

Spring 2009

To Die a Noble Death: Blood Sacrifice and the Legacy of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme in Northern Ireland History

Anne L. Reeder

Macalester College, reederan@msu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/history_honors

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reeder, Anne L., "To Die a Noble Death: Blood Sacrifice and the Legacy of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme in Northern Ireland History" (2009). *History Honors Projects*. Paper 6.

http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/history_honors/6

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

**To Die a Noble Death: Blood Sacrifice and the
Legacy of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the
Somme in Northern Ireland History**

**Anne Reeder
History**

**Thesis Advisor: Andrea Robertson Cremer
Committee Members: Casey Jarrin and Peter
Wiesensel**

Spring 2009

Abstract

In 1916, under the pressurized conditions of the Great War, two violent events transpired that altered the state of Anglo-Irish relations: the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. These events were immediately transformed into examples of blood sacrifice for the two fundamentally opposed communities in Northern Ireland: Nationalists and Unionists. In 1969, Northern Ireland became embroiled in a civil war that lasted thirty years. The events of 1916 have been used to legitimize modern instances of violence. This paper argues, through the use of cultural texts, that such legitimization is the result of the creation of mythic histories.

I first became interested in the study of legacy through my observations and experiences in Northern Ireland. It was in this deeply embittered province that I discovered first hand the tangibility of certain violent historical events and began to see the ways in which the memories of these events were deployed to legitimize future acts of resistance and violence. I feel extremely fortunate to have engaged in conversations with individuals who were deeply impacted by the war in Northern Ireland. My motivation for choosing the particularly violent thesis topics of armed rebellion and trench warfare is necessarily multifaceted. However, I believe that the pain, as well as the resilience, of those I encountered in Northern Ireland was one of the many reasons I chose to explore the long-lasting legacies of violence in the province.

My experiences in Northern Ireland taught me that single acts of violence have the capacity to reverberate through multiple generations. In her forward to the retrospective account of the Republican prison struggle entitled, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle, 1976-1981*, Northern Ireland politician Bernadette Devlin McAlinsky invokes the wisdom of a friend and mother of a Republican prisoner to suggest that people in Northern Ireland are “indelibly marked by [the] struggle and our children will carry that mark for three generations.”¹ It became abundantly clear to me that each generation carries its own burdens of the thirty-year civil war (colloquially called the ‘Troubles’) in Northern Ireland. I wanted to study the reasons for this persistence of legacies of violence and began to do so with an eye towards a year about

¹ JB Campell, Laurence McKeown, and Felim O’Hagan, eds. *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block, 1976-1981.*, (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1994), 3.

which everyone in Northern Ireland, be they Catholic or Protestant, seems to view as a turning point in Anglo-Irish history: 1916.

Examining the ways in which the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme are publicly remembered is one way to understand the means through which Anglo-Irish historical narratives are transmitted from generation to generation. While in Northern Ireland, I witnessed the ways in which the events of 1916 were used to legitimize modern acts of both violence and resistance. The images of the sixteen men executed for leading the Easter Rising decorate countless gable walls in Northern Ireland alongside murals celebrating the courage of the ten men who died in the 1981 Republican Hunger Strike. Similarly, commemorations of the Belfast-based Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which served on the opening days of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, must be viewed with an eye toward representations of the modern-day Ulster Volunteer Force, a Protestant paramilitary group formed in the image of the 1916 military organization. All four events have been described as blood sacrifices, around which martyrs have been created.

The creation of martyrs is central to the history of Anglo-Irish relations. In both Republican and Loyalist circles, the commemoration of those killed while promoting a particular political ideology contributes to the process of myth creation, which is responsible for binding the Easter Rising to the 1981 Hunger Strike, as well as the Battle of the Somme to the Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966.² These myths

² The terms Nationalist, Republican, Catholic, Unionist, Loyalist, and Protestant appear throughout this paper and therefore merit definition. Nationalists want to see a united, thirty-two county Ireland. They want British withdrawal from the island and advocate political action to achieve this goal. Republicans also support the unification of the island of Ireland and engage in violence against both the British military and Loyalists to force a British withdrawal from the island. All Republicans are Nationalists, but the reverse is not necessarily true. Republicans and Nationalists are almost exclusively Catholic, although there are Protestants who are Nationalists,

gloss over the particulars of history in an attempt to create a cohesive narrative and mythic arc that is based upon the principles of “justifiable” violence. I believe the process of myth creation is important to study primarily because acknowledging that historical myths *exist* is one way to break the long-standing cycles of violence. I have endeavored to understand this complex process of myth creation through two means. First, I have examined historically-rooted monographs and essays in an effort to grasp the historical currents that have allowed for the creation of myths surrounding the year 1916. Secondly, I have explored four works of literature, each of which engages one of the four historical events examined in this thesis. I chose the literature based primarily upon each work’s active engagement with understanding the past through the lens of the present day. Each work tells a story both *about* the past and *why* that past is significant today.

I examined two novels (*At Swim, Two Boys*, about the Easter Rising and *Resurrection Man*, about the modern-day UVF), one play (*Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, about the Battle of the Somme) and one diary (*The Diary of Bobby Sands*, about the 1981 Hunger Strike.) *The Diary of Bobby Sands* represents an adherence to a mythic history that is heavily invested in the need for sacrifice and martyrdom. I will begin my literary analysis with the diary, demonstrating one way in which people write a traditional mythic narrative about Anglo-Irish history. The authors of the other works challenge the mythic histories surrounding the events, displaying an attempt to interrogate mythic histories. I have chosen to examine four events (rather than

Republicans, or both. Similarly, Unionists want to maintain a union with Britain, leaving Ireland divided between the North and the Republic. They use the political structure to achieve this goal. Loyalists engage in violence against Republicans to assert their belief in a British-Irish union. All Loyalists are Unionists, however the reverse is not necessarily true. Unionists and Loyalists are almost exclusively Protestant, although some Catholics are Unionists, Loyalists, or both.

just one or two) because I believe the ways in which they are remembered are interconnected. Commemoration of the Battle of the Somme is intimately connected to that of the Easter Rising. The same is true of the 1981 Hunger Strike and the 1966 Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Before I begin my exploration of the four events and their corresponding works of literature, I will briefly examine the colonization of Ireland as well as the Great War to better ground my discussion of popular representations of the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme, the 1981 Hunger Strikes, and the 1966 Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

English Colonization of Ireland

Initial English contact in Ireland occurred in 1169.³ While there has been an English presence in Ireland ever since, the active process of colonization did not take place until Elizabethan rule of the United Kingdom. During this period, both English and Scottish Protestants established plantations in the Northeastern section of Ireland. The settlers forcibly removed indigenous peoples from their land, establishing political, social, and economic dominance over the population. Protestant land acquisition was widespread: “By the late 1770s, Irish Catholics – seventy-five percent of the population – owned only five percent of the land.”⁴ The settlers did not integrate into Irish Catholic culture, instead imposing their own set of cultural beliefs onto the native society. The English government worked hard to “drive out the Gaelic culture [from Ireland] and to suppress the Roman Catholic religion” and “treated Ireland as an economic colony to be

³ Alan J Ward. *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*. (Arlington Heights (IL): AHM Publishing Corporation, 1980), 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

exploited for England's gain.”⁵ In 1800, the Irish Parliament was abolished, giving way to the Act of Union, which constitutionally bound England and Ireland.⁶

The Act of Union was abandoned in 1921 after a bloody Civil War, leaving in its wake the Irish Free State, which is composed of twenty-six counties in southern Ireland, and Northern Ireland, which is made up of the six counties in the Northeastern corner of the island. The six counties of Northern Ireland are commonly referred to as Ulster, a reference to the region of Ireland to which they belong. The Irish Free State became the Republic of Ireland in 1946 and is classified as a sovereign nation. Northern Ireland is under the control of Westminster in London and a devolved government in Belfast. The English colonization of Ireland played a central role in the acts of violence perpetrated during the ‘Troubles’ and remains to a driving force behind both Irish Nationalist and Republican action.

The Great War and Ireland

The date August 1914 is rarely given its proper due; it was on this day that the British Empire declared war on Germany, sparking the Great War. The war significantly altered the physical, political, social, and economic landscape worldwide; large and small nations were affected both directly and indirectly by the human and economic cost of warfare. Throughout its four year duration, the war bore the dubious title of the “the war to end all wars” due to the carnage that accompanied the unsuccessful fusion of traditional and modern warfare techniques in addition to the overly optimistic belief that war had the capacity to end international policy disputes.

⁵ Ward, 30.

⁶ Ibid., 29.

The beginning of the Great War forced widespread recognition of Ireland's political status within the United Kingdom. The island nation was consistently dwarfed by the culturally, politically, and economically hegemonic England. Yet the wartime participation of Irish citizens played a vital role in shaping Anglo-Irish history. The declaration of war sparked three distinct reactions within Irish society: while "Unionists received Britain's declaration of war in a manner which demonstrated its psychological integration into a British patriotism, Nationalists "either opposed British participation [in the war] or offered support on the grounds of securing home rule."⁷

The campaign for Home Rule produced strong reactions within Irish society. Home Rule was a political concept that would give Ireland its own Parliament and more autonomy within the British Empire. The 1916 Home Rule Bill was the third such Bill put forth by Irish Nationalists; it was believed that it would finally pass. When the Great War began, the Bill was placed on hold. Irish Nationalists were again thwarted in their attempts to gain more independence within the United Kingdom. Both Unionists and Revolutionary Nationalists opposed Home Rule, while Constitutional Nationalists supported it. The Protestant paramilitary organization, the Ulster Volunteer Force, which was formed in 1912 to, "if necessary, fight to save Ulster from Home Rule," restructured themselves to become part of the 36th Ulster Division, which fought during the opening days of the Battle of the Somme.⁸ Nationalists who supported the British government in their bid to eliminate "intolerable military despotism" formed the Irish National

⁷ Thomas Hennessy. *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 123-124.

⁸ Brian Graham and Peter Shirlow. "The Battle of the Somme in Ulster Memory and Identity." *Political Geography* 21, no. 7 (2002), 882.

Volunteers.⁹ Finally, Nationalists who did not support the notion of Irish citizens accepting “duties or responsibilities within the British Empire,” formed the roughly 11,000-member Irish Volunteers.¹⁰ The president of the Irish Volunteers, Eoin MacNeill was the co-founder and leader of the Gaelic League, from which the Easter Rising drew both knowledge and support. The ideological backbone that formed the Gaelic League, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (a precursor to the Irish Republican Army), Sinn Fein, and the Irish Volunteers was one of romantic, or cultural Nationalism. The primary goal of these organizations was to provide a “repertoire for the crystallization of the nation [and promote the creation of] myths, memories, and symbols that unite[d] the rubric of the community.”¹¹ This commitment to the creation of myths, memories, and symbols is a crucial component of Northern Ireland’s history. Romantic Nationalism is closely tied to revolutionary Nationalism, which espoused the use of violence to achieve cultural revival. Perhaps revolutionary and romantic Nationalism’s most celebrated achievement is the Easter Rising.

Despite Britain’s involvement in an uncertain war that might “fizzle out [or might] be Armageddon,” the Home Rule Bill remained a significant issue in Anglo-Irish politics.¹² With the declaration of war came the opportunity for revolutionary nationalists to act radically on behalf of a completely independent Ireland. The belief that England’s difficulty was Ireland’s opportunity was common among both romantic and revolutionary

⁹ Hennessey, 86,91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 91-92.

¹¹ Jonathan Githens-Mazer. *Myths and Memories of the Easter Rising: Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland*. (Portland (OR): Irish Academic Press, 2006), 86.

¹² Ibid., 28.

Nationalists. These Nationalists planned to foment a revolt against the British government: “if a German army were to invade Ireland, if England were to attempt to enforce Irish conscription, or if the war were coming to an end and a revolt had not already begun.”¹³

The specific catalyst for the Easter Rising was rumors of conscription in Ireland.

Although conscription had been instituted in England, the policy implementation had been delayed in Ireland for fear of starting a revolution. However, with troop numbers low in the British Army in 1916, and voluntary enlistment numbers simultaneously low in Ireland, the possibility of mandatory military service for Irishmen was a stark reality.

In rejecting the notion of forced service under a colonial flag, the Irish Volunteers staked their claim to a specifically Irish, rather than British, identity and sought a means of resistance to express their opinion.

On April 24, 1916, approximately 1,600 Irish Volunteers occupied several crucial points in Dublin, declaring the establishment of a Republic of Ireland. Standing in front of the General Post Office, the newly-minted Republic’s President, Padraig Pearse, read a proclamation signed by seven revolutionary Nationalists, which “linked [the Rising] to a continuum of Irish insurgency against British rule.”¹⁴ The Rising lasted for five days, at which point rebel occupation of the city was deemed untenable by many leaders of the event. Popular support was against the Irish Volunteers and the number of British troops sent to Dublin to quell the Rising increased from an initial 400 to an overwhelming and seemingly unbeatable force of 18,000 - 20,000 by the end of the week.¹⁵ Padraig Pearse

¹³ Hennessey, 129.

¹⁴ Githens-Mazer, 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

accepted the terms of an unconditional surrender; the Rising had failed in its initial objective to usurp British control of Ireland. During the Rising, Central Dublin suffered extensive damage and 418 people – rebels, British soldiers, and civilians alike – were killed.¹⁶

Several factors contributed to the failure of the Rising, the most significant of which was the British interception of a shipment of German weaponry destined for the Irish Volunteers. Additionally, the revolutionary plot was necessarily shrouded in secrecy; confusion as to where, when, and how the Rising was to commence contributed to its downfall. Up against the highly trained and heavily armed British military, the Rising's failure seemed inevitable. Given the very real possibility of an unsuccessful Rising, it has been suggested that the leaders of the Rising *planned* the event as a blood sacrifice, rather than a coup d'état.¹⁷ Others believe just the opposite: the Rising was planned with the possibility of success in mind and the notion of blood sacrifice was conceived of only after the executions of its leaders.

Padraig Pearse's romantic and revolutionary ideology was steeped heavily in notions of blood sacrifice – the idea that Ireland “was owed all fidelity and always asked for service [from its people], and sometimes asked, not for something ordinary, but for a supreme service.”¹⁸ It was after the Rising had failed, and Pearse, along with fifteen other

¹⁶ Githens-Mazer, 120.

¹⁷ Fannin, Alfred. *Letters from Dublin, Easter 1916: Alfred Fannin's Diary of the Rising*, A. Warwick-Haller and S. Warwick Haller, eds. (Portland (OR): Irish Academic Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁸ Hennessey, 126.

participants in the rebellion had been executed by the British military, that the notion of the Easter Rising as a blood sacrifice entered the Irish popular imagination.

Blood sacrifice is a common trope in Irish Nationalist history, and has been used to fit insurrections in the name of Irish freedom from British rule into a narrative of anti-colonial struggle. The leaders of the Easter Rising, writing to loved ones before being executed expressed the hope that their deaths would be included among previous examples of blood sacrifice in the name of Irish freedom. Thomas MacDonagh, who was among the first to be executed following the Rising wrote of his pride at being allowed to “die for Ireland [his] glorious Fatherland” and the knowledge that his blood would “bedew the sacred soil of Ireland.”¹⁹ Sean MacDiarmada wrote, “our blood will rebaptise and reinvigorate the old land,” and Eamonn Ceannt penned the words, “I die a noble death, for Ireland’s freedom.”²⁰

Throughout the Easter Rising, popular support of the ideology from which the event sprang was virtually non-existent; the actions of the rebels were viewed as treacherous at best. Constitutional Nationalists believed the Rising placed the Home Rule Bill in jeopardy, and that the Irish Volunteers, with their notions of sacrificial grandeur, had also sacrificed the possibility of a greater level of Irish autonomy within the British Empire.

The collective shift in support of the ideals of the rebels came only *after* the Rising. According to historian George Dangerfield, “the great political effect of the

¹⁹ Piaras F. MacLochiliann, ed. *Last Words: Letters and Statements of the Leaders Executed after the Rising at Easter 1916*. (Dublin: The Stationary Office, 1990), 55,56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 141,171.

Easter Rising was that it generated impatience in a living generation.”²¹ Agitated by the British military’s response to the Rising, Irish Nationalists transformed the executed rebels from dangerous and misguided radicals into martyrs, a position they continue to hold today. The official British response to the Rising was conducted behind closed doors, which created an atmosphere wherein all “actions [of the British military] were subject to veiled secrecy and made more horrific than they actually were.”²² General Maxwell, the British military official charged with conducting trials immediately following the Rising profoundly underestimated the power of both romantic and revolutionary Nationalism. Maxwell was “concerned with the guilt of innocence of the ordinary Volunteers, not with the possible political effect of punishing them.”²³ The executions were intended to quell further manifestations of revolutionary Nationalism; rather, they had the opposite effect. In the eyes of the general Irish population, the Easter Rising rebels were rehabilitated and transformed from traitors to “good men-men that is, who willed no evil.”²⁴ In addition what seemed, to many Irish citizens, to be draconian executions, the British government undertook strict measures to ensure that further insurrections were halted before they began. The establishment of martial law, involving random arrests accompanied by arbitrarily long prison sentences and degrading house searches, fueled popular resentment against the British government and military.²⁵

²¹ George Dangerfield. *The Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations*. (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 218.

²² Githens-Mazer, 139.

²³ Charles Townshend. *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*. (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

²⁵ Githens-Mazer, 140.

Today the sixteen men executed in the wake of the Easter Rising remain very much a part of both Nationalist and Republican identity narratives. Opposition to the British government has “always been more or less ingrained in the Irish [Nationalist] character,” and the Easter Rising fits within the historical narrative the places Nationalists and Republicans as victims of British oppression.²⁶ The British government, through its grave underestimation of the effects of the executions on popular Irish sentiment, indirectly supported the aims the revolutionary Nationalists who took part in the Rising. The Easter Rising ignited the passions of Irish Nationalists as they fit the event into a historical narrative that stressed a specifically Irish, rather than British identity. The passions of Irish Nationalists were similarly ignited during the 1976-1981 Republican prison struggle in Northern Ireland, which culminated in the 1981 Hunger Strike.

In 1976, the Northern Ireland government opened a new prison outside Belfast to replace the Long Kesh prison camp, which had housed, among other convicts, both Loyalist and Republican prisoners. With the construction of the prison facility (officially called the H-Blocks because of its characteristic ‘H’-shaped sections) came a significant new policy: members of paramilitary organizations who were convicted of crimes after March 1st 1976 were to be treated as criminal, not political prisoners.²⁷ Republican prisoners had previously won the right to be treated as prisoners of war through a four-man hunger strike in 1972.²⁸ The regression to criminal status was viewed as a setback to

²⁶ Githens-Mazer, 140.

²⁷ Denis, O’Hearn. *Nothing But an Unfinished Song: Bobby Sands, the Hunger Striker Who Ignited a Generation.* (New York: Nation Books, 2006), 84.

²⁸ David Beresford. *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike.* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 13.

the Republican movement. Members of paramilitary organizations saw themselves as soldiers in an anti-colonial struggle and therefore believed they ought to be treated as prisoners of war, not as ordinary, or regular criminals. The crux of the prison struggle was the legal designation of paramilitary prisoners as alternately political or criminal prisoners. Republicans from within and without the prison system viewed attempts to re-criminalize prisoners as akin to criminalizing the entire Republican struggle. Irish Republicans saw themselves as engaged in a calculated anti-colonial struggle, not terrorism. Republican prisoners believed they were caught in a “perennial war [...] being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien, oppressive, unwanted regime that refuses to withdraw from [Ireland].”²⁹

Under criminal status, prisoners were required to engage in labor and wear prison issue uniforms. They were not allowed to freely associate with one another, nor were they separated from ordinary prisoners.³⁰ Republican prisoners mounted several offenses against the notion of criminal status, the most central of which was refusing to wear prison uniforms. Theorist Begoña Atrexa writes that “[f]or [R]epublican prisoners, to wear a prison uniform meant to assume Britain’s definition of reality and accept the judgment that Ireland’s history was no more than a concatenation of criminal acts. The attitude negated both their national and personal identities.”³¹ Republican prisoners refused to allow the British government to mark them as anything but freedom fighters,

²⁹ Bobby Sands. *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison*. (Boulder (CO): Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 219.

³⁰ O’Hearn, 46.

³¹ Aretxaga, Begoña. *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland*. (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1997), 86.

political prisoners in a politically driven war. The marking of prisoners as criminals, rather than as prisoners of war, is accurately characterized by the chorus of Francis Broolly's *H-Block Song*, "So I'll wear no convict's uniform/Nor meekly serve my time/That England might brand Ireland's fight/Eight-hundred years of crime."³²

For incarcerated Republicans, the prison struggle was part and parcel of the general IRA struggle that was occurring throughout Northern Ireland. Many imprisoned Republicans actively engaged in a radical political education, reading such revolutionary writers as Franz Fanon, George Jackson, Camillo Torres, and Che Guevara.³³ Additionally, Republican prisoners sought to learn the Irish language, a symbol of resistance to the Anglicization of Ireland. Even during the prison struggle, when prisoners were not allowed free association, denied reading and writing material, and living in adverse conditions, they continued learning the language by collectively conducting Irish lessons.

Kieran Nugent was the first Republican prisoner sentenced under non-political status.³⁴ He refused to wear a prison uniform, sparking the Blanket Protests. From 1976 to 1981, Republican and Loyalist prisoners in both the H-Blocks and the Armagh Women's Prison went 'on the blanket,' wearing only a blanket to cover their bodies. In 1978, the blanket protest escalated to a 'no wash protest' during which prisoners refused to bathe because they were refused a second towel to cover themselves after they

³² Campbell, McKeown, and O'Hagen, eds., i.

³³ Padraig, O'Malley *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

showered.³⁵ The ‘no wash protest’ turned ‘dirty’ after prisoners were not allowed to leave their cells to use the toilet unless they wore a prison uniform. Prisoners remained in their cells twenty-four hours a day. The conditions under which protesting prisoners lived were undeniably horrendous: not being allowed access to sanitation facilities, prisoners sat in their own human waste, smearing feces on the walls of their cells. Consequently, disease was rife among prisoners. The living conditions produced by the dirty protest were, according to Padraig O’Malley, “disgusting, putrid, and repulsive.”³⁶ The dirty protest lasted for three years – from 1978 to 1981. In 1980, when the strategy of dirty protest proved increasingly ineffective, seven Republican prisoners embarked on a simultaneous hunger strike to demand political status for imprisoned paramilitary prisoners. The tactic of hunger strike was not new to the British Isles, having been used by Republican prisoners in 1917, 1920, 1923, 1940, 1946, and 1972 before it was deployed in the H-Blocks in the autumn of 1980.³⁷ The strike, which lasted over two months, ended on December 18th 1980; Republicans had failed in their efforts to gain political prisoner status.³⁸ Despite the devastating setbacks of the first hunger strike, Republican prisoners vowed they would continue in their efforts to establish political prisoner designation within the Northern Ireland prison system through whatever means possible. The creation of a mythic Nationalist narrative arc that connects the Easter Rising and the 1981 Hunger

³⁵ O’Malley, 21.

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁷ Beresford, 9-12.

³⁸ O’Hearn, ix.

Strike mirrors that created by Loyalists around the Battle of the Somme and the Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966.

On July 1, 1916, the 36th Ulster Division (which was comprised, in part, of men from the Ulster Volunteer Force) was charged with holding the trenches directly in front of Thiépval Wood near the River Somme in France. When an allied bombardment failed to uproot German fortifications along the river, the Division advanced into heavy machine gun fire. During the first two days of what would later be named the Battle of the Somme, the Division suffered 5,500 casualties from an original total of 15,000 men. The immediate effect of the Battle of the Somme on Anglo-Irish history can be measured by the omnipresent memorials that mark the physical landscape of Northern Ireland. The loss of life was especially felt in the 36th Ulster Division because of the “particularly concentrated nature of the Division, not just socially but also in terms of religion and politics.”³⁹ This concentration meant the Division’s “losses on the first day of the Somme, grievous enough in themselves, had a disproportionately great impact back home.”⁴⁰ After the war, remembrance of the Battle of the Somme proudly (and perhaps somewhat blindly) celebrated what the men of the 36th Ulster Division had so selflessly given to Britain. One famous quote from a Great War correspondent of *The Times* illustrates the elevated position those who fought in the Somme received from Loyalists and Unionists alike in Northern Ireland. The correspondent wrote: “I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, as I followed their amazing attack I felt I would rather be an

³⁹ ATQ Stewart. *The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule: 1912-1914*. (Hampshire (UK): Gregg Revivals, 1993), 241.

⁴⁰ Keith Jeffery. *Ireland and the Great War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57.

Ulsterman than anything else in the world.”⁴¹ The Battle of the Somme came to represent a proud Loyalist past, comparable to the Easter Rising with regards to its mythic resonance. It became representation of blood sacrifice made on behalf of the British Empire.

Over time however, the Somme simply became “part of the withered iconography of the unionist state.”⁴² According to both Northern Ireland Unionists and Loyalists, the 36th Ulster Division sealed a “covenant in blood” during the Battle of the Somme. In the Unionist and Loyalist historical narrative, the Somme is remembered not because of successful military strategy (because it certainly was *not* a military success) but due to the collective and selfless sacrifice made by those engaged in the battle.

The sacrifices made by the 36th Ulster Division were not, according to many Northern Ireland Protestants, fully acknowledged by the British government, generating a friction between two distinct historical narratives: one British, the other Northern Ireland Protestant. The existence of this friction has not yet been fully explored; rather, its acceptance displays the desire of many Unionists and Loyalists to cling to an eroding British identity.

The Ulster Volunteer Force was the first Loyalist paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland. Once the ‘Troubles’ intensified, however, other such organizations cropped up throughout the province. They included the Loyalist Freedom Fighters, the Red Hand Commando, the Ulster Defence Association, and the Ulster Freedom Fighters.

⁴¹ Ibid., 55-56.

⁴² Graham and Shirlow, 888.

The splintering of Loyalist paramilitary organizations was due, in part, to an identity crisis originating from within Northern Ireland Unionism. The lack of a monolithic identity narrative (due to the splintered identity of both working-class Loyalism and dominant Unionism) has proven difficult to overcome; unlike Republicanism, Loyalism does not have the advantage of “all the best stories culled from the ‘easy history’ of oppression and exclusion backed by money from America.”⁴³ Northern Ireland Unionists and Loyalists find it difficult to claim both British *and* Irish identity. Unionists and Loyalists in Northern Ireland feel as though their British identity is neither recognized nor honored by the British establishment. With the re-birth of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966, the “re-righting” of history to include the myth of blood sacrifice at the Battle of the Somme again became an issue.

The Ulster Volunteer Force lay dormant for fifty years representing unrewarded valor in the face of extraordinarily violent circumstances. In 1966, the UVF was restructured under the auspices of the working-class Protestant men of the Shankill Road in Belfast. The primary objective of the paramilitary organization was to protect the community from the joint threat of violent Republicanism and the “perceived hegemony of official [U]nionism.”⁴⁴ The Battle of the Somme, and the 36th Ulster Division’s role in it, was successfully appropriated by the UVF, which saw itself as “a historically validated, military organization, which uses an iconography of violence-including the Somme –to control young men inculcated with notions of male discipline and

⁴³ Graham and Shirlow, 884.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 883,886.

understanding the need for personal sacrifice.”⁴⁵ The legitimacy given the UVF through the historical association with the Battle of the Somme lends them a certain moral superiority not afforded other Loyalist paramilitary organizations. One example of this perceived moral superiority is the fact that the UVF has remained relatively free of the self-perpetuating spirals of drug dealing and racketeering and has proven to be more grounded in radical socialist academic theory, than other Loyalist paramilitary organizations.⁴⁶

The UVF's appropriation of the Battle of the Somme as an identity icon began in the 1980s; since the cease-fires of 1994, the use of the Battle of the Somme, through such mediums as murals, monuments and the Division's original motto 'For God and Ulster', has increased substantially.⁴⁷ Today, popular remembrance of the Somme is palpable; poppies, stanzas from the Great War poet Siegfried Sassoon, and references to Thiepval Wood are omnipresent throughout Unionist and Loyalist communities in Northern Ireland.⁴⁸ In harkening to the war-destroyed flowers, the forest in which thousands died, and the verse containing the haunting lines: 'You smug faced crowds with kindling eye/who cheer when soldier lads pass by/sneak home and pray you'll never know/ the

⁴⁵ Graham and Shirlow, 887.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 887.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 891.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 891.

Hell where youth and laughter go,” the UVF suggests that they too have sacrificed and deserve to continue fighting on behalf of and Irish union with Britain.⁴⁹

The resistance that comes from actively celebrating the wholly unrecognized sacrifices of the 36th Ulster Division utilizes a mythic history to defy both Republicanism and official Unionists. The UVF sees their appropriation of the Battle of the Somme as a resurrection of a ‘peoples history,’ “a part of the Ulster past that owes little to bourgeois official unionism.⁵⁰ In acting as revealers of ‘true’ history, the UVF denies that history itself is a social construct shaped by past and present power dynamics. For them, history is absolute and inextricably linked to a popular imagination the formation of which, according to them, ought to be shaped by their participation.

The modern-day Ulster Volunteer Force relies upon the myth of direct lineage from the 1916 UVF, and more specifically the 36th Ulster Division, to legitimize its acts of violence. In his paper entitled: “The Ulster Volunteer Force and the formation of the (36th Ulster) Division,” Timothy Bowman suggests, through the use of military statistics, that the UVF may not, in fact have transferred *en masse* to the 36th Ulster Division. Bowman suggests that men from the original UVF were dispersed among various divisions, all of which fought in the Great War, albeit in different capacities. This reevaluation of history destabilizes the core of the assumption of a strong linkage between the original UVF, the 36th Ulster Division, and the modern day manifestation of

⁴⁹ Siegfried Sassoon. *The Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 119.

⁵⁰ Graham and Shirlow, 891.

the paramilitary organization.⁵¹ After hearing of the first UVF murder in Belfast in 1966, Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill stated emphatically: "let no one imagine that there is any connection whatsoever between the two bodies [of the modern UVF and the 36th Ulster Division]: between men who were ready to die for their country on the fields of France and a sordid conspiracy of criminals prepared to take up arms against unprotected fellow citizens."⁵² The Unionist government's condemnation of the tactics of the UVF was seen as misguided and elitist by working-class Loyalists who saw their struggle as inherently connected to that of the original UVF. The narrative arc to which the modern-day Ulster Volunteer Force subscribes is one that seals their allegiance to Britain, even if Britain is unable to recognize such loyalty. The myth is, of course, that the two organizations are directly connected. The organizations did not share the same members, or understanding of what it meant to defend the six-county state of Northern Ireland. For members of the 36th Ulster Division, loyalty to Britain meant engaging in the Great War. The modern-day Ulster Volunteer Force sees defense of Northern Ireland, in part, as launching attacks against Nationalists, Catholics, and the British military in a seemingly non-discriminatory manner.

The Diary of Bobby Sands

"I believe I am but another of those wretched Irishmen born of a risen generation with a deeply rooted and unquenchable desire for freedom." Bobby Sands, on the first day of the 1981 Hunger Strike

⁵¹ Timothy Bowman. "The Ulster Volunteer Force and the Formation of the 36th Ulster Division." *Irish Historical Studies*. 128 (2001), 517.

⁵² John Cusack and Henry McDonald. *UVF*. (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1997), 10.

On March 1, 1981, twenty-six year old IRA volunteer Bobby Sands embarked on what would become a sixty-six day hunger strike to the death. Sands was serving a fourteen year sentence for his participation in an armed robbery, which he committed under the auspices of the IRA. His death would be followed by the deaths of nine other hunger-striking prisoners in the H-Blocks: Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kieran Doherty, Kevin Lynch, Tom McIlwee, and Mickey Devine.⁵³

The hunger strikers demanded five concessions from the British governments: the right of prisoners to wear their own clothing rather than prison uniforms, the right to free association with one another, separation from both criminal prisoners and members of opposing paramilitary organizations, the right not to engage in prison labor, and more flexible visitations with non-prisoners. Taken together, the granting of these demands would have given all prisoners, Republican and Loyalist alike, political prisoner status. Many organizations, including the British and Irish governments, the Irish Catholic clergy, the Irish Commission for Peace and Justice, and the political party Sinn Fein sought to end the hunger strike through a blend of negotiations and eventual pleading with the hunger strikers. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, known for her hard line conservative politics, refused to grant any of the prisoners' demands. Thatcher regarded the paramilitary prisoners as terrorists, making her opinion abundantly clear with the words, "There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing, and criminal violence. We

⁵³ O'Malley, xi-xiv.

will not compromise on this. There will be no political status.”⁵⁴ Given the unlikelihood of achieving political prisoner status, the hunger strikers knew that some (if not all) of them would die during the strike. Having learned from the failed 1980 Hunger Strike, the 1981 hunger strikers staggered the start days of their strikes to keep continuous pressure on the British government, as each man would reach a critical medical stage at a different time.

Throughout its 217-day duration, the hunger strike drew both international attention and curiosity. When Bobby Sands was elected a Member of British parliament in the South Tyrone by-election on April 23rd, approximately two weeks before his death, the hunger strikers were further propelled into international notoriety. Worldwide, people asked: how could someone deemed criminal by the British legal system win sweeping popular support in an election? Republicans hoped that the British government would concede to their demands and end the Hunger Strike, believing that the British government would not allow a Member of Parliament to die. However, Margaret Thatcher refused to alter her opinion on the criminality of the hunger strikers and continued to view the Hunger Strikes as an outright suicide.⁵⁵ Protests were mounted on behalf of the hunger strikers in both Europe and the United States. Paramilitary violence and rioting increased throughout Northern Ireland as each of the hunger strikers reached a critical medical stage.

Bobby Sands died early on the morning of May 5th. Approximately 100,000 people attended his funeral, making it the largest funeral gathering in Northern Ireland

⁵⁴ George Clark. “Margaret Thatcher Pledges no Sellout on Ulster.” *Times* (London), 6 March 1981.

⁵⁵ O’Malley, 148.

history as of that date. At the funeral, Owen Carron, who replaced Sands as Member of Parliament stated: “Bobby has gone to join the ranks of Ireland’s patriotic dead.”⁵⁶ In connecting Sands to others who died in the name of Irish nationalism, Carron saw the hunger strikes as an integral part of an anti-colonial struggle and viewed the death of Bobby Sands as one story in a narrative of justifiable violence. Sands, too, placed his Hunger Strike within this continuum of anti-colonial struggle, documenting connections between his own fight and other instances of Republican resistance in his diary, which he faithfully kept during the first seventeen days of his hunger strike.

Although many of the hunger strikers wrote of their experiences of the Hunger Strike, Bobby Sands was the only hunger striker to keep a diary while on strike. Keeping the diary must have been exceedingly difficult: he wrote on cigarette papers snuck into prison by visitors using a pen insert he hid within his body cavities. The diary is written in a combination of English and Gaelic. The use of the Irish language is in itself a subversive act, providing both a concrete reminder of the history of British attempts to eliminate Irish culture from the island and the resistive power that comes from the use of a colonized language. Many Republican prisoners, like Bobby Sands, learned Gaelic while in prison primarily as a means of cultural reeducation. Sands excelled in his grasp of the language, eventually writing whole entries of his diary in Gaelic. Subsequent to his death, Sands’s diary was vaulted into the pantheons of both prison and Irish literature. The diary is deeply personal and reflects Sands’s fundamental humanity as he faces what he knows will be his death. The text must be approached and analyzed with caution, given that it is a diary and was meant for Sands to express himself *to* himself. I have

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

focused on the textual moments in which Sands himself made connections between the 1981 Hunger Strike and the Easter Rising, working hard to ensure that my analysis examines the *history* with which Bobby Sands engaged and not Sands himself.

The Diary of Bobby Sands came out of a critical moment in Anglo-Irish history, in which the notion of blood sacrifice came to be applied to the Hunger Strike by Irish Republicans and Nationalists. This connection bound the Hunger Strikes to other historical moments of violence and resistance, most notably the Easter Rising. Indeed, Sands readily connects his own struggle with that of the Easter Rising rebels, citing such martyred Republicans as James Connolly and Thomas Clarke. Sands's frequent invocation of the Easter Rising to root his own experiences of suffering contributes to a myth-making process that not only elevates the 1981 hunger striker's deaths to the level of martyrdom, but also reignites the Easter Rising within the minds of Irish Republicans. *The Diary of Bobby Sands* presents a version of history steeped heavily in notions of sacrificial grandeur. This history glosses over the complexities of both Anglo-Irish relations and Irish resistance to British rule seeking, instead, to draw support for the continuation of Republican violence in Northern Ireland.

On the first day of his hunger strike, Bobby Sands wrote the haunting words, "I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul."⁵⁷ Sands points to his understanding of the Hunger Strike as a sacrifice through his deliberate invocation of the afterlife. Indeed, after the failure of the first hunger strike in the autumn of 1980, Sands began planning for a second strike, which he thought would

⁵⁷ Bobby Sands. *Skylark Sing Your Lonely Song: An Anthology of the Writings of Bobby Sands*. (Dublin: The Mercier Press Limited, 1982), 153.

not be taken seriously until someone died. Sands, like Padraig Pearse, believed that sacrifice was necessary to seal a commitment to the ideals of Irish Republicanism. Bobby Sands and Padraig Pearse are often viewed as manifestations of the same Republican spirit. Padraig Pearse was also young, idealistic, and willing to die for revolutionary ideals.

The notion of necessary sacrifice was linked to the crucifixion of Christ by many Irish Republicans, including Bobby Sands, who connected his Hunger Strike struggle to that of Christ dying on the cross with the lines, “The time has come to be,/To walk the lonely road/Like that of Calvary./ And take up the cross of Irishman/Who’ve carried liberty.”⁵⁸ These lines reflect Sands’s own conception of what his death would mean in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. Bobby Sands engaged in the tactic of hunger strike so that Irishmen and women, whom he believed were “born of a risen generation with a deeply rooted and unquenchable desire for freedom,” could be saved from British colonization.⁵⁹ In reclaiming both their land and bodies from British imperial control, Irish people would be capable of staking their claim to a previously lost identity, redeemed in their embodiment of Irishness. The connection of the hunger strikes to the crucifixion of Christ solidified the martyrdom of Bobby Sands (as well as the nine other hunger strikers) in Irish Republican and Nationalist sentiment.

Sands mentions the Easter Rising throughout his hunger strike diary, actively binding the two events in a narrative arc of Irish Republican struggle. On the ninth day of his hunger strike, Sands wrote, “I always keep thinking of James Connolly, and the great

⁵⁸ Sands (1982), 64.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

calm and dignity that he showed right to his very end.”⁶⁰ This statement reflects Sands’s desire to die courageously as well as demonstrating his belief that the 1981 Hunger Strike was connected to the Easter Rising. We see the construction of an even more robust narrative arc between the Hunger Strike and the Easter Rising, when Sands writes, “I may die, but the Republic of 1916 will never die. Onward to the Republic and the liberation of our people.”⁶¹ This statement, alongside Sands’s belief that the Republican movement would always be “remain undaunted and unchanged,” suggest that Sands’s desired a version of history that was static.⁶² The creation of a static history lends itself well to the development of a mythic history, primarily because it is easier to negotiate the process of myth-making when the particulars of history remain unaltered. Although *The Diary of Bobby Sands* stands as a remarkable literary work, deeply imbued with pain, pride, and an incredible sense of willpower, the work does not challenge the development of a mythic history. Perhaps this is particularly fitting given that Bobby Sands is now regarded as one of the most dedicated Irish Republicans in history. He would therefore be more inclined than others to embody (and embrace) such a history. Sand’s version of history is in direct contrast with those of Jamie O’Neill, Frank McGuinness, and Eoin McNamee, whose works I will address next.

At Swim, Two Boys

⁶⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁶¹ Sands (1982), 162.

⁶² Ibid., 162.

“I don’t hate the English and I don’t know do I love the Irish. But I love him. I’m sure of that now. And he’s my country.”⁶³

At Swim, Two Boys, a novel ten years in the writing, was published in 2001 to critical acclaim. The novel’s title is a cunning play on Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim, Two Birds* and represents a not-so-subtle-nod to the rich tradition of Irish modernism from which it springs. The novel takes place in a middle-class Dublin suburb in the year preceding the Easter Rising. Its hauntingly beautiful prose documents the burgeoning friendship between teenagers Jim Mack, a naïve schoolboy, and Doyler Doyle, a radical socialist and member of James Connolly’s Irish Citizen Army. The boys develop an intense love for one another under the protective guidance of Anthony MacMurrough, a self-proclaimed homosexual who recently returned from England, where he served a two-year prison term for indecent conduct with a young man. The boys’ love is articulated through their objective of swimming to the Muglins (and island that lies in Dublin Bay) on Easter Sunday, 1916. There they will consummate their love and plant a flag, claiming the island for themselves and Ireland.

The end of the novel sees Jim, rather than Doyler, slipping off to fight in the Easter Rising in the belief that engaging in revolutionary action will bring him closer to Doyler. Jim is eventually spotted amidst the chaos and confusion of the rebellion by MacMurrough and Doyler, who have formed a search party. As Doyler rushes out into a street in a futile attempt to push Jim out of the way of danger, he is shot and killed. Both Jim and MacMurrough are arrested by the British military for their participation in the

⁶³ O’Neill, Jamie. *At Swim, Two Boys*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 379.

Rising and are sent to prison. Jim is killed in the Irish Civil War, thinking about Doyler as he dies.

At its heart, *At Swim, Two Boys* writes queerness onto the Easter Rising. The novel destabilizes the mythic history that has formed around the rebellion by introducing the notion of queer Irish nationalism as a driving force behind the event. Additionally, the novel challenges the belief that queer identity works in direct opposition to the Irish national project by placing queer figures in the fight for a Republic of Ireland. *At Swim, Two Boys* can be read as representative of a radically different way of understanding both the Easter Rising and blood sacrifice.

The Easter Rising represented the intersections between three radical movements in Great War-era Ireland: Nationalism, feminism, and socialist trade unionism. These three movements are personified by three Nationalist leaders of the Rising: Padraig Pearse (revolutionary nationalism), Constance Markievicz (feminism), and James Connolly (socialist trade unionism).⁶⁴ Margot Gayle Backus, in her essay, “‘More Useful Washed and Dead’: James Connolly, W.B. Yeats, and the Sexual Politics of ‘Easter, 1916,’” suggests that much of the crystallization of Easter Rising mythic Nationalism came out of the Yeats poem, “Easter, 1916.” The poem, according to Backus, erases both the feminist and socialist trade labor movements from the Easter Rising by portraying the leaders of these movements in an unfavorable light.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Margot Gayle Backus. “‘More Useful Washed and Dead’: James Connolly, W.B. Yeats, and the Sexual Politics of ‘Easter, 1916.’” *Interventions* 10 no.1 (2008),72.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*,72.

Padraig Pearse emerged from Yeats's representation of the Easter Rising as the *only* marker of Nationalism in Ireland, emblematic of "a 'pure' nationalism untarnished by the more divisive, controversial aspirations of gender and class equality."⁶⁶ Padraig Pearse's purported queer sexuality, however, complicates his elevated position within the conservative nationalist movement that followed the Easter Rising. Indeed, Backus writes, "[t]he question of individual rebel leaders' sexual orientation has long plagued conservative nationalists...They have determinately ignored the eroticism that saturates Pearse's poetic and dramatic representations of boys."⁶⁷ Today, Pearse's sexuality has largely been erased from the dominant historical narrative regarding the Easter Rising. *At Swim, Two Boys* places homosexuality at the center of the Easter Rising, creating a space in which queer men can fight for the advancement of nationalism. The novel suggests that such a centering is appropriate given the role of queer people (embodied by both Padraig Pearse and Roger Casement⁶⁸) in the Easter Rising. Scholar Michael Cronin writes that, "[b]y having MacMurrough, Doyler, and Jim fight in the Easter Rising, O'Neill grafts homosexuality onto the narrative of the Irish nation, creating a historical narrative for Irish gay men – even creating a gay martyr [Doyler] to place alongside the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁷ Backus, 72.

⁶⁸ Roger Casement was among the sixteen men executed for participation in the Easter Rising. Casement was tried and convicted of treason after being caught assisting with the transport of German arms destined for the Irish Volunteers. During his trial, his "Black Diaries," which revealed, among other things, his homosexual tendencies, were widely circulated in both English and Irish society. The diaries were used to further indict Casement for high treason, conflating treason with homosexual behavior. In her essay entitled "Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish National Identity," Kathryn Conrad suggests that "Casement's acceptance of physical-force nationalism as and his secret collaboration with the Germans on behalf of the Irish correspond, in the eyes of the British, with his secret homosexual life." (Conrad, 128)

executed leaders of 1916.”⁶⁹ The novel actively destabilizes the heteronormative notion (forwarded by the extremely conservative Irish government lead by Èamon de Valera in the wake of the Civil War) that all of the Easter Rising rebels were heterosexual.

MacMurrough articulates the radical destabilization of a heteronormative version of history when he states, “See, I come to war because I love that boy. See how beautiful he is, see how fine. Here is his friend. He too is fine and beautiful. They go to war because they love, each his country. And I too love my country.”⁷⁰ MacMurrough believes that fighting for one’s country is akin to queer love, suggesting that the object of his desire can be both a man *and* a country. Much of MacMurrough’s queer education of both Jim and Doyler focuses on a classical history in which military men take a lover for whom they fight in battle. The boys personify a modern representation of such queer arrangements, fighting alongside one another in the Easter Rising. Unfortunately, the events of the novel deviate significantly from their classical history counterparts. Doyler is killed without ever having a fired a shot during the rebellion, leaving Jim to carry the radical socialist flag during the Irish Civil War. Ultimately, however an Irish state (the Irish Free State) is established would actively disavows the sexual world created by Jim and Doyler.

O’Neill does more than graft homosexuality onto the historical narrative of the Easter Rising. He cunningly suggests that Irish identity can be paired with queer identity. To accomplish this complex feat, O’Neill employs the figure of Oscar Wilde. The trial of

⁶⁹ Michael Cronin. ““He’s My Country”: Liberalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Gay Fiction.” *Èire-Ireland*. 39 no. 3-4 (2004), 266-267.

⁷⁰ O’Neill, 550.

Oscar Wilde came at the same historical moment as the social phenomenon of homosexuality as *personal identity* was being solidified. Utilizing the theories of Foucault, Joseph Valente suggests that Irish and gay identities came to be understood as representing equivalent social standing. According to Foucault, “The category of homosexuality was constituted less by a type of sexual relation than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility...the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”⁷¹ Sexuality came to be seen as written on the body, a trait that could be classified, categorized, and pathologized.

Similarly, race came to be viewed as a “collection of traits, tendencies, and limitations.”⁷² Race came to “predetermine and explain colonial departures from metropolitan norms of civilization much as a certain imputed and embodied sensibility, gender inversion, came to explain homosexual deviance from the genital norms of virtue.”⁷³ In the same historical moment, racial and sexual identity were pathologized.

British colonial stereotypes represented Irishness as demonstrative of “backwardness, wildness, and incontinence.”⁷⁴ According to such stereotypes, Irish people were unsophisticated, lying outside the realm of metropolitan norms. This unflattering conception of Irish identity came to be paired with queerness, in part,

⁷¹ Michel Foucault in Joseph Valente. “Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim Two Boys*.” *Èire-Ireland* 40 no. 3-4 (2005), 70.

⁷² Joseph Valente. “Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim Two Boys*.” *Èire-Ireland* 40 no. 3-4 (2005), 71.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

through such figures as writer Oscar Wilde and diplomat Roger Casement, both of whom were publicly marked as homosexuals by the English judicial system.

At Swim, Two Boys points to the connection between queer and Irish identity, rewriting history to suggest that queer identity is a central component to Irish nationalism. One example of such a historical writing occurs in a conversation between MacMurrough and his schoolmate, Tom Kettle, a member of the Irish National Volunteers, who served (and is later killed) in the Great War. MacMurrough has just admitted that he was, in fact, guilty as charged by the English court system. An agitated Kettle asks, “Damn it all, MacMurrough, are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?,” to which a sly MacMurrough retorts, “If you mean am I Irish, the answer is yes.”⁷⁵ The rather coy response to Kettle’s confrontational question points to the ways in which O’Neill seeks to write queerness onto Irish national identity. MacMurrough’s response is an identifiable moment in the text during which Irish identity and queer sexuality come to stand for the same thing: immorality.

O’Neill’s strategic placement of MacMurrough, Jim, and Doyler, at the Easter Rising, a glorified nationalist moment in Irish history, complicates the assumption that homosexual identity stands outside the nationalist project. O’Neill challenges an Easter Rising history that rests solely on the nationalist (or Padraig Pearse, minus the homosexuality, which has largely been erased) identity alone. Margaret Backus suggests that popular depictions of the Easter Rising generally reinforced “the event’s mythic status in order to appropriate its glamour for a particular ideology.”⁷⁶ O’Neill constructs

⁷⁵ O’Neill, 268.

⁷⁶ Backus, 83.

his *own* “mythic status” surrounding the Easter Rising, therein destabilizing the dominant historical myth that erases the existence of not only queer people, but queer nationalism as well. He suggests that Easter Rising history is exceedingly complex, thereby demanding a space for the specific ideologies of feminists, socialist labor unions, as well as queer men.

At Swim, Two Boys calls common conceptions of blood sacrifice into question, seeking to write an understanding of queer sacrifice onto the Easter Rising.

MacMurrough and Jim are having a post-swimming lesson discussion regarding Irish militarism when Jim states, “We’ll be asked to fight for Ireland, sure I know that,” to which MacMurrough responds, “But what is Ireland that you should want to fight for it.?”⁷⁷ This brief (but significant) interaction points to the ways in which queer men feel marginalized by the dominant power structure. The very spaces they occupy are inhospitable toward their sexuality: why should they engage in a nationalist project that refuses to acknowledge their presence? Yet Jim has a surprising answer to MacMurrough’s question, “It’s Doyler.”⁷⁸ He goes on to explain his logic, “It’s silly, I know. But that’s how I feel. I know Doyler will be out, and where would I be but other beside him? I don’t hate the English and I don’t know do I love the Irish. But I love him. I’m sure of that now. And he’s my country.”⁷⁹ Jim reconfigures the object of his sacrifice, suggesting that, rather than fighting (and perhaps dying) for his country, about which he has rather ambiguous feelings, he will fight for Doyler. Doyler is Jim’s country,

⁷⁷ O’Neill 378.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 379.

representing a space in which he can feel at home, where his identity is accepted and loved.

A similar scene of replacing the object of desire takes place between the boys at a speech given by Padraig Pearse at the gravestone of the Nationalist martyr Wolfe Tone. Pearse tells of the heroic fervor Tone possessed, stating at the end of his speech, “I would rather have known Wolfe Tone than any other man whom I have ever heard or ever read.”⁸⁰ O’Neill writes Jim’s reactions to the statement as, “Jim knew this man’s heart was deep and true, for he made Jim wish for an equal love and an equal truth in his heart. He was swept by a great desire to take hold of Doyler’s hand and tell him in his ear, That’s how I think of you, that’s exactly how I think of you.”⁸¹ This statement, coupled with the intensely Nationalist rhetoric of Pearse’s speech, demonstrates the ways in which comradely love has the radical potential to replace love for one’s country. O’Neill suggests that queer conceptions of the relationships between comrades is a powerful (and necessary) means through which to examine Nationalist revolutions like the Easter Rising.

At Swim, Two Boys reexamines the history of the Easter Rising. In actively rewriting queer sexuality into the Easter Rising, O’Neill demonstrates the multiplicity of identities that fought in the Easter Rising. He does so not only by reinserting Connolly’s labor ideals (embodied in Doyler) and feminism (embodied in MacMurrough’s aristocratic aunt Eva) but also by centering the novel on the nationalist actions of queer

⁸⁰ Ibid., 198.

⁸¹ O’Neill, 198.

men. O'Neill demonstrates the ways in which queer men not only fought at the Easter Rising but *also* accurately articulated the purpose for the event's occurrence. O'Neill asks that we radically alter our understanding of blood sacrifice, moving away from the widely disseminated notion of the Rising as a sacrifice for Ireland, to the conceptualization of the Rising as an example of the comradely love that binds people together.

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme

“The fissiparous nature of Irish Unionism meant that there will always be a tendency toward producing a simplified historical creed for the consumption of the pious.”⁸²

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme was first staged at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin in February 1985. The year was a particularly violent moment in ‘Troubles’ history: both Irish Republicans and Loyalists were engaged in the active process of redefinition and rearticulation of their core values. *Observe the Sons of Ulster* must be read and interpreted in the context of both the violence of the Great War and that of the modern ‘Troubles.’ Indeed, scholar Declan Kiberd states that the play is “as much a product of the 1980s as it was a study of Ulster mind-set which achieved definition all of seven decades earlier.”⁸³ The play is a particularly salient work in an analysis of public memory because it interrogates the *process* of popular remembrance, seeking to tell a

⁸² Alvin Jackson in Richard Russell Rankin. *Irish Studies Working Papers: Ulster Unionism's Mythic and Religious Culture in Observe the Sons of Ulster.* (Fort Lauderdale (FL): Southeastern University Press, 1998), 1.

⁸³ Declan Kiberd. “Frank McGuinness and the Sons of Ulster.” *The Yearbook of English Studies: Irish Writing Since 1950.* 35 (2005), 280.

story *both* about historical events and how those events affect a present understanding of the past.

The play describes the physical and psychological Great War experiences of eight Protestant men, all of whom voluntarily joined the 36th Ulster Division shortly after its 1914 reorganization for the War. The men hail from a variety of geographical locations in Northern Ireland, demonstrating the ways in which the Great War united (both in pride and collective grief) Protestants from across the six counties of the province. The men's occupations are reflective of their working-class identities (with the exception of Kenneth Pyper who is an artist and the son of a plantation owner) and to some extent, the geographical locations in which they live. Both Nat McIlwaine and George Anderson hail from the urban center of Belfast and labor in the city's shipyards and William Moore is a fisherman from Coleraine, an area renowned for its salmon fishing. These references to the men's blue-collar occupations enable us to trace the ways in which Protestant working-class identity transcends physical location, uniting the province's laborers.

Working-class identity remains a significant principle around which both Catholic and Protestant communities organize in Northern Ireland. This identity reflects emotional and physical strength as people confront the daily realities of poverty and difficult manual labor. During the 1980s, it was working-class Protestants, rather than their middle or upper-class Protestant counterparts, who claimed the Battle of the Somme as a part of their identity narrative. In a coauthored essay entitled "The Battle of the Somme in Ulster Memory and Identity," Brian Graham and Peter Shirlow point to the re-emergence of the Somme as a key symbol for working-class Protestants in Northern Ireland whereby "paramilitary organizations [use] the Somme to legitimate their own activities but also to

distance the loyalist working classes from the former hegemonic Britishness of official unionism...”⁸⁴ In using the Battle of the Somme as a symbol of identity and pride, working-class Protestants buck not only an Irish Nationalism that seeks to erase their geographic and identity claims to the island of Ireland, but also dominant Unionism, which fails to take their lived experiences (of poverty, disenfranchisement, and identity crises) into account. Graham and Shirlow maintain that, “After years of use and abuse by their own politicians, working-class protestants see themselves as ‘puppets no more.’ They are far less interested in notions of symbolic reconciliation than in establishing a place for themselves, a place that demands its own past and claim to that past.”⁸⁵ The creation of popular representations of the Battle of the Somme, through such media as murals and literature, demonstrate one way in which working-class Protestants in Northern Ireland actively shape the past to match their self-identification.

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme seeks to complicate the role of the Battle of the Somme in modern working-class Protestant identity. The play problematizes the blind devotion to the British Empire (and British identity) that led thousands of young men to join the Division, as well as the way in which the Somme has become a powerful symbol of pride for working-class Northern Ireland Protestants. According to Geoffrey Bell, a commentator on Northern Ireland Protestant identity, a major problem with the Battle of the Somme and its role in Protestant identity is that Northern Ireland Protestants “are not angry, they are not bitter, they do not protest they

⁸⁴ Graham and Shirlow, 881.

⁸⁵ Graham and Shirlow, 886-887.

are proud...That is their tragedy.”⁸⁶ *Observe the Sons of Ulster* attempts to rectify the tragedy of Protestant devotion to the Somme by exploring the (albeit) fictionalized stories of eight men, seven of whom die during the battle. The play seeks simultaneously to honor the sacrifices of the men of the 36th Ulster Division and question the desire for British identity that enabled such tragic sacrifices to occur. It directly confronts the monolithic identities that erase the personal stories that would compose a more nuanced version of history. In so doing, McGuinness points to the ways in which the sacrifices of the Division have been distorted to promote a working-class narrative heavily invested in the perpetuation of ‘Troubles’-related violence against Catholics and British hegemony.

In engaging with the task of reexamining a monolithic history, *Observe the Sons of Ulster* works in direct opposition to such organizations as the Somme Association, a community-based non-profit in Newtownards, Northern Ireland, which seeks to excavate entrenched Great War British military history in order to place the 36th Ulster Division at the center of the Battle of the Somme. The Somme Association resists the notion that “memory is socially constructed and inseparable from imagination. Instead they [express] a belief in the reality of memory and in the objectivity of a history that ‘happened’ and can be reclaimed as such.”⁸⁷ The play requests that we question the usefulness of reclaiming a history that is not sufficiently complex. Additionally, *Observe the Sons of Ulster* asks us to do away with the notion that the Battle of the Somme was a particularly glorious moment in Northern Ireland Protestant history. The first day of the Somme, was

⁸⁶ Geoffrey Bell in Graham and Shirlow, 888.

⁸⁷ Geoffrey Bell in Graham and Shirlow, 891.

after all, the bloodiest day in British military history. The play asks that we address the sacrifices of the men who died in the battle as a tragedy.

Observe the Sons of Ulster is omnisciently narrated by two distinct characterizations of Kenneth Pyper: Younger and Older. McGuinness's choice to tell the story through two Pypers is not insignificant. As Richard Rankin Russell notes: "The interaction between Younger and Older Pyper illustrates the continued backward-looking aspect of Ulster Unionism and its essentially fractured identity, caught up in the eternal repetition of the past."⁸⁸ This eternal repetition demonstrates the ways in which violence can be used as a legitimizing force in history. In using both young and old representations of Pyper, McGuinness points to a historical continuity of violent acts. When the play opens, Pyper is lamenting his survival of a war that claimed the lives of his seven friends. Pyper, in speaking directly to God, states: "I do not understand your insistence on my remembrance. I'm being too mild. I am angry at your demand that I continue to probe."⁸⁹ Pyper's words remind us of the complexities of public memory: Northern Ireland Protestants desire remembrance of the Battle of the Somme because it fortifies their claim to British identity, yet survivors of the Battle do not wish to remember the event because of the physical and emotional horrors they experienced as a result of it. Pyper goes on to say, "The scale of the horror has no shape, as you in your darkness have no shape save what you bestow upon those you leave behind. Your actions that day were unacceptable.

⁸⁸ Richard Rankin Russell. *Irish Studies Working Papers: Ulster Unionism's Mythic and Religious Culture in Observe the Sons of Ulster*. (Fort Lauderdale (FL): Southeastern University Press, 1998),14.

⁸⁹ McGuinness, Frank. *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1986),9.

You have no right to excuse that suffering, parading it for the benefit of others.”⁹⁰

Although Pyper is speaking to God, we can see his chastising words as directed towards Northern Ireland Protestants. Pyper is angry at the way in which his own wartime experiences have been whitewashed into a glorious event, with little regard for the massive waste of life that occurred during the Battle of the Somme. In this opening scene, according to Declan Kiberd, “McGuinness is imagining the resistance of the dead to assimilation into any narrative written at the mercy of the present moment.”⁹¹

Pyper’s frustration at being unable to express his painful wartime experiences in plain English complicates our understanding of the Battle of the Somme as an event that holds any triumphal meaning. Indeed, Pyper invokes existential pleading to convey his fear that the Battle of the Somme was utterly lacking in purpose. He asks God: “Why did we let ourselves be led to extermination? In the end we were not led, we led ourselves. We claimed we would die for each other in battle. To fulfil that claim we marched into a battle that killed us all. That is not loyalty. That is not love. That is hate. Deepest hate. Hate for ourselves. We wished ourselves to die.”⁹² This powerful statement points to the complex identity Northern Ireland Protestants occupy. Accepted as neither Irish nor British, Northern Ireland Protestants stake their British identity by engaging in battle. Pyper believes this violent act is actually a form of self-hatred and extreme confusion over what constitutes loyalty to an (altogether absent) fatherland.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁹¹ Kiberd, 281.

⁹² McGuinness, 12.

Throughout *Observe the Sons of Ulster* the men consistently remind themselves of their reasons for engaging in the Great War. These reminders can be read as questioning both the purpose of the Great War as well as their individual reasons for fighting in it. One example comes from the Part Two of the play, in which Pyper asks newly arrived recruits David Craig, William Moore, and John Millen their reasons for joining the 36th Ulster Division.

Pyper: Why spend your time here?

Craig: It goes without saying.

Pyper: Say it.

Craig: I'm in this for Ulster.

Moore: Like ourselves.

Millen: For the glory of his majesty the King and all his people.

Moore: Exactly.⁹³

We can see the ways in which Ulster identity comes to be conflated with loyalty for “his majesty the King and all his people.” Sadness is expressed in this passage, primarily because history has taught the characters that British identity has proven extremely difficult for Northern Ireland Protestants to attain. Not even 5,500 casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme effectively staked their claim to such an identity.

Pyper expresses a desire to claim a history in direct opposition to that traditionally held by Irish Catholic Nationalists. He states: “Fenians claim a Cuchullian as their ancestor, but he is ours, for they lay down for centuries and wept in their sorrow, but we took up arms and fought against an ocean. An ocean of blood. His blood is our inheritance. Not theirs. Sinn Fein? Ourselves alone. It is we, the Protestant people who have always stood alone.”⁹⁴ The need to appropriate a symbol of Nationalist identity (in

⁹³ McGuinness, 22.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

this case both the political party Sinn Fein and the literal translation of *Sinn Fein*, Ourselves Alone) to legitimize Protestant identity destabilizes static versions of history that place Nationalists as the sole victims of Anglo-Irish relations. Pyper proposes a reassessment of modern understandings of Irish history, suggesting that Northern Ireland Protestants have suffered precisely because they fall between the cracks of Irish and British identity and have needed to stand alone as a group of people.

Pyper's monologue also demonstrates the self-reliance (both on and off the battlefield) of the Protestants of Northern Ireland. No superior officer makes his appearance in *Observe of the Sons of Ulster*, harkening to the eerie reality that "because an edict just before the battle confined commissioned officers to headquarters" many units engaging in the battle had "no one above the rank of captain leading them."⁹⁵ The archaic means through which the 36th Ulster Division fought the Battle of the Somme (walking slowly across No Man's Land in formation only to be slaughtered by German machine gun fire), is another demonstration of the ways in which the men of the Division felt they literally stood alone during the Battle.

Declan Kiberd cautions us from assuming that Northern Ireland Protestants truly stand alone, though. He states that "[The men's] assertion of independence could never fully compensate for a humiliating sense of dependence on an England which scarcely cared two pence for them. The debacle at the Somme seemed perfectly scripted to capture at once their spurned loyalty and utter vulnerability."⁹⁶ In *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, the men seek British identity and rely upon England to grant them a sense of belonging. The

⁹⁵ Kiberd, 279.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

rejection of Ulster Protestants' claims to British identity is a recurrent historical motif: it can be seen during the 'Troubles' just as easily as during the Battle of the Somme. Pyper reflects the understanding that Northern Ireland Protestants stand without the support of a British identity when he states: "The house has grown cold. Ulster has grown lonely."⁹⁷ In articulating the lack of British support for their identity, Pyper complicates the assumption that Northern Ireland Protestants can effectively claim a singularly British identity.

Observe the Sons of Ulster makes considerable mention of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the paramilitary organization that provided a sizable manpower pool from which the 36th Ulster Division drew during the opening days of the war. Although it would be erroneous to suggest that the Division was composed exclusively of men from the UVF, it was true that men from the UVF provided the backbone of the 36th Ulster Division. In *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, both Moore and Millen belonged to the North County Derry Battalion of the Ulster Volunteer Force. They express their hatred of Nationalists (deeming them "Fenian rats") and describe the punishment beating of a Catholic youth who painted an Irish flag on the side of Orange (Protestant heritage) lodge in Coleraine:

Millen: Battered him down the streets of Coleraine.
 Moore: Shaved every hair of his head.
 Millen: Cut the backside out of his trousers.
 Moore: Painted his arse green, white, and gold.
 Millen: That cured him of tricolours [Irish flags].⁹⁸

⁹⁷ McGuinness, 11.

⁹⁸ McGuinness, 27.

This scene enables us to see not only the intimidation tactics used by the UVF, but also the sectarian divisions within Northern Ireland society that allowed for such violence and humiliation to occur. A punishment beating similar to this one could well have occurred during the 'Troubles,' pointing to the genealogy of such acts of violence. *Observe the Sons of Ulster* asks us to question the practice of reenacting such forms of violence and, in so doing, requests that we work towards a more complicated understanding of Northern Ireland Protestant history. The supreme irony of the story that Millen and Moore relate immediately follows: Martin Crawford (whose mother, it is later revealed, is Catholic) enters the room. Crawford's presence within the 36th Ulster Division challenges the assumption that all members of the Division were completely invested in a Protestant identity. Individuals like Crawford (who occupy multiple and hybrid identities) complicate the struggle to definitively carve out a singular identity.

Part Three of *Observe the Sons of Ulster* sees the men dividing into groups of two. It takes place while the men are on leave in Northern Ireland. Each pair of men is in the presence of a symbol of Protestant identity: Pyper and Craig are rowing to Boa Island, Millen and Moore are suspended on a rope bridge, Christopher Roulston and Crawford are in a Protestant church, and Anderson and McIlwaine sit in a field with a lambeg drum, which is traditionally used in the July 12th Orange parades. The realities of warfare have worn away at the eight men, each of whom expresses a clear sense of disillusionment with fighting in France. When Pyper thanks Craig for saving his life during a battle, Craig is quick to insist upon forgetting the entire event as though it never happened: "Kenneth, I don't want that brought up ever. Hear me? I only did what you

would have done if it had been me. Not just me. Any of us. We need to forget.”⁹⁹ Craig demands amnesia of the event, suggesting that the heroics of the war compose only one part of the soldier’s experience. Craig demands a more complex conceptualization of the war in Northern Ireland Protestant history.

Roulston and Crawford experience a similar loss of faith in the value of fighting in the War:

Roulston: Why do you always question?

Crawford: Because you never do.

Roulston: That’s not true. I never stop making asking myself questions. Why do think I am not still a clergyman?

Crawford: Because you don’t believe.

Roulston: What?

Crawford: You don’t believe.

Roulston: I believe too much.

Crawford: You don’t believe in Christ. You don’t believe in God. You don’t believe in yourself. If you do, prove it.

Roulston: How?

Crawford: Leave.

Roulston: I can’t.

Crawford: You see, you don’t believe.¹⁰⁰

This scene demonstrates the existential crisis experienced by many Great War soldiers. As in the opening monologue of the play, references to God and Christ can also be read as being references to the Protestants of Northern Ireland, primarily because the same questions Pyper poses to God are those that Northern Ireland Protestants were asking themselves when *Observe the Sons of Ulster* was written. Roulston’s identity, as both a minister within the Protestant faith and as a man from Northern Ireland, is clearly rocked. He no longer places his faith in either crystallization of identity. In particular, Roulston

⁹⁹ McGuinness, 39.

¹⁰⁰ McGuinness, 40.

attempts to reject the War as a legitimate way to claim British identity for Northern Ireland Protestants. Yet, although he wants to cease fighting in the War, he cannot. The pull of an established identity is too much for him (and Northern Ireland Protestants) to resist. We can draw parallels between Roulston's existential crisis and the crisis of identity experienced by Northern Ireland Protestants. In both instances, a previously held understanding (for Roulston, it is the belief in God and for Protestants in Northern Ireland it is the claim to British identity) is destabilized, giving way to a harsh reality. For Roulston, this reality comes in the form of the atrocities of the Great War. For Northern Ireland Protestants it is represented by the struggle of coping with a disintegrating connection to the British Empire.

A similar conversation takes place between Millen and Moore, who are standing on opposite sides of a suspended rope bridge at the opening of the scene. Moore is afraid he will fall if he attempts to cross the bridge. Millen is trying to coax him across the bridge as gently as possible:

Moore: Why have we been spared?

Millen: Spared what?

Moore: Johnny, I can't go back.

Millen: You've told me that already.

Moore: I wouldn't tell anyone else.

Millen: Get to your feet and start walking to the bloody rock and back.

Moore: I am getting sick just looking down.

Millen: Don't look anywhere but straight in front of you.

Moore: You do it first.

Millen: It'll make no difference. Walk.

Moore: No.

Millen: We're not leaving till you cross it.

Moore: I'm tired. I'm frightened. I don't want to go on. I can't.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ McGuinness, 41.

Moore's reaction to serving in the Great War shatters the assumption that all of the men who fought within the 36th Ulster Division fought bravely at the Somme, reveling in the opportunity to martyr themselves for the sake of the British Empire. Rather, Moore has realistic emotions to the thought of returning to the carnage of war: he is "tired" and, more importantly, "frightened." Moore stands in direct contrast to Millen, whose character remains invested in upholding the facade of absolute courage, even in the face of extraordinarily violent circumstances. These men represent two distinct versions of Northern Ireland Protestant history: Millen personifies the monolithic version actively endorsed by many working-class Protestants, that of unquestioning compliance and bravery in the face of certain death. Moore, on the other hand, represents the version of history that Frank McGuinness is attempting to present to his audience: his history is one that includes the emotions and complex visceral reactions and hesitations of individuals.

The final pairing scene occurs between Anderson and McIlwaine who sit in a field with a lambeeg drum. They are intending to stage a 12th July Parade (an annual demonstration in honor of the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690) of their own because they have missed the actual day of festivities. They soon realize that staging a substitute celebration does not feel right. Both men decide it is the collectivity of the parade that gives it its meaning. Their conversation turns to another symbol of Northern Ireland Protestant identity, the *Titanic*. The ill-fated steamliner was built in the Harland and Wolff shipyards of Belfast and its 1912 sinking is regarded by many as reflective of the failure of all Northern Ireland working-class Protestant men. McIlwaine and Anderson must have been particularly affected by the sinking of the ship because both worked in the

Belfast shipyards, and may have participated in building the *Titanic* before joining the 36th Ulster Division.

McIlwaine: I'm always on my own. Always have been.

Anderson: Because you're a hateful git.

McIlwaine: It [the sinking of the *Titanic*] was a sign of what we're in for. What we've let ourselves in for.

Anderson: The bloody *Titanic* went down because it hit an iceberg.

McIlwaine: The pride of Belfast went with it.

Anderson: You're not going to meet many icebergs on the front, are you? So what are you talking about?

McIlwaine: The war is our punishment.

Anderson: There's more than Belfast in this war.

McIlwaine: But Belfast will be lost in the war. The whole of Ulster will be lost.

We're not making a sacrifice. Jesus, you've seen this war. We are the sacrifice.¹⁰²

McIlwaine highlights several key points regarding Protestant identity, primarily that it is based, in part, on unwavering pride in the past. Richard Rankin Russell writes,

“McIlwaine’s visionary moment is achingly redolent of both a recognition of Ulster identity and its decline.”¹⁰³ The final lines uttered by McIlwaine encapsulate the opinion Frank McGuinness is attempting to express through *Observe the Sons of Ulster*: Northern Ireland Protestants must address the Battle of the Somme as a tragedy and not as something to be celebrated blindly primarily because such celebration of a monolithic version of history contributes to the violence of the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’.

The final part of the play takes place as the men prepare to “go over the top” on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Two events transpire in the trench that are particularly salient to understanding the ways in which particular versions of history can be used to mold identity. The first is a discussion of the 1916 Easter Rising, which

¹⁰² McGuinness, 51.

¹⁰³ Russell, 8.

occurred fewer than two months before the Battle of the Somme. The men deride the rebels of the Easter Rising as a “disgrace to their sex” and jokingly maintain that Padraig Pearse “took over a post office because he was short a few stamps.”¹⁰⁴ By degrading the masculinity of the men who participated in the Easter Rising, the men at the Somme stake their claim to supreme heteronormative manhood, suggesting that a Protestant claim to the island is more legitimate than that of Catholics. The men also insult all Irish Catholics who, according to them, “couldn’t spell Republic much less proclaim it.”¹⁰⁵

In criticizing the Catholic claim to Ireland, the men harken to the colonization of the island, throughout which Irish people were believed incapable of maintaining their own society. It was precisely this brand of paternalistic (and deeply masculinist) brand of colonialism that Padraig Pearse and the other participants in the Easter Rising were rebelling against. This scene is yet another demonstration of the ways in which certain aspects of Northern Ireland history (including the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme) have been diluted, losing their complexities. The men of the 36th Ulster Division insult the meaning of the Rising to its participants. Through constructing the Battle of the Somme as more significant an instance of blood sacrifice than the Easter Rising, these men gloss over the particulars of history in an attempt to construct their *own* version as closer to the *truth*. One such glaring particular is the fact that, although many Protestant men fought at the Battle of the Somme and in the Great War in general, so did many Catholics. As many as one-half of the men who died at the Somme were Catholic, a reality just recently confronted in Northern Ireland.

¹⁰⁴ McGuinness, 64-65.

¹⁰⁵ McGuinness, 65.

The other example of the way in which history is used by the men of the 36th Ulster Division in *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is the reenactment of the Battle of the Boyne. Anderson narrates the battle while Crawford plays King James and Millen plays King William of Orange. Pyper and Moore are the respective horses of the kings. Before the acted Boyne begins Anderson states, “And remember King James, we know the result, you know the result, keep the result.”¹⁰⁶ Anderson points to the immutability of history in this statement, suggesting that the “truth” created by William’s victory over James at the Battle of the Boyne belongs to the Protestants of Northern Ireland alone. The irony of this statement is revealed just a few moments later, however, when Pyper trips sending Crawford playing King William (who, incidentally enough is the only half Catholic among the group of eight men, a fact that destabilizes the notion that either community in Northern Ireland has the right to claim any historical event as exclusively theirs) crashing to the ground. Silence ensues as the men help Crawford and Pyper to their feet.

Pyper: I fell.

McIlwaine: We saw.

Millen: Not the best of signs.

(Silence)

Crawford: It was as much my fault as Pyper’s. I lost control of his shoulders. That’s what happened.¹⁰⁷

The sudden alteration to the reenacted history stands as a particularly bad omen to the men, all of whom were raised with the unyielding understanding that King William *won* the Battle of the Boyne. According to Richard Rankin Russell, “The utter silence which

¹⁰⁶ McGuinness, 70.

¹⁰⁷ McGuinness, 71.

immediately follows Crawford's fall not only interrupts Anderson [the narrator], but signals a gap in the myth-making process the soldiers attempt to formulate by fusing the impending battle with the recreated victorious battle from their inherited past."¹⁰⁸ The failure of King William to emerge victorious from the reenacted battle indicates the instability of both the battle as a Protestant identity icon and Protestant identity in general. Russell accurately depicts McGuinness's message when he writes, "Faced with declining numbers and a recognition that by sheer birth rate, Catholics will soon outnumber them, [Protestants] their only recourse is to pound the lambeg drum even harder, clinging to symbols sashes, images and icons, which are largely devoid of any meaning."¹⁰⁹ McGuinness points to the withering Protestant master narrative when he ends the play *Battle of the Boyne* on the wrong side of history. Although the Boyne is traditionally held up as an example of the glorious past of Northern Ireland's Protestants, McGuinness asks us to question that notion and, in so doing, seek a more complex version of history.

Observe the Sons of Ulster urges Northern Ireland Protestants to actively question the current use of the Battle of the Somme in their identity narrative. The play suggests that blind devotion of those killed at the Somme fails to recognize the complexities of history, ignoring the multiple identities of the men who fought and died during the battle. Through *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, McGuinness advocates an approach to history that emphasizes the humanity, rather than martyrdom, of its protagonists. For Northern Ireland's Protestant population, structuring a more complex identity and history may

¹⁰⁸ Russell, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Russell, 7.

involve confronting the painful reality that they must forge their *own* collective identity. The current fragmentation of Northern Ireland Protestant identity “reflects a real sense of fragile identity being undermined by the British government, the Ulster protestant people seen as no more than pawns in a bigger game.”¹¹⁰ This sense of British betrayal was palpably demonstrated after the Battle of the Somme, when only four soldiers from the 36th Ulster Division were awarded the Victoria Cross, a medal awarded by the British military for valorous actions during battle. The perceived lack of official recognition by the British government for the sacrifices of the 36th Ulster Division set the stage for modern suspicions of British hegemony, leading in part, to the Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966.

Resurrection Man

“There was nothing to distinguish the bloodstains of the doorway where the body had been left, but they both had a sense of familiarity, of scenes repeated in history.”¹¹¹

Eoin McNamee’s *Resurrection Man* documents the fictionalized experiences of Victor Kelly a member of the modern-day manifestation of the Ulster Volunteer Force. The novel is set on the temporal threshold of the ‘Troubles;’ the period of violence serves not to *push* Victor toward Belfast’s murderous underbelly, but rather to underscore his preexisting occupation of such a space. Belfast itself is never explicitly named throughout the 233 pages of the novel. Rather, the city’s identity is expressed through characteristic street names (Ormeau, The Falls, Shankill Road), allowing us to understand the city as a

¹¹⁰ Graham and Shirlow, 886.

¹¹¹ Eoin McNamee. *Resurrection Man*. (New York: Picador, 1994), 15.

sum of its fractured parts. The divided society of Northern Ireland is articulated through the calculated descriptions of the Catholic and Protestant ghettos, separated by police checkpoints where people are forced to publicly declare their names and addresses, both symbols of political identity.

Victor is the leader of the Resurrection Men, a UVF gang modeled after the Shankill Butchers, who terrorized Belfast in the 1970s. In choosing to write a novel fictionalizing the exploits of the Shankill Butchers, McNamee severs a glorifying link between the UVF of the 1910s and that of today. The Shankill Butchers are viewed by many in the Ulster Volunteer Force as an anomaly, a gang of misguided men outside the ideology of the original paramilitary. The Ulster Volunteer Force was constructed along the lines of legitimate military organization; the actions of the Shankill Butchers threatened such legitimacy. *Resurrection Man*, through its almost unspeakably violent narrative of the acts of Shankill Butchers, questions the existence of a narrative arc that binds the modern-day UVF to that of the Great War. It points to the ways in which the violence and sacrifices experienced by the 36th Ulster Division cannot be used to explain or legitimize the modern-day violence of the Ulster Volunteer Force. The novel performs this task primarily by pointing to the destabilization of Victor Kelly's identity as a Northern Ireland Protestant.

The historical leader of the Shankill Butchers was Lenny Murphy, who, like Victor Kelly, was a Protestant with a suspiciously Catholic name. Victor's name plays a significant role in his identity – it necessitates his openly detestation of the Catholic presence in Northern Ireland. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews writes, in his monograph entitled *(De)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles Since 1969*, that

“Identity, whether afforded by family name or street name, becomes Victor’s dangerous obsession: uncertainty about his own identity is what drives him to the violent assertion of one.”¹¹² Victor’s fraught identity, his fear of being viewed as a Catholic, drive him to proclaim his Protestant identity through killing Catholics in particularly gruesome and ritualistic ways. As the novel progresses his violence acquires new meaning as he begins indiscriminately murdering both Protestant and Catholic citizens.

The complex identities with which Eoin McNamee engages in *Resurrection Man* are similar to those undertaken by Frank McGuinness in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. In both novel and drama, the protagonists struggle to find an identity that falls between Irish and British fault lines. In *Resurrection Man*, this struggle with identity is expressed through overt statements of a working-class Protestant sense of betrayal by the British government. As members of the UVF huddle around the television to watch the six o’clock news, they comment on the disconnect between their lived realities and those of Unionist and British politicians: “Look at them dirty bastard politicians on the TV—us doing their dirty work for them.”¹¹³ This statement allows us to see the problems associated with occupying the position of a pro-state terrorist organization, in which one must “break the state’s laws in order to preserve the state’s rule.”¹¹⁴ Loyalist paramilitaries vow to uphold British control in Northern Ireland, yet the means through which they do so are violent and therefore mark them as criminals in the

¹¹² Elmer Kennedy-Andrews. *(De)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969*. (Dublin: Four Corners Press, 2003), 123.

¹¹³ McNamee, 19.

¹¹⁴ Margaret, Scanlan, Margaret. *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*. (Charlottesville(VA): The University of Virginia Press, 2001), 41.

British legal system. The notion that, like Victor, so many Loyalist paramilitary men served prison sentences during the ‘Troubles’ was particularly disturbing to so many of these men primarily because they viewed themselves as augmenting (rather than working in opposition to) the British army. The act of being marked as criminal destabilized the Loyalist assumption of a British identity, requiring them to reevaluate what it meant to support the British Empire as a Northern Ireland Protestant.

Like *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, *Resurrection Man* includes a reference to the Battle of the Boyne, also pointing to its deflation as a symbol of proud Northern Ireland Protestant heritage. Victor and his friend and fellow UVF member, Billy McClure, are standing near a window when they hear a flute band approaching and glance out onto the street. The men in the parade are returning from the dedication of a new banner celebrating the victory of King William at the Battle of the Boyne and are dressed in traditional Orange clothing. For all intents and purposes, the parade mirrors that of thousands of other Orange parades yet, the marchers “seemed distorted to Victor, as if they had witnessed some corrosive spectacle.”¹¹⁵ The juxtaposition between proud heritage and corrosion suggests that, for Victor, the Battle of the Boyne no longer serves as an appropriate marker of identity. Rather, Victor’s identity is formed by his affectation of an American gangster personality, whereby he recites lines from James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson films. The alternative identity narrative questions the link between Protestant representations of past and present.

¹¹⁵ McNamee, 64.

Victor's response to the breakdown of his identity is one of unspeakable violence. McNamee records the Resurrection Men's crimes in lurid detail, citing such details as the number of knife cuts to the bodies and the degree of decapitation achieved by the men. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews suggests that Victor's descent into such monstrous violence is a result of his "lacking any sense of self."¹¹⁶ This lack of sense of self is frustrating to Victor, who is constantly trying to identify, if not as a Protestant man in Northern Ireland, then as an American gangster. His response is a transgression of the UVF military ethos, a form of violence that includes cinematic and gratuitous suffering. Victor's death at the end of the novel, is a reflection of the domination of his gangster identity over his Northern Ireland Protestant one: "[He] felt the bullets force him back against the door. Victor knew the moves. Struggle to raise the gun. Clutch the breast and lean forward in anguish."¹¹⁷ Victor's demise is outlined by a distinctive departure from that espoused by either manifestation of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Victor is lured to his parents' home before being gunned under the guidance of Billy McClure. Victor's last thoughts are, "There were no words, got him at last. No last rueful gangster smile, goodbye world."¹¹⁸ Victor's death was caused, in part, by a fellow UVF member, making it particularly dishonorable and complex.

Perhaps it is fitting that *Resurrection Man* is entitled as such. The title alludes to the Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966, but also points to the misguidance associated with connecting the two versions of the paramilitary

¹¹⁶ Kennedy-Andrews, 130.

¹¹⁷ McNamee, 230.

¹¹⁸ McNamee, 230.

organization. Victor Kelly is a detached figure, divided from the symbols that would tie him to the historical arc of the UVF. Such detachment is simultaneously a manifestation *of* and manifested *in* the acts of violence he performs. In choosing to fictionalize the Shankill Butchers, McNamee suggests that a connection between the modern-day UVF and its 1910s counterpart is problematic because the acts of violence committed by the Butchers ventured far beyond those accepted by the earlier manifestation of the paramilitary organization.

Conclusion

It is impossible to speak about the late 20th century conflict in Northern Ireland without examining the ways in which specific historical events inform modern day acts of violence and resistance in the province. For Republicans, all acts of resistance fit into an overly simplistic narrative that defines all struggle as inherently anti-colonial. Loyalists point to the 36th Ulster Division sealing the Northern Ireland commitment to British identity that was not awarded within the British establishment. Since the beginning of the 'Troubles,' Loyalist paramilitaries have been engaged in a struggle to claim a national identity. This struggle has been largely defined by the betrayal of the British government that occurred in wake of the Great War. In order to compete with the identity of Republicans, the Ulster Volunteer Force, more so than any other Loyalist paramilitary, draws its heritage from the 36th Ulster Division.

The narratives of both Republicans and Loyalists are based on the principle of blood sacrifice and martyrdom. Martyrdom substantiates future armed struggles because it provides a person, not just an abstract political cause, for which violence must be

committed. The riots that occurred after the death of Bobby Sands were committed in his name, and more generally on behalf of the IRA. The violence committed by the modern-day UVF is legitimized by the slaughter of the men of the 36th Ulster Division during the opening days of Battle of the Somme.

The creation of mythic histories is easier than acknowledging that cyclical conflict contributes more so to the problem of habitual violence than to the solution of a lasting peace. We cannot allow the deaths of more than 3,600 people to get lost in a mythic history that is more invested in identity politics than in acknowledging that violence cripples a society. One of the many components necessary for the creation of a peaceful Northern Ireland is the collective willingness to invest in a complex understanding of historical events. Until such a commitment is made, it will be difficult, although not impossible, for Northern Ireland society to create a lasting peace. The year 2008 marked the tenth anniversary of the Belfast Agreement, which effectively ended organized armed violence in Northern Ireland. The decade-long maintenance of the Belfast Agreement is a positive sign that peace will finally come to the province. Unfortunately, small-scale physical violence continues to occur in Northern Ireland in the form of punishment beatings and rioting. These acts of violence are as much a legacy of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme as both the 1981 Hunger Strikes and the 1966 Resurrection of the Ulster Volunteer Force are. Particular versions of history are difficult for people to relinquish, especially when historical events point to violence as the only solution to a problem. Violence, especially violence that is deeply embedded in one's understanding of what it means to claim a national identity, is a difficult legacy to

overcome and it is important for us to not blame the population of Northern Ireland for the seemingly intractable 'Troubles.'

The project of rewriting history is one that has been actively undertaken by literary artists. Jamie O'Neill, Frank McGuinness, and Eoin McNamee seek to redefine the contours of the narrative links between 1916 and the present day by complicating the notion of monolithic identities for Northern Ireland's citizens. Jamie O'Neill, in *At Swim, Two Boys*, seeks to inscribe queerness onto the Easter Rising, suggesting that the event was fought (both physically and ideologically) by more than one group of people. Frank McGuinness, in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, complicates representations of the Battle of the Somme by creating a wide range of men to fight (and die) in the 36th Ulster Division. Finally, Eoin McNamee, in *Resurrection Man*, seeks to sever the link between the two manifestations of the Ulster Volunteer Force by introducing a fictionalized version of a man deemed so repugnant that he perished at the hands of his own paramilitary organization. The difference between the military honor of the 1910s UVF and the hideous violence of its modern-day counterpart is too difficult to reconcile, forcing a separation of the two.

The Diary of Bobby Sands generates a much different story than any of the three other texts analyzed for this paper. The diary demonstrates Sands's wholehearted belief in a narrative that connects the Easter Rising and the 1981 Hunger Strike. Sands' nationalist leanings were amplified by his membership in the IRA, his imprisonment, and his position as the leader of the 1981 Hunger Strike, certainly contributing to his deployment of the narrative of Nationalist martyrdom in his prison diary.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute people in Northern Ireland can pay to the men executed in the wake of the Easter Rising, the men who died at the Somme, the ten men who starved themselves to death, and the victims of the violence committed by the modern-day UVF, is a commitment to lasting peace in Northern Ireland. After all, neither Padraig Pearse nor Bobby Sands died so future generations could suffer the same fate. Rather, they died so a political solution, albeit one that suited their specifications, could be implanted in Northern Ireland. Similarly, the men who died at the Somme certainly were not thinking that their act of military obedience would be used to legitimize the murders of Northern Ireland citizens. They saw their sacrifice as an answer to a collective Protestant identity struggle in Ireland. When people in Northern Ireland come to see the violence exacted against their martyrs as not necessary but as a tragic waste of life, the mythic histories will break away to reveal a history that does not favor one version over another.

Bibliography

- Aretxaga, Begoña. *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Backus, Margot Gayle. “‘More Useful Washed and Dead’: James Connolly, W.B. Yeats, and the Sexual Politics of ‘Easter, 1916’.” *Interventions* 10 no. 1 (2008), 67-85.
- Beresford, David. *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987.
- Bowan, Timothy. “The Ulster Volunteer Force and the Formation of the 36th (Ulster) Division.” *Irish Historical Studies*. no.128 (2001): 498-518.
- Cronin, Michael. “‘He’s My Country’: Liberalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Gay Fiction.” *Èire-Ireland*. 39 no. 3-4 (2004), 250-267.
- Campbell, JB, McKeown Laurence and O’Hagan, Felim, eds. *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle, 1976-1981*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1994.
- Clark, George. “Margaret Thatcher Pledges no Sellout on Ulster.” *Times* (London) 6. March 1981.
- Conrad, Kathryn. "Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish National Identity." *Cultural Studies* 15 no. 1 (2001), 124-137.
- Cusack, John and McDonald, Henry. *UVF*. Dublin: Poolbeg, 1997.
- Dangerfield, George. *The Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976.
- Fannin, Alfred. *Letters from Dublin, Easter 1916: Alfred Fannin’s Diary of the Rising*. Edited by A. Warwick-Haller and S. Warwick-Haller. Portland (OR): Irish Academic Press, 1995.
- Feehan, John. *Bobby Sands and the Tragedy of Northern Ireland*. Sag Harbor (NY): The Permanent Press, 1983.
- Githens-Mazer, Jonathan. *Myths and Memories of the Easter Rising: Cultural and Political Nationalism in Ireland*. Portland (OR): Irish Academic Press, 2006.
- Graham, Brian and Shirlow, Peter. “The Battle of the Somme in Ulster Memory and Identity.” *Political Geography* 21 no. 7 (2002), 881-904.

- Hennessey, Thomas. *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Jeffery, Keith. *Ireland and the Great War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kennedy-Andrews, Elmer. *(De)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969*. Dublin: Four Corners Press, 2003.
- Kiberd, Declan. "Frank McGuinness and the Sons of Ulster." *The Yearbook of English Studies: Writing Since 1950* 35 (2005), 279-297.
- MacLochliann, Piaras, F. *Last Words: Letter and Statements of the Leaders Executed after the Rising at Easter 1916*. Dublin: The Stationary Office, 1990.
- McGuinness, Frank. *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.
- McNamee, Eoin. *Resurrection Man*. New York: Picador, 1994.
- O'Hearn, Denis. *Nothing But an Unfinished Song: Bobby Sands, The Irish Hunger Striker Who Ignited A Generation*. New York: Nation Books, 2006.
- O'Malley, Padraig. *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.
- O'Neill, Jamie. *At Swim, Two Boys*. New York: Simon Schuster, 2001.
- Russell, Richard Rankin. *Ulster Unionism's Mythic and Religious Culture in Observe the Sons of Ulster: Irish Studies Working Papers*. Fort Lauderdale (FL): Southeastern University Press, 1998.
- Sands, Bobby. *Bobby Sands: Writings from Prison*. Boulder (CO): Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997.
- Sands, Bobby. *Skylark Sing your Lonely Song: An Anthology of Writings of Bobby Sands*. Dublin: Mercier Press, 1982.
- Sasson, Siegfried. *The Poems of Siegfried Sasson*. London: Faber and Faber, 1983.
- Scanlan, Margaret. *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville(VA): The University of Virginia Press, 2001.

- Shooter, WA. *Ulster's Part in the Battle of the Somme: July to November 1916*. Belfast: The Somme Association Limited, 1998.
- Stewart, ATQ. *The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule: 1912-1914*. Hampshire (UK): Gregg Revivals, 1993.
- Townshend, Charles. *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*. London: Allen Lane, 2005.
- Valente, Joseph. "Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim Two Boys*." *Èire-Ireland* 40 no. 3-4 (2005), 58-84.
- Ward, Alan J. *The Easter Rising Revolution and Irish Nationalism*. Arlington Heights (IL) AHM Publishing Corporation, 1980.