

Sebastian Barry's Portrayal of History's Marginalised People

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Abstract:

This paper addresses two groups of novels by Sebastian Barry and discusses his treatment of characters who have been marginalized by the dominant Irish historical narrative, based on the stories of members of his own family and argues that Barry's aim is not to produce a revisionist account of Irish history or justify minority positions. It is rather to present the plight of often isolated individuals and to reveal the complexity of the situations in which they find themselves. The paper uses recent theoretical writing on individual and collective memory and the relationship between memory and history.

Keywords: Sebastian Barry, history, Ireland, memory, war

This paper will explore the way in which the novels of Sebastian Barry published over the last fifteen years address the stories of people whose personal histories place them outside what has become Ireland's agreed national narrative. The paper focuses on two groups of novels: *Annie Dunne* (2002), *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *On Canaan's Side* (2011) which each recount the experiences of a member of the family of Thomas Dunne, Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police in the years immediately prior to independence; and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008) which follow the individual careers of two people connected with the old-established Sligo family of the McNultys. The central argument of this contribution is that Barry's work privileges the individual over political affiliation: the novels all concern the plight of characters whose story has been marginalised by the dominant narrative of Irish history, but the essay argues that they are not concerned with the re-assertion of a marginalised political narrative. Their importance lies in Barry's central characters, successfully portrayed, in his rich and layered style as unique individuals with their own flaws but with a very human need for love and affection, whose experiences are occasionally illuminated by friendships formed across political boundaries.

The two groups of novels examine both the political implications of collective memory and the related issue of the fate of the individual whose personal or autobiographical memory is at odds with the collective version. As is fairly well-known Barry's own family connections and stories took him into the neglected byways of Ireland's hidden history. In an interview in 2004 he explained, "Most of the adjectives that traditionally make up a definition of Irishness I can lay scant claim to" (Kurdi, Barry 2004, 46) although he does in the same interview comment that such families are "not as rare as one might think", (42) all of which points to the tendency of what many would describe as a postcolonial nation, but indeed of any nation, to assert a dominant national narrative at the expense of those which tell a different story.

The relationship of collective and individual memory has been the subject of much recent writing by both psychologists and cultural historians. Scholars such as James Fentress and Chris Wickham (1992) and Barbara Misztal (2003) have discussed the process of social remembering, structured by our interactions with others, an ongoing work bound up with social processes for which they use the term social memory. The historian, Jay Winter, considering the relationship between memory and history writes, "Historical remembrance is a discursive field, extending from ritual to cultural work of many different kinds. It differs from family remembrance by its capacity to unite people who have no other bonds drawing them together" (2006, 11).

Particular kinds of collective memory are given a particular authority when they become parts of acts of public remembrance, often though not always sponsored by the political establishment. As Ireland approaches what has been termed a "decade of commemorations" (Dorney 2013), or "a decade of centenaries" ("Century Ireland" 2013), dated respectively from 1912 to 1922 or from 1913 to 1923, the significance of its past is very much in the public consciousness¹. Indeed aspects of collective memory in Ireland, particularly surrounding the First World War, have been revisited with some frequency since 1998, a year which also saw a public debate about marking the bicentenary of the rebellion of 1798. After the conclusion of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, President Mary Robinson, alongside the heads of state of the UK and Belgium, unveiled the Peace Tower at the Island of Ireland Peace Park commemorating Irish soldiers from the 16th Irish and 36th Ulster Divisions who fought at the Battle of Messines Ridge in 1917. This renewed interest in Irish participation in the international conflict has been taken up by historians such as Keith Jeffery (2000) and Adrian Gregory, (Gregory and Paseta 2002) while possibly its most well-known literary representation is Barry's *A Long Long Way*². A further example of a willingness to revisit public collective memory came recently with the passing of legislation apologising for the treatment of members of the Defence Forces who deserted to join the armies of various countries fighting Nazi Germany in World War II (O'Brien 2013).

James Wertsch comments that performances of public remembrance have a “tendency to eschew ambiguity and to present the past from a single committed perspective” (2002, 42). This kind of publicly sanctioned collective memory, as well as legislation such as that referred to above carries with it something of a sense of a narrative which cannot be dissented from. Hence Barry’s comment that “such families are not as rare as one might think” (Kurdi, Barry 2004, 42) suggests that in fact the simplified version of collective recollection which grows out of the mediation of the analytic work of historians by a variety of cultural tools, such as commemorative ritual, special editions of magazines, novels, plays and films is unrepresentative of the family stories of a considerable number of people.

In the Irish context it can be assumed that memories of the First World War, the Easter Rising, The War of Independence and the Civil War will be influenced by the difficulties encountered by the postcolonial state, and that both collective and individual memory as part of an ongoing social process will be altered by them. To further complicate the issue one might propose that the difficulties of the postcolonial state are in turn in part created by the influence of the stories of individuals and groups, although of course there are other, (notably economic) difficulties. These are all issues which Barry confronts, particularly in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and *The Secret Scripture*. The latter novel in particular also confronts the related issue of individual memory, that, according to Fentress and Wickham is a process of “recognition, recall and articulation” (1992, 26) and this is examined in particular detail in *The Secret Scripture*. The boundary between what Fentress and Wickham term “social” memory and that of the individual is inevitably porous.

The current debate about memory includes debate about its terms. In what follows that of an individual either directly represented by a character’s thoughts or words or indirectly by their thoughts or words recounted or remembered by another, will be termed autobiographical. The memory of a particular group formed from the interactions of autobiographical memories will be termed social. That of a larger group, comprising individuals who do not come into direct intercourse with one another, mediated by cultural tools such as magazines, films and novels will be termed collective and when appropriate popular. It follows from this that the term collective memory will embrace but not be confined to national memory.

The novels written around the story of Thomas Dunne, Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police and based on Barry’s own great grandfather, focus on the family of a man who has played a not insignificant part in early twentieth-century Irish history. Wertsch comments on the importance of narrative as a cultural tool in the formation of what he terms collective memory, and I have termed popular memory (2002, 4-9). Barry’s blurring of the boundaries between fiction and fact by the construction of narratives around actual characters in his own family history may be seen as a way of us-

ing narrative to suggest alternative representations of memory, though without suggesting that these are better or more accurate than existing versions. The character of Dunne himself had already made a notable appearance in Barry's work as the subject of *The Steward of Christendom*. Dunne is held responsible for the suppression of protesters during the 1913 lock-out and his position places him close to the front line in the 1916 Rising. The novels written around the fate of his son and two of his daughters address the issues of collective, social and autobiographical memory with varying degrees of emphasis.

The importance of the public and political dimension of "collective memory", its relationship to national identity and its importance in Barry's writing, should not be allowed to obscure other dimensions of collective or social memory. Theorists of social and collective memory follow Halbwachs in arguing that it is structured by group identities such as the family, the neighbourhood, or one's workplace (1980). The interaction of these groups with a wider collective memory as a site of contestation is seen very clearly in the first of the "Dunne" novels *Annie Dunne*, which was published in 2002.

The creation of Annie, a flawed and not very appealing character is a tribute to Barry's ability to create unique individuals with a very human need for love and affection. *Annie Dunne* is narrated in the present tense and the first person, and in terms of the function of memory within its formal structure marks a half way stage towards the retrospective narrative of some of the other novels under consideration here. It is set in 1959 and recounts the events of a few weeks in the life of Annie while she has the temporary guardianship of her great niece and nephew, the grandchildren of her now dead sister, Maude, based according to the author on himself and his sister who spent a holiday with their great-aunt at her Wicklow home in 1959. According to Nicholas Grene, many of the incidents in the novel, which also appear sometimes in a different version in *The Steward of Christendom*, were based on Barry's own very distant memories of this period (2006, 171ff.). This fact in itself is a further illustration of the way in which the boundary between fact and fiction in the subject matter of Barry's writing is consistently porous.

There is much bitterness in Annie's character and she demonstrates none of the ability to hear across the political divide which will be later suggested in the story of her long-dead brother, Willie. Indeed it is worth reflecting that had the group with which she identifies become the victors in that troubled period of Irish history, the intolerance of people like her would have been likely to have created victims like herself on the other side, another set of outsiders. Reminiscing about her father's collapse into insanity after independence, she reflects "he could not give his loyalty to common gunmen, the sort that came in after and called themselves leaders" (Barry 2002, 181). When Maude's widower, the children's grandfather Matt visits them she makes no secret of her hostility to him and his admiration for De Valera. A vicious argument

breaks out over the Irish language which she describes as “that old language of gobdaws and cottagers” (156). It suggests the way in which the inevitable mediation of language and the role it plays as a cultural tool in the formation of memory produces two views of the same fact. Annie’s “gunmen” would undoubtedly be for Matt ‘heroes’, and while she speaks with contempt of the “language of gobdaws and cottagers” for him the Irish language is “a holy thing” (156). The argument between the two is set in oppositional terms, reminding us of Wertsch’s idea of the “usable past” (Zamora 1998) as a site of contestation (Wertsch 2002, 35).

As Annie shops in the village shop her mind wanders back to her father and his views on the shared history of Ireland and England, “the hatred between the islands had no sound base, he said. More to-ing and fro-ing than anyone knew, marrying, melding. We were the one people, secretly, he said. It was the fact of the secret that was killing the country, he said, in his later days” (103). On one level this points to a feature in the formation of the collective memory of the postcolonial nation, the repression of those parts of the history of England and Ireland which are shared. At another level there is a profound irony in that Annie fails to apply his ideas of what is shared between two apparently opposed groups to her own family’s history, to what is shared between her own family and the family of people like Matt.

She is nevertheless capable of redeeming moments of self-knowledge demonstrated for example when, after indulging as she often does in bitter thoughts, she says, using one of those wonderful images which is typical of Barry’s writing, “Oh, what a mix of things the world is, what a flood of cream, turning and turning in the butter churn of things, but never comes to butter” (99). John Wilson Foster describes this feature of Barry’s writing as his “most characteristic idiom [...] a gravid lyricism” (2006, 99). For Annie, this is a rare acknowledgement of ambiguity and complexity, an element in her world view, dependent as it is on the myth-making proclivities of memory which is often absent.

Matt, in the course of his argument with Annie about the Irish language, comments, “I’m sorry, Annie. I wasn’t being rude. I was being blunt, like yourself. You are one of that class of persons that can dish it out, but you can’t receive it” (156). And at various points in the story the reader becomes aware of how readily this woman, embittered by both history and her own fate as a woman excluded from marriage and therefore from economic self-sufficiency, puts barriers up between herself and her neighbours. Her hard-won independence is in reality no such thing since it is in fact dependent on finding a home with her cousin Sarah Cullen.

The proposal of marriage to Sarah by Billy Kerr who works for the two women threatens even that independence. Annie is presented as a woman disinherited by history. She reflects:

The world of my youth is wiped away, as if it were only a stain on a more permanent fabric. I do not know where this Ireland is now. I hardly know where I am. My father's country had first a queen to rule it, and then a king, and then another king. It was a more scholarly, a more Shakespearean world, it was more like a story. (95)

The passage exposes very clearly the myth-making elements of collective memory. Returning again to the idea of memory as the creation of a "usable past" (Wertsch 2002, 31) which becomes a site of contestation, we may see Annie's narrative of the past as an alternative version which like all narratives of the past has a tendency to be configured into story, to construct "meaningful totalities out of scattered events" (Ricoeur 1981, 278). Further she is isolated from those who might have shared in this minority narrative, not so much by her physical deformity as by the patriarchal nature of the society which has meant that her deformity has had such devastating effects on her existence. Her consequent isolation manifests itself in her barely concealed hostility to most of her Wicklow neighbours. The climax of the story is reached when the little boy she is looking after, whom she loves in her own selfish way, goes missing after an outburst of anger by Annie in which "my words strike harsh clouds across his eyes, I dim his lights for him" (176). In a moment of revelation, Annie, undergoing fear and despair that her anger may have resulted in harm to the child, sees help coming:

For it is Billy Kerr with the leading torch. And that is Mary Callan at this side, heaving with a lack of breath. And there surely is Mrs Nicodemus. And those faces are the faces of men I see as I pass, but do not greet, labourers of the O'Tooles and the more stately O'Tooles themselves. (210)

Mrs Nicodemus is the woman from the village shop and Mary Callan has been dismissed as "a dirty old woman that lives in filth" much earlier in the novel (28). The key point is the revelation which comes to Annie immediately after the sight of the search party, "So there is a district. It is myself that has no district, no sense of it, but it is there, despite me" (210). Wertsch in his discussion of social memory distinguishes implicit from imagined communities, pointing out that implicit communities can become imagined communities and this is what happens for Annie here (2002, 63–65). While she has felt excluded from a collective and popular memory which has transformed the imagined community of the nation into one which in her view is peopled by gunmen and glorifies the "language of gobsdaws and cottagers", there remains the community of the district, a community she has failed to recognize. Barry's novels often argue against the inhumanity of too much loyalty to a political cause, a loyalty which causes suffering to the individual but this is not to suppose that they are a celebration of individualism. Community still matters, but it is community created out of living in a shared space, not out of devotion to an abstract ideal.

Annie is portrayed as dwelling within what might be termed a minority collective memory, that of Catholic unionists, loyal to British rule. Annie's isolation from others who might think like her, means that she carries the memory of that minority collective within her own head, and in her case, she does not question it. Nevertheless, even for this isolated woman there is a community which in turn has its own social memory built out of the events which happen within the neighbourhood and from time to time impinge on Annie, and which by the end of the novel she is able to imagine.

The best known of the Dunne novels, *A Long Long Way* published in 2005, differs from the others discussed in this article in that it is not written from the perspective of an older person whose past, and its relationship to the past of the nation, has a particular significance for his or her present life. Its relating of past to present is of a different order, and connects with its readership within Ireland and the Irish diaspora in that it challenges the popular memory of the nation by introducing complexity into a collective memory which like all popular and collective memory is inevitably simplified. *A Long Long Way* is the story of Thomas Dunne's son, Annie's brother Willie who enlists in the army in 1914 and meets his death towards the end of the conflict.

Since 1998, numerous contributions, mainly historical have been published on the involvement of Irishmen in the First World War, and literary studies are also emerging, including two full length studies (Brearton 2000; Haughey 2002). The idea that the newly independent Irish state was complicit in repressing memory of the involvement of Irish soldiers in the conflict out of what Declan Kiberd called an anxiety "to repudiate its own origins" (1996, 240) has more recently been challenged by Keith Jeffery who has disputed Kiberd's use of the term "extirpate" in relation to public memory, "a strong word and clearly inappropriate" and argued against the "myth of 'national amnesia'" suggesting that the reality was more complex (2011, 255-257). According to Jeffery the period of amnesia occurred later, from the 1940s to the 1950s. Nevertheless the involvement of an estimated 210,000 Irishmen in the conflict was not a matter of national celebration and Barry's family shared with a great many other families a member who was involved in the conflict, and such men may be included among history's forgotten people. The novel does serve to represent their stories via the portrayal of Willie Dunne and his fellow Irish soldiers, and speaks most powerfully for the individual caught up in conflict, and in the case of the central character in an ideological divide.

While the novel may be seen as contesting the absence of the First World War from Irish popular memory, there are other ways in which it does not dissent from a more transnational popular one. It shares with much fiction written both immediately after the war and later, a sense of disillusion, which has survived as the predominant, though not exclusive popular memory of the war despite the efforts of some historians to revise popular understanding of the conflict. Several incidents in the novel suggest the unremitting horrors of life on

the Western Front. Witnessing the wounding of a private from Aughrim, who is left screaming on the floor of the trench, before being taken to what Willie considers his ultimate death either at a casualty clearing station or in hospital, he reflects that a horse would be treated better by being shot to put it out of its misery (Barry 2005, 67-68). By 1917 he has ceased to believe in the war:

It was that Death himself had made those things ridiculous. Death was the King of England, Scotland and Ireland. The King of France. Of India, Germany, Italy, Russia [...]

You couldn't blame King George, God knew. You couldn't even hardly blame the fucking Kaiser. Not any more. Death now had a hold on the whole matter.

And his loyalty, his old faith in the cause, as a man might say, a dozen times so sorely tested, was dying in Willie Dunne. An ember maybe only remaining, for his father's sake. (279)

One of the features of popular memory of the First World War when it is remembered is the exaggerated perception of the 'lost generation' and there is a way in which *A Long Long Way* for all Barry's resistance to popular memory reinforces this. By the time of his death which occurs with that "terrible irony" which Paul Fussell points to as the prevailing mode of literature about the war (1977, 3-35), in late 1918, Willie is totally disillusioned with the conflict. The narrator represents him as seeing four angels at his death, one of whom has the face of the first German he killed. There follows what can only be read as an expression of the futility of all violent conflict, although it is specifically focused on Ireland:

A soul in the upshot must be a little thing, since so many were expended freely, and as if weightless. For a king, an empire and a promised country. It must be that that country was in itself a worthless spot, for all the dreams and the convictions of that place were discounted. There was nothing of it that did not pass quickly away. Nothing of worth to keep. Some thirty thousand souls of that fell country did not register in the scales of God. (Barry 2005, 290)

For all that it conforms to one aspect of popular memory of the First World War, its destructive effects, this passage challenges other aspects. It confronts the element of amnesia which has surrounded the memory of Irishmen who fought and who died in the conflict but it confronts also, as indeed does the novel as a whole, the simply binary of the nationalist who refused to fight for the Empire on the one hand and the opponent of nationalism who fought loyally for the Empire on the other. Willie is no nationalist but by the end of the novel he has no loyalty to the Empire or to any cause.

The novel indeed subtly undermines the linguistic representation which is one of the cultural tools contributing to collective memory. Fentress and Wickham point to the fact that memory is in part structured by language (1992, 7) while Wertsch alludes to the role of "textual mediation" in the formation of collective memory (2002, 26). The narrator comments on the

way in which Willie and his comrades heartily sing “Tipperary” “as if most of them weren’t city-boys but hailed from the verdant fields of that county”, commenting that “Even the coolies sang ‘Tipperary’ while they dug” and in spite of the fact that they all are Irish they sing “Take me back to Dear Old Blighty”, “even though none of them were from dear old Blighty” (Barry 20005, 57). This is important as, certainly in English war memory, particularly after the stage musical *O What A Lovely War* of 1963 and its successful film adaptation in 1969, such songs contributed to the image of the typical Tommy as a cheerful cockney, no more true than the pastoral exile portrayed by Rupert Brooke which formed a key component of an earlier generation’s memory. Barry’s readers in the twenty-first century whether Irish, English or American cannot but be aware of such stereotypes.

On a later occasion, crouched in his trench and experiencing a gas attack, Willie reflects:

It was the thing before a joke was fashioned about it, before an anecdote was conjured up to make it safe, before a proper story in the newspaper, before some fellow with the wits would make a history of it. In the bleakness of its birth there was an unsullied truth, this tiny event that might make a corpse of him and his proper dreams. (111)

This is a profound reflection on the evolution of human social memory, from the joke and the anecdote through the newspaper report until it becomes the subject of historical analysis. The first two stages reflect autobiographical memory, and the phrase “make it safe” highlights the psychological motivation of what human beings do with their experience in this instance to make it something they can live with. Only in “the bleakness of its birth”, in direct experience, not remembered experience is there “unsullied truth”.

The novel’s particularly Irish dimension is provided by Willie’s encounter with the Easter Rising. He meets two men who have a strong influence on him: a new recruit from Cork, Jesse Kirwan who has just enlisted and a young rebel whose death he witnesses on the streets of Dublin. Willie is politically naive, indeed ignorant, one of what Christina Mahony describes as Barry’s naïfs (2006, 83-4) and when Kirwan explains to him what is happening, his first response is anger, having witnessed the death of so many of his fellow Irishmen in the war. Nevertheless, the experience leads him to write a fatal letter to his father in which he says in relation to the execution of the rebels, “I wish they had not seen fit to shoot them. It doesn’t feel right somehow” (Barry 2005, 139). From this springs the personal dimension which exacerbates the tragedy of Willie’s ultimate death. His father makes his displeasure clear and Willie meets his death before he receives his father’s letter of reconciliation. Not for the only time in Barry’s writing the political and the personal are brought into conflict. The divisions which are emerging in Ireland increase the suffering of one individual caught up in a different horrific conflict, who did not want to be bound by political affiliation but who reflects

when he first hears Jesse's arguments, "a person should listen to another person first, and be sure of what was being said" (96). This is a key comment. It is the not-listening of political ideologues on various sides, and in turn their role in the creation of memory which constitutes tragedy for Barry's individuals.

A Long Long Way challenges popular and collective memory, or rather forgetting, by its very existence, providing a cultural tool which becomes a reminder of the involvement of large numbers of Irishmen in the First World War. Within the account are reminders of the way in which memory is mediated by language. Like *Annie Dunne*, the novel while it sustains imaginative sympathy with one of history's outsiders, demonstrates intransigence by some characters who support the unionist position. The novel's hero however displays the reverse of such intransigence, his ability to listen to others may be compared to Annie's discovery of "the district".

The third of Willie's sisters, the child Lilly, nicknamed Dolly in *A Long Long Way*, is the subject of Barry's recent novel, *On Canaan's Side*, published in 2011. The story is set towards the end of the century and is the account, written in the first person, of the seventeen days between the suicide of Lilly's grandson, Bill, as a consequence of his involvement in the Iraq war and her own intended suicide. It interweaves the story of Lilly's last days with the memories of her youth, her enforced flight from Ireland with Tadg Bere, under sentence of death as a soldier implicated in a Black and Tan attack on a group of IRA men, and eventually killed by an avenging gunman in Chicago. If the closing scenes of *A Long Long Way* suggested an Ireland which was in some sense cursed, "a worthless spot" since "Some thirty thousand souls of that fell country did not register in the scales of God" (290), Ireland's curse, if such it may be called is revealed in *On Canaan's Side*, to be in fact the world's curse. The significance of the novel in Barry's oeuvre is that it takes us beyond Ireland, although Ireland's shadow remains until the end when Lilly's dying friend Mr Nolan confesses that he is the murderer of Tadg. Early in her account, Lilly reflects, "The one thread maybe, from Bill to my brother Willie, all the way back, through how many wars is that, it must be at least three? No, it is four. Four killing wars, with all those sons milled into them, and daughters these times too" (Barry 2011, 28-9).

She might have added a fifth war, the Korean War. Her doctor tells her, "We were obliged in my generation to go to Korea, that was my war, Mrs Bere. I was eighteen in 1950", emphasizing both his youth and his lack of choice (87). As her narrative comes to an end, the link with Willie is made again, "He knows nothing about the desert where he is going, to fight for his country. He has used that exact phrase, just seconds before, putting me back to my father's old sitting-room in Dublin Castle and Willie making the same fateful declaration" (232). It is not just in Ireland where bonds of loyalty to the abstract concept called nation have been the cause of so much suffering as the novel's reference to death and destruction in places as far apart as South-East Asia and the Middle East makes clear.

As reminiscence, the story combines autobiographical memory with collective memory. Lilly's memories are vivid and indeed sometimes border on direct re-experiencing (Wertsch 2002, 46-8), rather than semantically mediated memory. In the final chapter as she moves towards her last act she thinks of her sisters Maud and Annie, her brother Willie and her father. "There is never a day goes by that we don't drink a strange cup of tea together, in some peculiar parlour-room at the back of my mind" (Barry 2011, 251). Her memory of the death of Tadg includes a memory of a moment of experiencing through the senses rather than language, when the sight of his blood on her clothes recalls the sight of blood on her aunt's apron after the slaughtering of a pig on her aunt's farm in Wicklow. Re-experiencing through the senses is an element in recall which Fentress and Wickham highlight (1992, 31-32). In turn she recalls this occurrence of sensual memory through the language of the reminiscence, eight decades later.

Her autobiographical memories are unusually closely bound up with the narrative of collective memory which she terms history, and thinking of her son Ed who after serving in Vietnam withdrew from ordinary life to live out in the wild in the mountains of North Carolina, she wonders how much of her own inner sadness she has communicated to him. Comparing herself to Typhoid Mary, she says, "The poison, the extract of deadly nightshade in me, was history" (206). This acceptance of responsibility for what happens to her son, is typical of Lilly's attitude to the past which contrasts profoundly with that of her sister Annie, in *Annie Dunne*. Where Annie appropriates certain right to what she sees as her own side, Lilly is less sure when considering her father's role in the War of Independence, and wonders if he has had some role in the ill-treatment of the rebels which she has read about. Then she reflects, "I do not know how much such histories are weighted against the losers, in this case men like my father, loyal to kings and the dead queen, but I am sure there was evil and cruelty on both sides" (41). The old woman expresses an undoubted truth about the emergence of a dominant collective memory, of which so many of her own family have been the victim but her knowledge of human nature leads her to acknowledge that neither one side nor the other is likely to have monopolised right, and that in relation to the kind of man her father was, she herself "perhaps invented him as a child" (42), thus drawing out the subjectivity of autobiographical memory. This thought demonstrates the way in which autobiographical memory interacts with collective memory, as the father created by her own act of remembering influences her judgement of the actors who form part of the wider collective memory. During her early days in Chicago, before the murder of Tadg she rejoices in a place where "there was no history", reflecting:

[...] as my father's daughter, unthinkingly, I had lived as a little girl and young woman through a certain kind of grievous history, where one thing is always being knocked against another thing. Where my father's respect for the King was knocked

against Tadg's father being in the Irish Volunteers, where Willie's going out to war was knocked against his dying, [...] Where the very fact of my being alive was knocked against the fact that my mother had died in giving me that life. (71-2)

It is a testament to the complications of personal and political history. Loyalty to the King, membership of the Volunteers and enrolment in the army are actions of individuals, and their consequences are curiously mixed of good and bad just as the birth of Lilly was.

Lilly is more directly affected than Annie by the political actions of those around her. While Annie endures an unfulfilled life which though embittered by remembrance is caused by very different factors, Lilly endures something different, the implacable personal hatred of those on the other side which results in the death of Tadg and threats to herself, "they wouldn't allow us to cross into Canaan, but would follow over us over the river, and kill him on Canaan's side" (82). Added to this is the fate of her son and grandson. Lilly, like Willie learns a lesson which Annie fails to learn. Having been given a pot of Greek honey by the local chemist, Mr Eugenides, she reflects, "Greece, America, Arabia, Ireland. Home places. Nowhere on earth not a home place [...] Everywhere a home place for someone, and therefore for us all" (58). It is an acceptance of diversity, a recognition of each individual's right to their own feelings of loyalty. However, there are limits to Lilly's generosity, and the implacable hatred of at least one enemy proves less implacable than might have been supposed. Mr Nolan, having been the agent who killed Tadg and might possibly have killed Lilly too if he had had the chance, later befriends the lonely woman, though he knows full well who she is. Lilly herself for once is less generous and when he has confessed his past she cannot forgive him.

On Canaan's Side is the only one of the Dunne group of novels considered here to be in the form of a formal reminiscence. It asks important questions of how autobiographical as well as collective memory is informed, for example the role of language and sensory perception in autobiographical recall, and the relationship of autobiographical and collective memory. While recognising the diversity of loyalty to one's home place, it challenges the notion of patriotism which results in bloodshed. Unlike Annie, Lilly is capable of questioning her own version of the past.

These three novels demonstrate in varying degrees the price paid by members of the Dunne family for being on the wrong side, for being what Lilly terms history's "losers". The accounts privilege the individual and the personal over the collective, as well as challenging the simplicity of popular and collective memory. Each includes a significant moment if not always of friendship across divides at least of a sense of a common humanity: Willie's connection with Jesse Kirwan, Billy Kerr's support for Annie, and Mr Nolan's friendship to Lilly. Only in the last novel discussed does autobiographical as opposed to collective memory play a really significant role.

The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty and *The Secret Scripture*, are linked narratives of two members of the McNulty family. In contrast to the Dunnes with their significant role in the capital city, the McNultys are a very ordinary family, although they do claim a descent from more affluent ancestors. Where these novels focus on memory it is the social memory of a small town community although this in turn is influenced and interacts with a wider collective memory. *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* deals with the effect of this social memory on one individual whereas *The Secret Scripture* is much more about the process of remembering and the interaction of autobiographical memory with collective and social memory.

The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty, published in 1998 is the life story of the McNultys' eldest son Eneas, based on the story of Barry's great uncle, told not through Eneas's recollections but in the immediacy of a third person present tense narration. We learn of Eneas at the beginning of the story: "All about him the century has just begun, a century some of which he will endure but none of which will belong to him" (Barry 1998, 3). This statement might have been made of the Dunne family and could stand collectively for the group of history's outsiders which forms the subject matter of so much of Barry's work. Eneas is indeed represented almost from the start as an exile, not unlike his classical namesake, who flees from Troy in Virgil's epic. His troubles begin at the age of five when three siblings appear in rapid succession, so that having been the centre of his family's life he is at the age of eight the eldest of four children, "Driven from his little kingdom, an exiled being, shorn of his mighty privileges" (14).

Like Willie Dunne, Eneas makes the decision, during the First World War to enlist. His reasons are loss of the companionship of a childhood friend and lack of achievement compared to other members of his family. Trivial reasons perhaps to make such a life changing, indeed life threatening decision, but not dissimilar from Willie, another of Barry's naifs, and of course mirroring those made across Europe, for a whole range of inconsequential reasons that often had little to do with king, country or empire, however they might be viewed in a retrospective and collectivised memory. For Eneas it proves utterly life-changing. On his return home, as an ex-soldier he can find no work and joins the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). The key moment in his story, the moment which renders him an exile, whose whereabouts, fore grounded in the novel's title must be forever hidden occurs when after his return to Sligo he is visited by his old and much-loved childhood friend Jonno Lynch, now an IRA man. Lynch represents his leader O'Dowd and offers him the opportunity to have his name removed from the blacklist and perhaps even more importantly to Eneas the promise of "you and me going round again, like the old days" in return for one simple act- the killing of the Reprisal Man. Eneas's response is simple "I couldn't do that" (82-3). He struggles to explain that having witnessed the cold-blooded murder of his sergeant he couldn't do likewise, but Jonno's reply is devastatingly simple, "you're dead" (84).

Doomed to permanent exile, Eneas never loses his love for home. Having once more enlisted in the British army, he is stranded at Dunkirk, and after the supply of rescue boats appears to have failed, finds himself working on the land of Jean, a French farmer whose sons have been killed by the advancing German army. There is an unstated suggestion that here he has usurped the place of Jean's sons which in turn is a haunting reminder of his own long lost place on his father's hearth. It prompts memories of his lost homeland, "He would like to describe that home place, but the words for it have begun to desert him [...] He is a vine uprooted, and the cold white roots are tarnishing in the swimming air" (151). Fentress and Wickham discuss the way in which the act of remembering has a social dimension and it is the fate of the exile not to have the community which can confirm and reinforce his memories via the process of recognition, recall and articulation (1992, 26). It is a very powerful image expressing a profound sense of loss and which represents the underlying theme of the novel- the unnatural and destructive effect of Eneas's exile. Not long after, discharged from the army after a mental breakdown he does return and in spite of finding a very imperfect world, from which once more threats drive him away, he reflects on "the world he prefers for all its maggots and mysteries" (Barry 1998, 200).

The alliterative pairing provides a good enough description of what he finds in the Sligo of The Emergency. He returns to Ireland full of hope that at last his past will be forgotten, but as he embarks on the train journey out of Dublin:

He smells Ireland outside the window of the train, and she smells very much the same as always, as twenty years ago she smelled. Trouble, trouble [...] in all these things he senses as he sits in the knocking train the old strains and presences of trouble, even there, four hundred miles from Sligo. (166)

The reader here might justifiably object that nothing as yet has happened to him to account for the sudden destruction of his optimism, but what the passage does very effectively is to analyse the operation of autobiographical remembering. A romantic longing for his lost Eden has taken him from the shores of England but in a way which recalls Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, once his senses have been awakened by the smells of his homeland, the memories, not all of them good, which he struggled to recall semiotically in France come flooding back via sensual re-experiencing. His premonitions prove all too sound and the following fifteen pages or so present an anything but flattering version of small town life in independent Ireland.

In an interview, questioned about a postcolonial analysis of his dramatic writing Barry responded somewhat enigmatically, "I must confess I have no real relationship with the adjective "postcolonial or "postmodern" for that matter. Maybe this is truly postcolonial and postmodern" (Kurdi, Barry 2004, 43). It is however difficult to avoid a postcolonial analysis of this part of the novel. It begins with his welcome by his parents into their new bungalow

which abounds in those “maggots and mysteries”. His father is revealed as the marginal figure he has probably always been, and his mother is represented as desirous of advancing her family in very traditional rather than radical ways, “His mother has sewn flowers into cloths and draped them over the set of seats, a sofa and these stiff, clerical chairs. It all looks like a priest’s parlour. His father is maybe afeared of the great cleanliness, of the great strangeness of it all” (Barry 1998, 170). This is consistent with Eneas’s observation of the town’s matrons at the celebration of the signing of the treaty twenty years earlier “who now consider themselves as good as their Protestant neighbours” and recalls Frantz Fanon’s postcolonial analysis of a class who keep intact “the manners and forms of thought of the colonial era” (1973, 37).

Tom is now mayor of the town and has taken an all too familiar route to power, taking full advantage of the opportunities created by wartime shortages:

It might be wartime for Joe Soap, but for Young Tom it’s harvest time. Petrol, oil, chocolate, sugar, soap even - all legal and above board, of course. Nothing ever passes through his hands. It’s just- he accommodates the free flow of goods. In the interests of the town, the corporation. These are hard times for everyone. (Barry 1998, 175)

The link of political and economic power and the failure of the new state to offer any radical response to the deeply embedded inequalities left over from colonial rule are all too apparent, and again recall Fanon’s comments about the new bourgeoisie who find a means of “getting on through scheming and legal robbery” (Fanon 1973, 37). The erstwhile revolutionaries have benefited from the new dispensation, new only in that the power structures have different occupants. The old Republican leader, O’Dowd now lives in a big house and Eneas’s old friend, turned enemy Jonno Lynch is to be the next mayor. Eneas leaves once more after receiving a threatening letter and makes one final visit to Sligo in the late 1950s, where he finds things little changed with Jonno and O’Dowd now into beef, “the coming thing [...] We never touch a bullock but we’re in the beef business. Paperwork. Mighty” (Barry 1998, 260). In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland these words carry even more significance for the reader than they carried in 1998.

The dominance of his mother in the family home is symptomatic of a patriarchal society in which the home is the only place where women can wield influence. There are mysteries surrounding both his brothers’ wives which, once again, are never fully resolved in the pages of this novel. Eneas’s visit home has shown him a society in which he and his like are the new oppressed and marginalised figures, in which power and material advantage are the preserve of those whom the complex process of social remembering has privileged in this small community. In the interests of social cohesion, uncomfortable facts concerning Eneas’s brothers’ wives are not talked about, memories and histories are suppressed.

For all that Eneas's story is largely that of a lonely exile, as in all these novels there is a reaching out to others, and as in the much later *On Canaan's Side* there is a dimension which takes us well beyond the shores of Ireland. After his second expulsion from Sligo in the 1940s, Eneas encounters Harcourt, a Nigerian and the two of them spend several years working on an engineering project in Nigeria. Harcourt is the only person in the course of Eneas's wanderings who succeeds Jonno Lynch to the title friend. He eventually suffers a fate remarkably similar to that of Eneas when Nigerian patriots come looking for him, as they see him as an imperialist collaborator. The similarity of their fates underlines once more the way in which any cause both unites and divides, the tyranny one might say of ideology over the individual human being, "there is freedom for Nigeria [... but] Eneas and Harcourt are scraps of people both, blown off the road of life by history's hungry breezes" (284).

And yet again there is the recognition just as in *Annie Dunne* of the importance of community. On that final visit to Sligo in 1959, Eneas leaves not because he is threatened but in response to a letter from Harcourt. He uses his new found wealth – many years of an uncollected war pension – to set up with Harcourt the Northern Lights Hotel in the Isle of Dogs. Here on the Isle of Dogs, if not a literal island, a name suggestive of the despised and the marginal there are hints of another kind of non-political community, a bit like Annie Dunne's "district", though more deliberately brought into existence and imagined. It is the possibility of an alternative utopia. For these two exiles it is their "homeland and home, though homeland and home have but two citizens" (284). Here they "receive the battered wanderers, the weary sailors, the refugees from ferocious lives, the distressed alcoholics," and when anyone dies they observe "the proper obsequies of their inmates whether Methodist, Jewish, Baptist or renegade" (285). There is a strong moral message here, if perhaps a little sentimentalised.

It ends with the return of Jonno Lynch and another man to carry out the long postponed death sentence, but the manner of the ending is not what the reader expects. Jonno is apparently killed in the fight which ensues and Eneas and Harcourt set the hotel on fire to avoid the consequences. As they escape the flames, Eneas hears a groan from Jonno emerging into consciousness and at the door of the Northern Lights hotel he makes a choice between his new friend and that old childhood friend whom he has always regretted. In a doomed attempt at rescue he meets his own death. The figure from that Sligo childhood from which he has never managed to detach himself has drawn him back.

The end is therefore personal, not political. Barry has been criticised for a somewhat idealistic portrayal of the policeman Eneas and men like him (Cullingford 2006) but Eneas is, like most of Barry's protagonists, a flawed central character, in his case a man who does not make friends easily and who has never quite recovered from the childhood sense of rejection he experienced between the ages of five and eight. The novel deals with history's outsiders but most importantly evokes pity for the exile – an exile forced from a social group which

maintains divisive power structures of which he is the new victim. The new society demonstrates the power of memory. Eneas is never to be allowed to forget his past. In the process of demonstrating this, the novel does make important political points about the Ireland of the decades which follow Eneas's original exile.

An element of this is the treatment of women. This has even more relevance to *The Secret Scripture* as does the role of the church touched on only slightly in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*. This novel, more than any of the others considered here highlights the elaborate processes which together constitute autobiographical, social and collective memory. The narrative method of *The Secret Scripture*, set in the early years of the present century foregrounds the issue of memory, and of memory's relation to history in that it takes the form of two written accounts, the diary of the psychiatrist Dr Grene who looks after inmates who include Roseanne Clear, and which is in turn informed by the other documents which come into his possession, and Roseanne's written account of her past life. In this novel, the postcolonial analysis of the new Ireland in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* is supplemented by the treatment of the Catholic church and of the position of women. The novel lays bare the tragedy of Roseanne Clear, the wife of Tom McNulty, Eneas's brother. One of the chief architects of that tragedy is Father Gaunt, whom with one of those wonderful poetic passages which characterise Barry's writing, Roseanne early in her account characterises thus:

Fr Gaunt was young and might have been expected to feel a special kinship for the slain. But Fr Gaunt was so clipped and trim he had no antennae at all for grief. He was like a singer who knows the words and can sing but cannot sing the song as conceived in the heart of the composer. (Barry 2008, 36-37)

It is a powerful metaphor for the religious person who has imbibed all the rules but lacks any element of spirituality. Gaunt thus becomes the agent without feeling of the power of the church. Much later, when reading Fr Gaunt's deposition, Grene reflects on De Valera's privileging of the church and wonders if "such all-knowing, stem-minded and entirely unforgiving priests still exist" (227). After a lengthy reflection on some of De Valera's subsequent actions, including acting against some of his erstwhile allies, he concludes that "De Valera is greatly to be pitied that he was met with these necessary horrors" (228). And goes on to reflect:

Perhaps here we can trace the origin of the strange criminality of the last generation of politicians in Ireland, not to mention so many priests being found to have moved across the innocence of our children with the harrows and ploughshares of abuse. The absolute power of such as Fr Gaunt leading as day does to night to absolute corruption. (228)

Grene, the fictional psychiatrist's analysis of the effects of the circumstances of the foundation of the state find an interesting echo in the words of the hi-

storian Kevin Whelan commenting recently on the issue of memory, “Violence then becomes the originating moment in the mobilisation of collective identity, where cultural memory becomes a storage system of violence, wounds, scars, anger, where the past bleeds uncontrollably into the present” (Whelan 2005, 4).

Roseanne’s story is a story of a victim of absolute power, directed as so often against women. After her father’s death, Gaunt sees her as a threat “a mournful temptation, not only to the boys of Sligo but also, the men” (Barry 2008, 94). Gaunt is central to the two key events which dictate Roseanne’s destiny. The first is the annulment of her marriage to Tom McNulty on the evidence of Fr Gaunt witnessing her meeting with a certain John Lavelle on Knocknarea, by the tomb of Queen Maeve, a location suggesting a time when women had much greater power. The meeting results in her isolation for several years in her former marital home. When Gaunt returns after several years he tells her that her marriage has been annulled on the grounds of nymphomania, “Something like this is never granted lightly. Deep deep thought at Rome, and my own bishop of course. Weighing everything, sifting through everything” (223). “Everything” includes everyone’s evidence except the voiceless Roseanne’s. This is on the grounds of one single indiscretion. To say his account leaves the reader somewhat sceptical is an understatement.

His second intervention in her life comes when alone and helpless, having been turned from the elder Mrs McNulty’s door, she gives birth on the beach near Strandhill to the child whom no-one but herself knows is the child of Eneas. The child is taken from her while she is unconscious and Fr Gaunt has it removed and sent for adoption to England. Apparently on his evidence she is then institutionalised.

It is at the end of this long period of institutionalisation now a very old woman and a patient in a Roscommon hospital for the treatment of psychological disorders that she begins her written account. This is presented alongside the diary of her psychiatrist Dr Grene. Dr Grene’s attempt to construct Roseanne’s history from her verbal answers to his questions is informed by the deposition of Father Gaunt recovered from the original institution in Sligo in which she was confined and supplemented at the end by further investigations. Only near the end of the novel does he discover Roseanne’s written account. A consideration of some recent theories of memory, particularly the importance of articulation in the process of remembering (Fentress, Wickham 1992, 7) sheds light on why this very old woman might be represented as having undertaken this act. If we cannot remember without recourse to information from the world we inhabit, since memory is an inherently socially constructed act, then memory in isolation is all but impossible. Roseanne’s narrative may be seen as a process of remembering, committed to paper in a desperate effort to give her almost impossibly maintained memory in isolation the authority of the written word. This is given additional pathos by the consideration that Roseanne’s memories will inevitably run counter to the social memory of the

district. The spurious authority of the written word is recognised by Dr Grene when he receives a copy of Father Gaunt's deposition from the Sligo mental hospital and struggles to contain his excitement, reminding himself that "the written word assumes authority but it may not have it" (135).

The need to find authority, to find the final arbiter who can order memories, in Grene's case springs from his professional experience of the fallibility of memory, which on one occasion he describes as "the absolute fascist certainty of memory, the bullying oppression of memory" (178).

Struggling to make sense of her own memories, Roseanne writes, in less abstract language using another of those wonderful homely images Barry creates for his characters:

Memory, I must suppose, if it is neglected becomes like a box room, or a lumber room in an old house, the contents jumbled about, maybe not only from neglect but also from too much haphazard searching in them, and things to boot thrown in that don't belong there. (201)

This articulates not merely the plight in which Roseanne finds herself but the conscious reflections of Lilly about the reliability of memory, as well as Eneas's struggles to recall his lost homeland. Roseanne, at the beginning of her account of her life recognises that history is a narrative in that it inevitably includes elements of selection and organisation as it seeks order in the lumber room of memories and records. She writes that certain aspects of her father "embarrassed history" because he was not clearly on one side or another and therefore his life did not fit with any predominant narrative. She suggests that human beings depend on a heroic version of events, and that facts are often distorted to fit such a version, "History needs to be mightily inventive about human life [...] My own story, anyone's own story is always told against me, even what I myself am writing here, because I have no heroic history to offer" (55).

History's impulse to turn events into story and into founding heroic myth too easily becomes an impulse to oversimplification. The link between history and memory is summed up by Grene himself when he has learned what one hesitates to call the truth, that he himself is in fact Roseanne's long lost son, and speculates on the motivations of the man who brought them together, "Well, I supposed all these things. It is not history. But I am beginning to wonder strongly what is the nature of history. Is it only memory in decent sentences, and if so, how reliable is it? I would suggest, not very" (293). This might be seen as a partial view since academic history which Grene dismisses as "memory in decent sentences" will also include painstaking research in archives. Nevertheless the role of memory, certainly in the selection of historical narrative cannot be too lightly dismissed.

The events of the novel, which may be summed up as two individuals' encounter with the past, have prompted this final declaration of uncertainty from a man so desirous of obtaining written records. The stories of Roseanne's

past, compiled from her own memories, from Father Gaunt's deposition and from unspecified "official records" are confusing and contradictory. What may be ascertained with certainty is that Roseanne's father died a violent death when she was a young woman. In Roseanne's version he died by his own hand, after a series of personal misfortunes consequent on having lost his job at the town's cemetery, after an incident in the Civil War in which he was asked to bury a Republican who has been killed by Free State soldiers, Willie Lavelle, the brother of John Lavelle. Roseanne, then aged fourteen, was sent to fetch Father Gaunt to give the last rites, and subsequently held to have informed on the men, when the Free State soldiers arrived and arrested them. In Father Gaunt's version Roseanne's father was a member of the RIC, killed by rebels for his part in the death of Willie Lavelle, killed "evading capture" by RIC men after Roseanne had witnessed the hiding of guns and information in a grave in the cemetery where she often played. The cemetery and Roseanne's role as well as the identity of the dead man point to a common source for the story. Roseanne insists throughout that her father was never a member of the RIC, but official records, eventually discovered by Grene say that he was. Roseanne's story is the one the reader encounters first and the detail gives it a ring of authenticity.

This credibility is however balanced by the curious tale of the hammers and feathers. Roseanne recounts an earlier incident, when she was ten, and her father sought to conduct an experiment to prove that everything fell at the same rate. He took her to the long thin tower in the graveyard and bade her watch while he threw hammers and feathers out of the window. At the end of the novel, having read Father Gaunt's account, Grene tells us that he was murdered by the rebels in the tower using hammers and stuffing his mouth with feathers. Grene opts for this as more likely, after a lengthy speculation on the effects of trauma on Roseanne's memory. However the reader is not allowed too easy a resolution – Grene checks Gaunt's account and finds it mentions only hammers and not feathers. Grene's memory has cheated him. Yet, he says he read it before he found Roseanne's manuscript. He then decides, having toyed with all kinds of interpretations that Roseanne must have told him of the incident at some time in the past. The only tenable conclusion is that we will never know. There is however a key political consideration. Roseanne's account has her father unwillingly and unwittingly involved in an incident in the Civil War. In what might almost be regarded as the officially sanctioned account by Father Grene he is killed in the War of Independence. Barry himself has commented:

The civil war was a time of exceptional savagery, and our history books at school didn't dwell on this less admirable period. To erase the memory of the civil war was also an erasure of part of oneself, and again of nation. A real nation has to acknowledge also the section of itself that is murderous and dangerous and deeply uncivil. (Barry 2013)

Barry has been accused by some critics of collaborating with what they see as a programme of historical revisionism. (Kenny 2005; Cullingford 2006) Part

of his project is certainly the recovery of characters written out of history. But it is these characters themselves, characters such as Annie, Eneas and Roseanne, flawed and often inarticulate characters who are the real and very powerful subject of his novels. His novels do problematise history and memory but the problematising includes Lilly's questioning of the minority version of history to which she subscribes, and *The Secret Scripture* highlights the ambiguity and complexity of memory, rather than privileging any one version. If the novels have any political project it is a project to place humanity before issues of allegiance, whether it be to nation, or political grouping. What might be termed a postcolonial analysis of Irish society, seen particularly in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and *The Secret Scripture* embraces a condemnation of the power of the church and of certain kinds of economic exploitation which would be shared by many commentators writing from a nationalist perspective. The condemnation of certain kinds of patriotic fervour and blind allegiance has a significance not just for Ireland but, as we see in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and *On Canaan's Side* in places far beyond Ireland's shores.

Notes

¹The appearance of an RTE website, *Century Ireland*, and last year's conference in Dublin hosted by the Institute for Cross Border Studies are only two examples of current concern with commemoration.

²Other well-known literary works include two plays: Frank McGuinness's play, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1986) and more recently Dermot Bolger's *Walking the Road* (2007) and one novel, Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974).

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