"Telling Lies to the Children is Wrong"

Does Irish Historical Fiction tell the Truth?

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Lies

Telling Lies to the children is wrong.
Proving to them that lies are true is wrong.
Telling them that God's in his heaven and all's well with the world is wrong.
The young know what you mean. The young are people.
Tell them the difficulties can't be counted,
And let them see not only what will be
But see with clarity these present times.

Yvgeny Yevtushenko.

Of course we think we can all agree with Yevtushenko here, until we get into the whole nitty-gritty of what constitutes children's literature, when we find ourselves invariably asking what *is* suitable for children and whether there *should* always be some hope offered to them. Sometimes we feel it necessary to shield them from the realities of 'These present times' but sometimes we also feel a need to shield them from the past .

In Siobhán Parinson's recent novel *Kathleen, the Celtic Knot,* set in Dublin in the 1930s, Kathleen asks several questions, some but not all of which are answered in the course of the novel. Her particular question that I want to address here is, 'if St. Patrick was a Catholic, why is Dublin's Church of Ireland Cathedral called after him?' The answer that Kathleen receives from her kindly but strict head nun, Mother Rosario, is a very politically correct one that avoids the morass of sectarian history and might even be exceptionally tolerant for a nun in that period. She answers that 'St. Patrick lived a long time before Catholics and Protestants parted company. He was a Christian, and belonged to all Christians'. It is typical of Parkinson's subtle playfulness that Kathleen is unsatisfied with this answer because it doesn't square with the popular Catholic view of Protestant wickedness. 'The devil lived in Protestant Churches, but how could he if they were Christians?' In spite of Kathleen's assumption, the popular children's rhyme suggests to me that St. Patrick was more likely to have been a Protestant than a Catholic! He was, after all. 'a gentleman and came from decent people' firstly, both strongly suggestive of a Protestant heritage and secondly he exhibited distinct features of the Protestant work ethic: 'And in Armagh he built a church and on it put a steeple'. On second thoughts however the Patrick who plays linguistic tricks with shamrocks and weighing scales has a Catholic, even a Jesuitical, cast to his character. Or perhaps there really were two St.Patricks! At any rate, his story seems a good place to begin an exploration of Irish historical fiction. In George Otto's Simms words 'It is thought that Irish history as recorded in writing began with Patrick's letter to Coroticus and his Confessions'. Two hundred years later St. Muirchiu wrote the first piece of historical fiction in the form of his life of Patrick. What he says about his task is so beautiful and so relevant to the work of the writer of historical fiction even today that I quote it in full, from Dr. Simms' translation.

> 'I have taken my little talent, like boys who make their first speech in a school play. I take a boy's paddleboat and take it out on the deep and dangerous sea of my holy story. The waves rise to towering heights among the sharp rocks hidden in the water. I do not want to give the impression that I want to make something big out of something small. I shall try to describe bit by bit and step by step a few of the wondrous deeds of Patrick, with my little knowledge and my sources from an unreliable memory, written in a poor style, but prompted by my great affection for Holy Patrick.'

I don't think that this would serve as a model for writing pure history; it has too much affection and passion and insufficient scepticism or objectivity. But it would serve as a very useful model for the writer of historical fiction. We have a historical Patrick, and Muirchiú's fictional Patrick, which depends on the historical one, but also on the accretions of folklore that have grown around that history in 2000 years.

In recent times four texts for young people which evoke the Patrick story are Gabriel Rosenstock's *Naomh Padraigh agus Crom Dubh*, *The Chieftain's Daughter* by Sam McBratney and Colman O Raghallaigh's two graphic novels, An Sclábhaí,and An Teachtaire. *The Chieftains Daughter* uses the figure of Patrick in a very subtle and interesting way. He becomes merely the listener to whom a tragic tale of love and violence is told rather than a teller of stories or a worker of great deeds He is the trigger who necessitates the telling of this tale. The features of Patrick which strike one as authentic in this book are his charm, his patience, his courtesy and his ability to listen. He is depicted as the gentleman of the children's rhyme. However in spite of these qualities he is sent away, rejected firmly but politely. He does not get to make any kind of closing statement on the tale. The whole notion of the truth is problematised . Patrick says 'You have nothing to fear from the things I say, it is only the truth'. In response, Dinn Keane, the old narrator and hero of the story thinks, 'Only the truth. Now there was a weapon to carry round with you. It would test the best of armour or the deepest ditch.' He goes on to say: 'I have been expecting you for many years now, or someone like you. I knew that you would walk into my village and sit down there and tell me your version of the truth over a bowl of food. Actually you have come a little late in the day.' The story is one in which the arrival of an earlier Christian missionary, Ancell, is at least in part responsible for unleashing tragedy in Dinn Keane's life and world. The tale is a historical one in that it explores a historical vision of Ireland at the moment at which a new belief system threatens an older one. It explores the trauma caused by this collision. It suggests that the seeds of destruction were already there in the earlier society. It laments its destruction. It is unusual and challenging in that it invites the reader to consider the possibility that the arrival of Christianity might have been a very mixed blessing. It has also, in my view, that quality that we associate with the best historical fiction: it casts light on the present. In this case a changing contemporary Ireland, including Northern Ireland.

Rosenstock's *Naomh Padraic agus Crom Dubh* engages with the Patrick of folklore, rather than of history, the clever Catholic Jesuitical Patrick referred to earlier. It shows no reservations about the superiority of Christianity over the old Celtic customs. It endorses the sleight of hand by which the pagan chief is converted. However it is a witty version of the story which exploits the confusion caused by varieties of language and dialect, and in that sense has relevance to a multi-cultural Ireland. Colmán O Raghallaigh in his two graphic novels, *An Sclábhai* and *An Teachtaire* re-tells the traditional story of St. Patrick in a very modern form. Here we would expect a closeness to the historical and the legendary, and we do get that to a large extent. In *An Sclábhaí* (The Slave), the suffering of young Patrick is vividly conveyed in images and words. The ritual recourse to prayer rings is convincing because it is presented in such a dramatic and compelling way, and the use of speech bubbles to convey the rhythmic and broken quality of, for example the Psalm *The Lord is my Shepherd* , has a particular urgency. There is one section of *An Sclábhaí* which might raise problems for the reader in terms of historical accuracy, and perhaps in terms of traditional piety, and that is the section where a budding love story is depicted between Patrick and Macha, his master's daughter. How justified is this in historical terms? Of course in the *Confessions* Patrick tells of one beautiful chieftain's daughter who was converted to Christianity through her encounters with him; his charm has already been alluded to. If to that you add the story of the sinful guilty secret he confided to a friend who betrayed him, you could easily construct a youthful sexual passion. But the question remains. In the sequel, *An Teachtaire* (The Messenger) the dream and nightmare worlds which are such a striking feature of the confessions are very convincingly depicted. Ó Raghallaigh's words combined with the power of very modern images from the Cartoon Saloon remake this fundamental story in a contemporary idiom. As graphic novels they can hold their own beside some of the best work in the genre.

I'm not sure if either I, or the texts we have considered here, can quite answer Kathleen's question about St. Patrick. However I hope we have got some impression of the variety of purposes that his history and legend can serve.

What Kathleen's question alerts us to is the binary division in Irish life and culture, that in some shape or form, informs or underpins nearly all Irish historical fiction for children. One of the first of the recent group of historical novels to illustrate this tendency was Michael Mullen's first, and in my view still his best, historical novel for children, *Sea Wolves from the North*, 1983. Michael Mullen is among that group of writers who set a very high premium on telling the truth about history, on faithfulness to the record. Sometimes that very concern to tell the whole truth can militate against the energy and drive of his story. In *Sea Wolves* he largely avoids that danger. The binary division, Christian Irish and Pagan Viking seems to work very creatively. Mullen displays an intimate understanding of monastic life in the period, of the interconnectedness of Ireland and Scotland, and above all of the art of the scriptorium which gave us some of the world's most beautiful objects. He balances that with a keen appreciation of the beauty and terror of the Viking long-ship. So beauty, creativity, courage and indeed aggression are not the properties of one particular side. Of course the precious book of Kells must be saved, and the longship must be sacrificed in the end. The Sea Wolf, Sigmund the Red and his men are cast as villains ultimately. But it is a difficult choice, and I suspect that any 'real boy' reading the book would secretly identify with Sigmund and his ship. In Mullen's later novel, set during the Williamite wars, *The Little Drummer Boy*, the binary division is, more explicitly, the religious division in Ireland. In this book however the insistence on balance at all costs works against artistic truthfulness and against historical fact. Mullen, by refusing to take sides, by putting two boys together, Williamite-Jacobite, Protestant -Catholic, by eradicating difference, weakens both the action and the sense of history.

A similar and related problem can be seen in Tom McCaughren's first book about the 1798 rebellion, where two boys from different Protestant traditions, Presbyterian and Episcopalian are thrown together during the rebellion, and are forced to work out their contrasting political ideologies in that context. His second 1798 book *Ride a Pale Horse* was more successful because the point of view offered was that of one boy from a Protestant but Republican background. He also evokes the essential volatility of the sectarian impulse in a way that he doesn't in the first book. McCaughren, like Mullen, is seriously engaged with history, and uses the historical record very carefully. A danger that he sometimes fails to avoid is that of overwhelming his narrative with too much detail. Although the facts of history are accurate, there may be too many of them. He is more ideologically engaged than Michael Mullen, more anxious to teach the young reader about the horrors of war, the folly of sectarianism and to assert the values of a common humanity. The obvious risk here is that history does not always agree with these laudable contemporary values. To use history to teach good behaviour can sometimes be a mistake. If Mullen and McCaughren are directing the reader to a position of balance, of saying that war and rebellion are ultimately futile and best avoided, both avoid attributing blame or taking sides. One recent book about the 1798 rebellion is much less circumspect and takes a decidedly unionist narrative shape. That book is Bill Wall's *The Powder Monkey.* Here the young rebel hero, survivor of the 1798 rebellion, sets off on a stirring sea adventure, in which he comes in contact with the crews of American and French warships who turn out to be stereotypical untrustworthy foreigners. He ends his journey in the sanctuary of the British Navy where he feels at home for the very first time. He sees the error of his Wexford revolutionary ways.

If we look at the literature of the Great Famine, we will find similar patterns repeating themselves. With the exception of Eve Bunting, whose book *The Haunting of Kildoran Abbey* is an entirely unionist interpretation which confidently blames callous Irish landlords and exonerates the British government, most writers, Irish and British, try to create a balance and avoid attributing blame. No contemporary Irish writer alludes to British culpability, for example to the fact that Lord Trevelyan, the Undersecretary at the Treasury, charged with famine relief 'fully believed that the famine had been ordained by God to teach the Irish a lesson, and therefore should not be too much interfered with.' (Cormac O'Grada *The Great Irish Famine*,p.53) On the other hand even now, with so many books about the famine for children, no writer has still dealt with the fact that most Irish famine refugees found refuge in England where they changed the face of the industrial cities of the north, and not, as more conventionally and romantically imagined, in America though Michael Hennegann's time slip novel *The Grave* begins with the discovery of a famine grave in Liverpool but its plot returns to Ireland during the famine.

The truth of misery and of sympathetic kindness is in my view effectively rendered in Marie Louise Fitzpatrick's picture book *The Long March.* Here it is seen through the lens of the historical Choctaw gift of 500 dollars for Irish famine relief, re-told as a fable. The meaning is at its most potent when images of Choctaw and Irish victims of Hunger and oppression merge and become indistinguishable from each other. This book is an example of what Luke Gibbons in *Re-inventing Ireland, Culture Society and the Global Economy* describes as 'Rooted Cosmopolitanism', where the experience of national trauma translates into universal sympathy. The simplicity of the narrative and the restraint of the images make this a classic work in my view. I think that the continuous appeal of Marita Conlon McKenna's *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is in some ways comparable. It is a very simple unadorned narrative, which plots its course entirely within Ireland, entirely focussed on the poorest people, the victims of famine. It avoids irony, and uses a series of very simple but resonant images sparingly. It avoids unlikely interventions such as the use of gifts of gold coins by soldiers (a trope interestingly used by both British writers, Murporgo and Lutzeier, in their famine books) or members of wealthier classes to resolve its dilemmas. *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is a modest tale in an almost oral folk idiom. It is closer to the truth of history than most of the other famine narratives by Irish and by British writers. However that binary division referred to earlier underpins this book as it does others. For example the generosity of the Quakers and of other Protestant clergymen are highlighted but the corresponding portrait of the Catholic priest is of a selfish greedy man eating bacon while children die. Of course there were selfish Catholic priests and proselytising Protestant ministers, but the record shows extraordinary compassion and heroism in clergy of all denominations.

When we begin to consider the wealth of material published in the last ten years or so about the period of the Irish War of Independence up to the Irish Civil War, a number of interesting features can be observed. First of all there is again the care for historical accuracy which informs the work of Gerard Whelan, Mark O'Sullivan, Aubrey Flegg, and Siobhán Parkinson. These writers can be trusted with the facts of history. A striking recurring trope in their work, however, is the prominence invariably given to the First World War as the principal contextualising element of the Irish conflict. This is true in Siobhán Parkinson's Amelia books, In Gerard Whelan's *Guns of Easter*, Mark O'Sullivan's *Melody for Nora*, Aubrey Flegg's *Katie's War* and most recently Elizabeth Lutzeier's *Crying for the Enemy*. This frame narrative is almost always used to suggest the sadness and futility of military action in general, and the relative smallness of the Irish conflict in this context. A common feature in several of these books is the presence of some damaged but essentially wise character, a survivor of the Great War, who acts as a voice for peace, highlighting the folly of war. Of course the First World War was an enormous conflict in which thousands of Irish men and child soldiers lost their lives. Their story, perhaps most especially that of the child-soldiers certainly deserve to be written for children in its own right. But nothing like that happens in these works. The war is presented as some great tragic accident or natural disaster. None of these books suggest that it was caused by people, by imperial governments in a scramble for control of the wealth of the world. It is used principally as a backdrop to the Irish revolution. There might be other possible contexts for The Rising and the War of Independence, such as for example the 1913 Lockout, the social misery of Dublin, or indeed the failure of three Home Rule Bills. But they don't really figure to any significant extent. Even in *Crying for the Enemy*, where James Connolly features as a character, no indication is given of what he stood for, or even that he lead the Citizen Army, as opposed to the Volunteers, into battle. Almost all these books suggest that revolutionary violence is somehow more morally culpable than fighting in the army of the state. Siobhán Parkinson is the only writer dealing with this topic who finds a clear reason for the kind of pacifism articulated. Because in her books, the Pimm family are Quakers, their opposition to all violence makes perfect sense, as a principled pacifism, that opposes equally all forms of combat. By developing a feminist sub-plot Parkinson also broadens the context and suggests the complexity of the period. Elizabeth Lutzeier's *Crying for the Enemy* is a very interesting addition to these novels. It is an extraordinarily tightly written book, confining its action to the GPO and the military hospital at Dublin Castle. It uses three fourteen year olds to sustain the narrative, Michael, a Volunteer, Sarah an upper middle class girl who helps out in the hospital, and Daisy, an American girl, who chances into the GPO and becomes embroiled in the rebellion. If the reader suspends disbelief, especially about the role of Daisy and the number of coincidence required to get her into the action, then the historical accuracy of the account of Dublin Castle and the GPO is very impressive, as is the respect accorded to all the protagonists. What is surprising is a certain carelessness about some very obvious facts. One such fact is the confusion about what to call Dublin's main street at the time. It was properly called Sackville Street, but many people already popularly called it O'Connell street, even though it was not officially called O'Connell St. until later. But Lutzeier writes of Sackville Street and O'Connell Street as if they were two different streets. An even more glaring error however is when she refers to Heuston Bridge, when what she ought to have written is Kingsbridge. The reason why this is a glaring error is of course the fact that Kingsbridge was renamed Heuston Bridge to Honour Commandant Sean Heuston, who was executed in 1916.

A particularly painful and shameful chapter in Irish social history, the treatment of children in orphanages and industrial schools is dealt with to my knowledge for the very first time for children, in Marita Conlon McKenna's *A Girl Called Blue,* set in the 1960*s*. In my view it is Conlon McKenna's most truthful book to date. Nuns feature as oppressive and occasionally kindly, but ground down by the misery of the world they inhabit, in which life itself is somehow taboo. Conlon McKenna does not shirk showing how their own profound sexual repression makes them incapable of respecting girls whose very origins are seen as sinful. The book holds out the barest hope for its protagonist. It is a frank and angry novel but is not overwhelmed by that anger. Resilience and action, usual features of her characters in even the most miserable circumstances, barely feature here. The pain and cruelty are not exaggerated. Punishments are recognizable to anyone who went to ordinary convent schools in the 1950s. Even ostensibly happy moments carry an undercurrent of misery, as when the children are brought out for a mystery tour by the Dublin Taxi drivers: 'They all screamed out the words of the Beatles new song "She Loves You".' The song chosen could not be more poignantly and ironically apt. The liberating air of sixties rock music merely highlights the complete lack of personal freedom available to the orphaned girls whom nobody loves. The word 'screamed' seems perfectly chosen. There is no other point of view presented here than that of the orphaned child. This is an important, but not a comfortable book. In Yevtushenko's terms it 'Tells that sorrow happens, hardship happens, and it forgives no wrong'.

Another important recent book which opens a chapter in Irish social history for children is Siobhán Parkinson's American published, *Kathleen, the Celtic Knot.* I have previously referred to the fact that among the stories omitted in Irish historical fiction for children were those of Protestant domination through the Penal laws, and the story of Catholic emancipation. That omission still continues and it is a very striking one. Imagine if we could write for children about twentieth century South African history without ever mentioning apartheid? But a parallel omission was that of the ugly Catholic triumphalism of the 1930s, and Parkinson deals with that, among many other issues in her book. For that reason alone this is an important book. She treats the sectarian idea with humour and gentle irony, as the extract quoted at the beginning of this paper indicates. She depicts the Liberties of Dublin with affection, energy, and a sense of real community, in spite of grinding poverty. Her working people are not stereotyped. They have minds, intellects, feelings and a variety of viewpoints. Kathleen’s father and mother, who have supported opposite sides in the civil war, articulate the debate about the creation of independent Ireland. DeValera gets a slightly comic treatment: ‘Dev was very keen on happy maidens dancing at the crossroads, but it was a long way from the crossroads to the tenements of the liberties, Mam always said, and Our National Heritage didn’t put bread on the table, and that was for sure’, anachronistically (because it was not made in the 1930s but in 1943) repeating a common misquotation of DeValera’s famous St. Patrick’s Day speech, which in fact omits any reference to dancing. There is a clever Parkinsonian sleight of hand here however, since the narrative moves almost seamlessly from Kathleen’s voice to her mother’s, as it is clearly not that of a child, even as forthright a child as Kathleen . In fact the remark is very much addressed to an imagined contemporary adult reader, sharing in its obvious revisionist scepticism about the nationalist project. However Parkinson’s text is very complex. There is a sense at the end of the novel, at least in the expression of Kathleen’s hopes, that her Irish dancing skill will put bread, and even biscuits, on the table, because her ambition is to become a very good dancing teacher. Parkinson is not overwhelmed by notions of political correctness, as for example when she writes of Catholics or Protestants. She uses the word ‘tinker’ in a context that restores the respect due to that designation, representing as it does an old and honourable trade. Traditional objects of devotion like a little Lourdes water bottle are presented affectionately. The details of daily life, its pleasures and pains are delicately evoked. Above all, against the backdrop of poverty, unemployment and illness, she admits the joy of dancing, in this case Irish dancing. There are dark things in this book too, such as Kathleen’s mother’s illness, which the reader suspects is not going to get better, and the sexual terror of an unwanted pregnancy which was a fact of life for virtually all girls and women in the period. Parkinson deals with these issues with great tact. Unfortunately, at the end of this American edition of the book, there is a history section called ‘Then and Now, Ireland’ which has a series of glaring errors of historical fact. Parkinson was not responsible for writing this section, but it is a great pity that it is there, especially since the target readership is Irish-American children. It should be republished in America , and in Ireland, without these errors, because it deserves to be known.

To borrow Huck Finn’s wonderful sentence about Twain, Irish historical fiction ‘Tells the truth, mainly… with some stretchers as I said before.’ Its strongest achievements have been in the handful of books which recreate moments in Irish social history but almost all these works reflect the divisions in Irish culture and society. Evasions are more likely to arise in the domain of political history. It might be more accurate in this context to say that it tells truths, versions of a historical narrative. Indeed in spite of the title of this article there is of course no single historical truth to be told. However there have been serious gaps in this narrative of Irish history as told to children.

Two books published in 1968 and 1969, significant dates, are important in this regard. The first, Meta Mayne Reid’s 1969 adventure, *The Two Rebels*, has as its setting the 1798 Rebellion in Antrim. Its hero and heroine, Andrew and Bess, belong to a dissenting farming family. They become marginally involved in the rebellion through their efforts to help their rebel uncle and his wounded friend escape. The narrative is focalised almost entirely in the revolutionary camp. The beauty of the secular revolutionary ideal is recited in a very poetic way. The need for political change is not questioned or undermined. The debate at the end of the book is a very objective one, about the relative merits of political and legal as opposed to military action, and to recycle a phrase, the ballot box wins out over the armalite, but only just. It is treated as a tactical rather than an ethical question.

The second book Eilís Dillon's 1968 *The Seals* is set on one of the Aran Islands and in Connamara in 1920 during the war of Independence involves engagement with the Black and Tans (Blackened Hands as the islanders call them). The narrative is entirely centred on the local rebels. The Black and Tans are brutal villains embodying qualities of folk or fairy tale villains. This narrative of Irish history is unapologetically in the nationalist tradition, in which seven hundred years of oppression are evoked .

It is my argument that neither Mayne Reid's willingness to countenance revolution, nor Dillon's clear Nationalist narrative are anywhere to be seen in the works of historical fiction published since that time. I believe that children's historical fiction is the poorer for the loss of these voices. There have been Unionist narratives such as Eve Bunting's famine book, and Bill Wall's 1798 story. The majority of works however are either revisionist, in that they imply that armed revolution is never justified, or they are ambiguous. The absent narrative is that which gives voice to a revolutionary or nationalist interpretation of Irish history. In my view that is a serious loss. Of course it is not difficult to speculate about why that is. Those two books were published at the very beginning of the recent Northern Ireland Troubles, when civil rights constituted the main issue, before the provisional IRA came into being, and 'the troubles' became characterised by military engagement, civilian bombings, sectarian atrocities and brutal state repression. The nationalist narrative of history for children, it seems was a casualty of The Troubles. In that sense, even though recent Irish history for children tells truths, it doesn't tell the whole truth.

Celia Keenan.