Comparing Revolutionary Narratives
Irish Republican self-presentation and considerations for the study of communist life-histories

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Writing about the life histories of individuals and their experience of the ‘Troubles’ has been well-represented in recent published works about the conflict in Northern Ireland. The experience of Irish Republicans, revolutionary nationalists who were dedicated to the removal of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland and the creation of an all-Ireland Republic, has been central to this development. This article is based on the belief that Northern Ireland’s movement towards a ‘post-conflict’ environment has given fresh impetus to the long-established tradition of political autobiography associated with the historical evolution of Anglo-Irish relations. Many protagonists (or ex-protagonists) of the ‘Troubles’, whether Irish republican/nationalist, Ulster unionist/loyalist or British, now feel the time is ripe to tell their ‘stories’ to a wider public, to explain their motivations, and to try and shape the historical debate over the rights and wrongs of the conflict.

In some cases, these (ex-) protagonists have used their writing to engage in self-critical reappraisal of previous commitments and actions, but perhaps it is more likely that writing in this genre and at this juncture is likely to involve a large measure of self-justification. The autobiographical design may well, in this event, represent a proxy weapon in an ongoing ideological struggle; a textual means of engaging the ‘enemy’ by the force of argument (as opposed to the argument of force). Rather than unvarnished ‘truth-telling’ with regard to the individual’s role in the conflict, memoirs of this type are more likely to offer ‘truths’ that are ‘partial, loaded and incomplete’. In interpreting political autobiography in the Northern Irish context, therefore, we need to be mindful of what Roy Foster has described as ‘the deliberate gap in the narrative: the momentous elision, the leap in the story’. Autobiographical writing may also have a significant role to play in contemporary political discourse about how to approach ‘the past’ in Northern Ireland, by providing an opportunity for individual narratives to be told in their entirety, retaining their integrity, unlike for instance legal processes: ‘law
does not permit a single witness to tell their own coherent narrative; it chops their stories into digestible parts'. This writing may also provide a symbolic, collective or communal element to the process of narrative construction, particularly when the authors are viewed as emblematic individuals. However, the lacunae or gaps that often characterise these stories make this process complex and uncertain, especially where there is still no public consensus about the essential causes of conflict. As Egerton has argued:

with all the distortions to which this type of personal historiography is prey, the potential for honesty, accuracy and insight remains; for historians, ‘truthfulness’, however old-fashioned, ultimately stands as a fundamental critical concern in the evaluation of memoirs.4

This article starts from the premise that there is a clear absence of research that compares Irish Republican self-representation, especially through political autobiography, with that found in other self-proclaimed radical or revolutionary political movements (or erstwhile revolutionary movements), such as the communist tradition. Within the historiography of international communism, there has been, at least until recently, an ‘impoverished’ disregard for biography; ‘historians of communism are beginning to avail themselves of the possibilities of ‘life-history’, even if they have scarcely explored the potential of the headier approaches to it.5 It has been argued that, in terms of a biographical dimension, there has been a dearth of comparative study within the context of the international communist movement, even although some national studies have recently begun to redress this gap.6 It is even more clearly the case that research that compares the study of communist life-history with that found in other non-communist revolutionary political movements has been conspicuous by its absence. The following formulates some preliminary thoughts for a comparison of life-history (and specifically, autobiographical writing) within the Irish Provisional Republican movement and the West European communist movement. In particular, it does so through an analysis of Provisional Sinn Féin (PSF) President Gerry Adams’s autobiographical writing, underlining some of the differences and similarities with memoirs by leaders within the West European communist movement (for instance, Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB] and Maurice Thorez, General Secretary of the Parti Communiste Français [PCF]). Can we identify how the construction of an exemplary Provisional Republican life converges or diverges with the construction of an exemplary communist life?
The Construction of an Exemplary Irish Republican Life

‘At 11.32 and 25 seconds, Gerry Adams lit his pipe. That was the signal that we were really down to business.’ An Phoblacht/Republican News (6 November 1986)7

Roy Foster has argued that ‘the elision of the personal and the national, the way history becomes a kind of scaled-up biography, and biography a micro-cosmic history, is a particularly Irish phenomenon’.8 However, he also reminds us that there is ‘a mesh of nuance, complexity and contradiction involved when the stories of nations intersect with supposedly emblematic individuals’.9 There is a very long tradition of autobiographical writing by political leadership figures in the nationalist and republican milieu in Ireland, dating back at least to the middle of the nineteenth century.10 In the aftermath of the crucible of guerrilla warfare and civil strife in the revolutionary period 1916–23, an earlier generation of Republicans such as Dan Breen, Ernie O’Malley and Tom Barry had developed this tradition of autobiographical writing by (ex-) protagonists of violent conflict.11 In the recent past, one only needs to contemplate the memoirs and autobiographical fiction-writing of the PSF President, Gerry Adams, or the party’s erstwhile Director of Publicity, Danny Morrison, to understand the significance of this genre for the Provisional Republican movement’s self-presentation.12 At an earlier stage of the recent ‘Troubles’, Seán MacStiofáin, ex-Chief of Staff of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), also published a memoir.13

In seeking to explore comparative elements in the Irish republican and international communist worlds of life history, it is not the intention to argue that there is any convincing ideological convergence of these movements and parties. It is probably best to understand PSF and the PIRA as a unified radical nationalist and populist movement, which may contain some socially progressive elements, but these have certainly not defined the movement’s ideology. Indeed, one of the reasons for the Provisional republican movement’s formation in 1969–70, out of a split in the IRA and SF, was the explicit rejection of the avowedly Marxist and communist politics associated with what became known as the ‘Official’ republican movement.14 Nonetheless, until recently at any rate, the Provisionals have been an avowedly revolutionary and anti-system movement, seeking constitutional change through confrontation, often violent, with the established states in Ireland, both North and South.

However, there are arguably several similarities between the political context faced by Provisionalism in Ireland and Western communism, in
terms of structure and organisation, even if not in terms of ideology. As a revolutionary movement adjusting to a non-revolutionary context, the progressive incorporation or co-option of the Provisionals into reformist and electoralist political structures, over the course of the last fifteen years or longer, and the watering down of its avowedly revolutionary method (if not the continuing aspiration towards Irish unity), has parallels with the position of west European communist parties during the post–1945 era. There has been a similar dilemma between maintaining the revolutionary ‘purity’ of the movement, ‘pas comme les autres’, and seeking to maximise its political impact in the here and now, through building a mass party, and campaigning vigorously to win positions of public influence (for example, in parliamentary elections). In Leninist parties, there was often an explicit denial that ‘bourgeois parliamentarism’ (winning political power through democratic electoral means) should be a primary concern for a revolutionary movement; in Irish republicanism, there was until recently a parallel denial of the legitimacy of ‘partition assemblies’, whether the devolved Stormont parliament in Belfast, or the Dáil in Dublin, and an even clearer rejection of the jurisdiction of the Westminster parliament in Ireland. As far as working alongside other political forces is concerned, both Irish republicans and western communists have often displayed a purely instrumental approach, viewing both competitors and potential allies with disdain. It is also clear that at least part of the organisation has been engaged in clandestine and conspiratorial (often illegal and/or violent) activity in order to further its political goals. Arguably, this ‘twin track’ approach to political organisation has necessitated an internal culture associated with revolutionary discipline and something akin to idemocratic centralism. At various junctures, the Provisionals have been accused of displaying both fascistic and communist characteristics but neither is especially persuasive, at least in ideological terms.15

The Provisionals have been characterised since the early 1970s by a small, self-perpetuating leadership group (including Adams and Martin McGuinness, currently SF Deputy First Minister in the Stormont parliament), and a cult of the leadership, particularly the PSF President (as the quotation that begins this section illustrates). It is worth examining further the significant parallels between the Provisional movement and communist parties, with regard to the longevity, pre-eminence and the significance attached to the origins and social background of leaders. Gerry Adams has been PSF President continuously since 1983, and before that was vice-President from 1978–1983. He has spent 35 years as one of the key strategic leaders of the Provisional movement, and has certainly become the domi-
nant individual in his party, the ‘undisputed leader’, capable of inspiring awe among his supporters.\textsuperscript{16}

Outside the movement, amongst opponents and enemies, especially during the aftermath of particularly bloody IRA actions, he has sometimes been vilified and treated as a uniquely malevolent bogey-man.\textsuperscript{17} More recently, this position has been amended somewhat, with some outside the movement willing to fete Adams as a ‘statesman’ of international repute for leading the Provisionals towards an abandonment of violence.\textsuperscript{18} However, within the Irish Republican community there are critical dissenting voices that have accused the PSF President of presiding over the neutering of the movement’s revolutionary vocation.\textsuperscript{19} There are clearly echoes here of the position held by various General Secretaries of West European Communist parties in terms of their longevity, their public standing and their internal reputation (Pollitt was GS of the CPGB for thirty years, off and on, Thorez and subsequently Georges Marchais occupied office for similar periods in the PCF, as did Palmiro Togliatti and Enrico Berlinguer in the \textit{Partito Comunista Italiano}).

Adams was born into and became socialised within a highly politically conscious Republican family and neighbourhood milieu in west Belfast (Ballymurphy), and thus there is no conversion narrative in Adams’ description of his adoption of a republican belief system in the first volume of his autobiography, \textit{Before the Dawn}. He became a republican almost by a process of osmosis. There was no ‘second birth’ necessary for Adams and his republican credentials were almost incontestable from his first forays into civil rights politics in the mid-1960s. As with communist movements, Republican individuals could be ranked, and were encouraged to rank themselves, along a ‘continuum of graded purity’.\textsuperscript{20} All starting points in terms of social identity or family origins might be considered legitimate, but if a communist began life as an incontrovertible proletarian, then s/he had less work to do with regard to self-fashioning than an individual with bourgeois origins. The latter was required to demonstrate a degree of self-transformation, in order to become recognised as a ‘good’ communist, which the former could expect to be taken for granted.

So it was for the republican movement; an ‘historic’ family like the Adams/Hannaway clan (Gerry Adams senior had been jailed for attempted murder on IRA active service in 1942) had no need to wrestle with the difficult balancing act of both renouncing and embracing the ‘resolutely superseded’ pre-conversion self.\textsuperscript{21} Morgan has pointed out that the ‘autobiographies’ of leading Western communists, because of their emblematic significance to the movement (both national and international), may be inter-
interpreted as ‘a personalised form of official party history’. He further argues that researchers can study these texts on the basis of three broad dimensions: anonymity, combativity and teleology, and this article utilises this schema to critically assess Adams’ autobiographical self-presentation.

The Authorial Voice and Purpose

In terms of anonymity, the authorised communist ‘master narrative’ involves a deep-seated anti-individualism (often overlooked by those who stress the ‘cult of the personality’ in regard to communist leadership). The life history of the leader must be subsumed within the Party’s collective ethos and values, and anything that ‘might set him apart or single him out’ is renounced. The leader is assimilated to the bureaucratic ‘persona’ of the Party, and often the first person singular (the autobiographical ‘I’) is eschewed for the plural. Jochen Hellbeck has also investigated Soviet subjectivity in the Stalinist period, through a study of individuals’ diaries, and he asks ‘what is meant by writing the word I in an age of a larger We?’. This formulation has echoes of Victor Serge’s fictional (but partly autobiographical) recreation of the same period, in his The Case of Comrade Tulayev (1948). In the novel, Serge has the character of Makeyev (a Tsarist soldier who becomes a Bolshevik during the civil war, and rises rapidly through the party hierarchy, becoming an alternate member of the communist party central committee in 1925) reflect upon the blurred nature of his individual self-identity, and his relationship with the collectivity of the Party:

‘All is ours!’ he said, sincerely, at public meetings of the Railwaymen’s Club, and he could easily have substituted ‘All is mine,’ since he was only vaguely aware where ‘I’ ended and ‘we’ began. (The ‘I’ belongs to the Party, the ‘I’ is of value only inasmuch as, through the Party, it incarnates the new collectivity; yet, since it incarnates it powerfully and consciously, the ‘I’, in the name of the ‘we’, possesses the world.)

The apogee of this approach can be seen in the production process; there is evidence from the German Democratic Republic of memoir writing being undertaken by Party committee (there was a Memoir Section of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in East Berlin). In the case of Thorez’s Fils du Peuple (first published in 1937, but regularly republished in amended form, to bring the text into line with current political orthodoxy, up until 1960) the narrative was ghost-written by Jean Fréville and subsequently edited by senior PCF ideologists. It has been described as a ‘socialist realist’ autobiography.
Morgan argues that in this schema ‘the mildest deprecation of self or party’ was taboo, and ‘not human frailty or temptation but a steely self-control was expected’.

In this case, modern Irish republicanism may be somewhat diverse. Gerry Adams, for instance, was already a writer of some repute (in the genres of local history and autobiographical fiction), before he published his two volumes of political autobiography so far, *Before the Dawn: An Autobiography* (1996) and *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland* (2003). There is no doubt that Adams himself is the authentic author of his narratives, although he does regularly recognise the aid of some prominent and trusted confidants (such as Richard McAuley, PSF press officer/spin doctor, and Steve MacDonogh, his editor/publisher at Brandon/Mount Eagle). Furthermore, Adams employs a subtle device, utilising self-deprecation (or even self-mockery) and acknowledgement of personal frailties as a badge of authenticity, introducing a note of bathos into his writing. This studied folksiness or affected simplicity is supposed to convey humility; he may not be a paragon of revolutionary virtue, and perhaps he suffers from similar faults to the rank-and-file grassroots republicans. The purpose of this is to establish Adams as a grounded ‘man of the people’ who understands and even shares their foibles, but also their dreams. In this regard, Adams’s narrative shares many of the characteristics that have been associated with Harry Pollitt’s *Serving My Time* (1940), ‘a narrative conforming to the wider conventions of British labour autobiography at least as much as to the special requirements of a communist party life’. In Adams’s case, we can speculate that this distinctive approach may, in part, reflect a less deferential era, a time when any attempt to hold up the leader as an wholly virtuous incarnation of all that is ‘pure’ in the movement is no longer credible, even in authoritarian parties.

For instance, Adams recalls that in the initial stages of the inter-party talks process leading up to the Good Friday Agreement, when unionists were deeply distrustful of republican intentions, ‘most of my best conversations with unionists were in the toilets. It was just small talk.’ The effect sought here is to convey Adams’s willingness to fraternise with the ‘enemy’, his non-dogmatic openness to dialogue, in contrast to the intransigence of Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble. Interestingly, there are distinct echoes here of the unorthodox approach to communist memoir adopted by Harry Pollitt, who also jokily recalled fraternising with police officers and industrialists. No doubt, some of these anecdotal interventions are genuinely humorous but that ought not to deflect us from their determinedly political purpose. Foster notes Adams’s professed enjoyment of P.G. Wodehouse’s
writing; he argues that this ‘is inevitably linked with a carefully calculated joke
that, like Jeeves, he has to go around clearing up the mess left behind by
Englishmen’.32

It is also worth saying something about fact and fiction in Adams’s writing.
His two volumes of memoir were preceded by *Cage Eleven* (1990), a book
based on his ‘Brownie’ articles written while he was an internee and then a
convicted prisoner (after a failed escape attempt), and published in *Republican
News* between 1975 and 1977. Although Adams gives the real names of some
of his fellow internees in the book’s introduction, he later claims that ‘the
main characters are fictional, but they and their escapades are my way of
representing life as it was in Long Kesh’.33 Steve MacDonogh characterises
his literary development (at least before his memoirs were published) as a
gradual move away from factual writing towards fiction. Introducing Adams’s
*Selected Writings* (1994), he explains that while *Falls Memories: A Belfast Life*
(1982), a local history of a Catholic nationalist area of Belfast, has ‘qualities
of fiction’, and *Cage Eleven* ‘hover[s] between fact and fiction’, *The Street and
Other Stories* (1992) is ‘more decidedly fictional’.34

In *Before the Dawn*, however, Adams’s propensity to blur the margins
between fact and fiction provoked controversy when he ‘tried to capture in
a short story something of the harsh reality of the campaign waged by the
IRA against Britain’s armed forces as they patrolled the streets of my home
town’ in the early 1970s.35 Although this ‘story’, which recounts the internal
moral questioning of an PIRA sniper before he shoots a member of a British
army patrol, is written in italics, it is not explicitly presented purely as fiction,
the product only of imagination rather than experience. Fintan O’Toole crit-
icised the evasiveness of Adams’s narrative style, adding: ‘it is striking in itself
that the IRA campaign on the streets of Belfast is not represented by bombs
tearing civilians apart in restaurants, by children blown up on their way into
the Falls Road baths or by “informers” having nail-studded clubs aimed at
their flesh’.36 There was, of course, a political rationale behind this approach;
Adams could only present such details in ‘fictional’ form because of his
steadfast denial that he has ever been a member of the PIRA, despite the
incredulity and derision of critics. Nevertheless, the strength of the critical
reaction that greeted this aspect of his autobiographical style seems to have
had an impact; certainly, no similar episode appears in *Hope and History*.

**Conveying the Struggle: An Ambiguous Strategy**

Although Gerry Adams is willing to use personal anecdotes to supplement
and further his political purpose, nevertheless this makes any perceived
dissimulation on his part more damaging. Of course, Adams is by no means alone in utilising what Aughey has described as ‘the art of political lying’; as McIntyre has pointed out, the idea of the ‘revolutionary lie’ has been used by many organisations that accept the logic of the ends justifying the means. Adams wants to identify himself in Before the Dawn with the heroic communal sacrifice and struggle of the republican community and its ‘army’, the PIRA, but this identification inevitably leads him into an ambivalent position as far as the actual campaign of violence is concerned. His position is complicated by his strategic purpose at the time of publication (1996): first, he wanted to distance the political ‘wing’ of the Provisional movement from the military, arguing against all the evidence that they are in fact entirely separate organisations; Adams’s oft-repeated argument is that the former deserved to be involved in all-party talks because of its electoral mandate alone. One way to achieve this was for Adams to deny ever having played a prominent role in the PIRA, or indeed having been a member at all; second, with the benefit of hindsight, we can speculate that he wished to prepare the ground for the definitive abandonment of armed struggle, but he could not state this openly, for fear of provoking a serious split in the movement.

His credibility on this issue has been undermined by a succession of biographers and commentators, and there is virtual unanimity amongst academic researchers: ‘between April/May 1971 and March 1972 Gerry Adams was OC of the Provisionals’ 2nd Battalion in Belfast; in the latter year he became Adjutant for the Belfast Brigade as a whole; by the time of his arrest on 19 July 1973 he had become OC of the entire Belfast Brigade…Adams was released from prison in 1977 and in the same year became an Army Council member, a position which he was to hold for a long time’. Most accounts also agree that Adams was, for a short period at the end of 1977 until February 1978, the PIRA’s Chief of Staff. In fact it is harder than ever to take seriously Adams’s claims, given Martin McGuinness’s recent admission that he was a significant PIRA commander in Derry at the time of Bloody Sunday in 1972, an admission that perhaps heralds a change of heart at the apex of the organization. Nevertheless, as O’Toole has observed, Before the Dawn ‘almost entirely glossed over’ Adams’s IRA career, a view endorsed by Foster, who claims that he is ‘unnecessarily coy’ about the IRA and likens his memoir to ‘a biography of Field Marshal Montgomery that leaves out the British Army’. The political subtext was clear to all, however. The context of the developing peace process, and the perceived requirement to maintain Adams’s position as the Provisionals’ unchallenged leader, capable of delivering a PIRA ceasefire and committing (at least the vast bulk of) the movement to this new strategy, meant that ‘these incredible assertions were
allowed to pass with no more than mild expressions of skepticism'.

If Adams was to be accepted locally and internationally as a genuine agent of peace and compromise, then it suited the purposes of governments in London, Dublin and Washington, as well as republicans and even pro-Agreement unionists, to collude in this necessary fiction.

However, as O’Toole notes, ‘the danger has always been that the tacit agreement to ignore the IRA past of the SF leader would encourage a larger and more profound act of denial. If Adams did not have to account for his involvement with the IRA, then perhaps the IRA itself could remain unaccountable.’ More than ten years after the signing of the Agreement, this issue of accountability for past actions remains central to Northern Ireland’s political future. Adams must have been more aware than most of the likely reaction to his address at the recent PSF-sponsored March for Truth Rally (August 2007), in which he called for full disclosure of the British state’s role in ‘violence and collusion’ with loyalist paramilitary ‘death squads’ during the Troubles. Entirely predictably, Adams was roundly condemned from many quarters for his apparent hypocrisy; a senior political source at Stormont was quoted as saying, ‘It’s a case of be careful what you wish forî because the whole truth and nothing but the truth would have far more serious consequences for Adams and co. than anyone else’. Families and victims of alleged state collusion, who may well have legitimate grievances that deserve to be investigated impartially, must also surely recognise that recruiting Gerry Adams to publicise their case will inevitably lead to accusations that they are willing pawns in a party political game, where the ‘truth’ is merely harnessed to party calculation at any given moment.

The motifs of communal endurance and resistance are repeated at virtually every turn in Adams’s memoirs, and he consciously adopts an omniscient stance, seeking to symbolise and embody this spirit. Adams readily eulogises the republican base’s stubborn refusal to buckle under enormous pressure, despite the tough conditions that it had to endure whilst sustaining the guerrilla conflict. However, one of the consequences of prosecuting the war, according to Adams, is that it helped to create an under-developed political consciousness within the movement’s heartlands. The implication, though not explicit, is that only he (and a few other perspicacious members of the leadership coterie) can be aware of the broader context within which the Provisionals’ heroic resistance was played out, and only this hand-picked close-knit group can fully appreciate the newly-changed political circumstances. Ordinary activists and foot-soldiers are conceived as incapable of this sort of deeper strategic and political thinking, and are therefore almost completely reliant on the wisdom and far-sightedness of their leaders. Again,
the parallels with communist parties, and their intolerance of internal questioning and dissent, are strikingly clear. This may have been convincing within the Provisional movement whilst PSF were making steady electoral progress, but as a result of more recent setbacks (particularly in the general election in the Republic of Ireland in 2007) increasingly questions are being asked, and perhaps Adams’s hitherto unchallengeable position will be less secure.

Finally, in this section, what is clear is that Adams’s ‘most passionate commitment is to the narrow world of West Belfast, a self-justifying and tightly-knit community later replicated in the republican wing of internment prison’. Adams’s story is couched in localised terms, partly due to his desire during the mid-1990s to confirm the republican heartlands in their belief that the ‘revolutionary struggle’ had not been defeated, despite the PIRA ceasefire, and that all of the sacrifices had been worthwhile. It also makes his self-appointed task of subsuming his personal story into the heroic collective ‘resistance’ of the republican community much easier. Indeed, as Foster has argued, Adams ‘is determined to see things purely in the perspective framed by his mother’s back window’, although this localism is, of course, a conscious political decision, masking a much broader strategic, and cunning, intent. In contrast to this disingenuously parochial image, he ‘enjoys’ massive worldwide exposure: in marketing terms, ‘as an Irish product, Gerry Adams has name recognition rivalling Guinness or Waterford Glass’. He purports, moreover, to be a ‘very shy person’, explaining: ‘I find other people are much more relaxed in dealing with public events. I mean, I wouldn’t be running about to banquets or balls or fancy suppers. It’s nothing to those who lost their lives…or lost loved ones, but I think the loss of anonymity is a big thing’. Adams’s target audience in Ireland and (especially, the USA) is again invited to see him as a grounded politician who understands them and their community; in short, as a ‘man of the people’.

The Teleological Imperative: United Ireland

If Adams’s autobiographical writing is guarded and opaque, this is explicable in terms of his perception of the political imperatives of the republican movement at that particular juncture, though this does not of itself render such an approach justifiable to a wider readership. Foster acknowledges that ‘since the Adams story is a small part of the story of modern Ireland, so the fact that it supplies—yet again—a narrative of evasions is only appropriate’. O’Toole notes that ‘political autobiographies should be written when the hurly-burly’s done. They should tell a story whose ending is known,
There is a clear parallel here with the communist autobiographies we have mentioned (Pollitt’s was published when he was aged fifty, yet he still had another sixteen years to serve as CPGB leader; Thorez’s was first published when he was only thirty-seven, and still had twenty-five years to come at the apex of the PCF). But, the end of Adams’s story remains unpredictable (he was only forty-eight when his first volume of memoir came out), because as he recognises in the foreword to *Before the Dawn*:

> I am also conscious that the elements of conflict remain today and retain their potency. For this reason I must write nothing which would place in jeopardy the liberties or the lives of others, so I am necessarily constrained. It is probably an invariable rule that the participants in any conflict cannot tell the entire story until some time after that conflict is fully resolved.

These words were written in February 1996 when, with the end of the IRA’s ceasefire at Canary Wharf, it was the Provisionals’ actions rather than Adams’s text that was taking lives, and not merely jeopardising them. Even today, Adams would no doubt take the view that the conflict has yet to be ‘fully resolved’. Indeed it is arguable that when Adams talks of the conflict requiring complete resolution before he could tell ‘the entire story’, the only circumstance that would satisfy his criterion is the creation of a united Ireland, or at least PSF in government across the island. Again, just as there is a teleological core at the heart of Adams’ thinking, the parallel with the communist view of the necessary conditions for the ending of class conflict is striking.

Despite the absence of discernible movement towards a united Ireland, in 2003 Adams brought out a second volume of autobiography. However, *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland*, came no closer to offering a ‘real and fully truthful autobiography’. Rather, it presented the author’s version of the process leading up to the successful negotiation of the Agreement in April 1998, and while there is a perfunctory final chapter outlining some of the problems it has encountered in subsequent years, Adams has conceded (again) that the narrative remains unfinished: ‘there is a natural third book…but apart from noting that in my head, I have no plans, notions, ambitions to even think about writing it at the moment’. Moreover, he insists that since the ‘story’ of the peace process is ‘still unfolding, still sensitive, still fragile…it is not my business to offer an objective account of events or to see through someone else’s eyes. Nor is it my responsibility to docu-
ment these events. My intention is to tell a story. It is my story. My truth. My reality.\textsuperscript{54} The rationale for publication at this particular time, therefore, seems to be that ‘a happy ending’—the signing of the Agreement—is ‘more important than a tell-all story’.

Once more, Adams also conflates his ‘personal journey’ with the communal story. The peace process in his eyes is presented as a morality tale, where selfless nationalists—notably John Hume of the SDLP and Catholic clerics such as Fr Alec Reid—and republicans consistently urge the British government and the unionist parties to address ‘the underlying causes of conflict’, as if these are self-evident, uncomplicated and uncontested. He places enormous emphasis upon his dialogue with Hume and the quest for pan-nationalist unity in the early 1990s, and the need to press the Dublin and Washington administrations to adopt the ‘Irish peace initiative’, with no apparent recognition that, without a balancing input from the Westminster government, no serious negotiation with any section of unionism would be feasible. Indeed, the unionists as an autonomous force hardly figure at all in Adams’s narrative. Interestingly, his later overtures to unionism are revealed as merely a rhetorical device:

\begin{quote}
the mess within unionism is inherently part of any process of change. Unionism \textit{at its best} is quite a conservative, reactionary philosophy….I’ve been reading recently Faulkner’s memoirs, different bits and pieces of writings by unionist leaders…and you’d almost think that some of the senior British officials, some of the NIO people, are using a script written in the 1920s or 1970s.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

But, doesn’t Adams’s own presentation of his political thought imply that his own ‘script’ remains fundamentally unaltered? From this perspective, the 1993 Downing Street Declaration is seen as no more than ‘a significant development’, though an alternative reading would suggest that without it there would have been no potential for progress towards genuinely inclusive talks. Republicans had to be provided with an alternative to ‘armed struggle’ before peace was possible, says Adams, but the unanswered question remains: what happens if the republican movement maintains its evolution into a party ‘like all the others’, if the military wing is entirely dismantled, and the ‘struggle’ is pursued solely through the democratic process, but the outcome is not Irish unity, at least not any time soon? The teleology inherent in Adams’s narrative means that he cannot entertain such an outcome; a ‘proper’ democracy, in his view, is defined as leading inexorably to a sovereign, united Republic.\textsuperscript{56} Even today, there is no adequate answer to this question, but it
is becoming starker for many ordinary Republicans. Perhaps for the first time, Adams’s self-proclaimed revolutionary vocation is being subjected to close scrutiny, and not just by ‘dissidents’, but also by hitherto devoted supporters. Anthony McIntyre, commenting on recent criticism of Adams in the usually compliant Andersonstown News, has argued that Adams ‘now stands increasingly isolated as the sole remaining dinosaur of Northern Irish politics...an antediluvian figure from the 1980s.’

Conclusion

We can tentatively draw a number of conclusions from this comparison of the construction of exemplary communist and republican lives: both share a rejection of the false dichotomy that is often posited between individual and societal processes of remembering, and both construct narratives that identify the individual leader as emblematic of the wider political community. In both cases, we can speculate about the impact that a loss of revolutionary vocation or at least of self-confidence has had on the respective autobiographical projects. Paradoxically, despite the shared teleological vision, both of these movements were progressively integrated into the political systems they were ostensibly committed to overthrowing. Perhaps the autobiographical design is meant to make sense of this development for the rank-and-file. From this perspective, they are pragmatic attempts to conscript the past in the service of the movement’s present strategy, which is unfolding in a non-revolutionary context.

Adams’s approach to political autobiography, therefore, is to echo, through the mask of supposedly personal testimony, the officially-endorsed and internally-validated version of ‘party’ history, and to use this testimony in the service of his contemporary goals. In this way, autobiographical reflection is harnessed to the yoke of political expediency. If the ‘revolutionary movement’ progressively loses its revolutionary vocation, then what is left? For a leader like Adams, just as for communist leaders like Georges Marchais, the answer is internal power. To the question posed by Sharrock and Devenport in the title of their unauthorised biography of Adams: ‘Man of War or Man of Peace?’ we can juxtapose McIntyre’s view that Adams should be understood, above all, as a Man of Power!

Notes

2. R. Foster, The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland (London, 2002),
10. For example, see J. Mitchel, Jail Journal (Poole, 1996 [1854]); J. Denvir, Life Story of an Old Rebel (Shannon, 1972 [1910]).
as ‘Stalinist’ (Guardian, 13 March 2007).


17. After Adams helped carry the coffin of the IRA man Thomas Begley, who had, in October 1993, blown himself up along with nine people in a fish shop on the strongly loyalist Shankill Road in West Belfast, the British press reacted furiously: ‘Gerry Adams: the two most disgusting words in the English language’ said the Sun in its editorial (Sharrock and Devenport, Man of War, Man of Peace? p.310).

18. Nancy Soderberg, the Clinton administration’s leading official on Northern Irish policy during the early 1990s peace process, invoked the name of Nelson Mandela when discussing the importance of Adams to the process (New Statesman, 21 March 2005). A decade later, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the allegations of IRA training FARC rebels in Colombia, and Adams’ visit to Havana to acknowledge the support of the Cuban administration for Irish republicanism, mainstream US opinion was much less enamoured; the New York Post headlined an article about Adams ‘Osama’s soul brother’ (10 November 2002).

19. Aside from the relatively small organised republican alternatives to the Provisional movement, in the shape of Republican Sinn Féin/Continuity IRA and the 32 County Sovereignty movement/Real IRA, there have been several non-aligned republicans who have been a constant thorn in the side for Adams and the PSF leadership. Perhaps the best known is Anthony McIntyre, who ran an influential website, The Blanket that regularly castigated the PSF President, and the alleged centralism and censorship employed by the Provisionals.


31. J. Harkin, ‘Unifying Force’ (*Guardian*, 17 December 2005) noted of his interview with Adams that his sense of humour is ‘drier than dust.’ Adams himself (*Guardian*, 24 August 2007) recently wrote a comic piece about the attention he receives from security personnel at airports during his frequent travels to the US: ‘The man behind the desk was friendly. “You must be Irish,” he said. “You look like that guy, Adams.” “I know,” I said. “He’s always getting me into trouble.”


George Best telling his life-story but failing to mention that he had played for Manchester United. Cited in R. Dudley Edwards, ‘Gerry the Liar’, Spectator, 27 July 2002; in another metaphor, Roy Foster argued that it was about as credible as Paul McCartney denying his past membership of the Beatles, Financial Times Magazine, 23 October 2005.  

44. Foster, The Irish Story, p.176.  
45. Foster, The Irish Story, p.177.  
56. See the extensive interview with Adams conducted by Nick Stadlen (Guardian, 12 September 2007). Asked whether the IRA’s armed struggle was justified, given what was on offer at Sunningdale in 1973, and what republicans settled for in the 1998 Agreement, Adams replied, ‘Well, you can only—at the risk of scaring the unionist horses—you can only make that judgment at the end, and the end in my view will be a united Ireland.’  