

**The**  
**BOOKPRESS**  
*THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS*

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Volume 8, Number 7      November 1998      Ithaca, New York

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**Irish Journal**

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## I. Carlingford

Carlingford is a small jewel of a town in Louth, itself the smallest county in Ireland. It is located on the east coast just off the Irish sea in a protected harbor whose inlet, or lough, extends upland the ten miles into County Down. It sits at the foot of a 3,000 foot mountain, Slieve Foy, whose peak is often as not covered with clouds moving in from the west, and whose hills and slopes are dotted with sheep grazing the grass and heather. It's more a village than a town, with a population under 1000, and if you want to go shopping in department stores or larger outlets, you have to travel to Dundalk about 8 or 9 miles south around the peninsula, or 7 or 8 miles up the lough road to Newry, which is just across the border with Northern Ireland.

I'd first come to Carlingford over 20 years ago on something of an unexpected sidetrip. I had been best man at my brother's wedding in Paris that summer, and there had been a sale price on a Paris-Dublin-Paris roundtrip which would allow me an excursion to explore my roots, or tubers as I liked to say, given my fondness for potatoes. At the time I knew almost nothing about my connection to Ireland. My father had emigrated from this part of Ireland in the 1920's, following his brother, my Uncle Barney, who had come over the year before. Since my father died just after my fifth birthday--a freak appendicitis mishap--I have almost no memory of who he was, other than a few images, mostly in his New York City policeman's uniform. He had been in America for over 10 years when he met and married my mother, so most of her recollections had to do with what had happened since he had been in the U.S. One of Barney's sons, though, my cousin Donald, had told me we had relatives in Carlingford, and that I should be sure to look up the McKeivitts if I ever got to that town.

That initial visit is now part of the town legend. The bus conductor, worried that the young Yank on the bus with the broken suitcase wouldn't find his way to the McKeivitts, had the driver redirect the bus from the town station to the door of their grocery store. Joe McKeivitt, standing in the store in his apron, looked sternly dubious as I entered. But when I introduced myself as his wife Lily's cousin from America, he immediately extended his hand with a bright smile and said, "Well then, welcome home !" He took me into his house, which connected to the store, sat me in the parlor, and set his children running. Dan was to get a steak from the shop for my tea; Elizabeth Ann was to fly upstairs and start a bath to take the dust off my travels. A few minutes later, when Lily herself arrived, the welcome was complete. A woman with bright red hair and a wonderfully infectious smile, she was delighted with everything I had to say. She couldn't get over discovering that she had another first cousin sitting in front of her.

It was later that day, though, that I came across the other side, the underside, of this familial Eden. Lily had to pick up some of the bulk goods for the grocery shop and asked me if I wanted to accompany her to Newry, which was just a few minutes up the road. The scenery along the road was spectacular, with the Cooley mountains rising just off to the left and Carlingford lough, which was about a half mile wide at that point, separating this side of the land from the Mourne mountains which were rising on the far side of the water. Looking a bit mischievous, Lily casually asked me if I were carrying any political papers. I didn't have a clue as to what she was talking about; the Vietnam War was over, and no one burned their draft cards anymore. Then I noticed two things at once. In the water was an enormous British gunboat, or at least it looked enormous in the inlet, and its guns seemed pointed at the road we were on. And ahead of us was a fortified roadblock with machine gun towers. A very

young soldier with an M-16 was directing automobiles, one by one, into a central area where the driver would get out, walk to a concrete bunker, and slip some identification in through the slit in the fortification. Lily turned to me and said, "Those are the visitors."

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I'd come back to Ireland and Carlingford a number of times since, and this summer I had a grant from Ithaca College to attend the Yeats International School in Sligo. That initial visit had intensified an interest I had in modern Irish literature, and for the last eight or nine years I had been teaching more of it in my courses. My last time over had been in 1993 as part of a sabbatic to research the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry (*Bookpress*, Summer 1993). Using my father's thatched roof cottage which my cousins still owned in nearby Whitestown as a base of operations, I drove up to Derry and down to Dublin (or as the Irish insist, down to Derry and up to Dublin).

At that time, the political and economic scene was dismal. Ireland was in the tailend of an extended recession, which produced layoffs in Dublin and Galway, especially in the high-tech, high-paying sectors. The Provisional IRA was still squared off, as they had been for over 20 years, against the Protestant paramilitaries and the British Army. For all the talk of compromise and reconciliation, the Major government hadn't shook itself free of the Thatcher legacy ("No, no, no") which refused any recognition of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provos. Gerry Adams's books were banned in the Republic, and hopes of peace talks foundered with each new act of violence. In the two weeks I was there, there were three assassinations, and things got much worse in terms of bombings and killings before they got better.

Clearly, I was now returning to a changed country. For the past five years, the Celtic Tiger had come to life. The GNP of Ireland had grown the fastest of all the countries

in the European Union, and the Republic had sustained low unemployment and low inflation. In terms of politics, too, there had at last been what everyone hoped was a breakthrough in the north.

In April, after four years of broken ceasefires, walk-outs, and endless political posturing and in-fighting, George Mitchell had, just before Easter, facilitated a peace accord to which all the significant parties had signed on to. (Interestingly enough, this was called the Mitchell Accord for a day or two to acknowledge Mitchell's role as a neutral American arbitrator, but almost immediately it was anointed the Good Friday Agreement, reminding everyone that psychic calendars in Ireland, north and south, are ecclesiastical). More importantly, in a general referendum held simultaneously in the north and south on May 22, the citizens of both Northern Ireland and the Republic overwhelmingly approved the terms of the agreement. Next, on July 3, the elections which were held as part of the agreement took place without a hitch, and Sinn Fein won 18 seats in the new Assembly which was to have limited self-government in the north. All of this seemed near-miraculous in light of the decades of violence and animosity, but, as I found out when Joe and Lily picked me up at Dublin airport, things in Ireland were considerably more volatile than they appeared abroad.

Life had changed for the better for the McKevitts as well. Joe had sold the grocery store the year before and retired, so he and Lily had more time, as he said, just to enjoy life. Dan and Elizabeth Ann were all grown up, with Dan working as a salesman in Dublin and Elizabeth Ann as a community health organizer in Drogheda. They'd be up (or down) for a visit before I left for Sligo. In the ride from the airport, and, over the next several days either during a walk or over a drink, I heard from each of them about some of the real problems left unresolved by the Agreement.

One of the reasons for the rush to get the accords signed before Easter was the fact that

marching season in the north would begin shortly after--that season where the Protestant Orange Order would commemorate the victory of the Protestants over the Catholics some three hundred years earlier. The marches and the parades occurred throughout the spring and summer and culminated with coordinated parades on July 12, the day commemorating the victory of William III over the Catholic forces of James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. These parades have been an open boil on the skin of the northern body politic, a constant source of provocation and retaliation. As it happened, they were the occasion of the first dramatic test of the Agreement.

The Parades Commission set up specifically to deal with these exercises of free speech, as the Orange Order perceived them, had banned a planned Orange march from Drumcree Church in Portadown. This parade, passing down the Gavaghy Road through the Catholic section of town, had provoked extensive riots and counter-riots in the past. This summer the Orange Order decided to test the resolve of the British government by staging increasingly violent protests which involved, among other things, the firebombing of Catholic homes and churches. Three years earlier there had been a similar ban at Portadown, but violent protests on the part of the Orange Order forced the British government to lift the ban. There was on Irish television a now-infamous clip of Ian Paisley and David Trimble skipping hand-in-hand down the Gavaghy Road to celebrate their victory. Thus it was no surprise that the Orange Order assumed a similar British capitulation this July.

This time, though, the British did not back down; in fact, on July 11, just as the rioting at Drumcree once again seemed to be getting out of hand, they brought in units of the First Parachute Regiment, the Special Air Services regiment responsible for the killing of the 14 civilian protestors on Bloody Sunday back in 1972. The Widgery Tribunal, appointed by the British government, exonerated the regiment completely, much to the dismay and outrage of

Irish and international observers, and, as part of a reconciliation process, Tony Blair has authorized Lord Saville of Newdigate to reinvestigate the Bloody Sundays killings. The deployment of the First Parachute was an irony lost on no one, north or south. As Elizabeth Ann drily observed, "Those lads would shoot their own grandmother, so the Orangemen knew they weren't going to get a free ride this time."

But what averted the predicted public cataclysm turned out to be a horrific act of individual violence. Early on the morning of July 12 unknown assailants, presumably on the side of the Orange protestors, threw a petrol-bomb through the window of Christine Quinn and Raymond Craig, a "mixed" couple (read Catholic and Protestant), and in the conflagration that followed, three of their children, all under the age of 10, were burned to death. There had been literally hundreds of incidents of sectarian violence in the days leading up to the 12<sup>th</sup>, but the peculiar horror of the deaths of innocent children repelled the country, and in the aftermath the protests at Drumcree subsided.

Two events at the time seemed to illustrate the changed political landscape of the north. The day after the death of the Quinn children, David Trimble, now the elected First Minister of the new northern Assembly, issued a joint statement with Seamus Mallon, the Catholic First Deputy Minister, calling for the Orangemen "to immediately end their protest and to return to their homes." Needless to say, a statement of this sort would have been unthinkable for the man who danced the victory jig with Ian Paisley on the same spot three years earlier. Even more paradoxical, at least in the political world of cause-and-effect in the North, Trimble's own constituency is the Protestant unionists of Portadown who had elected him on a hard-line, "no surrender" platform. The distance Trimble had to travel from the dance with Paisley to the statement with Mallon has earned him enormous praise abroad, as witnessed by his recently being awarded, along with John Hume, the Nobel Peace Prize for 1998. But it has also generated

enormous mistrust for him among unionists and nationalists alike, and the Peace Prize may oddly destabilize his role as peacemaker.

The same Parade Commission which had banned the Orange march down the Garvaghy Road in Drumcree, in an effort to strike a balance between the opposing sides, had allowed an Orange march down the Lower Ormeau Road in Belfast on July 13. This march too had been a scene of violence in the past, and, given the outrage and universal condemnation generated by the death of the Quinn children, I had pessimistically assumed there would be nationalist retaliation during this march. Once that fuse was detonated, the violence and hatred would explode throughout the north.

But the Lower Ormeau Road march went off peacefully. Nationalist organizers, assuring that there would be no violence, asked the police and army to pull back, which they did. Along the parade route, the nationalist protestors carried black flags and placards saying "Parade of Shame" and maintained complete silence as the Orangemen marched by. Joe McKeivitt, who backs Sinn Fein's position in the agreement, explained, "There wasn't a stone thrown in Northern Ireland that day; that was the discipline of Sinn Fein." While I wondered whether any group can exert monolithic control over a population filled with so many different degrees and forms of burning resentments, I agreed that Sinn Fein may have done more to break the back of bigotry by turning the other cheek that day than they had in 30 years of sectarian bombing.

## II. Sligo

Sligo, like Carlingford, is a town in the Republic very close to the border with Northern Ireland. It's located on the other side of the island in the northwest right on the Atlantic coast, and therefore the most direct route from Carlingford is through the north. It's about the same size as Dundalk and about the same distance from the border, and therefore, as Joe

informs me during our drive over, Sligo would be seen as a nationalist town. Joe proves something of a political and demographic guide as we pass through each town and county. One area, he says, is "true blue," meaning heavily unionist, while another is nationalist, and yet another mixed. It's hard for me to imagine having such familiarity with the political landscape of a place, or even to imagine the effects it has on day-to-day life. Living side by side in separate communities, according to Seamus Heaney, has produced in northerners a code in the way they talk, a way of indicating by reticence and indirection what they mean, summed up in the title of one of his poems: "Whatever you say say nothing." Joe and Lily drop me off at the Yeats Building in downtown Sligo, and insist that I come back in two weeks for a last visit before returning to America.

The Yeats Building, where most of the seminars will be held over the next two weeks, is next to the Garavogue River which runs through downtown Sligo. It's there I meet George Watson from the University of Aberdeen, who is this year's director. Watson, to my delight, looks, talks, and even smiles like Seamus Heaney. As it happens, he is a northern Catholic from Portadown, and, as he playfully suggests at an opening session, this year he has packed the Yeats School with northerners. In fact, though, what he has done is gather a disputation of critics (if that's the right group word) from Ireland, north and south, Scotland, England, and the U.S. to review the current state of Yeats criticism. The study of Yeats's poetry has become something of a flashpoint in the Irish culture wars which have erupted, parallel to the political disruption, over the past two decades, and the morning lectures, at 9:30 and 11:15 daily, constitute a kind of graduate course in Yeats.

Twenty different lecturers, over the course of the next two weeks, take a two-pronged approach to his work. Some address each of the individual volumes of Yeats's poetry in sequence as they were published in his lifetime, and the two-week trajectory thus constitutes a critical

overview of his life and work. Others place Yeats in a variety of cultural and critical contexts which have emerged in the last decade--gender, the visual arts, politics, and nationalism, among others. The talks are absolutely first-rate, and, when the third or fourth lecturer cites Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, it's clear that post-colonialism has moved to the forefront of Yeats criticism this summer. It's the Irish lecturers who prove most irreverent, though. Patricia Coughlan from University College Cork has no patience with Yeats's aristocratic posturing in the later poems, and Fintan O'Toole from the Irish Times archly notes that, since his death in 1939, Yeats is quoted more frequently by Irish politicians advancing their own agendas than by Irish poets interested in his anachronistic vision of Ireland.



The Yeats House

In addition to the lectures, there are an array of one-week seminars devoted to individual topics and approaches. These meet daily in the late afternoon from 5:00 to 6:30, leaving the time between the lectures and the seminars open for reading, walks along the Garavogue quays, or naps to clear away the cobwebs resulting from

late nights at the pub. The two seminars I sign up for are Bernard O'Donoghue's seminar on Yeats's early poems and Helen Vendler's "Yeats and Elegy," and both of them prove spectacular. O'Donoghue is an Irish poet who teaches medieval literature at Wadham College, Oxford. He is bilingual in Irish and English, an accomplished linguist and critic (he's written a book on Heaney's poetry), and winner of the Whitbread Poetry prize for his 1995 *Gunpowder*. In the seminar, he's encyclopedic in his knowledge of the poems, deft at teasing out semantic and prosodic nuances, and completely approachable, both in class and out. It's like having a poetry mentor for a week.

Vendler, probably the best known "close reader" of poetry on both sides of the Atlantic, proves vintage Vendler. Using Milton's "Lycidas" as the paradigm elegy for entry into Yeats, she ranges effortlessly over five centuries of poetry in English to provide clarifying models for Yeats's expansion and transformation of the genre. In the seminar, rather than the formidable authority many of the students were expecting, she's very funny and down to earth. She insists that the students participate in the discussion and presents the most subtle of readings as straightforward common sense, if you just take the time to look at the poem. Even so, it's breathtaking how much poetry she has committed to memory and quotes verbatim to support or contextualize Yeats's strategies in the shaping of his poems. In midweek she teaches right through a bout with bronchitis and finishes with a stunningly condensed reading of the elegiac poems in Yeats's last volume.

Throughout the two weeks of the School, too, there are poetry and fiction readings held in the evening at St. John's Cathedral, delivered from the raised pulpit which each of the writers has to ascend in order to read. Starting with Patrick McCabe, who reads from his *Butcher Boy*, each of the writers notes that it's the first time he's spoken from such an ecclesiastical height. After the readings, there are informal receptions for the writers at the School's Social

Centre (read the Silver Swan hotel pub across the street from the Yeats Building). Since most of the lecturers and seminar leaders are also staying at the hotel, the pub becomes the place to gather in the evening.

Both the faculty and the writers seem to relish the informality. It's a touch intoxicating, over a pint, to ask Bernard MacLaverty what he thinks of my teaching his "Life Drawing" next to Joyce's "A Painful Case" since they both explore, as I see it, the myopic underside of an artistic sensibility. He's delighted to be placed in such distinguished company and fills in a few details that had occupied his mind when he was writing the tale. Another time I get into a one-on-one with John Montague, who has joined one of the seminars for three days. I ask him about his last meeting with Beckett, which he'd written about in *The New York Times Book Review*, and the subjects range out from there. Montague, born in Brooklyn in 1929, was taken back as an infant to County Tyrone in Northern Ireland and fostered out to his mother's family, and his poems record the strange sense of coming into his Irish identity from such an alienated perspective. Sensing some kindred transplanted spirit, I tell him about an experience I had before coming over to the School.

On the way to Carlingford from the airport, I stopped in to the County records center at Dundalk to get a copy of my father's birth certificate. Since my father was born in Ireland, I am eligible for dual citizenship if I can gather all the appropriate documents. The computer age hadn't descended on the Louth Records office yet, so I waited while the clerk took down the huge ledger with the birth certificates for 1906, cracked open the book to the appropriate page, and copied out the document, entry by entry. When I read the handwritten entries across the page, though, I paused. They read: Name of Infant: Edward; Name of Father: Peter Murphy; Occupation: Farmer; Signature of Father: **X**. The **X** was placed between the words "His" and "Mark" which the clerk had copied at the top and bottom of the signature box.

Right away, Montague knows what's up; it isn't necessary to spell out all the ironies of starting from that mark and ending up at the Yeats School. He asks me if I'm going to write a poem about it. I say I want to, but haven't written for some time. He then adds, "If you're going to write it, here's the first line: 'This is a poem about a man who couldn't write.'" When I see him the next day, he asks me if I've finished the poem yet. I reply no, and he says only half-jokingly, "That's the amateur in you; old Yeats'd have hammered it out by now." It takes me a while to figure out the second piece of advice, at least in terms of my own writing, is more valuable than the first.

In the second week, though, the evening conversations turn more specifically to northern politics. Frank Ormsby, a Belfast poet, reads poems from his recent book *The Ghost Train*, and one sequence reflects his joy and anxiety of expecting a child against the background of alternate ceasefire and violence in the north. Later in the Silver Swan, when we talk more specifically about the peace agreement, he becomes very emotional in his opposition to the prisoner release program. I stayed up late one night with Dan McKeivitt back in Carlingford talking though the pros and cons of such a release program. Dan knew of the torture, the murder, the human violation that many of the prisoners, both Loyalist and Provo, had committed and been convicted of, but he couldn't see any way around such amnesty if there was going to be peace. For Ormsby, though, the release of the prisoners, especially those convicted of atrocities, means an utter abandonment of human principle.

Edna Longley comes over from Queen's University, Belfast, to give her lecture on the Irish context of Yeats. She examines--and skewers--the myopic and condescending assumptions of American and British modernist critics who fail to see Yeats's poetry in its specifically Irish social and political context. I had read a number of Longley's works--she's the principle critic of Ireland's Field Day and doesn't pull punches--and so am pleased to see her at the

Silver Swan later in the evening. At first, Longley has much to say about the paralyzing dialectic the two communities in the north are caught up in, with each side reinforcing the fears and anxieties of the other. What starts out as a conversation on the possibility of peace ends up later in the evening surprisingly personal: I recount my own painful exit from the Church in adolescence, to which she responds with parallel stories from her own background.

The last night of the School is a late one at the Silver Swan. The singalong, which has become part of the evenings for both weeks, moves from the pub to the hotel lobby at midnight (thereby allowing drinks to be served to the guests), and everyone, faculty and student, joins in. There had been a group of local nationalists earlier in the week singing *their* songs, almost in contest with the foreigners--Irish and non-Irish alike--who had invaded the hotel, and so at first there's some diplomatic restraint to the songs. At one point I begin to sing a drinking song I learned in graduate school--a macabre round about people dying and worms eating them up and ducks eating up worms and us eating up ducks and everyone eating up everyone else. One of the lecturers from Trinity turns to me and says, "Careful--that's a Yorkshire song," and I break off.

An hour later, and presumably a drink or two further on, he breaks into a full-throated version of the song himself, and, all factional concerns dissolved into ecumenical chorus, we join in on the refrain.

### III. Carlingford

I left Sligo on the Dublin train in the early afternoon on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and about the time I was gazing at the purple heather growing on the peat in the Bog of Allen, the bomb exploded in Omagh. No one on the train, of course, knew anything about it, and when I got to Connolly Station in Dublin, everyone seemed concerned with his or her own business as the crowds moved through the station and out toward

Grafton Street. I met up with Dan McKeivitt at the department store where he works, and we headed out together for the drive up to Carlingford.

Dan, as it happens, is something of a news junkie, so, in between telling me the latest clergy jokes circulating around Dublin, he pressed the radio station buttons in search of news or the many commentary shows that fill the Irish airwaves. He had almost pressed another station button when the news broke that a massive bomb had exploded in Omagh some 2 ½ hours earlier. There were many casualties, with some confirmed dead, and the property damage was extensive. Very quickly Dan searched through other stations for confirmation and follow-up, and, as we sped north, the death toll began to rise.

When a newscaster announced that the confirmed death total was now at 16, Dan said to the windshield, "O Christ, it's worse than Enniskillen." Dan was referring to the worst civilian bombing in the north over the past decades. In November 1987 the IRA had detonated a bomb at a Protestant Remembrance Day service commemorating World War I war dead. The blast killed 11 and wounded 63 Enniskillen residents, and given the occasion and the people attending the service, it was seen as a deliberate massacre of a civilian population.

When we got to Carlingford, the TV was on in the living room and stayed on for the rest of the day and night. The details of the carnage spilled out of the screen hour after hour, and the specifics were first nauseating, then numbing. The death count rose to 20; scores of people were injured and maimed. A boy's leg had been blown off, lying in the street with his shoe still on it, while corpses were strewn over the road. There was a horrific story of three generations of the same family being killed simultaneously in the blast: a grandmother, her pregnant daughter, and the daughter's eighteen-month-old baby girl. The local hospitals could not handle the number of



victims, estimated now at over 200, and helicopters were brought in to evacuate the wounded to hospitals in Belfast, Derry, Enniskillen, and Dungannon. By the end of the night the death count was 28, and one other victim would later die in hospital.

The circumstances surrounding the blast began to emerge. The group calling itself the “Real IRA” had telephoned in two warnings to Ulster Television and a third to the Samaritans, using the recognized code words for that organization, and said that a bomb was going to explode at the courthouse in “Main Street” Omagh in 30 minutes. The television station instantly notified the police who in turn began an immediate evacuation of the area around the courthouse at the top end of the town’s High Street. The police, assuming the bomb was near the court building, began evacuating people down to the bottom end of High Street, which runs into Market Street. The car bomb, however, had been parked at the junction of Market Street and the Dublin Road, and the police had unwittingly directed people toward rather than away from the bomb. Thus, there were hundreds of people in the very area of the bomb when it exploded, and the force was powerful enough to collapse three nearby buildings.

The group which made the calls and thereby claimed the responsibility for the bomb was one of several groups which had splintered off from the IRA Provisionals and Sinn Fein as the peace talks had proceeded during the past several years. I had talked about these groups with Elizabeth Ann McKeivitt a couple of weeks earlier, and she said their main grievance was the concept of Partition upon which the peace accords were based. What the accord recognized, and what the subsequent elections ratified, was a concept that Irish Republicans had resisted since the Treaty of 1921. The accord guaranteed Northern Ireland’s status as part of the United Kingdom, a status which would not be changed without the consent of the majority of people of Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein presented the agreement as a transitional phase toward the

agreed-upon goal of a unified Ireland, but for the “Real IRA” it was a betrayal of everything the earlier IRA had stood for, of everything that the hunger strikers in the 1980’s had died for.

This particular group, as it happened, was very close to home. A number of the IRA members who broke off from the Provisionals and Sinn Fein were from County Louth, and the leader of the group lived and worked in Dundalk. Joe McKeivitt, who’s usually an ebullient, gregarious man, remained stunned and depressed by the events unfolding on the television and several hours later bitterly summed up the motive for the blast: “This is not about the Brits, Kevin; it’s about who’s the better Irishman.”

In the days and weeks that followed the bombing, there was some small consolation to be found in the Irish response to the massacre. As Liam Ferrie, editor of *The Irish Emigrant* on the Internet, pointed out, in all the newspaper and media accounts of the victims of the blast, there was no attempt to separate out the Catholic from the Protestant casualties, as in “x number of Catholics as opposed to y number of Protestants died in the blast”; they were all Irish citizens of Omagh, a mixed community. Exactly one week later, at 3:10 in the afternoon of August 22, hundreds of thousands observed a minute of silence at commemoration services all across the Republic and Northern Ireland.

Both the Irish and British governments introduced emergency legislation to crack down on terrorism, but the shock of the blast itself seemed to have jolted some of the paramilitary organizations. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) announced a permanent ceasefire, and the “Real IRA” announced a suspension of all military operations while it “was embarking on a process of consultation on our future direction.” Gerry Adams, speaking the week before Bill Clinton made a trip to Ireland, condemned the Omagh bombing and stated, for the first time, that violence must be “a thing of the past, over, done with and gone.” Shortly after that statement was issued, the Provisional IRA

responded to the Real IRA's refusal to declare a permanent ceasefire.

On the evening of September 1, in a series of coordinated visits reminiscent of those orchestrated by Don Corleone, members of the Provisional IRA visited the homes of approximately 60 members of the Real IRA and the 32 County Sovereignty Committee associated with it. Within a 90-minute period homes were visited in south Armagh, Dundalk, Dublin, and other locations further south. As *The Irish Times* tersely put it, "Two unmasked men visited each house and read a statement from the Army Council. It demanded the Real IRA disband, the sources said, otherwise action would be taken against its members and against those who resigned from Sinn Fein last year." They were given a two-week period to make amends, with some simply warned that "action" would be taken, and others specifically told they would be shot. While there was some speculation concerning the Provisional IRA's intent as to its carrying out the threats, on September 8 the Real IRA announced a "complete cessation" of all hostilities as of the previous midnight.

In terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the Omagh bombing brought the volatile issue of decommissioning front and center, with the unionists insisting that the Provisional IRA must turn in its weapons before the peace process can continue. Part of Bill Clinton's trip to Ireland was to urge the negotiations to continue, and he appeared on a number of platforms with Tony Blair, David Trimble, and Seamus Mallon throughout his visit to Northern Ireland. This campaign was capped by an emotional visit with the survivors of the Omagh blast, some released for the day from the hospital for the meeting. But three weeks after the bombing, the American public had lost interest in the goings on in Ireland. Other issues had captured their attention in the latter part of August. Incurring the incredulous resentment of Irish journalists, the American media from Dublin reported one item over and over: Bill Clinton had used the word

"sorry" in reference to his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

#### IV. Kilwirra

The last evening I'm in Carlingford, Lily and I go to Kilwirra cemetery, the place where our grandparents are buried. That day, a Sunday, is Cemetery Day in Ireland, which means that after Mass the parishioners follow the priest out of the church to the churchyard and say the rosary over the graves of those buried there. The McKevitts know I'm a non-believer, but, in response to their announcement that morning that they are off to Mass, I say from the living room that I'm still working on the assignment John Montague had given me. Once or twice Lily has asked me if I ever pray, and I usually answer, noncommittally, that I do in my own way.

Throughout the day the television replays over and over the details of the carnage at Omagh. I keep thinking of the Oklahoma bombing back in the United States, and the utter exhaustion, emotional and physical, that enveloped the nation as everyone watched the scenes of destruction and the scores, then hundreds, of vignettes of human suffering.

The weather clears in the early afternoon, so Lily and I decide to take what has become our now-traditional walk across Slieve Foy, the mountain that rises up behind the small town.. Each time I come to Carlingford we find a morning or afternoon on which to take the hike, usually getting a ride over to the other side and walking up and over the mountain and back down into town. This day Lily and I assemble a small troop, Elizabeth Ann, her cousin Susan, and the family dog Lashes, and we are dropped over to the far side of the mountain where we make our climb. The ascent of Slieve Foy is always an exhilaration. You enter the sloping pastures of the grazing sheep, and hike uphill through the grass and heather. From the top you can see the entire Cooley Peninsula, as it curves out from Carlingford into the Irish Sea and back into

Dundalk Bay. On a sunny summer day, or even a cloudy one, the landscape is green and gold, mottled with the pastures, barley fields, and small towns of the peninsula.

Even though it's hard to make out where everything is precisely, I know that the thatched roof cottage where my father and his brothers grew up is somewhere just beyond the steeple of the distant minuscule church, about a quarter of a mile up from the sea. In my visits I had learned a bit more about my father's life in Ireland. After their mother and father's early deaths, he and his brothers, still young children, had been raised by a woman in the village who had moved into the cottage. Why the woman chose to do that, no one seemed to know. Once, my cousin Peter, Lily's older brother, introduced me to a man in a pub who had played Gaelic football with my father as a teenager. He was then about 70 years old, and, holding his pint of Guinness in one hand, he stepped through a play with which my father had scored a winning goal in the county championship.

In the closer distance, at the bottom of the mountain, is Carlingford town, and its medieval castle and buildings seem miniature in the distance. At this height the distinguishing features of the townscape are the stone piers whose arms reach out from the two ends of the harbor, providing a sheltered anchorage for boats coming in from the sea. I remember that it was to that stone pier leading out from St. John's Castle that Lily had taken me, one night during that first two-week visit over 20 years ago. She said, out of nowhere it seemed at the time, that she had wanted me to know that she didn't think of me as a distant relative who had come back to Ireland for a visit. Instead, she thought of me as a brother who had come home, and that I should always consider this area home, a place to come and be welcome.

Looking at Susan and Elizabeth Ann jumping over the rocks and small rivulets with Lashes up ahead of us makes me think that not much time has gone by at all since that first visit. When I say that to Lily, she says how much of

your life and spirit is renewed in watching your children grow up, and that I must be feeling just that way watching my boys grow back in America. I know that for Lily there's a dark side to that lovely thought, because she had told me that the one enduring regret she lived with was that her father, my uncle Micheal, had never lived to see his grandchildren grow up. Life on the farm was rugged and demanding, and he had died unexpectedly of a heart attack in his fifties. But he was the kind of man who would have enjoyed watching Dan and Elizabeth Ann change and grow, and just take pleasure in who they were. She was sure of that.

It's then I remember it's my birthday. I forgot that I had one coming up for most of the time I was in Ireland, operating as I am on a different psychic time zone. But no sooner do I blurt this out to Lily than I realize I should've held my tongue. Given the track record of hospitality over the years, I should know that any mention of my birthday will have consequences. Predictably, when we descend back into Carlingford, Lily disappears into the shops. After dinner, she comes into the dining room with a cake and candles, and everyone round the table joins in for the birthday song. That's followed by gifts, books, and hopeless gags (I'm just not the type to use a bright yellow tablecloth covered with Murphy's Law cartoons).

It may be the swim of hospitality set off against the somberness of the weekend, or perhaps a lingering sense of deficiency, or more accurately disloyalty, that I hadn't gone to church with the family earlier. In any event, given the strange emotional logic of the day, I suggest a visit to Kilwirra.

The cemetery is out on the peninsula not far from the family cottage and the nearby working fields. The last time I had visited I stayed in the cottage, took long walks along the shore, and had come upon the cemetery off one of the roads I took doubling back. At the time I hadn't known my grandparents were buried there, and, since it was then undergoing restoration, I wouldn't have been able to locate them without

help. We get to the cemetery just about sunset, and Lily takes me to the section where the Murphys of Whitestown are buried. The ruins of the Dominican chapel of which the cemetery had once been the churchyard stands in the midst of the graves, and the stones in the Murphy section have already been so weathered that you can only make out "M Murphy/ Whitestown Shore" on one of them. The others seem a match for the eroded stones of the roofless chapel.



The Chapel at Kilwirra Cemetery

While Lily says a prayer, I take in the surrounding fields and see, in the distance, the summit of Slieve Foy where we were standing earlier in the day. I wonder, naturally enough, what my life might have been like if I lived here, grew up here, worked here, rather than in the United States. It seems uncanny the way the Irish history of the last third of the century is repeating the violent convolutions of the first third. I realize too that Dan and Elizabeth Ann have grown up their entire lives as involuntary witnesses to the political and sectarian violence in the north. After walking round and through the walls of the chapel, we start back.

Since I might not be back for a long time, I ask Lily if we can stop at the lane that heads down to the four family fields. The last time, the only time, I had seen them was during my first visit. Peter, Lily's older brother, had been my guide for most of that time, and he himself had worked the fields until his mid-twenties when he gave it up to be a lorry driver. Like his father, though, Peter had died young of a heart attack, now almost 15 years ago. While we walk down the lane, Lily remembers all the times she came down this path as a child bringing lunch to her father or coming to work herself. Once, when she was about ten, she tried to ride a cow and fell flat on her face. She still can see the worker in the nearby field laughing and laughing.

She points to two of the family fields which are nearby and indicates that the others are just over the hill at the far end of a barley field. The grain catches the last of the light, and beyond the field is the darkness of the Irish Sea. It's then she also points out at the side of the lane almost at our feet a large stone with a faded cross chiseled into its surface. "That's the Mass Rock," she says. During the period of the Penal Laws Catholics were not allowed to practice their religion, and priests were persecuted for administering the sacraments. There are traditions that the peasants gathered in the open fields to hear Mass secretly, though historians now question the image of fugitive priests officiating at rocks like these. Even so, as I look at the rock about the size of a large sleeping bag, a number of surreal associations begin to coalesce.

The cross on the rock produces an eerie echo of the **X** on my father's birth certificate, and the collected weight and grief of all those killed at Omagh the day before begins to rise. I realize even now that in a short time these painful events will mean very little to Americans, even Irish-Americans. All of these people, too, my cousin Peter, my long dead uncles, my unknown father, and, further back, my unlettered grandfather, his stone and story worn by the weather in an abandoned churchyard, are even

now fading into a vast anonymity, the lost, unacknowledged voices and lives that never make the history books. But these ordinary people are the lifeblood, the foundation and support of a culture, even as they bear the burden of its excess and injustice. There's no way for Lily and me to bring back our fathers or our grandfather or the innocent victims of Omagh; there's no way for anyone to undo the horrible history of the twentieth century, in Ireland or Bosnia or Southeast Asia. But we can remember and respect their plain, related lives. At some level their distant experiences of love and work, of sex and death, pulse through our veins, and we must acknowledge the dark continuity of their lives, their meanings, and our own. They, and therefore we, are the folk of this planet.

At the end of his poem, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," Derek Mahon imagines the dispossessed, ordinary souls of history pleading directly with all of us, who, like voyeuristic photographers, witness these catastrophic events, near and far, from a position of relaxed detachment:

Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!  
"Save us, save us," they seem to say,  
"Let the god not abandon us  
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.  
We too had our lives to live.  
You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,  
Let not our naive labours have been in vain."

I give Lily a hug, and, when she looks at my face, she asks if something's wrong. I say, "No, I was just praying."

for my son Peter

summer 1998

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