When Heroes Become Heroines: Brian Friel Re-Makes History

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> Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.
> (Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*)[1]

In 1980, Brian Friel and the Belfast actor Stephen Rea founded the Field Day Theatre Company – whose headquarters were located in Derry – with the intention of paving the way towards a cultural rebirth in the North. It was a very ambitious project, in which they set out to find innovative and daring paths away from the deadlocked situation in Northern Ireland, using the means of culture. The members who were subsequently to form part of the company – Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, David Hammond and Tom Kilroy – outlined the project with the metaphor of the 'Fifth Province' to speak about a province of the mind where there could be freedom, intelligence and generosity to imagine a new territory without cultural or sociological borders.[2] Andrews described the manner in which Field Day worked towards a fresh start in Irish culture stating how: 'Field Day asks us to unlearn the Ireland that we know, the received ways of thinking about it, and to learn the new ones'.[3]

Making History was Friel's third play for the company, one which fitted perfectly into Field Day's philosophy. However, Friel was also answering some of the criticism he received for his treatment of history in *Translations*.[4] In fact, it was precisely the controversy which the former play aroused that provoked this new historical drama, where the author deals with the way in which myths are created. Much has been discussed on the point of Friel's departure from historical accuracy. Murray, noting the amount of deviations from the proven facts, suspected a clear intention on the author's part: 'These inaccuracies, omissions, and distortions could doubtless be multiplied. It is plain, however, that they are of such number and degree as to underline a deliberate attitude on Friel's part'.[5] Years later, this critic identified the ulterior motivation for all these historical 'mistakes', as events in Northern Ireland developed towards a better understanding of both conflicting factions, in part through the agency of cultural projects like Field Day: '[Friel] was less interested in the sixteenth

than in the twentieth century, less interested in historical accuracy than in aiming for a play of ideas [. . .]. The insistence is that the play, any play, is a fiction'.[6] Nonetheless, it was Friel himself who best excused his careless use of history in the interest of fiction in the programme of the play's opening, daring historians to find fault with his creative freedom:

> *Making History* is a dramatic fiction that uses some actual and some imagined events in the life of Hugh O'Neill to make a story. I have tried to be objective and faithful – after my artistic fashion – to the empirical method. But when there was tension between historical 'fact' and the imperative of the fiction, I'm glad to say I kept faith with the narrative. For example, even though Mabel, Hugh's wife, died in 1591, it suited my story to keep her alive for another ten years. Part of me regrets taking these occasional liberties. But then I remind myself that history and fiction are related and comparable forms of discourse and that an historical text is a kind of literary artifact. And then I am grateful that these regrets were never inhibiting.[7]

Friel's words echo what he had already stated in his discussion with Andrews about his use of history in *Translations*: 'Drama is first a fiction, with the authority of fiction. You don't go to *Macbeth* for history'.[8]

Moreover, Friel's iconoclastic stance aims not only at history and historical texts, but also at the meaning of 'fact', the workings of both the individual and the collective memory,[9] the cultural clash between the factions in Northern Ireland and, foremost, the way women had been represented in historical chronicles. The author thus demonstrates Bahri's observation about the misrepresentation of women: 'Those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be seen'.[10]

The play is based on some events in the life of the last O'Neill, leader of the war against Queen Elizabeth, whose defeat after the battle of Kinsale ended in the infamous Flight of the Earls in 1607. However, Friel was actually inspired by Seán O'Faoláin's *The Great O'Neill*, a 1942 text which was not very accurate historically speaking. In O'Faoláin's original approach to the figure of Hugh O'Neill, he intended to dismantle the nationalist myth of the Irish hero who fought against the English tyrant. In the preface to his book O'Faoláin wrote what seemed to be the instructions followed by Friel some forty years later: 'a talented dramatist might write an informative, entertaining, ironical play on the theme of the living man helplessly watching his translation into a star in the face of all the facts that had reduced him to poverty, exile and defeat'.[11]

Making History, Field Day's fourth production, opened in The Guildhall, in Derry, on 20 September 1988. The play, divided into two acts, relates the events leading up to the battle of Kinsale in the first act, and its aftermath in the second. In the first act, we find O'Neill recently wedded to the sister of the Queen's Marshall, Mabel Bagenal, who has eloped from her home in Newry. A year later, she receives the visit of her sister Mary, who disapproves of Mabel's conversion to the Gaelic customs and religion. Meanwhile, O'Neill prepares for war with his friend O'Donnell and the Archbishop Lombard, who is already writing O'Neill's biography. In the second act, as a result of the disaster at Kinsale, O'Neill is hiding in the mountains, where he learns about his wife's death in childbirth. We find him many years later as a bitter exile in Rome, together with Lombard, who is finishing the Earl's biography. The tragic moment of the defeat, which is connected to the bereavement caused by Mabel's demise, is told on stage, but not shown. Thus, the play circumvents the climax, resulting in a series of speeches between the characters that enhance the impression of a play of ideas.

This article discusses the manner in which Friel rewrites history in this play in order to question received beliefs at work in Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century. By evidencing the impossibility of a reliable truth, the author deconstructs the different discourses of exclusion operating in the Ulster of the Troubles, enabling thus the formation of an in-between ground where consensus seems feasible. Scrutinising the characters' confrontations, I will analyse first the use of the terms 'memory', 'history' and 'truth' as understood by O'Neill and Archbishop Lombard, his biographer. Friel utilises these two characters' arguments to unravel the intricacies of the controversy between the nationalist and the revisionist stances. Next, I will consider the importance, not only in the playwright's career but also in the Northern cultural life of the 1980s, of Friel's shift of the character of Mabel from a historically marginal position to the decisive figure she is in this play. Subsequently, I will examine the confrontation first between the Bagenal sisters, and afterwards between O'Neill and Mary Bagenal, in order to disclose the parallels between, on the one hand, the colonised and the coloniser discourses in the seventeenth century, and the discourses of the opposing factions in the Ulster society of the 1980s, on the other. Finally, to confront this exclusive discourse, it will be stressed how the depiction of Hugh O'Neill and Mabel Bagenal as Janus-faced characters is used by the author as an example of a discourse inclusive of both cultures.

Memory, History... Truth?

In *Making History*, Brian Friel abandons his usual setting of Ballybeg and makes use of historical characters to revisit the disquisition about the different versions of reality. Friel had previously described in *Faith Healer* (1979) a discrepancy between the realities expressed by the three characters in the play. In *Making History*, however, the focus moves towards the different realities believed by a nation. 'Memory', 'history' and 'truth' are the three concepts which intermingle and pervade both plays. In neither can we find a favoured interpretation, an indicator of a truer 'history'. Throughout *Making History* we are shown, like in a kaleidoscope, all the possible truths, the different versions of history that could be narrated, the amalgam of visions which would constitute what Mabel calls 'the over-all thing',[12] and that, as she acknowledges, neither she nor anyone else will ever be able to grasp. Admittedly, the various interpretations are neither fortuitous nor innocent, something Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone note in their description of the relation between hegemonic memory and subaltern memories:

> The very fact that there are divergences, inconsistencies, different versions at different times, is in itself revealing both about the culture in which these memories have been built and emerge, and about the workings of memory itself. The idea of memory as a tool with which to contest 'official' versions of the past, too, shifts from an opposition between the subordinate truth versus the dominant lie, to a concern with the ways in which particular versions of an event may be at various times and for various reasons promoted, reformulated, or silenced.[13]

Thus, we become spectators of the motivations that lead the different characters, representatives of factions of a people, to seek protection in a particular version of history. By displaying their various perspectives, Friel mediates between the self-explanatory narrative of the conflicting factions of the past and those of the Ulster of the 1980s. These were the years in which Irish historiography had started to revise the old myths that, from the nationalist Renaissance onwards, had nourished the narration of the Irish nation. What Friel and the Field Day Company seemed eager to show was how these old myths were still working and undisputed for the conflicting factions in the North. Crowley considers this backward look as the only feature commonly shared: 'despite their different interpretations of history, the forces of Irish nationalism, pro-British Unionism and even the British, cited the past as source, authority, and justification'.[14] Consequently, Friel

enacts diverse interpretations of such a determinant historical fact for Ulster as the Flight of the Earls, to prove them to be fictions, *ad hoc* creations conforming to the political needs of the moment. This is why the author feels at liberty to make O'Neill live in England, compress nine years into one, or merge two historical characters in Archbishop Lombard: Peter Lombard the biographer, and James Archer, a Jesuit and a politician who was the liaison between the Gaelic clans, Spain and the Pope.[15]

The creation of national history, the hegemonic narrative, is, at best, problematic in its need for interpreting events. Lombard, as the true representative of traditional authority, does not hesitate in modifying the facts of O'Neill's life to suit his political purposes, leading thus to a controversy between truth and history from the moment O'Neill learns that Lombard is writing his biography. On two separate occasions, he demands that the Archbishop 'tell the truth', to which Lombard answers evasively, posing as a pure relativist who will not acknowledge a single truth:

> If you're asking me will my story be as accurate as possible – of course it will. But are truth and falsity the proper criteria? I don't know. Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible narrative. Isn't that what history is, a kind of story-telling? [. . .] Imposing a pattern on events that were mostly casual and haphazard and shaping them into a narrative that is logical and interesting.[16]

In Bhabha's description of the construction of the discourse of a nation, he alerts to the provisional nature of history: 'meanings may be partial because they are *in media res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of "composing" its powerful image'.[17] This is, in fact, Lombard's understanding of history: 'nothing will be put down on paper for years and years. History has to be made – before it's remade'.[18] Moreover, he sees the fictional and mythical soil as a generator of many histories, rather than of one single narrative:

> I don't believe that a period of history – a given space of time – my life – your life – that it contains within it one 'true' interpretation just waiting to be mined [sic]. But I do believe that it may contain within it several possible narratives: the life of Hugh O'Neill can be told in many different ways. And those ways are determined by the needs and demands and the expectations of different people and different eras. What do they want to hear? How do they want it told?[19]

The Archbishop's apology for his work makes the subjectivity of history evident: the chosen version will depend on the narrator's ideology, and the discourse is not only imprinted by it but, even more, it aims to promote the hegemony of this ideology. Just as the apolitical writer does not exist, there cannot be an apolitical chronicler. Friel uses this character to ridicule the protests of objectivity with which scholars and historians disguise their work. O'Neill's awareness of Lombard's real intentions induces him to acknowledge in a conversation with Mary Bagenal that he had fought together with the English army against his own people, although his biographer would not include this piece of information in his narration because 'art has precedence over accuracy'.[20]

When O'Neill is in exile in Rome and is only too conscious of his failure as a politician and as a leader of his nation, Lombard's biography is almost completed. The Archbishop explains his objective: he intends to influence their own time; history is created to that end. He works towards the creation of a national hero, as this is what Ireland most needed at the time:

> Ireland is reduced as it has never been reduced before – we are talking about a colonised people on the brink of extinction. This isn't the time for a critical assessment of your 'ploys' and your 'disgraces' and your 'betrayal' – that's the stuff of another history for another time. Now is the time for a hero. Now is the time for a heroic literature. So I am offering Gaelic Ireland two things. I'm offering them this narrative that has the elements of myth. And I'm offering them Hugh O'Neill as a national hero.[21]

Lombard's discourse echoes Renan's discussion of what makes a nation: 'A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle [. . .]. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is [. . .] the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form'.[22] Friel acknowledges the Archbishop's effort in agglutinating the people of Ireland, although the author is also denouncing what Bhabha calls the 'intellectual appropriation of the culture of the people [. . .] within a representationalist discourse that may be fixed and reified in the annals of History'.[23] The playwright has recent events in mind: the old myths which converted Ireland into a country that was suffocating under the traditionalist Catholic Church once independence was achieved, and the clichés which the members of each faction in the North believed about themselves and the others.

O'Neill, on the other hand, maintains that history is not about politics but about facts; therefore, he wants 'his' truth to be recorded: 'You are going to embalm me in – in – in a florid lie [. . .] The schemer, the leader, the liar, the statesman, the lecher, the patriot, the drunk, the soured, bitter émigré – put it all in [. . .] Don't embalm me in pieties'.[24] He will not accept that a defeat such as what really happened in Kinsale, or a cowardly desertion of their own people, like the one carried out by the Ulster noblemen, should be pictured as glorious landmarks. Lombard describes the battle as legendary: 'culminating in the legendary battle of Kinsale and the crushing of the most magnificent Gaelic army ever assembled. [. . .] You lost a battle. [. . .] But the telling of it can still be a triumph'. O'Neill thinks otherwise: 'Kinsale was a disgrace. Mountjoy routed us. We ran away like rats'.[25] What is more, Lombard's poetic invention, 'The Flight of the Earls', is painted as a tragic exodus: 'That tragic but magnificent exodus of the Gaelic aristocracy [. . .]. When the leaders of the ancient civilisation took boat from Rathmullan that September evening and set sail for Europe. [. . .] And then the final coming to rest. Here. In Rome'.[26] O'Neill reminds him of the more prosaic truth: 'We ran away just as we ran away at Kinsale. We were going to look after our own skins! That's why we "took boat" from Rathmullan! That's why the great O'Neill is here – at rest – here – in Rome. Because we ran away'.[27] Lombard's use of the tragic is not innocent either; Renan had already exposed the agglutinant effect of playing the victim: 'suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs'.[28]

No matter how O'Neill insists on the need to reflect the 'true' facts (as he protests: 'That is the truth: That is what happened. [. . .] Those are the facts. There is no way you can make unpalatable facts palatable'),[29] it is, in fact, Lombard who puts into words what Friel has so often shown in previous plays: 'People think they just want to know the "facts"; they think they believe in some sort of empirical truth, but what they really want is a story'.[30] The play's last lines offer the hero's exaltation as written by the Archbishop: 'A man, glorious, pure, faithful above all / who will cause mournful weeping in every territory. He will be a God-like prince / And he will be king for the span of his life. (*O'NEILL is now crying. Bring down the lights slowly*)'.[31]

Friel also challenges the canonical representation of Ireland as a woman, ever-present in literary and popular displays of nationalist pathos, to which Anne Fogarty refers as '[t]he seemingly ineluctable association of Englishness with maleness and Irishness with femininity'.[32] From Lady Gregory and Yeats's seminal play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* to Derry and

Belfast mural paintings, Éire has either been a mother, a young defenceless girl, or an old woman. England was, as in Heaney's poem 'Act of Union', 'the tall kingdom [. . .] imperially male'.[33] Edward Said noticed the use of the feminine to refer to colonised peoples in the coloniser discourse, although, as Bahri stresses: 'many anticolonial struggles for nationalism in turn used the figure of woman to symbolise the nation'.[34] This metaphor confirms Renan's statement about suffering: the female body-nation seen as the passive receiver of male violence, therefore in need of protection. What we find in *Making History* is, nonetheless, a powerful and imperial English enemy, but embodied in a woman, Queen Elizabeth, in possession of a great intelligence and thirst for power. She will subdue the Gaelic chieftains, all of them men. Friel counteracts the literary image of Éire's rape with that of the domination of the very masculine Hugh O'Neill by this 'very resolute woman', in Mabel's words.[35] The significance of this contravention of the traditional nationalist representation of the conflict between Ireland and England can be better understood when observing the transformation which Friel effected on the conventional portrayal of Mabel.

Mabel at the Centre of the Stage

The character of Mabel, despite its absence in the second act, fulfils a pivotal function in Friel's version of the life of O'Neill. Fogarty considers the relationship between both as the main act of subversion of the traditional narrative in Ireland: 'The invention of an elusive, gynocentric sub-plot subverts the master narrative of Irish history that appears inveterately wedded to sectarian conflict, violence, male biography and nationalist essentialism'.[36] This movement, from the backward position which the historical character had in previous texts to the new centre-stage one the playwright decided to give her, signalled the change in focus in Friel's plays from mostly male-centred to a recognition of the role of women in the micro and the macro domain of history.[37] It was a meaningful advance, considering the controversy aroused by the publication in 1990 of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volumes I-III (550 A.D.-1988)*, edited by Seamus Deane, which was already promoted in the play's programme, and which, together with the fact that the company was composed only by men, was highly criticised for its unpardonable neglect of women writers.

Friel defies O'Faoláin's work by making Mabel of flesh and blood when she was no more than a frightened child in O'Faoláin's narration, barely mentioned as O'Neill's hostage in his war against the Bagenals.

Anthony Roche notes the humiliating description given in *The Great O'Neill*:

> This young woman of twenty is repeatedly referred to by him as a 'girl', usually prefaced by the epithet 'poor'. These attributions work to diminish her agency. They undercut the independence and courage of the character it took to leave not only her family but the Protestant ethos that was 'civilizing' Ireland.[38]

Moreover, Mabel is also an example of the fallacious nature of the historical chronicles, which keep the female characters hidden or directly erased. This is O'Neill's last confrontation with the Archbishop, since the latter has no intention of including Mabel in his record. In the end, we observe the victory of the Archbishop's pragmatic ideas when he recites the beginning of his hagiography about O'Neill while the Earl, defeated, can only apologise to Mabel for being unable of rescuing her from the oblivion of history.

Thus, Mabel is presented as O'Neill's counsellor and support, although not a compliant or acquiescent one. In all the negotiations previous to the war, she offers her privileged perspective as an outsider. This perspective makes her agree with the Duke of Lerma when he is afraid of allying with the unruly Irish. Mabel warns O'Neill: 'You are not united. You have no single leader. You have no common determination. At best you are an impromptu alliance of squabbling tribesmen [. . .] grabbing at religion as a coagulant only because they have no other idea to inform them or give them cohesion'.[39] The author evidences the parallels with the 1980s situation, with the Republican Army in the North split into factions which fought between themselves, as can be read in the historian Patrick Buckland's depiction of the 'bitter' and 'violent' relations between the two wings of the IRA (the Provos and the Officials): 'the differences between the two wings were expressed not dogmatically but more in terms of a domestic squabble about status, family and community allegiance and, later, as a feud or vendetta'.[40] Mabel knows that going to war is not O'Neill's way, and the result will be disastrous: 'Every important move you have ever made has been pondered for months. [. . .] That's why you're the most powerful man in Ireland: you're the only Irish chieftain who understands the political method'.[41] She is the only one who foresees that this league is no more than a manipulation on the part of the Spanish Crown and the Pope, and suspects in the Archbishop a lack of honesty:

> He talks about a Catholic Confederation, a Catholic Army, about you leading Europe in a glorious Catholic Counter-Reformation. But I

> always have the feeling that when he's talking about you and about Ireland, he's really talking in code about Rome and Roman power. [. . .] Just as Spain's only interest is in Spain and in Spanish power. [. . .] And all I know for sure is that, when the war is over, whatever the outcome, the Lombards and the Oviedos won't be here – they'll have moved on to more promising territories.[42]

Nonetheless, Mabel's sensibility clashes with O'Neill's pride, something she reacts to by encapsulating her husband's dilemma in a scathing statement: 'So go and fight. That's what you've spent your life doing. That's what you're best at. Fighting to preserve a fighting society'.[43] O'Neill rebels against her as against an authentic Cassandra, and her words are bitterly rejected: 'I can see it wouldn't break your heart to see the Gaelic order wiped out';[44] only to submit to her guidance after the disaster of Kinsale and the consummation of her predictions. In Act II, her moral ascendency over O'Neill is absolute; hence the audience never ceases to hear her. O'Neill's intended submission to the Queen is written following Mabel's advice, and counts with the approval of the fugitive O'Donnell:

> O'DONNELL: What does Mabel think?
> O'NEILL: She's urging me to hang on, pick up the pieces, start all over again. [. . .] Her reasoning is that since the country is in such anarchy Mountjoy has neither the energy nor the resources to impose order; but if I were to make a public declaration of loyalty to the Queen and if she were to reinstate me, [. . .] [w]ith only nominal authority, without political or military power whatever, then Mabel says I should accept almost any conditions, no matter how humiliating, as long as I'd be restored to my base again and to my own people. [. . .] At least that's Mabel's argument. I think I could get enough of my people behind me and she thinks some of the New English would back it.[45]

From the moment of Mabel's disappearance from the stage, hers is the most pervasive presence, to whom all the dialogues allude.

Every Story Has Seven Faces

Manus Sweeney, in Friel's *The Gentle Island*,[46] reminds the audience about the many potential lights in which every story can be seen. In *Making History*, the playwright makes use of mainly three characters to exemplify these potential narratives about the same events. With the discussion between the Bagenal sisters and subsequently between Mary Bagenal and

O'Neill, we are able to hear on stage differing voices that might help us understand the Ulster situation of the 1980s.

Mary is undoubtedly the character who best expresses the point of view of the colonists, and one of the means to show the parallels with Ulster at the end of the twentieth century, as she shares with her descendants the feelings of incomprehension and isolation from both the native Gaelic and the far-off English administration.[47] She believes her father to be a great Marshall because he achieved the taming of County Down and County Armagh on his own, and brought order, peace and prosperity. Her sister Mabel confronts her with the perspective of the colonised people: 'I imagine the Cistercian monks in Newry didn't think our grandfather an agent of civilisation when he routed them out of their monastery and took it over as our home'.[48]

O'Neill's sister-in-law cannot understand a culture that bases its economy on stockbreeding and not on agriculture; not to cultivate the land is for her a sin that deprives the natives of the right of owning it: 'You talk about "pastoral farming" – what you really mean is no farming – what you really mean is neglect of the land. And a savage people who refuse to cultivate the land God gave us have no right to that land'.[49] Friel is, nonetheless, only paraphrasing Thomas More in *Utopia*, where the humanist employs the same argument as the only occasion when it is justifiable and even laudable to colonise the neighbouring lands. In the chapter entitled 'Of Their Traffic' from Book II, More seems to write with Ireland in mind:

> if the natives refuse to conform themselves to their laws, [the colonists from Utopia] drive them out of those bounds which they mark out for themselves, and use force if they resist. For they account it a very just cause of war, for a nation to hinder others from possessing a part of that soil of which they make no use, but which is suffered to lie idle and uncultivated; since every man has by the law of nature a right to such a waste portion of the earth as is necessary for his subsistence.[50]

Mary and her people believe that they represent civilisation and true religion, that they are enlightened and superior to Catholic superstition: 'They are doomed because civility is God's way, Mabel, and because superstition must yield before reason'.[51] To support her conviction of the backward and bestial manners of the colonised, she mentions O'Neill's two concubines and that, although he masters four languages, she has seen him eating with his hands. For Mary and her people O'Neill is '[t]he Northern Lucifer – the Great Devil – Beelzebub!'.[52]

The distance between both civilisations is insurmountable. Consequently, Mary is ready to marry a man forty years her elder, who displeases her unbearably but who is, nevertheless, one of them. The Planters are besieged by the enemy: 'We're surrounded by the Irish. And every day more and more of their hovels spring up all along the perimeter of our lands'.[53] However, as she painfully complains, London does not understand the dangers they are exposed to and the incredible task the colonists have undertaken in a hostile environment: 'Never depend totally on London because they don't understand the difficult job we're doing over here'.[54]

Mabel is warned by her sister of the treacherous nature of her husband, since he swore fidelity to the Queen of England only to become Spain's ally in its war against her. On the other hand, O'Neill deems the English as sibylline, far from the idealism and coherence that define the Irish: 'the English, unlike us, never drive principles to embarrassing conclusions'.[55] Nonetheless, he does not consider his people's extreme congruity an advantage, as can be seen in his resentful complaint of his fellow chieftains: 'Their noble souls couldn't breathe another second under "tyranny". And where are they now? Wiped out. And what did they accomplish? Nothing. But because of their nobility, survival – basic, crude, day-to-day survival – is made infinitely more difficult for the rest of us'.[56] Echoes of O'Neill's lament can be read in Buckland's report on the Troubles: when describing the workings of the Provisional IRA in the Ulster of the 1970s, the historian points to their lack of political results in much the same way: 'they failed to appreciate the importance of taking advantage of political opportunities created by their military activity. Instead, they persisted in regarding political compromise as treachery, an insult to their dead comrades and a mockery to the toll of suffering'.[57]

If Mary sees the Gaelic civilisation as colourful and curious, although barbarian, O'Neill shows the crude materialism on which the Planters' so-called civilisation is based: 'the buccaneering, vulgar, material code of the new colonials. [. . .] The new "civility" approved, we're told, by God himself'.[58] But O'Neill is shrewd enough to make use of the English cliché about the Gaelic in his act of submission to the Queen, when he promises to end the uncivilised Gaelic uses, accepting thus the Planters' historical truth: 'Particularly will I help in the abolishing of all barbarous Gaelic customs which are the seeds of all incivility'.[59]

A Hybrid Garden

Mabel and Hugh O'Neill partake of both the Gaelic and the English culture. O'Neill is a typical example of an inhabitant of two worlds: he has been raised by an English family for nine years, where he not only learnt the language and the 'upper-class' accent, but also the Renaissance ideas that were in vogue in Europe. He is at home with the customs of both peoples and that enables him to move easily on both sides of the border. His dream, as he explains to Mary Bagenal, would be to reconcile both cultures: 'I try to live at peace with my fellow chieftains, with your people, with the Old English'.[60] This character is specially dear to Friel because, in spite of his mistakes, he tried to accomplish what a group of Northern Irish intellectuals was striving to achieve with initiatives such as Field Day: the course towards a modern nation, respectful of the legacy of their own culture but at the same time open to the new world represented by Europe. Nonetheless, O'Neill confesses to Mabel the complexity of this endeavour:

> I have spent my life attempting to do two things. I have attempted to hold together a harassed and a confused people by trying to keep them in touch with the life they knew before they were overrun. [. . .] And I have done that by acknowledging and indeed honouring the rituals and ceremonies and beliefs these people have practised since before history. [. . .] And at the same time I have tried to open these people to the strange new ways of Europe, to ease them into the new assessment of things, to nudge them towards changing evaluations and beliefs. [. . .] Two tasks that are almost self-cancelling.[61]

Mabel embodies the complementary representation of hybridity. This young woman has deserted her own world to embrace a new form of life, notwithstanding her fear of the unknown and the pain of having been the cause of her father's misery, since he would never be able to understand why she abandoned them. The day after her elopement and wedding to O'Neill, only fifteen miles from her home in Newry, she finds herself in a foreign land, where everything is strange and incomprehensible. Nevertheless, she assimilates her new home to reassure her husband: 'We're a tough breed, the O'Neills'.[62]

As Friel has shown in previous plays, these Janus-faced characters suffer the consequences of marrying out of the tribe. When Mabel is introduced to O'Neill's friend O'Donnell and Archbishop Lombard, both react indignantly. O'Donnell even accuses O'Neill of betraying them: 'That's a class of treachery [. . .] as long as he has that Upstart bitch with him, there'll be no welcome for him in Tyrconnell'.[63]

A year later, we witness the difficulty of the task Mabel has undertaken when she is seen struggling to make herself understood among her servants. She cannot help making a harsh remark to two Gaelic-speaking peasants: 'If you want to behave like savages, go on back to the bogs! [. . .] I'm wasting my breath because they don't understand a word in English'.[64] Despite this, she has converted to the Catholic faith out of loyalty to O'Neill and his people, and her defence of the Gaelic civilisation against her sister's arguments is vigorous. Every time Mary asks about what she thinks these people should have but do not – 'They have no bees here, have they? [. . .] They have no orchards here, have they?' – Mabel includes herself in her answer: 'No, we haven't'.[65]

Mary is used by Friel as the canvas against which to understand better Mabel's progress towards hybridism. During her visit, Mary warns Mabel about the danger of planting two species of seeds together, as they could cross. Although Mabel does not see this as problematic, Mary remains firm in her purism: 'You'll end up with a seed that's neither one thing or the other'.[66] The author presents this potential hybrid plant as the desirable fruit of the mixed couple, disclosing Mabel's pregnancy at the end of the first act. Whilst this hybrid offspring could be understood as a healing remedy for the bleeding injury of the conquest, the playwright does not allow it to grow, as both Mabel and the baby die in childbirth. Fogarty sees in O'Neill's grief at the end of the play a lament for the unattainable dream: 'O'Neill's mounting and irrational attachment to this lost relationship in the closing scene of the play is [. . .] a threnody for the frustrated ideal of a multicultural and peaceful Irish society'.[67]

Conclusion

Friel had drawn on historical plays previously, using the narratives of the past like a mirror up to the present state of his country, to demonstrate in this manner the repetitive pattern of behaviour of the Irish nation. Regarding *Making History*, parallels between the time in the play and the time of its performance were undeniable: the feelings expressed by the Gaelic and their reactions are easily comparable to those of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. What makes the playwright's artistry evident is, nonetheless, his sensitivity towards the feelings of helplessness, loneliness and confusion that gripped the settlers and would provoke what the historian Buckland calls the 'siege mentality'.[68] Friel presented the different perspectives on the conflict with characters that are complex and worthy of admiration and compassion. In *Making History*, all the characters are comprehensible and acceptable in their own particular view of things,

without simplification or Manichaeism: the audience understands and empathises with their sufferings and their efforts to try to find a way out of this stagnant situation. If the dominant discourses which the different factions had held for so long had been working to exclude the other, Friel, by exposing the fallibility of historical truths, managed to build a discourse in which every voice could be equally heard and valued.

Moreover, *Making History* opened up a new path in the strongly male-dominated world of the Irish cultural elite of the last century. In spite of the play's bitter ending, it offers us the hope that lies in watching on stage many diverse truths and many plausible histories, all of them valid and useful in their own way. Thus, Friel lays the foundation for a national reconstruction, one in which women are restored to their rightful place.

Notes and References

1 Homi K. Bhabha, ed., 'Introduction', *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 2002) 1, 1-7.

2 Andrews traces the term 'Fifth Province' back to the first issue of *Crane Bag* in 1977. Elmer Andrews, 'The Fifth Province', *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, ed. Alan Peacock (Gerard Cross: Colin Smythe, 1993) 29-48.

3 Andrews 30.

4 Brian Friel, 'Translations', *Brian Friel: Plays 1* (1980. London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 377-451.

5 Christopher Murray, 'Brian Friel's *Making History* and the Problem of Historical Accuracy', *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama*, ed. Geert Lernout (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991) 62, 61-77.

6 Christopher Murray, *The Theatre of Brian Friel: Tradition and Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 95-96.

7 Programme for the Field Day's production of *Making History* (Derry, 1988) 10.

8 John H. Andrews, '*Translations* and *A Paper Landscape*: Between Fiction and History', *Crane Bag* 7.2 (1983): 124, 118-124.

9 I apply in this essay Hamilton's definition of collective memory as 'the making of a group memory so that it becomes an expression of identity, and accepted by that group as the "truth" of experience. Collective memory can be set in stone as an unquestioned myth or it can be continually renegotiated across time in accordance with external circumstance and generational shifts'. Quoted by Paula Hamilton, 'Sale of the Century? Memory and Historical Consciousness in Australia', *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, eds. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London: Routledge, 2003) 142, 136-152.

10 Deepika Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', *Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 205, 199-220.

11 Hiram Morgan, 'O'Faoláin's *Great O'Neill*, Seán O'Faoláin Centenary at University College Cork on 25th February 2000', 8 December 2014, web, 19 February 2009, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/OFaolain.pdf>.

12 Brian Friel, *Making History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) 39.
13 Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., 'Introduction: Contested Pasts', *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003) 5, 1-22.
14 Tony Crowley, 'Memory and Forgetting in a Time of Violence: Brian Friel's Meta-History Plays', *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008): 73, 72-83.
15 Peter Lombard was archbishop of Armagh at the time of the Nine Years' War against the English; his biography about Hugh O'Neill, *De Regno Hiberniae Sanctorum Insula Commentarius*, was written in Rome in 1600. James Archer, on the other hand, was the first rector of the Irish college at Salamanca from 1591 until his return to Ireland. He got involved in the Spanish expedition to aid O'Neill against the English. See Brian Mac Cuarta, *Catholic Revival in the North of Ireland 1603-1641* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007).
16 Friel, *Making History* 8.
17 Bhabha 3.
18 Friel, *Making History* 9.
19 Friel, *Making History* 15-16.
20 Friel, *Making History* 27.
21 Friel, *Making History* 67.
22 Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 2002) 19, 8-22.
23 Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 2002) 302, 291-322.
24 Friel, *Making History* 63.
25 Friel, *Making History* 65.
26 Friel, *Making History* 65-66.
27 Friel, *Making History* 66.
28 Renan 19.
29 Friel, *Making History* 66.
30 Friel, *Making History* 66.
31 Friel, *Making History* 71.
32 Anne Fogarty, 'The Romance of History: Renegotiating the Past in Thomas Kilroy's *The Great O'Neill* and Brian Friel's *Making History*', *Irish University Review* 32.1 (2002): 31, 18-32.
33 Seamus Heaney, 'Act of Union', *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) 43.
34 Bahri 201.
35 Friel, *Making History* 38.
36 Fogarty 20.
37 Examples would be *The Enemy Within* 1962 (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1992), *The Mundy Scheme* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,1969) and *Volunteers* 1975 (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1989), where women do not play any significant role; and, as for the shift in focus, the plays since 1990 – for instance *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) or *Molly Sweeney* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1994).
38 Anthony Roche, *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 167.
39 Friel, *Making History* 38.
40 Patrick Buckland, *A History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981) 144.
41 Friel, *Making History* 38.
42 Friel, *Making History* 39.
43 Friel, *Making History* 40.

44 Friel, *Making History* 40.
45 Friel, *Making History* 48.
46 Brian Friel, *The Gentle Island* (1973. Loughcrew: Gallery, 1993) 57.
47 The Unionist parties experienced a distinct feeling of betrayal whenever the British government tried to bring about a solution to the Ulster question. That was, in fact, the motivation behind the creation of extremist parties such as Reverend Paisley's Ulster Constitution Defence Committee or the Protestant paramilitary forces Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Protestant Volunteers (Buckland 119-123).
48 Friel, *Making History* 24.
49 Friel, *Making History* 24.
50 Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 55-56.
51 Friel, *Making History* 24.
52 Friel, *Making History* 25.
53 Friel, *Making History* 22-23.
54 Friel, *Making History* 22.
55 Friel, *Making History* 26.
56 Friel, *Making History* 30.
57 Buckland 148.
58 Friel, *Making History* 40.
59 Friel, *Making History* 50.
60 Friel, *Making History* 27.
61 Friel, *Making History* 40.
62 Friel, *Making History* 18-19.
63 Friel, *Making History* 14-15.
64 Friel, *Making History* 20.
65 Friel, *Making History* 20, 21.
66 Friel, *Making History* 22.
67 Fogarty 32.
68 Buckland 9.