Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Northern Ireland,
1968–98

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Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Northern Ireland, 1968–98

Hardened to Death

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Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.

Simone Weil, “*The Iliad*, or The Poem of Force”

For Gloria

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Preface

While researching and writing an earlier book, *Breaking Enmities: Religion, Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland, 1967–97*, I found myself noticing two quite simple points more or less independently of my main enquiry. The first is how extraordinary is the documentation pertaining to the Troubles in Northern Ireland during the past thirty years. I had known that John Whyte once described Northern Ireland as, per capita, probably the most intensely researched community on earth, and that Robert Fisk singled out the political collection in the Linen Hall Library as unique because of the unmatched insight it provides into all shades of opinion about the conflict. I was familiar with these views and others like them, but only gradually came to realize how much the remarkable archive of printed materials pertaining to the Troubles has to offer to students of violent conflict not only in Northern Ireland but in general. Within the confines of a society comprising just over 1.5 million people, we can follow the grain lines of a dispute in which the interests of nation states, ethnic minorities, post-colonial economies, globalization, identity politics and urban guerrilla warfare combine and metamorphose in a compelling and bewildering variety of ways. One main legacy of these troubled years in Northern Ireland is therefore likely to be the sheer richness and density of the documentation provided by sociological and political commentary, journalism, biography, memoirs, academic research, political pamphleteering of many kinds, and a literary renaissance that has produced an extensive body of writing, often of high quality.

The second point that I came – again gradually – to notice is how perplexed yet captivating are the relationships between words and the actual conduct of violence, and I found myself increasingly preoccupied by the complex ways in which a war of words has accompanied and interpenetrated with the actual war. In this context I also came to realize how the Troubles are deeply and pervasively represented in literature of the period, though not always directly, and usually not in a straightforward partisan fashion. Indeed, one main contribution of a good deal of the literature is to challenge traditional oppositions, disclosing how these contribute to violence and demonstrating why they need to be deconstructed rather than re-confirmed. In short, literature has a lot to say about the seductions, demonic intoxications and inevitable failures

of violence, communicated through an imagined complexity which is a necessary adjunct to the other forms of written discourse by which the Troubles are recorded.

Understandably, one often feels a disturbing incommensurability between printed records of actual, lethal violence and how violent behaviour is represented in literature. Yet the evaluations and re-evaluations enabled and provoked by works produced by the fictive imagination, as well as by an assessment of how these relate to other forms of discourse, have a vital contribution to make not just in Northern Ireland but in any society concerned to understand how precarious is the order maintained by the rule of law and the conventions of civilized behaviour.

Elsewhere, I have written in detail about some basic positions – religious, political and aesthetic – that also underlie the present study, and in the following pages I attempt to avoid undue theorizing and specialized debate. Although I intend to provide arguments sufficient to sustain the case I want to make, the central idea that literature does not occupy a hermetically sealed, specialized realm will, I hope, sufficiently discourage me from writing as if I inhabit one.

I have received help from a great many people to whom I am immensely indebted, though I will not attempt to list their names here. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has supported the project through a Standard Research Grant, which I gratefully acknowledge. Permission has been granted by the Blackstaff Press to reproduce “The Iron Circle” from *The Collected Poems* by John Hewitt; by Jonathan Cape to reproduce “The Civil Servant” and “Wounds” from *Selected Poems* by Michael Longley; by the Gallery Press to reproduce “Rage for Order” from *Collected Poems* by Derek Mahon; by the Gallery Press and Wake Forest University Press to reproduce “Apostle of Violence” from *Captain Lavender* by Medbh McGuckian.

List of Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CLMC	Combined Loyalist Military Command (emerged in 1991 to represent loyalist paramilitary interests)
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party (strongly conservative; founded in 1971)
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army (an extreme republican paramilitary group, founded in 1975; is associated with the Irish Republican Socialist Party, IRSP)
IRA	Irish Republican Army (a split in 1970 resulted in two organizations, the Officials and the Provisionals, who are sometimes designated PIRA. In the present study, IRA indicates the provisional wing; is associated with Sinn Féin.)
IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood (a revolutionary organization founded in 1858; a forerunner of the modern IRA)
IRSP	Irish Republican Socialist Party (founded in 1974; associated with the Irish National Liberation Army, INLA)
LVF	Loyalist Volunteer Force (extreme loyalist paramilitary group, founded in 1996)
MRF	Mobile Reconnaissance Force
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (founded in 1967)
PUP	Progressive Unionist Party (founded in 1979; associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force, UVF).
RTE	Radio Telefis Eireann (Irish broadcasting network)
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary (Northern Ireland's police service)
SAS	Special Air Service (an elite British Army undercover unit)
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party (mainline nationalist party, founded in 1970)
SF	Sinn Féin (political party associated with the IRA)
UDA	Ulster Defence Association (loyalist paramilitary group, founded in 1971; has used the cover name Ulster Freedom Fighters, UFF; is associated with the Ulster Democratic Party, UDP)
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment (formed in 1970 to replace the B Specials (a part-time police force founded in 1920); merged in 1992 with the Royal Irish Rangers to form the Royal Irish Regiment)

UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters (cover name for Ulster Defence Association, UDA)
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party (mainline unionist party, which also governed Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1972, when direct rule from London was imposed)
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force (loyalist paramilitary group, formed in 1966; traces its origins to resistance to Home Rule in 1912, and is associated with the Progressive Unionist Party, PUP)