

# Making Sense of the Senseless: An Irish Education

*Claudia W. Harris*

NOVEMBER 1982:

**I**'m out of breath. This past month I've passed both my written and oral exams and presented my prospectus. Now nothing stands in the way of my trip to Ireland except earning the money. But why is what I'm doing so very difficult for others to understand? I'm simply interested in the relationship between theater and politics. Perhaps I confuse people because I define theater in the broadest possible terms, not just plays performed on the stage or even in the street but as also including those scenarios we write for ourselves and perform for others to create a particular dramatic effect. I define politics broadly, as well, and include any behavior with a decidedly political aim.

Which brings me to the Irish. Naturally dramatic and overwhelmingly political, they seem to invite a study of theater as politics and politics as theater. Is there really, as I suspect, a literary renaissance developing in Northern Ireland, much like the one in turn-of-the-century Dublin? And if there is, what does that say about art growing out of conflict? Are Irish artists still involved politically as they have been in the past? And what role does theater play in all this?

I hope going there helps me define the interrelationship of theater to politics in a useful way. I want to explore, among other things, the theatrical quality to the hunger strikes and the accompanying pageant-like funerals. Often the

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*CLAUDIA W. HARRIS* briefly pursued her interest in theater at BYU but, still a first-quarter freshman, was cast as a professor's wife, then promptly married her co-star, Chet, who has since, as the script seemed to dictate, become a professor. Leaving her first love, Mount Timpanogos, she has followed her husband to Idaho, Samoa, Minnesota, and now Georgia, picking up on the way, incidentally, three children and other valuable adventures. Where she caught the Irish passion she does not know, but it refuses to wane even though she's now in the throes of writing her dissertation on Northern Ireland. A Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts, Emory University, she is also a writing consultant for government agencies. Honesty dictates that she admit the letters used in this essay were edited, but to cure long-windedness not to change content.

subject of dramatic literature, the hunger strike has also been a frequent political means. It is an ancient practice used by the Irish to shame their enemies. When Terrance MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork, died in Brixton Prison in 1920 after seventy-five days of fasting, Yeats rewrote the end of his 1904 play *The King's Threshold* so that the fasting poet dies on that threshold. Is this a case of life imitating art, then art imitating life?

JULY 1983:

I'm in the hospital. Here I've survived everything this year, even my son's wedding, and I couldn't walk out of the Federal Building without breaking my ankle. I'm scheduled to leave for Ireland in less than five weeks; all my plans seemed to crumble before my eyes. But I hopped over to the car, drove myself to the emergency room, and waited for the verdict. The doctor told me I'd still be hurting in two months which is, I suppose, ambiguous enough for me to go ahead.

AUGUST 1983:

The Aer Lingus tickets have arrived. What surprises me is that even after anticipating this trip to Ireland for several years and planning it seriously for the past year I am not now overjoyed at the prospect. But then I have never been totally on my own for longer than a week in my entire life. In some ways, I feel bereft. Just imagining being gone from everyone I know for four months makes me quake. I also feel somewhat desperate. I must in a relatively short time gather information from diverse individuals whose existence seems quite removed from my own. Since I am often fearful of new experiences and have no way of knowing how I will respond to this particular situation, my hesitation is no doubt understandable, though curious. I have told almost anyone who would listen about going. Was it a hedge against faintheartedness? Was I simply trying to make it impossible not to go?

I'm not sleeping. It's not the pain from my ankle. I have finally admitted to myself that I'm afraid. Funny! To anyone who has expressed fear for my safety, I've given the rational response: statistically I'm safer in Northern Ireland than I am in Atlanta. But that London *Sunday Times* picture of a Belfast street still haunts me. On the left, nine soldiers in riot gear crouch next to a building with their backs to the camera. Bricks are strewn all over the street. The disposition of the crowd in the distance is not clear. But in the center of the picture are two mature women walking hand in hand toward the camera, past the soldiers and barricades, talking animatedly and swinging their purses. I could see myself on that street. When I showed Chet the picture, concern crept into his voice for the first time, "Are you going to be in situations like that?" I answered, "I hope so." Which was less than candid. I've written my will after all these years of procrastination.

I'm sleeping soundly again. Once I identified what was bothering me, I gave myself permission to come back down to Dublin if Belfast is too frighten-

ing. My committee would accept a dissertation which did not focus on Northern Ireland. Besides, going there was my own idea which gives me ultimate control. I'm trying to be flexible about everything except not going. After all, the tickets are in the drawer, the money is in the bank, my schedule is cleared. It's being on my own for that long and my ankle that gives me pause.

But my ankle might be a blessing in disguise. I could easily have put my foot up on a pillow and chosen a new topic which required relatively safe library research. But I've never considered that alternative nor delaying my departure. Apparently I'm determined to take Ireland any way I can, even on crutches.

#### SEPTEMBER 1983:

Dublin is more charming than I expected. I feel comfortable and at the same time alien. I'm surprised at how easily I've adjusted to busses and money and phones and accents. And I needn't have worried about being alone because I haven't felt lonely since I got on Aer Lingus in New York. In fact, I would almost welcome the feeling.

There's an urgency here among Church members to know and believe that I haven't felt in meetings for a long time. The buildings look like any Church structure, and the members could fit in very well in the Atlanta Ward — until they open their mouths. The accents are obvious, of course, but there's also a definite increase in verbal ability. Testimony meetings are quite enthusiastic. One man bore stirring testimony to the gifts of the Spirit; he said that after he received the Holy Ghost he was not only then able to write poetry but play-scripts as well. Now am I wrong in thinking his testimony might be uniquely Irish?

When I announce that I'm researching the relationship between theater and politics in the North, all sorts of people seem quite delighted to share their strong opinions with me. Everyone talks politics. There are so many Northerners living in Dublin it's easier than I anticipated. I limp around much of the day shaking my head in wonder at each new conquest — whether it's lunch in the Dail (parliament) with a politician or cocoa in a tea room with a poet or club orange late at night in a pub with a revolutionary. My audacity scares my landlady a little; she thinks I'm fearless. I smile when she scolds me for taking risks because so far, despite my earlier dread, I have felt no fear; but then, I'm still in Dublin.

My meeting with Ulick O'Connor was typical of many. He's a poet and playwright and something of a TV personality. At the beginning in the coffee shop he was perfunctory and businesslike but it was fun watching him warm up. When he found out that I was interested in the hunger strikes, he told me he'd written a poem about them. He took my gold pen and wrote the three stanzas in my notebook, talking as he wrote. Then he recited the poem and explained a couple of slang terms. At one point, he stood up and looked over a divider. I thought he was expecting someone, but no. He was making sure there weren't any British spies around. Now that sounds crazy, but the news has

just broken here about several spies, some who have been at organizational meetings he's attended. Sometimes I feel as if I'm on the front lines and I haven't gone North yet. He said he was concerned that if they saw me with him I might be implicated. These gallant Irishmen!

There seems to be ready consensus in Dublin that Britain is responsible for Irish problems both North and South. That came through clearly when I toured Kilmainham Jail. To see the names of Irish revolutionaries above cell doors and to hear the recitation of the struggle moved me to tears. I do feel curiously patriotic; a couple of times I've caught myself purposely keeping quiet on the street or in shops and wondering if I could pass for Irish. But despite this game, I'm asking tough questions and spotting biases easier.

Contrary to my experience in Atlanta, people here seem to grasp instantly what I'm trying to do. They readily supply me with instances of life in Ireland becoming theater. And I must say, I'm pleasantly surprised. I didn't expect the dramatic aspects of life to be so pervasive or so self-conscious. In fact, my thesis now seems rather inevitable. Irishmen don't find it remarkable, either. Ted Smyth, the press officer for the New Ireland Forum laughed when he learned I was researching the relationship between theater and politics. "What's the difference?" he asked. When I replied, "That's my thesis," he said, "It's a good thesis."

Getting the press pass was an inspired move. I've managed to get in places as a journalist that would have been closed to an academic. Attending sessions of the New Ireland Forum open to the press has been my single most useful activity in Dublin. Forty-two representatives from the four nationalist parties of Ireland, North and South, are meeting to hammer out a consensus solution to the crisis in the North. These parties, dedicated to constitutional politics rather than violence, represent eighty percent of the inhabitants of the entire island. But the idea that these bitter political opponents could achieve consensus on anything seems incredible. And as if the situation were not dramatic enough, the setting for the forum is Dublin Castle — that symbol of British imperialistic rule. But the plush meeting-room is in no way reminiscent of the castle dungeon which imprisoned so many Irishmen. The five Waterford chandeliers hanging below skylights dispel any gloom and cast a purely Irish tone.

The form of the meetings matches the dignity of the room. The debate is seldom explosive, unlike the style of other political assemblies on the island. Nearly 300 position papers have been submitted to the forum, most coming unsolicited from individuals and groups of all persuasions. And then they question formally many of the writers. But even when Northern Unionists present their starkly contrasting views, the dignity is maintained. And yet, paranoia is rife. When I talk to the participants, they are all ready to accuse the other groups of wanting to undermine the goal of the forum. For them to arrive at a solution to a problem which has eluded successful compromise for 600 years seems impossible.

But the problem itself is elusive. Observing the New Ireland Forum has taught me how complex the situation in the North is. I'm very suspicious now

of anyone who gives me simple solutions, such as “Brits out!” Even what to call the place becomes an issue. Northern Ireland is not recognized officially as a political entity by the majority on this island; in fact, the North is included under the Southern constitution. And knowing what to call the participants is even more difficult. Whether Protestant or Catholic, unionist or nationalist, loyalist or republican, or even British or Irish — any of these efforts to categorize also polarizes. The population in the North doesn’t fall into these neat categories. The usual practice of identifying two distinct warring populations only describes the extremes and alienates the majority. Many Northern residents now reject all labels as being inappropriate descriptions, but still they frequently use Catholic or Protestant to indicate background or culture not religion. How did I ever choose to study a place I can’t appropriately designate with a problem I can’t clearly identify and with participants I can’t adequately name?

The only negative aspect of being here is my broken ankle. Even having my wallet stolen seemed to fit the texture of Dublin, and I’ve survived the loss. I now have an Irish driver’s license which makes me feel more a part of the place. But when I hurt as I do nearly all the time, I begin to question what I’m getting. Impressions, biases. It’s all so amorphous. I guess the choice was coming and being miserable but stimulated or staying home and being miserable but frustrated and disappointed as well. Not much choice. Coming was really all I could do. But sometimes I’ve been physically ill, not from the pain but from the effort it takes.

But my ankle is really the only hitch. Things have worked so smoothly in my favor I know I can’t take full credit for making it happen. Just being in Dublin in late September means theater seems like the city’s main focus. Even John McEnroe’s rather stormy visit didn’t eclipse the twenty-fifth annual Dublin Theatre Festival. During these two weeks, forty-two productions have been staged in eighteen venues. Although the term *venue* implies the festival use of several spaces not designed as theaters, there are nonetheless, fifteen theaters in the city center, some tucked away in alleys or residential neighborhoods. Other productions have been held in the mayor’s home, churches, and even a pub. More than 150 outdoor performances and productions at universities and clubs, although not part of the official festival, have added to the overwhelmingly theatrical atmosphere. Luncheon and late-night theater have made it possible for me to see three productions a day. That and the festival’s generosity — free passes to anything I wanted to see. I concentrated on theater from and about the North. This festival has always been the main audience for new Irish plays and has given me a chance to see the work of theater companies from throughout the island.

I am genuinely surprised to see how well I’m able to play this role — not exactly pushy but clearly not the secure role I play at home. Frankly, I have thrived. I feel more in control and even more outgoing toward life. I really set myself up for a good time. My work is reading newspapers, seeing plays, talking to interesting people, and even writing here in my room with my toasty gas heater on and hot chocolate to drink. What a life!

But enough of comfort; it's time to go North. I am beginning to feel ready, even anxious, to go.

### OCTOBER 1983:

Now that I'm comfortably settled in Belfast, I'm amused that I hesitated. I delayed my departure twice, partly because Dublin is such a seductive place. So many doors were open it was hard to turn away, especially since I was inundated daily with the war news. On the train to Belfast I unfolded my map of Ireland and laid it on the seat next to me, just as I would spread it out on my bed in Dublin as I'd read the reports of the conflict — the jail breaks, killings, bombings. I followed the map now because I wanted to know the moment the train passed over the border. I felt tingly from excitement. I laugh about that first crossing now. After ten crossings, I know that the only readily discernible difference is that the roads in the North are better. I felt good about my time in Dublin: I'd interviewed thirty-two people and seen thirty-one plays, thanks in part to the Dublin Theatre Festival. But I hated to start over again making those initial contacts, those endless phone calls. I'll probably never again be able to pass a phone booth without thinking I need to call someone about something. I figure it takes at least ten calls to make one appointment.

So pulling into the new train station (the old one is bombed out), I wondered how I'd be able to continue the pace. I felt as if I were running after something but would never catch it, or even know clearly what I was chasing. And yet, I kept on running. Then at other times, I felt as if I were trying to take a drink from a firehose. And yet, sputtering and engulfed, I continued somehow to be ready for more.

Riding in the taxi from the station through the barricaded downtown and up the bombed-out Springfield Road, I was struck by the ugliness of the city. There was no instant recognition here as in Dublin. I felt no comfortable sense of place. These were alien surroundings, even if the taxi driver did try to kiss me and wouldn't give me back enough change. I had chosen to board on the worst side of town on what they call the peaceline. Belfast is masterful at euphemisms — *peaceline* for warline, *troubles* for war. I lived in no-man's land between the Catholic sections of Falls and Turf Lodge and the Protestant Shankill. That decision proved to be one of my best. Had I stayed in the proffered lodgings by Queen's University in Stranmillis, I would have missed the daily confrontation with the essential paradox of Belfast. I have never felt warmer, more taken care of, more cordially received anywhere. And yet, the road blocks, the searches, the tanks, and military personnel all are a constant reminder that this is a war zone. The headlines scream daily of atrocities and they do not lie: the day I arrived the courthouse was blown up in Omagh and a policeman was blown up in Derry. But the quality of my life has never been better.

I did not feel warmth initially. My first time downtown after being searched three times in fifteen minutes and getting abrupt answers to questions and being unable to find an open restroom (most are closed for fear of bombers), I felt overwhelmingly discouraged. The cursory nature of the searches was far

from comforting. Anyone who wanted to carry a bomb past the barricades could easily do it. The searches seemed more like harrassment than protection; they were reminders of war but did not prevent war-like acts. Rather than abandon my goal after an unpleasant morning, however, I persisted and went to Queen's University. I'm glad I did.

After only three days in Belfast, I was in the faculty lounge after a playwright's presentation to the English Society meeting at Queens. I observed myself talking to these people and drinking my inevitable club orange and realized that I had been accepted, befriended. It seemed so much easier than it would have been in America. Here I was in a room with poets, playwrights, producers, directors, professors, politicians, reporters, and critics who seemed genuinely interested in me and my research.

The intimacy of Belfast continues to delight me. To be called by name in a shop and reminded we'd met at a party, or to be hailed from a theater balcony by actresses I'd interviewed, or to be recognized at a play by a member of the audience as having been at the BBC that day, or to be seated in a restaurant next to writers I'd wanted to meet, or to be approached at the Crown Court by a journalist who had acted in a community theater production I'd attended, all seem to belie a city of 360,000. The contrast between what I felt that first morning and what I felt after only three days in Belfast was incredible; I had felt alone enough to want to go home for the first time since I'd been in Ireland, and now I wanted to stay a long time and come back again whenever I could.

Nothing irritates them more here than for the media to focus only on the conflict, so I suspected, at first, that the treatment I was getting was reserved for journalists. But I do not believe I was treated specially. There is a warmth, call it Northern hospitality, that they also experience as the fundamental quality of their lives. I felt it among the rich and the poor, among artists, businessmen, politicians, policemen, and paramilitary. They did not seem to see it as paradoxical that warmth could coexist with violence. In fact, when I brought up the issue they would laugh, especially those who knew I came from Atlanta. How could *I* talk about murder and mayhem! When I tried to explain that what went on in Atlanta was either crimes for gain or crimes of passion, they would deplore our situation: "But that's awful, people dying for no purpose!"

If I had expected to find the good guys wearing white hats and the bad in black, I was soon disabused. There really are no villains here although the society is so polarized that people are convinced there are. I have often wished that everyone in the North could have experienced all the diverse and often warring groups as I have. I do believe that what is missing is a recognition of the opponent's underlying humanity. Since I know their capacity for warmth, I want them to reach out to their enemies as they've reached out to me. A Protestant learned I'd walked along Falls Road and asked me, "Didn't you feel the evil there?" Several days later a Catholic expressed surprise that I'd ventured down Shankill Road and said, "Didn't you feel the evil there?"

I had decided before I came to Ireland to listen to anyone who would talk to me, but apparently that's unique. Most people who come here talk to one

side. Northerners themselves usually only talk to those who agree with them. And anytime things begin to look better, new violence widens the rift. To say there are no villains needs explanation. One of the chilling things for me was knowing that a person I was talking to, who was being reasonable and warm and witty, actually condoned killing and had even participated in the violence. Somehow I would have expected to dislike people whose values are so different from my own. At those times, when I pull back from a spontaneous expression of my own warmth, I feel most like an alien. But I persist. Everyone I talk to gives me two or three more names of people I must see. I figure if I stayed long enough I could meet everyone in Ireland. I leave the house at nine in the morning and return close to midnight. The crush of ideas and experiences and personalities often threatens to overpower me. I left my crutches in Dublin but I'm still limping and exhausted. Here I am, trying to understand what I am coming to believe can only be understood not solved. But my own human helpfulness cries out for more.

The Church is a bright spot in the North. It seems to be one of the few institutions that is bridging the gap, that is even working. I'm pleased that at least we have been able to unite Ireland ecclesiastically; since last spring there is only one LDS mission on the island. But the unity is not perfect. Despite the obvious love and caring in the Church, we have Protestant Mormons and Catholic Mormons. Members are very aware of cultural roots, and political divisions sometimes divide the Church. The Derry branch often meets in a hotel on the Protestant Waterside because of the repeated vandalism the building on the Catholic Bogside has suffered. Bombs have been planted on cars in the parking lot, not randomly, but because members who were formerly in the security forces are now on a paramilitary deathlist. But one Saturday when the branch president and his wife came to work around the building and practice the organ and found feces spread on the walls, benches, and carpets, they decided to board up the building for a time. On the next day they met in the building which they'd cleaned late into the night. Somehow word of the desecration had spread, and members they hadn't seen for years came to help. But now they meet each Sunday on one side or the other of the River Foyle. When the meeting is on the Bogside, some members don't feel they can safely attend. But when it's on the Waterside, others don't feel they can come. They fear for their lives. And a thriving congregation of 200 has dwindled to 20.

Attending Ian Paisley's Memorial Free Presbyterian Church was a stark contrast, although my landlady thought the IRA was going to plant a bomb on her car outside the church. There were 400 present, mostly old and female, but the huge church still seemed empty. Paisley stood all in black in his fortress-like pulpit. Surely here was a villain. I had read his pronouncements and abhorred his politics; I was fully prepared to dislike him intensely. I'm glad his subject was not politics because I could get past my own prejudices and listen carefully to how he, as another Christian, viewed the world. He really does believe that environment has more to do with a person's sinning than willfulness. The picture Paisley paints is of a siege; a person must guard against every evil influence — be it a wife, a child, a neighbor. There didn't seem to



be any room to reach out in love or forgiveness. He orchestrated his performance, capitalizing on every nuance of voice and emotion. I found him loud and brash but also pitiful. As his stories accumulated, a picture of an evil, fearful world grew. I understand now why he fears popery, as he calls Catholicism. If the world really is as he describes, then any belief contrary to his own threatens him. If life is a siege, there is no room for compromise. So even Paisley I found to be human. I pity him for the world he has constructed around himself; I pity others that he has induced to enter his world. But no one approached him that night. No one even raised his hand to accept Paisley's Christ.

People here react variously to the conflict. Many try to ignore it entirely, going on with their lives in whatever fashion possible. As long as a friend or neighbor or family member is not killed or maimed, that works for many. Some talk about the conflict and deplore the killing but lead lives essentially divorced from any involvement. They emphasize the quality of their lives, not the disjunction. Others express their dissatisfaction in peaceful ways. They work in community centers, in education, in labor movements, in the arts. Still others become activists and work in peace movements or as politicians or in the security forces. The line between this group and the extremists is often hard to draw because many politicians and other activists are also in paramilitary groups. The range of extremism varies because many extremists expound rather than act, encouraging others in their terrorist acts.

But it seems to me that to ignore the conflict would require a level of psychological denial which would not be healthy. Since 1969, the conservative estimate is that 2,300 people have been killed and another 24,000 have been wounded. Sixty percent of those killed have been civilians unassociated with any of the security forces or paramilitary groups. Those 2,300 deaths over the last fourteen years might seem slight at first but that would be equivalent to 325,000 sectarian killings in the United States for the same period. Often arbitrary, the shootings and bombings have killed twice as many Catholics as Protestants even though Protestants outnumber Catholics in the North two to one. In fact, it was to protect the Catholic minority that the British Army first entered Northern Ireland in August 1969. Britain has increased its control since then to the present direct-rule arrangement. The New Ireland Forum has figured the cost of the conflict the past fourteen years at \$15 billion, North and South.

I believe Martin Luther King, Jr., may be the most admired American in Northern Ireland. Groups of all the different persuasions mentioned him to me as someone who had the answer. And yet paradoxically, nonviolent movements in Ireland have been met with violence. When I mention Bloody Sunday, when thirteen young men were shot in Derry by British paratroopers in 1972 during a peaceful march, many try to tell me there were really guns in the crowd even though no government inquiry has been able to prove it. The violence in the North since 1969 grew out of America's protest movement. But violent reaction to an essentially nonviolent effort has created terrorists. Most of the young men that I talked to who are now actively involved in paramili-

tary activities began as committed nonviolent activists who were then literally beaten into the belief that nonviolence doesn't work. In 1968 the IRA had decided that violence didn't work and had abandoned that method for political ones. The IRA owned six guns when the trouble began in the North.

This creation of terrorists continues. Policemen laughed as they told me of the rock-throwing games they play with children, of the harassment, of circling the block to get in another lick — all power plays. They admitted that many of their activities in West Belfast were provocative and actually heightened the tension. As I walk along Springfield Road past the barricaded police stations, as I see policemen drive past, two standing up back to back in their armored land rovers, rifles at the ready, as I observe the army warily patrolling the streets, dodging in and out of doorways — the contrast with other parts of the city is striking. There is very little security presence elsewhere. I can understand why everyone calls it a war even though the government will not acknowledge it openly.

I realize I have become the picture that frightened me when I was still in Atlanta. I walk along the streets and never look at the police or the army unless they stop me. I see but ignore the guns trained on me. I submit to searches, not willingly but with resignation. And I am curiously unafraid. The violence here is so arbitrary that if I were fearful it would be uncontrollable. I am not even safe in my room — it looks over a police yard and terrorists could come to bomb the yard or hold hostages. To be afraid here would be like *knowing* a car would hit me every time I crossed the street or that every mushroom I ate would be poisonous or that I would be shot every time a gun was trained on me. I find that I disassociate myself from the street scene; it is drama to be observed but not lived. And if I can so easily become alienated and part of the enemy, I can understand the alienation those in Belfast feel. Many tell me they are unaware of the tension they're feeling until they leave the country and the pall lifts.

I went to Crown Court to hear the Lord Chief Justice Sir Robert Lowry sentence ten whom Kevin McGrady had accused of terrorist acts. McGrady's case is an interesting one because he is an informer that the police did not turn. He had escaped to the Netherlands and then became involved with a religious group there. Once he was "born again," he felt the need to relieve his conscience and returned to Northern Ireland to confess his crimes. That he also implicated many others does not make him a very popular Christian.

The whole system of juryless trials based on uncorroborated evidence from an informer/accomplice would not be acceptable elsewhere in Britain. No authority wholeheartedly supports it here but most excuse it in terms of the end justifying the means. The trial appalled me. No one spoke up — the judge, the barristers mumbled their parts. If I couldn't hear from the press box, how could the defendants who were twice as far away hear? One who was sentenced to seven years actually thought the judge had released him. The anti-theatrical nature of the trial bothered me but it was the way the judge dealt with the testimony that overwhelmed me. The judge began by asserting: "This war is being waged by organizations which style themselves armies and observe

military procedures, but it has not invaded, and will not be allowed to invade, the courts" (Unpublished Verdict, pp. 7-8). The judge then acquitted four of the accused:

To have convicted on any of the counts in these groups of charges would have been a perversion of justice according to law, so contradictory, bizarre and in some respects incredible was McGrady's evidence and so devious and deliberately evasive was his manner of giving it. One can only speculate on the reason for the frailties of his evidence on which counsel have pertinently commented. Were they due only to faulty memory? Obviously not, since the witness dug pits for himself by trying to evade his pursuers. Were the glaring absurdities due merely to a foolish desire to "improve" a good case? Did McGrady believe that those whom he accused were guilty and then pretend to have been present? Or did he make the whole thing up? I find it hard to say, but perhaps the choice is between the second and third hypotheses. Whatever be the true explanation, the absurdities were too great to allow the cases to stand and this must gravely affect *this particular witness's* credibility when he is unsupported by other evidence (pp. 11-12).

And yet based on the testimony of McGrady who had pleaded guilty to twenty-seven charges, including three murder charges, Judge Lowry sentenced the six other defendants to terms in prison ranging from seven years to life imprisonment. The forty-page document, which he read in a monotone, traces where, in the judge's opinion, McGrady was lying and where he was telling the truth. During one of the breaks in the trial, a member of the Church who works in the court visited with me. I felt sorry for the good man as, avoiding my eyes, he whispered that the trials were not good but what other method was available? The concept that when you diminish another's civil rights you diminish your own is foreign to Northern Ireland. I believe the war has invaded the courts despite what Judge Lowry asserts.

Not all of my activities this month were as serious as this recitation implies. I went with the cast of Martin Lynch's new play *Crack Up* to Coleraine. It was fun riding in the van with them talking about the play. I was even so audacious as to suggest a couple of script changes to Martin. He is a young working class, socialist playwright who is fighting hard to retain his working-class status. He still lives in Belfast's Turf Lodge although he could probably afford much better. In fact, *Crack Up* is about the stress families suffer once the lure of middle-class respectability divides them.

But the biggest coup this month was getting Paddy Devlin to see me. He's the most elusive politician I've pursued. One night I went in the Forum Hotel which like so many buildings in Belfast is a minifortress. It has huge gates and a security check. It has been bombed twenty-seven times, perhaps because it's a favorite hangout for journalists. But it was warm and the phones worked. I kept calling the various numbers I had for Paddy; I finally reached his wife who said he'd be home in an hour. I waited and called again. I knew I'd be able to persuade him if I could just talk to him, and I did. Every appointment I make seems like a small victory.

Seeing City Hall where I met Paddy was in itself worth the effort. It's this marvelous barricaded building in the center of Belfast which is closed now to anyone without legitimate business. Paddy came to the door to vouch for me

and then took me into a conference room adjacent to his office. He is a Belfast city councilor who has long been a promoter of theater. Now fifty-nine, he was a member of the IRA from age eleven to twenty-five. He was interned for three years when he was seventeen. Internment or imprisonment without trial has been repeatedly practiced in Northern Ireland. At twenty-five Paddy joined the Labor Party and has been a socialist/labor politician since, often serving as the leader of his party. He has written several plays and possesses that wonderful Irish belief that art really can make a difference. He's much more hopeful about art and education than I am. Right now Paddy is a loner, besieged on every side. He exposed corruption in City Hall and now says they're out to get him. He told me that Watergate was the greatest thing to him — that you would get rid of a president because he lied, that was wonderful. No one should lie or do any other bad thing. He angrily denounced the killing and those who supported it, saying he didn't care anymore if they shot him. The tape is punctuated with his salty language and with his apologies to me for using it.

Paddy writes plays to try to change people's lives. My heart went out to this dedicated socialist. He really believes the labor movement is the answer to the problems of Belfast and that his socialist plays might educate people. We sat there looking out at the city as the daylight faded, and Paddy talked about what a good place Belfast is. If you can look past the faded splendor, the seediness that's crept in, you recognize the spirit here! You feel it in the Church; you feel it in the arts; you feel it in public and private life. It's a vitality I haven't felt in America for a long time.

## NOVEMBER 1983

Dear Chet,

It's after midnight so it's really the 3rd which means I've been here two months. It usually seems much shorter than that to me but tonight I feel like I've been here forever and really am bogged down in it all.

I began the day talking to an Official Unionist Assemblyman, Edgar Graham. He's a law professor at Queen's University, Oxford trained. He's polished, intelligent, reasonable. He's also admirable and can be seen as a man of good will. I sat in his neat office at Queens, him in a pinstripe suit, having a stimulating intellectual discussion about the North and the conflict.

From there I rushed to the Sinn Fein (IRA) headquarters on Falls Road and talked to politicians there. The only thing cozy about these surroundings was the fireplace that we huddled by. Here I talked to three committed young men, also admirable and men of good will.

Neither Graham nor they would have much good will toward each other, although Graham does have a more reasonable attitude toward Sinn Fein than other Unionists. I then walked home along bombed-out streets, shopping for newspapers along the way, observing people and my own feelings. I've been asked if I don't feel the evil as I walk through these Catholic areas. I can honestly say all I notice is the poverty and the soldiers. I passed so close today to so many of them and even saw one crouched in a doorway with his gun trained in my direction. There is no such presence over by Queens.

Well, I was home for awhile writing and processing, then walked over to see Des Wilson, a priest who is very much a part of the republican movement now. Not that

he's participated at all with terrorism but he knows firsthand what generates it. He's a modern saint if there is such a thing outside the Church. To get to him I had to walk through one of the worst slum areas I've been in. I hesitated for a moment to walk past the barricade into Ballymurphy because I could see about twenty children with huge sticks chasing a couple of men. The men jumped into a truck and drove off as the children beat on the truck and hollered and ran after them. I swallowed hard and proceeded down the hill. Those beautiful little children swarmed around me and I talked to them as I walked on. The area is bleak, almost all cemented over. There's no way to blame those children for their circumstances and yet there they are, caught.

Well, I had a wonderful two-hour conversation with Des, this good man who has been pretty much removed from any position within the Catholic Church because of his political activities. He comes from a very wealthy family across town and the church assigned him to Ballymurphy, this poor area that he now cannot leave. The church has left him but he found a house here and he continues to work with families and prisoners. I tell you enough so you will also see him to be honorable and admirable. He's a man of good will, too.

When I left and walked back, I cried a little because of the impossibility of any solution. They all know what they want but do not really understand the limits of the other and so the conflict proceeds. And all those little children become the next participants in this age-old battle. I see them all as men and women of good will and I care about them regardless of their politics. I want to make sense of the senseless, I suppose.

I just wish I could give everyone in Ireland the same experience I've had these last two months. Surely they'd be affected by what I've heard and seen — maybe not in the same way, but surely somewhat. I try to share what I hear with my landlords. They are such good people and recognize the obvious bigotry but don't recognize their own. You see the Catholics don't really want to make anything of themselves, they really are different from other people, they like living in squalor, they only want a handout. This was the response I got when I mentioned the poor area I'd been in, that and the fact that it had been a nice area when Protestants lived there. But poverty seems to look the same regardless of the color or the features. And when there are no jobs for anyone except Protestants, what are the alternatives?

Enough of this discouraging litany. I love you and miss you.

Claudia

The next afternoon I met Ciaran McKeown, one of the Peace People. He spoke at the United Nations after his group received the Nobel Peace Prize, which incidentally he deplored getting, but said none of it had any effect on Ireland. He had questioned whether he could help me, then talked nonstop for two hours. A pacifist and ascetic, he described the early civil rights marches that he'd led from Queens and the fearful beatings they'd endured. At one point he looked at me with his piercing eyes and said that nonviolence will only work if all parties agree to the rules. Even this dedicated nonviolent activist has been taught to question the method. He quoted Camus a great deal, saying since everyone is capable of murder he made sure he never had a gun. He talked of the difficulty of being a moderate in a polarized society such as this; anyone who doesn't take an extreme position is considered a traitor.

That evening, I heard Martin Lynch speak at Queens and the socialists in town really turned out. There was the usual gathering in the lounge afterward and then Martin took me home. The next day I met Maura McCrory, chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee Against Informers, who has a son in the

Maze Prison. Then that night Charabanc had me to dinner and gave me a wonderful interview about their beginnings and their plans — these five actresses who overcame unemployment by forming their own theater group and writing their own plays. The morning of November 5th, I spent at Sinn Fein advice centers getting the standard tour but was able to ask pointed questions, too. I then saw Sue Triesmann who is British and teaches theater at the Ulster Polytechnic; she's the first person I'd talked to who wanted to get out of Northern Ireland. Hillary Bryans, a reporter with Ulster TV during the hunger strikes, was my next contact. And then I rushed to meet Patrick Sanford, the artistic director of the Lyric Theatre. I helped him audition a young man for a part in *Oliver*, his Christmas offering. Patrick gave me dinner and I saw O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* and Yeats's *Dreaming of the Bones* there at the Lyric. *Shadow*, set in 1920, is about the Irish War of Independence; *Dreaming* is about an even earlier war. But seeing the two plays together in the present-day context makes me realize that nothing ever changes.

When I got home after the play, the house was full of people staying over so they could go to stake conference the next morning. I gather I'm something of a curiosity because everyone wanted to meet the American on Sunday morning. Here they all were, ready for conference, and yet talking about the conflict and how to solve it. But what they were talking about as a solution was killing people. It was a strange experience because I'd met some of the people they thought should be done away with. But that gives me an advantage. I could sit there and listen to them talk about the benefits of dictatorships, bringing back internment, shooting on suspicion, and not judge them either. I can appreciate their frustrations in living in such lawless surroundings. I find myself in a very hurtful place. I don't approve of the killing, whoever does it. I certainly don't approve of the IRA, INLA, UDA, or UVF, although I understand the history behind these Catholic and Protestant paramilitary groups. Not everyone can be Ciaran McKeown and stay above the hate and violence, but wouldn't it be a better world if we could?

Late in November I rented a car and drove to Derry. After being in Belfast, spending time in a city with a Catholic majority was quite a contrast. There are no barricades or searches either; that gives the impression of a more open city which I did not find to be true. The difference between the haves and the have-nots was still pronounced. All weekend it was a dizzying back and forth—Waterside, Bogside; Protestant, Catholic; rich, poor. It seemed to be the most divided, divisive place I'd been, although residents were surprised if I said so. I talked to John Hume, the leading Catholic politician in the North, and Brian Friel, the leading Catholic playwright. But most of my time in Derry was spent in the homes of prisoner's families. These mothers talked about their sons in the Maze with such pride — much as I discuss my sons away at university. But I was struck by the discipline problems I observed and wondered if you can teach children respect for the law selectively. If it's all right to murder and steal for the cause, why then isn't it all right to be abusive at home and lie to parents? The vandalism here in the North seems to point to a general breakdown in society.

If I could use only one word as an impression of Derry it would be anger. Whether I was being given the Catholic or Protestant tours of the city, or being given the recitation of police brutality and prison abuse, or being railed at because of Irish-American support for the violence, the tone was angry. I was glad to escape to a mansion on the river where Jennifer Johnston, a novelist and playwright, gave me dinner and a good chat by the fire. She sees Derry very differently than I do, as a peaceful but dynamic place. When I left her, I went to a poetry reading, my choice for my last activity in Derry. I did feel comforted and calmed somewhat. The next morning I left with people asking to see me. But I had heard enough and for the first time in Ireland left a place without regret.

DECEMBER 1983:

I am leaving Ireland now after interviewing over a hundred people and seeing sixty plays. The things which concerned me initially were easily solved. I seldom felt alone and even my ankle which still hurts terribly has not deterred me. How could I have done more with two sound ankles? Someone asked if I was ever in danger here. I don't know. Various groups let me know subtly that they'd checked on me and knew where I was living. One Protestant paramilitary group had even figured out I was a Mormon. To fundamental Protestants, Mormonism is much worse than Catholicism. I never felt physically threatened although my beliefs and emotions have suffered an onslaught. But the experience overall has been so positive. Just what I have learned about my own power to overcome adversity, my capacity to look for the good in people and situations, my persistence when the circumstances seem impossible was worth the trip.

My time in the North had changed me. I could tell when I visited Kilmainham again and shed no tears for the revolutionaries. I almost mourn my lost innocence. It was easier when I thought there were simple solutions. And then there is the fear I feel for the friends I'm leaving behind. When I write or talk about my experience, I use only the names of those individuals already publicly known. I worry about the member of the Church whose wife won't let him attend because he's already been a target of a bomb at the church building. I worry about the young policeman and his pregnant wife who have been forced to sell their new home because he's on a deathlist according to an informer. His crime? He is a Catholic on the force. I even worry about the teachers and artists and politicians and other people of good will whom I've met, those whose main goal is to live lives devoid of violence. And I worry about those children in Ballymurphy and elsewhere who might be recruited into a new wave of violence.

This fear for my Irish friends is not irrational. I was watching TV when I heard Edgar Graham's death announced. He was the young Unionist I'd admired for his straightforward approach although I didn't agree with all he said. I sank onto the bed, sick as I thought of the waste. He was shot 7 December in the street outside his Queen's office, shot five times in the head by the

IRA. He had had a more reasonable attitude toward them than other Unionist politicians. He did not condemn the IRA more than any other group; he spoke out against all paramilitary activity on all sides of the conflict. He told me there was no hope for peace until all groups rejected violence. And there he lay on the street in a pool of his own blood only twenty-nine years old. My mind raced. Had I said something to anyone which might have made him a target? Nothing came to mind. Apparently both Protestant and Catholic paramilitaries wanted him dead. The morning he saw me he was carrying in his briefcase a gun issued to him for protection.

What for me might have begun as an academic interest and a delight in cultural diversity, for these people is a life and death struggle. It could never be less than that for me now.

The letter I sent to my friend Conor Farrington summarizes my feelings about my Northern Irish experience. Conor, a poet and playwright, is the nephew of John Millington Synge, so he comes by his craft understandably.

Dear Conor,

16 March 1984

I never did answer a speculation you made and thought I'd take a minute to do so this morning. Partly for you and partly for me. You wondered once how my religion would affect my view of the conflict. I thought a great deal about that. I suppose my initial response was less than forthright. I believe I hemmed around saying my background was Catholic historically. But of course that is not fully true. Like your friend Patricia, I come from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds with a strong dose of American thrown in and superimposed over all of that is my Mormonness. Usually people could accept that I might be able to get past the Catholic background or the Protestant or even the American but never the Mormon. I don't know in talking to people what stereotypes are operating so I usually try to keep the Mormon side out of intellectual discussions. But of course it has an effect.

Let me tell you my reactions to the North and maybe you can attribute those reactions to particular backgrounds better than I. For one thing I believe I became much more objective. I came wanting a unified Ireland, the American disease, I suppose. I know you have some sympathy for that view or you couldn't have written *Aaron Thy Brother*. I left Ireland much more objective, more keyed in to the complexity of the situation. I also left with little tolerance for violence as a means of change. And perhaps that's where my Mormon side comes in. I really do not believe anarchy is the answer. Now I met wonderful people on both or all sides — there really aren't any villains. It would be easier to understand if there were. But I believe many of the means these wonderful people employ are intolerable. That goes for the security forces, too.

In one way I can stand back and be more objective and see both sides or all sides of the situation, even appreciate the Southern (Ireland) approach and the American. But in another way I'll never be able to objectify it again. I'll never be able to be anything but subjective about it. I've been there and have come to love certain people of all persuasions and appreciate their point of view even when I don't agree with it. And I've learned to care that there seems to be a running sore on a society that in many ways I found to be the warmest and most open and caring I'd ever experienced.

You tell me what part my Mormonness has to do with my response. I don't know.

Conor might not know how to answer my question but I think I do. The first Sunday I was in the North we read Section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants in the adult class in the Derry Branch. There were only five members



there that morning and the teacher asked me to do most of the reading. They wanted to hear my accent. As I read those words which I had heard so many times before, they suddenly took on a reality that almost made it impossible for me to continue. In every way, Northern Ireland is the antithesis of the ideal outlined in this revelation. I realized why the missionaries are successful. Like me, the people here must yearn for the perfect organization prescribed by the Church. Even the basic expectations of society are missing — government for all the people, courts which are fair, police you can trust, lawfulness as a principal value. While in the North, I repeatedly thought of Book of Mormon lessons as I struggled with how goodness could coexist with evil. I left Ireland strengthened in my belief that often only Jesus Christ and his restored gospel can give people the means to surmount the difficulties of this world.