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Art Imitating Life Imitating Death. An Exploration of “Guests of the Nation” by Frank O’Connor*

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Abstract:

In 2003, as part of the centenary celebrations for Frank O’Connor’s birth, I was commissioned by the Irish National Broadcaster (RTÉ) to adapt his short story “Guests of the Nation” for radio. My research led me to a number of real-life incidents that echoed O’Connor’s emotionally charged exploration of the tragic consequences when friendships are formed between sworn enemies in a time of war. In the twilight zone where life imitates art, I was invited by descendants of the IRA Unit who had kidnapped and executed Major Compton Smith during the Irish War of Independence, to visit the isolated farmhouse in which he had been held hostage. I welcome you to join me on my journey into a world where history and story go hand in hand, and fact and fiction dovetail together seamlessly without contradiction or contrivance.

Keywords: Fiction, Frank O’Connor, History, Irish War of Independence, Short Story

Frank O’Connor creates a colourful and textured narrative that captures the Cork City of my childhood in all its idiosyncrasy and eccentricity. Born on Douglas Street and reared in Harrington’s Square (via Blarney Street), O’Connor was a neighbour’s child. He was one of our own. His words were our words. His stories were our stories. His characters were steeped in our parish yet resonated across the planet. Embraced by Irish-America at a time when the recently established Republic of Ireland was taking its first faltering steps as an independent nation, O’Connor cast a larger-than-life shadow from the footlights of the world stage. Meanwhile, here in his hometown, we basked in the reflected glow of his global glory.

* “Art Imitating Life Imitating Death. An exploration of ‘Guests of the Nation’ by Frank O’Connor”, was first presented as a lecture by Cónal Creedon at the Swiss Centre of Irish Studies at the Zurich James Joyce Foundation, Zurich University, 24 January 2020.



Fig. 1 – Cónal Creedon outside Frank O’Connor House. Douglas Street, Cork. Courtesy of the Author

I first came upon “Guests of the Nation”, in the pages of “Exploring English I”, my Intermediate Certificate school anthology (Martin 2011 [1967])¹. Barely a teenager, I was bored by textbook experts spouting textbook theories. The education I craved was to be found beyond the school gates, for out there was the greatest educator of all – life itself. My rampant imagination ran with the fox and chased with the hound. But then, one day, while thumbing through my schoolbook, my fingers hesitated at “Guests of the Nation”. Something about that story just stopped me in my tracks. Seduced by a narrative that was deeply rooted in a culture, a history and a landscape so familiar to me, I was captivated by this wartime parable, that somehow elevated me above the tedium of the classroom. In time, O’Connor’s curly tales of shawlies (Martin 2017)² steps and steeples, became like a gateway drug that unlocked the magical mystical world of Irish literature in the mind of this adventure-seeking youth.

¹ Great credit is due to Augustine Martin the editor of this anthology of short stories. This collection of short fiction originally intended as a school textbook in the mid-1960s became so popular that it was republished “by public demand” forty-five years after it was first published and became a best seller.

² Shawlies – a name given to a very specific class of Cork women of an earlier generation, identified by the distinctive black shawl they wore. Usually working-class women, fruit sellers, street vendors – renowned for their sharp wit and cutting turn of phrase.

In retrospect, I now understand why “Guests of the Nation” made such a profound impression on me at that time. I was fourteen years of age, and Ireland was a place of change just as I was coming of age. The cosy cartel of church and state that had been enshrined and embraced since the formation of the Irish Free State³ was beginning to show hairline cracks, and after eight hundred years of asset stripping and despotism as a colony of our nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland was finally getting up off its knees and finding its “place among the nations of the earth” (Vance 1982, 185)⁴. The island of Ireland was in transition – a short few decades had passed since independence, and the capital “R” of Revisionism was poking its finger in and around the soft underbelly of Irish sacred cows (Costello 2014).

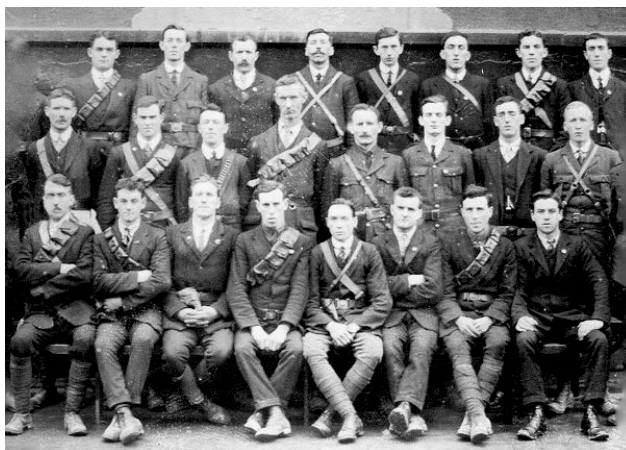


Fig. 2 – Cork City Volunteers, 1916. Courtesy of the Author

Something momentous happened in 1970, when a young Catholic schoolgirl stepped out from behind the sectarian barricades of Derry (Londonderry; Ferguson 2015)⁵ in Northern Ireland (The North of Ireland) and won the Eurovision Song Contest for the Republic of Ireland. Her gentle song of love soared above the sabre rattling, gunfire, rioting and unrest. And when the British tabloids asked what sort of a name was Dana, they were told it was an Irish name meaning bold, fearless or brave.

³The Irish Free State was established in 1922 in the aftermath of the Irish War of Independence.

⁴This is a reference to “Robert Emmet’s Speech from the Dock”, in which, the Irish patriot Robert Emmet, facing execution in the aftermath of the failed rebellion of 1803, insists that his epitaph should not be written, and no headstone should be erected in his honour until Ireland is free and independent and “takes its place among the nations of the earth”.

⁵Derry or Londonderry? What’s in a name? The London prefix was added to Derry when the city was granted a Royal Charter by King James I in 1613. The name, Derry, with its connection to the ancient Gaelic name of the city is preferred by nationalists and it is broadly used throughout Northern Ireland’s Nationalist community. For the most part, Derry, is also used south of the border in the Republic of Ireland. Unionists prefer the name Londonderry. However, I am reliably informed that Derry is also used by most residents of the city – Nationalist & Unionist. There exists a similar cultural and political schism regarding the name of a relatively small north eastern portion of the Island of Ireland. Ever since the The Government of Ireland Act 1920 and Anglo-Irish Treaty 1922, this specific six-counties which is part of the nine-counties that make up the Irish province of Ulster is known variously as The North of Ireland or Northern Ireland? Ulster or The Six-counties? Depending on which side of the political or cultural divide one is aligned.

Down south of the border, the lines of demarcation between Catholic, Republican and Nationalist had become so tangled, entwined and confused, that when Dana and her mother were invited by the Catholic Bishop of Derry to receive a blessing before setting out for Europe, it left us in no doubt, but that Dana was singing for Ireland; a holy Catholic and united Ireland (Scallon 1999, 13). It is difficult to contextualise or quantify the significance of Ireland winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1970. But at that particular moment in time, when Dana appeared on every single television screen across the land, live from Amsterdam in her white *bánín* dress embellished with ancient Celtic knots of emerald green, it was as if a united Ireland had stepped onto the world stage wrapped in the tricolour of the Republic. There was something about those seemingly inconsequential three minutes of popular music history that fed into the lifeblood, soul and marrow of the nation – it was as if, for the first time since partition, Ireland, north and south of the border, was united as one.

At that time, Ireland was seldom represented on the world stage, so, to witness Dana standing toe to toe against all comers and emerge victorious, imbued a spiralling sense of national pride. Dana highlighted the notion that nationalist Ireland was one nation divided by a man-made line drawn on a map – and the ink was still wet. For my generation, it seemed to mark the moment when everything changed. Europe, which had always been such a far away and exotic place, now seemed somehow closer⁶, and the Irish were standing proudly centre stage at the heart of it. We had taken our first tentative steps to align ourselves with the Continent on an equal footing and, in doing so, we further severed the apron strings of the toxic and unequal arrangement that had existed between Ireland and our nearest neighbour since the eleventh century (McGreevy 2019).

1970s Ireland seemed politically charged and ideologically confused. The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter 1916 Rising (Foy, Barton 2011)⁷ had rekindled the flames of nationalism. The Republic was experiencing its first flush of nationhood. The martyrs of 1916, who had laid down their lives, were eulogized from every parish pump and pulpit to the point of beatification. The GPO⁸ in Dublin had become our “Alamo” – a venerated shrine of national pilgrimage to hold dear the blood-sacrifice of a failed rebellion.

But amid all the flag waving and cheering, a number of complicating loose ends of history remained untethered and dangling. Not least the glaring anomaly that the planned commemoration of the 1916 Rising happened to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of World War One – a far greater tragedy in terms of carnage, a conflict in which almost quarter of a million Irishmen volunteered to join the British army and march through the blood-drenched fields of Flanders. To add further complication to the national celebrations, fifty years had also passed since The Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). This exposed the convoluted irony that while many Irishmen had volunteered to fight for the British army during World War One for the “freedom of small nations” (Collins 2014), Britain had no qualms about executing the Irishmen who had attempted to free the small nation of Ireland from British rule during the 1916 Rising. When the Great War ended – like Óisín on his return from Tír na nÓg⁹, many

⁶ Dana (1970), “All Kinds Of Everything”, *Eurovision Song Contest*, Amsterdam, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xmnd3uiK_Y> (03/2021).

⁷ Ireland has a long and gory history of failed rebellions, risings and insurrections, but the failed rebellion that took place in Ireland at Easter 1916 holds a special significance and continues to be a hot topic of debate right to the present.

⁸ The General Post Office, O’Connell Street, Dublin. GPO was the headquarters of the Irish Rebels during the 1916 Rising.

⁹ Óisín is a character in Irish mythology who had been away from Ireland in Tír na nÓg for a short while. On his return, Ireland had undergone such dramatic change in his absence that it was unrecognisable.

Irishmen returned home to a dramatically changed Ireland, a people who had been militarised and politicised, a land where all had “changed and changed utterly” (Yeats 1989, 287)¹⁰. Some former British soldiers joined the survivors of the 1916 Rising in the ranks of the IRA¹¹ and went on to play a pivotal role in the war against Britain during the Irish War of Independence (McGreevy 2020a).

But then the most difficult commemoration of all – The Civil War. How would the fledgling Irish Republic mark the fiftieth anniversary of the unholy trinity of truce, treaty and civil war (Kissane 2005). Therein lay a twisted tragedy of interconnecting events; a chaotic period of savage and personalised bloodletting between former comrades that ended in vindictive stalemate. Some might argue that the Irish Civil War never did end. The battle lines remained intact, the conflict just moved from the rural heartlands and city street corners into the newly established Irish Free State parliament, where former comrades continued to face each other as enemies across the floor of Dáil Éireann, the lower house and principal chamber of the Irish government, and the vitriolic war of words and ideologies continued to rage day after day.

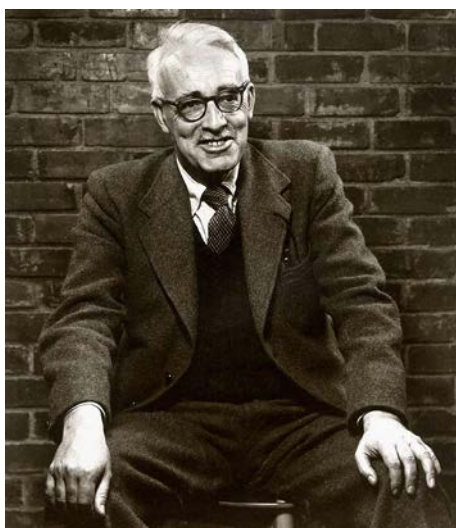


Fig. 3 – Frank O'Connor. Courtesy of the Author

My teenage years saw a heightened sense of nationalist fervour running rampant throughout the country. The scars of unresolved conflicts that had been festering for decades, were once again rising to the surface in a weeping open wound. And while the Republic of Ireland was struggling with the contradictions of the past, a few miles up the road, the North of Ireland was focused on resolving the complications of the present. North of the border had become a powder keg set to explode. News was filtering south of civil rights denied and the persecution

¹⁰ “changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born” – is the iconic line from the poem, “Easter 1916”, by W.B. Yeats.

¹¹ The IRA – Irish Republican Army. A paramilitary organisation, that has reinvented/regenerated itself on various occasions. It was first officially established in 1919 as a natural successor to the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858 to 1924). The IRA (1919), The Official IRA (1969-1972), The Provisional IRA (1969), The Continuity IRA (1986), The Real IRA (1997), etc.

of Catholics. The escalating sectarianism saw northern nationalists burnt from their homes and forced to flee to the South with nothing but the shirts on their backs. British troops were once again on the streets of Ireland. Catholics were manning the barricades of Free Derry Corner, the carnage of Bloody Sunday (McGlinchey 2019, 161)¹² and the willful murder of innocent civilians, shot down in the streets of Ballymurphy in Belfast by the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment of the British Army (Hutton 2021), made a shocked international media sit up and take notice (McCann 2006, 4). This pressure cooker of rising tension set the scene for what some would view as the generational mandatory split in the ranks of militant nationalism (Turner 2002)¹³. The Official IRA stepped back into the shadows. Meanwhile, amid rumours of southern Irish government ministers actively gunrunning to the North (Heney 2020), the Provisional IRA were busy replacing the “pike in the thatch” (O’Toole 2012)¹⁴ with an armalite (White 1993, 81).

In keeping with the sense of militant urgency of the times, The Dubliners¹⁵ were belting out “The Merry Ploughboy”¹⁶ with its simple unambiguous message that we should all pick up a gun and join the IRA. And though the song celebrated the IRA of a previous generation, it captured the mood in the country – a new day had dawned and regardless of what shade of green was recruiting beneath the tricolour, the IRA was the IRA. The song became an extremely popular street ballad that climbed to the top of the Irish music charts within days of its release and held that position for six weeks – and every child old enough to shoulder a hurley or a hockey stick joined in the chorus:

We’re off to join the IRA.
And we’re off tomorrow morn.
Where the bayonets clash, and the rifles flash,
to the echo of the Thompson gun.¹⁷

So, when I first stumbled upon “Guests Of The Nation” by Frank O’Connor in the pages of my “Exploring English I”, Intermediate Certificate anthology, my imagination was fertile ground. This tale of reprisal and counter-reprisal held up a mirror to real-life events unfolding north and south of the border, right across the island of Ireland. I felt compelled to follow O’Connor’s tale on a journey to the beating heart of Irish nationalism.

¹² Bloody Sunday (Bogside Massacre). On 30 January 1972 in Derry, British soldiers shot 26 civilians during a protest march. Fourteen people died: 13 were killed outright. The British soldiers were from the 1st Battalion, Parachute Regiment – also implicated in the Ballymurphy Massacre on 11 August 1971.

¹³ Renowned Irish writer, wit and IRA volunteer, Brendan Behan once described the tendency of militant republicanism to split with each new generation as the first item on any republican agenda is the split in the organisation following the previous meeting.

¹⁴ “Pike in the Thatch” – is a metaphorical symbol of revolutionary readiness. Historically, in the aftermath of defeat, Irish rebels would hide their weapons (pikes) in the thatched roof of their cottages, to be used when the time comes for the next generation of Irish revolutionaries to step forward.

¹⁵ The Dubliners – an Irish folk group who spear-headed the ballad singing era of the late 1960s-1970s.

¹⁶ “The Merry Ploughboy”, a hit single by Dermot O’Brien and the Clubmen in 1966. It reached the top of the Irish music charts in only seven days and held that position for six weeks in late 1966.

¹⁷ The Dubliners, “The Merry Ploughboy”, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VR12Q4kcdqQ>> (03/2021).



Fig. 4 – Sean Keating, *Men of The South* (1921-22) © Estate of Seán Keating, IVARO Dublin, 2021. Collection: Crawford Art Gallery, Cork

“Guests of the Nation” is an exploration of friendships, ideologies and divided loyalties – tested against the cold brutality of duty. Set against the spiralling violence of the Irish War of Independence, “Guests of the Nation” creates a world where history and story go hand in hand. Though often cited as a powerful anti-war story, it seemed to tap into the renewed nationalism that was taking root in 1970s Ireland. Maybe that’s why the crisis of conscience explored in O’Connor’s tragic anti-war story seemed to justify the extreme personalised bloodletting that occurs in a time of war, particularly in the context of a guerrilla war.

The story unfolds in a small, isolated hillside cottage where two young and inexperienced IRA volunteers (Noble and Bonaparte) are set with the task of guarding two captured British soldiers (Belcher and Hawkins). In a classic example of “The Stockholm Syndrome” (Westcott 2013)¹⁸ a familiarity between captors and captives develops into a deep and profound friendship, a friendship enhanced by the maternal presence of the woman of the house. This amiable and comfortable dynamic is interrupted from time to time, when the IRA commander, Jeremiah O’Donovan, calls to the cottage to check up on his raw recruits and the hostages. But when Jeremiah O’Donovan eventually takes his leave and disappears off into the night, life in the homestead relaxes and returns to normal.

The blossoming friendship between friend and foe is typified by the constant banter between the young IRA volunteer Noble and the British soldier Hawkins, like two young bucks with their antlers locked in eternal conflict. Meanwhile, Belcher, the older more philosophical of the two British soldiers, steps comfortably into his role as man about the house, fetching water, chopping wood and generally making himself useful. Belcher quickly establishes a gentlemanly

¹⁸ Stockholm Syndrome is a condition in which hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors during captivity.

and caring relationship with the woman of the house. This could well be interpreted as his personal desire for the domesticity of family life, particularly in light of his revelation later in the story that his own wife and child had abandoned him. The other young IRA volunteer, Bonaparte, is the narrator of this story. He is contemplative by nature and seems more mature than his comrade Noble. As the narrator of the piece, Bonaparte seems removed from the main action. His mind internalising and analysing the unfolding situation as he struggles to make sense of the camaraderie that develops between sworn enemies. Bonaparte's detachment is brought into sharp focus at the end of the story when he finds himself centre stage – his finger on the trigger, barrel of his gun pressed to Belcher's head.

The intensity of this ever-deepening bond between enemies is accentuated by the claustrophobic intimacy of the isolated setting. This is a friendship fuelled by late-night card playing and kindled with fiery discourse on such diverse topics as the merits of capitalism over socialism and the existence of God. Meanwhile, the woman of the house remains adamant that the Great War was caused by neither capitalism nor socialism – God, King nor Kaiser, but rather, she insists that the recent carnage in Europe during World War One was a direct result of, “the Italian Count that stole the heathen divinity out of a temple in Japan”.

When I first read “Guests of the Nation”, I was too young and politically naive to grasp the full implications of the complexity and competing loyalties explored in O'Connor's story. But the sheer pain and heartbreak when a friendship is tested by the demands of duty has resonated with me down through the years.

In 2003, as part of the national centenary celebrations of Frank O'Connor's birth, I was commissioned by RTE, the Irish National Broadcaster, to adapt “Guests of the Nation” for radio¹⁹. Thirty years had passed since I had first read the story, and I found myself revisiting and exploring O'Connor's work from the perspective of a writer rather than a reader – and there is a difference. Reading as a writer demands a more intense level of concentrated focus. It became a project of research as I found myself striving to get inside O'Connor's head in the hope that my adaptation would do justice not only to his storytelling and characterisations but also to his creative intent. And so, I set about deconstructing the story, every twist in the narrative was forensically examined, every character was held up to the light for scrutiny.

I was struck by the notion that this tale offered more than a nod of recognition to an earlier wave of guests to our nation, the Hiberno-Normans of the thirteenth century. Belcher and Hawkins, two soldiers of fortune, find themselves in enemy hands as hostages. Their surnames are British and alien – Frank O'Connor makes a very conscious decision that these two soldiers would not have names that might identify them as sons or grandsons of Ireland, for to do so would set in place a very different dynamic and exploration. The realisation that Belcher and Hawkins were not of Irish immigrant stock is subtle but significant. Similar to their Hiberno-Norman (Anglo-Irish) counterparts of the thirteenth century, Belcher and Hawkins very quickly began to show signs of becoming “more Irish than the Irish themselves” (Ellis 1999). Unwittingly, they pay homage to pivotal moments in Irish history by learning the traditional dance steps such as “The Siege of Ennis” and the “Walls of Limerick”. This detail is extremely noteworthy, as one of the early casualties of colonisation was the banning of Irish cultural practice including dance. The Statutes of Kilkenny (Foley 2017), passed into law in 1366, were specifically aimed at curtailing the behaviour of the Hiberno-Norman (Anglo-Irish) ruling class, who, after two hundred years in situ in Ireland, were perceived by the London administration

¹⁹ Guests Of The Nation, this is the link to my radio play adaptation of O'Connor's short story <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EjX3Vu6dfY&t=930s>> (03/2021).

as being in danger of “going native”. Such an assimilation of culture was perceived as dangerous, interpreted as a potential divided loyalty or a conflict of interest, if not, a direct threat to England whence they originally came.

The friendship between sworn enemies is quickly established in the story, but commitment to duty brings the loyalty of friendship into sharp focus. When the order arrives from a higher authority that the British hostages are to be shot in reprisal for the execution of IRA volunteers in Dublin – the cold wind of reality sweeps across the bog, and the fragile utopian dream of peace among all men dissipates.

Selecting a name is a seminal moment in the life cycle of every fictional character. I found myself examining the names of the characters in this story in an attempt to uncover why O’Connor had opted to choose a particular name for a specific character. I will take this opportunity to present a brief analysis of the names attached to the various characters in “Guests of the Nation” with a view to understanding and unlocking their significance within O’Connor’s story.

1. A Brief Analysis of Character Names – “Guests of the Nation”

1.1 The Old Woman

The importance of the old woman in “Guests of the Nation” is often overlooked, maybe because O’Connor decided *not* to assign her character a name. Yet her presence looms large in the narrative. All the action unfolds in her cottage and on her land. The development of her very personal relationships with the IRA volunteers and the hostages, particularly Belcher and Jeremiah O’Donovan, acts as a barometer tracking the changing mood within the story. So, I wondered why O’Connor had actively decided not to name a character of such significant presence.

There are a number of aspects regarding the old woman that are worthy of consideration. Historically, guerrilla and revolutionary armies don’t have the luxury of auxiliary resources such as barracks, canteens, hospitals, centres of recreation or prisons for incarceration at their disposal. They travel light, living off the land and the support of a non-combatant public is essential. Active service units appear as if out of nowhere from the general population and having carried out a specific duty they disappear back into the population. Consequently, a network of discrete support systems is the lifeblood of survival and ultimate success for a guerrilla army.

That sense of a network of public support is referred to in “Guests of the Nation”, when Hawkins reveals that a brother of one of the girls (Mary Brigid O’Connell) had a pair of Noble’s socks. We can gather from this, that Hawkins and Belcher met Mary Brigid O’Connell while they were held hostage by the 2nd Battalion – a different IRA unit. This presents that sense of IRA active service units travelling light through the countryside, stopping off at safe houses along the way, where they change into clean and dry clothes, eat a hot meal, sleep and then move on.

A safe house is by definition a secret place of sanctuary. Anonymity, security and isolation are the fundamental requirements of a safe house. In a hostage situation, as presented in “Guests of the Nation”, when enemy prisoners are incarcerated in a safe house, it demands more secrecy, more security and a more long-term arrangement. In such a case, it is vital that the old woman is discrete, trustworthy and her loyalty to the cause must be unquestioning and unquestionable. Maybe it is precisely that sense of discretion and secrecy that O’Connor was implying when he decided not to reveal the name of the woman of the house – her name was on a need-to-know basis.

The old woman represents that section of society who support the cause, but for many and various reasons decide not to participate in the military action. She represents the sympathiser, the enabler, the facilitator – that highly valued non-participatory resource which is so essential to any guerrilla army in the field.

The old woman in this story is not politicised, she is not militarised. Her ill-informed analysis of World War One is revealing, particularly when she claims the war in Europe was caused by “the Italian Count that stole the heathen divinity out of a temple in Japan” (O’Connor 1931, 5). Yet despite her political naivety, she is wholeheartedly committed to the cause of independence and is without question willing to risk everything – her home, her land, her life by offering her cottage as a safe house to the IRA.

It is significant that O’Connor did not assign a name to the old woman. I believe she represents the faceless voice of Irish nationalism – that section of society who, for generations, have always had a deeply engrained loyalty to the cause of liberty, yet are not actively involved in the conflict. She represents that anonymous section of the population who offer crucial support to a guerrilla army in the field, yet whose names are seldom engraved on monuments or recorded in the history books.

1.2 Jeremiah O’Donovan

Jeremiah O’Donovan is a gruff, uncompromising and seasoned IRA veteran. He is the officer in command of the younger IRA volunteers (Noble and Bonaparte). Clearly, Noble and Bonaparte are raw recruits. The task of guarding the hostages could very well be their first experience of active duty. Jeremiah O’Donovan spends most of his time barking out orders as he attempts to knock the young volunteers into shape.

Jeremiah O’Donovan is a dark character, with little time for small talk. He arrives without warning and leaves at short notice. His bitterness towards the British is extremely deep-rooted and unwavering. It is significant that the two young volunteers find it challenging to comprehend Jeremiah’s coldness when it comes to the actual deed of executing the hostages.

O’Connor’s choice of the name Jeremiah O’Donovan is a direct evocation of the Fenian leader, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa. The Fenians, also known as The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), were hardcore militants who had survived the previous failed Irish Rebellion of the late 1800s. The Fenians (IRB) were the nucleus of militant nationalism during the early 1900s – a strictly secretive inner circle and driving force behind the 1916 Rising. They were the leaders, the planners and above all, they were responsible for “blooding” and bringing on the next generation of young militant nationalists (Dorney 2017).

One Fenian in particular stands head and shoulders above all the rest, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa. His funeral was staged as a showcase of support – a call to arms for the many and various strands of Irish nationalism at home and abroad (McGreevy 2015). When Patrick Pearse gave his oration at Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa’s graveside (Hull) to a mass gathering of as many as 10,000 fully armed paramilitary Irish Volunteers (Roche 2015), the authorities were left in no doubt that a rising was imminent.

There is no ambiguity in O’Connor’s use of the name Jeremiah O’Donovan, the character in the story is an old Fenian (IRB). His role is to focus the minds of the young recruits. Instructing them to carry out the execution is the defining test he will set them.

Within the context of the story, Jeremiah O’Donovan could have quite simply executed the two British soldiers himself, but his insistence that the hostages should be executed by the two young IRA volunteers is clearly a test of their willingness to kill in cold blood, and an exercise in blooding the next generation. This is precisely the significance of O’Connor’s reference to

Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa – a figure who keeps the flame of insurrection burning long enough to influence the next generation of militant nationalists.

1.3 Feeney

Feeney's presence in the narrative is intriguing. As a character he seems totally insignificant and superfluous. He is often neglected, written-off or ignored as a non-character in this story. Feeney's only appearance is on the fringes of the final scene. He does not speak. There is no sense of his physical appearance. He is always lurking in the shadows. He does not enter the light of the house. The reader is offered no glimpse of the physical features or the character of Feeney.

But if Jeremiah O'Donovan represents Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and the Fenian (IRB) influence on militant nationalism – then the case could be made that the illusive Feeney may be the most influential character of all. As his name suggests, Feeney could well be interpreted as the anglicisation of Na Fíniú, the Irish language word for The Fenians. The name Feeney also echoes the mythical Irish warrior class Na Fianna, and of course, Fianna Éireann, the Irish nationalist youth organisation established in 1909, most of whom went on to form the core of the Irish Volunteers during the 1916 Rising (Hay 2019).

We are told that Feeney is an “intelligence officer” which would place him as senior to Jeremiah O'Donovan in the chain of command. In the darkness of the bog, on the night of the execution – could it be that the silent Feeney, lurking in the shadows, is the judge and presiding senior officer in command. Is he present not only to ensure the executions are carried out in a correct and due military fashion, but also to appraise the actions and suitability of the young IRA volunteers (Noble and Bonaparte) for future duties.

Feeney's presence at the end of the story brings a great sense of menace and immediacy to the moment of execution. We can hear the urgency in Jeremiah O'Donovan's voice when he orders Noble to shoot Hawkins. We can feel his frustration, when Noble refuses to carry out his duty. Could it be that Jeremiah's leadership ability is also the subject of appraisal by Feeney?

One might question the validity of including a character who does not speak, a character who remains concealed in the shadows. But it is a testament to O'Connor's literary brilliance that this unseen character, who lives in the shadows, offers such contextual depth and historical detail to the narrative, bringing a heightened reality to the core cast of characters who inhabit the spotlight.

1.4 Belcher

Belcher is the older, mild mannered and courteous British hostage. Curiously, his name seems at odds with his character. Belcher's personality is the very antithesis to the ill-mannered crudeness his name suggests. Described as a “gentleman” by the woman of the house, Belcher is presented as a philosophical man, a calming influence on the younger IRA volunteers and the argumentative Hawkins.

Belcher has lived a full life and seems comfortable with his own mortality – at ease with his impending fate. Belcher goes to his death with a certain resolve and detachment. It is significant that in his final words before execution he makes the point that he does not blame the volunteers who are about to carry out the deed, referring to them as “good lads”, adding that he never quite understood the notion of duty.

1.5 *Hawkins*

Hawkins is the younger of the two British hostages. He is impetuous and argumentative and provides a perfect foil for Noble's character. Hawkins declares himself to be a communist and an atheist, and tends to be hawkish, combative and independent by nature. He represents the new generation who believe the next war to end all wars will not be nation versus nation, but rather it will be a clash of ideologies – the struggle between capitalism and socialism. Hawkins is not particularly committed to the British Army. He says that he would willingly desert (Ó Ruairc 2011)²⁰ and join his newfound comrades (Noble and Bonaparte) in their fight for Irish independence. This is not necessarily just a ploy to save himself from execution, he genuinely considers the two young IRA volunteers as friends. It is apparent that he has found a kindred spirit in Noble, and there is a strong sense that he has misgivings about his role as a British soldier in Ireland.

1.6 *Bonaparte*

Bonaparte narrates “Guests Of The Nation”. The story unfolds as a retrospective personal retelling of Bonaparte's involvement in a traumatic and tragic event during the Irish War of Independence. Bonaparte's character undergoes a dramatic shift, particularly in the context of his role in the execution of the two British soldiers, an event which ultimately had a profound effect on his life.

I believe his name, Bonaparte, was most likely a nickname given to him by his fellow IRA volunteer recruits – possibly a name he earned while participating in training camps. The implication being that he was viewed by his peers as a little Napoleon – gung-ho in training, a volunteer who had wholeheartedly embraced the demands and challenges of guerrilla warfare, a young volunteer who craved action and the cut and thrust of battle, an enthusiastic volunteer who would carry out orders.

This is significant, because while the other young volunteer (Noble) is unable to shoot the hostages, Bonaparte steps up to the mark when duty calls. He has the steeliness that is required to pull the trigger and ultimately kill the hostage. Through this action, Bonaparte sets himself apart from Noble. Bonaparte has been “blooded”. The inferred narrative is that he will go on to become an active and full-blooded militant nationalist in the IRA.

Bonaparte's statement at the end of the story – “and anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again” (Martin 1967 [2011], 86) – is often interpreted as an expression of his revulsion for the bloodletting of war. But alternatively, it seems to me, that having taken the step to actually kill a British soldier in cold blood, there was no going back. His life and his commitment to the cause had risen to a higher level. Unlike Noble, who was unable to execute Hawkins, when Bonaparte pulled the trigger and killed the hostage, he learned something new about himself. Maybe that's why he “never felt the same about” anything that happened after that.

²⁰ Commenting on British Soldiers deserting in Ireland, William McNamara 1st Batt. Mid Clare Brigade IRA said, “They were a decent body of men and the vast majority of them did not relish the particular class of soldering at which they were employed in Ireland. On pay nights, when a good number of them got a bit tipsy, they could be heard in the pubs in Ennis singing Irish rebel and Sinn Féin songs” (Bureau of Military History 1951).

“Guests of the Nation” unfolds during the final months of the War of Independence, obviously the characters in the story do not have the gift of foresight and are not aware that, within a year, following the disputed terms of the treaty with the British, Ireland would erupt into full-blown civil war (Kissane 2005).

The terms of the treaty between Ireland and England included partitioning the island of Ireland. Six counties of Ulster became known as Northern Ireland and remained within the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. The treaty not only divided the island of Ireland, it also effectively split the IRA in two – Republicans and Free Staters. The Republican side vowing to continue the war against England to the bitter end, in an attempt to achieve an all-Ireland Republic. The Free State side opted to agree with the terms of the Treaty. This led to the inevitable clash between former comrades-in-arms, and so began the Irish Civil War (Clarke, Litton 2008).

Frank O’Connor identifies two individual and opposing personality traits in the young IRA volunteers, Noble and Bonaparte. When duty calls Bonaparte, is able to pull a trigger and kill. Noble on the other hand, is unable to kill. It is speculation on my part, but the character profile of Bonaparte, not least his ability to kill, leads me to believe that Bonaparte will align himself with the IRA hardliners and will continue the fight with the Republican side during the Civil War.

1.7 Noble

Noble is a young, hot-headed and argumentative IRA volunteer. Despite his characteristic bluff and bluster, it becomes apparent at the end of the story that the order to execute the two British soldiers was a test set by his commanding officer Jeremiah O’Donovan, and Noble failed in his duty to carry out the order to kill. Noble would not have been aware that, within months of the Irish War of Independence, a civil war would sweep the land. It would be a brutal conflict of bloodletting between former comrades and once again, Noble and Bonaparte’s sense of loyalty and duty would be tested. Judging by Noble’s character, it seems to me that he would support the peace terms of the treaty as negotiated by Michael Collins (Hopkinson 2004), and most likely would go on to become a supporter of the Free State rather than a Republican. Frank O’Connor deftly plants this subtle signpost to the future diverging lives of the two raw recruits. There is a sense that within a short time Noble might find himself fighting against his former comrade Bonaparte on the opposing side of the Irish Civil War.

O’Connor’s choice of the name Noble for this character is intriguing. Noble is argumentative, impulsive and hot-headed by nature. The name seems at odds with the character as presented in the story, although beneath his combative exterior is a mild, considered and emotional soul. Noble’s quarrelsome exterior leads me to believe his character is more brittle than hard.

When I first read this story over forty years ago, I was baffled by O’Connor’s choice of such an obscure character name. It was a name that stood out. I had never come across the name Noble in Cork, or anywhere else for that matter – except in the pages of Frank O’Connor’s story “Guest Of The Nation”. In the course of my research, I found myself in the Cork City Archives thumbing through dusty old Irish Volunteer application forms from 1913. There, among that stack of maybe 2,000 documents, I was surprised to come across a young volunteer by the name of Noble Johnson. On closer inspection, I was amazed to find that this volunteer’s address was – 11, Devonshire Street. Cork.

Leanaíam go dlúct do clú ár rinnríir.

Company..... No. 775

ÓGLAÍŞ NA hÉIREANN - Irish Volunteers.

I, the undersigned, desire to be enrolled in the Irish Volunteers, formed to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland without distinction of creed, class, or politics.

Name..... Noble Johnson

Address..... 119 Devonshire St. Cork

Date..... April 2 1914

Corcoran, Printer, 21, Sullivan's Quay, Cork.

Fig. 5 – Irish Volunteer: Noble Johnson. Courtesy of the Author

I live on Devonshire Street – 1, Devonshire Street to be precise. My family has traded on Devonshire Street for over a century. I knew instinctively that number eleven at the end of our street is now, was then and always has been Pa Johnson's Pub. Considering our two families have lived and traded on this street spanning a time frame that straddles three centuries and two millennia – it might be interesting to point out that generations of Creedons have stood at Johnson's bar counter, just as generations of Johnsons have stood at Creedon's shop counter.

So, in the interests of research, I visited Pa Johnson's pub, where my neighbour Barry Johnson is the current licensee. And having called a pint of Murphy's, I enquired as to how vigorously I would have to shake his family tree for a Noble Johnson to fall out of its branches. Barry smiled, and he informed me that his grandfather, uncle and older brother were all named Noble. This kernel of information came as a great surprise to me. Noble was a name I had never known except as a character in "Guests of the Nation", and there I was in my neighbour Barry Johnson's pub, hearing for the first time about three individuals named Noble – all of whom had lived on my street.

I wondered whether it was possible that the character Noble in "Guests of the Nation" was inspired by my neighbour, Barry Johnson's grandfather. Frank O'Connor and Noble Johnson would have certainly known each other. Cork was a lot smaller back at the turn of the last century, the population and city boundary was only a fraction of what it is currently. Noble Johnson and Frank O'Connor were both members of the (Cork) Irish Volunteers. Both were from the Northside of the city. Johnson's pub was then and continues to be, a very well known, if not a landmark drinking establishment in the city.

For me, the process of adapting Frank O'Connor's short story could never be merely a matter of joining the narrative dots. Adaptation of another writer's work required that I find an emotional if not personal connection to the original. I like to think that there is a possibil-

ity of a connection between the character Noble the Republican in the story and Noble the publican on my street.

And so, before I put pen to paper, I broadened my research.

2. *Art Imitates Life*

In that twilight zone where art imitates life, there are many recorded incidents of hostage taking by the IRA during the Irish War of Independence.

Frank O'Connor, a former member of the Irish Volunteers (IRA), would have been familiar with the numerous tales involving British hostages that were circulating at that time. Such incidents became headline international news, with daily updates reported in the press, including the publication of extracts of highly personal and emotional love letters between hostages and their loved ones at home²¹.

Attempting to pinpoint the precise source of a writer's inspiration is near impossible, but tales of kidnapped British soldiers were very much part of the zeitgeist at that time. And of course, O'Connor's story would have brought its own influence and inspiration to bear on the work of future generations of writers – *The Hostage* and *An Giall* (1958) by Brendan Behan and Neil Jordan's film *The Crying Game* (1992) tackle similar themes and focus on the potential tragic outcome when friendships are formed between sworn enemies – specifically, in the context of British soldiers taken hostage by the IRA.

Certain aspects of the various hostage-taking situations display a great degree of similarity, such as anecdotal stories of captives being moved from safe house to safe house, and the custody of prisoners being handed from one IRA unit to another. Letter writing between captives and their loved ones became another common feature – and numerous accounts of socialising between captives and captors, including card playing, sing-songs and dancing – which inevitably brought about the complicating dilemma of friendships formed between enemies during wartime.

The kidnapping of Brigadier-General Cuthbert Lucas stands out as one of the more bizarre accounts. Brigadier-General Lucas was Officer in Command of the 16th Infantry Brigade, stationed at Fermoy Barracks in East Cork. He holds the dubious honour of being the most senior-ranking British army officer taken captive by the IRA (McGreevy 2020b).

Liam Lynch of the East Cork 2nd Battalion IRA devised a plan to capture a high-ranking British officer with a view to holding him hostage in exchange for IRA prisoners who were facing execution at Victoria Barracks in Cork City (Ryan 2012). The opportunity to put the plan into action arose on 26 June 1920, when Brigadier-General Lucas, Colonel Danford of the Royal Artillery and Colonel Tyrrell of the Royal Engineers were spotted fly fishing on the River Bride near the town of Fermoy in East Cork. Word was relayed back to Liam Lynch, who made his move, and a plan was hastily put into action.

²¹ An indication of the international media/press interest in the Major Compton Smith story, full details of the kidnapping, incarceration and execution of Major Compton Smith, including transcripts of letters sent to his wife, his regiment, and the House of Commons debate feature in the Christchurch, New Zealand newspaper – *The Star*, Tuesday (18/05/26). <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/imageserver/newspapers/P29pZD1UUzE5MjYwN-TE4LjEuNiZnZXRwZGY9dHJ1ZQ==>> (03/2021).



Fig. 6 – A fascinating photograph of Brigadier-General Lucas (seated centre) during his captivity. Seen here in the company of his captors: Paddy Brennan, Michael Brennan, James Brennan and Joe Keane of the East Clare Brigade IRA. Brigadier-General Lucas wearing the suit bought for him by his captors in Ennis Co. Clare. The photograph beautifully captures the recreational and comfortable atmosphere that existed between friend and foe. Note: Commandant Michael Brennan of the East Clare Brigade IRA (second from left) with revolver in trousers belt. Courtesy of Cork Public Museum

A unit of East Cork 2nd Battalion IRA made their way to the riverbank and took the three British officers captive at gunpoint. The hostages were transported from the scene in two waiting cars (API Parliament, UK- HANSARD 1803–2005, 28 June 1920). But the abduction was not without incident. Colonel Danford and Colonel Lucas, who were travelling in the second getaway car, made an attempt to escape. In a botched effort at overpowering the driver, a fight broke out causing the car to career off the road and crash. The fist fight which began inside the moving vehicle spilled out onto the road and erupted in a full-scale brawl between the IRA volunteers and the British army officers. The lead car carrying Colonel Tyrrell returned to the scene of the skirmish to find Colonel Danford had broken free and had made a run for freedom. Order was only restored when two gunshots rang out and Colonel Danford fell to the road wounded. Liam Lynch decided that Colonel Tyrrell would be left behind to care for Colonel Danford, and the IRA hightailed it with their prized possession, Brigadier-General Lucas (Murphy 2020a).

When news of the kidnapping reached Fermoy Barracks, a massive manhunt was mounted right across the Province of Munster. Two nights later the East Kent Regiment ransacked and looted the nearby town of Fermoy in reprisal for the kidnapping of the Brigadier-General. *The New York Times* reported on 28 June 1920,

Barracks and camp were immediately alarmed and all soldiers turned out of bed. Soldiers of an artillery battery mounted their horses and numerous parties of fully equipped troops in motor cars, scoured the country for miles around all day and all night. But the general had vanished completely. (Carroll 2010, 50)

And so began an intriguing and highly dangerous game of cat and mouse as Brigadier-General Lucas was moved from safe house to safe house through North Cork, Limerick, Tipperary and Clare – always one step ahead of the British authorities.

A peculiar aspect of Lucas' time in captivity was his insistence that he should receive a bottle of whiskey every day. As an officer this was his statutory prisoner-of-war allowance. His request was duly honoured. The whiskey intensified the social aspect of his incarceration. As one would expect, friendships developed – as related by Jack Hogan of the Shannon Social History Project,

He [Brigadier-General Lucas] was a very affable sort of man who was easy to get on with. They played cards with him. He was particularly good at poker. He also played bridge and they taught him to play Forty-fives. He also liked his whiskey and had plenty of help drinking it. He was particularly good at poker. The trouble was that they couldn't keep him. He used to drink a bottle of whiskey every day and he cleaned them out at poker. (Hogan 2011)

Shortly after Lucas was taken hostage, his wife, Poppy Lucas, gave birth to their first child. He was granted permission by the IRA on compassionate grounds to write home to his wife. In due course, Poppy replied to her husband, she simply addressed her letters to: General Lucas, c/o THE IRA, Ireland (McGreevy 2020b). There followed a relay of letters between Lucas and his wife which are currently held in the Lucas Family Archive. Their correspondence makes for fascinating reading. They contain many references to how well he was treated by the IRA, including accounts of playing croquet and tennis, games of cards that stretched late into the night, fishing expeditions on the River Shannon and days spent helping farmers in the fields "to save the hay" (Murphy 2020b).

There were a number of farcical escapades during his incarceration, including a shopping trip into Ennis, Co. Clare to buy clothes for the Brigadier-General who was still in his fishing attire since his abduction. There's also the amusing anecdotal tale of Brigadier-General Lucas and his IRA captors salmon poaching on the River Shannon in Co. Limerick. Seemingly, Lucas expressed concern that they might be caught fishing illegally by the river bailiffs. His concerns were laid to rest when he was reassured that the IRA volunteer rowing the boat was in fact the local river bailiff (Brennan 2012).

Lucas was held hostage for over a month, but the IRA became frustrated due to the British lack of interest in facilitating a prisoner exchange. The incarceration of Lucas was costing the IRA heavily in manpower and resources. It has been suggested that Lucas' skilful card playing and his capacity for the consumption of alcohol may have played a part in the IRA's decision to release him unharmed. Eventually, on 30 July, Commandant Michael Brennan of the East Clare Brigade IRA decided that Lucas would be allowed to escape (Brennan 1980).

Brigadier-General Lucas' release by the IRA was not the end of the story. It is on record that he made his way on foot to the RIC barracks in the nearby village of Pallas Green, Co. Limerick. There he had a bath and a change of clothes. He then wrapped the clothes he had been wearing and instructed that they be posted. The parcel eventually reached the IRA in East Cork with a note attached that simply read:

To the Sinn Feiners, or to the IRA, with compliments of General Lucas. (Murphy 2020b)

Another extraordinary episode unfolded as General Lucas was on his journey home to Fermoy Barracks in Co. Cork from Pallas Green, Co. Limerick. By pure chance, that very same day, the 3rd Tipperary Brigade IRA under Sean Tracy had planned to ambush the mail convoy, unaware that Lucas, released a day earlier by the East Clare Brigade IRA, was on board.

The convoy rolled into the IRA ambush near Oola in Co. Tipperary. An intense firefight ensued and within a short time, two British soldiers lay dead on the road and three others were wounded. When the gunfire ceased and the smoke cleared, it was found that General Lucas had survived the attack – once again, the fickle finger of fate intervened and deemed that Lucky Lucas would live to tell the tale.

The IRA failed to secure a prisoner exchange with the British authorities, but the kidnapping of such a high-ranking officer and their efficiency in concealing his whereabouts across a number of counties was a great morale boost for the Irish Volunteers. The kidnapping made international news headlines – it was reported that the then Secretary of State for War, Winston Churchill was “purple with rage” (McGreevy 2020b). Meanwhile, a satirical street ballad, “Where Did General Lucas Go?”, aimed at taunting British soldiers, became popular around the towns and villages of North Cork. But most significantly, at a time when the British authorities were actively portraying the Irish Volunteers as murder gangs and indiscriminate killers, General Lucas’ accounts of the friendships he had formed during his captivity became a source of embarrassment. In particular, on Tuesday 29 June 1920, the *Irish Bulletin* published an extract from a letter to his wife, in which Lucas stated that his captors were “delightful people”, and he went on to say, “I was treated as a gentleman by gentlemen”. Lucas reaffirmed these sentiments when he got back to Fermoy Barracks. He addressed his troops and admonished those who had committed outrages and atrocities in retaliation for his abduction – insisting that the troops under his command had shown “an overzealous display”.

The kidnapping of Brigadier-General Lucas had an air of an Ealing Comedy slapstick adventure, but the same cannot be said for all such incidents. There are a number of recorded examples of strong bonds of friendship formed between friend and foe that came to a profoundly tragic end when duty called, and the inevitability of execution had to be carried out.

During the course of my research, the kidnapping of another senior British officer, Major Geoffrey Lee Compton Smith, attracted my attention. Not only because of the striking similarities to the narrative of “Guests of the Nation”, but Major Compton Smith had been held captive in Donoughmore, Co. Cork – the birthplace of Frank O’Connor’s mother. O’Connor had many happy childhood memories of visits to extended family in Donoughmore – it is noteworthy that he adopted his mother’s family name (O’Connor) as his pen name in favour of his paternal surname (O’Donovan; Ní Shíocháin 2018).

The fictional tale explored in “Guests of the Nation” presents many close similarities to the true story of Major Compton Smith, who was taken hostage by the IRA and held in exchange for the release of four IRA volunteers facing execution in Victoria Barracks, Cork. Considering Frank O’Connor’s family connections to the locality of Donoughmore and his membership of the Irish Volunteers, it is highly probable that O’Connor would have been very familiar with the key individuals and locations associated with the tragic events surrounding this particular kidnapping.

It was reported at the time that Major Compton Smith had been on a landscape painting excursion to Blarney on the outskirts of Cork City when an IRA unit chanced upon him. In an interview published by *The Cork Examiner* on 4 June 1921, Compton Smith’s wife, Gladys, picks up the story:

Sketching was a favourite amusement of my husband, and he had gone to Blarney, presumably to sketch the castle, when he fell into the hands of the Sinn Feiners. I received a letter from him written the next day, in which he said, – while away sketching yesterday I had the misfortune to get held up by

the IRA. I am now a prisoner but being very well treated. I have no doubt I shall get out of this scrape as I have got out of others. There is nothing to worry about.²²

But the painting excursion theory is unconvincing. It seems highly unlikely that a senior British Army Intelligence Officer would be ambling around the countryside painting landscapes in a known IRA stronghold at a time when the War of Independence was at its height and raging out of control. The previous six months had seen a sharp escalation in IRA unilateral attacks on British army personnel. General Strickland, Officer in Command of the Southern Division at Victoria Barracks in Cork, had issued strict guidelines regarding the security of senior staff and officers.

Local lore in Donoughmore has it that Major Compton Smith had been lured to Blarney Station in a honey-trap to meet a nurse. This assertion was given some credence when Sir Harwood-Banner stated in The British House of Commons,

Major Compton Smith left his home in mufti [civilian clothing] to meet the monthly nurse. (API Parliament UK – HANSARD 1803-2005, 23 June 1921)

But Compton Smith's reason for being in Blarney that day was irrelevant, be it his love of art or an affair of the heart. We now know that no nurse was waiting on the platform when the Major stepped from the train. Instead, he was greeted by an active service unit of the local IRA under Frank Busteed and was taken prisoner. Major General Strickland, Officer in Command of Victoria Barracks, Cork, was subsequently contacted and informed that Compton Smith would be released unharmed in exchange for four IRA prisoners who were due to be executed on 28 April 1921. And so began the deeply moving story of Major Compton Smith's captivity.

Some years ago, I and two friends of mine, John Borgonovo and Dan Breen, were invited by the descendants of the IRA volunteers involved in the kidnapping of Major Compton Smith to visit the key locations where he had been held hostage.

We were met at the railway station in the village of Blarney, just as Compton Smith had been met by Frank Busteed and his IRA unit that fateful day back on 16 April 1921. We travelled in convoy along a maze of disorientating back roads and boreens, our driver pointing out significant locations along the way; stopping off at various ambush sites and a string of safe houses that had held Compton Smith. He shared details of another more controversial event: the kidnapping and execution of Mrs. Lindsay and her chauffeur, Mr. James Clarke (Gordon 2015) – which, incidentally, had also been carried out by the local IRA under the command of Frank Busteed just a short few weeks prior to the taking of Major Compton Smith. We were also told the fascinating story of a Rolls Royce Silver Ghost armoured car, known locally as the Moon Car, an IRA war machine of mythical status. We were brought to the farmyard where the Moon Car had been buried after the Free State Government put a bounty of £10,000 for information leading to its whereabouts (National Museum of Ireland). It struck me that every twist and turn of the road through this beautiful tranquil, green and leafy countryside had a story to tell of a violent and bloody past.

²² As a measure of the international interest in Major Compton Smith story, full details of the kidnapping, incarceration and execution of Major Compton Smith, including letters sent to his wife, his regiment, and the House of Commons debate feature in the Christchurch, New Zealand newspaper – *The Star*, Tuesday (18 May 26). This is an extract of a letter sent by Major Compton Smith to his wife Gladys as reported in this article. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/imageserver/newspapers/P29pZD1UUzE5MjYwNTE4LjEuNiZnZXRwZGY9dHJlZQ==>> (03/2021).



Fig. 7 – The Cottage in Donoughmore where Major Compton Smith was held hostage before his execution by the IRA. Courtesy of Denise Sheehan

Eventually we reached our destination – a sidetrack at a bend on the road. There we parked the cars, the remainder of the journey was made on foot, along a hillside track to the isolated cottage where Major Compton Smith spent his final days.

The rain was driving hard, so we took shelter in the derelict cottage. Lightning flashed and thunder crashed, as if nature had presented us with a magnificent theatrical backdrop for that most evocative of days. Standing there looking out across the valley, there was talk of the people of Donoughmore and Major Compton Smith. The conversation was peppered with memories that had been handed down through the various families from generation to generation. Gradually, the story emerged of how a series of catastrophic events in another part of the county had led to the kidnapping of Major Compton Smith.

In February 1921 an IRA ambush in Mourne Abbey near Mallow, Co. Cork went badly wrong. Four volunteers died as a result of the incident and several were taken prisoner. Two of the prisoners, Patrick Ronayne and Thomas Mulcahy, were court-martialled and sentenced to death. The executions were to take place on 28 April 1921. Then a few days later another IRA flying column found themselves surrounded in a farmhouse near Clonmult in East Cork. There are a number of accounts of what happened at Clonmult – but the only certainty is that twelve volunteers were shot dead, and a number were taken prisoner – Maurice Moore and Patrick O’Sullivan were court-marshalled and scheduled to be executed on 28 April 1921. The IRA decided they would take a senior British Officer hostage to be held in exchange for the release of the four volunteers facing execution. Major Compton Smith was that hostage, and so the waiting game began.

In an interview on *The Cork Examiner* on 4 June 1921, Gladys Compton Smith quoted from another letter she had received from her husband which highlights the social and informal nature of his incarceration:

I am still going strong and write this lying on a heap of hay in a barn. It has been most interesting to compare notes with the Sinn Féiners. Last night I had a discussion with a lot of them representing different ranks, and rebels with various grades of education were sitting round the cottage fire. I was single-handed among many. Some of them were very bitter against us, but they treated me most fairly. The night ended up with a song in which I joined in most heartily. (*The Star* 1926)²³

It becomes apparent that, similar to Frank O'Connor's short story, a deep friendship and mutual respect developed between Major Compton Smith and his captors, the deepening relationship is highlighted in a letter to his regiment written shortly before he was executed:

I intend to die like a Welch Fusilier with a laugh and with forgiveness for those who are carrying out this deed. I should like my death to lessen rather than increase the bitterness which exists between England and Ireland. I have been treated with great kindness, and during my captivity have learned to regard the Sinn Feiners rather as mistaken idealists than as a murder gang. (O'Halpin, Ó Corráin 2020, 398-399)

Once again, the heightened emotion of the time becomes evident in what has become known as the "shot in an hour's time" letter, which Major Compton Smith wrote to his wife, Gladys. In it, as a dying wish, he asks that his watch be given to the IRA volunteer charged with the duty of carrying out his execution – he goes so far as to describe his executioner as a gentleman:

Dearest,
your hubby will die with your name on his lips, your face before his eyes, and he will die like an Englishman and a Soldier. I cannot tell you sweetheart how much it is to me to leave you alone – nor how little to me personally to die – I have no fear, only the utmost, greatest and tenderest love to you, and my sweet little Anne. I leave my cigarette case to the Regiment, my miniature medals to my father – whom I have implored to befriend you in everything – and my watch to the officer who is executing me because I believe him to be a gentleman and to mark the fact that I bear him no malice for carrying out what he sincerely believes to be his duty. Goodbye, my darling, my own. Tender, tender farewells and kisses.
Your own, Geoff. (Kenefick 2011)²⁴

Of course, Compton Smith would not have been aware that his alleged meeting with the monthly nurse at Blarney Station had been discussed in the British parliament and the details were reported in the British Press – his intended liaison with the nurse would have been a source of great public humiliation for his wife and family.

²³ As a measure of the international interest in Major Compton Smith story, full details of the kidnapping, incarceration and execution of Major Compton Smith, including letters sent to his wife, his regiment, and the House of Commons debate feature in the Christchurch, New Zealand newspaper – *The Star* (18/05/26). This is an extract of a letter sent by Major Compton Smith to his wife Gladys as reported in this article. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/imageserver/newspapers/P29pZD1UUzE5MjYwNTE4LjEuNiZnZXRwZGY9dHJlZQ==>> (03/2021).

²⁴ This final letter between Major Compton Smith and his wife Gladys, was given the name "Shot In An Hour's Time" by Sir Harmood-Banner, when he read the full transcript of the letter to the House of Commons (01/06/1921). The emotional content of the letter was immediately seized upon by the international media, propelling the story of Major Compton Smith's kidnapping and execution onto the world stage. See <<https://historicgraves.com/story/major-geoffrey-lee-compton-smith>>.

The rain stopped, the wind eased, and with the lull in the weather our guides decided to take the opportunity to lead us up the hillside to the place of Major Compton Smith's execution. As we made our way along the track there was talk of mundane but no less important matters: the land, the weather, sheep and cattle. It occurred to me that not a lot had changed around Donoughmore since the time Compton Smith came and lived among these people. The land continued to be farmed by generations of the same families – back as far as anyone cared to remember. This landscape had been shaped by the people, just as much as the people had been shaped by the landscape. These were not a professionally trained military machine, they had little by way of weaponry or resources. For generations, they had eked out a living on small holdings. They ploughed and they harvested – for not to do so would have meant that they and their families would most certainly starve. First and foremost, the people of Donoughmore were farmers. Clearly, they had been willing to fight and die for the cause of Irish Independence. And just like so many other villages, parishes and townlands across the land, the people of Donoughmore had stood up to one of the most powerful warlike nations on the planet – and surprisingly, they were victorious.

I wondered if Major Compton Smith had made similar observations during his time in Donoughmore. He had recently returned from the mindless human carnage and destruction of World War One, it must have been a surreal experience to be held captive in an isolated Irish rural townland such as Donoughmore where the main activity of any particular day would be centred around domestic pursuits: milking cattle, feeding chickens, baking bread. To find himself sitting at a farmhouse kitchen table sharing meals with a family, playing cards, singing songs – living as a guest of the enemy. This country cottage was a busy hub in a rebel stronghold: the sound of children playing, cattle lowing, cats and their kittens lapping up saucers of milk, the sheep dog barking and putting the run on the phantoms of the night and the beady-eyed chickens pecking at the window. In his letters to his wife, Major Compton Smith refers to the social gatherings at the fireside, the comings and goings of gunmen to the house, “a lot of them representing different ranks, and rebels with various grades of education were sitting round the cottage fire”. The Major must have reevaluated his indoctrination about the Sinn Féiners and questioned their portrayal as bloodthirsty murder gangs. Did he conclude that his hosts, these hillside farmers were just ordinary people caught up in the events of extraordinary times?

When we finally reached the place where Major Compton Smith was shot, the conversation turned to the events that led to his execution. There was a general sense of seething anger at the “800 years of oppression” that had been inflicted on the people of Ireland by the English, but a particular fury was reserved for the British authorities whose inaction during the Spring of 1921, had placed the local people in an impossible moral dilemma – faced with no alternative but to execute this enemy who had become a friend. It was suggested by one of our party that – if the British had only met them halfway and commuted the death sentence of the four Irish Volunteers to life imprisonment, Compton Smith would have been released. But the British were not for turning. Major Compton Smith's fate was sealed on 28 April 1921, when Patrick Ronayne, Thomas Mulcahy, Maurice Moore and Patrick O'Sullivan were executed at Victoria Barracks in Cork City. Two days later Compton Smith was taken to the very spot where we were standing in that lonely bog on a hillside near Donoughmore – he died by a single bullet to the head.

The details of his execution are recorded in the Bureau of Military History Witness Statement by Maurice Brew:

When removed to the place of execution, he placed his cigarette case in his breast pocket of his tunic and asked that after his death it should be sent to his regiment. He then lighted a cigarette and

said that when he dropped the cigarette, it could be taken as a signal by the execution squad to open fire. (BHM 1951)

Before we departed, our guide stepped forward and spoke of the respect and friendship that had been forged between Compton Smith and the local people of Donoughmore. Like an echo from the past, the emotions and feelings had survived through the generations right to the present day. We were reminded that 1920-1921 was a time of war. A list of atrocities that occurred throughout the centuries of abuse, poverty, starvation and death during the eight hundred years of English occupation were recalled like steppingstones through time. Then, following a moment of reflection, he proceeded to recite a decade of the Rosary “as Gaeilge”²⁵ – for the repose of the souls of Major Compton Smith and the executed IRA volunteers: Patrick Ronayne, Thomas Mulcahy, Maurice Moore and Patrick O’Sullivan.

In 1921, Michael Collins (Coogan 2015)²⁶ made several attempts on behalf of Compton Smith’s family to find, exhume and repatriate his remains to England. But the horrors of the Irish War of Independence had been overtaken by the more poignant and personalised blood-letting of the Irish Civil War. With former comrades taking up arms against each other, the country was once again plunged into turmoil. Major Compton Smith’s body laid buried in an IRA stronghold, making it next to impossible for the Irish Free State authorities to retrieve his remains.

In his correspondence with Gladys, the wife of Major Compton Smith, Michael Collins outlined the difficulties he faced in locating her husband’s remains:

Dear Madam,

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of 21st April.

You will understand that in the present circumstances here in Ireland, it is extremely difficult to attend to matters of this kind. Even though it is not possible to secure all the information I should like to secure for you, you may rely on me to keep the matter in my mind with a view to giving all remaining details, and securing, if necessary, the transfer of the remains, as soon as conditions become restored here. (Kenefick 2011)

Within a few months, Michael Collins was dead – killed in an ambush set by his former IRA comrades at Béal na Bláth, just 15 miles west of Donoughmore.

When peace was eventually restored to the land, Compton Smith’s body was recovered. On Friday, 15 March 1926. *The Cork Examiner* reported:

The remains were located in Barracharing wood and brought in a lead covered coffin to Collins Barracks – they will remain there pending the receipt of instructions as to their removal to England.²⁷

²⁵ Translation: “as Gaeilge”: “In the Irish Language”.

²⁶ Michael Collins was an Irish revolutionary leader during the War of Independence, a leading figure in the early twentieth century Irish struggle for independence. He was Chairman of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State during the Irish Civil War. Because of disputes arising from the agreed peace treaty with Britain, The Civil War unfolded as a particularly personalised bloodletting between the Irish Free State and their former comrades in the IRA.

²⁷ In the intervening four years since the Civil War had ended (1922-1926), Victoria Barracks in Cork City which had been the centre of British Military administration, had been re-named Collins Barracks by the Irish Free State Government – in memory of Michael Collins.

By this time Major Compton Smith's widow had remarried and was living in Italy as Gladys Mary Peterson – the wife of Major Guy Lansberry Peterson. Protracted negotiations took place between the Irish Free State and the Compton Smith family but, for some unspecified reason, the family declined the opportunity to bring his remains home to England. In April 1926, Major Compton Smith was finally laid to rest in Fort Carlisle Military Cemetery, Whitegate, Co. Cork, where it is interred to the present day. At the base of his headstone is a bronze wreath with a short inscription from his daughter Anne:

*Major G L Compton Smith D.S.O.
With Love from Anne. (Kenefick 2011)*

3. In Conclusion

That day I spent as a guest of the people of Donoughmore is indelibly imprinted on my memory. The mood was solemn and dignified in accordance with honouring the memory of past generations. Having paid our respects, we made our way back down that lonely hillside track and regrouped at a local farmhouse. There a fine spread and a blazing turf fire awaited us. The talk was of tales of the townland, times past and hopes for the future, and as afternoon drifted towards evening we sang songs – I believe I may have given a verse or two of the “Lonely Woods at Upton”²⁸.

Our reason for gathering that day was never too far from our minds, someone mentioned Major Compton Smith's watch. *The Cork Examiner* of 15 March 1926 published a letter sent by Major Compton Smith to his wife Gladys prior to his execution, in it, the Major expressed as a dying wish, that his watch would be given the IRA volunteer charged with the duty of carrying out the execution:

and my watch to the officer who is executing me because I believe him to be a gentleman and to mark the fact that I bear him no malice for carrying out what he sincerely believes to be his duty. (Bennett 2010 [1959], 191)

There was general agreement that the gifting of such a personal possession to his executioner was a clear indictment of the genuine affection and meeting of minds that had occurred between two sworn enemies. When asked about the current whereabouts of the watch the reply was vague, but I understood it is still in the possession of a family in Donoughmore, not too far from the kitchen table where we were sitting. And there was something very reassuring in the realisation that Major Compton Smith's watch was not displayed as a trophy of war but rather it was held as a treasured personal gift from a friend.

There was talk of the very public humiliation endured by Gladys Compton Smith when it was announced from the floor of the British Parliament that her husband had not been on a landscape painting expedition, but rather, he went to Blarney to meet a nurse. We wondered whether the decision by the Compton Smith family not to repatriate his body to England, and the omission of his wife's name on the bronze wreath at the Major's headstone, was in response to his alleged indiscretion with the nurse at Blarney Station? Could it be the case that sometimes all is not fair in love and war? Such are the fascinating speculations of love and lore.

²⁸ “Lonely Woods Of Upton”, commemorates an IRA ambush on a train at Upton Station in North Cork. This is the link to Sean Dunphy singing the song: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WpOoil9eB8>> (03/2021).

The many and varied tales of British soldiers taken hostage by the IRA are invaluable to historians and academics. They offer a precise and factually detailed account of Ireland and the inner-workings of IRA active service units at the height of the War of Independence – on the cusp of the Civil War. But the genius of Frank O'Connor's fiction is found in the depth and complexity of the characters he creates. The story as it unfolds is but a backdrop from which a fascinating cast of full-bodied characters come alive. "Guests Of The Nation" brings us on an emotional rollercoaster journey that leads directly to the beating heart and very soul of rural Ireland. O'Connor invites the reader into a magical world where history and story go hand in hand and fact and fiction dovetail together seamlessly without contradiction or contrivance.

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