

The Tyranny of Memory: Remembering the Great War in Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*

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First produced at the Peacock Theatre in 1985, Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, has gone on to become an iconic First World War play, and has had several landmark productions, not least of which was when it was performed at the Abbey in 1994 to an audience of Ulster Unionists, as an acknowledgment of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. McGuinness states that in writing *Observe the Sons of Ulster* 'it was an eye-opener for a Catholic Republican, as I am, to have to examine the complexity, diversity, disturbance and integrity of the other side, the Protestant people.'¹ In this play there is thus a conscious engagement with a competing mythology, and the challenges of crossing the barrier between self and other. And this spirit of necessary but difficult exploration of self and other is the foundational ground for the play; the process that McGuinness went through in writing the play, is thus the same process that the characters go through within the play.

Observe the Sons opens in a kind of present, where the lonely figure of Pyper wakes onstage, the only survivor of his First World War regiment. Pyper is tormented by the invocation to remember the past:

Pyper: Again. As always, again. Why does this persist? What more have we to tell each other? I remember nothing today. Absolutely nothing.

Silence

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.²

Pyper is commanded by a silent, absent, 'dark' force to remember, yet though he appeals to the 'Lord' to release him from this act of remembrance his address is implicitly directed to the audience as well, and the imperative of theatre and, indeed, commemoration rituals, to perform again, as always, again. Although Pyper initially refuses the command, his assertion of amnesia breaks down as he admits that 'Yes, I remember.'³ Both what and how he remembers is what this article will explore: as Pyper says of the war, 'Invention gives that slaughter shape. That scale of horror has no shape'.⁴ This is the crucial question that the play poses: how to put shape on the Unionist experience of the First World War, culminating in the Battle of the Somme, and how that experience should be remembered. Part One, in which the Elder Pyper is forced to summon up the past, frames the action of the play, so that when the audience watches the following three parts, in which the soldiers meet, suffer the first traumas of war and, finally, are poised to die, to sacrifice themselves for King and Country, what the audience sees is always viewed through the lens of memory and remembrance.

As he recollects the past, Pyper articulates both the rhetoric of triumphalism and total despair, veering between, 'The sons of Ulster will rise and lay their enemy low, as they did at the Boyne, as they did at the Somme', and 'Darkness, for eternity, is not survival.'⁵ The darkness is present within the triumph, and what can be seen through Pyper's aggressive avowal of Unionist superiority and independence, is the underlying despair of isolation and loneliness, for 'the Protestant people ... have always stood alone.'⁶ When Pyper allows himself to remember details of the Battle of the Somme, the sons of Ulster indeed rise, as the ghosts of his fellow soldiers Craig, Roulston and Crawford appear, as if called forth. As Pyper continues talking, the ghosts of Moore, Millen, McIlwaine and Anderson rise, till all seven of his comrades stand before him. When words fail him, Pyper 'holds his arms to the ghosts' and as he tries to enact an embrace with these unreal figures, his own younger self

appears, signalling that this is the realm of memory, and that the Elder Pyper – and we as the audience – are being transported into the past, as a way of embracing it.

‘Part Two: Initiation’ restores to the ghosts their life force and they are once again young and energetically alive, banishing from the stage the pain and melancholy of ‘Part One: Remembrance’. Craig and Pyper are the first onstage and the young Pyper cuts his finger, appealing to Craig to kiss it better, a first suggestion of his homosexuality and his attraction to Craig. When Pyper repeatedly comments on his ‘remarkably fine skin’, and describes his marriage to a woman with three legs, the ‘middle one shorter than the normal two’ his sexual difference brands him ‘a rare boy’.⁷ Though Craig is initially distrustful of Pyper, asking him does he think he is ‘a fit man for this life’,⁸ as the scene progresses Craig’s own attraction to this unpredictable man is also suggested, leading Pyper to extend to him also the title of ‘rare’. Pyper’s anarchic nature is obvious to the new soldiers who reckon he would be ‘a dangerous man in a fight’⁹. When Pyper slices his own hand open with a knife, Craig bandages the hand, as they recite ‘Red Hand. Red sky. Ulster. Ulster.’¹⁰ Pyper’s association of his own reckless death-wish with the image of the Red Hand of Ulster is the first major suggestion of the self-inflicted destruction and desire for blood sacrifice within Unionism.

The break between Parts Two and Three covers five months when the men are ‘over there’ training and fighting. The men that we see in ‘Part Three: Pairing’ are altered by their first experiences of war, and in these scenes we witness their process of rehabilitation during home leave, as they attempt in their different ways to make sense of their experience of war, and to accommodate it into their formerly secure and established identities. The horror of war is not directly dramatised, but is implicit in every exchange between the men, as they are paired off, occupying four different parts of the stage, each space representing a landmark, and which together represent Ulster: ‘Boa Island, Lough Erne, carvings [Craig and Pyper]; a

Protestant church [Roulston and Crawford]; a suspended ropebridge [Millen and Moore]; the Field, a lambeg drum [McIlwaine and Anderson].¹¹ Craig's fervent desire is to 'forget' the past five months in Flanders, to wash himself clean of the blood of fighting, while the other men also go through some form of crisis. The clearest trauma is that suffered by Moore who cannot find the strength, the hope or the trust to cross the suspended rope bridge:

I've lost my nerve, you bastard. Do you not see I've lost my nerve? I can't move.

Leave me alone. I want to fall here. I want to die.¹²

Moore is haunted by ghosts and the sound of the guns, he cannot differentiate between home and the battlefield. Even his friendship with Millen is challenged as he tells him to 'Leave me alone'. His professed desire 'to fall here' not only refers to the bridge, but suggests the battlefield and his identification of himself with the fallen soldier. He is already fallen in the sense that he cannot face the idea of going back to war, but he is rescued, kept on the thin line of the bridge, by Millen's insistence on his remembrance. Millen invokes Moore to remember the battle in terms of his fellow soldiers who are with him on the bridge. It is Moore's reluctant identification of them and his implied trust in them, 'good men' as they are, that gives him the support he needs to move across the bridge. He is able to imagine that he sees them at the other end of the bridge, they give him something to walk towards. Moore also imagines that he can reach Millen's outstretched hand, though they are far from each other. These two leaps of imagination – possible in the magic space of theatre – are echoes of the kinds of reaching out enacted in the play. But in the end it is a form of return to the self, to the individual that gets Moore across the bridge, as he starts to see the bridge as a piece of cloth that he can colour, 'And the colour is my life and all I've done with it. Not much, but it's mine. So I'll keep going to its end.'¹³ Moore uses colour to represent his own personal memories and to project his life into the future, in a scene taut with the tension between remembering and forgetting.

For McIlwaine it is the absence of community and the concurrent failure of communal memory which shakes his identity most strongly. Having missed the July Twelfth celebrations, Anderson and McIlwaine decide to re-create their own private march. But alone they cannot command the same sense of joy or celebration. McIlwaine declares:

It's no good here on your own. No good without the speakers. No good without the bands, no good without the banners. No good without the chaps. No good on your own.¹⁴

What McIlwaine realises is that the commemorative aspect of Orange culture only makes sense, is only fulfilling, when it is a group activity, when it is public, communal memory that is being re-enacted. Individually, on your own, it is 'no good'. Though Anderson and McIlwaine do eventually manage to summon the energy to beat the drum and deliver the rhetoric, it is still not the same 'on your own'. McGuinness represents what this means to McIlwaine and Anderson on a personal level, but this failure of commemoration, combined with the later failed re-enactment of the Battle of Scarva in Part Four, suggests that Unionist commemorative culture is vulnerable and weakened, particularly after the men have experienced the war in which they are performing their loyalty to the Unionist cause. Ironically, this culture was strengthened after the First World War, when commemorations were reinvigorated by living memory, as the Battle of the Somme became a keystone of Unionist mythology. In despair, Anderson bitterly comments of their role in the war that 'We're not making a sacrifice. Jesus, you've seen this war. We are the sacrifice.'¹⁵ Anderson's bitterness is not simply at his presumption that they will die, but at the failure of military strategy that led to so many thousands of deaths. For audiences, however, there is the additional knowledge that the Lambeg drum Anderson beats in this scene, is now beaten not only to remember the Battle of the Boyne, but also the fallen heroes of the Somme.

In 'Part Four: Bonding' the inevitability of death is palpable. The fighting spirit of the men is profoundly challenged by the combination of fear and the knowledge of what awaits them in battle. In this part there are two versions of communal memory which are confronted. First is the myth of the Easter Rising, as narrated by McIlwaine. In this version, the Rising was started in the GPO when Pearse 'walked in to post a letter and got carried away and thought it was Christmas.' Pearse is later shot not by the British Army, but by his own mother, who says 'That'll learn him, the cheeky pup. Going about robbing post offices.'¹⁶ McIlwaine is upfront about the fact that some of these details are invented, as he's 'very imaginative. I play the drums, you see ... To hell with the truth as long as it rhymes.'¹⁷ There is an incongruity here, however, as McIlwaine mixes metaphors – drumming doesn't rhyme. What his reimagining of the Rising myth suggests is that, notwithstanding the opposition between Republican and Unionist mythologies, the rhythm of myth in general is out of step with the rhythm of real life, certainly as seen from a trench at the Somme.

This sense that myths are not sustainable in the reality of war is further established by the second dialogue with the past, which is less deliberately parodic. In an attempt to rouse the soldiers and 'make the blood boil' Anderson organises the men into a re-enactment of the sham Battle of Scarva, with Crawford as King Billy and Pyper as his horse, facing Moore's King James and Millen as his horse. Grumblingly, Millen objects to being King James as 'He has to get beaten', but as it unfolds history is rewritten. It starts well, as Anderson provides a roaring commentary, but King James and his steed keep avoiding death, to the annoyance of Anderson, whose voice rises to insist, 'this time James will fall'. But just as 'the victor stands poised before the victim', the positions are reversed, Pyper trips and Crawford's King Billy '*crashes to the ground*'.¹⁸ The defeat of King Billy is, as Moore says, 'Not the best of signs' for the men as they prepare to go into battle, defending the historically glorious Unionist cause.¹⁹

There are several reasons why this re-enactment is key, the first is the choice of Scarva as opposed to the Boyne. The men choose this Battle for logistical reasons, as they have so few men, but McGuinness's choice of Scarva may be more complicated. Scarva is not, in fact, a real battle, but the site of a Sham Fight, a re-enactment version of the real event at the Boyne. So the instability of myth is already implicit within the fact that men are performing a version of a version. Furthermore, the festival to mark the Sham Fight of Scarva on July 13th places its emphasis on religious themes, as opposed to the military prowess of the Unionist tradition celebrated at the Twelfth parades, and it is also less dominated by paramilitary regalia, making it a less aggressively tribal event for the men to perform within the play.²⁰ The distancing of the men from the Boyne, and the failure of King Billy, in fact, mirrors the way in which in recent years many Unionist parades and murals have moved away from the triumphalism of the Boyne, towards the more sympathetic commemoration of the Somme. In this, Unionism has perhaps learned from the Republican tradition, that it is even more powerful to be remembered as the martyrs of history, than the victors.²¹ Moreover, as with McIlwaine's sham version of the Easter Rising, the fall of King Billy here clearly illustrates that history and tradition are always mediated by people and politics, and thus subject to change. If traditions are vulnerable, as shown also by Anderson and McIlwaine's failed July Twelfth 'parade', then the cultural identities based on those traditions are also vulnerable. This is particularly the case, given that King Billy is here played by Crawford, who is, unbeknownst to the other men, half Catholic and as such represents a flaw in the uniform Unionist identity. The fall of Pyper, the least Unionist of the men, and Crawford, a hybrid of self and other, thus suggests certain fissures in the unity of the Unionist identity.

Yet still, as Pyper recites in Part One, the sons of Ulster must 'rise and lay their enemy low, as they did at the Boyne', and as the men face the approaching battle they turn again to tribal signs to fortify them.²² Each man takes out his Orange sash, with the exception

of Pyper who has none. Anderson insists on giving Pyper a sash, so that 'we'll recognize you as one of our own',²³ but Pyper at first refuses to accept it, and it is only when Anderson insists 'I said take it. Do you want me to put it round you?' that Pyper 'snatches it'.²⁴ After Roulston has led the men in a final prayer, the men don their sashes, though again Pyper resists and doesn't wear his. Craig, seeing that Pyper does not want to wear the sash, decides to truly bond them all by giving his own sash to Moore, and inspiring the other men to swap sashes, forging a symbolic single cultural identity. The individuality of the men is now submerged into a true group identity and even Pyper accepts Roulston's sash, a sign of resolution as Roulston is the man to whom Pyper has been most oppositional. Throughout the play Pyper has been the outsider, but by accepting another man's sash he becomes one of 'us'. This is the journey of the play, to show how Pyper can be socially and culturally integrated, though it is only when facing death, and when it is a symbol of brotherhood, not simply of traditional Unionism, that this becomes possible.

The imminence of death and his acceptance of the sash, jointly inspire Pyper to pray for the men, imploring God that 'If you are a just and merciful God, show your mercy this day. Save us. Save our country. Destroy our enemies at home and on this field of battle.'²⁵ Pyper's war-mongering sermon equates the Battle of the Somme with the battle against Home Rule in Ireland. The reality of the men's subsequent deaths not only suggests that God is not, in fact, 'just and merciful', but also implies that if they were not saved, then neither was their country. The parallel between the Somme and Ireland being made here does not work in the favour of the Unionist cause for though partition to some extent vindicated the Unionist stance, 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people', it divided the province, a division and loss highlighted within the play by the men's repeated references to Ulster. Pyper ends with this chant of 'Ulster. Ulster. Ulster' and the men take it up, turning it into a battle cry. Yet what the chant brings forth is not the frenzy of battle but the returning figure of the Elder

Pyper, the figure who represents the darkness, loneliness and despair of modern, partitioned Ulster. The chant ceases as the men become witnesses to the reunion of the two selves of Pyper, delayed since the first part. The words exchanged by these two selves – ‘Ulster.’ ‘The temple of the Lord is ransacked.’ ‘Ulster.’ – are tersely and self-consciously mythic and strangely abstract. The gesture that accompanies them, though, is far more human and humane as ‘*Pyper reaches towards himself*’.²⁶ The younger and older selves reach across the decades towards each other, representing a final, healing moment. This moment of personal reconciliation parallels that of Pyper’s integration into the Orange identity, and the end of the play is thus a reconciliation with himself *and* with his tribe. While the heroic public myths embodied by both Pearse and King Billy are undermined, the personal is constructed as an alternative myth that can be invested in instead.

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In 1994 *Observe the Sons* was produced at the Abbey Theatre, directed by Patrick Mason, as an acknowledgement of the Peace Process. The opening night had an unusual invitation list, including twenty four representatives of the Shankill Road community, the Táiniste Dick Spring, and the Taoiseach Albert Reynolds (though he sent his apologies half an hour before curtain-up). No members of Sinn Féin were invited; this was not a cross-party conference but a deliberate project to ‘reach out’ as it were to Northern Unionists. The following days’ papers commented on the importance of the National Theatre of Ireland staging the play in this context and several days later *The Sunday Business Post* ran a two-page feature article on the reaction of the Unionist members of the audience to the play. Among comments about the play’s representation of Unionism as balanced or biased, John Cowan questioned the project itself: ‘That all happened 75 years ago, so you can’t really equate it with the present. ... Do they want to understand us now or do they want to understand us then? If they want to understand us now, they’ll have to come up to the Shankill.’²⁷ This comment suggests the

impossibility of using the past to read the present, as a kind of backwards palimpsest, particularly in the Peace Process 1990s. This contrasts with much of the critical reception of the play, for example, as Nicholas Grene puts it, ‘What the play represents is not just a re-creation of the past but an attempt through that re-creation to understand the pathology of the present; it is as much about 1980s Northern Ireland as it is about the Great War.’²⁸ If Grene is right about the play’s intentions, then we really need to ask what this play is attempting to say about 1980s Northern Ireland.

There are two ways of answering this question, by focussing on either the play’s opening or its conclusion. In ‘Part One: Remembrance’, Unionism is represented as an isolated and spent force: ‘The temple of the Lord is in darkness. He has ransacked his dwelling. The Protestant gods die’.²⁹ Indeed, as Tom Herron argues, Unionism is represented by McGuinness as ‘spectral’, and the play can be read as a ‘death notice for a community’.³⁰ Likewise, Fran Brearton comments on McGuinness’s use of the Titanic in Part Three as a metaphor for Unionism as a ‘sunken culture’.³¹ What the play thus says about Unionism now is pretty bleak; it is a haunted and hunted presence in Northern Ireland, as Elder Pyper tells his ghostly companions, ‘Men my age have been burned in their beds [by] Fenian cowards’, suggesting a dormant and vulnerable community. Yet this is, as John Cowan pointed out, very different from the reality of modern Unionism. Though membership of the Orange Order has declined in the latter half of the twentieth-century, it is still very much a strong culture, and with a politically active membership. And while Orange culture has undergone some transformation, as in the move towards emphasising the commemoration of the Somme over the Boyne, and the introduction in recent years of the playful Orange cartoon hero, ‘Sash Gordon’ suggest, it is certainly not a ‘sunken culture’. However, there is another way to view the play’s perspective on Unionism, by redirecting our gaze towards memory, and the destructive legacy of remembrance within Unionist culture.

In 'Part One: Remembrance', memory is a tyranny that plagues the Elder Pyper, whose survival has sentenced him to a living death of darkness. He inhabits an Ulster that 'lies in rubble at our feet' because of this tyranny.³² The darkness is not Unionism per se, however, but the role of the past within Unionist culture, and the rubble is the result of 'this war' and the 'Evil [that] has come upon us'.³³ For, while we certainly hear and see expressions of sectarian violence towards Catholics and 'Fenians' from the men (though not from Pyper or Craig), it is clear that this is not a hatred necessarily innate within the men, though it is intrinsic to understanding them, but the result of a siege mentality, created and maintained through rituals of cultural memory: parades, murals, sashes and re-enactments. It is this overly ritualised public culture of memory that is sunken and spectral, and out of step with the rhythms of life. In contrast to this, McGuinness represents, the weave and weft and the colour of the men's lives, illustrating not only the disturbances, but the integrity, complexity and diversity of a people.

In Parts Three and Four, the failure of the two forms of official commemoration – the July Twelfth parade and the Battle of Scarva – combined with the parodic version of the Rising, suggests that there is something bankrupt, or ruined, about these forms of remembrance. In their place, what the play creates is a form of personal commemoration, a private ritual in which symbols such as the sash are removed from their political context, in order that they can be identified with sympathetically. Pyper's acceptance of the sash is primarily about joining a brotherhood of his fellow soldiers, men with whom he has bonded. Their war cry of 'Ulster. Ulster. Ulster' is, by the end of the play, a form of personal identification, and a cry for home. The play is still about sacrifice, and its tone is still elegiac, but it is not bitter in the same way as Pyper is bitter at the play's opening. If Pyper in 'Part One: Remembrance' is isolated and broken, it is because after the war he turned towards the forms of Unionism he previously rejected, which lead him to voice the triumphalist rhetoric

of Unionist slogans, a kind of cultural ventriloquism, because he believes that this is the way to honour and remember the comrades, and lover, he lost at the Somme. What McGuinness creates in the rest of the play is an alternative, and positive way of remembering them. In the final moments of the play, the war cry dies away as the Elder Pyper walks onto the stage, reaches towards and, in many productions, embraces his younger self. This act of reconciliation of past and present versions of the self happens in the realm of memory. But it is personal memories, as opposed to the rigidly narrativised public acts of remembrance, which are invested with meaning and the hope that a divided identity can be overcome. What McGuinness is thus suggesting in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is that certain forms of memory are divisive and destructive, and need to be dismantled. In their place, he crafts a new ritual, artfully transferring meaning from the public and the political to the private and the personal.

‘Notes’

¹ Frank McGuinness, ‘Introduction’, *Frank McGuinness: Plays One* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p.x.

² Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* in *Frank McGuinness: Plays One*, p.97.

³ McGuinness, p.98.

⁴ McGuinness, p. 97.

⁵ McGuinness, p.98.

⁶ McGuinness, p.98.

⁷ McGuinness, p.127; p.129.

⁸ McGuinness, p.104.

⁹ McGuinness, p.137.

¹⁰ McGuinness, p.138.

¹¹ McGuinness, p.118.

¹² McGuinness, p.143.

¹³ McGuinness, p.160.

¹⁴ McGuinness, p.148.

¹⁵ McGuinness, p.156.

¹⁶ McGuinness, p.175.

¹⁷ McGuinness, p.176.

¹⁸ McGuinness, p.183.

¹⁹ McGuinness, p.184.

²⁰ See Neil Jarman’s discussion of the different types of Orange parade in *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 1997), pp.116-117.

²¹ For a comparative discussion of this issue, see Guy Beiner, ‘Between Trauma and Triumphalism: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Crux of Deep Memory in Modern Ireland’, *Journal of British Studies* 46.2 (2007), 366-389.

²² McGuinness, p.98.

²³ McGuinness, p.193.

²⁴ McGuinness, p.194.

²⁵ McGuinness, p.196.

²⁶ McGuinness, p.197.

²⁷ John Cowan speaking to Eddie Doyle, *Sunday Business Post*, 23 October 1994, ‘Agenda’, p.26.

²⁸ Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.258.

²⁹ McGuinness, p.100.

³⁰ Tom Herron, ‘Dead Men Talking: Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*’, *Éire-Ireland* 39.1-2 (2004) 136-162; 144.

³¹ Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.175. However, we might argue that the Titanic is not simply a metaphor of Unionism as a sinking ship, but also refers to the decline of the traditional heavy industries and the detrimental social and economic impact on working-class Unionist communities.

³² McGuinness, p.100.

³³ McGuinness, p.100.