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THE LEGACIES OF CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE POLITICS OF MEMOIR-WRITING

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1. Introduction

Much scholarly attention across several disciplines has been devoted to the interlocking series of issues that, taken together, constitute efforts to address the complex legacies of the Northern Ireland conflict. Although the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998 tended to concentrate upon the constitutional future and the institutional architecture of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, nonetheless questions concerning the ‘politics of the past’, or how society should remember the ‘Troubles’ have been increasingly at the forefront of both popular and academic debate. The nature of the conflict, its genesis, its prosecution, and its outcome, if indeed it can be said to be definitively over, are all key aspects of this urgent, though often unfocused, attention. In an emerging, though still fragile, post-conflict environment, ‘dealing with the past’, whether in terms of a mooted overarching truth and reconciliation process, or through piecemeal attempts to uncover hitherto disputed or neglected aspects of the violent conflict, has become a critical arena within the contemporary political life of Northern Ireland. This is the context for the body of work which constitutes this submission, and which has broken new ground in the study of political memoir in a divided society.

The author developed a deep interest in the politics of the ‘peace process’ in Northern Ireland from the mid-1990s onwards, building upon a more general interest in the politics of the left in Ireland and Northern Ireland (e.g. Dunphy and Hopkins, 1992). From 1998 onwards, the author analyzed various aspects of the institutional structure put in place in the aftermath of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. In particular, the author engaged in a joint project, supported by an Economic and Social Research Council grant, to investigate the potential role and powers of the British-Irish Council (BIC), the body set up under the East-West (third) strand of the inter-party negotiations. This research helped to shed light on an under-researched aspect of the
institutional innovations introduced by the Belfast Agreement, and also illuminated the extent to which the BIC might grow beyond the immediate Northern Irish political context, and potentially operate as a forum for bilateral and multilateral relationships to develop between devolved administrations in different regions of the United Kingdom, and the sovereign governments in Dublin and London (see Hopkins, 2002a, 2002b; Lynch and Hopkins, 2001a; 2001b and 2006).

Subsequently, the author turned his attention to the increasingly significant interlocking issues concerning the legacies of the violent conflict. These were issues that raised questions regarding the historical roles and individual responsibilities of key actors in the contemporary political life of Northern Ireland. In terms of methodology, and as a partial reflection of the increasing significance attached to the ‘biographical dimension’ and the nascent cross-disciplinary field of ‘memory studies’ within the social sciences and humanities (e.g., Keightley and Pickering, 2013), the author began to focus his research upon the ways in which important political protagonists sought to construct and influence the historical narrative of the ‘Troubles’ (for an early example of this approach, see Hopkins 2001). As a specific route into this inter-disciplinary approach to the legacies of conflict, and as a means to interpret the collective memories of the conflict, the author has recently been engaged in a book project analyzing the memoir-writing of many of the critical political figures of this era (see Hopkins, 2013). A central argument of this work, which has been developed over the course of the author’s research during the last decade, is that the study of political memoir in a divided society, slowly emerging from conflict, can illuminate many of the critical aspects and problems associated with the legacies of violent confrontation. The research agenda which informed this monograph, and the rationale for approaching the study of Northern Ireland’s complex past in this inter-disciplinary fashion, will form the core of this report.

2. Studying Collective Memory and Commemoration in the Northern Ireland Context

All sides to the conflict recognise that Northern Ireland is in a period of transition, but from what and to what is the subject of intense debate and confusion. Many of Northern Ireland’s weary and traumatised inhabitants might be expected simply to be
thankful for a period of relative peace, after the intensity of the violence. However, this is a deeply politicised society, for better or worse, and there is little realistic prospect of erasing the Troubles from collective memory, even if moving on from a *tabula rasa* does have its attractions to some (Aguilar, 2000). Many individuals in Northern Ireland (and outside) have to live with the consequences of the Troubles on a daily basis, and the notion that they could, even if they so desired, simply forget, silence their memories and restart their lives from scratch, is surely wishful thinking. However, it is also the case that many experiences and emotions associated with the political violence have remained unspoken up to now, whether consciously or sub-consciously pushed to one side, due to their traumatic character (Dawson, 2007). These lacunae and silences may also contribute to a culture of denial, in which erstwhile protagonists do not feel sufficiently confident to acknowledge all elements of their role in the conflict.

Therefore, this report begins with the observation that individual and collective commemoration or memorialisation of the Troubles is often unavoidable. If the potential exists for such remembrance to contribute to the forging of a consensus (or at least the minimising of polarisation) in post-conflict societies, then it is also possible, perhaps probable, that it will serve to deepen existing divisions. There has been a great deal of recent debate in Ireland (though much less in Great Britain) regarding the ‘decade of centenaries’ that stretches from 2012 until 2023. During this period, many of the foundational events in forging British-Irish relations over the last century will be remembered and commemorated. The author has argued that whilst such commemoration may involve a sincere effort on the part of protagonists to move beyond the sterile antagonisms of the past, to subject previous shibboleths and commitments to a robust critique, and to engage in a thoroughgoing self-criticism of long-held attitudes and policies, this is by no means guaranteed. If it could take root, however, such an approach to the past may support the development of a culture of tolerance in a hitherto pervasively divided society.

However, although evidence in the Northern Ireland case can be adduced to support the existence of an inclusive and placatory approach to the past, nonetheless this must be recognised as a minority trend. More often than not, even in the absence of violent physical conflict, commemoration of the Troubles has involved a ‘pitched battlefield
of opposing ideologies, more divisive and triumphal than healing and celebratory.’ (Goldstone, *Irish Times*, 21 January 1998; cited by Arthur, 2004). As Shirlow and Murtagh (2006: 2) have argued, ‘there appears to be a common tendency in societies emerging from conflict to present the future as utopian, shared and equal. Such naivety undermines the potential for history, victimhood and new forms of violence to reappoint the desire among most to remain attached to separate ideas, beliefs and practices.’ Competing and exclusive interpretations of the Troubles may also comprise attempts to wrest control of the narrative telling and retelling of the conflict, shaping the future historical understanding of the nature of the meta-conflict. Breen Smyth (2007: 21) recognises the ‘perceived risk that truth recovery will reopen wounds, reactivate old grievances and re-stimulate the desire for revenge’, but on balance, her view is that these dangers should not invalidate the search for a comprehensive approach to the legacies of conflict. A more cautious note is sounded by Paul Arthur (2004: 76), who warns that ‘collective memory can be seen as a major obstacle in the business of trust-building’. He cites Padraig O’Malley’s judgment that Northern Ireland (in the aftermath of the 1980-1 hunger strikes by Republican prisoners) had become a ‘victim-bonded society in which memories of past injustice and humiliation are so firmly entrenched in both communities’ that escaping the ‘helplessness’ this engenders will prove hugely difficult. Shirlow and Murtagh (2006: 29) go further, stressing that ‘the decrease in politically motivated violence over the past decade has been accompanied by an intensified process of claiming and “owning” victimhood.’ Even if such a logic is bound to undermine political stability and progress towards ‘normalising’ society, nonetheless Shirlow and Murtagh argue that both sides have a tendency to adopt discursive strategies that seek to ‘claim the totem of having been the most persecuted community [...] Remaining blameless thus remains a key component in the perpetuation of sectarian atavism in Northern Ireland.’ Evaluating the report on ‘Ways of dealing with the past’ of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of the United Kingdom’s House of Commons, Arthur noted that the effort to tackle the ‘politics and administration of “healing”...is an immensely complex and traumatic process that has to proceed in terms of decades rather than months.’ Through his detailed study of memoir-writing, the author has sought to engage with this broader debate, through an explicit focus upon a hitherto neglected dimension of this subject, namely the memoirs produced in increasing numbers by many of the key protagonists of the conflict.
3. Interpreting Political Memoir in Northern Ireland

This increasing willingness of erstwhile protagonists of political life in Northern Ireland to publish their stories of the Troubles has become a significant element in the public engagement with the politics of the past in Northern Ireland. And yet this area of study has been under-researched in the academic treatment of this complex subject in the post-ceasefire era. This relative neglect stems from a number of factors: one is the surprising dearth of interest among scholars from a range of disciplines in the genre of memoir or autobiography in the Irish (and Northern Irish) context more broadly conceived; a second is the understandable scepticism with which historians and political scientists have tended to approach the unverifiable aspects of life-writing, even taking into consideration the ‘biographical turn’ in the social sciences over recent times; a third reason relates to the problematic nature of defining the parameters of the genre of ‘memoir’ or ‘autobiography’, a difficulty which is no less apparent in the sub-genre of ‘political memoir’. All in all, the intrinsically interdisciplinary nature of ‘memory studies’, including the study of political memoir-writing, may also help to explain the relative dearth of scholarly interest in this field.

In the first major contribution of the author to this nascent field (Hopkins, 2007) it was argued that notwithstanding this lack of critical attention, the study of these sources can help to illuminate hitherto shadowy aspects of the wider issue of a societal reckoning with the past. In a broad volume dedicated to modern Irish autobiographical writing (Harte, 2007), the author’s chapter analysed a wide range of memoir-writing from some of the key protagonists in the Troubles, including leading figures within nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist political parties and movements. It was argued that a key advantage of studying the legacies of conflict through the life-writing of some of the major protagonists is the opportunity offered to understand in real depth the multi-layered relationship between the roles played by the individual and the politics of the collective and communal. Furthermore, this focus can potentially permit researchers to grasp the genuine complexity of the lived experience of the Troubles, and the efforts made to address the politics of its difficult personal and social aftermath. In a different, but related, context, one can discern a
similar approach in the recent work of political scientists studying the life histories of British political leaders (see Rhodes, 2012; Diamond and Richards, 2012).

The author attempted to distinguish between autobiography and memoir-writing as sub-genres, and followed George Egerton (1994), in seeing political memoir as a ‘polygenre’. The difficulty in ‘classifying memoir in tidy categories, however, should not stand as an argument for diminishing its significance or impeding the development of a helpful body of criticism.’ (Egerton, 1994: 342) Memoir and autobiography may be understood as at opposite ends of a continuum of life-writing, based upon ‘whether the focus is primarily inward, on the development of the self, as in the case of autobiography, or more external, on others, on events and deeds, as with memoir.’ (Egerton, 1994: 342; Pascal, 1960) Of course, it may well be difficult to assign a particular place for any individual text on that continuum, and ultimately it needs to be recognised that no hard and fast definitional boundaries are likely to prove robust, given the inherently hybrid nature of this kind of writing. Many, if not all, ‘memoirs’ involve this complex combination of both inward-looking self-reflective material, which concentrates upon the evolution and presentation of an individual psychology, alongside or bound up with externally-oriented discussion of the politico-historical context in which that individual life is inscribed. For my purposes, it was argued that although many of the memoirs studied undoubtedly contain some autobiographical reflection, they tend to be more clearly oriented towards the public life of the writer and the public events they have witnessed or taken part in; therefore, the author’s subsequent work has generally used the term ‘memoir’, rather than ‘autobiography’.1

The author put forward an interpretation of memoir-writing in the context of Northern Ireland’s apparent movement towards a post-conflict environment. Clearly, political memoir-writing was not a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland, but it was argued that the perception that the ‘peace process’ had been firmly embedded gave fresh impetus to a long-established tradition. Many (ex-) protagonists of the conflict felt the time was ripe to recount their ‘stories’ to a wider public and to explain their motivations. This process was often predicated upon a conscious attempt to influence the debate over the rights and wrongs of the conflict; in other words, an effort to shape the competing narratives concerning the meta-conflict (i.e. what had the violent
struggle actually been about). The remainder of the chapter examined a range of important issues to do with authorial motivation of memoirists, the authenticity or otherwise of the authorial voice, generational and geographical differences, and the diversity of writing from within the parliamentary and paramilitary arenas.

The chapter demonstrated that many of these political memoirists (often leading personalities of the conflict, whether in conventional, ‘mainstream’ political parties such as the Ulster Unionist Party or the Social Democratic and Labour Party, or in paramilitary-aligned movements such as the Provisional republican movement, based around the Irish Republican Army and Sinn Féin, or the loyalists of the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association) could be interpreted as embodying collective or communal aspirations. In this significant sense, these memoirs should not be read only, or even primarily, for what they can reveal about the individual author’s historical evolution and motivations. Instead, in a highly politicized society, they may shed light upon the collective experience of their constituencies (broadly understood), and they may come to be seen as emblematic or exemplary. The chapter adapted the argument of Foster (2002: xvii), who argued that this conflation of personal biography with national history was a ‘particularly Irish phenomenon’. He underlined the ‘mesh of nuance, complexity and contradiction involved when the stories of nations intersect with supposedly emblematic individuals.’ In the Northern Irish context, one might add that this could also be true for the ‘stories’ of ethno-national ‘communities’ (of Catholic Irish nationalists, and Protestant British unionists), emerging from protracted and bitter conflict.

From a methodological perspective, the author maintained that these sources can be utilized profitably by political scientists and contemporary historians, notwithstanding the difficulties associated with what Foster (2002: 3) called the ‘deliberate gap in the narrative, the momentous elision, the leap in the story.’ It is certainly the case that memoir-writing needs to be treated with circumspection by researchers, and often memoirists are tempted onto the paths of ‘vindication, exculpation and the byways of personal interest.’ (Egerton, 1994: 344). However, the author argued strongly that whilst the truth or falsehood of any testimony is clearly of critical importance to the political scientist, and memoir-writing should always be ‘read’ with an eye to both internal consistency and its conformity to established facts gleaned from documentary
and archival sources, nonetheless the sensitive interpreter also needs to make judgments regarding the political motivations and intentions of the memoirist. The argument here is that these published texts should be studied not simply for their literary merits, but also for their historiographical insight and contemporary political relevance. Gamble has pointed out in this respect that ‘some think political scientists should be like detectives, searching out the one true account of what happened.’ However, since ‘reality is constructed and experienced in so many different ways, determining what actually happened in any final sense is an aspiration impossible to achieve.’ (2002: 142).

In this work, my approach recognized this apparent limitation of the genre, but also followed Egerton (1994: 344-8) in arguing that ‘with all the distortions to which this type of personal historiography is prey, the potential for honesty, accuracy and insight remains; for historians [and, we might add, political scientists] “truthfulness”, however old-fashioned, ultimately stands as a fundamental critical concern in the evaluation of memoirs.’ There is often evidence that memoirists tend to ‘retroject perspectives and motives, to rationalize behaviour, to attribute present meaning to past experience […], and particularly to find a unity and pattern in the disorder of past political strife’ (Egerton, 1994: 347). And yet, the author maintained that whether being deliberately self-serving and/or manipulating the historical narrative for contemporary ideological purposes, the memoirist almost always self-betrays him/herself into the hands of the careful reader. By ‘sifting’ and interpreting these sources, alongside other related methods such as oral history and interviews, the researcher may uncover significant evidence to paint a fuller picture of the experience and conduct of key protagonists of the Troubles. Whilst there has been important work done to record the ‘personal accounts’ and experiences of ‘ordinary’ citizens in Northern Ireland during the conflict (see, for example, Smyth and Fay, 2000), the approach adopted by the author stressed the significance attached to analyzing the historical narratives promoted by ‘emblematic’ political leaders, figures of authority within the divided polity.

4. Narratives of Reconciliation?
The next two works presented here built directly upon the chapter in Harte (2007), but analysed specific aspects of the memoir-writing that had been produced in the post-conflict era. The first was a chapter in an edited volume examining Irish Protestant Identities (Hopkins in Busteed, Neal and Tonge, 2008), which looked at loyalist memoir-writing. This chapter argued that, in comparison with memoirs written from within the republican community, individuals from a loyalist background had, at least until recently, been under-represented. The personalization of Irish republican historical writing could be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, at least, but by contrast loyalists had been slow to react to the republican strategy of attempting to shape the narrative ‘telling’ of the conflict. The potential reasons for this relative dearth of loyalist life-writing were explored, as well as the ‘confusion of voices’ that resulted from uncertainty regarding who was actually in control of these narratives (given that several of them were ‘ghost-written’, often by tabloid journalists). The chapter also tended to confirm the emerging academic consensus in contemporary historical studies of the loyalist movement; namely, that many of those closely associated with the UVF/Progressive Unionist Party have been motivated to a large extent by a politically conscious desire to construct an autonomous working-class politics in the Protestant community. This has involved life-writing that has been characterized, at least partially, by self-critical judgments concerning the violent past of the movement. On the other hand, memoirs from within the UDA/Ulster Democratic Party have displayed a tendency to be driven by commercial and parochial considerations.

The second of these publications was an article (Hopkins, 2009) that investigated recent memoir-writing by Irish republicans (and, in particular, the works of SF President, Gerry Adams) in a comparative context. The article examined ‘revolutionary narratives’ by explicitly comparing Adams’ writing with the memoirs of communist party (CP) leaders in Western Europe. The article started from the premise that there was a prima facie case for comparing Irish republican self-presentation, through memoir-writing, with that produced within other avowedly radical or revolutionary political movements. This was especially the case for self-proclaimed revolutionaries in cases where the movements to which they belonged had progressively been incorporated, or co-opted, by the wider political systems that they had supposedly rejected. Despite a significant growth in scholarly interest in the
potential of a life-history approach to the history of the international communist movement (see *inter alia* McIlroy, Morgan and Campbell, 2001; Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, 2005; 2007), this article represented the first attempt to compare the insights from this literature with life-writing from the realms of another revolutionary context. The article sought, through a close examination of the memoir-writing of SF President Gerry Adams, alongside the memoirs of CP General Secretaries (such as Harry Pollitt of the British CP and Maurice Thorez of the French CP), to answer the question: is it possible to identify the similarities and differences between the construction of an exemplary Provisional Irish republican life and an exemplary communist life?

The article argued that there were important parallels between Irish republican leaders, and their communist counterparts, in terms of longevity, predominance within the party/movement and the significance attached to the origins and social background of leading personnel. As with communist movements, Irish republicans could be ranked, and were encouraged to rank themselves, in terms of a ‘continuum of graded purity’ (Halfin, 2003: 27). It was possible to become a ‘good republican’ whatever one’s social origins and family background, but it was simply much easier for an individual with a connection to an ‘historic’ family to win acceptance. As with incontrovertible proletarians, a republican from this milieu had less work to do in terms of self-fashioning. In the case of Gerry Adams, his credentials were impeccable (Sharrock and Devenport, 1997). It was partly this family background that enabled Adams to convincingly portray himself as a paragon of revolutionary virtue, and which also meant that his memoir-writing may be interpreted as a ‘personalised form of official party history’ (Morgan, 2005: 56). The article proceeded to examine the complex interweaving of fact and fiction in Adams’ writing, and offered a specific critique in this context of what Aughey (2002) has described as ‘the art of political lying.’ The article concluded by pointing out the study of exemplary communist and republican life-writing showed that both shared a rejection of the dichotomy that is often posited between individual and societal processes of remembering. Similarly, both movements have constructed narratives that identified leading figures as symbols or emblems of the wider political community.

The most significant work presented here is clearly the 103,000-word research monograph, *The Politics of Memoir and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (2013). This
work distilled much of the author’s developing ideas in this field over the course of approximately a decade, as outlined in this report. The book began with a methodological chapter which dealt in greater depth with many of the themes discussed in this report, as well as examining the ideas of truth and falsehood in the context of memoir-writing (Yagoda, 2009). The book continued with thematically-organised chapters that analysed a range of memoirs from within ‘mainstream’ Provisional republicanism, the ‘dissidents’ who have rejected the leadership’s narrative of both the past and the present trajectory of this movement, loyalists, Ulster unionists, SDLP ‘constitutional nationalists’, British Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, print and broadcast journalists who have reported on the Troubles, and memoirs written by victims and survivors of the violence. In addition, there was a specific chapter devoted to memoirs of the short-lived 1974 power-sharing Executive.

Clearly, this coverage was not absolutely comprehensive (e.g. memoirs written by British service personnel and by political figures from the Republic of Ireland were not included), although reviews of the book have noted the ‘enormous range’ of the sources consulted and analysed (O’Doherty, Irish Times, 28 September 2014). The book did provide an insight into the lived experience and retrospective judgments of most of the important political figures (whether associated with the paramilitary or parliamentary arenas of activity) to have participated in both the conflict, and the more recent efforts to establish peace in Northern Ireland. The concluding section argued that the book had examined two related dimensions of political memoir-writing concerning the Troubles in Northern Ireland: first, to highlight the importance of memoir as a specific genre and a neglected source of material for a richer, more textured understanding of the political evolution of the conflict, and its legacies. Second, to highlight and analyze the rhetorical strategies employed by these protagonists, as they have sought to wrest control of the narrative ‘telling’ of the conflict, often with the twin objectives of justifying the political stances they adopted in the past, and of interpreting the conflict for future generations.

Communal divisions in Northern Ireland have not dissipated with the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, as many had expected or hoped. Indeed, these divisions are to some degree built into the institutional architecture of the present dispensation, and they continue to structure party competition, as well as the
contemporary share-out of socio-economic resources. However, as a close reading of the memoir literature confirms, such antagonisms are regularly reinforced and embittered by struggles over how to interpret the past. The conclusion of the book argued that although it might have been hoped that the relative peace would have opened up the space to allow less restrictive discourses to flourish, in fact there have been only marginal gains in this respect. It has been relatively rare for memoirists to vacate the ‘battlefield’ of ideas about the meta-conflict; many continue to inhabit contested ideological territories, partly because they are habituated to them, and partly because they are nervous that an honest re-assessment of their past actions and commitments will be subject to critical scrutiny, both from their ‘own side’, and from erstwhile opponents. Of course, there are exceptions, but the language of societal reconciliation and individual ‘healing’ have often masked strategies that seek to score rhetorical victories, and discomfort traditional enemies, as well as providing reassurance to the memoirist’s own community that the sacrifices of the ‘war’ were worthwhile. As Edna Longley (2001: 231) memorably put it, cultural production (including memoir-writing) in the contemporary era in Northern Ireland is very likely to comprise ‘remembering at’ the ‘other side’, summoning the dead to re-fight, or continue fighting, what McKay (2008: 301) has called ‘undignified battles’.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the book concluded that the study of political memoir could be interpreted as a microcosm for a broader understanding of the impulse towards self-justification, both for individuals and at the communal level. The influence of some key memoirists in the establishment and propagation of an ‘official history/memory’ or a ‘master narrative’ has been a crucial facet of this process. However, it is also the case that these narratives are often subject to challenge (as we have argued was the case within the Irish republican movement; see Hopkins, 2014), and during this period of political transition or ‘openness’, alternative voices and memories may be heard and jostle for supremacy. Insofar as political memoirs are widely disseminated and discussed in Northern Ireland, and help to shape the prevailing cultural environment, they are important in any wider rhetorical history of the Troubles. The author’s judgments of this myriad of conflicting sources has been praised for its refusal ‘to be contaminated by the polemicist’s emotion’ (Parr, 2014); similarly, in commenting on the book,
O’Doherty has argued that, ‘given that the history of the place [Northern Ireland] is often told as myth or propaganda, a writer who can avoid the influence of both is rare.’ As more of the scarred ‘survivors’ of this bitter conflict decide the time is opportune for them to compose their narratives, and tell their stories, whether primarily in a spirit of reconciliation or not (see Hopkins, 2015 for a fuller discussion and critique of the Republican movement’s ‘reconciliation agenda’), this research agenda should not diminish in its significance any time soon.
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\[1\] In Harte (2007), the term ‘autobiography’ was used, so it should be recognised that there is a good deal of overlap.