Brian Friel and the Conflict in Northern Ireland: How the Troubles Have Shaped the Playwright and Informed his Plays

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

A conflict exists between the countries of Ireland and England stretching back over 800 years. Colonial in nature, the conflict has assumed many faces throughout its history. Evidence of its existence today is most noticeable in the situation in Northern Ireland, a situation euphemistically referred to as the "Troubles." The Irish people have been shaped by this conflict and Irish writers have often embraced it thematically within their works. Irish playwright Brian Friel is such a writer. Friel's plays frequently embody this conflict, both explicitly and implicitly.
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How the Troubles Have Shaped the Playwright and Informed his Plays

by

Timothy Hayes

Thesis

A conflict exists between the countries of Ireland and England stretching back over 800 years. Colonial in nature, the conflict has assumed many faces throughout its history. Evidence of its existence today is most noticeable in the situation in Northern Ireland, a situation euphemistically referred to as the "Troubles." The Irish people have been shaped by this conflict and Irish writers have often embraced it thematically within their works. Irish playwright Brian Friel is such a writer. Friel's plays frequently embody this conflict, both explicitly and implicitly.

I write it out in a verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born
W.B. Yeats
Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921)
Easter 1916

Introduction: An Historical Perspective

The "terrible beauty" to which Yeats alludes, of course, is Ireland. Yeats' poem is set in 1916, during Ireland's "Easter Rebellion," a nationalist uprising that resulted from England's failure to implement Irish Home Rule. This was a time of profound change in Ireland. A group of more than 2000 "volunteers," led by Pearse, revolted against the crown in an effort to win independence for Ireland. Although the leaders were captured and later executed for treason, this act initiated a series of events that led by treaty with Britain to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. To appreciate fully the origins of Anglo-Irish hostility, however, one must examine the historical events that gave rise first to the Easter Rebellion and later to the "Troubles," the euphemistic term used to describe the undeclared war that simmers in the North of Ireland between the Protestant majority, loyal to the British crown, and the Catholic minority, who seek a unified Irish state.
The roots of this conflict, in practical terms, go back over 800 years, to the middle of the 12th century, when Pope Adrian (the only Englishman ever to become pope) granted overlordship of Ireland to Henry II. Thus began a bitter struggle between Ireland and England, a struggle characterized both by colonialism and religious intolerance.

Tensions escalated in the 16th century when England tried to impose Protestantism on the largely Catholic population. Rebellions ensued and the British responded with an overwhelming military might. Ireland's Hugh O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell put up fierce resistance, but they were finally defeated at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. Their exile and that of the Gaelic aristocracy is known as the "flight of the earls." The Irish natives were then systematically dispossessed and Ulster was repopulated with Scottish and English migrants, ensuring a Protestant character in contrast to the rest of Ireland. This division of Protestant settler and native Catholic has had repercussions ever since.

In the mid-1600s, Oliver Cromwell began a campaign in Ireland that will live forever in infamy with the Irish people. Sweeping south from Ulster, Cromwell and his troops evicted Irish landowners from their farms and homes throughout the country. Entire villages were burned to the ground. With spectacular brutality, men, women, and children were put to death if they refused to swear allegiance to the crown. To this day, the campaign lives on in folk memory as "Cromwell's curse."

In 1688, James II was deposed from the English throne for trying to impose Catholicism on the English. He fled to Ireland where on July 12, 1690, he attempted, unsuccessfully, to defeat William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne. Today, James' defeat is commemorated in Northern Ireland as Orangeman's Day, a public holiday marked by parades, often traveling defiantly through predominantly Catholic neighborhoods.

Determined to win their independence from Britain, the Irish persevered. However nobly they tried, time and again they were put down, often brutally. In 1800 the Act of Union was passed and England abolished the Irish parliament, effectively annexing Ireland. Agitation by the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell resulted in the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, by which Catholics were relieved of the civil disabilities imposed during the reign of Henry VIII. These developments, notable as they were, would be overshadowed however by the Great Potato Famine of 1845-49.

The blight that decimated the potato crop, Ireland's staple food, had its origin in the United States. Spores from the potato blight were carried across the Atlantic where they found a plentiful host in the Irish tuber. Slowly at first, and then with amazing speed, virtually the entire Irish potato crop was lost to the disease. The worst year of the famine, 1847, often referred to as "Black '47," saw the death of nearly one million Irish citizens from starvation and disease and the emigration of nearly two million more. That Britain received worldwide food donations to help aid the starving Irish, and yet failed to distribute them fully, has never been forgotten by the Irish people.

The turn of the century saw a rise in Irish nationalism, with a seemingly greater and greater number of patriots willing to join the guerrilla movement. The outbreak of World War I proved opportunistic to the republicans, who saw this as their chance to wage war with Britain while they were preoccupied abroad. On Easter Monday, April 24, 1916, a group of about 2000 men led by Padhraic Pearse and James Connolly seized control of the General Post Office in Dublin. From the steps of the Post Office the leaders
of the rebellion proclaimed the independence of Ireland. The rebellion was put down on April 29 and fifteen rebels, including Pearse and Connolly, were sentenced to death and executed by firing squad.¹

Six years later, in 1922, popular Irish nationalist Michael Collins, along with Sinn Fein founder Arthur Griffith, negotiated the establishment of the Irish Free State by treaty with Britain. Although there was widespread public support for the free state, opponents protested the partition of the country into two states. A civil war ensued and later that year Collins was assassinated by IRA guerrillas. The anti-treaty forces, led by Eamon De Valera, were defeated, but the IRA continued as a secret terrorist organization.

De Valera later became prime minister, and in 1937 a new constitution was declared establishing the sovereign state of Ireland, or Eire, within the British Commonwealth. In 1948 Ireland demanded total independence from Great Britain. In 1949 the Republic of Ireland was proclaimed and the country withdrew from the Commonwealth.

For the next 20 years, the situation remained relatively stable throughout Northern Ireland, marked only by periodic disturbances between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority. Tensions escalated, however, in 1969 when protests by the Catholic minority against growing economic and political discrimination led to widespread violence by the "provisional," or military, wing of the IRA. Retaliation by the Ulster Defense Association, a Protestant terrorist organization, further exacerbated the situation, leading to the deployment of British troops within the province.

Having long been the victims of electoral gerrymandering, the Catholic minority sensed an opportunity to capitalize on the popularity of the growing civil rights movement in the United States in order to focus world attention on their own plight and stepped up its level of demonstrations in the Northern Ireland cities of Derry and Belfast. On "Bloody Sunday," January 30, 1972, during a peaceful civil rights march conducted in defiance of a government ban, British paratroopers opened fire on a crowd of Catholic protesters in Derry City. Thirteen people were shot dead. None was armed. The next day, on January 31, the IRA called for a general strike to protest the shootings. On February 2 in Dublin 25,000 demonstrators rallied, destroying the British Embassy. The "Troubles" had been born.

Although the past several years have seen an increased effort on behalf of both Ireland and England to resolve the Troubles, little has changed since 1972; an undeclared war rages on. The cost to England of maintaining a military presence in Northern Ireland has been great. The economic damage has been in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Thousands of victims, Catholic and Protestant alike, have died in the sectarian violence. A wall now runs through the heart of Belfast, not unlike that which previously ran through Berlin, separating Catholic neighborhoods from Protestant.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, however, the Troubles have more to do with issues of discrimination and the denial of basic human rights than with religious differences among the peoples of Northern Ireland. They are, first and foremost, a reaction to discrimination in jobs, education, housing, and political representation towards the Catholic minority. The unemployment rate in Belfast, for example, averages 15%. In the Catholic ghettos it's nearer to 50%. They are also a response to what many consider to be a biased and unfair British system of justice. Ulick O'Connor, in an address before the
concludes, "These factors have profoundly impressed themselves on Friel's writing..." (11). More telling are Friel's own comments to a journalist in 1981: "Even when the British have gone, the residue of their presence will still be with us" (O'Connor 8).

From 1939 to 1945 Friel was educated first at Long Tower and later at St. Columb's College. In 1945 he entered Maynooth College, the Catholic seminary, where he left in 1948 with a B.A. degree (but not for the priesthood). He then spent a year at home before teaching in various Primary and Intermediate schools in the Derry area in the period between 1950 and 1960. He married in 1954.

It was during this time that Friel began writing short stories, mainly as an after-hours activity. Many of these stories appeared regularly in The New Yorker in the mid-fifties. In 1958 Friel produced two radio plays for the BBC's Northern Ireland Home Service; A Sort of Freedom, and To This Hard House.

Friel spent much of his childhood and boyhood holidays just across the border in Donegal, where his family had originated. Although he denied it for a time and insisted that he wished for nothing more than to spend some of his proceeds from Philadelphia, Here I Come! on a house in the country, Friel longed to escape the oppressive environment of Derry and later chose to move to Donegal. He continues to live and work there today. It has been said that Donegal represents a sort of "image of possibility" for Friel, a place where "hope can find a source" (Friel, Selected Plays 12). As a result, the Donegal region figures prominently in Friel's work and is the source of much of his literary invention. The fictional town of Ballybeg, for example, first featured prominently as the home of Gareth O'Donnell in Philadelphia, is a remarkable composite that "becomes the microcosm of contemporary Ireland" (Dantanus 12). The collective angst of the entire island is embodied in this deceptively simple creation. Anglicized from the Gaelic Baile Beag (small town), it alludes to the loss of identity felt by native Irish denied the use of their mother tongue and establishes Friel as a "Northern" writer as surely as the Aran Isles established Synge as a "Western" writer or Dublin established O'Casey as an "Eastern" writer.

The Irish storyteller or writer employs a unique vernacular in his work. A simple sentence, for example, like "Aren't you leaving?" becomes, in the Irish vernacular, "Are you not after leaving?" As Friel's contemporary, the playwright Hugh Leonard, has said: "We do our own kind of violence to the language."2 Or, as James Joyce explained more elegantly in Portrait of the Artist in Exile: "The Irish, condemned to express themselves in a language not their own, have stamped on it the mark of their own genius, and compete for glory with civilised nations."3 Confusing when first heard by the untrained ear, this atypical application of the English language imparts a distinct and endearing quality to much of Irish literature. Friel, having descended from a common literary heritage with many of Ireland's finest writers, understands this vernacular and uses it often in his work. The effect is poetic.

The Irish literary renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was aimed at reviving ancient Irish folklore, legends, and traditions in new literary works. Essentially, it was a rebirth of literature in Ireland as Irish literature rather than as a pale reflection of English literature.4 Friel has assumed his place as today's leading practitioner of this tradition, a legacy he inherited from Synge, O'Casey, W.B. Yeats, and Lady Gregory,
among others. His use of the Irish vernacular imparts a unique sense of place to his plays -- they are categorically and unmistakably Irish. Clearly, he is a product of his environment.

Although Friel's plays examine issues that transcend the individual characters to embrace the whole of Irish cultural, socio-economic, and political history, it's the emphasis on the Troubles in his work from the 1970s that has influenced and defined him as a mature artist. Friel, like Shaw before him, writes plays that propagate for social reform. Ulick O'Connor recognized this and, in Brian Friel: Crisis and Commitment, spoke of a "commitment," of a writer "...involving himself in any cause which he considers necessary to protect the principles of liberty, justice and progress" (4).

Prior to the escalation of the Troubles in the mid-seventies, however, Friel was a reluctant social critic and reformer. He repudiated plays designed to convey a social message and generally preferred instead to illuminate issues so that audiences might draw their own conclusions. In 1970, three years before he wrote The Freedom of the City, Friel remarked to Eavan Boland in The Northern Writer's Crisis of Conscience, "The crisis is there, and I keep wondering how it can be of use to me. I know this may seem a very selfish attitude. But it is, after all, a professional approach to the situation. On a personal level, of course, we're all terribly involved in it. But for the writer, I think his position is better as a sideline one, as against an involved one. This is against the feeling of the moment where writers everywhere are becoming more and more committed socially" (The Irish Times, 12 August 1970 n.p.). Ulf Dantanus, in Brian Friel: The Growth Of An Irish Dramatist, writes: "In his Irish context there is no place for the Border, and it does not seem to exist in his writing, where his characters, especially in the short stories and early plays, move from west to east and from north to south without the Border being mentioned" (25). This all changed for Friel in 1973 with the debut of The Freedom of the City, his first direct examination of Northern Irish political upheaval as a subject.

For Friel, the Troubles, which began in 1972 and continue to this day, represent just the latest manifestation of Anglo-Irish hostilities. He uses them metaphorically, however, to explore the macrocosm of historical race relations between the two countries. Within the context of them can be found all of the familiar Irish themes of oppression, confrontation, emigration, exile, and the search for an Irish identity. Thus Friel uses the Troubles, as do many of his contemporaries, including Keane and Leonard, to focus attention on the root causes of the Irish condition and to describe and define the Irish Diaspora.

What distinguishes Friel from many of his contemporaries and predecessors however, is the marked restraint of his criticisms and his unwillingness to engage in sardonic polemizing. Witness Friel's observation on British colonialism versus that of Jonathan Swift, author of Gulliver's Travels. When Lemuel Gulliver proudly recounts for the Brobdingnag king the conquests of his native England, the king replies: "...I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives, to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (76). No less accommodating, Friel's declaration on the subject is terse and to the point: "There will be no solution 'till the British leave Ireland" (O'Connor 8).
Indeed, this may be Friel's greatest strength as a playwright -- his ability to stand resolute in the face of forces that might bring about his undoing. A lesser man might falter, or worse, be written off simply as a curmudgeon. Friel, though, would have none of this. Rather than simply propagandize, Friel uses a play like The Freedom of the City to pierce the veil of romanticism common to so many lesser writers who take up the Irish question. As a result, his work is both more authentic and more credible. Still, this has not spared Friel the occasional critic's wrath. Regarding Freedom, England's Evening Standard wrote: "The play suffers fatally from this overzealous determination to discredit the means and the motives of the English in the present Ulster crisis" and the writer "is also engaged on a Celtic propaganda exercise."

This, perhaps more than anything else, establishes Friel unquestionably as the heir-apparent to O'Casey. Like O'Casey, Friel, too, was a member of the Nationalist Party who resigned out of disillusionment. Unlike O'Casey, however, Friel remained in Ireland where he continues to "fight the fight." Friel's weapon in this fight, of course, is the pen. I think he realizes, as did Yeats before him, that "the Irish question [can] not be settled by a handful of English arms." Or, for that matter, Irish arms.

That notwithstanding, Friel recognizes the situation for what it is, a colonial crisis. Ulick O'Connor, a Friel biographer, echoed this sentiment in an address before the Yeats Summer School in August of 1987 by describing the situation that years earlier had come to be known as the "Troubles": "In August 1969 when the British Home Secretary, James Callaghan, ordered the General-in-Command of the British Army in Northern Ireland to move in troops to Derry and Belfast to contain the situation, it became clear that a classical colonial crisis had arisen" (O'Connor 4).

Friel's position has ceased to be a sideline one. In 1980, he and Irish actor Stephen Rea founded Field Day, a theatre company. "It was founded to put on plays outside the confines of the established theatre and...to begin to effect a change in the apathetic atmosphere of the North" (Friel, Selected Plays 20). Whether or not his plays choose to deal explicitly with the Troubles, it clearly has become impossible for Friel to distance himself entirely from them in his subject matter. The poet Seamus Heaney, referring to his own poem The Last Mummer, once said: "I didn't, at the time of writing, mean this to be a poem about Northern Ireland, but in some way I think it is" (Dantanus 10). Friel himself has said: "The Troubles are a pigmentation in our lives here, a constant irritation that detracts from real life." By his willingness to explore the Irish question in all its manifest complexity, Friel exhibits his authenticity and proves, beyond any doubt, that he is Ireland's greatest living playwright.

The Plays: The Troubles, Explicit and Implicit

The Freedom of the City (1973)

Friel was outraged by the Bloody Sunday killings of thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers by British security forces in Derry City in 1972. He responded with The Freedom of the City, his first play to deal explicitly with the conflict and its effect on the everyday lives of Northern Ireland's people.
Freedom marks a distinct point in Friel's career, a point at which he could no longer afford to remain "on the sidelines." The formerly-reluctant social critic was now engaged by the conflict. To some extent, explicitly or implicitly, his work from this point on reflects this preoccupation.

Freedom is the story of three civil rights marchers, Michael, Lily, and Skinner, trapped by British troops in the Guildhall, Derry City's government center. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that they have been mistaken for terrorists and will emerge only to be shot. The injustice is underscored by the random nature of their misfortune: they're strangers; they simply sought refuge together to escape the police tear-gassing.

Friel traps these characters in the Guildhall in order to dissect their lives for our inspection. By doing so, he puts a human face on the conflict and dispels its anonymity. Because we see how they've been oppressed, we can empathize with them. What disturbs us most is not simply the injustice of their oppression, but rather the extent to which life in a suddenly militarized society has marginalized them.

What's most notable about these characters is their sense of defeat. Michael, twenty-two, has lost two jobs in the last year. Although he now attends technical school four nights a week, his prospects for employment remain dim. Lily, forty-three, is an impoverished housewife with eleven children and a husband with tuberculosis. She lives in a two-room flat in a condemned building with no toilet and no running water. Skinner, twenty-one, has no living relatives, no known address, and is unemployed. These people, Friel is telling us, are doomed. What's more, we know from the outset that their lives have been subjugated by a cause beyond their comprehension and that their deaths will have little consequence on the future course of events. This is the play's tragic irony.

Still, Friel manages somehow to imbue Freedom with a small measure of humor, however crude, perhaps as a means by which to convey the indomitable Irish spirit. Celia Cunningham finds the tear gas a cure for her young son's stuttering. Minnie McLaughlin took a rubber bullet to the leg and walks with a limp -- her friends call her Che Guevara. Everyone, it seems, has been affected somehow.

Indeed, this is precisely Friel's point. The Troubles, as anyone familiar with the conflict knows full well, and as we have noted earlier in this paper, are not about politics, nor are they about religion (the conventional misconception). They are about fear and about the effects of prejudice on the ability of people of different cultures to live together peacefully and harmoniously. There's a prescient and transcendent message there for people today, further evidence of Friel's gift.

Friel often employs commentary in his plays to help supply relevant contextual information. In Freedom, the commentary is supplied by two characters. One is the sociologist, Dr. Dodds. Dodds is used to elucidate the culture of poverty in which the characters have been raised and to define the ways in which it has shaped them as people. Another is the Balladeer, an effusive, hopeless, romantic. Much to the delight of his captivated chorus of children, the Balladeer sings songs of praise to Ireland's past glorious and noble heroes. One should not overlook, however, the significance of Friel having cast the Balladeer as a drunkard, or that Ireland's glorious and noble heroes are presently as dead as our principal characters are about to become.
Freedom so accurately reflects the actual Bloody Sunday occurrence that Friel chose to set it in 1970 so that it would not be mistaken as a factual retelling of the actual event. The judge's inquiry into the events leading up to and culminating in the death of the marchers, which opens the play, is clearly meant by Friel to invoke comparison with the Widgery inquiry and report in the wake of the January 30, 1972, killing of the 13 unarmed civil rights marchers by British paratroopers in Derry City.

However critical Freedom may be of British policy in Northern Ireland, though, it's far from one-dimensional. Friel holds the same disdain for radical Nationalists as he does for British policy-makers. Witness Michael's indictment of Skinner at the end of Act One: "Some bastard must have done something to rattle them -- shouted something, thrown a stone, burned something -- some bloody hooligan! Someone like you, Skinner! For it's bastards like you, bloody vandals, that's keeping us all on our bloody knees!"

Finally, the message of Freedom, as Lily realized while she lay dying, is that life has somehow eluded them. Their lives have been eclipsed by violence. Michael's trust in people, even at the moment of his death -- "I knew they weren't going to shoot" -- has been rewarded, ironically, with his killing. History, in Ireland at least, seems destined to repeat itself.

Freedom is a profound work of art. With sublime skill, Friel manifests the whole, complex reality of the Troubles in his fictional creation. This is an admirable literary accomplishment and one which continues to elude many contemporary writers of the Irish crisis.

Volunteers (1975)

Friel continued to explore the nature and consequences of Northern Ireland's conflict in his next play, Volunteers. The title refers, ostensibly, to the five political internees who have volunteered to assist with an archaeological dig. Paroled each day to assist in the excavation of a Viking site, they have been ostracized by their fellow inmates, who plan to kill them upon their return to prison. Of course, the title also invokes association with the "volunteers" of 1916; rebels who fought alongside Pearse and Connolly in the failed Easter Rebellion. Thus, Volunteers is given a charged political context.

The action in Volunteers occurs over the course of a single day. The five prisoners have been assisting in the excavation of an ancient Viking site. The diggers have uncovered the remnants of a simple Viking homestead and the skeletal remains of its inhabitant, Leif. Leif is found with a leather rope around his neck and a small hole in his skull, evidence that he died a violent death.

The first thing one notices about Volunteers is that it's a much angrier play than its predecessor. Clearly, Friel was discouraged by Britain's continued military presence in Ireland. There's little hint here of the tolerance that existed in Freedom and less yet of Friel's disdain for the radical Nationalist. The IRA, of which the prisoners are presumably members, receives a more sympathetic treatment by Friel in Volunteers. Far more parochial, Volunteers manifests Friel's growing rage with Britain's unwillingness to bring about an end to the Troubles.
But Friel is critical of Irish complacency as well. He knows that the suffering the Irish endure is often that of their own making, and he refuses to let his countrymen escape accountability for this fact. Keeney is *Volunteer*'s tragic hero; his invocation of Shakespeare's troubled Dane is meant to suggest the extent to which he, too, has been incapacitated by melancholy and sentimentality. Keeney informs the others that they are engaged in a "thrilling voyage in self-discovery," and insists that "the more we learn about our ancestors, children, the more we discover about ourselves." Then he asks, "How many of us want to make that journey?" Behind his mask of bravado, Keeney is immobilized by fear. Friel is both saddened and angered at the Irishman's seeming inability to affect or control his own destiny.

There's a sense of urgency in *Volunteers* that's acutely fatalistic. On this last day of the dig, the diggers learn that they have been found guilty by a kangaroo court of their peers, and that they are to be killed upon their return to the prison for having "collaborated" with their jailers. Trapped between opposing political and social ideologies, the diggers are confronted with anarchy. When Smiler, who years earlier had been rendered an idiot by a savage beating he received at the hands of his oppressors, escapes, the remaining four diggers override the authority of George and "democratically" vote amongst themselves to allow Smiler to remain at large. Although certain of his inability to survive for long on the streets alone, they agree this is preferable to the violent death he's sure to endure at the hands of his fellow prisoners.

Friel's setting for the play of a Viking excavation site is a complex device that he uses, metaphorically, to great advantage. On one level, it suggests Ireland's search for a cultural identity, on another, the proclivity of the British to regard the Irish as little more than anthropological curiosities. Also, it alludes to the nature of occupation. Viking conquerors helped to build, not destroy, Ireland's cultural heritage, and they eventually assimilated into Irish social life. This has not been the case with the British, whose lasting legacy seems to be the efficacy with which they've raped and pillaged Ireland's riches.

The clarity with which Friel has drawn *Volunteers*' characters is painful. Like those in *Freedom*, they too have been marginalized. Wilson, their warden, has the audacity to suggest that they weren't "born right." Again, Friel underscores the classist nature of the conflict. The hopelessness of their situation is overwhelming.

Writing in 1975, Friel must have seen no end to the conflict. Pyne's farcical apprenticeship to Keeney implies a perpetuation of the cycle of violence. The excavation was an exercise in futility, yielding nothing new in the way of understanding, either among the characters or among themselves. The divisions among them remain as deep as before. It's an admittedly pessimistic outlook for Friel, but it is understandable given the nature of the events. It would prove to be nearly 20 years before a truce was called and the violence ceased. Whether it holds remains to be seen.
Friel acknowledges this tragedy. As the play draws to its close, the prisoners are being readied for their return to the prison and to a certain death. George and Wilson arrange a phone call for later in the evening; business as usual. Keeney rhymes:

On an archaeological site
Five diggers examined their plight
But a kangaroo court
Gave the final report-
They were only a parcel of...

and closes with Horatio's farewell:
Good night, sweet prince.

*Volunteers* marks the point at which Friel's plays ceased to examine the Troubles as an explicit thematic element. Although he would now, however, turn his attention towards other subjects, the Troubles would continue to inform implicitly his work. This is the hallmark of both Friel's greatness and his maturity as an artist: his ability to move on in his work and yet not altogether abandon those concerns which have inspired his creative genius.

**Translations (1980)**

*Translations* was the first production of the Field Day Theatre Company, founded in 1980, as we have already said, by Friel and noted Irish actor Stephen Rea. The mission of Field Day, in part, was to "...put on plays outside the confines of the established theatre and,...to begin to effect a change in the apathetic atmosphere of the North" (Friel, Selected Plays 20). *Translations* is widely regarded to be Friel's masterwork. It's the story of the British government's famous 1830s ordnance survey of Ireland, a survey which saw the local Gaelic place names anglicized in accordance with Ireland's recent integration into the United Kingdom.

What, we might logically inquire, would inspire Friel in *Translations* to revisit the subject of Britain's historical imposition of colonialism upon Ireland? Clearly, the answer lies in the very nature of the current conflict, which Friel sees as little more than the rebirth and reimposition of classic colonialism, this time, upon the people of Northern Ireland. *Translations* is his reaction to this development within the broad historical context of Anglo-Irish hostilities.

The tension in *Translations* is excruciating; I can only conclude that Friel must have found it very difficult to conceal his rage over the continuing state of affairs in Northern Ireland. Friel attacks the British army's presence in Ireland and their campaign to impose the English language on a Gaelic speaking populace. His reference to the newly instituted compulsory education system, conducted in English, reminds us that Irish schoolchildren were once beaten for speaking Gaelic. When Hugh replies to Yolland's observation that the Irish language is rich and ornate, we sense the whole ugly history of the conflict through the ages and of the frustration that comes from being deprived of one's right to self-determination. "Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception -- a syntax opulent with tomorrows.
It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes, our only method of replying to... inevitabilities." Friel's pen is truly, mightier than the sword.

*Translations'* second act is Friel's most lyrical. The two lovers' struggle to communicate through a seemingly impenetrable language barrier is pure literary (and theatrical) magic. Finally, in a way that only lovers can, they find the means to communicate, with each wondering to himself or herself: what is that word -- "always?"

But the beauty of their moment together will be short lived; Yolland's disappearance the following morning results in a threat of violent retaliation from Lancey. In her fear, the fragile Sarah is dumb-stricken. An infant's sudden death underscores the loss of hope. This is theatre at its most visceral and most tragic. And Friel at the height of his powers.

**Conclusion**

As a young man, Brian Friel was shaped by the events of his native County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, an area characterized by racial divisiveness and religious intolerance and discrimination. British colonial attitudes and actions towards Northern Ireland's Catholic minority profoundly impressed themselves on Friel's writing. An early reluctance to deal explicitly with the area's growing tensions in his work later gave way to Friel's zealous effort to expose British discrimination and all of its injustice. "The renewed outbreak of sectarian violence at the end of the sixties after a period of Civil rights agitation and demonstration, its continuation up to the present day and the political, social, economic and religious realities of everyday life for people in the North have probably been the strongest influence on Friel's career as a writer. After Bloody Sunday in Derry, and Friel himself took part in the march, contemporary reality forcibly entered his work; he could no longer refuse to deal with it" (Dantanus 210). Friel's plays from this period, beginning with *The Freedom of the City* in 1973, are characterized by a marked disdain towards Britain's military presence in Northern Ireland and by the British government's refusal to allow the citizens of Northern Ireland their right to self-determination.

The Troubles would become Friel's muse for much of the 1970s. Plays like *The Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers* would deal with them directly and explicitly. Friel's 1980 masterpiece, *Translations*, employed a more implicit approach. Evidence perhaps of Friel's artistic maturation, later plays, like *The Communication Cord*, described as an antidote to *Translations*, and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, for which Friel won 1991's Tony award, would make little or no mention of them at all. Still, because we know how passionate Friel is regarding the conflict (and because the conflict continues to exist), it's tempting to look critically for evidence of their inspiration in his latest work. Molly Sweeney, the title character in Friel's most recent production, faces "...the sudden predicament of having to learn how to see at forty-one" (Lahr 107), raising the possibility that Friel might, in some small way, be referring to the challenges facing Northern Ireland's citizenry with the prospect of a brokered solution to the conflict finally upon the horizon.

Brian Friel is a consummate storyteller. His plays transcend a superficial examination of contemporary events to embrace the complex whole of Irish cultural, socio-economic, and political history. Like the poetry of Yeats before him, they concern themselves with the nature of men changed by their circumstances. With sublime skill,
Friel exhibits his authenticity and proves, beyond any doubt, that he is Ireland's greatest living playwright.

It is not the literal past, the "facts" of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language.
Hugh, in *Translations*, act 3
Chronology

- **1929**: Born Omagh, Co. Tyrone, where his father was then teaching.
- **1939**: Family moved to Derry City on father's appointment to Long Tower School.
- **1939-1945**: Educated Long Tower School and St. Columb's College, Derry.
- **1945-48**: Maynooth College, the Catholic seminary, left with B.A., but not for priesthood.
- **1948-49**: Year at home in Derry.
- **1949-50**: St. Joseph's Teacher Training College, Belfast.
- **1950-60**: Teaching in various Primary and Intermediate schools in Derry; began to write as an after-hours activity, mainly short stories, which appeared regularly in *The New Yorker* in the mid-fifties.
- **1954**: Married.
- **1959**: *A Doubtful Paradise*, Group Theatre, Belfast.
- **1960**: Retired from teaching to work full time as a writer.
- **1963**: *The Blind Mice*, Eblana Theatre, Dublin.
- **1964**: *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Gaiety Theatre, Dublin.
- **1968**: *Lovers*, Gate Theatre, Dublin.
- **1969**: *Crystal and Fox*, Gaiety Theatre, Dublin.
- **1971**: *The Mundy Scheme*, Olympia Theatre, Dublin.
- **1975**: *Volunteers*, Abbey Theatre, Dublin.
- **1987**: *Fathers and Sons*, Lyttleton Theatre, South Bank, London.
- **1990**: *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Abbey Theatre, Dublin.
- **1994**: *Molly Sweeney*, Gate Theatre, Dublin.
Bibliography


