

Troubled Tales: Short Stories about the Irish in 1970s London

Tony Murray

Some of the most violent ravages of ‘the Troubles’ occurred during the Provisional IRA’s bombing campaign of mainland Britain that began in March 1973 and continued intermittently, but often devastatingly, through to February 1996. London was the main focus of activity with government buildings, department stores and mainline railway stations becoming prime targets. For much of the 1970s and 80s, the Irish community in the city found itself under considerable pressure as dormant anti-Irish prejudices within sections of the host population were re-ignited in response to the outrages (Delaney, 2007: 125). Apart from damaging property and causing substantial disruption to Londoners, the bombings resulted in over thirty deaths and hundreds of injuries. The pressure on Irish people living in the city was particularly acute during the days and weeks after a bomb explosion when, whatever their political sympathies, the possession of an Irish accent became grounds in some quarters for verbal and even physical assault (Hickman and Walter, 1997: 205). By the 1970s, the generation of Irish migrants who came to Britain in the immediate post-war years had put down roots, were building careers, and were raising families. As a result, such pressures were all the more profound and many Irish men and women kept a low profile for fear of victimization.

Political violence and its effects on Irish society has been a perennial theme in the country’s literature. The Troubles, in both their early and their late twentieth-century manifestations, provided writers with a dramatic backdrop against which to depict and interrogate issues of Irish history and politics. In response to their work, a substantial body of criticism has emerged, prompting one author to recently note that ‘no issue has been treated so extensively and so probingly in the modern Irish story as the Troubles’ (Storey, 2004: 1). A number of ‘Troubles thrillers’ set in London, like their parent genre, have tended to sensationalize and stereotype the role of the IRA in the city.¹ They have also tended to obscure the effects of the conflict on the Irish community there. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how six short stories depict the ways in which London Irish people, most of whom have no connections to the paramilitaries, are seriously affected by the conflict. Three of the stories are written by William Trevor and three by the Green Ink Writers Group, and all of them provide

a rare insight into the personal dilemmas and crises that London Irish people faced at the time, especially in relation to their sense of national allegiance. In this sense, the texts can be understood, as Peter Mahon remarked in a recent study of Troubles fiction, 'as sites where assured essentialist political identities ... are opened up to disruption and renegotiation' (Mahon, 2010: 4).

In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, William Trevor writes that 'stories, far more than novels, cast spells, and spells have been nurtured in Ireland for as long as imperial greed has been attempting to hammer its people into a subject class' (Trevor, 1991: xv). Despite regarding himself as a non-political writer,² Trevor is renowned for his skill at portraying the cultural and political nuances in personal relations between the Irish and the English. Gregory A. Shirmer has observed that Trevor often depicts the Troubles in his short stories 'as an experience that forces individuals into taking moral stands' (Shirmer, 1990: 8). This is largely the case with the three stories I focus on here, each of them revealing in powerful and perceptive ways how unforeseen consequences of the conflict impact upon individuals' lives. Prior to the 1970s, Trevor's London Irish characters tended to appear in novels rather than short stories. They were somewhat peripheral and unsympathetic figures, usually employed as foils against leading English characters or, as one critic aptly described it, as 'narrative "grouting"' (Thomas, 1998: 153). But, a marked development took place in this regard as a result of the Troubles. As a writer who had established a reputation for his empathetic portrayal of the anomalous position of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland (especially during the period of the War of Independence), the political and moral dilemmas that Irish Londoners faced during the Troubles provided Trevor with similar subject matter, but in a wholly new context.

One of the earliest examples of this is 'Another Christmas' (1978), the major theme of which – how a long-established human relationship is tested by the re-emergence of political enmities from the past – is a familiar one for the author. Whereas this is more commonly traced in Trevor's work through the lives of Anglo-Irish Protestants in a predominantly Catholic Ireland, here the reverse is the case with a story about Irish Catholics who find themselves in an invidious position in England. For the generation of Irish migrants who came to London in the immediate post-war years, the onset of the Troubles threatened to undermine many of their efforts to win the acceptance and respect of the host population. Questions of national allegiance for Irish people in Britain were thrust into the public domain in a way that hadn't been the case since the war. Like many of their compatriots, the middle-aged couple at the centre of 'Another Christmas' discover that the relationship of mutual tolerance between Londoners and Irish migrants that had been carefully maintained throughout their years in the city was, in fact, alarmingly fragile in the wake of an IRA bombing of the capital.

Originally from Waterford, Dermot and Norah have been living in Fulham for over 20 years. They are clearly proud of their Irishness and their Catholicism and are typical in many ways of Irish migrants of their generation. Their children have Irish names, Norah is active in community work on behalf of their local parish church, and they are concerned to get along with their English neighbours. Over the years, Mr. Joyce (their elderly English landlord) has become a close friend of the family, calling for a chat each Friday evening and bringing 'carefully chosen presents for the children' at

Christmas (Trevor, 1978: 491). Then, one evening, Norah informs her husband that, for the first time in years, Mr. Joyce would not be joining them for Christmas dinner. It emerges that the previous August, after a conversation the couple had with Mr. Joyce (who ritualistically refers to the IRA as ‘maniacs’), Dermot had argued that ‘the bombs were a crime but it didn’t do to forget that the crime would not be there if generations of Catholics in the North had not been treated like animals’ (Trevor, 1983a: 493). On previous occasions when the subject of the Troubles had come up, Dermot had opted for a diplomatic silence about his political views for the sake of maintaining cordial relations with their landlord. But, he is a well-read and methodical individual who has clearly developed a keen understanding of the relationship between historical cause and effect, and on the occasion in question, he had hoped to give Mr. Joyce some pause for thought about the origins of the present conflict in Northern Ireland. Norah, however, treats her husband’s comments as nothing more than ‘an excuse for murder’ (493). Smarting from the embarrassment of what she considers to be his terrorist sympathies, she urges her husband to apologise for his behaviour and ‘to make it up with Mr. Joyce’ (492). But Dermot believes Norah is over-reacting and, in what Tom Paulin describes as his ‘desperately principled Irish intransigence’ (Paulin, 1979: 49), he refuses to comply with her request. As a result, a serious divergence of opinion emerges between husband and wife. It becomes apparent that the Troubles have created a rift, not only between the couple and their landlord, but between themselves, forcing them to take sides on a political issue they had hitherto suppressed for the sake of maintaining a happy marriage.

For Dermot, the traditional nationalist narrative to which he is still emotionally attached asserts itself with deleterious consequences for the relationship with both his wife and his landlord. For Norah, on the other hand, such a narrative is anathema to the point where she disowns any claim or responsibility for what is happening in Northern Ireland. ‘Let them fight it out and not bother us’, she proclaims, preferring instead to disassociate herself and her compatriots from events across the water (493). From her point of view, consideration of their landlord’s political sensitivities outweigh any need on the part of her husband to provide historical context for current events. The IRA’s tactics make her feel ashamed of her Irishness and she is unable to tolerate expressions of anything other than revulsion and condemnation of the bombers from her husband. When out shopping, she suddenly ‘begins to feel embarrassed because of her Waterford accent’ (493) and reflecting on their original decision to move to London in the first place, she now believes that they are ‘caught in a trap they’d made for themselves’ (492). She wonders whether, due to his political views, Dermot might lose his long-standing job with the gas board and even goes so far as to think that, under ‘the present circumstances’, such an eventuality ‘would be understandable and fair’ (494).

Dermot and Norah are typical in many ways of a particular generation of Irish migrants who nurtured hopes for a new life in London after the Second World War. But with the onset of the Troubles, the couple discover they are not immune from changing political circumstances. Seen within a broader historical context, they are subject to the conflicted discourse of a long colonial relationship between the two countries. Dermot and Norah’s differing responses reveal how cultural identities are produced through the collision and contestation of not only political, but personal

allegiances. The Troubles impact, therefore, not just upon Norah and Dermot's sense of national identity, but profoundly destabilize a partnership sustained by over 20 years of mutual tolerance and understanding.

One of Trevor's acknowledged qualities as a writer is his ability to persuade us, as readers to understand, if not necessarily warm to, his less sympathetic characters.³ The figure of the ideologically driven and ruthless young terrorist became topical again after the events of 7 July 2005 when four young Islamist suicide bombers killed 56 people (including the bombers themselves) on the London tube and bus network. As a result, Trevor's short story, 'The Mourning' (2000) has an additional resonance in the aftermath of that event. Liam Pat Brogan,⁴ a young man from County Cork, moves to London on the advice of a trusted friend who fixes him up with a job in the construction industry. However, the job does not live up to its promise and Brogan finds himself consigned to the menial task of operating a cement mixer with little sign of more skilled work in prospect. His digs are less than ideal and he finds himself being bullied by the English site foreman, who insists on calling him 'Mick' and disparaging the quality of his work with reference to his Irishness. Before long, Brogan is considering giving up the job and returning to Ireland. He divulges his feelings to Feeny, an older man and his point-of-contact when he first arrived in the city. Feeny takes Brogan under his wing and tells him that because of the Troubles the English 'look down on any man with an Irish accent' (Trevor, 2000: 69). He then lends him money and finds him superior accommodation through a man called McTighe.

However, Brogan discovers that Feeny has ulterior motives when he reveals to him that there is bomb-making equipment under the floorboards of his flat. McTighe, it transpires, has 'a mission' planned for Brogan, something Feeny refers to as having 'possessed every Irishman worth his salt, the further from home he was the more it was there' (79). Subsequent references by Feeny to "the massacre of the innocents" on 'Bloody Sunday' and to "the dream of Wolfe Tone" (79) stir latent patriotic sentiments in the young man who becomes aware of 'a vigour [he] had never experienced in his life before' and 'a power in him where there'd been nothing' (81). Brogan's self-esteem is fragile, especially given the prevailing anti-Irish climate of the time, and so when such a heroic narrative presents itself, it fortifies him in the face of the daily taunts from his foreman and he is seduced into seeing himself as a successor in a long line of Irish patriots. Identifying in particular with a fellow Corkman, Michael Collins,⁵ he resolves to carry out McTighe's orders. Aware that Brogan has no police record and, crucially, that he has no previous connections to the paramilitaries, McTighe knows that the mission can be conducted with the minimum risk of detection.⁶ It is also notable that Brogan lives in the same part of London and at approximately the same time in which 'Another Christmas' is set. By reading the two narratives in unison, one might reflect on the fact that, while Dermot and Norah debate the politics of IRA operations in London, such activities are closer to home than they realize by virtue of an unknown neighbour and compatriot. However, when the night finally arrives for the planting of the bomb in the centre of London, Brogan recalls newspaper reports of how a young man from his home-town died while attempting a similar mission in the city and, in particular, how his father had described him as 'a poor bloody hero' (85). The searing memory

of this event is enough to give Brogan pause for thought and with Big Ben chiming the hour in the background, he drops the explosives into the Thames. After fleeing to Ireland, he reflects on how close he came to destroying not only innocent people's lives but his own. Rather than 'seeing himself in Michael Collins's trenchcoat, with Michael Collins's stride' (83), an alternative take on the grand narrative of republican martyrdom asserts itself and the young man remembers the horror and sorrow he felt for a person he now realizes he was close to becoming himself. Begging God that 'his mourning would not ever cease' (88) he steps back from the brink and renews his religious belief in the sanctity of life.

In a 1983 interview, William Trevor stated:

Just as the bomber has to avoid looking at the humanity in his victims, we have to seek the humanity in the bomber. We don't have to be sympathetic with the bombers, but unless we find a way to see them as ourselves, the whole thing makes no sense. (Boylan, 1983: 14)

The implication here is that literature has a role to play in reaching some kind of understanding of why an individual such as Brogan is driven to such desperate measures. This is a feature, however, which is conspicuous by its absence from most popular novels about the conflict in Northern Ireland. According to Patrick Magee who conducted an exhaustive study of the genre, in most depictions of Irish republicans, 'we encounter again and again the same set of tropes and lurid misrepresentations' (Magee, 2001: 2).⁷ In contrast, 'The Mourning' provides a more sophisticated insight into the mindset of the ideologically driven bomber. It charts how an impressionable but otherwise respectable young Irish migrant in London is persuaded to carry out an extreme act of violence when under the influence of political dogma and the promise of national immortality.

The Troubles exert a more oblique yet no less devastating influence on ordinary people's lives in Trevor's story, 'Being Stolen From' (1981). Bridget Lacy is a shy middle-aged woman who married a man from the same locality in County Cork and with whom she had 'weathered the strangeness of their emigration' for over 20 years (Trevor, 1983b: 751). The story is set in the late 1970s in a London that 'had become their home, a small house in a terrace, with the *Cork Weekly Examiner* to keep them in touch' (746). However, Bridget's life changed radically when her husband unexpectedly left her for another woman shortly after they adopted the baby girl of Norma, a teenage neighbour from across the street. The precise reason why Norma gave up her daughter for adoption is not entirely clear. However, her current husband refers to her having suffered from depression and having been 'flighty and irresponsible' (746), suggesting that she was too immature and psychologically unstable for the role of motherhood.

The story opens with a plea to Bridget by Norma to return the child (who is now four years old) on the basis that she had recovered from her mental disorder and is now ready to take up her maternal responsibilities. Having only recently recovered from the shock of losing her husband, the prospect of losing a daughter also is too traumatic a proposition for Bridget and she declines the request. However, Norma's husband (who counselled his wife through her recovery) is more persistent about the

matter and makes repeated calls on Bridget, employing gradually more coercive forms of persuasion in the process:

In what he said, and in the way he looked, there was the implication that this room in a cramped house was an unsuitable habitat for a spirited four-year old. There was also the implication that Bridget at forty-nine, and without a husband, belonged more naturally among the sacred pictures on the walls than she possibly could in a world of toys and children. (747)

Bridget, in the view of Norma's husband, is now clearly unsuitable for the role of an adoptive mother, given her advanced age and her recent separation. His remarks, apart from bordering on emotional blackmail, also reveal a prejudice regarding what he evidently perceives as the Irish woman's overtly religious lifestyle. There is an interesting cultural disjunction here. Religious iconography was common in the homes of Irish migrants of Bridget's generation but it clearly strikes Norma's husband as unusual and arguably provokes an unconscious anti-Catholicism. When this initial strategy fails to persuade Bridget, he refers to the currently problematical position of the Irish in Britain in the wake of the Troubles, arguing that 'the Irish are a different kettle of fish today than they were ten years ago' (757). The clear implication here is that Bridget is no longer a reliable parent by virtue of her membership of a 'suspect community'.⁸ As Michael W. Thomas points out, Bridget's 'rights as an adoptive mother are being erased by reinterpretations of her status, as offered by Norma's husband in the light of current sectarian foment' (Thomas, 1998: 155). Norma's husband goes on to suggest that an Irish family is an inappropriate environment for a child to grow up in under present circumstances. 'That child', he says, 'would have to attend a London school, for instance, where there could easily be hostility ... no mother on earth would care to lie awake at night and worry about that' (757). However, he conveniently forgets that when Bridget first adopted Betty four years before, his wife raised no such objections. The motives behind his remarks, therefore, appear to be a fear that the child will be brought up as part of a 'suspect community', or as he euphemistically puts it, 'in an atmosphere that isn't always pleasant' (767).

While not directly about the Troubles, the spectre of Irish republican violence is powerfully invoked in this story and, as in 'Another Christmas', results in seriously destabilizing the life of the female protagonist. This time, however, rather than the past being brought to bear on the present, it is an imagined future (in the form of a second generation Irish person) that serves as the catalyst for personal crisis. Bridget's somewhat fatalistic predisposition makes her vulnerable to persuasion by people with ulterior motives, but for the most part she withstands the emotional coercion placed upon her, both as a mother and as a Catholic. However, the invocation of the Troubles and the implied untrustworthiness of the Irish in Britain is a decisive factor in her eventual capitulation. The politically-adverse context in which she finds herself as an Irish migrant in 1970s London, undermines her sense of security and ultimately leads to her marginalization. In this regard, the story is another demonstration of how the Troubles impacted on the Irish in London, not just publicly, but in subtle and sometimes invidious ways within the private domain.

When the Troubles broke out across Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, many citizens of the Republic of Ireland had an ambivalent attitude to events: an ambivalence

that was shared, to a large degree, by the Irish Government itself. On the one hand, they were distressed by widespread discrimination of the nationalist minority by the Unionist authorities that had led to the unrest in the first place. On the other hand, after 1971, when the Provisional IRA usurped the role of the peaceful Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, fears were raised that the conflict might escalate into a revival of the civil war that had engulfed the whole island in the 1920s. As a consequence many Southerners preferred to maintain a judicious distance from events across the border, something that was interpreted by many in the Catholic community in the North as a betrayal: these conflicting perspectives undoubtedly resulted in a mutually suspicious relationship thereafter. However, Southerners who migrated to London were unable to insulate themselves from the Troubles to the same extent, especially in the aftermath of an IRA bombing in the city. Although many strove to keep a low profile in order to avoid conflict with their British workmates and associates, ignoring the topic of Northern Ireland was not as easy in London as it might have been back home.

The stories that I examine in the following section reflect this situation both in terms of their focus on Irish migrants from the Republic and in terms of how the Troubles affected relations in the workplace. All were written by members of the Green Ink Writers Group, a non-profit-making co-operative founded in January 1979 at the Camden Irish Centre by a number of contributors to the annual writing competition run by *The Irish Post*. After receiving one of the first grants awarded to an Irish organization by the Greater London Council, the group published its debut anthology in 1982 and went on to produce a further five volumes of poetry and short stories in subsequent years. The quality of the writing in the anthologies varied considerably and only a minority of the contributors went on to publish elsewhere, the most notable of whom was Peter Woods whose novel *Hard Shoulder* was published in 2003. However, the anthologies are significant in being one of the few places where short stories about the London Irish in the late 1970s and early 1980s can be found, and they hold a particular interest because of the ways in which they foreground the effects of the Troubles upon London Irish people.

Frank Arthur's 'A Day in the Office' (1985) is a good example. Kevin O'Neill is the only Irishman among a group of technical clerks in the London offices of an engineering firm. He doesn't particularly like most of his colleagues but is happy to share a joke, even an Irish one, as long as it is genuinely funny. O'Neill is also somewhat better educated than most of his peers; he is a keen reader and is credited with 'having some culture' by his line-manager, Nigel Trent-Jones (Arthur, 1985: 82). Kevin shares an interest in etymology with his boss and on this particular day they are engaged in tracing the meaning of the word 'alma' which O'Neill suspects might mean 'other'. The ironic relevance of this derivation for O'Neill's personal circumstances becomes apparent when news spreads through the office of a bomb that has killed four people in central London. O'Neill's worst fears are realized as he overhears the draughtsmen in an adjacent office making anti-Irish comments such as, "those bastards should swing" (86). When he enters the office where his immediate colleagues work, he detects a distinctly chilly atmosphere:

Ten minutes O'Neill stood there filing in silence. He knew that it would soon be time to go home but tomorrow would be worse. The full extent of the horror

would be seen in close-up on their television screens that evening and renew their sense of self-righteousness. He knew that tomorrow he could expect no further information on 'alma'. (88)

What is striking here is that the silence and ostracism O'Neill experiences from his colleagues has at least as much impact on him as the open anti-Irish hostility that he hears elsewhere in the building. This is partly because he does not know for certain how long the threatening atmosphere will last. Furthermore, the partisan role that the media frequently played at such moments meant it was difficult for someone in O'Neill's predicament to engage his English colleagues in any serious discussion about the historical causes of the Troubles (Curtis, 1984: 1–3).

O'Neill, understandably, has no desire to put his livelihood at risk for the sake of an ill-advised political remark, and indeed, he even has some sympathy for his colleagues who, he realizes, have also been put in a difficult position by events. He is relieved, for instance, that his colleague Pete, who had been receptive when he confided his anxieties about just such an eventuality, is absent from work that day and will be spared any embarrassment. Others, however, are not as understanding. Gary suggests that 'people from Southern Ireland had no right to be in the country and should be repatriated immediately' (87), while William proclaims that it 'was time to remove the kid gloves' (87), in other words suggesting that the British had been too lenient and that what was needed now were more coercive powers against the Irish community (87). Such opinions ensure that O'Neill desists from making any intervention, but, rather like Dermot in Trevor's 'Another Christmas', he is frustrated by the fact that he is unable to voice his feelings about the situation. On the one hand, he recognizes the bombing as an atrocity but, on the other, he knows that to say this would sound 'too much like asking for forgiveness for something [for] which he was not responsible' (86). He also knows that the bombings are not taking place in a historical or political vacuum and that there are 'many atrocities carried out by British organisations in Ireland' (86). While he is aware that he can make this point if engaged in an argument, he also appreciates that it is not likely to be tolerated under present circumstances; and so he is reduced to silence.

Frank Arthur's short-story is a telling depiction of how Irish people were indirectly affected by the Troubles in their workplace. This is particularly the case for the story's main protagonist who is the sole Irish employee in his department and whose Irishness is especially conspicuous in the wake of IRA activity in the city. Unlike the character of Brogan in William Trevor's story 'The Mourning', who is also subject to anti-Irish abuse at work, O'Neill does not have the compatriotism of his workmates to call upon in his defence. As a result he hides his true feelings and self-censors his national identity for the sake of his personal safety and job security.

Jim Scanlan's 'Burden of Innocence' (1983) is another account of how the IRA bombing campaign affected the London Irish in the workplace. The narrator, Thomas John Ryan, is a machine-operator in a factory making electric cooker components. Born in Cork, he came to England at the age of seven but, despite this, has retained his Irish accent. Ryan claims to have no strong political allegiances: 'Conflict between the two sides of my up-bringing often tormented me. I was grateful not to have a decision

forced on me that would haunt me whatever way it went' (Scanlan, 1983: 69). Ryan's attitude to national identity is informed by a dual inheritance that he neither wishes to completely disown nor fully acknowledge. However, as the story demonstrates, this position proves to be untenable in the politically polarized environment of the time.

Shortly after an IRA bombing in the city, Ryan is questioned by two detectives from Scotland Yard. Despite his protests to the contrary, the inspector suggests that he resembles a photograph of the alleged bomber they are pursuing. Eventually, Ryan provides enough evidence to secure his release (subject to police checks on his identity elsewhere), but as he returns to the workplace, he finds himself in an even more difficult position than Kevin O'Neill in 'A Day in the Office'. Regardless of his innocence, questions have been raised about his possible republican sympathies and activities. 'What would my English workmates think about it at all?' he wonders. 'Irishmen', he anxiously recalls, 'had been attacked at work after the Birmingham bombings' (70).⁹ The story is also set at a time of economic recession and Ryan (a navy by trade) considers himself 'lucky to be getting paid for using any muscle at all'. But all the same, the 'silence now seemed ominous' (70) for Ryan and, as was the case for Kevin O'Neill, the threat of intimidation has almost as much effect as if actual violence had been perpetrated against him.

Unlike the office in which O'Neill works, Ryan's factory consists of a mixture of black and white operatives. The 1970s were a period when the black community in Britain suffered from police harassment under the notorious 'sus laws'¹⁰ and Ryan's black co-workers show their contempt for the detectives, something that affords the Irishman a degree of sympathy. To Ryan's relief, 'the coloured blokes' as he refers to them, react to his predicament with humour rather than hostility. One of them shouts out, "'if you come to blow 'dis place up, man! ... start wid de' fucking press I's on, eh?'" (71). However, the way in which the black workers josh Ryan about being 'a fully fledged IRA-man' (71) makes him feel somewhat uncomfortable, given his avowedly apolitical attitude. It would seem Ryan's black workmates are sufficiently convinced of his innocence to make such jokes but the solidarity they exhibit is something the Irishman had no guarantee he could rely on beforehand, especially given his knowledge that 'colour-prejudice' was not 'unknown amongst the Irish' (70).

On the face of it, Ryan is in a very vulnerable position: potential rejection by his white workmates for his perceived association with the IRA; potential rejection by his black workmates for his perceived racism. The latter, at least, proves to be an unfounded fear. His black workmates seem motivated both by the sense of a common position as workers and by a shared experience of police intimidation, creating a class-based cross-ethnic solidarity between themselves and the Irishman. Although Ryan acquires a certain heroic kudos as a result of events, the issue of whether he will be disadvantaged in the longer term by his erroneously acquired reputation is, however, left open to question. This is especially so, given that the fact that as the story closes, the reaction of his white workmates remains unclear. Furthermore, while some of his workmates have demonstrated a solidarity that makes him feel supported and accepted, he wonders (as the title of the story indicates) whether this has been won at the cost of denying his nationalist sympathies. 'What', he asks himself, 'have I ever done to help the oppressed minority in the North?' (70). Like the male protagonists

of 'A Day in the Office' and 'Another Christmas', Ryan appears to experience the aforementioned 'guilt of betrayal' felt by Southerners in relation to the conflict.

By the end of the story, a variety of narratives are vying for primacy in Ryan's sense of himself: his identity as a worker; his identity as an Irishman; his ethnic identity as an Irish migrant within a multicultural setting. Although the events that take place in this story are more serious than in 'A Day in the Office', the atmosphere in which Ryan works is more sympathetic. Unlike O'Neill, who works under intermittent threat of intimidation from his colleagues, Ryan is fortunate to work in an environment where the Troubles are openly, if flippantly, discussed. 'Burden of Innocence' illustrates, therefore, how the particular social and cultural complexion of the workplace plays a key role in determining the extent to which individual Irish workers were subject to hostility in the wake of IRA activities in London.

The way in which the Troubles impacted on motherhood was explored in William Trevor's 'Being Stolen From' and this is also the theme of Elizabeth Moore's 'Another Pawn Lost' (1982). Liz Murphy wakes up to read news of an ambush in the Northern Ireland town of Crossmaglen and fears that Kevin (one of her two sons serving there in the British Army) might be involved. Liz, a Catholic from a small village in Ireland has, since just before the Second World War, lived in London where she and her family survived the Blitz while living in a 'slum house in the back streets of Paddington' (Moore, 1982: 43). Like many Irish people, she lived and worked in Britain during the Second World War and contributed to the war effort despite her native country's official policy of neutrality (Wills, 2007: 313–14). She is a close friend of her Protestant neighbour Eileen whose sons have also served in Northern Ireland. One of Eileen's sons was killed by a sniper in Belfast, while the other is married to Liz's daughter, Maureen.

In a number of ways, therefore, Liz's circumstances exemplify the closely entwined relations between the two countries. As a consequence, when she finally hears that Kevin has been killed in the ambush, she has a complex set of reactions. She tells Eileen, "his own race killed him, it wasn't his fault or his fight. If he was at home in Ireland, he'd be a hero, now he's just one British soldier less" (44). On the one hand, Liz resents the fact that her son has died for a country to which she feels no sense of belonging, while on the other, she resents the fact that his death has been at the hands of men who claim to represent the country to which she felt she *did* belong. Liz clearly feels that her son's death is not just futile but that it is unjust given that he did not have strong political or religious allegiances one way or the other. But while this might have been his motivation for the job he chose to do, Liz is also fully aware of the fatal consequences of her son's decision and the cruel and ironic questions of national identity his death has provoked.

A subsequent exchange between the two women discloses further nuances in regard to the position of the Irish in London. Like her compatriots in previous stories, Liz reveals her resentment about having to camouflage her feelings about British-Irish relations, and as the magnitude of the sacrifice she has made as a mother begins to impact on Liz, her anger deepens. She reveals, like Norah in 'Another Christmas', that her personal attachment to Ireland stops at the border. "I couldn't care less whether we get back the six counties or not" she proclaims, "I'm sure the very Devil himself is in Northern Ireland." This is not just a territorial disownment but a disavowal of

political claims for which she, as a mother, has now become a victim. As Michael Parker points out, “‘Troubles literature’ [...] is not just concerned with bombs and bullets but also reflects female concerns and perspectives in regards to the conflict’ (Parker, 1995: 3). With no readily available alternative narrative to call upon, Liz is left to deal not only with her grief, but a sense of a cultural identity that has been ruptured by events over which she has no direct control or influence.

The 1970s was a challenging and disruptive decade for the Irish in London. The impact of the IRA’s bombing campaign had far-reaching consequences, not least of which was the pressure on Irish people to suppress expressions of national allegiance. Literary representations of these experiences are rare and, as a result, the texts that do exist provide valuable insights into what the London Irish were experiencing and thinking at the time. The short stories I have analysed here demonstrate how the grand narratives of national identity can move to the fore in people’s lives at times of major historical change. The precise social and psychological consequences on individuals vary according to circumstances, but it is notable how often sites of employment and relationships with fellow workers figure in these texts. Some of the stories show how the semi-public domain of the workplace becomes a heightened political ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1992: 7) between migrant and host communities. Other stories demonstrate how the private domain can also be a site of tension and conflict. This is especially the case with regard to questions of motherhood and relationships between couples, where differing political perspectives disrupt long-standing partnerships in trying times. By writing about the Irish in London in the 1970s, William Trevor and the Green Ink Writers Group provided vivid insights into how the conflict in Northern Ireland impacted in different ways and to different degrees on the lives of Irish Londoners according to their gender, their occupation and their relative position in the wider Irish community. As such, their stories and the narratives of identity they reveal provide a distinct contribution to the genre of Troubles fiction and an important corrective to the more pervasive stereotypes found there.

Notes

- 1 Approximately 15 per cent of ‘Troubles thrillers’ are set in London. See, for instance: Shaun Herron (1973) *The Whore Mother*. London: Jonathan Cape; Max Franklin (1975) *Hennessy*. London, Futura; and Jack Higgins (1983) *A Prayer for the Dying*. London: Collins.
- 2 See transcript of interview with John Tusa for BBC Radio 3: http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/trevor_transcript.shtml (2 August 2006)
- 3 Perhaps the best-known example of this is the psychopath, Hilditch, in William Trevor (1994) *Felicia’s Journey*. London, Viking.
- 4 Trevor’s choice of name for his protagonist has strong resemblances to Tim Pat Coogan, the Irish historian and biographer of Michael Collins. Indeed, it may have been a mischievous decision on the part of the author.
- 5 Collins joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (the forerunner of the IRA) while living in London. See Peter Hart (2006) *Mick: the Real Michael Collins*. London, Pan Macmillan: 65.

- 6 One of the reasons that the IRA bombing campaign in London was so effective was because it was mainly carried out by members of the organization who originated from outside Northern Ireland and were generally unknown to the security forces: perhaps most notable in this respect were the members of the 'Balcombe Street Gang'.
- 7 For other studies of the 'Troubles thriller', see Bill Rolston (1989) 'Mothers, Whores and Villains: Images of Women in the Novels of the Northern Ireland Conflict', *Race and Class*, 31 (1): 41–57 and Aaron Kelly (2005) *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror*. Aldershot, Ashgate.
- 8 A term coined by the author of the eponymously titled book. For the relevant section, see Paddy Hillyard (1993) *Suspect Community: People's Experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain*. London, Pluto Press: 257–61.
- 9 The Birmingham pub bombings, which took place on 21 November 1974, killed 21 people and injured a further 182. The incident led directly to the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the subsequent erroneous conviction and imprisonment of the 'Birmingham Six'. In the immediate wake of the bombings, many Irish people were victimized and assaulted at work; particularly in car plants in the city. See James Moran (2010) *Irish Birmingham: A History*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press: 200.
- 10 An informal name for a law that gave the police the power to stop, search and arrest people on suspicion of intent to commit a criminal act. It was used extensively in the 1970s to target young black men in British cities.