition and all that had come with it, made the road ahead appear bumpy and foggy. There were funding concerns, discrimination in scholarships and employment for alumnae and the overarching worry that the “bad old days” of education designed to elevate the Empire at the expense of the Irish story were back again. The deeply local struggles and successes, at the same time, seem irrevocably tied to larger questions of Catholic and Irish identity --- an identity that seemed very much afloat.

Or consider this letter, written in 1939 by Father John McShane to the provincial coordinator for Boy Scouts to explain why Catholic boys weren’t flocking to the Boy Scouts, a program originating in England and modeled on a Protestant ethos, helps illuminate the Catholic position. In it, McShane was clear that the historical perspectives of Northern Ireland’s “average Paddy Murphy” might not in fact be factual; however, he was adamant

¹³ “St. Columb’s College Jubilee.”

¹⁴ “St. Columb’s College Jubilee.”

that this did little to diminish their explanatory resonance. Among his eponymous “Paddy’s” closely held beliefs were the following:

- Paddy takes no pride in the British Empire. He feels no thrill when he reads the exploits of men, even of his race, who have helped to build up that empire...
- As regards loyalty, Paddy’s loyalty is to Ireland. He feels he owes the King of England the same allegiance the Belgians owed to the Kaiser during the German occupation.
- Paddy’s reading of Irish History has convinced him that for 700 years England has been trying to make good an unjust title to rule Ireland. That claim has never been admitted. In every generation, down to our day, it has been resisted even to death. As long as this act of aggression on the part of England continues, so long will it continue to be resisted, no matter what the cost.
- To put the whole thing in a nutshell, Paddy is convinced that England has no right to claim ownership of a single sod of Irish earth or a single blade of Irish grass. For over 700 years she acted as an aggressor and until she desists from her aggression there can be no real peace between these two countries. Such being the viewpoint of Paddy Murphy down the ages, do you think it is likely that he will change it today?.....We of the older race for centuries have had to sleep in our armour...¹⁵
(seriously, a Hugh O’Neill reference)

In Derry in particular, where Catholics had outnumbered Protestants since 1850, the city’s gerrymandered political system, which secured political voice and the benefits it

¹⁵ Paul Bew, et al., *Passion and prejudice: Nationalist/unionist conflict in Ulster in the 1930’s and the origins of the Irish Association* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University, 1993), 73-75.

provided for Protestants at the expense of their Catholic neighbors, this kind of recalcitrant sense of injustice was real. Memory work recycled old hurts and historic wrongs through the long years when residential segregation and poor housing conditions kept the gerrymander on artificial respiration. The issue of the gerrymander and the memories of the gerrymander for me are the MOST overlooked part of Derry's nationalist history. Fights over the gerrymander from nationalists began in 1896 and they didn't ever stop until the Londonderry Corporation was suspended in 1969.

In 1939, a special investigation of the third major redrawing of voting wards in Derry saw the combination of memory work and public messaging. In preparation for the investigation, members of the Derry Catholic Registration Association wanted to highlight the struggle for Catholic voters to obtain a voice, particularly in local politics.....

They decided to make a *Protest Covenant*, similar to the Ulster Covenant. Their scroll on revision reports documented the voting numbers in every major local and parliamentary election between 1918 and 1939 and compared the voter numbers to the Catholic majority numbers – which fluctuated between 10% and 20% despite mounting population increases.

The minutes of the Derry Catholic Registration Association read as follows --- “Mr Frank McAuley recalled the propaganda value of the Ulster Covenant. The signing of that covenant was surrounded by all the solemnity it was possible to display. St. Columb's Hall should be accrued for some Sunday for the purpose of enabling voters to call in and sign the Protest. If a long queue extended down Shipquay Street, it would be so much more publicity. The matter was simple one.”

Just these few sources, three out of hundreds, hint that the events of the mid to late 1960s had a long and diverse historic lineage. Thus, the study of memory work calls into question the standard historical interpretation of the genesis of the movement -- the influence of mass media and exposure to global fights for human rights, civil rights and democracy, the passionate and contagious exhortations of the '68 generation, the emergence of the welfare state and increased educational opportunities that bolstered Northern Irish Catholics' economic expectations in postwar society and the failure of the Catholic church to exert the authority it had long held over the people. Likewise, it illuminates the weaknesses in an interpretation that the mass civil rights protests were the results of spontaneous combustion.

I make the argument that the civil rights movement and early mass civil disturbances are not the complete and utter rupture they first appear to be on two grounds. FIRST, they came out of an intense localized historical consciousness of inequality. Ordinary Catholics framed their experiences during the push for civil rights through a long historical lens. Historical consciousness of injustice motivated thousands of local Catholics who ordinarily might have steered clear of anything resembling unlawful behavior to support and eventually to participate in the civil rights movement. But just as important, the movement for civil rights after Duke Street/October 5th was a series of actions and expressions that in fact were quite similar to traditional modes of behavior that had evolved in the catholic nationalist community over decades of living in and out of one another's pockets, and grappling with political disenfranchisement and debilitating poverty. This is an argument I can't go into here, but I do in my larger body of historical scholarship.

So, to understand the civil rights movement and the early riots as continuity as well as rupture, one has to consider the history of housing need, the politics of urban development, and the cultures of interdependence, creativity and community solidarity that housing deprivation had built and sustained. And it really helps explain why and how the housing crisis became a rallying issue in Derry. It was the concrete byproduct of an entire set of social, political and economic relations that had always been tacitly understood but not really articulated or externalized in Northern Irish public life. The issue held both tangible and symbolic meaning and was easy to mobilize around. Civil rights took form in Derry primarily through the Derry Housing Action Committee. As founding member and civil rights icon Eamonn McCann explained -- attacking housing was a way of launching an assault on the political and economic structure as a whole. The fact was that most Catholics in the city did not separate the sectarian divisions that shaped Northern Ireland from day-to-day problems they faced with housing:

The gerrymandered Corporation was the living symbol in Derry of the anti-democratic exclusion of Catholics from power. The stated reason for our activities...was to highlight the housing situation, but they were generally regarded by Catholics as an attack on the whole political set-up; which, of course, they were. There were many in the Bogside who did not approve of our 'extremism' and were nervous of our 'communistic ideas' — but there were none who would defend the Corporation.¹⁶

For many, the battle over housing opened up a space in which old frustrations blossomed into public indignation. But that indignation wasn't new, and the larger questions of identity, self-determination and the fight to claim space physically and metaphorically were just as much about continuity as they were about change.

¹⁶ McCann, *War in an Irish Town*, 84-85.