

The Northern Athens or A City Of Horrors? Belfast as Presented by Some Irish Women Writers

Britta Olinder, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract

Few cities have changed so much over the last century as Belfast. This is mainly due to industrialisation and de-industrialisation and not least to the three decades of the Troubles. For women the same period has meant the gaining of the vote, opportunities to work outside of the home and growing independence. My purpose here is to investigate the pictures of Belfast in the work of some Irish women writers and the urban spaces available to their characters, considering the segregation of the city. The idea of an urban culture is cohesion, of people living closely together and sharing the same space and culture, while Belfast in the twentieth century has been marked by class divisions, gender inequality and political disruption. I will investigate *A Belfast Woman* by Mary Beckett, a novel by Deirdre Madden and plays by Anne Devlin and Christina Reid for the different neighbourhoods in Belfast they present and the role there of gender and class barriers.

Key words: city, urban culture, landscape, community, the Troubles, segregation

The prosperity of Belfast at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century was the reason for giving the city the extravagant designation “The Northern Athens,” also recycled in the mid-twentieth century to emphasise the promising flourishing of Northern Irish literature and pictorial arts, while it was the Troubles that in the last third of the century made people flee the city in fear and horror.¹ Against the bare background facts that Seamus Heaney—like many others—left for good to settle in the South of Ireland, while Michael Longley stayed and still lives in Belfast, and John Hewitt, after his fifteen years as Director of the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry, returned in the heat of the Troubles, we will see what picture we get of Belfast by reading Mary Beckett’s short story about a Belfast woman, Deirdre Madden’s contradictory descriptions of the city through the main characters of her

¹ Focusing on the arts “‘The Northern Athens’ and After” was the title John Hewitt gave his contribution to *Belfast: The Making of a City* (Hewitt 1983: 71-82).

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novel *One by One in the Darkness*, or through the different characters in plays by Anne Devlin and Christina Reid.²

In these literary works I have been looking for descriptions, impressions, experiences and opinions of Belfast but also, more generally, for what the nature of a city is, as distinguished from a village or small town. What is the essence of a city culture? These are issues discussed in the course of a seminar series on the concept of the metropolis in literature, a context in which I had chosen to deal with Belfast as a metropolis. It might not be the first term that comes to mind in this case, so what do we mean by “metropolis”? Is it to be defined as a capital or a city of a certain size, or something more specific as a centre towards which other towns or villages are directed? The original meaning of the word in Greek is “mother city,” and it described the place from which colonisers were sent out. This is a definition still used in certain postcolonial discourses and often denotes the whole of a country, like France or England, in relation to its earlier colonies. As the capital of the six counties forming Northern Ireland, Belfast is undeniably the centre of a province. At the same time, it is directed towards other capitals, towards Dublin, and not least towards London, the real metropolis, especially in colonial terms, since Ireland was England’s first colony.

What, then, about urban areas as such, and what was the origin of these? In the classical drama of antiquity we can notice that, in a very general sense, tragedies took place in palaces among people of great political importance; comedy was a city play, acted out between bourgeois people, merchants and artisans, while the pastoral or burlesque took place in the countryside, staging shepherds and buffoons, respectively. In a historical perspective, at least as far back as the Latin writers, the city, basically the metropolis or, simply, Rome, was seen as the centre of civilised life and of the arts, while the countryside was notorious for ill-mannered people and rude customs. In addition, the formerly walled-in city was a refuge, offering protection. Gradually the city was, however, regarded as a hotbed of vice—in English literature we can think of Milton, or Blake as in his poem on London.³ When the ideas

² See Russell (2010: 1-2), and for the development of Hewitt’s perception of Belfast see Olinder 2012a.

³ Blake, however, makes the distinction between the reality of industrialisation with its “dark Satanic Mills” and the utopian city to be built “in England’s green

of Rousseau became generally accepted, country life tended to be preferred to that of the city. With Romantic poetry this will be further enforced in descriptions of Nature as innocent, idyllic and picturesque.⁴ This is something that applies still more to the picture of Ireland, in setting off things Irish in contrast to English industrialisation and city life. “True” Irish identity and culture were represented as rural or connected to and originating from rural idyll.⁵

So how are we to look upon Belfast? As a strongly industrialised city in the nineteenth and early twentieth century it has actually often been compared to Manchester or Liverpool, i.e. more English than Irish. Few cities have changed so much in the course of the last century as Belfast, mainly due to rapid industrialisation followed by de-industrialisation coupled with decades of conflict and violence. To women, the same period brought the vote, possibilities for professional work and growing independence. But then we have to take into account that the place of women was traditionally within the home, while men could move about freely, especially in towns and cities—a pattern that still exists in many countries today. This difference between men and women increased with growing urban spaces, often divided as public and private between men and women, but was countered by the developing freedom for women.

The very idea of urban culture is about the bringing together of people from different backgrounds. The urban space is ideally seen as multicultural, in contrast to segregation, whether for ethnic, religious, class or gender reasons. Seeing the traditional divisions in Northern Irish society, Belfast is all the more interesting to explore, and this is why I have here chosen to investigate women’s views of the city. A general idea of how Belfast is presented in literature can be found in *A Belfast Anthology*, edited by Patricia Craig and published in 1999, including almost two hundred writers, some of them appearing in several different contexts. Since she has excluded drama, the plays by Devlin and Reid that I have examined are not represented, but there is a passage from

and pleasant land,” i.e. the new Jerusalem (Blake 1978: 62). Note that Heaven, the final paradise is a city, the perfect utopian place.

⁴ Cf. Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973).

⁵ See e.g. *Transformations in Irish Culture* by Luke Gibbons (1996), the introduction by Irene Gilsean Nordin and Carmen Zamorano Llana to the collection *Urban and Rural Landscapes in Modern Ireland* (2012: 1-13), or Martin McLoone’s *Irish Film* (2000).

Anne Devlin's short stories in *The Way-Paver* (Devlin 1986). Deirdre Madden is not included. Mary Beckett is represented by a paragraph from *Give Them Stones* (1988), but not from *A Belfast Woman* (1980). Craig has, however, quoted most of Kate O'Brien's eight pages on Belfast in *My Ireland* (1962), split up to illustrate seven different issues. It is a very good choice, and even if Kate O'Brien is not a Belfast woman, I think she offers an excellent point of departure in this context. O'Brien begins her presentation of the city with a couple of anecdotes, followed by an interestingly selective history of Belfast, naturally, not to be compared to Dublin but with stark contrasts:

[. . .] it was the nineteenth century and big business—the big business of shipbuilding and linen-spinning—which finally created the rich and famous city, and cursed her with an all-round ugly look—pretentious here, mean there, dirty and haphazard mostly everywhere. A brazen kind of ugliness, if you like, which is disconcerting, and represents, as one soon finds, neither the voices nor the manners of the citizens. (O'Brien 1962: 97)

There are, however, other things she appreciates about the city:

For one thing, it is packed with real faces—no two alike. And it is full of light. At noon in Belfast, even in bad winter, one seems to be in the presence of the full light of the sky, and all the inexcusable buildings around and including the City Hall stand leisurely back from the wide, white-gleaming pavements so that you can mock them at your ease. And the flower-barrows on the kerbsides are radiant and the women in charge of them witty and friendly to match. There often is wind blowing, salty from the Lough—and hats fly off and newspapers flap, and cornerboys make soft local jokes. (O'Brien 1962: 98)

The difference between “the inexcusable buildings” and the ugly look of the city, on the one hand, and the people, the life and the light in it could not be greater. Here, there is no high-falutin reference to classical Greece, but neither is there any of the fear and terror that we will find in the writers discussed below, since Kate O'Brien describes a period before the thirty years of the Troubles. She speaks about “a civic quality” as “just an expression of energy and love of life,” something that “has always enriched and sweetened Belfast writing, the best of which has usually been strongly regional, and because of that, laced with a peculiar humaneness and good sense, qualities not primary ever in the best writing of Dublin or Munster” (O'Brien 1962: 98). What she emphasises is the fact that a city is not only made up of streets and buildings, but of

the experiences and attitudes of a large number of individual men and women, influencing one another's lives. This is something that also stands out very clearly when looking at the women writers I have chosen to discuss.

Mary Beckett

Although the protagonist of the story in Beckett's "A Belfast Woman" is a Catholic herself, she lives in a Protestant street, because of her husband's family.⁶ As she tells her story, we get a graphic description of the different cultures of Belfast: In a Catholic area there is a lively relationship between the women, going in and out of each other's houses, with the men who are out of work, gathering around the corners, while the Protestant streets are quiet and deserted, since the women keep to their own houses and the men are at work.

The woman's earliest memory as a little girl is from a crisis in 1921, when the family's house was burnt down and they had to get out in the middle of the night, taking refuge with her grandmother. Fourteen years later, a letter arrives containing a threat to burn them out from there. She is reminded of these two incidents when, on a beautiful morning half a century after the first occasion, she finds another menacing letter inside the door. First, she leaves her home to seek refuge with her son's family, but on second thoughts decides to go back and stay put. After a while, however, something strange happens. Her Protestant neighbours begin moving out. To her surprise, the woman finds that it is their turn to be threatened. Not long after, Catholics start moving in with ensuing change of social relations.

The story closes on an episode when a man comes round trying to sell Venetian blinds. She declines because she wants to be able to see out, and she points to the sunset, "bits of red and yellow in the sky and a sort of mist all down the mountain that made it nearly see-through" (Beckett 1980: 98). The man looks at the view and remarks that Belfast has "the most beautiful sunsets in the whole world," and it is "because of all the smoke and dirt and dust and pollution," adding that "if the dirt and dust and smoke and pollution of Belfast just with the help of the sun can

⁶ Here, the short story in the collection of the same title is discussed, Beckett 1980: 84-99.

make a sky like that, then there's hope for all of us." Afterwards, when the woman is alone again, she cannot help laughing in spite of menacing letters and the general situation. What he had said was true: "There is hope for all of us. Well, anyway, if you don't die you live through it, day in, day out" (99).

Belfast is here, then, seen from the inside of a woman's deeply painful experiences of the division of the city into Catholic and Protestant streets. This is a segregation representing different attitudes to the space of the street, and a segregation that time and again erupts in violence. In the end, with the only real description of the city, we get an example of Belfast humour in its hopefulness in spite of all.

Most of the other stories in the collection are set in the countryside, with visits to Belfast limited to the market and the bus station. In "The Master and the Bombs," the only other exception, a woman is feeling "useless and unwanted and of dwindling instead of growing" (Beckett 1980: 79). There is, however, one occasion when she is standing downtown at a pedestrian crossing among the crowd waiting to cross, "and when we were let cross I got an excitement out of the pushing two-way jostle of people and I felt it mattered only to be alive and to use every bit of one's life" (79). The excitement of being one in a crowd of unknown people is a genuinely urban feeling.

The last story in Beckett's collection *A Belfast Woman*, "Failing Years," is set in a city, but it is about a Belfast woman married in Dublin. As an ageing widow she longs back to her young days in Belfast. Even if it is set in Dublin, there is one passage of urban feeling that need not be related to any specific city. It is a memory of her husband, as they

[. . .] strolled round arm-in-arm looking at shop windows. It was a mild night and hundreds of people were doing the same. Nora became aware of a light, bubbling sound rising from the streets and she realised it was people laughing all over town. So she began having an affection for Dublin as one can grow fond of someone else's child. (Beckett 1980: 108)

This refers, then, indirectly to "her own child," which is still Belfast, the city she loves, and again depicts a true urban experience of a fellowship with strangers.

Deirdre Madden

Madden's novel, *One by One in the Darkness* (1997), is mainly set in the countryside, but also leaves room for different experiences of Belfast, made by several of the characters. Thus, as a child, the mother in the family feels that Belfast is a noisy, grimy, ugly place, but later when she attends teacher training college there, she finds that the city also had the special attraction of its position and the varied activities represented by the large number of houses, and the different kinds of work. The city

[. . .] had a beautiful position, tucked in between the mountains and the sea. The rows and rows of terraced redbrick houses, with the mills, the yellow gantries of the shipyards, the spires of the churches, and the bare slopes of the Black Mountain together gave the city its atmosphere. [. . .] she decided that when she was qualified, she would do her best to find a job in Belfast, rather than go back to Ballymena as was expected of her. (Madden 1997: 116)

Later Cate, one of her three daughters, is more ambivalent, looking at Belfast while driving into the city. She has to concentrate on the traffic, while lorries are thundering past on either side. But she registers the large posters outside a church, a cemetery in the distance, and Belfast Lough beyond that. She likes the docks and the yellow gantries, but the Lower Falls makes her uncomfortable, "she always felt nervous and conspicuous and was afraid that something would happen there" (Madden 1997: 85).

Her eldest sister, Helen, lives in Belfast where she works as a lawyer defending terrorists. This leads to an account of one of the many murders, this time with a taxi driver as the victim, making the streets of the city a stage for crime. At the same time, she helps a friend to plan for the first visit to Belfast of his London partner. How to avoid his being put off by "seeing soldiers all over the place; and the barracks all fortified and stuff; that's going to frighten the life out of him. And what if anything happens? I mean, what if a bomb goes off, or the car gets hijacked or something?" (56). But everything is carefully planned and works out. The partner, Steve, does not care about

[. . .] the checkpoint at the airport, and once we got on to the motorway, we just barrelled up to the city. My luck was in: you know what a marvellous evening it was yesterday. Belfast Lough was like glass, the sun was on the mountains, it couldn't have been better. Steve couldn't get over how beautiful it was, and that sort of made

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up for the city being so ugly when we got into it. He says it reminds him of Manchester, and fortunately, he likes Manchester. (56)

The whole visit is so successful that Steve wants to come and live in Belfast. So to dissuade him, he is to be shown the other side of the coin. This time when David

[. . .] collected him at the airport, he didn't drive into Belfast by the motorway, but went over the Divis mountain, through Turf Lodge and then down on to the Falls Road, pointing out the heavily fortified barracks and all the other things which, before, he would have been at pains to conceal. [. . .] [Later] he took him back over to West Belfast, took him through the narrow web of streets, showed him the Republican murals on the gable walls around the lower Falls, then took him over to the Shankill and showed him the Loyalist murals. (57)

From several angles of vision, then, Madden's novel points to aspects such as what Edward Soja, the postmodern political geographer and urban planner, terms "synekism," or "urban agglomeration" (Borch 2010: 118), as well as to the energy of large working places like the shipyards. At the same time, these descriptions enhance the beautiful situation and surroundings of Belfast while they show other features as ugly, frightening and downright revolting. The heart of the matter is the question whether the city with its conflicts, crime and elements of war can at all function as a community or not.

Anne Devlin

What does Belfast look like in *Ourselves Alone* (1986)? The title of the play is the English translation of "Sinn Fein," the name of the Irish Republican movement, but here applied in a feminist spirit. This is a play first performed in 1985, at the Liverpool Playhouse, and the Royal Court Theatre, London. It is about two sisters and their sister-in-law, trying to find some meaning in their lives among Republicans, in the period after the hunger strikes of Bobby Sands and others. The action of the play is mainly set in Andersonstown, West Belfast, where the Republican Club is characterised by power struggles and violence, from which the women seek protection in the sister-in-law's home. But both the father and the brother-husband are menacing when they turn up, and outside in the street the hammering of bin lids on the pavement is heard every now and then. This is a warning that British soldiers are on their way, and on one

occasion we also see the soldiers force their way in to search the house. Most scenes are marked by fear, with people listening for threatening sounds, surreptitiously sneaking away, so as not to be seen in the wrong place.

Even if Devlin very clearly declares that the setting is mainly Andersonstown, West Belfast, she does add “but also Dublin, a hotel room, and John McDermot’s house in South Belfast, near the university and the Botanic Gardens” (Devlin 1986: 11), an area of the city with a Protestant majority. One scene there takes place in a children’s playground. The younger sister, Frieda, and her partner, are trying to catch the falling autumn leaves before they reach the ground, since every leaf caught means a happy day next year. But also in a safe area like that, Frieda, with her Republican background, is pursued and harassed; even the police have complaints that the two of them are causing a disturbance. Then, a brick is thrown through their window with a menacing note for her, stating that this is a Protestant street. The reality behind the different addresses is to set off the contrast between them but especially to demonstrate that the essential arena for the three women in focus is still the private room, a traditionally gendered scene.⁷

When, in *The Long March* (Devlin 1986a) Devlin turns to a TV play, a more flexible medium without the constrictions of the theatre, the setting moves as a taxi travels between West Belfast and Stranmillis, showing Republican quarters near the Falls Road, with their murals from the hunger strike period, also giving glimpses of the Royal Victoria Hospital, and Divis Flats, proceeding towards Great Victoria Street and on to the University area. At other times, the focus is on the centre with the City Hall and the streets around it, with security gates locked. The stage directions meant for a TV production can prescribe the scenes to take place much more out of doors, thus evoking a very particular Belfast atmosphere of the time, with effects like church bells, mixed with helicopter motors, and joggers passing outside Queen’s Bookshop.

The climax of the play comes the week before Christmas 1980 with a go-slow action of the men emptying the rubbish bins, while the state of some of the hunger strikers is critically deteriorating, and threatening demonstrators, with torches alight, are screaming and chanting: “Brit

⁷ Cf. Enrica Cerquoni, “Women in Rooms: Landscapes of the Missing in Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*” (2007).

lovers out out out!” Finally, Father Oliver arrives to tell them that the hunger strikers have accepted the terms offered.

Two short scenes in the drama, one from a hotel in Belfast, and the other from “a colonial drawing room” in London, differ from the rest of the play, by providing glimpses from weddings, which should be symbols of unity but here indicate disharmony. The play ends with a picture of the moon over West Belfast which is presented as a place for conflict, but also with awkward attempts, like Father Oliver’s efforts, at bridging the controversies.

To conclude this discussion of Devlin’s work, it is worth mentioning her later play, *After Easter* (1994). This play was looked forward to with great expectations, when it was first to be performed in Northern Ireland at the Lyric Players Theatre. The performance was however, met with disappointment and harsh criticism.⁸ The beginning and end of the play take place in England, but the larger part is set in Belfast, represented in a great variety of scenes: convent, hospital ward, a sunny family yard and the inside of a home, which is suddenly besieged and in a state of crossfire; in other words a city to long for and to get away from. It is shown with its violence, threats, menacing sounds during a wake, in an atmosphere of irony and humour, mixed with fear. We see social engagement, but also a deeply segregated society, close to a state of war. The city of Belfast is seen as a refuge, but also a dangerous place to escape from.

Christina Reid

Christina Reid’s three plays from the 1980s are very much Belfast plays. *Tea in a China Cup* (1987) covers the period from 1939 to 1972, switching back and forth with changes in lighting, indicating changes of time and place. While Beth has married into an elegant house up on the Lisburn Road, symbolised by a velvet sofa on the stage, here indicating a wealthier area than Beth’s original home, the main scene is the little Protestant house of her grandparents, later inhabited by her mother, Sarah. An important feature here is the wall with first the portrait of the grandfather, in a First World War uniform, later with the addition of his

⁸ See Cottreau 2006: 325-35. For a more extensive analysis of the play see Olinder 2012b: 73-81.

son, also in uniform, killed in the Second World War, and finally his grandson in his army uniform, posted to Germany as a motor mechanic: “three generations for King and Country” (Reid 1987: 23) as the grandfather proudly exclaims. The first scene makes it clear—although it is first taken as a joke—that the new cemetery is strictly divided into Catholic and Protestant plots, demonstrating how segregation continues even after death.⁹ An important line of action in the play is the parallel lives of Beth and her Catholic friend, Theresa, emphasising the differences in their upbringing and opportunities, as well as the respective prejudices of their backgrounds. The divisions in the city are not only between Catholics and Protestants, or rich and poor, but also between Catholic poverty, relying on social assistance, and Protestant genteel poverty, refusing such help to keep up appearances and the family pride, represented by the almost proverbial “tea in a china cup.” The initial stage direction states that the action is set in Belfast, but there is only one direct reference to a street, the above mentioned Lisburn Road. It is, however, the whole context, the family history, people’s reactions, behaviour, and relationships that make the play a presentation of Belfast.

Another play, *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989), is much more explicit, not only in the title which refers to the now 77 year-old Dolly, once topping the bill for singing and dancing in the halls as “The Belle of the Belfast City.” Here the opposites are those who can enjoy life versus the moralists who cannot but only seem to enjoy judging the other lot. The singing and dancing, particularly of the good old days, are contrasted by the demonstrations of the time in which the play is set, i.e. the mid-eighties. The family shop is in East Belfast, in a side street that the army has closed to traffic, but the city and its streets are mentioned throughout the play. When young Belle, the coloured granddaughter, born in England, arrives for the first time in Belfast, we get her fresh impressions of the city, and we can see the wide differences in her perceptions and expressions of them from those of other characters. Belle is also the one to observe that, apart from the very centre of the city, many people know only their own neighbourhood. This reveals the strict

⁹ Another kind of division is seen when comparing Beth’s mother Sarah’s intense pleasure at hearing the Orange bands practising for the twelfth of July, with the horror felt on similar occasions by the Catholic characters in Madden’s novel discussed above.

division of the city, which, in turn, means that it is partly lack of knowledge of “the other” that leads to lack of empathy. The moralist racist is confronted by the fact that his cousin, Belle’s mother, gets her daughter outside marriage, with a black Baptist preacher who had been thrown out by that same cousin and mother-to-be for being “a sanctimonious American bible-belt prig” (Reid 1989: 15). The play offers a full variety of political opinions, from hard core National Front members in Nazi uniforms, to the many nuances of Liberal views. The varied accents are also explicitly mentioned from Irish, Northern Irish, Scots, Northern English, ordinary English, to Aristocratic English, as an important feature of each of the characters. Since one of them is deaf and dumb, sign language also plays a role in the play, adding to the urban variety. This mixture is also characteristic of Belfast, even if a mix of different dialects or languages must be a feature of most big cities these days. The play provides a light-hearted picture of Belfast and its inhabitants, reflecting the good old times, while at the same time this is set off by the general unrest, and especially by the callous insensitivity of the National Front member of the family.

Conclusion

Urbanists like Edward Soja will say that a city is the combination of three elements: a place, time as expressed in its history and a social community aspect (Borch 2010: 115). In other words, a city is the effect of a great many people interacting, in constant development of the place where they live, and their sense, individually, of being one among many. This is also what we have seen in Mary Beckett’s short stories, Deirdre Madden’s novel and Anne Devlin’s and Christina Reid’s plays, where Belfast is occasionally represented as one big criminal area, but most of the time a place for human encounters. This is so, even if the feeling of common interest as an essential aspect of urban unity is lacking—sometimes also within the same group. The conflicts of the past are seldom mentioned explicitly in these works, even if they lie heavily on people’s minds, but most important is, of course, the ongoing conflicts. The picture of Belfast presented to us as readers and audience is, thus, ambiguous, multifaceted, at times very attractive, but all too often the opposite. The difference between, on the one hand, urban life with its freedom but also, mainly due to the Troubles, its dangers and limitations

and, on the other hand, the beautiful surrounding landscape is clearly marked. The city's function as an administrative or cultural centre looms in the background, but in these literary works, the city is mainly seen from a number of individual points of view, those of the writers and of their created characters. The many subjective images make up a composite picture of Belfast as a city to long for, but also a city people intensely want to get away from, as from a life that has gone wrong.

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