

# Legacy—People and Poets in Northern Ireland\*

Isobel Reilly\*\*

*'Experiences however hot they may be when felt, are cooled by the mediating effect of language' Sluzki (1991: 2).*

## 'Where Does the Healing Take Place?'

Sluzki's brief sentence captures the potential of language to express powerful emotions, to introduce new possibilities with which to process experience. In 'Where does the Healing take Place' (op. cit.) he reminds us as therapists of the extraordinary in the ordinary, and of 'all those places' where healing occurs, that the transformative experience of healing is not limited to the therapy room and the privileged exchanges between therapist and patient. It is also to be found in the commonplace and the everyday, and in the unplanned and unexpected.

In Northern Ireland two communities are struggling to redefine themselves in terms of their relationship with each other. The aspiration to embrace diversity and respect difference appears to be only that, its achievement perhaps unattainable. Issues of identity and loyalty are contested and the arenas in which these 'hot' experiences are given voice are many. They are present in the hate filled name-calling of sectarianism, in political wranglings and posturings, in our seemingly unresolvable fights over marching routes for commemorative parades and in arguments about where to fly flags and what emblems (harps, shamrocks, etc.) belong equally to both communities.

Yet in the middle of this frustrating impasse, the mediating effects of language are also present. For so much of the last thirty years of our conflict, talking has been the domain of the politicians, usually from their own partisan perspectives. Journalists have observed and reported, academics have commented and analysed. But in the creative arts (poetry in particular) alternatives are to be found, powerful explorations of our dilemmas and quandaries. As Seamus Deane writes in 'Derry':

*Our bitterness and love  
Hand in glove.*

Poets have also borne witness to many of the horrific atrocities we have experienced. This extract from James Simmons' poem 'Claudy', written after the bomb in the village exploded before a warning was received, captures the moment and its horror:

*... the small town of Claudy at ease in the sun  
last July in the morning, a new day begun.*

*How peaceful and pretty if the moment could stop,  
McIlbenny is straightening things in his shop  
and his wife is outside serving petrol, and then  
a girl takes a cloth to a big window pane ...*

*And Mrs McLaughlin is scrubbing her floor,  
and Artie Hone's crossing the street to the door,  
and Mrs Brown, looking around for her cat,  
goes off up the entry—what's strange about that?*

*Not much—but before she comes back to the road  
that strange car parked outside her house will explode,  
and all of the people I've mentioned outside  
will be waiting to die or already have died ...*

Poetry can capture and reflect emotional and moral sensibilities, speak to us of the human condition, our relationship to ourselves, to others, and to our world. It provides 'transcending' opportunities and touches those quiet and private self-reflective places. The poet can help mediate shared frustrations, articulating experiences we can identify with (in this instance, it is Derek Mahon in 'Rage for Order'):

*Somewhere beyond  
The scorched gable end  
And the burnt out  
Buses there is a poet indulging his  
Wretched rage for order...*

A good poem is a contribution to reality ... helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him (Dylan Thomas, in Jewel, 1998).

But sadly, poetry is often a minority interest and to many is seen as inaccessible. Radio and television on the other hand are more within reach, often irresistibly so. However, both public broadcasting and poetry invite us to engage our narrative imagination and to take 'some distance from the immediacy of our own lives' (Sheehan, 2000). Both can speak of shared experiences, of vulnerability and risk, and none of these are unfamiliar to a systemic therapist.

Radio and television have given 'air-time' to many views, with phone-ins, chat shows, debates and on-the-spot street interviews. Uptake of these opportunities has significantly increased since the peace process got underway. Contentious issues are discussed daily, our bigotry and narrow mindedness shamefully and embarrassingly exposed. It feels as if the lid has been lifted on 'a legacy

\* A shorter version of this paper appears in *Context* 50 (August 2000); our thanks to Editor John Hills.

\*\* Family therapist, Family Trauma Centre, 1 Wellington Park, Belfast BT9 6DJ, Northern Ireland; I.Reilly@sebt.n-i.nhs.uk

of buried emotion and unresolved hurt' (An Crann/The Tree, 2000).

One program in particular merits special recognition, *Legacy*, winner of a Sony Bronze award. It was broadcast on Radio Ulster every morning, at two minutes to nine, during the whole of 1999. The series was the outcome of BBC Northern Ireland's decision to mark the last year of the 20th century with a program that would give ordinary people an opportunity for their voices to be heard. For thirty years 'ordinary people' largely 'kept going' and got on with life. We dealt in whatever ways we could with death and injury; ruined businesses; fear, intimidation and threat; and the tedium of time consuming and restrictive security precautions.

In *Legacy* each day on the radio a different voice was heard, of an 'ordinary person' speaking of events extraordinary. There was a certain comforting ritual created by the program's regularity of time and space. People could choose what they wanted to speak about, and many understandably chose to speak of the impact of the 'Troubles' on their lives. A man (65 years) speaking of several deaths, including a young boy who died when shot by a plastic bullet, his daughter's partner beaten to death and his son's suicide, said:

Then when it stops [the violence] you start to think of all the desperate things—that happened in Northern Ireland. You can't say it didn't happen, it did happen, but you can do nothing about it.

Ordinary people (and I include myself in this category), generally played down their experiences, stoically endured and minimised the impact of the mayhem all around. One woman said of her experience of having to get out of two different neighbourhoods:

I lost two homes, first ... intimidated by Loyalists, the second ... being bombed by the IRA ... It's ironic, to be put out of your home ... by both sides [one supposedly her own].

*Legacy* was a real gem of public service broadcasting, combining both art and craft; the art (and higher order skills) of the respectful and interested interviewer; the editorial craft and precision required to hone down what was often a lengthy interview to exactly two minutes. The product was an important piece of oral history that touched many listeners with its accounts of fortitude, pain, anger and anguish. One man, from a farming community, mourned several deaths:

I lost a brother, it was hard not to become a terrorist ... I lost a nephew, blown to pieces, right beside his parents ... bits of him sticking in the bushes. Every time you took one of those coffins to the graveyard part of you was missing ... It breaks your heart.

*Legacy* was the briefest of brief programs, so short it ran the risk of going unnoticed and discounted. Positioned just after the morning news magazine program *Good Morning Ulster*, the traffic round-up and the weather outlook, and before the nine a.m. news headlines, the program punctuated the present of today's news—with its current atrocities, punishment beatings, drug dealers' turf wars, the stop-go and start again of whether the

Assembly and devolved government would materialise. There was no hype or special promotion by way of trailers. It was introduced with the quietly spoken words 'And now, *Legacy*', and the scene was set, its two minute length unintentionally evoking other two minutes of silence and remembrance. A father, whose son was murdered in 1991, recalled:

He left his wife, three sons and a daughter ... he's never out of my mind, he's always with me, he was my son and I loved him.

Over the year the stories reflected the full spectrum of difference and diversity in our communities, our ties of loyalty, identity and belonging. *Legacy* did not privilege one group over another, and achieved a remarkable inclusiveness. Ex-prisoners from both republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations; widows, widowers and children of those bereaved through terrorist acts; those who suffered physical and mental injury; people from completely different walks of life—housewives, teachers, youth workers, priests, doctors, business men and women, students and school children—all had their own story to tell.

Much suffering has been endured in silence and we need to pay respects to the past as a way of moving forward (Victims Commissioner Report, 1998). Those who identify themselves as victims want their victimhood honoured and *Legacy*, perhaps unwittingly, provided a means. The older sister of a boy shot in the 1980s remembered:

To this day my brother can't, doesn't talk about our Danny, as if Danny had never been. He was only fifteen, an innocent schoolboy. Now he's just one of the forgotten victims.

A woman whose mother was killed by a bomb in Dublin in 1974 spoke of:

all my firsts, my first day at school, my first communion, my first dance, she missed out on all of that. It's so hard, getting on with your life.

The raw emotion of many of the stories, the questions asked and inevitably left unanswered, must have resonated painfully for many listeners. A widow:

What do I feel about meeting John's killer? ... I just want to find out John's last couple of minutes ... please, please let me meet you some day ... I am persecuted by wondering, did he suffer, what were his last words ... just to know. The end of the book and I want to close the page and see the end.

I found myself listening to the *Legacy* programs not just as someone who has lived through the Troubles with my own memories and connections to the stories told, but also as a therapist. I wondered what impact the stories were having on other listeners. The potential of the media to perturb and stimulate clearly parallels the therapist's endeavours to encourage family members' reflexiveness, to 'imagine' other possibilities. The juxtaposition of the brief fragments in *Legacy* alongside the everyday activities the listener was likely to be engaged in at the time reminded me of Sluzki's question (above). Here was one such 'place'.

In Northern Ireland we are currently much vexed by the idea of healing, the overwhelming sense of it as a

‘good thing’, that unless we can achieve it we will not be able to leave the past behind. There are arguments and counter-arguments. Forgiveness follows fast on the heels of healing, or does it precede it? Are we expected to ‘just forget’ the past; what about confession and owning up to past crimes? Would a Truth Commission provide the answer? Do we need more memorials, in this country of endless commemorations? What price will the healing exact? Are we ready for it? A young man whose mother died in a terrorist incident reflected:

Her death has a part in making me who I am today, it’s made me a better person. I could have taken the easy way, I could have taken my bitterness and resentment and put it to a negative use, I could have become a paramilitary but that’s not what this country needs.

*Legacy* provided a unique, if unintentional, contribution to the different healing activities and practices that are emerging, many of which have empowerment at their centre. One organisation, founded by the poet and playwright Damian Gorman, is An Crann/The Tree. It is an arts-based charity dedicated to ‘providing a space in which people can tell—and hear—the splintered, complex, often contradictory stories of the “Troubles”’. Victims’ Groups have also been harnessing the healing potential of storytelling, collecting personal accounts and painful memories, and facilitating this in group meetings as a means of bearing witness to the past. With *Legacy* many similar stories were brought right into our homes and hearts.

Whatever the reasons why the voices of ordinary people are not heard, people have, however, begun to speak out. Their stories, such as those in *Legacy*, are what Wade (1997) defines as ‘small acts of living’, the actions people can take, albeit minuscule, that constitute ‘everyday resistance to violence and oppression’. The potential power in these poignant narratives of lived experience has yet to be harnessed. Many want to be heard, to state their position whatever their cultural and political affiliations. One young man observed:

I was brought up in a Catholic area with a dislike against Protestants and I have Protestant friends who told me they were brought up with a dislike against Catholics, and we just think it’s sickening and annoying that you could be brought up like that.

And another young man:

I’d like it that people can be accepted for who they are and where they’re at.

## Views from Afar

The experiences of those who have left, (what Mary Robinson, as President of Ireland, named the Irish Diaspora), were also heard on *Legacy*. The intense attachment felt by those who have left is counterbalanced by ambivalence. Two young woman, the first living outside Northern Ireland and the second speaking of her struggles in returning to make a life for herself here again, expressed these binds:

I miss it so much when I’m away, but when I’m here, after three or four days, that whole culture, the sectarian culture, permeates every decision, every choice, every relationship you might have. Everything swings on that and that alone. It’s very stifling, it’s very constricting ... and that is just something I cannot deal with, and that’s what keeps me away.

I didn’t have a banner to go behind ... I couldn’t live in Northern Ireland any more ... and there’s so many of us who want to return ... what here allows us to be what we are?

The struggle to explain ourselves, our history and the ‘ties that bind’ was captured by Dugdale in his poem ‘Provincia Deserta’:

*... You will find this strange,  
No doubt; and stranger still our fierce  
Cleaving to the only thing  
We share and murder for. It is a land,  
You see, of quite surpassing beauty,  
Of stream and mountain, lake and wood  
With many haunting presences  
Which will shadow you always, beckoning  
Still, however far your country.*

Seeing your own country from a distance brings a new perspective as reflected on by this man:

When you go away you see the place from a distance and can understand how ludicrous the situation is, how big the world is, how small minded Northern Ireland can be, how introspective, and so inward looking.

Dugdale’s ‘haunting presences’ and the *Legacy* fragments from Ulster people living abroad are evocative of the tearingly painful nineteenth century accounts of Irish migration to Australia (Fitzpatrick, 1994). The juxtaposition of relief at being away (and it rings of survivor guilt) alongside the poignancy of loss felt for family and place, was movingly caught by Perth poet Alan Alexander in ‘For my Brother in Belfast’:

*Call me not hard of heart or say  
My love is sounding brass because  
I have lived so long in the sun,  
Many times I have thought of Ulster...  
It is not simple, this living away  
From the monotones of streets  
Where hypocrisy has exploded;  
Call me not hard of heart,  
You are in the thick of it, while I  
Pick up the paper thrown against my door  
And think of you and suffer, as before.*

## Testimony and Witness

These themes inevitably emerged during the telling of the *Legacy* stories, and as the end of the year (and century) approached, there was an added edge to this. Quite remarkably, on the morning of the day that saw power devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly (2nd December 1999) Seamus McKee, one of the *Good Morning Ulster* presenters, made an exception to the usual practice of

not commenting on the program. After it was broadcast and just before the nine a.m. news headlines he commended that day's *Legacy* to listeners. A man spoke of his father's death in a booby trapped car bomb, of his sister's survival and of the retaliation killing within 24 hours of a young Catholic man. He told of his visit to the young man's home and the grief the two families shared.

I still can't understand ... I never really felt any anger in my own heart against the men who murdered my father. I couldn't understand, and I still can't understand why people should be so evil towards other people but I never did feel a need for revenge. I felt no bitterness, I felt a forgiveness. I felt simply I was able to leave it all with God and I've never felt any further anger.

Through the process of bearing witness, and in such a public way, the *Legacy* stories helped us listen and be touched, bear our own and others' pain, and maybe 'imagine' what it might be like for others, and 'the other' we defend ourselves from. Perlesz's tantalising question as to 'what distinguishes a therapist as witness?' (Perlesz, 1999) invites consideration, as although there was no listener to the telling, in the conventional therapeutic sense, there was a way found by 'ordinary people' to put feelings and experiences 'into words' and to begin 'to think about them and integrate them into their sense of themselves, their identity and their history' (Blackwell, 1997: 84). The social and political implications of such public telling, and hearing, is what all of us in Northern Ireland must get to grips with (Boraine, 2000).

John Hewitt's poem 'Neither an Elegy or a Manifesto' (below) brings together the personal and the political, confirming that in the grander scheme of things the legacies of the past must be remembered and that personal tragedies and the social realities of injustice and inhumanity go hand in hand. All the means by which we constrain ourselves and perpetuate our grievances must be exposed, whether they be social, political or cultural. In a society which lives by codes, *Legacy* stimulated decoding (Duffield, 1999). It challenged us to hear the 'other', it insinuated the personal and the political into our homes, gently and unobtrusively reminding us that whatever else, 'truth is bitter' (Boraine, op cit).

In therapeutic practice these worlds, the personal and political, are often inevitably present (Shamai, 1999; Reilly, 1999). Blackwell, from his work with people who have suffered as a result of political conflict, contends:

it is not only individual lives which are disorganised and fragmented by torture and organised violence. It is whole communities ... belief systems and ideas. Bearing witness involves a recognition of these processes as they bear on individual clients and families ... This is a movement from the personal to the political which is rooted in a recognition of the political process in the personal experience (Blackwell, 1997: 87).

As systemic therapists we attend in our practice to both the particulars of our clients' personal stories and their social and political contexts. We need to be conscious of these dimensions, however discomfiting. The more

public the acknowledgment of shared pain, as exemplified in these extracts from poetry and all the many stories now being told, the more explicitly this pain is expressed in our therapeutic sessions. We need to be ready for this and to have thought carefully about where we sit in relation to these challenges.

*So I say only: Bear in mind  
Those men and lads killed in the streets;  
But do not differentiate between  
Those deliberately gunned down  
And those caught by unaddressed bullets:  
Such distinctions are not relevant ...  
Bear in mind the skipping child hit  
By the anonymous ricochet ...  
And the garrulous neighbours at the bar  
When the bomb exploded near them;  
The gesticulating deaf-mute stilled  
By the soldier's rifle in the town square;  
And the policeman dismembered by the booby trap in  
the car ...  
Patriotism has to do with keeping  
the country in good heart, the community  
ordered by justice and mercy;  
these will enlist loyalty and courage often,  
and sacrifice, sometimes even martyrdom.  
Bear these eventualities in mind also;  
they will concern you forever:  
but, at this moment, bear in mind these dead.*

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Aislinn Duffield, BBC Northern Ireland, for the time she took to talk with me about the making of *Legacy*. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for kind permission to reprint extracts from the following poems:

The authors and The Gallery Press:

'Gradual Wars' by Seamus Deane. From *Selected Poems* (1983).

'Rage for Order' by Derek Mahon. From *Collected Poems* (1999).

'Claudy' by James Simmons. From *Poems 1956-1986* (1986).

The Blackstaff Press:

'Provincia Deserta' by Norman Dugdale. From *Running Repairs* (1983).

'Neither an Elegy or a Manifesto' by John Hewitt. From *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (1991).

The author and Fremantle Arts Centre Press:

'For my Brother in Belfast' by Alan Alexander. From *In the Sun's Eye* (1977).

### References

- An Crann/The Tree, 2000. *Bear in Mind: Stories of the Troubles*, Belfast, Lagan Press.
- Blackwell, D., 1997. Holding, Containing and Bearing Witness: The Problem of Helpfulness in Encounters with Torture Survivors, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 11, 2, 81-89.
- Bloomfield, K., 1998. *We will Remember Them*, [Report of the Victims' Commissioner], Belfast, The Stationery Office.
- Boraine, A., 2000. *All Truth is Bitter*, [Report to Victim Support NI and the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders], Belfast, NIACRO.
- Duffield, A., 1999. Personal communication.
- Fitzpatrick, D., 1994. *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*, Cork, University Press.
- Jewel, 1998. *The Night without Armor*, NY, Harper Collins.
- Perlesz, A., 1999. Complex Responses to Trauma: Challenges in Bearing Witness, *ANZJFT*, 20, 1: 11-19.

- Reilly, I., 1999. Therapists' Reflections: A View from Northern Ireland, 'We Build to Fill the Centuries' Arrears', *Journal of Family Therapy*, 21, 2: 230–235.
- Shamai, M., 1999. Beyond Neutrality—A Politically Motivated Systemic Intervention, *Journal of Family Therapy*, 21, 2: 217–229.
- Sheehan, J., 2000. Narrative imagination, the arts, and collective identities. [Paper presented to An Crann Workshop 'Narrative and the Arts ... Towards a Pluralist Society'], Lusty Beg, Co. Fermanagh, 6th April.
- Sluzki, C., 1991. Where does the Healing Take Place? *Family Systems Medicine*, 9, 1: 1–2.
- Wade, A., 1997. Small Acts of Living: Everyday Resistance to Violence and other Forms of Oppression, *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 19, 1: 23–39.

### Editors and their Sheds: The Expert

Don Bloch, interviewed by Myrna Gower, said: 'There is nothing wrong with being an expert' (*Context*, 46, 1999: 3). Look again at:

Cade, Brian, 1982. The Potency of Impotence, *AJFT*, 4, 1: 23–26.

Chapman, Jane, 1993. Politics and Power in Therapy: A Discussion on the Implications of Postmodern Ideas for Therapeutic Practices, *ANZJFT*, 14, 2: 57–62.

Smart, Rosemary, 1994. Expertosis: Is it Catching?, *ANZJFT*, 15, 1: 1–9.

Flaskas, Carmel, 1990. Power and Knowledge: The Case of the New Epistemology, *ANZJFT*, 11, 4: 207–214.