Reinterpreting the Past: Inclusiveness in Siobhán Parkinson’s ‘Amelia’ Novels

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Abstract

Perhaps because of the colonial and post-colonial background of the Irish Republic, and the need for history to be re-interpreted for a new generation of young readers, historical fiction seems to have formed a larger than usual proportion of Irish children’s fiction. Siobhán Parkinson’s two novels set within the period of the First World War, both celebrate female heroism and take account of the heterogeneity of Irish nationalism by portraying the friendship between two young girls, one a Quaker girl and the other a Catholic. The novels can be seen as an attempt to restore history’s openness by recovering a feminist, socialist, ecumenical and pacifist nationalism as the basis for an open and creative re-imagining of Ireland.

Introduction

The last three decades have seen a dramatic change in Irish society and a major questioning of traditional underpinning values – namely Catholicism and territorial Nationalism – which were in the past inextricably linked to Irish national identity. Integration into the European Union and closer relations with Britain, resulting from the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, reflect an evolving and more flexible national identity with a stronger international dimension. An erosion in institutional authority in Ireland, particularly that of the Catholic Church, more liberal social attitudes and changes in family structure have led to a society in flux. The election in 1990 of the country’s first female president, the prominent feminist and human rights campaigner, Mary Robinson, and the appointment in 1997 of the first female Tánaiste, Mary Harney, highlighted the leadership potential of women in the public sphere. Unprecedented economic prosperity in the 1990s caused a reversion in emigration trends, with the return of emigrants and an inflow of immigrants resulting in a cultural diversity not yet fully mirrored in Irish children’s literature.

While Janet Fisher noted in 1996 that there had been a distinct falling off internationally in the number of historical stories published for children (1996: 375), Celia Kennan pointed out that historical fiction constituted a notably large proportion of children’s literature published in Ireland (1996: 69). Indeed, Keenan’s estimate that approximately a quarter of all books published for children in Ireland at that time consisted of books of predominantly historical interest, would suggest a disproportionate representation of historical fiction. The historical novel, of course, has particular significance in colonial and postcolonial countries and obviously Irish writers at the end of the last millennium felt a strong need to re-interpret Ireland’s past for a new generation of young readers. While many writers looked to the

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1 The Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed on November 15th 1985 by the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald. The Irish government were given an advisory role in the government of Northern Ireland and in return agreed that there would be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland unless the majority of its population voted to join the Republic.

2 The Good Friday or Belfast Agreement was signed on April 10th 1998 by the Irish and British governments and endorsed by most political parties in Northern Ireland. On May 23rd the Agreement was endorsed by the voters of Northern Ireland and on the same day voters in the Republic agreed to change the Irish Constitution in line with the Agreement.

past, however, they did so with the more inclusive viewpoint of a rapidly changing Ireland on the cusp of a new millennium.

In an essay entitled ‘History, Culture and Children’s Literature’, Tony Watkins described recent conceptualisations of history and its relationship to culture as characterised by ‘a lack of faith in the objectivity of historical study and, instead, an emphasis on the way the past is constructed or invented in the present’ (1996:32). Indeed the wider debate in Ireland in the 1990s regarding nationalist and revisionist historiography indicated, not only the importance of history to postcolonial national identity, but also the way in which ideology inevitably colours any construction of the past. Irish historical fiction for children published in the 1990s overwhelmingly shows a desire among Irish writers to balance opposing perspectives and to demonstrate inclusiveness in interpreting the past, a desire which acknowledges and respects the hybridity that is the hallmark of postcolonial culture. Michael Mullen’s novel The Little Drummer Boy (1989), for example, which is set during the Battle of the Boyne, attempts to balance Williamite and Jacobite perspectives by featuring boy protagonists from both sides of the divide. Similarly, the two boy characters in Tom McCaughren’s Ride a Pale Horse (1998), set during the 1798 uprising, come from opposing sides of the conflict. While the Catholic Gallagher sisters in Elizabeth O’Hara’s The Hiring Fair (1993) and No Peace for Amelia (1994) are set in 1914 and 1916 respectively. They relate the maturation of a Quaker girl, Amelia Pim, against a backdrop of impending war in Europe and nationalist unrest in Ireland. While the emphasis is on personal rather than public history, with neither novel overburdened by historical detail, Parkinson successfully conveys a complex range of political opinion, as characters voice contesting viewpoints and struggle to resolve their own inner doubts regarding the justification of violence in the resolution of political conflict. While the context for the self- interrogations of Amelia and the Catholic servant girl, Mary Ann, is the Great War in Europe and revolution in Ireland, such questions have obvious relevance to the initiatives for peace in Northern Ireland occurring during the 1990s. The Sinn Féin / SDLP peace initiative began in 1993 when the first of these novels was published and continued throughout 1994 when the second was written and 

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6 The Battle of the Boyne has particular significance for the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. Orange Order parades are held annually on the 12th of July to commemorate the victory of William of Orange over the forces of the Catholic King James. These parades can be occasions of sectarian and political tension and were often marked by violence in the recent past.

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published. Women, both north and south of the border, were becoming increasingly active in campaigning for peace, culminating in the foundation of the Northern Ireland’s Women Coalition\(^8\), a cross-cultural community political party promoting human rights, inclusion and equality. These same principles underpinned the presidency from 1990 to 1997 of Mary Robinson, who succeeded in incorporating traditional elements into a modern and enlightened national consciousness and significantly contributed to a redefinition of Irish identity at home and abroad.

In *Amelia* and *No Peace for Amelia*, Parkinson challenges the masculinist values linked to nationalism in the rhetoric generated by the Great War and the Easter Rising and, indeed, perpetuated in children’s literature through the cult of the male hero. In these novels female heroism is celebrated and the heterogeneity of Irish nationalism is restored as Parkinson engages in recovering, not only its feminist, but also its socialist and pacifist strands, both largely ignored by official post-independent nationalist historiography. Both books feature strong female characters. Amelia, her mother, her grandmother, and Mary Ann are resilient and resourceful people, who rise above hardship and demonstrate heroism through their humane treatment of others. By comparison, the male characters are rather weak and need taking care of. When Amelia’s father becomes bankrupt and the Pims must adapt to a very different standard of living, it is the women of the household who shoulder much of the responsibility. Mr. Pim, hitherto a hero in his daughter’s eyes, is distracted by his own sense of failure and seeks solace in alcohol. Mrs. Pim, initially a disappointment to Amelia due to her disregard of appearances, is regarded with a new respect by her daughter, whose own personal experience of prejudice gradually leads her to identify with her mother’s feminist beliefs. When Amelia’s mother is imprisoned for her suffragist activities, it is Amelia who holds the family together and nurses her younger brother Edmund though a dangerous illness. Amelia, who is initially a rather self-centred and spoilt girl, awakens within herself the heroism that her father is unable to muster in times of crisis.

Similarly, Mary Ann’s poverty-stricken family is dependent on her for support. Her mother is dying in a home for incurables and her father, depicted sitting in his coat and hat in the middle of his tenement room, reading an out-of-date newspaper while surrounded by hungry children, seems an oddly irrelevant figure. Parkinson’s depiction of both fathers is in line with the tradition of weak paternity in Irish literature for adults which Declan Kiberd relates to the necessity of self-creation of the upcoming generation (1996: 388). In contrast, strong mother figures, particularly the enlightened Mrs. Pim, are positive role models to which the younger generation can look for inspiration. Like the heroines of Séan O’Casey’s Dublin plays\(^9\), Parkinson’s female characters endure hardship through practical necessity. More important, however, Parkinson’s heroines transcend their hardship through self-realisation.

Perhaps the greatest heroism demonstrated by Amelia and Mary Ann is the genuine effort made by each of them to extend her imaginative vision comprehensively in order to accommodate that of the other. Parkinson’s choice of a Quaker heroine without strong nationalist or unionist affiliations renders more probable the friendship which occurs with the working class Mary Ann. The Quaker disregard of social distinction and Mrs. Pim’s socialist beliefs allow for the crossing over of class lines. When Amelia’s friends desert her after her family’s fall in fortune, it is to Mary Ann that she turns for much-

\(^8\) This non-sectarian political party was founded by a Catholic academic, Monica McWilliams, and a Protestant social worker, Pearl Sagar. The party was officially wound down in May 2006.

\(^9\) Juno and Mary Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* (1925), Nora in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926).
needed companionship. Amelia is surprised and offended at Mary Ann’s reluctance to allow her visit her family.

‘I don’t mean to be unkind, Amelia. It’s just that you’re used to better things. You’re a young lady.’

‘No!’ cried Amelia. ‘I’m just a ... well, a girl really, a girl like yourself, Mary Ann.’ She surprised herself by saying that, but what surprised her was not so much that she made such a claim, but that she didn’t give a fig any more for all that young lady nonsense. (A, 156)

Similarly, both girls are aware of differences in their religious observances, although neither fully understand her own, let alone the other’s, beliefs. Mary Ann is amused when Amelia confusedly attempts to explain the Quaker attitude to class distinction:

Now it was Mary Ann’s turn to wonder if Amelia wasn’t a bit soft in the head... saying they were friends and in the next breath seeming to change her mind about it, and now it seemed that something was against this girl’s religion. Mary Ann was blowed if she knew what exactly it was that was supposed to be against her religion, but she thought it best just to go along with her. Other people’s religion could be a touchy subject. (A, 20)

Amelia, in turn, is puzzled when Mary Ann describes Mrs. Pim as ‘a living saint’:

Amelia thought this was a strange thing to say. Of course, Amelia didn’t go to church, but she had seen inside one or two on a few occasions, and the statues of saints she had seen were mostly very dreary-looking people with long faces who would trip up if they were alive, because their eyes were always cast heavenwards. Mama wasn’t the least bit like any of them. (49)

When Amelia accompanies Mary Ann to Easter Vigil Mass in No Peace for Amelia, she is struck by the strange theatricality of the ceremony. Parkinson deliberately describes the Mass from the perspective of an outsider, thus estranging it from Catholic child readers. In response to Amelia’s questions afterwards, Mary Ann, to whom the Mass is not at all strange, privately thinks that ‘good and all as the Quakers certainly were, they were perhaps spiritually deprived in some way that was not their fault’ (NPA, 122). Significantly, however, ‘both girls thought their private thoughts and both of them kept their counsel.’ Parkinson’s implicit advocacy of religious tolerance here seems significant in the context of continuing sectarian tension in Northern Ireland. While both Amelia and Mary Ann are aware of differences in their religious practice and may even find that of the other strange, each understands to some extent that genuine practice of their respective faiths involves respect for human life. Religion, therefore, historically a divisive force, becomes in this context a unifying one, an aspiration that bears obvious relevance to the resolution of sectarian tension in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, while Mary Ann’s Catholicism is as integral to her identity as Amelia’s Quakerism is to hers, neither is equated to national identity.

The bond of friendship between Amelia and Mary Ann and their shared human experience is shown to be greater than the differences between them. Mary Ann secretly accompanies Amelia to the North Wall to see Frederick Goodbody off to the war in France despite her disapproval of Irish involvement in what she perceives as Britain’s war. Similarly, Amelia secretly helps Mary Ann’s brother, injured

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10 Since Catholicism has traditionally been the majority religion in the Republic of Ireland, this deliberate estrangement challenges the notion of Catholicism as the norm. The Amelia books were published by the O’Brien Press, whose books are read largely by an Irish readership. Parkinson may therefore have assumed that the majority of her readers would be Catholic.
during the Easter Rising and seeking refuge at the Pim home. More interesting than the girls’ disagreements regarding the relative merits of either war is the self-questioning of each as to the moral justification of any war. Amelia is torn between admiration of Frederick’s courage at making a stand, in defiance of the pacifism of the Quaker community, and doubt as to the worthiness of his cause. She is unsure whether he is fighting for his own country, in defence of small nations or in defence of the Empire, and when challenged by Mary Ann, is unsure whether these motives are compatible or mutually exclusive. She finds the glossy recruitment posters both alluring and repelling, and, while initially excited by the glory of war, is finally horrified by its violence. Her grief at Frederick’s death is worsened by guilt at having found Mary Ann’s brother attractive.

When Patrick suggests that everyone is anti-war at heart, that no one likes fighting and killing, Amelia retorts that such sentiments are not enough, that ‘you have to work for peace, not just have a distaste for war’ (NPA, 176). In a moment of realisation she recognises that pacifism can be an active rather than a merely passive stance, that working for peace requires conviction, commitment and courage. Amelia’s questioning and ultimate affirmation of the pacifist values of her upbringing take on greater significance, not only in the context of the Northern Irish peace process, in its early tentative stages at the time of the book’s publication, but also in the light of ongoing debates about Irish neutrality.

Mary Ann undergoes a similar self-questioning. A committed nationalist and socialist and a great admirer of Countess Markievicz, she is in sympathy with the 1916 revolutionaries but fears for the safety of her brother. Out of loyalty to the Pims and respect for their pacifist beliefs she refuses to hide a gun in their house:

Although she was in favour of the idea of armed rebellion, it was a bit different when it came to actual guns that might be used to shoot actual real live people being kept in your own bedroom. (NPA, 35-36)

She does, however, give refuge to her injured brother at a later stage, seeking Amelia’s help in nursing him and stowing him away to safety. Mary Ann is both excited at the prospect of revolution and national liberation and terrified at the inevitable violence involved. Relief at reading in the newspaper that the rising has been called off is mixed with disappointment. Disruption of the tram service on the family’s return from a pleasant Easter Monday picnic and rumours of trouble in town raise Mary Ann’s suspicions that the rising has begun. She experiences it indirectly through reading the newspapers and is horrified at the complacent indifference of suburban Dubliners going about their daily business ‘just as if Ireland hadn’t been proclaimed a republic at all and the country was just rolling along as usual under the old regime’ (NPA, 146). Her elation and apprehension at the ‘wonderful and terrible’ thing that was happening in their midst is reminiscent of Yeats’s ambiguous awe at the ‘terrible beauty’ of Easter 1916. While fully supporting the ideals of the revolutionaries - nationalist, feminist and socialist- she is doubtful as to the human cost of armed resistance and is relieved at the lucky escape of her own brother. She does not doubt the heroism of the revolutionaries but has scruples about such heroism.

A strong sense of value in both novels is Amelia’s feminist and socialist mother, Roberta, whose concern extends beyond the preservation of human life to genuine commitment to the improvement of the quality of life for all. Having worked alongside Countess Markievicz in Liberty Hall, providing relief for workers

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11 Countance Markievicz (1868-1927) was a prominent nationalist, feminist and socialist, a member of Sinn Féin, of Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) and an officer in the Irish Citizen Army.
during the 1913 lockout\textsuperscript{12}, she joins Cumann na mBan\textsuperscript{13} in the hope that women might bring a fresh perspective to the nationalist cause. While believing in the connection between national and female self-sufficiency, her pacifist beliefs do not allow her to attempt to achieve either through force. Parkinson successfully portrays the diversity of opinion within the suffragist movement itself and aligns Roberta with pacifists such as Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington\textsuperscript{14} who feared that feminist and social ideals would be sacrificed in a narrow militant nationalism. Such fears were indeed borne out by the conservatism of the state that emerged after independence. While the 1922 Constitution gave women full voting rights, in the decades after the civil war the role of women was redefined in purely maternal and domestic terms and enshrined as such in the Constitution of 1937. Religious minorities were also marginalised as state legislation largely reflected Catholic social thinking. Parkinson’s choice of a Quaker heroine is significant in this respect and helps restore those marginalised after independence to their valued place in Irish history. While the tone of No Peace for Amelia is one of questioning, it is predominantly positive – a story of hope, courage and inclusiveness.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Referring to the First World War and the Easter Rising, Declan Kiberd has claimed that ‘only a state anxious to repudiate its own origins could have failed – after a predictable period of post-independent purism – to evolve a joint ceremony which celebrated the men who served in either army’ (1996: 240). No Peace for Amelia is a form of joint commemoration rather than celebration. The overwhelming emphasis, however, is on the horror of war and the need for more creative resolution of conflict. The novel is ultimately a celebration of the heroism of women who actively work towards a peaceful and inclusive society. It is a call to detribalise history and acknowledge the hybridity integral to postcolonial national identity, to evolve beyond nationalism to a thoroughly renovated national consciousness. This is a difficult challenge in the context of continued political partition.

Parkinson’s Amelia novels, set during a particularly significant time in Irish history and published against a backdrop of peace initiatives in Northern Ireland, attempt to restore history’s openness by recovering a feminist, socialist, ecumenical and pacifist nationalism as the basis for an open and creative re-imagining of Ireland. If there is truth in Benedict Anderson’s observation that the problems facing many partitioned states stem from having been ‘insufficiently imagined’ (1996: 127), then perhaps it is through such inclusive re-imaginings that solutions may be found.

\textbf{Bibliography}


