



MEMORY AND THE DARK DREAM OF IRISH HISTORY

Seán Farrell Moran

In James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* the main character, Stephen Daedalus, protests that "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." To those who love Ireland such sentiments seem harsh. For most people the common notion of Irish history is of a uniquely dream-like and mythical world, peculiar to the place and its past, recoverable in some way in the present. For Joyce and many other Irish intellectuals, such notions are part of the nightmarish past from which Ireland and the Irish need to escape. Deep within the past are memories, affinities, and desires that determine events and grant them their significance. In the Irish mentalité the past is never completely erased. Like a palimpsest on which the past has been written, erased, rewritten, erased once more, and so on, over and over, Irish history has left its traces in memory, legible vestiges which survive no matter how often they seem to be erased. It is these traces which reiterate Irish history and in the process control the past and the present.

In the Easter Rising of 1916, widely recognized as the most important moment in modern Irish political history, the Irish educator, poet, and playwright Patrick Pearse led over a thousand Irish republican insurgents to take over areas of downtown Dublin. In theory they hoped to set off a spark of revolution throughout Ireland, but Pearse, as well as his other commanders, knew this would not happen. His real accom-

plishment was in his conceiving of the Rising as an act of self-immolation that would provide for his generation a mythic example, a "blood sacrifice" that would renew the spirit of resistance to British rule. Thus the Rising was to be a redemptive act more than it was intended to be a political one. Besides those who died before the rebels surrendered to the British, Pearse and most of the insurrection's leadership were to be executed by firing squads, dying a martyr's death as intended.

When it came time for the newly independent Irish Free State to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Rising, it did so in part by commissioning a monument by the sculptor Oliver Sheppard. The statue was to be placed in the General Post Office (site of what had been Pearse's headquarters). Sheppard decided not to cast a bronze statue of the rebels but chose to portray instead the Irish mythological hero CúChulainn. In the great Irish epic the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* CúChulainn has sworn to defend his homeland to the death. Sheppard depicted a dead CúChulainn chained to a tree in an act of defiance against the enemies of ancient Ulster. Given Pearse's notion of the "blood sacrifice" of 1916, it seems sadly appropriate that the commemoration is not of triumph but of defeat and death.

Pearse knew himself to be a dreamer and wondered often what would happen if his dreams of a free Ireland came true. The problem he had was with reality and its inevitable darkening of that dream. Pearse was not the first Irishman to choose a way out in death, to transcend reality and its attendant wisdom by sacrificing himself on behalf of the dream, prevailing not in history but doing so beyond time and space in the dreams of succeeding generations. This tragic narrative within Irish history has all too often been a conscious mythopoesis, which compels and confounds us at the same time.

Irish nationalist history came to exalt in myth making at the very time modern historians set their sights on destroying myth. The modern Irish revolutionary tradition was born in

the late 18th century under the "authorship" of the improbably named Theobald Wolfe Tone, and passed through the Famine and down to the establishment of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), to Irish dynamitards and assassins, (inspired by Bakunian and Blanquist embrace of "the propaganda by deed"), to Pearse and the socialist James Connolly, to Michael Collins and Mary MacSwiney, all the way down to Bobby Sands and "blanketmen" locked in Ulster's H-Blocks. In each case the *leitmotif* was self-immolation which justified itself in martyrdom. After making one of the most famous of all republican speeches from the dock, Tone was sentenced to death. He sought to cheat the hangman and to prove himself a worthy self-sacrifice by attempting to slit his own throat. Tone sawed his way through part of his trachea but missed the artery and said to his keepers with characteristic narcissistic irony "I guess I am a bad anatomist." James Connolly was as hard-bitten a realist as one could have found. He had spent years in the United States as an organizer for the IWW, had led workers to the storm the barricades there and in the British Isles, and for all the romance of syndicalism had proven to be a pragmatist able to reconcile in his writing socialism's need to incorporate nationalist ideas. Yet in the end, Pearse, convinced Connolly that the "blood sacrifice" was an idea whose time had always been. After being wounded in the ankle, suffering from gangrene, Connolly was dragged to jail from the GPO and was finally executed after being strapped upright in a chair—even his executioners noted the eerie echoes of the Crucifixion. In the 1970s and 1980s IRA men and women resorted to hunger striking—an ancient Gaelic tactic which, in its modern ideological mode, has led to the self-destruction of many an Irish patriot. For those who go on the hunger strike, death is the ultimate proof of the rightness of the cause. In 1972 the then head of the IRA, Seán Mac-Stiofáin (originally named James Stephenson and born in England), ended a hunger strike without going the full measure and in so doing discredited himself in the movement and

even the public. The failure to die is far more dangerous than the failure to succeed.

In "Irish pubs" from Birmingham to Moscow, political ballads glory in the Irish revolutionary's speeches before British courts, speeches which are both political manifestos and mythopoeic death rituals. What morbidity but that of the Irish could account for the use of the funeral as the preferred site for reaffirming one's political solidarity with the dreams of Irish freedom? In this light Irish republicans become artist *manqués* acting out their role in history. Obsessed with death and failure, they are all too willing to abandon rational political formulations in the pursuit of an artistic gesture, replete with its aesthetic standards and religious archetypes. Who could blame the rational historians who conclude that so much of this is ludicrous and pathological?

There are reasons for the strangeness of this history. Ireland has always been a marginal place and its history has usually been tangential to the history of western civilization. The Romans never got to Ireland and it seems that the Irish missed the Renaissance altogether. Some things, like feudalism, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution went awry there, while others, such as the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, affected only small parts of Ireland. Ireland developed its own Christian culture in the aftermath of Roman collapse. It had to because Irish Christians were separated so profoundly from the center of the Latin Church. Much as he and other missionaries tried, St. Patrick found Irish Christians determined to set their own course, developing a calendar, clerical tonsure, and church government very different from Rome's. For a time, before Rome was able to assert itself in northern Europe and before the Vikings savaged it, the Celtic Christian Church threatened to establish itself as the dominant religious culture of western Europe and was a beacon of scholarship and evangelism in a dark time. Lastly, many an invader would find himself "going native," surrendering to a peculiarly Irish seduction, abandoning much of what they had brought and becoming *Hiberniores ipsis Hibernicis* ("more Irish

than the Irish themselves"). For most Europeans, and in fact, Ireland remained a parochial and peculiar place, described in almost every quarter as odd and dreamy—inviting to those who would choose to remain there.

Compounding this peculiarity is Ireland's over 800-year history as a colony. Ever since 1169, when Anglo-Norman knights invaded, looking for land and political power, Irish identity has been forged in opposition to "imperialist" ideas. Thus the Irish have found themselves standing against the Latin church's claim to universalism, the hegemonic aspirations of Angevin monarchs, English colonization and empire, and today it has to fight against Anglo-American cultural dominance. The story of Ireland is one of a people forced to either resist or accommodate alien cultures, a people whose native identity has been oppressed, bullied and engulfed by wealthier and aggressive outsiders. Oft commented upon but rarely seriously studied, the meta-psychological effects are incalculable, suggesting that one of the most pre-eminent Irish characteristics of all has been a steady "ontological insecurity." In Joyce's short story "The Dead" the main character, Gabriel Conroy, freely seeks learning and pleasures on the continent. He cannot wait to get away from his country. But he is stung over his refusal to vacation in the west of Ireland, knowing all too well that the young woman nationalist who calls him a "west Briton" is onto a profound truth indeed. When Ireland at last achieved some measure of independence in 1922, the Free State government continued in a British vein, keeping on colonial era appointees in the civil service. It kept the common law despite many who argued that a uniquely Irish legal system could be built upon the ancient Brehon Laws of Gaelic times. Even Irish judges continued to wear British style wigs on the bench despite the centuries-old mistrust of British justice amongst the Irish people.

Lastly, until recently, and even now if many an Irish person were to tell it, Ireland has suffered from poor political leadership. No doubt part of this has been due to the premature deaths, by choice or by the hands of the British, of the

cream of the political elite. It is hard to sustain the fight to secure national identity when your best and brightest die all too early. Forced immigration has compounded this problem since the fleeing of Ireland's leaders to France and Spain in 1607. This "Flight of the Earls" (every Irish disaster has poetic titles, consider "The Wild Geese") started a trend which continued for nearly three centuries. The Irish lost those who founded Hennessey Cognac and this was only one of hundreds of lost men at arms or imagination who left to seek their fortunes in the service of others in Europe. Still more left as a result of famine (several severe local and national ones in the century before *An Gorta Mor*, the Great Hunger), or fled out of fear of persecution. One can only imagine what Irish art would have become without the exile of its leading poets and intellectuals. Swift tried to leave, Sheridan did, as did O'Casey, Joyce, Beckett, and others. It is almost absurd to mention this when one considers the social devastation of Irish emigration in the modern period, an emigration which left Ireland the only country on earth to lose population over the last two hundred years.

Is it then any wonder Irish politics has remained in the hands of the mediocre? Independence for the south did not lead to significant changes in Irish society, culture or economic life. Part of this was the terrible toll of war. Those executed in 1916 certainly were a loss to the new nation, compounded by the internecine bloodletting of the Irish civil wars of 1919–1923, but it was not only the British who killed off the future political talent—the Irish were all too guilty of this themselves. Michael Collins, whose political potential probably outshone that of any Irish figure, was killed (or assassinated, it depends upon your politics) in an ambush for no purpose whatsoever. Others such as Liam Lynch, Cathal Brugha, Erskine Childers, and Liam Mellows were to follow in the twenties, most of them executed after Irish courts martial. The ace survivor was the wholly improbable Eamonn De Valera, a math teacher born to a Cuban father and an Irish woman in Brooklyn.

It would take an interpreter of dreams to comprehend the fits and starts of Irish history. Ireland's "time" conforms to something akin to something more like the dream-time of pre-modern societies than it does to the measurable fractions which mark modern experience. For Pearse and the poet W.B. Yeats, time was seamless and transcended the world of cause and effect. In Irish history our ideas of the rational marking of events tied together in a world of cause-and-effect, are meaningless and serve to deaden the spirit.

It is not that Ireland does not have defining moments similar to those of most nations. The problem is most of them were disasters and betrayals. The event which defines the beginning of "early modern" Irish history is the Flight of the Earls in 1607. The most powerful Irish earls fled because they believed the crown was about to take them. Their self-preservation brought doom to the Old Gaelic Order which had dominated Ireland since before the time of St. Patrick. No event can compete with the Great Hunger of the late 1840s. Depending on your politics it was either the last great subsistence crisis in western history or it was a genocidal catastrophe if not caused by, then certainly exacerbated by, the British. In either case the famine years mark the beginning of "modern" Irish history and a more depressing beginning to modernity can scarce be imagined. Even those few obvious political/military events such as the Rising or the Anglo-Irish war of 1919–1921 were tragically pyrrhic victories at best. The story of Ireland is all too often a story of what might have been in an attempt to avoid the desolate realities of fact.

Around the globe, Irish people, members of the vast Irish diaspora, and those with no historical connection to Ireland whatsoever, commemorate Ireland's patron saint, St. Patrick, on his feast day. March 17th has assumed a cultural significance well beyond its origins and obvious locale to become one of the most universally observed of all Christian holidays. In many ways the shape and form of these observances have been defined by the Irish diaspora, particularly here in America. Who could wonder then that the depressing realities of

the Irish past yield themselves over to an imagined Ireland of leprechauns and Guinness, green beer (something no real Irishman or woman would ever consider), Aran sweaters, and the electronic Celtic illusions of Enya?

“What an amazing thing, did ya know that yer men there, you know, Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton, were all descendants of Brian Boru, Ireland’s greatest king?”

Even far from home Irish dreams overcome reality. Given immigrant memory this might not be such a remarkable thing, but it is remarkable how those memories have influenced Irish history. The diaspora has channeled millions of dollars and pounds into the cause of Irish freedom, a brave sacrifice indeed when one could fall from one’s Barcalounger when reaching for the checkbook. This would be pathetic or amusing if the effects had not been all too deadly for innocents in Belfast and Manchester.

This kind of surrealism finds a match in Irish history’s endless series of fantastic and tragicomic moments. Jonathan Swift, the greatest satirist in the English language, could not possibly have designed the blunders, obsessive compulsive repetitions, and pathologies which have won out over reality. When the rebels marched into position in downtown Dublin they took over the General Post Office and a biscuit factory but failed to take over the heart of British administration at Dublin Castle or the army barracks. Under the leadership of a wacky Irishwoman socialist Countess Markievics (so named because she was the wife of a member of the Polish aristocracy), rebels secured St. Stephen’s Green, a lovely park in central Dublin which was a gift to the Irish people from the Guinness family. High in symbolic significance the park was a tactical nightmare without any strategic significance. It was impossible to defend as it was surrounded on every side by four and five story buildings tailor-made for British snipers. Patrons at the famous Shelbourne Hotel could oversee the action in the park while they continued to read their papers and indulged in high tea.

Swiftian indignation would have made shortshrift of the

famine. While over a million died and nearly two million left, Irish landlords continued to produce surpluses of grain, often shipping them out on the same boat that carried the starving to America and Canada. What would Swift have made of the pathetic if heartfelt desperation of those who mounted a rising at the height of the famine, only to have it end in utter disaster in a widowed woman’s cabbage patch?

In 1916 Pearse’s military strategist was the bizarre Joseph Mary Plunkett. Plunkett was a mystical poet who envisioned himself dying and his blood impregnating the female soil of Ireland. He was also impossibly odd, narcissistic in the worst way, and was dying from tuberculosis. He had no military knowledge other than that he culled from his own mind and Plunkett went to combat knowing he was dying, marching into battle covered in jewelry and a scarf to hide the results of a recent throat operation. On the evening before he was to be executed Plunkett married Grace Gifford, consummating his marriage in death but not in life. People forget that when the British led the rebels away in 1916, men and women spat on Pearse and his comrades. The destruction of much of downtown Dublin explains this to some degree but betrayal had already become a feature in Irish revolution. As they did throughout the Empire the British cultivated many collaborators who made their rule run smoother and in the end Irish revolutionary history is as notable for its informants as it is for its martyrs. This is a history which has yet to be written but nonetheless it is there buried in popular memory. In virtually each revolutionary attempt, from 1600 to the present, someone in the pay of perfidious Albion has betrayed the dreamers. Like all informers everywhere the act of betrayal made the Irish informer insecure in his identity. Unclear about where his/her loyalties lay, the informer usually harbored more than a small amount of rancor towards charismatic figures and accomplished figures such as Collins.

There are other types of betrayal in Ireland. Thousands took meat soup on Fridays during the famine and in so doing these “soupers” betrayed their faith as well as themselves.

Could one really blame them? The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy sided with the forces of British authority rather than take the risk of siding with the poor and alienated and because of it Bernadette Devlin said that "Mother Church" was the best traitor of all. The Conservative Party "killed republicanism with kindness" when it realized that most farmers would lose their political radicalism once land reform gave them a stake in an orderly society—property ownership is guaranteed to make you a decent citizen of society.

All this is not to say that there is not reason to celebrate Ireland and its culture. Its contributions, in millions of sons and daughters scattered throughout the world, and within its own world, have proven to be disproportionately influential and eloquent. In 20th century literature few cultures can boast a list of figures such as Yeats, Synge, O'Casey, Beckett, Heaney, Shaw, Trevor, O'Faolain, O'Brien, and many others. It is especially telling that such a small country with so few people has indeed had such an impact upon western culture. And it is totally right that expatriates wish to celebrate their own contributions to that heritage, to remember how they came to forge an Irish-American or Irish-Australian identity. Nevertheless history insists upon a more penetrating gaze than celebrants can muster.

For Karl Marx history was much more than Joyce's nightmare. He compared it to an alpine mountain weighing down on the present. No doubt for both of them history was a burden they believed controlled those who live now. In Ireland this nightmare has molded all those who have lived within its dark and dramatic history. In the end, historians suffer from an impossible hope, that their rational endeavors can conquer what people remember and believe. Yet no amount of evidence will overcome the memory of British culpability for the famine. No exegetical brilliance will do away with the dark dreams of Irish history.

Even this author has to admit that he dreams of Ireland every day of his life. This is more than missing one's family and friends. It is a result of the unavoidable attachment to

those psychic residues which have made someone the way that they are. He remembers almost giving himself to the republican cause in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday 1972 when British soldiers killed unarmed civilian protesters inspired by Martin Luther King. He almost succumbed again when a female relation of his, an admitted terrorist, was assassinated by the British to make an example for other republicans. He has to admit that he tears up most of the time when he hears an Irish tenor sing "Danny Boy" even when he knows what is being done to him. And even though he has dedicated himself to write rational history, he bristles at the ideological intolerance of the rational revising of Irish history. Yes, the traces are deep and their effects are deep. They force one to the conclusion that historians of Ireland have to be humbled by a single essential truth: what people believe is far truer than what is true in fact.