DOOMED VOLUNTEERS: TWO GREAT POLITICAL PLAYS FROM IRELAND

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Abstract:

Seamus Byrne's *Design for a Headstone* (1950) and Brian Friel's *Volunteers* (1975) are some of the most controversial plays in the canon of Irish drama, exceptional in their explicit political implications. Loosely based on the role of the IRA in the Republic, they achieve a high degree of universality in their discussion of such provocative issues as political radicalism, internment, hunger strike, the role of the Church in society, passive resistance vs. active rebellion, justice vs. humanity, and loyalty vs. betrayal. In their tragic endings, both plays reveal a deep pessimism on the part of their authors.
Keywords: Byrne, Friel, Political Drama, IRA, Tragedy.

Frank O'Connor, in *The Backward Look*, has claimed that all Irish literature is characterised by what he calls a "political note", and he insists: "I know no other literature so closely linked to the immediate reality of politics" (121). In a fairly general sense, this is also true of Irish *drama*. If, however, "politics" is more specifically understood as the struggle for the acquisition of power in society and the conflicts

between various social groups arising from such a pursuit, political plays in Ireland are much less frequent than might be expected from O'Connor's dictum. Admittedly, Irish drama knew a number of polemical protest plays against the evils of colonialism, indignant rejections of anything English or sentimental glorifications of the superior virtues of the Irish nation, but these often lacked true dramatic qualities, the juxtaposition of radically opposed points of view that are given an equal hearing. The two plays to be discussed in this paper, Seamus Byrne's *Design for a Headstone* and Brian Friel's *Volunteers*, must therefore be seen as exceptions in Irish drama. At the same time, they are outstanding plays in their own right, although, for a variety of reasons, they have not found the attention they deserve.[1]

On April 8, 1950, the Abbey Theatre staged *Design for a Headstone* in a production directed by Ria Mooney. According to Robert Hogan, the play met with initial resistance from conservative Church circles:

> On its sixth night, Maria Duce, an ultra-right wing Catholic organization, staged a demonstration in the theatre: protests were shouted, an attempted assault was made on Byrne, and several young men dashed down the aisle shouting, in refutation of a remark in the play, "Maritain was wrong!". Police were brought in on the next night; the demonstration, lacking popular support, dwindled away; and the play had a successful six weeks' run. (Hogan, *Seven Irish Plays* 97)

It is highly unlikely that the protest was occasioned merely by a subtle point of Catholic theology. The actor and critic Gabriel Fallon, apparently an eyewitness, admits as much when, in his brief introduction to the printed version, he lists the charges brought against the author: he was "(a) using his play 'as a vehicle for Marxian philosophy'; (b) attempting to 'smear the Catholic priesthood'; (c) insulting Ireland, Irishmen, and a Temperance Association" (Byrne, *Design for a Headstone* 4).[2] However amusing the conjunction of Ireland, Irishmen and a

Temperance Association may appear today, the quotation indicates that Byrne was accused of a heinous offence: the promulgation of "un-Irish activities", an accusation that had driven many other Irish writers into self-chosen exile. For conservative Irish circles, Byrne had, of course, been a suspect for a number of years. While practising as a solicitor in Leitrim, he had become involved in politics and had been jailed for illegal radio transmissions on behalf of the IRA in 1940. In prison he had gone on hunger strike for twenty-one days, as a consequence of which he was released, having served nine months of his two-year sentence.[3] In the year following *Design for a Headstone*, the Abbey company (which had just moved into the huge and shabby Queen's Theatre), produced Byrne's *Innocent Bystander* (unpublished), apparently a play about embezzling solicitors in the provinces (Hogan, *Seven Irish Plays* 97) and thus another criticism of contemporary Irish society. Byrne's second published play, *Little City*, written soon after the Abbey fire, was so controversial that it had to wait until 1962 before it could be staged in Ireland, and then only in front of the international audiences at the Gate during the Dublin Theatre Festival, where the theatre enjoyed a certain amount of liberal scope. According to M.J. Molloy, the long-term rejection of *Little City* by the Abbey and other theatres silenced Byrne as a playwright (Byrne, *Little City* 6). Given the political and social climate in Ireland during the nineteen-fifties, the rejection cannot surprise anyone, because the play dealt explicitly with the prevalent Irish attitude to abortion.

Byrne, then, was a highly controversial playwright who dared to touch subjects which others preferred to leave alone. This is also true of *Design for a Headstone.* Set in the 1940s, it deals with a large group of IRA prisoners in the remand section of an Irish prison (probably Mountjoy) who are awaiting their sentence and will in all likelihood be refused the status of political prisoners they claim for themselves. They prepare and stage a mass breakout which fails because the plans have been betrayed by someone. The play therefore ends with a collective disaster which is bound to arouse the audience's compassion. At the

same time, it also ends with individual disasters for a number of characters who are differentiated sharply, and it is their individual positions that make for most of the *intellectual* interest the play generates.

Given Byrne's personal experience, it cannot surprise anyone that his play has a solid autobiographical foundation. It is clear from every page of the printed text that the author writes from first-hand knowledge when he describes the conditions in an Irish prison in mid-century. The layout of the prison buildings, sketched in quite skilfully in the dialogue as well as in the stage directions, the relative roles of warders, prison chaplain, criminal prisoners, political remand prisoners and wardsmen, the hierarchy among the prisoners, not always accepted freely, the prison jargon, and, of course, the discussions on the hunger strike twice begun during the play, all have the ring of immediate authenticity, and so do individual speeches, for instance Conor's induction of the younger members to the terrors of solitary confinement:

> Solitary *can* be undermining, over a long period. No books, no papers. Sometimes, not even a Rosary beads. Yes, you can do a lot of things with a beads, besides, just pray. Fiddle with them – feel them – get to recognise, by touch alone, a flaw in a single bead. Four white walls, to four black walls, changing to four white walls again. Dreary enough! Play tricks with the light that streams down from the cell window–project an image on to the wall, and wait for the shadowy bars to form again against the white. Trace the veins in the back of your hand. Or study, for the millionth time, the Venetian red door, unsmiling as a sulky child–Yes, it *can* be undermining; but it need not be, at all. Set out for a walk from your home place, as I often did, in my mind's eye; though I never got very far on my walk, for I stopped and chatted with people I knew, and with people I didn't even like. (34)[4]

One might even argue that the author's personal experience is responsible for the intricacies of the plot and for the wealth of details some of which are superfluous, even detrimental to an understanding of the play and could be confusing in performance if the text should fall into the hands of an inexperienced director. Awareness of this autobiographical layer, however important it must have been to the author, is, of course, not indispensable for an appreciation of the play, while the historical background he also sketches in, is essential for its understanding.

It must be remembered that in the 1940s when the action is supposed to take place, the IRA was proscribed in Ireland, and membership was considered a criminal offence. Since the armed struggle for independence after the end of the First World War, the status and the self-chosen ideological position of the IRA had undergone a number of significant changes. When the "Anglo-Irish Treaty" was signed in December 1921 and was subsequently approved by a narrow majority of the Dáil, this led to a sharp division in the ranks of the Irish forces who until then had fought for Irish independence. The succeeding Civil War between the promoters of the Treaty and its opponents, which was won by the pro-Treaty forces and consolidated the establishment of the Free State, turned the majority of the IRA members into a radical opposition who, as "die-hard Republicans", refused recognition to the compromises negotiated with Britain. When Fianna Fáil, until then the chief political opposition to the consequences of the Treaty, entered the Dáil in 1927, the IRA remained the only organised resistance movement to the Treaty conditions. Consequently, in 1931 the IRA was banned in the Irish Free State, and when it was proscribed in 1936, its members became outlaws who, however, saw themselves as the only true defenders of Irish interests.

The period of the Civil War and the succeeding years is, of course, a classic example of the conflict between realists and radicals, between those who will acknowledge that compromises are necessary to achieve at least part of their political objects, and those who consider any

compromise as a betrayal of the original project, and therefore will accept total defeat rather than partial success. That this discussion – with many convolutions – has persisted until the present time (the two major parties in Ireland emerged from this conflict) is partly due to the role of the IRA in the years following the Civil War, and this although its activities were not highly effective. Despite the publicity aroused by the so-called "British campaign" of 1938-1940, by 1940 membership in the IRA had dwindled. This was partly due to the rigorous measures of the Free State under De Valera "which showed ruthless resolve in suppressing an alternative army fighting in the name of the tradition from which they themselves had emerged" (English 59-60), but also because "the overriding problem for this army was that, while they claimed to act for the Irish people, the Irish people seemed not to be interested in their doing so" (English 76). In contrast to the situation of 1920, when the IRA had seen itself as the spearhead of views generally (if more moderately) held by the vast majority of the Irish population, by the time of Byrne's play it found itself in a minority position, which was largely responsible for a number of senseless and brutal actions, causing loss of life without achieving any of the IRA's objects.

Byrne is careful not to assign a specific historical moment to the plot. He dates the play vaguely to "*Prior to 1950"* (7), and the only suggestion that it might be set during the Second World War occurs in an emotional speech by Aidan O'Leary, in the course of which he says "[...] whilst God himself is in the headlines, and *Divine Justice is acclaimed as the war aim of opposing nations* – in the criminal section of a remote prison, the real fight for freedom goes on [...]" (93; italics added). The past history of the IRA is lightly sketched in through the character of Jakey the wardsman (who is not, of course, a completely reliable witness). Jakey claims, for instance, that

> [...] I'm none o' yer peace time soldiers. Jakey was in the thick of it, right up to the split. Yez know the rest: internecine strife, brother's hand turned against brother. But no more

> fightin' for Jakey! It's wan thing to bate the lard out o' the foreigner; but when it comes to Civil War, it couldn't be good nor lucky (12).

And with a degree of nostalgia that was probably typical of many of the earlier members, he remembers that

> Time was when the I.R.A. was good gas. No better! Fightin' for freedom, on the run, flyin' columns, and all to that. When you and I were seventeen. But that was a revolution. Ye had the Countess, and Maud Gonne – and Dev sittin' up in the oul' Ford, and she goin' goodo round the town, the same as it might be a motor car. But, sure that was a hundred years ago! Things is very different now (47).

In the play's present, the romantic certainties of the insurrection have given place to the realities of life in the early Republic where, in Jakey's words, the people "haven't the time to be fightin' for freedom, careering about the place, romancin' about a Republic. I'm tellin' yez, now, yez missed the bus [...] . Them days is gone" (47). The IRA members therefore find themselves not only in a tangible prison but also in an invisible one, forced upon them by the majority verdict of the population.

While the historical dimension of the play may be of limited interest today, the themes that grow out of it remain as relevant as they were at the time of writing. These themes are not so much stated in abstract discussions as personified in credible characters, some of whom at least (the play has a large cast of twenty-one characters identified by name, plus a number of walk-on parts) emerge as believable individuals. Their status as living human beings is confirmed by the fact that they are contradictory in themselves: Conor Egan, the mild idealist, takes the burden of the hunger strike upon himself and yet in the end gives in to the pressure of the Church when he is refused Absolution; Aidan

O'Leary, the man of action who plans the jailbreak, nevertheless accepts his responsibility for continuing the hunger strike; Ructions McGowan, the rebel by nature whose impetuous, often thoughtless bursts introduce violence into the ranks of the IRA, nevertheless is prepared to assume the passive role of the hunger striker[5]; Pat Geraghty, the prison warder, is torn between his loyalty to the service and his secret commitment to the IRA; Mrs. Egan vacillates between love for her husband and acceptance of his political objects; even Father Maguire, the prison chaplain, is less fixed in his views than one might expect and finds it hard to defend the uncompromising position of the Church. The most convincing character (whose role, in theatrical terms, must be a dream part for any actor) is Jakey, the shabby small-scale criminal who has been sent to prison for the sixteenth time because he cannot resist "finding" objects which might come in useful. Carrying his bucket, cadging cigarettes right and left, he successfully winds his way through the intricacies of a prison existence, and his humorous comments on any subject under the sun provide the comic relief that the grim prison atmosphere so badly needs. That even he, the survivor *par excellence*, should in the end be killed, shot by mistake as a traitor to the "cause", is a bitter comment on the insoluble conflict into which the IRA men as well as the authorities have manoeuvred each other and themselves.

One of the themes that emerge from the plot as well as from the extended discussions among the protagonists, is the theme of loyalty– to an organisation even more than to a cause. Much of the plot is concerned with the attempts – futile, as it turns out – to identify the traitor who has given away the plans for the breakout and is responsible for the death of its leaders. In the course of the play, three innocent individuals are "executed" as a punishment for such an offence, their deaths in each case the consequence of perverted "justice": the shadowy figure of "George", Pat Geraghty the warder, and finally Jakey, while it becomes clear to the audience that Mrs. Egan alone is responsible. The role of traitors is a problem that has haunted all the Irish risings, from the insurrection organised by Wolfe Tone through the various rebellions of the nineteenth century to the War of Independence, all of which

were harassed by the presence of informers in the ranks of the rebels. Liam O'Flaherty, who with *The Informer* has devoted a novel to such a character, compresses its importance in the Irish context into a single phrase: "Informer! A horror to be understood fully only by an Irish mind" (63). In Byrne's play, it becomes clear that the attempt to isolate a suspected traitor and to punish him with an irreversible death sentence by a hastily summoned court martial is not only ineffective but inhumane in the extreme. One might even argue that, if this is so, it renders the existence of secret societies such as the IRA highly doubtful: where the struggle for freedom and justice can only be sustained by the death of innocent persons, the fight itself loses its justification.

A second theme, and one closely linked to the subject of the informer, is the theme of the hunger strike, because, taken to its extremes, it is again bound to end in loss of life. Hunger strikes had been one of the most effective weapons of the IRA in the psychological struggle against forces of superior strength; their victims, such as Terence MacSwiney, the erstwhile Lord Mayor of Cork, who in 1920 died after a fast of seventy-four days, achieved martyr status in Ireland. In Byrne's play, the arguments for and against a hunger strike are discussed at great length. On the one hand, it appears as a harmless measure that avoids all "collateral damage" to innocent civilians while mobilising maximal public support for the cause of the IRA. Conor Egan, the IRA leader, considers it his personal duty to go on hunger strike to regain political status for the organisation. At the same time, it is indirectly suggested that, with regard to his pregnant wife, he may also choose the strike as a less dangerous alternative to the jailbreak, because it is optimistically hoped that the authorities will give in to the psychological pressure, which would then save his life. The opposite view is held by Ructions McGowan who describes the emblematic self-devouring dragon-device on his ring as "the symbol of passive resistance – the sufferer unto death–the Christ-like worm who never turns–the monster consuming his own tissue", and again, as "Symbol of the hunger striker, who turns his violence against himself – whose mortal wound is self-inflicted–the warrior who raises his axe, only to

cleave his own skull" (15). To him, the passivity of a hunger strike is not only ineffective but irreconcilable with the objects of the organisation which, in his view, can only be achieved by positive action. Therefore he supports the plans for the break-out: "This is something we can do. Do, Conor! – not suffer. Fight, Conor – shoot our way out – not just present them with a martyr–a gift on a silver salver–a body on a marble slab" (56). The conflict remains unresolved to the end, because both Egan and Ructions die on their separate paths to continue the fight. The nastiest side of a hunger strike is suitably introduced by Jakey, the realist: when the striker is sufficiently weakened, he is forcibly fed by the authorities, which will then terminate his fast.

The discussions on the justification and the effectiveness of a hunger strike are directly linked to the role of the Church in this matter. Maguire, the prison chaplain, repeatedly presents the position of the Bishops when he declares that hunger strike is suicide, and suicide is a mortal sin: "To abstain from food is a positive act, as much as to cut your own throat" (71). When he withholds Absolution from Egan and thus forces him to take food before his death, he sees this as a victory: "I rejoice in Egan's victory–in that he achieved the immortality, which is the proper birthright of the soul" (100). The irony of the conflict, as the play presents it, lies in the fact that in the end the strike is continued not by the atheist Ructions who might be impervious to Maguire's religious blackmail but by the Catholic Aidan who, it is made clear, will succumb to it once he is threatened with the refusal of Absolution.

The controversy on the Catholic Church is not restricted to its views on hunger strikes. Ructions, Aidan and Maguire are the protagonists in a running debate on the role of the Church in public life and its right to interfere with the vital decisions of the individual. The author is at great pains to preserve a balance between the opposing positions, for instance by supporting Maguire's views with stage directions such as "*Utter sincerity*" or "*Unafraid, gently*" (100). Ructions' chief argument is that the Church has taken the side of the State against the individual when the chaplain–in the 1940s–again distributes the Pastoral Letter of 1922 which forbids membership in a secret society and withholds

Absolution if the prisoners do not cease membership, whereas Maguire claims that "The State holds power under God; and an act of rebellion is sin" (26). The discussion is raised on to an international level when Aidan accuses the Church of supporting the Franco regime in Spain against the republican government (27), and when Ructions attacks the Church missions which he describes as "Hawking the Mystical Body of Christ around the world on a salary and commission basis" (16). It is taken to the extremes of questioning fundamental aspects of Church doctrine when Ructions asks provocatively: "Did Christ accept criminal status? Did *He* knuckle down to Caesar – and disclaim the title of Son of Man? [...] Or did He compass his own death? Was the Crucifixion suicide?" (71). However much one might agree from a present-day position, it is hardly credible that the last sentence was actually spoken on the Abbey stage in 1950, and it may well have been gently removed from the script. Like the discussions on other subjects, this controversy remains unresolved, underlining the play's quality as a true platform of conflicting views. What renders all this eminently political is the prominent role the Church was given in the Free State and the early Republic, as fixed in the Constitution of Éire of 1937.

Occasionally, the political debate is even raised to the level of a Marxist vs. Capitalist controversy. Ructions, like a minority in the IRA of the 1940s, holds moderate Marxist views (to avoid the taboo term "communism") as opposed to the prevalent alliance of conservative, Catholic, patriotic and law-and-order forces, when, for instance, he criticises that "the State is built on violence – the Church pronounces as lawful the Government which can maintain order–thereby rationalising the greater potential of violence" (16), or when he proclaims "Not until Marx came, like a thief in the night, did Mother Church bestir herself, then she made a belated effort to stage a death-bed repentance. Her death-bed was one of labour – she brought forth a mouse–Rerum Novarum–like a rabbit out of a hat" (63). The point is, however, that such views, just as in Irish reality, do not have the slightest consequence in the play, and Ructions the Marxist is killed like his Catholic companions in arms. Byrne's text therefore provides a forum for

discussion, not a pedestal for winners and losers. In the end both the leaders of the escape *and* the suspected "informers" are killed, and even Maguire, the representative of the Church who might be considered victorious, is left with an additional burden on his conscience. The final words, Aidan's "We'll play this out to a finish", though referring to a chess game, take on an ominous ring, predicting more senseless sacrifices of life and convictions. In Robert Welch's words, *Design for a Headstone* "is a tormented work, in which the human dereliction wrought by conflict, misprision, hate, treachery, and sincerity, in their dragon-like contorted shapes, is fully (and bravely) registered" (152).

Byrne's play has sometimes been compared to Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, which was premiered in Dublin in 1954 at Alan Simpson's Pike Theatre Club, and two years later, in Joan Littlewood's version, by Theatre Workshop at Stratford in East London. The comparison is valid where the general atmosphere of increasing tension and violent personal conflicts, generated by the setting (Mountjoy Prison), is concerned, but the similarity ends here. While Byrne's play has a complicated, highly involved plot, Behan's work has only a basic story line. Where Byrne is concerned with political and religious issues, discussed by articulate characters, Behan presents figures who would be incapable of comprehending such complexities, let alone articulate them. The only character in the Byrne play who points forward to Behan's cast is Jakey, who, however, has also a central position in the overall scheme (and whose language sounds, to the uninitiated reader, more convincing than Behan's somewhat forced stage dialogues). Behan's is an emotional statement, Byrne's an intellectual disputation, and the similarities do not amount to more than superficial parallels; to suspect a fundamental influence, as apparently the Irish press did at the time (Hogan, *After the Irish Renaissance* 256-257n.), is to mistake the nature of the two works.

The play that is much closer to *Design for a Headstone* is Brian Friel's *Volunteers*, although the similarities may not be evident at a

first glance and a direct influence seems, in view of the distance of twenty-five years, more than unlikely. *Volunteers* was premiered in March 1975 by the Abbey Theatre in a production directed by Robert Gillespie and with Donal Donnelly in the role of Keeney. According to Patrick Burke, it "was greeted by ignorance and critical myopia" (122), a judgement confirmed by a glance at the press reviews (briefly summarised by O'Brien, *Brian Friel: A Reference Guide* 41-43). The play's American reception seems to have echoed the Irish reception. Although sheltered from total oblivion by the undisputed status of Friel as one of the greatest living playwrights in the English language, it has never received the critical attention it deserves, and Burke is almost in a minority of one when he numbers it (without disclosing his criteria) among the seven "masterworks" by Friel, describing it as his "most neglected major play" (120, 122). Its limited stage career may well have to do with the fact that, most unusually, it is an all-male play, but one suspects that in Ireland it is also due to a collective uneasiness concerning the political issues it projects.

In *Volunteers*, set in "*the centre of a city*" in "*the present in Ireland*" (11)6, several hundred members of a secret organisation have been interned for unidentified political reasons. Five of them have volunteered, or perhaps "have been volunteered" (in Pyne's words, "I want five volunteers–you, you, you, you and you" [32]) as unpaid diggers in a major archaeological excavation project when the funds for the professional workers ran out. It is these five "volunteers" who are at the centre of the play – one of the most unusual (but highly effective) situations to be invented by any playwright since Prospero was made to encounter Caliban on his island. The diggers have almost descended to boulder-clay level, i.e. they have symbolically arrived at rock bottom after penetrating through various historical layers to the remains of a Viking settlement, where they have discovered, among other archaeological finds, the skeleton which they have christened 'Leif' (life). They are unaware through most of the play that this is the last day of the dig; the investor who plans to erect a huge hotel complex

on the site, burying the historical remains under tons of concrete and steel, is not prepared to grant another extension that would delay his project. The "volunteers" will therefore have to return to the internment camp where a kangaroo court has already decided that their fate will be sealed in a staged riot for the "offence" of having collaborated with the authorities.

This situation (as in other plays by Friel, it is hardly possible to speak of a "plot" in the traditional sense of the term [cf. Kosok]) is based on two separate historical occurrences in Ireland. On the one hand it obviously refers to the role of the Provisional IRA in the 1970s which had staged a series of bombings in the North, profiting from the growing public support for the Civil Rights movement. As a consequence, the government of the Republic, wishing to avoid all appearance of complicity, applied harsh measures, including internment, to the Provos to prevent them from using the Republic as a safe haven for their attacks. Although the play avoids any direct reference to the IRA, the atmosphere of the Civil Rights campaigns in the 1970s can be sensed throughout, not surprisingly so when the play came in the wake of the 1972 "Bloody Sunday" events (which Friel had dramatised in *The Freedom of the City*) and the numerous smaller incidents following upon that disaster. Incidentally, in the Irish context Friel's title serves as an indirect reference to the origins of the IRA which can be seen in the founding, in 1913, of the Irish Volunteers as a reaction to the emergence of the Ulster Volunteer Force. Throughout the War of Independence and the Civil War, and probably much longer, the members of the IRA were commonly called "Volunteers".

On the other hand, and more specifically, the play is based on the discovery of the remains of a large Viking colony (in fact, the largest Viking settlement outside Scandinavia) in the centre of Dublin, which led to the popular "Save Viking Dublin" campaign in which many prominent Irish scholars and writers were involved. It is one of the minor tragedies in recent Irish history that in the end the campaign failed to achieve its object when the site was precipitously built over

with huge office blocks for the Dublin Corporation before there was time to adequately secure the finds of the excavations.

A third, if more personal source of the play can be seen in Seamus Heaney's early "bog poems", where the discovery of Iron Age sacrificial victims in a Danish bog (e.g. the "Tollund Man") leads to a discussion of the persistence of cruelty and victimisation in human society throughout the ages, prefiguring Friel's central "character", the Viking skeleton Leif. Heaney's poetry was, of course, preoccupied with "digging" (into the past as well as into deeper layers of consciousness) from the start, and his poem "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces" from his collection *North* (1975) constitutes another link with *Volunteers* (Niel 43-47). The specific relationship between Heaney's poetry and Friel's *Volunteers*, underlined by the fact that the printed version of Friel's play is dedicated to Heaney and that Heaney defended the play in his *TLS* review, deserves further exploration. For the present investigation, however, the *historical* references in the play are of greater relevance.

It is one of Friel's great artistic achievements to have allowed sufficient room for details to make the historical references clear to anyone in the least familiar with the recent history of Ireland, without however allowing an abundance of realistic facts to obscure the far-reaching implications of his play. Thus the action is not set in Dublin but "*in the centre of a city*" (11), and the internees are never addressed as IRA members, nor are the IRA's operations in the North referred to. The most direct reference to the history of Ireland occurs in a bawdy limerick where Keeney alludes to the notorious story of Kitty O'Shea and Parnell "who screwed her to hell / And we feel the result to this day" (18), suggesting that the situation of Ireland in the 1970s is still influenced by the fall of Parnell in the early 1890s and the succeeding collapse of the Home Rule movement. There is nothing in the play to suggest that it is concerned with the Six Counties, and it is, therefore, more than doubtful whether the play can be counted, together with the more explicit *The Freedom of the City*, among Friel's "Northern Ireland 'Troubles' play[s]", as in a recent article by Stephen Watt.

Friel's main purpose in the play is to explore the motivations that lead ordinary citizens into political action which soon is turned into illegality by the state and is then punished accordingly. The five diggers are "volunteers" in a dual sense: they have joined a secret organisation, and they have volunteered for the archaeological project. Both acts have led them into disaster: internment first, then the prospect of death at the hands of their own comrades. As doomed volunteers, they are made to suffer for the decision to join a minority which is frowned upon by the majority. Their personal background stories as well as their motives for volunteering are highly diverse. While little is known of Keeney's past except that he was a bank employee, and of Pyne that he was a sailor returned from New York, the others are more clearly identified as victims of society. Butt was "a poor peasant crofter" (41); he might have been an architect if his education had not been spoiled by the Christian Brothers who taught him useless bits of knowledge by "beating the tar out of [him]" (41). Knox, the snivelling old man without a purpose in life, came from a wealthy family (he had an Italian music master) but was left destitute when his father was killed in an accident, and had to make a living by "carrying messages from one clandestine group to another" (57). The most detailed story is that of Smiler, the helpless imbecile of the group whom Kenney describes as

> [a] stonemason from the west of Donegal; a quarry employing seven men; and Smiler's the shop-steward. And when they interned one of his mates, what d'you think the stupid bugger did but call his men out and set off on a protest march to Dublin! Can you imagine? Six thick quarrymen from the back of nowhere, led by Smiler, thumping across the country behind a tatty banner and a half-drunk mouth-organ. Well, of course they got about as far as the Derry border and there they whipped Smiler off to jail in Dublin and beat the tar out of him for twelve consecutive hours – you know, just as a warning. And begod it worked, George, worked like a spell (46).

However, much more frequent than such an explicit identification is the volunteers' indirect characterisation when their experiences are projected on to the fictive character of Leif. Throughout the play, the diggers' past histories are revealed in a series of flashbacks to their past lives in which Leif, the Viking skeleton with a hole in his skull and a leathern thong around his neck, serves as a catalyst. Each of them projects his own life experience into a fictitious story of Leif, while Keeney invents a whole series of Leif/life narratives (analysed by McGrath in some detail [131-133]), thereby creating in Leif the archetypal victim of society:

> A poor Viking slave who rowed his masters across the seas on their plundering expeditions; until one morning suddenly all the muscles of his body atrophied with exhaustion and then because he could never row again they disposed of him.
> [...]
> Or he was a blacksmith who tramped the country shoeing other men's horses and then one day he asked: 'Why can't I have a horse of my own?'
> [...]
> Or he was a carpenter who had built a whole Viking village and then asked to be allowed to keep one house for himself.
> [...]
> Or he was a crofter who sucked a living from a few acres of soggy hill-farm – a married man with a large family. And then one day a new landlord took over the whole valley and he was evicted because he had no title (58).

In each case, indignation at notorious cases of injustice is the basic motive for "Leif's" reaction, and this indignation is transferred to the audience in the stalls. It is clear from such passages that Friel here is not concerned with the dominant nationalist, anti-British tendencies in the IRA of the 1970s but rather with the socialist minority in the movement

which fought against social injustice instead of the continued foreign dominance in the North.

The stage manager in these revelations is Keeney, the desperate clown who enters with Pyne performing an extended music-hall act and who throughout the play slips into a series of roles, from an auctioneer to an American school mistress, a scintillating personality who conceals the tragic hopelessness of their situation by calculated acts of fooling. Significantly, Keeney is a close relation of the anarchist Skinner in Friel's more overtly political play *The Freedom of the City.* It is Keeney who knew from the start that their fate was sealed once they volunteered for the dig. As revealed by Butt, the most reliable witness in the play, Keeney at one time was "a bank-clerk who had courage and who had brains and who was one of the best men in the movement" (58), which renders his present descent into cynicism and despair all the more depressing. One should add that Keeney is saved from the audience's sentimental compassion when he persuades the innocent Smiler to take his place in the cesspit–a nasty piece of selfishness and one of the strokes that in a flash reveal Friel's skills as a master of character drawing. Keeney's counterpart is Butt, the only one among the diggers who takes a genuine interest in the excavation, even borrowing magazines on archaeology and worrying to the end about the future of their discoveries. When he eventually smashes the thirteenth-century jug which had been carefully restored by George the foreman from the pile of fragments discovered by Smiler, this is the ultimate sign of resignation on the part of the author as well as his characters.

The resignation is made to appear universal because it concerns every one in the group, although they are so utterly different in character, past history and present-day attitude to life. Collectively, they are revealed, in the final words of the play, as "only a parcel of … [shite]" (70). The play, then, is about the failure of justice and humanity in Irish society, a radical condemnation that leaves hardly a ray of hope; even the diggers' concern for Smiler when he has inadvertently

wandered away from the site remains futile because Smiler is doomed, inside or outside captivity.

That the diggers have been betrayed by the public becomes clear from the reactions of the representatives of bourgeois society, George the foreman and Mr Wilson the prison warder. When, at the beginning, George and Wilson discuss their charges, this does not only serve as a skilfully devised exposition scene, but at the same time represents the invisible walls that surround the diggers on all sides. Wilson describes them, with George agreeing, as "Bloody trash. [...] 'Political prisoners' – huh! In my book they're all bloody criminals" (15), and he adds with obvious glee that for the last three months they have been sent to Coventry even by their own mates, making it clear from the start that they do not stand a chance of survival. One step worse is "Desmond the Red", the student who prides himself on his anti-bourgeois convictions and sympathises with the diggers' plight, but quickly allows himself to be won over to the other side when he is promised a job on the next project and swears "But by God I think now that hanging's too good for you" (56)–a betrayal that is even more reprehensible than Wilson's lack of interest or George's persistent antagonism. The diggers' tragedy–there is no way out whichever direction they turn–develops into a wholesale accusation of Irish society in the 1970s, and by implication an attack on every society that prides itself on its humanitarian stance. Keeney's frequent references to *Hamlet* find their justification here: they underline that "something is rotten in the state of [Ireland]". It is a measure of the degree of Friel's despondence when the term "volunteers", that in Irish history "resonates with notions of sacrifice freely made and the values of disinterest, generosity, and independence of mind" (O'Brien, *Brian Friel* 83), here denotes the exact opposite of such values.

What do *Volunteers* and *Design for a Headstone* have in common? In other words, what justifies their being discussed in one article? Superficially one could point to the fact that both plays have an all-male cast, which may partly account for their precarious position in

stage history. One could also insist that both plays are based on the conventions of realistic theatre which allows for the inclusion of highly symbolic objects – Ruction McGowan's ring in *Design for a Headstone*, the skeleton and the jug in *Volunteers* – but foregoes the systematic rejection of recognisable reality. More to the point, they portray men in captivity and in a situation where they are in constant danger of death, exploring the wide range in human behaviour under such conditions as well as the relationship between the outsider and society at large, with "betrayal" as the central motif. The group dynamics that develop in such a situation are explored to the full: the individuals are not only threatened by cruelty from outside but also by internal conflicts, resulting in outbreaks of violence on the stage. In both plays, the author is clearly on the side of the underdog and succeeds in transmitting such an attitude to the audience in the stalls or the reader in his study, and this although the characters are far from being idealised or sentimentalised. While this makes for a universal dimension, it is also in each case a reaction to the specific conditions of *Irish* political life and the values of Irish society. The role of the IRA–or, to be precise, of the socialist element in the IRA–is explored in some detail. It appears that nothing much has changed between the 1940s and the 1970s, except that in *Volunteers* the role of the Church has disappeared from the ideological framework and has been replaced by a near-existentialist attitude (which is why *Volunteers* has been called "perhaps Friel's most Beckettian play" [McGrath 125]). Despite such obvious parallels, it would of course be absurd to overstress the similarities between the two plays: each of them is a great play in its own right; and they both deserve more attention than they have found so far.

Notes

1. Among the recent standard works on Irish theatre and drama, only Robert Welch in *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999* gives them the space they deserve, while even Nicholas Grene in *The Politics of Irish Drama*, the title notwithstanding, does not refer to them.

2. According to Hunt (175) the protests against suspected Marxist tendencies in the play came also from members of the IRA.

3. If one is to go by the standard works on the history of the IRA, Byrne's IRA activities seem to have been not very extensive. He is either mentioned very briefly (in connection with radio transmissions) or not at all.

4. All page references in the text are to the first (1956) edition of the play.

5. It is worth noting that in the original production the part of Ructions was played by the actor and playwright Walter Macken, whose subsequent plays may well have been influenced by it.

6. All quotations are from the first (1979) publication of the play.

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