

THE POLITICS OF PITY IN SEBASTIAN BARRY'S *A LONG LONG WAY*

by Liam Harte

I

Commenting on the inspiration behind his “ghost plays”, the Irish writer Sebastian Barry confessed: “I am interested not so much in the storm as the queer fresh breeze that hits suddenly through the grasses in the ambiguous time before it” (*Plays: I* xv). This remark nicely encapsulates Barry’s imaginative fascination for the disregarded, the idiosyncratic, the uncanny. Little wonder, then, that his fiction and drama should be populated by characters who exceed traditional categorisation. As Fintan O’Toole has pointed out, Barry specialises in “history’s leftovers, men and women defeated and discarded by their times [...] misfits, anomalies, outlanders” (vii). His particular affinity is for historically obscured individuals who, because of their personal choices, public duties or political allegiances, have been excluded from the Irish nationalist master-narrative. The biblical epigraph to his novel *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998)—“And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire”—speaks to the restorative and corrective impulses that undergird his entire oeuvre. Virtually all of the prodigal protagonists through whom Barry explores the themes of historical erasure and ambiguous belonging have their origins in his own family history, which he has recursively mined for transgressive forebears whose experiences he reimagines as both singular and representative, “exception[s] to a general rule of Irishness, but at the same time not as rare as one might think” (Kurdi 42). The most critically acclaimed of his “family of plays about a family” (Kurdi 42) is *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), loosely based on the life of his great-grandfather, a Catholic who rose to the rank of chief superintendent in the Protestant-dominated Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) during the 1910s. Although the opprobrium attached to this ancestor made Barry fearful of the consequences of wrenching him from “the dead grip of history and disgrace” (“Steward” ix), the elegiac drama he fashions transforms him into an unabashedly tragic figure, a noble survivor from “a vanished world” (*Plays: I* 246), the ghosts of which are his only companions in the nursing home where he languishes in his dotage. As a Catholic loyalist, Thomas Dunne found himself on the “wrong” side of history in the nationalist state that emerged from the rubble of revolution and civil war in 1922. Ten years on, he bitterly laments the violent eclipse of the colonial structures that sustained his proud record of service to crown and country. Yet despite being branded a traitor for his complicity in colonialist domination, Dunne refuses to renounce his loyalty to Queen Victoria, whom he eulogises as “the very flower and perfecter of Christendom” (250). Instead, the play challenges contemporary Irish audiences in particular to respect the imperial values Dunne embodies and to afford him the same “mercy” (301) and forgiveness his father showed Thomas as a child, when he returned home after sheltering an errant sheepdog which he feared would be put down.

Despite their broadly factual basis, Barry is keen to deter audiences from expecting historical exactitude from his “familiar” fiction and drama. He tends to downplay his scholarly credentials and disavow polemical intent, presenting himself as a benign re-

deemer of suppressed histories. Commenting on the central figure in his 2008 novel, *The Secret Scripture*, he explained:

I'm afraid of the damage that is caused by not speaking of people like Roseanne, the unmentioned first wife, like so many families' old uncle Jacks who died in the first world war fighting for England. I'm concerned these silences leave a gap in yourself which then leaves a gap in your children and can ultimately lead to a hole in the country's sense of itself. Ireland's history is so much more rich, exciting, varied and complicated than we had realised. What I'm trying to do is gather in as much as I can. It's not to accuse, it is just to state that it is so. (Wroe 13)

In spite of such conciliatory remarks, Barry's ongoing imaginative rehabilitation of the tradition of Irish Catholic unionism cannot be divorced from fractious debates about historiography and the politics of remembrance in contemporary Ireland. On the contrary, his determined efforts to queer the pitch of traditional nationalist history has led to him being firmly identified with the revisionist strand of Irish historical and cultural discourse. Elizabeth Cullingford, for example, forcefully argues that "Barry borrows the rhetoric of silencing from radical critics and appropriates it for conservative ends: his desire to give voice to the historically occluded native collaborator is a literary extension of the project of historical revisionism" (12). The dedication of Barry's 2005 novel, *A Long Long Way*, to historian Roy Foster appears to copper-fasten this association, yet the dedicatee is himself quick to defend the novelist against crude accusations of "Raj revisionism," even though he acknowledges that there are "several points where Barry's work chimes with recent preoccupations in Irish historiography: the many ways in which Irish Catholics, often middle-class nationalists, made their careers through imperialist channels" (191).

Foster's defence forms part of a sympathetic reading of what is Barry's most historically informed use to date of the specificity of individual experience to counter the prejudicial force of abstract categories and fixed stereotypes. Through the story of Private Willie Dunne, Barry seeks to honour the contribution to the Allied cause of southern Catholic Irishmen during the First World War, many of whom enlisted in the British Army in the belief that their actions would yield the dividend of Irish self-government when the war ended. The spur to memorialisation lies in the fact that these soldiers' sacrifice has until recently been officially unacknowledged by the Irish state, loyalty to the former imperial power being traditionally regarded as an affront to the authorised narrative of nationalist resistance to British rule. Such strategic forgetting stands in stark contrast to the recurrent ceremonial remembrance of the sons of Protestant Ulster, whose sacrifice at the Somme in 1916 as part of the 36th (Ulster) Division has long been woven into a tapestry of deep-dyed loyalty to British monarchical Protestantism that stretches back to the Battle of the Boyne in 1690—and this despite the fact that in 1914 many of those same Ulstermen were threatening armed rebellion against the British authorities in Ireland, using German-sourced rifles. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that the contribution of nationalist Ireland to the British war effort began to be investigated by historians, and Barry formally acknowledges his indebtedness to a number of pioneering studies at the novel's close.¹ As a memorial gesture, then, *A Long Long Way* complements other public expressions of the Irish Republic's new-found respect for its "unknown soldiers,"

including the Irish National War Memorial at Islandbridge in Dublin, officially opened in 1995, and the Irish 'Peace Tower' at Messines in Belgium, jointly dedicated by Irish President Mary McAleese and Queen Elizabeth II in 1998.² Furthermore, the novel's special contemporary relevance is attested not only by its enthusiastic critical reception—it was shortlisted for the 2005 Man Booker Prize and the 2007 International Impac Dublin Literary Award, and was chosen for the "Dublin: One City, One Book" event in 2007³—but also by the repressed personal histories it has released, sometimes in the presence of the author himself: "I was down in Kilkenny and this woman in her 70s stood up and said in a trembling voice how her grandfather was the chaplain in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. It was probably the first room she had ever been in where she could stand up and say that" (Wroe 13).

In righting this lopsided Irish culture of remembrance and in retrieving experiences that have previously been excluded from official historiographies, Barry seeks not only to advance his project of enlarging the terms upon which Irishness is constituted but also belatedly to elevate the Great War to a tragic status it has never attained within postcolonial Irish culture. In this essay, I wish to examine critically the textual strategies he employs to achieve these ends. Unlike a number of notable recent Irish historical novels—Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999), Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002)—*A Long Long Way* eschews the postmodern tools of self-reflexivity, irony, subversion and pastiche in its critical re-visioning of the Irish past. Despite its proximity to revisionist historiographic culture and its creation of protagonists who complicate simplistic antinomies of heroism and villainy, the novel cannot be straightforwardly categorised as historiographic metafiction, defined by Linda Hutcheon as "fictionalized history with a parodic twist" (*Politics* 50). Even though it is marked by a fundamental concern with the questions of "*whose* history survives" and "*whose* truth gets told" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 120, 123, her emphasis) in historical narratives, *A Long Long Way* is in many respects closer to the nineteenth-century model of historical fiction in its realistic interleaving of the fictional and the factually historic. That is to say, Barry does not self-reflexively interrogate the myth-making tendencies of Irish historiography nor does he foreground the unknowability of the past other than through its textualised remains. What is at issue is not how we come to know and represent the past *per se* but rather the substance of the received narrative of Irish history and the blind spots and elisions it contains. We might therefore characterise *A Long Long Way* as well-researched, politically engaged, unironic historiographic fiction that actively solicits the reader's sympathy for its anomalous and decidedly innocent protagonists, to whom the author wishes to extend full humanity. The rhetorical means by which Barry garners and sustains such sympathy will be a key part of our explorations, since this is a novelist who wants as few barriers as possible to his readers' identifying with his pitiful protagonists and succumbing to narrative illusion. In the process, however, Barry's political agenda of not merely recuperating but exalting the sacrifice of the ordinary Irish volunteer in World War One causes him to take a number of rhetorical risks that, I will argue, result in the simplification of the novel's subjects and a diminishment of its empathic and experiential power.

II

"He was born in the dying days" (3): the novel's opening sentence proleptically encapsulates Dubliner Willie Dunne's fleeting existence, the very brevity of the statement enacting the shortness of his life's span. Here is a child of a transitional generation, born in 1896 in a city poised on the threshold of monumental change, who is destined to be crushed by history's "ferocious" (4) jaws. This, then, is a protagonist whose story is effectively over before it begins, consciousness of which is forever with us as we read. Although his naming (after William of Orange) and surroundings (Great Britain Street) identify him with the imperial forces that sought to bind Ireland to a unitary British state since the 1690s, the blood that "gathered on the nurses' white laps like the aprons of butchers" (3) and the storm that sluiced it down to the sea portend the tumultuous events that will soon violently sever those bonds. This leaking blood also presages that which will be shed at the western front by Private Dunne and "all those boys of Europe born in those times" (4) who succumbed to the cataclysmic events of 1914-18. These sentiments form part of a sudden amplification of tone and elevation of narrative perspective in which time is telescoped and a stately voice of lofty omniscience eulogises all the forgotten fallen of the Great War. From this Olympian vantage point Barry posits his humane, compassionate aesthetic, explicitly invoking the familiar motifs of the "lost generation" and the futility of war, and aligning his novel with the canonical works of Britain's soldier-poets, notably Wilfred Owen, whose late war lyrics comprehensively repudiate the persistent idealization of battle and glorification of death found in much popular poetry of the 1914-18 period (Norgate). By borrowing the plangent idiom of Owen's trench lyrics, Barry leaves us in no doubt but that *A Long Long Way* is to be read as a belated anthem for Ireland's forgotten doomed youth, channelled through the experiences of one raw recruit. Thus, in the space of a mere twenty sentences, the narrator whisks us from an evocation of Willie Dunne's inauspicious, meaningless birth to a view of his inauspicious, meaningless death, compressing his fate with that of countless hapless others. Before we are allowed even a glimpse of his heart and mind, the lens of historical inevitability strips this common soldier of all individuality and particularity, casting him as an anonymous atom of history predestined to be "milled by the mill-stones of a coming war" (4).

With this opening, Barry performs a calculated trade-off, forfeiting dramatic tension in order to purchase the reader's sympathy and pity for his benighted protagonist, whose heavily accentuated paltriness—Willie is "provisional and bare" (3), "a scrap of a song" (4), "a featherless pigeon" (5)—seals the deal. Again, Owen comes to mind, particularly his excoriation of the meaningless horror and searing inhumanities of mechanised warfare, pithily expressed in the preface to his *Poems* (1920): "The subject of it is War, and the Pity of War" (31). Yet Barry also primes us for the next turn of his narration, where this requiem for the senselessly sacrificed is counterpointed by the image of Willie's mother being stilled by her son's singing voice and made to marvel at "the power of mere words, the mere things you rolled around in your mouth, the power of them strung together on the penny string of a song, how they seemed to call up a hundred vanished scenes, gone faces, lost instances of human love" (5). This scene is deftly metonymic for the historical novelist's own relationship to history: "human stories told for nothing" (4) may yet be redeemed from history's "mighty scrapheap" (4) and the "secret Scripture"⁴ of the face-

less dead memorialised in prose fiction. With this, we are ready to witness Private Willie Dunne's symbolic resurrection from the no man's land of both Flanders and twentieth-century Irish history.

The condensed narration of Willie's childhood and adolescence continues over the rest of chapter one, glancingly taking in the death of his mother in childbirth; his family's move to Dublin Castle, the epicentre of British rule in pre-independence Ireland; the involvement of his father, James Dunne, a DMP chief superintendent, in the baton-charging of striking workers during the 1913 Dublin lockout; Willie's burgeoning secret passion for Gretta Lawlor, whose father was among those injured by the police; and his decision to enlist in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, a regiment of the 16th (Irish) Division, in August 1914, thereby becoming one of the estimated 58,000 Irish servicemen who were mobilised at the start of hostilities (Fitzpatrick 1017). Such abbreviated treatment of Willie's first eighteen years gives the chapter—which, like the novel as a whole, is replete with proleptic detail—the feel of an overture to the defining action to come. In keeping with this anticipatory mood, Gretta's father, to whom Willie ferries unwanted gifts from his guilt-ridden father, broaches some of the novel's governing themes when he berates Willie for not having an opinion on the police's rough treatment of the protesting workers: the necessity of knowing one's own mind; the conflict between personal feeling and public duty; the difficulty of reconciling individual conscience with the dictates of state and civil society.⁵ Furthermore, in questioning whether James Dunne “knew his own mind” (10) when he led the baton charge, Lawlor disabuses Willie of his ignorance of his father's culpability for the deaths of the four men who were killed in the fracas. On hearing this, a troubled awareness of his father's guilt lodges in Willie's mind “like a rat and made a nest for itself there” (11). This knowledge constitutes the first mote in his naive political outlook. Up to this point, he appears to have acquiesced in the general consensus that “the police had acted bravely and had won the day” (7); now he stands “marooned” (11) by the force of an unsettling counter version, the whole episode being proleptic of his final, stateless fate on Flanders field. Thus discomfited, Willie reflexively answers Lord Kitchener's call for Irish recruits and is plunged into a much more disorienting “deep, dark maze of intentions” (15): the complex motives, tangled emotions and divided allegiances that surrounded Irish military participation in the First World War, an event that both intensified and transformed the country's already acute political tensions. Given the centrality of the tumultuous politics of the 1912-18 period to the novel, it is necessary to summarise the historical contexts of *A Long Long Way* at this point, before proceeding to examine the rhetorical strategies and ideological implications of Barry's representation of his central characters and their dilemmas.

The impassioned conflict over Irish home rule dominated British politics in the immediate pre-war period. When the Parliament Act of 1911 removed the House of Lords' absolute veto over legislation, the way was cleared for the third Home Rule Bill, which was introduced in the House of Commons by the Liberals in April 1912, to be passed into law within two years. Outraged Ulster unionists responded by marshalling all of their resources to prevent Irish self-government from becoming a reality, publicly threatening to defy, by any means necessary, the authority of any parliament forced upon them. The implicit threat of militancy represented by the signing of a Solemn League and Covenant by nearly 250,000 Ulstermen in September 1912 was made explicit four months later with the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a citizen militia committed to the preservation of the Union.

Irish nationalists responded to this extremist move by setting up the National Volunteers in Dublin in November 1913 to fight *for* the home rule cause. Each paramilitary organisation professed loyalty to the crown while threatening armed revolt if their political demands were not met. Such threats were not merely rhetorical; by the summer of 1914, both militias were in possession of significant quantities of arms and ammunition smuggled in from Germany. Tensions were heightened by the the passage of the Home Rule Bill by the Commons in May 1914, which allowed for six of Ulster's nine counties to opt out of a self-governing Irish parliament for a six-year period only. When the Lords responded by amending the Bill to enable all nine counties to exclude themselves in perpetuity, the political situation became seriously deadlocked. With no resolution in sight, civil war in Ireland seemed to many to be inevitable until, on August 3rd, Germany's invasion of Belgium diffused the "Ulster crisis" by sweeping Britain and Ireland into the twentieth century's first global war, bringing about a radical realignment of Anglo-Irish politics in the process.

The immediate effect of the outbreak of war was to prompt the political leaders of both Irish citizen militias publicly to pledge their respective followers to the Allied cause. Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson did so because he saw an opportunity to demonstrate Ulster's unyielding loyalty to the Union; Irish Party leader John Redmond, because he strategized that common sacrifice for the British war effort would ensure the implementation of the Home Rule Bill, which was signed into law as the Government of Ireland Act in September 1914 but had its operation suspended for the duration of the war. Redmond also believed that collective action by Irishmen of diametrically opposed political persuasions would lay the foundations for a post-war reconciliation of the country's warring traditions. He wrote:

I pray that whenever a battalion of the Irish Brigade goes into action there may be a battalion of the Ulster Division alongside them. I need not point out the moral to you. This is the way to end the unhappiness and discords and confusion of Ireland. Let Irishmen come together in the trenches and spill their blood together and I say there is no power on earth when they come home can induce them to turn enemies one upon the other. (quoted in Denman 28-29)

And so, in an impromptu speech at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow on September 20th 1914, Redmond unconditionally pledged the National Volunteers to the British war effort, announcing that they would go "wherever the firing line extends, in defence of right, of freedom and of religion in this war" (quoted in Denman 26). This declaration had seismic political ramifications in that it led directly to a split in the Volunteer movement, pitting the pro-war Redmondite majority against a minority of militant republican separatists who were guided by the ancient Fenian dictum that "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity." Nor was the irony lost on this minority that the nation now purporting to be the protector of "gallant little Belgium" was still Ireland's oppressor. So while recruits to Redmond's mainly nationalist "Irish Brigade," formally constituted as the 16th (Irish) Division, marched off to Belgium and France to fight alongside the other two Irish divisions of Kitchener's new army—the 10th (Irish) and the 36th (Ulster)—the breakaway separatists remained at home, secretly planning for an insurrection that would eventually materialise in April 1916.

At the front, Willie Dunne—who, as a Catholic loyalist, simultaneously stands apart from these fierce internecine tensions and straddles mutually exclusive categories of Irish-

ness—encounters volunteers from many different parts of Ireland who harbour varying degrees of fealty to crown and shamrock. The spectrum stretches from the patrician Captain George Pasley, scion of landed Wicklow Protestants with a proud history of imperial loyalty, to Sergeant-Major Christy Moran, who curses both the army in which he serves and the 1916 rebels, to Private Jesse Kirwan, a Redmondite nationalist whose entire *raison d'être* for enlisting is so undermined by the Easter Rising and the execution of its leaders that he shrinks, literally and figuratively, from the very fabric of his uniform, before being court martialled and shot for “cowardice.” It is a key part of Barry’s revisionist project to give voice to such varied ideological positions and to show how many of them were radically destabilised by the overlapping force fields of the First World War and the Rising. Thus, the contradictions and complexities of allegiance that conventional nationalist versions of this period of Irish history have tended to elide are densely woven into the narrative to underline the point that history is subtle and ambiguous, and not “all threads going one way only” (22), to adapt a phrase applied to Christy Moran. Moran himself, indeed, highlights the hybrid realities that monochromatic exteriors conceal when he declares that the British Army should be renamed the “Irish-British” Army (55), in view of the ubiquity of khaki-clad Irishmen at the front.

While this assertion rests on sound historical evidence, there is a somewhat tendentious flavour to some of the novel’s other challenges to the biases and elisions of nationalist historiography.⁶ For example, Barry’s insistent reminder that it was not only the sons of senior metropolitan policemen who volunteered for war service in 1914 results in a disproportionate number of Willie’s comrades—Joe McNulty, Joe Kielty, Pete O’Hara—being of Connaught origin, the province that “invariably had the lowest provincial rate of enlistment” (Fitzpatrick 1020) during the war. Clearly, it suits Barry’s aesthetic and political purposes to foreground such regional diversity, not least because it enables him to endow Willie with a belief in the pervasiveness of “his father’s fervent worship of the King” as “the lynchpin that held down the dangerous tent of the world,” thus convincing him “that all Ireland was, and all that she had, should be brought to bear against this entirely foul and disgusting enemy” (22-23). This evocation of universal Irish sacrifice for a common cause undoubtedly heightens the pathos of hundreds of “Catholic, Protestant and Jewish Irishmen” (54) succumbing to chlorine gas at St Julian alongside English, French and African troops, their bodies pestled together in death. Such mass chemical slaughter seems to erase the very markers of national, ethnic and ideological difference, giving the soldiers who survive this carnage the composite appearance of imperial Everymen: “They stripped to the waist and got black as desert Arabs. The white skins were disappearing. Mayo, Wicklow, it didn’t matter. They might be Algerians now, some other bit of the blessed Empire” (54).

The St Julian gas attack, which claims the life of Captain Pasley and several of Willie Dunne’s closest pals, marks a crucial stage in the young Dubliner’s declension from proud volunteer to disillusioned combatant. The invigorating “euphoria” (23) he felt on completing his basic training in Fermoy is as distant a memory as the quasi-epiphanic sense of fearlessness he experienced during his first, night-time excursion into no man’s land. Sorrow had now “gone rancid in him, he thought; it had boiled down to something he didn’t understand. The pith of sorrow was in the upshot a little seed of death” (59). The more Willie atrophies inwardly, the more *unheimlich* the verdant Flanders landscape appears. When, in the aftermath of the gas attack, a “strange teem of rain” (53) falls on the

ragged survivors with a degenerative rattle, it seems that even nature's restorative potency has become debased. Although he still tries to calibrate the horrors of "this new world of terminality and astonishing dismay" (52) against seemingly temperate Irish realities, his propensity to domesticate the Belgian landscape can no longer be sustained in the charnel house of the front. On the contrary, when Irish realities become blood-darkened after Easter 1916, Flanders becomes an uncanny facsimile of home. When Willie stops to bury "his German" (142), he realises that "Dublin and Ypres were all the one" (124), a phrase that echoes the title of a post-Rising souvenir picture postcard, "Ypres on the Liffey," published by Bairds of Belfast (Jeffrey 52).⁷

The full extent of this mirroring reveals itself only gradually. It is not just a matter of events imitating each other in these two sites of war, though the execution by firing squad of Jesse Kirwan, who is too weak to stand unsupported, bears obvious similarities to that of the wounded James Connolly, who had to be propped up in a chair in order to be shot in Kilmainham Gaol in May 1916. More fundamentally, Dublin and Ypres exist as polar points of an echo chamber in which reciprocal truths and treacheries ramify disconcertingly. Thus, Willie feels like a "traitor" (73) in his father's presence because he cannot banish the knowledge of Chief Superintendent Dunne's betrayal of the Dublin populace's trust in him during the 1913 riots. Yet he himself is subsequently accused by his father of having a "treacherous gob" (247) when he dares to express tentative, ambivalent sympathy for the 1916 rebels, whose own act of national "treachery" haunts "loyal" Irishmen at the front: "The executed men were cursed, and praised, and doubted, and despised, and held to account, and blackened, and wondered at, and mourned, all in a confusion complicated infinitely by the site of war" (144). Ultimately, it is Willie Dunne's belated appreciation of the truth of words spoken by the doomed Kirwan, who is the living embodiment of this complicated confusion, that constitutes the most tragic echo of all: "Now we won't have a country at all. Now everything you and me and the others were trying to do is useless" (156).

Willie's descent into grim disaffection further underlines the novel's affinity with experiential First World War literature produced by frontline witness-participants, one of the most pronounced traits of which is that it is "a literature of brutally disappointed expectations" (DeCoste 4) that exposes the cruel myths of heroic warfare and patriotic sacrifice. In this respect, it is interesting to note Barry's admission that the book that served as his "talisman" ("Conversation") during the composition of *A Long Long Way* was *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), since the structural and thematic impress of Remarque's anti-war classic on Barry's text is quite marked. The young protagonists of both novels follow a similar trajectory: basic training on enlistment followed by swift immersion in the horrors of the trenches; intervals of rest and recuperation, including visits to brothels; going on home leave and returning to the front as changed men; killing an enemy soldier in hand-to-hand combat; being wounded and sent on convalescent leave; being killed in action in October 1918, on the eve of the Armistice. The deeper affinities between the novels centre on the core theme of war as a wholly destructive and degrading experience, the harrowing effects of which are heightened by the youthfulness of the protagonists. Eighteen-year-old Willie Dunne's "sense of youth not vanishing but being submerged in a killing sea from which no one might emerge, bathed in the acid blood of bomb or bullet" (130) resonates with Paul Bäumer's bleak reflections on what war did to his school friends: "We were



eighteen years old, and we had just begun to love the world and to love being in it; but we had to shoot at it. The first shell to land went straight for our hearts” (Remarque 63). Both Dunne and Bäumer are also devastated by their shared awareness of the senselessness and insignificance of their sacrifice and the indelibility of their feelings of existential lostness, such that the former’s climactic realisation that “he had no country now” (286) echoes the latter’s sense of his generation as “superfluous even to ourselves” (Remarque 206). Yet both novelists also strive to deny death complete dominion. The courageous comradeship of the doomed acts as a temporary “reserve against the onslaught of oblivion” (Remarque 193) for both of these common soldiers, and that “nameless active force that we call life” (Remarque 192) continues to assert itself right up to the moment when the snipers’ bullets find their respective marks. Willie dies with an antiphonal hymn on his lips, Paul Bäumer, wearing a tranquil expression, both soldiers having ceased to believe that those in the opposing trenches are enemies, only suffering fellow humans.

It is, however, the novels’ contrasting treatment of the emotion that is synonymous with the literature of the First World War—pity for a whole generation of young men, condemned to routinized slaughter by ignorant and negligent elites—that brings the problematic aesthetic and polemical aspects of *A Long Long Way* into sharp focus. Whereas Remarque’s rendering of the brutal reality of battle relies on lapidary sentences that plainly convey subjective individual experience with a minimum of emotion, Barry’s emotionally charged prose not only evokes the felt reality of war but also relentlessly solicits our pity for the Irish volunteers on the basis of their enduring innocence and harmlessness. As it does so, the novel indulges in a kind of rhetorical excess, sentimentalising and sanctifying these benighted young men to such a degree that the suasive force of the work is significantly blunted. Readers who are familiar with Barry’s oeuvre will not be at all surprised by this feature of his characterisation, which has drawn plaudits from critics such as Christina Hunt Mahony, who explains:

Barry endows ordinary people with a degree of sustained innocence and a purity of soul and spirit which seems to defy any negative experience life might have dealt them. [...] Barry’s often ornately poetic language is used to cultivate a lush aural environment in which such intensity and purity can thrive, forcing audience or reader to suspend disbelief, even while it remains steadfastly at odds with the realism of Barry’s historical and geographical settings. (83)

But whereas Mahony clearly admires Barry’s poetics of innocence and the liberal humanist ideology it posits, I find that the pronounced accentuation of the protagonists’ naivety distorts the imaginative integrity of *A Long Long Way* because it sacrifices much moral, psychological and political complexity in order to press home the *parti pris* point that the protagonists are to be seen as irreproachable paragons of goodness. In this, I find myself in sympathy with key aspects of Cullingford’s critique of *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* and *The Steward of Christendom*, the affective power of which is significantly diminished, she argues, by the author’s subordination of his protagonists to a schematic political allegory which suggests that “the history of Ireland in the twentieth century has been bedeviled by the patriotic idea of ‘freedom’: decolonization spells disaster” (35-36). While I regard *A Long Long Way* as a less ideologically programmatic text than either of these earlier works, I nevertheless believe that Barry’s polemically driven exaltation of the

Irish volunteer relies on a set of rhetorical strategies that, by placing undue emphasis on the cultivation of sympathy, leads to simplifying acts of representational selectivity.

Of particular interest to me here is the way Barry deploys a decidedly sentimental and exonerative narrative idiom to elicit the reader's uncritical pity for his durably innocent central protagonist. Mark Jefferson's remarks about the nature and implications of sentimentality are highly pertinent in this context, insofar as they help us to understand better the special character of narratives that employ this particular emotion. Jefferson argues that what chiefly distinguishes sentimental works is

their emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotions' object. The qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence. But this almost inevitably involves a gross simplification of the nature of the object. And it is a simplification of an overtly moral significance. The simplistic appraisal necessary to sentimentality is also a direct impairment to the moral vision taken of its objects. [...] The unlikely creature and moral caricature that is someone unambiguously worthy of sympathetic response has its natural counterpart in a moral caricature of something unambiguously worthy of hatred. (526-27)

Now, we have already noted the pervasive emphasis in the opening chapter on Willie Dunne's diminutive size, his "damnable" height" (6) being a mark of his failure to live up to his father's expectations of him.⁸ As the narrative develops, the cluster of mental and emotional experiences associated with puniness are ruthlessly exploited to deepen the pathos and sentimentality of his plight in the midst of "a human nowhere" (231). The most obvious of these associations is a childlike neediness and vulnerability that "little Willie" exhibits throughout. For example, after he escapes the lethal cloud of chlorine gas in chapter four we are told that he "wanted his sergeant and his captain and his mates the way a baby wants its home, no matter how provisional" (49). This metaphor is effectively literalised during his first furlough, when the motherless recruit is deloused, washed and swaddled by his father, as if "they were still in Dalkey and he was a little lad" (74). On his return to the front, the horrors of trench warfare infantilise him further; one of the novel's most harrowing scenes shows Willie childishly gripping the coattails of Christy Moran as they cross a field of high corn on their approach to village of Guillemont, which is clogged with the pulverised corpses of Allied and German troops. His rejection by his father and by Gretta during his final furlough diminish him to ghostly status, so that he is "just wisps and scraps of a person" (252) on rejoining his regiment for what proves to be the last time. This imagistic seam reaches an appropriate apotheosis in the final chapter where, on the threshold of death, the starkness of Willie Dunne's utterly forlorn predicament is exposed: "He had no country, he was an orphan, he was alone" (289).

Although he is the beneficiary of most authorial sentiment in the novel, Willie is not the only volunteer to be represented in this way. Joe Kielty, to whom the epithet "gentle" is applied as consistently as the adjective "poor" is to the fusiliers in general, is compared to a sleeping baby, the wounded Captain Sheridan to a six-month-old infant and Pete O'Hara to "a child thrown among blood and broken souls" (169). In fact, Barry persistently infantilises the volunteers as a means of accentuating their piteous simplicity

and divesting them of the messy complexities of adult agency. This motif is established early in the narrative when five of Willie's regiment go for a swim in a river near their billet. They immediately revert to boyish behaviour, setting paper boats on the water and playing football in their long-johns before taking a skinny-dip. Afterwards, they dispose themselves in a chillingly vulnerable fashion on the riverbank: "They were naked as babies. A little breeze played about in the willows. The five penises lay like worms in their nests of pubic hair" (40). The sense of innocuous sexuality conjured up by this pastoral interlude is reinforced by the sanitised quality of many of the volunteers' sexual thoughts and deeds, Pete O'Hara's complicity in the horrific rape of a Belgian woman notwithstanding. For example, the foul-mouthed Christy Moran's fantasy of a romantic rendezvous in Kings-town is improbably non-sexual, stopping at "how clean and good and sweet-smelling" (30) his girl would be, and Willie himself harbours remarkably chaste thoughts about Gretta, despite being "plagued" by "endless" erections (7). Furthermore, for all that the war marks his transition to "bloody manhood" (21), there remains much of the passive, pure-hearted naïf about Willie. It is telling that even though he loses his virginity to an Amiens prostitute, it is she who is pointedly shown to be taking the initiative throughout, obliging the submissive youth to surrender helplessly to her "graceful heat" (63). This episode is one of several in which Willie is absolved of mature agency and intentionality, be it sexual or ideological. Like Eneas McNulty, his unimpeachable goodness precedes him. Indeed, a key point of contrast between the two protagonists merely serves to underline their similarity. Whereas "Simple, innocent, foolish Eneas is unable to kill even when he gives it a shot" (Cullingford 28), Willie Dunne slays a German soldier in hand-to-hand trench combat. Yet even as he does so, the narrative exonerates him by having him react almost involuntarily, as if acting unbeknownst to himself:

For some reason, without himself actually registering it, he had got the funny tomahawk into his left hand and when he raised the hand the spike at the top of the short stick horribly drove into the underchin of the German. The man now clawed there himself and to Willie's surprise tore off the saving mask, which looked a very much more admirable design than Willie's. Now Willie again almost on instinct struck at the man's face with the hatchet and it opened the cheek from the side of the mouth to the eye above. (114)

Such persistent use of an exculpatory idiom means that Willie Dunne and his fellow volunteers exist as angels of history in the midst of diabolical grand carnage, a sentimental characterisation that jars somewhat beside the unflinching fidelity with which the rest of the novel conveys the physical and psychological miseries of modern industrial warfare. The volunteers' almost holy humility strikingly manifests itself in chapter eight, by which point Willie is back in Flanders, his mind still reeling from the disorientating events of Easter week in Dublin, during which he comforted a dying rebel. Although the young man's death had "shifted his very heart about" (102), its indelibility symbolised by the stubborn bloodstain on Willie's uniform, his scorn for the rebels' "violent ignorance" (110) reasserts itself as the Hulluch gas attack looms. In an epiphanic moment just before the "familiar ogre" (111) descends, the "unsullied truth" (111) of his comrades' sacrifice is powerfully borne in upon him, such that he sees his companions frozen in a *tableau vivant*, their pose supplicatory,

their ghosthood immanent (to purloin a phrase of Seamus Heaney's). The pathos of the scene is overpowering, not least because the crouching troops are explicitly denied heroic status, being "only poor Tommies of Irishmen, Joe Soaps of back streets and small lives" (110). Yet despite being stripped of all emotional and spiritual comforts, a strange kind of grace inheres in these pitiable pawns of history, a quasi-metaphysical quality that, like the soothing power of the Ave Maria, "could not be rendered meaningless even by slaughter, the core inviolable, the flame unquenchable" (134). For all that they see and do, none of these volunteers become overtly brutalised or emotionally injured by war. Unlike Paul Bäumer and his fellow recruits, these soldiers do not grow "tough, suspicious, hard-hearted, vengeful and rough" (Remarque 19). Willie himself never seems to harden fully, emotionally or morally, despite his telling Gretta that "you do end up here as hard as a nut" (64). Like the horses that "looked even in death faithful and soft" (231), a pith of refined feeling and fidelity to humane values remains intact in him. To the rhetorical questions that punctuate the narrative—"What of such hearts and souls? Could the soul hold good, could the heart?" (169), "Could they not all be holy" (289)—the novel posits poignantly affirmative answers.

Aesthetically, Barry's pervasive accentuation of Willie's innocence, and that of most of his companions, undoubtedly succeeds in engaging the reader's pity and sympathy for "these wretched fools of men come out to fight a war without a country to their name" (134); one has only to scan the encomia that festoon the paperback edition of the novel to appreciate this. Ideologically, however, Barry's poetics of innocence seems to me to veer towards a rather heavy-handed polemic, insistently promoting the message that these once-vilified volunteers should now be seen only as tragic victims of historical circumstance, thus leaving the novel open to the charge that it rebuts one partial version of history with an equally partisan retelling of it. The protagonists' staggering naivety and innocuousness are so heavily ring-fenced by the exonerative narration and sentimental characterisation that psychological verisimilitude and historical plausibility are sometimes stretched to breaking point. This is perhaps most evident when we examine the men's motives for enlisting in the first place. Barry's volunteers are, in the main, "loyal, unthinking and accepting sort of men" (26), few of whom appear to be motivated by deep ideological conviction. On the contrary, some of their reasons for joining up are markedly contingent, even whimsical. Christy Moran reveals he enlisted because his wife burned her hand whilst drunk, Joe Kiely says he did so because he was presented with a white feather in Ballina, and Joe McNulty appears to have followed suit simply to keep his cousin company.⁹ Even the nationalist Jesse Kirwan is made to disavow full-blooded political commitment when, after telling Willie that he volunteered in order "to save Europe so that we might have the Home Rule in Ireland in the upshot," he proceeds to blame his father for lumbering him with "this rigmarole, this torment of talk of freedom" (157).

Willie's own motives for joining the Fusiliers are decidedly overdetermined. A number of impulses are shown to be acting upon him, primarily his being too short to join the DMP but also his wish to please his father and protect and his sisters and his beloved Gretta, since "there were women like her being killed by the Germans in Belgium, and how could he let that happen?" (13).¹⁰ However, the sense of patriotic duty that underpins the last-named of these reasons is strikingly nebulous and barely intuited by him: "something in him had leaped forth towards this other unknown something. He could put it no clearer than that in his mind" (23). Like many of his fellow volunteers, Willie

is understandably oblivious of the peculiar horrors and wrenching changes the war will bring. But if, as Mahony argues, his naive idealism at the point of enlistment is “not out of place historically nor in literary historical terms” (90), Willie’s utter consternation on being deployed to quell the 1916 Rising while on leave is harder to credit. Throughout his brief assignment, he remains completely baffled by events in Dublin, to the extent that he mistakes a fatally wounded rebel for a German. Even allowing for the fact that he has been away from his home city for two years, it beggars belief that someone of his background, who has chosen to don khaki and fight in the empire’s service, would be so drastically ignorant of Ireland’s murderous political animosities as to require an impromptu history lesson from Jesse Kirwan. After all, we know that Willie read a “long account” (14) of Redmond’s Woodenbridge speech in the *Irish Times*. Surely, then, he would have had at least an inkling of the bitter factionalism that subsequently racked the Volunteer movement and of the existence of a dissenting minority of Dublin-based advanced nationalists intent on fermenting rebellion?

Contextualised thus, Private Willie Dunne’s innocence seems more reprehensible than pitiable. So careful is Barry to protect his protagonist’s political and moral inviolability that he freezes him a state of arrested development that tests the limits of our suspension of disbelief. Although the authorial tenderness lavished on Willie and his fellow volunteers clearly appeals to many readers’ sensibilities, there is to my mind an overly directive and ultimately self-defeating quality to the novelist’s insistent attempts to persuade us to feel with him on this politically charged subject. By portraying this “featherless pigeon” as someone who is, in Jefferson’s terms, “unambiguously worthy of sympathetic response,” the novel’s sentimental exaltation of its disenfranchised subjects distorts and detracts from what is otherwise a richly textured and deeply moving account of young Irishmen crushed by a conflict of Dantean ferocity.

Notes

1. Reflecting on the composition of *A Long Long Way*, Barry also revealed: “my wife’s grandfather was in the Royal Army Medical Corps right through the war and came home safely. I had his Soldier’s Small-Book, still pristine, on my table while I worked” (“Conversation”).
2. The history of the Irish National War Memorial is itself indicative of the cultural neglect of those whom it commemorates. The memorial was completed in 1939 and dedicated “To the memory of the 49,400 Irishmen who gave their lives in the Great War, 1914-18.” However, its formal opening was delayed by the outbreak of the Second World War and the site subsequently fell into disrepair until the Office of Public Works initiated a restoration programme in the 1980s. Even then, no government representatives attended the blessing of the renovated park by church leaders in 1988, and it was not until April 1995 that the memorial received an official state opening (Whelan 185-91).
3. Launched in 2006, this annual event is designed to encourage as many people as possible to read the same book during a nominated month.
4. The phrase, which is also the title of Barry’s 2008 novel, comes from a sonnet written by Tom Kettle, poet, professor of economics at University College Dublin, Irish nationalist MP and British soldier, who was killed at the Somme in September 1916. Five days before his death he wrote a sonnet for his daughter Betty which ends: “Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead, / Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor, / But for a dream, born in a herdsman’s shed, / And for the secret Scripture of the poor” (quoted in Denman 176-77).
5. James Dunne’s “treats” are also rooted in an awareness of the class difference between the Dunes and the Lawlors. This transmits itself to Willie, who feels he must keep his love for Gretta hidden from his sisters because she is “a slum dweller” (11).

6. Ireland was a valued repository of British military manpower throughout the nineteenth century. In 1830, for example, Irish-born soldiers comprised 42 per cent of the British Army, and although the post-Famine decades witnessed a sharp decline in enlistment in numerical terms, Irish service in the British Army remained constant in proportional terms up until the First World War (Kenny 104-06).
7. This may well have been the postcard Gretta sends Willie in chapter eleven, which is described as "showing poor Sackville Street in ruins" (140). Willie sends her one of Ypres in return.
8. The proleptic significance of the marks on the wallpaper made by James Dunne's police pencil when ritually measuring his young son's height become clear in chapter six when Willie notices these "ancient marks" while on leave from the front and recalls the time "when his father used to put him up against the wall like a fella to be shot at dawn" (75).
9. The song "The Boys from the County Mayo" may be an intertext here, the chorus of which contains the lines: "So, boys, stick together in all kinds of weather, / Don't show the white feather wherever you go."
10. Interestingly, one of the commonest motives of those who joined the Dublin Fusiliers in 1914, economic necessity (which Father Buckley refers to in chapter sixteen), is not among Willie's reasons, presumably because of his relatively comfortable situation as a senior policeman's son.

Works Cited

- Barry, Sebastian "Following the Steward." *The Steward of Christendom*. London: Methuen, 1997: vii-xxi.
- _____. *Plays: 1*. London: Methuen, 1997.
- _____. "A Conversation with Sebastian Barry." Penguin Reading Guides. http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/long_long_way.html
- _____. *A Long Long Way*. London: Faber, 2005.
- Cullingford, Elizabeth. "Colonial Policing: *The Steward of Christendom* and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*." *Eire-Ireland* 39: 3 & 4 (2004): 11-37.
- DeCoste, Damon Marcel. "The Literary Response to the Second World War." *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*. Ed. Brian W. Shaffer. London: Blackwell, 2005: 3-20.
- Denman, Terence. *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War, 1914-1918*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1992.
- Fitzpatrick, David. "The logic of collective sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army, 1914-1918." *The Historical Journal* 38:4 (1995): 1017-1030.
- Foster, Roy. "'Something of us will remain': Sebastian Barry and Irish History." *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Ed. Christina Hunt Mahony. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006: 183-197.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Jefferson, Mark. "What is Wrong With Sentimentality?" *Mind* 92: 368 (1983): 519-529.
- Jeffrey, Keith. *Ireland and the Great War*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Kenny, Kevin. "The Irish in the Empire." *Ireland and the British Empire*. Ed. Kevin Kenny. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004: 90-122.
- Kurdi, Maria. "'Really All Danger': An Interview with Sebastian Barry." *New Hibernia Review* 8:1 (2004): 41-53.
- Mahony, Christina Hunt. "Children of the Light amid the 'risky dancers': Barry's Naïfs and the Poetry of Humanism." *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry*. Ed. Christina Hunt Mahony. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006: 83-98.
- Norgate, Paul. "Wilfred Owen and the Soldier Poets." *Review of English Studies* 40:160 (1989): 516-530.
- O'Toole, Fintan. "Introduction: A True History of Lies." *Plays 1* by Sebastian Barry. London: Methuen, 1997: vii-xiv.
- Owen Wilfred. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Cecil Day Lewis. London: Chatto and Windus, 1963.
- Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Trans. Brian Murdoch. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Whelan, Yvonne. *Reinventing Modern Dublin: Streetscape, Iconography and the Politics of Identity*. Dublin: UCD Press, 2003.
- Wroe, Nicholas. "A Life in Writing: Sebastian Barry." *Guardian Review*, 11 October 2008: 12-13.