Wars of independence: the construction of Irish histories in the work of Gerard Whelan and Siobhán Parkinson

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In their book *Reinventing Ireland*, Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin describe Irish culture in the 1990s as 'characterized by an adulatory and uncritical tone, and which often fails to trace its historical development or to identify the forces that have shaped it. Instead it is seen as marking a break with the past and the coming of age of an enlightened tolerant and liberal Ireland'.[1] The essentializing of national historiographies to suit elements of contemporary culture presents problems when the forces that have shaped modern society are explored.

Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin propose that in attempting to validate a pedigree and promote an image of a tolerant and welcoming nation, Ireland produced a distinct view of history in the1990s. They believe that Irish nationalist history is fashioned into a category of a *distant past* 'that massages conflict out of representation'; thus distancing itself from nationalist violence in Northern Ireland, while simultaneously providing an acceptable cultural commodity in the heritage industry.[2] Viewing the past in such a way thus creates a sense of historical continuity for Ireland. As a result, the fragmentary and antagonistic nature of Irish history is often blurred or overlooked in support of the ruling order. Such a rejection of the Irish past as an area of study ignores many of the unfinished debates within Irish history that may aid in our understanding of contemporary issues.

The beginning of Gerard Whelan's *The guns of Easter*, a novel set in Dublin during the insurrection of 1916, attempts to cater for this neo-liberal, cosmopolitan culture. Whelan includes several political movements that were present in the cultural climate of 1916, with various adult characters reflecting different and often conflicting ideals and philosophies in Irish society at the time. The character of Mr Conway is fighting in the British army during World War I, while on the other side of the divide is the voice of uncle Mick, a member of the Citizen Army.[3] (The

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[1] Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, *Reinventing Ireland: culture, society and global economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 2.

[2] Kirby et al., *Reinventing Ireland*, p. 6.

[3] The character of Mr Conway joined the British army and is fighting for the empire, not in defence of queen and country but because he is unable to get work in Dublin as a result of being involved in the 1913 lockout. Although he wonders 'why should I fight their damned wars?' he blames the bosses for Ireland's problems rather than the English, while Mick views the English as the cause of Ireland's economic and social woes. Gerard Whelan, *The guns of Easter* (Dublin;

Irish Citizen Army was established during the labour disputes of 1913 to protect workers during marches and meetings. James Connolly later became leader of the I.C.A., which mainly consisted of socialist workers. They participated in the 1916 rising.) This offers a more intricate account of events rather than simply rooting the Rising in a simplistic dichotomy of the Irish people versus the Empire. As a result, it appears that any sense of Irish historical continuity is complicated from the outset. The multifaceted nature of the events of 1916, however, is subsequently reduced and retold by the character of Jimmy as he pieces together fragments of arguments that he has overheard in adult conversations. As a result, the narrative form itself problematizes the reception process involved in the construction of dominant historiographies.

Initially through Jimmy's idiolect, the Irish Volunteers and the Citizen Army are not seen as 'real soldiers' in comparison to the Georgius Rex (or Gorgeous Wrecks, as the British soldiers were sometimes known), since Jimmy is clearly in awe of these soldiers, attaching a lot of prestige to them. He believes that 'At least the wrecks had once been real soldiers – not like the Irish Volunteers who wanted Ireland to be a separate country ...' In this description of the legacy of the British, Whelan raises concerns in relation to the writing of history. The tone of the text and the narratorial control of the author are unclear in references to the accomplishments and victories of the Georgius Rex:

> Some of them had fought the Boers in the African war that had ended a few years before Jimmy was born. Others had battled the savage Zulus, or the wild Dervish hordes of the Mahdi, who had killed the saintly General Gordon in Khartoum.[4]

While Whelan is satirizing the methods of historical writing in many British colonial histories, most notably empire adventure stories aimed at a young male readership, it is possible that the irony is lost on the implied child reader.[5] There is no change in tone for the reader and no indication that the passage should be read as ironic. This section is of particular importance when questioning the modes of historical representation and the reception processes that construct the individual's perception of history. Perhaps this is only the character's view of British colonial history that he has acquired through reading various newspaper reports and by listening to adult conversations. But this is also how his perception of Irish history is

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O'Brien Press, 1996), p. 11. [4] Whelan, *Guns*, p. 21. [5] The implied reader is a term used by Wolfgang Iser to describe a hypothetical reader of a text. The implied reader 'embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.' Wolfgang Iser in Greig E. Henderson and Christopher Brown, 'Glossary of Literary Theory', http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/glossary/Implied_reader.html. Accessed 20 September 2003.

established. This has implications for the reception of the entire novel, as Whelan is possibly assuming that his implied reader shares his set of values and knowledge. If Whelan has not structured an implied reader into the text, then the narrative functions to perpetuate racial stereotypes and representations inherent to the colonial project, despite it being a postcolonial text.

This language of imperial adventure stories is mirrored in the immediate glorification of the rebels as Jimmy witnesses the Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers marching toward the GPO. (The Irish Volunteers were a nationalist organization established in 1913 that aimed to fight for the liberty and rights of Irish people. They joined forces with the Citizen Army during Easter 1916.) It is at this point that the complexities of histories outlined above are lost and the rebels are romantically glorified as the British soldiers descend to the level of brutes. As Jimmy recognises the leaders of the rebellion, he comments that 'It was almost as though the three men were surrounded by a light that came from inside them, that had nothing to do with the real Dublin that they were walking through'.[6] They are no longer described as 'lunatics' or 'would-be-heroes', but are firmly mythologized as deliverers of Irish freedom. From this point onward, the acknowledgement of contradictions in Irish history and society is limited, apart from a momentary thought that his mother will be unable to get her separation allowance from the GPO. (The separation allowance was a payment given by the British Government to the families of soldiers who were fighting for the British army during World War I.)

Within the development of the narrative, the depiction of Jimmy's private struggle must fight for space against the public national struggle. The depiction of the stereotypes of history overshadows Jimmy's original battle to find food. He appears to float from historical landmark to historical landmark, as the novel transforms itself from the adventures of a boy during 1916 to a version of 1916 for young children. However, at one point, Jimmy's private moral dilemma eclipses the public history, as he considers stealing the basket of food. He strives to do the right thing, vacillating between becoming a looter and letting his family starve. At home, he explains his confusion to his mother. In response, she begins:

> 'You know it is wrong to shoot at people'. Jimmy was puzzled. 'Yeh', he said. 'But your father is in the army and he shoots at people. And now Mick is out fighting, and maybe he'll have to shoot at people too.'
>
> 'But that's different…' He stopped. It was a complicated matter. He didn't have the words to express himself.
>
> 'Sometimes', his mother said, 'Taking things that aren't yours is the same. It's wrong. But you know it would be more wrong to leave us with no food while this lay thrown away in the street.'[7]

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[6] Whelan, *Guns*, p. 54. [7] Ibid., p. 88.

What may be deduced from this exchange is that in order to feed the starving, sometimes stealing is the only option; in order to achieve freedom from an oppressive situation, sometimes shooting the opposition or oppressor is the only option. In this manner, violence is established for the child reader as the only means of liberation and in turn war is justified. Whelan glosses over the complex arguments and contradictions (such as the role of the women's movement, and the differing ideals and philosophies of the Volunteers and the Citizen Army) found within the various movements in favour of establishing these absolutes.

This justification of violence may also be understood through an analysis of images of childhood in the novel. The construction of childhood as a period of innocence devoid of responsibility is represented, not through the child characters, but through Uncle Mick and the rebels. Whelan constantly likens Mick to a child, using the analogy of rebels as children, found in much of the writing of W.B. Yeats and Pádraic Pearse. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd notes this obsession with metaphors of childhood at the time of the uprising. He believes that there was a conscious effort to invent an image of childhood at the time similar to the conscious effort to construct or invent Ireland.[8]

Kiberd continues by discussing Yeats's use of childhood, particularly in his poem 'Easter 1916', in which the dead heroes are likened to stolen children: 'the rebels being children were not full moral agents, he seems to say, and so, even when they seem to have done wrong, they can be forgiven'.[9] This would concur with Whelan's image of nationalist violence. I argue that it is this romantic depiction of childhood that Whelan perpetuates throughout his novel. This image of childhood innocence is transferred to the rebels, particularly uncle Mick as his 'boyishness' seems to call for forgiveness for his actions and it is indicated to the implied reader that sometimes it is right to do the wrong thing. In this way, violent conflict is not massaged out of Irish history (as proposed above). There does, however, appear to be a definite legitimisation of a violent national history, possibly supporting the current social order's image of a mythical Irish past.[10] Although violent, the Irish Rising is represented as the only means to freedom. Drawing on Kirby's idea, it is in the *distant* past, the present distanced from violence, yet functioning as a vital strand in the pedigree of the current social order.

In the sequel, *A winter of spies*, Sarah's family home is dominated by the intrusion of public events in the private world, primarily through the family's close links with Michael Collins.[11] Sarah wants to be directly involved in a war against the Black and Tans (the irregular members of the Royal Irish Constabulary recruited to patrol an increasingly hostile Ireland), while Jimmy, Da, and Mick reveal their weariness with killing and violence. The representation of Collins as hero unearths unresolved debates in Irish society. He is in one sense seen as a hero, as in the novel, leading Ireland's war against the Empire.[12] However, he may also be viewed as the signatory of the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty, cause of Ireland's partition into two political entities (the then Irish Free State, now the Irish Republic, and the six counties of Northern Ireland) and possibly of the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland. The celebrity status of Collins is interesting in that the novel was released only two years after Neil Jordan's 1996 film *Michael Collins*. At the time, the Irish film censor Sheamus Smith acknowledged that the film contained scenes depicting explicit cruelty and violence. However, he gave the film a Parental Guidance (PG) certificate and recommended that all Irish people, including children, should see the film because of its national importance. The implied readership of *A winter of spies* was therefore already familiar with the figure of Michael Collins. Again, there is a commodification of history in a very postmodernist sense.[13] The audience's knowledge of a previous historical fiction is called upon in order to sustain the narrative of another historical fiction, in an attempt to create historical fact; an imitation of an imitation of history.

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[8] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Cape, 1995), p. 10.

[9] Ibid., p. 114.

[10] See Kirby, *Reinventing Ireland*.

[11] Following his involvement in the Rising, Collins created an intelligence network and employed guerrilla tactics using 'flying columns' to assassinate British troops during the War of Independence. He later became Minister for Finance in the new Irish parliament. Collins was assassinated in 1922.

The construction of history is also questioned in *A winter of spies*. As Sarah transgresses the boundaries that separate her from the adult world, she analyses her own perception of history. She begins by reflecting that: 'In school she learned of history as something made by Kings and Queens and armies', but then she realizes that these official histories are not the only histories that have created society. Sarah grasps that 'History was, for that matter, her Ma baking in the kitchen'.[14] There is a recognition, as in the closing pages of *The guns of Easter*, that both public and private histories have shaped Irish society. However, Whelan primarily documents the public history rather than the private struggle of a family during the Rising and the War of Independence. Within this public history, he assumes a shared set of values and knowledge for his implied readers, presenting a historical narrative as tradition. There is a development in his use of the Irish past in *A winter of spies*, as the narrative focuses on Sarah's predicament during the War of Independence. However, the Conway's history is firmly rooted in the public events of the war, particularly through their close links with Michael Collins. These principally public histories of the novels often gloss over the complexities of the Irish past and subsequently adhere to versions of history that serve to marginalise certain contemporary struggles while promoting others. In contrast, Siobhán Parkinson's exploration of private histories influenced by the public sphere is aligned with contemporary cultural debates. Her narrative calls into question the process of writing history and invites the child reader to question the very idea of a unified notion of history.

[12] See Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins: a biography* (London: Arrow Books, 1991). [13] For a further discussion on *Michael Collins* and postmodernism, see Ruth Barton, 'From history to heritage: representations of the past in Irish cinema 1970–2000'. Unpublished thesis, University College Dublin, 2000. M0120407UD. [14] Gerard Whelan, *A winter of spies* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1998), p. 118.

In her novels, Parkinson uses the Irish past to scrutinise local and contemporary issues in order to make sense of universal issues, working through and exploring narratives of the past in order to create solidarities in the present. This idea of interrogating dominant Irish historiographies can be found in the work of Luke Gibbons.[15] He believes it is important 'to give a belated hearing to voices or patterns of experience that have escaped the nets of official knowledge or have been muted by the dominant ideologies of the day', and to continue to explore the forces that have shaped contemporary society.[16] *Amelia* and *No peace for Amelia* attempt to create a more balanced historical memory, with such an investigation of Irish history revealing some of the marginalized dimensions of the Irish Renaissance.

In *Amelia*, set in Dublin in 1914, we are presented with a version of Irish history that differs from dominant national historiographies. Parkinson centres the narrative around the protagonist Amelia and her private struggles within her family home. It is these private struggles that are of great concern in the public sphere of the time as issues such as class, gender, nationalism, religion and violence are raised through various social and ideological movements of the period. In the novel, many of these public debates are explored through the private struggles and concerns of the Pim household.

The fact that the family are Quakers, members of the egalitarian, non-conformist Religious Society of Friends, is an important narrative construct, as it allows the author to explore the issues of the time from an unconventional and perhaps more objective viewpoint. It evades the traditional binaries found in many accounts such as English versus Irish, or Catholic versus Protestant, avoiding the simplification of ideological movements. It also is the Quakers' belief in pacifism that complicates the use of violence to achieve freedom. The depiction of such a history is also related to Michel Foucault's idea of popular memory, in that it deploys the memory of popular struggles that were suppressed by dominant historiographies. Popular memory is a means of deconstructing the forces at work in the production of official history and recognising the validity of those predominantly undocumented histories of marginalized groups.[17]

Amelia and *No peace for Amelia* challenge some of the dominant or received histories in Irish society; particularly history that acknowledges events of the public but not the private sphere.[18] Amelia is overtly concerned with material wealth and frivolity, while her mother is equally passionate about issues of equality and women's rights. However, the complexities of the debates are revealed through the characters of Amelia, Mrs Pim and the servant, Mary Ann. The view that women's rights are of any significance is strongly linked to issues of social class. Mrs Pim sees it as a matter of natural justice that women should be allowed to vote. Amelia complicates the matter by asking why some people get to be 'ladies' and others 'women', and wondering whether that should be a case of natural justice also. Meanwhile Mary Ann, a member of the lower classes, is so preoccupied with her day-to-day concerns and keeping her family alive that she cannot see the difference a vote will make to her immediate circumstances.

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[15] Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish culture* (Cork: Cork U.P. in association with Field Day, 1996). Also see his editorial work in *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing*: 'Constructing the canon: versions of national identity', vol. 2, pp 950–1020, and 'Challenging the canon: revisionism and cultural criticism', vol. 3, pp 561–680. [16] Luke Gibbons, *Transformations*, p. 16. [17] See Keith Tribe, 'History and the production of popular memory', *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977–8), pp 9–23. [18] Luke Gibbons notes the suppression of Irish struggles in the construction of dominant historiographies.

Throughout the novel, Parkinson maintains a pacifist undertone, mainly through the character of Mrs Pim, while simultaneously creating a forum for the debate of various ideological viewpoints. It is not until her mother is sent to jail that Amelia realizes the true value of the women's struggle. Her father, revered up to this point, remarks:

> 'They've done it before, you know, arrested these suffragettes with their chains and their stones and their ridiculous placards. Votes for women, indeed! If they stayed at home and looked after their families they wouldn't need votes. They'd be happy doing the work God intended them to do. They shouldn't be out on the street disrupting the natural order.' Amelia gaped at Papa. She had never heard him express opinions like this.[19]

When presented with such an extreme viewpoint, Amelia slowly begins to change her opinion. Although she cannot quite articulate the reason behind this change and is still confused by feminist issues, she believes in her mother's cause.

However, the true value of the suffragette movement is revealed to Amelia through her own private experience as she tends to her sick brother. Her father laments the possible loss of his son by saying 'Ah, a daughter. Daughters are well and fine, but what is a man without his son?'(143) Amelia, flabbergasted, is not angry with her father or with Edmund, but with society, for she believes that 'He was only saying what was true. That boys were more valuable than girls. That was what made her angry, that bare fact.' (144) It is now that Amelia begins to comprehend her mother's plight and the importance of the women's struggle. Through her own private history and experience, she realizes the relevance of the public history of the women's movement.

The continuing struggle for gender equality is aligned with the suffragette movement in the early part of the century, which in turn is linked back to the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Amelia packs two books for her mother in gaol, the bible and Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the rights of women.* (128) Parkinson thus emphasizes the importance of the women's movement to Irish history, in that it offers a model for present struggles against oppression. However, this historical continuity is problematized and contradicted. As Amelia supports her mother's cause, she continues to send her washing to the Magdalen laundry (as laundries run by convents and staffed mainly by ostracized unmarried mothers – the Magdalens – were known. The last of these was finally closed in the early 1990s).[20] In this way, Parkinson reveals a subtle irony in the multifaceted fight for women's rights.

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[19] Siobhán Parkinson, *Amelia* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1993), p. 127.

Despite Mary Ann declaring herself a socialist, issues of class, workers' rights and poverty are explored through the characters of Amelia and Mrs Pim, while Amelia's friend Lucinda represents the conservative views of the upper classes. Mrs Pim lays the blame with the broader social structure as Lucinda accuses the poor of inflicting poverty upon themselves. Social inequality is explored from both a public and private perspective, raising debates about the roots of poverty within society. The subject is further developed through the character of the unfriendly dressmaker who blames Dublin's problems on the 'foreign ideas'[21] that labour leader James Larkin and Constance Markievicz, revolutionary and suffragette, had imported. The portrayal of history is never reduced or simplified, as Parkinson reveals the worthy ideals of Larkin and Markievicz, while simultaneously representing the harsher social realities that accompanied the implementation of such ideals.

In *No peace for Amelia*, Parkinson continues to explore the trials and tribulations of Amelia Pim, now fifteen years old. The private history of a young Quaker girl is set against the backdrop of the public histories of Britain and Ireland. Amelia is aware of World War I but is more concerned with her hair staying up on a Sunday afternoon than with investigating the complexities of war. As a pacifist, Amelia does not engage directly with the ethics of war, but firmly maintains an anti-war opinion. That is, until the character of Frederick signs up to prove his manhood (44), and then Amelia calls her anti-war stance into question. She begins by adopting a mythical view of war and starts to see Frederick's fight as magnificent. This romantic account of war echoes many of the public histories that promote an image of brave young men fighting to protect those at home. This often acts as a justification of events and to support the ruling order that follows. This is also similar to mythical views of the Rising that created martyrs of the leaders of the rebellion. Amelia's attempts to romanticize events reach a climax as she waves to Frederick's ship. Her poetic language takes over as she comments 'Oh look, there's a definite glow in the east', mirroring many of the poetic histories of both Ireland and England.[22] The harsh realities of the private histories are transformed into public histories of valour and sacrifice. This romantic ideal is undercut by Mary Ann's response, reminding the implied reader of the brutality and suffering of war: 'Glow in the east, yer granny ... It's not a poem we're in.' (62)

Parkinson emphasizes the cruelty of war in Frederick's private account in his letter to Amelia. She reveals a private history that is often overshadowed by the public and official histories. Similarly, Amelia's exposure to the lives of Mary Ann and Patrick force her to recognize the futility of war and return to her pacifist ideology with a greater understanding of the principles in which they are rooted, and the true meaning of being a pacifist: '"It means", she said firmly, "that you have to work for peace, not just have a distaste for war".' (176) Although an important philosophy to keep in mind during any conflict, perhaps Parkinson is alluding to the Northern Ireland conflict and the peace process that was developing at the time of writing. As a result, historical events are not firmly positioned within a *distant past* but are used to help understand contemporary issues.

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[20] For a further discussion on the place of the Magdalen laundries in Irish history, see Francis Finnegan's *Do penance or perish* (Kilkenny: Pilltown Publishing, 2002). [21] Parkinson, *Amelia*, p. 52. [22] Siobhán Parkinson, *No peace for Amelia* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1994), p. 62.

As Amelia's personal ideologies are called into question, so too is the nationalist stance of Mary Ann. Similar to Sarah in *A winter of spies*, Mary Ann wants to play a role in Irish history and become a heroine of sorts. Parkinson draws upon famous Irish historical figures that are often mythologized within Irish historiographies as Mary Ann (in a melodramatic outburst) aligns herself to Ireland's mythical heroes, believing that she would be:

> a modern warrior-woman, like Queen Maeve or Granuaile. She'd be part of the ancient struggle against the English oppressor and vital to the uprising that would finally rid Ireland of English rule and allow Robert Emmet's epitaph be written when his country took her place amongst the nations of the earth. (36)[23]

Mary Ann attempts to write a poetic history of Ireland, linking the current nationalist struggle to Ireland's legendary heroes, ignoring the complexities of Irish history.

The contradictory nature of the Rising is represented through Mary Ann's inner struggle and the Pims' general and ideological support. Mary Ann can only see a valid participation in the country's history as occurring in the public sphere of history, negating the private history in which she is currently involved. However, it is to her own private sphere that she constantly returns. Following her romantic outbursts, the reality returns to her as she remembers Patrick and the life-threatening events of the public sphere. On reading Patrick's letter, Mary Ann can only comprehend elements of it as a result of his bad handwriting. She notes the 'confusion in its construction and tone' and that 'It was full of sentences repeated from things that Mr Pearse, the leader of the rebels, had said, and bits of a poem by somebody else all about blood and roses, which was half like a prayer and half not.' (35) The messages of Pearse as only half-understood may epitomize the manner in which many of the goals and ideologies of the rebels were lost or forgotten after the rebellion. The new leaders of the country did not bring the type of freedom promised by many of the rebels, but took the form of a conservative

[23] For this melodramatic outburst, Parkinson draws upon famous Irish historical figures that are often mythologized within Irish historiography.

neo-colonialism. Many of the ideologies for which the rebels had died (in the belief that their ideals would live on in a new Ireland) were simply forgotten or ignored to suit the needs of the new ruling and social order.[24] The novels of Gerard Whelan and Siobhan Parkinson demonstrate two contrasting approaches to the writing of Irish history. Parkinson's re-writing appears to be much more self-conscious, as the past is used to challenge received 'official' history and highlight cultural debates in the 1990s. In comparison to Whelan's texts which ultimately depict a linear, public history, *Amelia* and *No peace for Amelia*, document a private struggle in Irish history around 1916, presenting the readers with conflicting historical narratives and allowing them to draw their own conclusions. The novels highlight the impact that the public history of the women's movement has had on the private history of Amelia Pim, simultaneously exploring an often-marginalized public history through a private sphere and exposing many forgotten ideals that have yet to be realized in Irish society.

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[24] For a further discussion, see Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: politics, culture, philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997); and Kirby, *Reinventing Ireland.*