

More than “Casual Interest” or “Casual Pity:” Canadian Memoirs of Belfast

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At least two Canadian memoirs have been published about the Irish Troubles: Charles Foran's *The Last House of Ulster: A Family in Belfast* and Derek Lundy's *The Bloody Red Hand: A Journey Through Truth, Myth and Terror in Northern Ireland*.

Interestingly, both works share with Canadian emigrant memoirs “the entirely conscious, deliberate construction (for auto/biographer and reader alike) of identities that explore the meaning of ‘Canadian’” (Egan and Helms, 5). While each narrative touches only briefly on Canada, each, like emigrant memoirs, makes “Canada... not the subject but the occasion and the audience” (Egan and Helms, 7). Intended in part to show a Canadian audience the complexity of the history of the Irish Troubles, each memoir focuses on the histories of specific Irish families, but the portrait of individuals cannot be disassociated from the history of Northern Ireland as a whole. The epigraph that Charles Foran takes from a well-known Derek Mahon poem, “In Belfast,” could illustrate the autobiographical techniques applied in both works. In his poem, Mahon recounts that learning to “know my place” requires that “the things that happen in the kitchen-houses/ and echoing back-streets of this desperate city” should “engage more than my casual interest” and “exact more interest than my casual pity.” At the most personal, intimate and domestic levels, as individuals in each memoir discover or defend their place in Northern Ireland, they re-enact or represent some of the problems of representation and identity faced in any history of Northern Ireland.

Consequently, the mapmaking metaphor Helen Buss uses to illustrate both the problems of representation in women's autobiography and the skills required to overcome them is helpful in understanding the techniques used by both Foran and Lundy. To Buss, an autobiography is never simply a mirror's reflection of an individual; it is a conscious act of exploration. Unlike reflection,

Map making... involves a complex of intellectual and practical skills that offer a dynamic metaphor far superior to any offered by passive mirror gazing. As well, mapping can be seen metaphorically as joining the activities of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. Language “maps” both the self and the coexistent world. (Buss, 9)

The analogy of the map reminds the reader that any story is a construction; maps are not copies of reality but a record of “the problems with representing perspective” (Buss, 11). Buss claims that “the arts used to overcome these are externalized in the map itself” (11). Each memoir is a map that records the author's arrival at a sense of personal identity through his travels in Ireland; not surprisingly, Lundy, who immigrated to Canada from Ireland, calls his exploration of biography, family history, and mythology a “journey.” Foran, a visitor to Belfast, writes to account for his sense of nostalgia for a place that was not his literal home and now exists only in words on a page: “The Belfast that I wandered is gone. The McNallys whom I so adored are gone as well.... External time has won another bullying victory.... But inside a book... there is sanctuary. The interior of this

book, for sure, is a safe house” (Foran, vii). In their search for an identity and a place they can call home, both writers draw a sense of themselves as Canadians from their travels, and share with their biographical subjects the challenge of navigating shifting, sometimes invisible borders continually redrawn by history.

Each work presents portraits of ordinary people who are irrevocably affected by events with which most Canadian readers would be familiar only as impersonal statistics or news stories. By contrasting individual histories and national history, each memoir resists the determinism that can arise from relying solely on historical explanations of the current Troubles. In each memoir, the reader meets individuals making choices in response to historical events, or even making history themselves. However, both Lundy and Foran’s narratives focus on individuals who generally resist the pressure to conform to the collective values of ethnic or sectarian groups that are all too often seen as monolithically tribal in explanations of Irish troubles. While each memoir offers individual experience as a window on Irish history, especially the Irish Troubles, the authors resist the tendency -- apparent in some nationalist mythology -- of using individual histories merely to illustrate aspects of a national narrative.

In *The Bloody Red Hand*, Lundy tries to piece together the biographies of several ancestors during significant moments of Northern Irish history:

The lives of Robert Lundy, William Steel Dickson, and Billy Lundy encapsulate many themes in the Northern Irish past. Robert and William played roles that can be described as pivotal. In telling their stories and Billy’s more modest one, perhaps I can lay bare the harsh and sometimes murderous mythologies of the Protestants of Northern Ireland. The lives of my ancestors resonate in the very core of Ulster history. (Lundy, 28)

Robert Lundy, the author’s possible ancestor and namesake, was the governor of Derry during the siege of 1688. His initial decision to surrender to King James’s approaching army has made his name synonymous with treachery, and he is still yearly burned in effigy in Northern Ireland bonfires. “For a writer looking for a human synecdoche -- an individual to represent a whole mythology” (Lundy, 24), Robert Lundy could prove irresistible, but Lundy the memoirist immediately encounters problems in establishing the most basic facts about his life and motivations. The written historical records that refer to Lundy become an impediment to representing him as an individual.

Lundy notes that there are portraits of all the historical players in the siege of Derry except Robert. The leaders of the siege published their accounts almost immediately, but Robert is “taciturn and utilitarian to the end” (Lundy, 40), and only a few of his letters survive, along with statements he made to a government inquiry after the siege. The paucity of biographical detail about Robert forces Lundy the writer to invent a fictional account of the thoughts and experiences that led to Robert’s decision to surrender to King James, but Lundy implies that his fictionalized account of his ancestor is no more a construction than the self-justifying and factually conflicting siege memoirs written by the Protestant defenders of Derry shortly after the event. Lundy’s invisibility and silence

make it easy not only for the defenders to blame the siege on him, but for subsequent generations to demonize him as the archetypal traitor so necessary to the developing Protestant myth of “No Surrender:” “He is faceless, a visual mystery.... We can fix Robert with any aspect we desire” (Lundy, 38). The writer’s difficulty in attempting to separate Robert Lundy the man from the mythology surrounding him points both to the power of the myth and to the way it obscured alternative interpretations of history. The label of traitor may be covering an early dissident viewpoint.

Equally deeply buried in the Protestant “collective memory” that Lundy claims governs how Northern Irish Protestants “interpret history” is also the occasional “tentative, long in the past and mostly forgotten, enlightened solidarity with Catholics across the old divide” (Lundy, 10). To recreate the time when some members of the Protestant community reached out to Catholics, Lundy recounts the life of his great-great-great-great-grandfather, William Steele Dickson, a Presbyterian clergyman widely believed to be a general in the United Irish army, and consequently viewed as a traitor to both Britain and his own community. Lundy finds much more written information to round out William’s biography, including, helpfully, an engraved portrait and William’s own published autobiographical account of his detention as a suspected rebel; but again Lundy discovers that the information he possesses is “oddly selective” (Lundy, 126).

Lundy notes that “William’s evasiveness makes sense for reasons of practicality and principle” (Lundy, 131), given that his book was written partly as a defence of his actions in the events leading up to the United Irish uprising; he was writing it, after all, in protest at having been held for three years without trial. William consequently provides an individual account of the uprising that raises more questions than it answers; as such, it cannot easily be co-opted into any myth of identity that the history of the rising often serves for both Protestants and Catholics. One significant absence in Dickson’s autobiography is his motive in becoming involved with the United Irishmen. Since Lundy sees Northern Irish history as a “Rosetta stone” (Lundy, 11) that helps explain conflicts and terrorism in other parts of the world, he would love to have an explanation of his ancestor’s motives:

Just when we most need William to tell us his state of mind, he falls silent. He could show us how a man dedicated to peaceful reform by constitutional means becomes a revolutionary. His conversion might illuminate how anyone in any time or place crosses the line from political agitation... to ambushing government troops or putting bombs on civilian trains and airplanes. (Lundy, 192)

Like the siege memoirs that demonize Robert, William’s autobiography is less a faithful reflection of historical events than an attempt to set straight earlier historical records. It is as much a map of William’s struggles to be vindicated in his violent opposition to the more conservative Protestant factions in Ireland as a factual record of the uprising or his motives for joining it. William’s refusal to supply what Lundy desires -- a factual, individual account that can act as a case history or synecdoche for terrorism -- prepares us for Lundy’s complex portrait of the Catholic community at the time of the rising:

Irish Catholics, like the Protestants -- like any group of people -- were not a single bloc of believers in one thing. That's what the standard received version of Irish history dictates, with its categories of 'Catholics' and 'Protestants,' 'Planters' and 'Gaels.' But as usual, complexity keeps intervening. (Lundy, 172)

The most compelling insight he draws from William's account is in fact his awareness of the narrative holes that indicate the location of a viewpoint that has been obscured by written histories and autobiographies. The written records work best as maps or blueprints of the conscious construction of individual and national identities, and merely point the way to an untold story hidden by historical records. For instance, the views of the idealistic "New Light" Presbyterians were preserved in their copious writings, William's memoirs included, and consequently were "given a disproportionate amount of attention in the historical record" while "the unexpressed views of the silent... majority" of Protestants were forgotten (Lundy, 176).

Like the Catholic and Protestant communities of his time, William's life resists simplification. By focusing on both the facts and omissions in his personal account of the United Irish Uprising, Lundy concludes that, contrary to nationalist mythology, Catholics and Protestants didn't really "c[o]me together in the years before 1798 and join in a battle to free Ireland from England, its ancient enemy" (Lundy, 174). Still, he values Dickson's autobiography for its record of an individual's decision to think outside his community's prevailing mythology of siege and no surrender. That Dickson used his beliefs to reach out to Catholics provides Lundy with hope. While it "sobers" him (Lundy, 213) to realize that William's "scripture politics" bear some resemblance to Ian Paisley's, he "take[s] comfort in the much greater differences between the two men: William's sincere, goodhearted ecumenical scholarly patriotism against Paisley's simplistic fundamentalist vision of good and evil" (Lundy, 214).

In recounting William's life, Lundy undermines one of the myths of martyrdom constructed around the rising. He argues that the United Irishmen were influenced more by the American Revolution than the French one; the American precedent gave them every reason to believe that they would be successful. To view them merely as willing precursors to the executed martyrs of the Easter Rising, as they have been portrayed in popular retellings of Irish history, is another oversimplification. The martyrdom motif Lundy feels is essential to understanding Protestant mythology comes from a later event, the Battle of the Somme, a mythologized historical moment that in turn is undermined when viewed from the perspective of the individuals involved. In choosing his third ancestral subject, Billy Lundy, a member of the ill-fated 36th Ulster Division (a Canadian historical counterpart that suffered equally devastating losses was the 1st Newfoundland Division), the author offers a loyalist portrait that helps illustrate the attitudes of the silent majority of Protestants against whom William Dickson spoke.

Even though his paternal grandfather lived until the author was seven, Lundy "realize[s] with surprise and sadness that I know as much about my ancestor William in the

eighteenth century as I do about my grandfather Billy in the twentieth” (Lundy, 234). Billy’s silence and absence from Lundy’s own memories becomes analogous to the absence of Billy’s class, religion and region in popular concepts of Irish national identity in the early 20th century. “Missing the main event was getting to be a family theme” (Lundy, 229), Lundy observes and suggests that he may owe his very existence to history’s overlooking of the Lundy family, since Billy would have been at the Battle of the Somme with the 36th Ulster Division but for a lucky injury that triggered his discharge.

Nevertheless, understanding the neglected majority that Billy represents is key to understanding the Protestant enclaves and heavily fortified drinking clubs that the adult Lundy encounters on visits to his grandfather’s neighbourhood. Billy’s personal history allows Lundy to reconstruct a minority view of the Easter Rising that took place months before the Battle of the Somme, and of the civil war and partition that followed. Using family recollections (including his own memories of Billy’s son, Lundy’s father), he portrays Billy Lundy as a hard-line bigot who shared in a family tradition of habitual violence which Lundy claims is “a natural intimate family extension of the vehement communal anger” (Lundy, 237) of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland -- a factor for which the politicians shaping Home Rule and Independence repeatedly failed to account. Perhaps trying to over-compensate as a man “with a traitor’s name among a suspicious people” (Lundy, 279), Billy was not only an active Orangeman and a signatory to the Solemn League and Covenant that pledged the majority of adult male Protestants in Northern Ireland to resisting Home Rule, but may also have joined the Ulster Volunteer Force, a “huge illegal Protestant army” (Lundy, 279) that Lundy suggests provided the nationalist Patrick Pearse with a model of a paramilitary organization.

Billy’s story reveals much about the daily life of Protestants in the Northern State that was born and died in Billy’s lifetime. In speculating on the role his grandfather played in the mass expulsion of Catholics from the Harland and Woolf shipyards during the sectarian riots of the 1920s, the author reminds us again that, as in the Great War and the Irish fight for independence, neither community could be regarded as a mere bloc. Nearly 2,000 Protestants with “socialist -- and a few, of nationalist -- sympathies also lost their jobs, sad counterparts to the 700 expelled Catholic veterans of the Somme.” (Lundy, 302) Both groups, comprised of “forgotten men”(Lundy, 291), were omitted from the nationalist mythologies of all the Irish communities, North and South, as were the histories of Lundy’s mother’s family, Protestants massacred by the Black and Tans on a horrific night. In recounting his family history during the early years of the Republic and the Northern Ireland “statelet,” Lundy uses individual experience to deliberately undercut the differences that the opposing nationalist mythologies try to emphasize. Protestants and Catholics alike suffered during the Troubles in the early 20th century. The tragedy, Lundy suggests, is that in ignoring their common history and suffering, Irish nationalists and unionists on both sides of the border continue to reinforce their sense of separateness and to take actions that perpetuate the Protestant myth of no surrender but “no victory either” (Lundy, 301).

Lundy's portrait of his father, Alexander Lundy, is also both representative and dissident; his birth takes place during sectarian fighting, with "gunfire chattering away in the mean sundered city" (Lundy, 310), an inauspicious beginning that may have influenced Alexander's eventual decision to move to Canada with his own wife and son. Alexander's life helps illustrate how the problems encountered in creating an Irish identity are shared by emigrants to Canada:

Alexander and the province of Northern Ireland came into existence in the same year... If the unionist Northern Irish state had been a person, a diagnosis would have been comprehensive: deeply neurotic (anxious, obsessive behaviour), fundamentally sociopathic... and episodically psychotic.... Alexander was equally complicated, a solitary, melancholy man, hard to know or touch. (Lundy, 311)

In Canada, Alexander found his experience as an immigrant to be depressingly similar to his experience in Northern Ireland, at least in terms of being secure in one's identity: his world travels and the intelligence that allowed him to escape the hard life of his parents ensured that not only did he "remain out of place and deracinated" in Northern Ireland, but also felt "like an exile" in Canada (Lundy, 312).

In recounting the key points of Irish history through the eyes of ordinary men (and women), Lundy undermines the "lyrical certainty" (280) of nationalist myths by recording the difficulties entailed in reconstructing individual identities and determining how they fit into nationalist narratives. Even after recent attempts at peace in Northern Ireland, Lundy claims that Protestants are still learning to know their place in their failed state and in the larger nation of Ireland. He concludes that "things for the Protestants were -- and remain -- so complicated. Where do they belong? Where is home[?].... Surely everyone belongs somewhere?" (Lundy, 280). The confusing and often painful construction of individual identities, crystallized in moments when the individual moves against the tide of family or even tribal expectation, shines a light on both the individual dissidence within communities and the cooperation between factions that are often overwritten by nationalist mythologies. Lundy concludes that the Irish Protestants belong in Ireland, and that their survival depends upon their own and the Irish nationalists' acceptance of this fact.

Foran's memoir also records absences, especially in official historical records; like Lundy's memoir, it is as much a mapping out of problems of representation as a retelling of history from an individual perspective. As Lundy realizes, written records often reveal the existence of essential biographical information that ultimately eludes him. Foran's memoir offers us a written record of a disappeared world: it is as much a memorial to the lost homes of the dispersed McNally family as a record of the everyday conversations and *craic* (meaning sociability, wit and hospitality) that by their ephemeral nature are threatened with oblivion in places less dangerous than Belfast. Like Lundy, Foran encounters the sectarian drinking clubs that rose from the ruins of pubs (like the ones run by the McNallys) that once allowed Protestants and Catholics to mingle. Losing the pubs meant losing common cultural ground between the communities, and the *craic* became

maintained within individual homes such as the McNally family's. The homes they built and saw destroyed, like the pubs they ran, become symbols of conviviality and openness at odds with the historical pressures to remain segregated:

James and Maureen [McNally] maintained two hopes: to conceive of a future for their children, and to preserve a family life. They were actually being ambitious. By the early 1970s, many northern Catholics could not see much beyond the crisis. Especially in West Belfast and Bogside Derry, where individuals were exposed to a relentless if familial indoctrination into the collective values of their people and where practical balances to tribalism -- a job or house elsewhere... were imperceptible, the future paled against the present. People knew what they knew and were comforted by it.... Finally, in any place where poverty was dire and prospects were limited, people sought shelter in the imaginative and spiritual houses they had constructed from history: sufferings endured atavistically and memories expanded into legend, feelings hardened into politics. (Foran, 155)

Foran uses the metaphor of maps to reveal hidden fault lines of religion, race, language, and -- most important -- class that he argues run through Canadian society as much as Northern Irish society. He also suggests that once these fault lines are recognized and exposed, they can be challenged. At the end of the memoir, Foran asks himself if, had he been brought up in Belfast, he would have made the same decisions as the McNallys' oldest son, arrested for IRA membership. Martin's nagging greeting, "What about you, Chuck?" challenges Foran to account for his own upbringing and eventual sense of identity and place. Is Canada -- and is Foran himself -- free of the forms of self-segregation that so often lead to violence in Belfast?

Foran wryly describes a belated coming-of-age experience that makes him aware of the arduous construction of both individual and national identities. Driving his infant daughter into Northern Ireland for the first time, he ponders "the logic or illogic" of demanding a child's car seat to ensure she is safe while he drives her straight into "a military police state patrolled by 28,000 heavily armed security forces" (Foran, ix). "For my Northern Irish friends, the dizziness that resulted from pondering these incongruities formed a state of mind, while the trials and tribulations that must have resulted from coexisting with such incongruities surely constituted a way of life. Finally, at age thirty-two, I realized where they had been all their lives" (Foran, x).

As in Lundy's narrative, official histories and written documents, like official borders, belie the complexity of individual and national identity. In fact, James and Maureen's youth, shaped roughly by the same sectarian strife as Billy Lundy's, is depicted as a map with constantly shifting borders: "The Belfast James knew was an ordinance map willfully misdrawn" (Foran, 17). An official border has been imposed upon the Catholic Irish McNallys in both the creation of the Northern Irish state and in the unmarked sectarian divisions of their city. In order to understand Irish history, Foran implies, one needs to investigate the little-recorded migrations the Troubles forced upon ordinary

people. (In fact, the collective loss of homes by Catholics and Protestants driven out by neighbours was, Foran notes, “described by a commission as the largest forced population movement in Europe since the Second World War”) (89). From the time they are children, James and Maureen’s survival depends upon their ability to read under the surface of the official map. To read it correctly,

one had to hold it to a light that shone only in the north and west parts of the grid. Then the true divisions would be revealed. The flash-points and fault-lines, the walls and borders; they were all there, looming but invisible, defining but indiscernible, like family secrets. Map literacy was taught early in childhood. Adults, meanwhile, never stopped studying changes to the blueprint. (Foran, 17)

Foran describes the clandestine tour of the Troubles hotspots that he takes with the teenaged Martin as another map whose contours need to be illuminated. To the inexperienced Foran, the “fearsome sectarian divides” that “Martin’s route kept crisscrossing” are invisible as he travels through identical lower-class neighbourhoods: “To the uninformed eye, the city we drove through was a study in sameness: same shabby neighbourhoods and low-end shops and businesses, same urban blight” (Foran, 12). Martin, whose “totalizing view of the world” burns rather than illuminates, provides a perspective that shows that the neighbourhoods

were, in fact, religions and histories apart.... Look closer, and I would notice that one neighbourhood was coloured Orange and the other Green. Nor were the army patrols in the Shankill the same as those along the Falls Road. Quite the opposite: in the Shankill, the army was the protector and colluder. In the Falls, it was the attacker and adversary. (Foran, 12)

Early on, Foran realizes that his view of the city is hampered by a “problem of perspective (12).

To some extent, his problem of perspective is solved as his interest in the lives of the McNallys challenges him to examine his own Canadian upbringing: “Suddenly I could see why the McNallys might want to interrogate, however circumspectly, a suburban Toronto teenager. It had never occurred to me that such a specimen might be of interest to a Belfast family, or to anyone else” (Foran, 24). While each seems initially exotic to the other, Foran eventually realizes that the McNallys have much in common with his own family. Like James and Maureen, Foran’s parents were migrants within their own country, meeting in northern Ontario and eventually settling in the Toronto suburb of Willowdale. Like the Irish couple, his Canadian parents harboured middle-class aspirations and embraced an ordinary though hospitable culture. While on the surface Canadian suburban life may seem more diverse, tolerant and welcoming than the communities in Belfast, Foran’s recollection is complicated by his portrait of the housing estate adjacent to his middle-class neighbourhood.

Our block had put a metaphorical mile between us and the Willowtree estate. We had pretended great distance where great proximity existed. Consciously or not, we had decided on the need for sides, and chosen them, and then ensured that few crossovers would be welcomed. I had been raised in a segregated environment.... What was extraordinary was how long it took me to recognize that Dunview Avenue and Willowdale were like everywhere else. We hadn't escaped history after all. People hadn't checked their pasts at the border or on the exit ramp off the 401.... And there was nowhere else for us to call home. No England or Ireland, no Blind River or Ottawa. Though it wasn't presented that way, Dunview Avenue was our community: where we came from, where we belonged.... What we made of it all, how we conceived ourselves as individuals, within history, families within a society, constituted all the actual degree of belonging, the actual sense of community, that we could ever establish. Our houses were last houses, too. (Foran, 171)

It is only after repeated visits to the McNally family over more than a decade that Foran is able to acquire perspective on his own sense of identity and place, and on Belfast. The clear view of the McNally family's place in Irish history is represented by a climb he takes with a daughter, Patricia McNally, to the top of Cave Hill. As in Lundy's memoir, the 1798 rebellion becomes a symbol of the commonality hidden by national myths that Foran both deconstructs and sees as something illuminated by his experience of the McNallys' modest achievements in steering their children, even the rebellious Martin, away from sectarian hatred in the face of a long past of community division, represented repeatedly as problems of cartography:

The past in Ireland was united in fact but estranged in interpretation. It commanded attention the way a mountain in a city did: because of bulk and shadow; because of altered light and affected weather; because, whatever your personal views, you still had to negotiate with the past -- go over, go around, go not at all. (Foran, 29)

That the past is still tangled in the present is illustrated by Patricia's sudden terror at meeting two young men -- obviously not hikers -- on the same hill where the United Irishmen held clandestine meetings. Later, Foran tries to explain why he feels the hill "has the status of an emblem" just as he falteringly tries to explain his view of the United Irishmen as "exemplars" of

a miracle in Irish history -- a reconciliation of communities, a moment of synthesis -- perhaps capable of being repeated and certainly available as an example.... My half-baked contribution to the discourse centred on the physicality of Cave Hill. First, I granted the mountain the status of emblem: it embodied those two hundred-year-old ideals. Then I volunteered the observation that, no matter where you lived in Belfast, the mountain was starkly visible. (Foran, 166)

Patricia McNally's skepticism reminds Foran that he may be succumbing to the oversimplification of nationalist myth; her reminder that the United Irish commitment to violence was similar to that which caused her family so much grief recalls the part of Derek Mahon's poem "In Belfast" (later republished as "The Spring Vacation") that Foran doesn't quote in his epigraph: "We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill/ at the top of every street, for there it is, / Eternally, if irrelevantly visible" (Mahon, 4).

With a new perspective from the top of the mountain, Foran recalls Martin's 1979 car tour:

Less the details, more the Belfast map; how he had outlined for his cousin and me a city west of the Lagan, shadowed by the Antrim Hills. How the parameters of that three-hour tour had, I realized afterwards, encompassed only a small part of the city but nearly all the major hotspots, the key flashpoints. How, for a Troubles watcher, Martin's Belfast had been dead on -- where the conflict was, would likely always be. And how realizing that the map was both incomplete and exclusive still hadn't done much to broaden my focus. (Foran, 167-8)

What Foran comes away with from his vantage point on Cave Hill is how the McNally family embodies the two sides of the United Irish movement: angry despair and hopeful tolerance. The McNallys become a more satisfactory, living example of how to maintain hope, hospitality, humour and tolerance in heartbreakingly difficult circumstances. Interestingly, the historical landmark Foran ultimately finds as metaphor for what he has learned about Ireland (and himself) from the McNally family is not the mountain where the United Irishmen conspired, but the library that some of their leaders helped found, and which is described as a counterpart to the beleaguered environment the McNallys created in their homes and pubs:

The Linen Hall Library has always been run by Protestants. As an institution, however, it has never been considered the exclusive domain of that community. It welcomes new members; in recent years it has welcomed anyone to simply walk in and wander, do homework, drink tea. Linen Hall is a public Belfast house. Two centuries after its inception, the library remains the greatest, if not the only, example of a city institution that is imaginatively owned by all citizens.... Politics have not been explicit there since 1798. Implicit, however, in the endurance of the Linen Hall are the politics of sanity and principles; principles not of a republican-style government, but of fairness and tolerance, acceptance of difference; politics not of a United Ireland, but of a shared Irish culture and history, a shared vision of the future that excludes gunmen, hard men and bigots. (Foran, 194)

For Foran, the fact that the IRA was forced by universal outrage to apologize for attempting to burn down the library in 1994 is a hopeful sign that the very ordinary

values embodied by people like the McNallys on both sides of the sectarian divide will prevail.

Both Lundy and Foran express a very cautious sense of optimism even in the face of current sporadic violence and the continued pervasiveness of nationalist myths that distinguish and separate rather than bring people together. Both writers favour individuals who, if they slip out of their everyday lives to become exemplars of anything, are scholars and quiet rebels against conformity, witty conversationalists and generous hosts rather than gunmen and martyrs. When the universality of their individual experience is emphasized, it is to illustrate the commonalities of identity that should unite rather than separate the different communities of Ireland.

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