



REVIEW ESSAY

History with a Divided and Complicated Heart?¹ The Uses of Political Memoir, Biography and Autobiography in Contemporary Northern Ireland

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Gusty Spence

Roy Garland

Blackstaff Press, 2001

HBK: ISBN 0-85640-698-8 £16.99

pp. xvi + 333 (including: index)

Belfast's Dome of Delight: City Hall Politics 1981-2000

Máirtín Ó Muilleoir

Beyond the Pale Publications, 1999

PBK: ISBN 1-900960-08-7 £8.99

pp vi + 227 (including: index)

Personal Accounts from Northern Ireland's Troubles: Public Conflict, Private Loss

Marie Smyth and Marie-Therese Fay (eds.)

Pluto Press, 2000

HBK: ISBN 0-7453-1619-0 £35.00

PBK: ISBN 0-7453-1618-2 £10.99

pp. x + 147 (including: index, references & appendices)

It may not be immediately obvious that these books should be reviewed together, and it is certainly the case that there are significant differences in both content and style, but nonetheless I want to argue that they all shed light on a number of parallel themes. At the risk of clouding the important issue, it is possible to identify one of these volumes as biography, one as political memoir, and one as an edited collection of autobiographical reflections. These may be different genres, but they share several common elements, and provoke some interesting methodological concerns.

The uses (and, it must be said, abuses) of political memoir, biography and autobiography ought to be the subject of much discussion and debate among political scientists and contemporary historians. *Ought to be*. In fact, relatively little substantive thought seems to have been given to the advantages and pitfalls for researchers who make use of these sources. Recognising the complexity and diversity of the elements that have been included under the rubric 'political memoir', Egerton (1994: p. xiii) argues that it should properly be conceived as a 'polygenre', encompassing a number of potential characteristics, for example:

- a) contemporary descriptive recording of events (as participant or observer)
- b) retrospective narration with explanatory or interpretative reflection
- c) autobiographical portrayal
- d) biographical depiction of political contemporaries
- e) revelation of the hidden working of a political system

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and the books under review contain several of these features, in complex combination. For contemporary historians, there is a

¹ Marie Smyth and Marie-Therese Fay (2000: 137) argue that the accounts they include seem extraordinary because they 'are not usually part of the official record, that history is often history from above – or maybe even history without a divided and complicated heart.'

tendency, perhaps understandable, to relegate the significance of memoir, in the face of the demands and rigours of an established, professionalised discipline (historiography). Despite the fact that autobiographies and memoirs need to be viewed and used with circumspection, they are often accessible, intriguing and revealing, engaging the reader in a way that the patient collection and collation of documentary evidence may not. Although these sources can be highly selective, self-serving, providing the opportunity for retrospective self-justification by (ex-) protagonists, rendering coherent and consistent episodes or lives that were anything but, it is still true to say that using political memoirs, carefully and cautiously, can permit a richer, more textured account of public events and figures. If this is true for stable, advanced liberal democracies and their polities, is it also the case for deeply divided societies seeking paths towards conflict resolution, as in the specific case of Northern Ireland under review here?

There are a number of salient points here. First, the recent spate of memoir and auto/biography published about Northern Ireland is an indication that, for many protagonists in the conflict, the 'peace process', the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires and the negotiation of the Belfast Agreement, represent a 'line in the sand', an implicit recognition that their 'war' is over. There is a perceived opportunity to 'set the record straight', and shed light on actions and events, many of which may have been too sensitive to discuss previously. Of course, this effort can have as a primary objective self-justification and represent an attempt to shape the agenda of historical discourse, so the 'judgment of posterity' reflects favourably on the author (memoir/autobiography) or subject (biography), and his/her political party or organisation.

Second, and alternatively, the primary purpose of such publications can be to continue the conflict by other means. In this case, the purpose is not so much an effort to influence the historical record, but is rather a contemporary political device, an element in the ongoing conflict, whereby the protagonist seeks to use memoir as a proxy weapon. For those authors/subjects who have played an 'active' role in the conflict, and belong or have belonged to paramilitary organisations, this can serve as a means of conducting the battle by force of argument, rather than by the argument of force.

Nonetheless, in this scenario, there are both advantages and disadvantages for the academic or general reader. In the Northern Irish conflict over the last 30 years, as with conflicts elsewhere, a good deal of 'political' activity (especially, but not exclusively, the use of violence for political ends) has been, of necessity, clandestine and conspiratorial. It is extremely difficult to verify the veracity of claims made in published memoirs or biographies, and they cannot easily be confirmed or undermined by official archives or documentary sources. Generally speaking, in the case of Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups, for example, we have not had access to reliable or authorised documents concerning internal affairs or political debates. However, precisely because of the relative paucity of these other primary sources, much of what is now commonly accepted by historians of the conflict has been gleaned from memoir and personal recollection. In the absence of official or authorised accounts, and despite the significant difficulties associated with their use, contemporary historians simply cannot afford to write off these protagonists' accounts.

Third, we should not discount the possibility that in a conflict resolution situation, some protagonists of the erstwhile conflict will be ready and willing to commit their experiences and interpretations to print, more in a spirit of self-criticism than self-justification. In this case, memoir and autobiographical material may well be used in a sincere effort to build bridges between the antagonists, with the objective of aiding



mutual understanding, or as a clarion call to future generations, warning them of the mistakes of the present one.

Of course, this classification of the primary purpose of memoirs should not be understood in terms of mutually exclusive categories; many memoirs will include elements of self-justification *and* efforts to score points against the 'enemy'. Genuinely self-critical publications are likely to be much rarer.

Fourth, these memoirs are often marked by a significant degree of localism and sometimes parochialism. This is not unusual in autobiography, and detailed insights into the lived experience of an individual are likely, by their nature, to be restricted in their scope. However, the most useful volumes are also likely to be those that can offer a broader overview of the particular lives and events described. Recent memoirs from within the ranks (or ex-ranks) of the Republican movement serve to illustrate this point: Raymond Gilmour (1999) provides a detailed account of the IRA in Derry, with little attempt to connect this to the development of the movement more generally across Northern Ireland, while Shane O'Doherty (1993) covers similar territory, but with a broader perspective. Eamon Collins (1998) concentrated his account on Newry and South Armagh, and Martin McGartland (1998) and Gerry Adams (1996) reflect very different interpretations of the Republican milieu of West Belfast. The point here is not to assess the honesty or otherwise of these memoirs, or to investigate the motivation of the authors, but to argue that these accounts vary considerably in terms of their capacity to portray *particular* events within a broader context. Ultimately, several of these volumes are of limited help to contemporary historians in that *political* considerations and reflections appear only tangentially, if at all. Many of these writers tend to concentrate their interest on paramilitary activities, 'security' issues, and engagements with the 'enemy', etc. This may be the result of a deliberate decision to highlight these considerations, perhaps with an eye to sensationalism and sales, or it may be a reflection of these authors' relative lack of concern with the broader context of strategic and political thinking, with regard to the events they describe and their roles within the Republican movement.

Having considered a number of general methodological issues, I want to turn to the specific books under review. Marie Smyth and Marie-Therese Fay have collected autobiographical accounts of some of those injured or bereaved over the course of the 'Troubles'. Under the auspices of the 'Cost of the Troubles Study', they conducted 77 interviews; 14 edited transcripts are collected together in this volume, while others appeared in the 'Do you know what's happened?' exhibition in Belfast in 1998. This volume does not make for easy reading, for many of the interviews are harrowing, and the interviewers themselves 'were unable to maintain [a] detached, professional stand. We were often moved to tears by what we heard. Frequently, we left with the memory of a story that would stay with us for months, maybe years afterwards.' (p. 1).

The book also includes a thought-provoking introduction, conclusion and appendix concerning interview techniques. Smyth and Fay emphasise their role as 'instruments', whose purpose was to enable the interviewees to recount and document their stories. They distinguish this approach from more journalistic exercises, in the sense that the bereaved or injured continued to 'own' their stories; they were intimately involved with the editing process, in order that the 'integrity of the story, ... the sense and emotional tone of what was conveyed to us in the interview was presented in the shorter [published] version.' (p. 3). They acknowledge that this project is not about forming a balanced history of the period, but they do nevertheless aim for 'representativeness' in their selection of interviewees. This refers to the balance of Catholics, Protestants and (a

single) ethnic minority interviewee, as well as to gender and geographical representation, although there are no interviews with 'those who had relatives killed in British security forces, nor with those who served in such forces, in spite of our attempts to conduct such interviews.' (p. 2). A fuller explanation of this apparent gap would have been useful.

For Smyth and Fay, the purpose of their project is two-fold: first, the public at large are not, they contend, aware of the 'true consequences of violence', and this is 'profoundly dangerous' because without such an awareness, 'violence can seem an attractive way of dealing with conflict'; second, they argue that in the deeply divided society of Northern Ireland, there is a need to provide 'access to the experiences and views of those from the "other side".' (p. 3). Generally, the book succeeds in addressing these issues, but there are also clear limitations in this approach, particularly with regard to the latter objective. These individual experiences may be authentic and 'true', and provide some understanding of perceptions within both communities, but the wider interpretative historical or political framework within which these experiences are felt/understood is not often explicitly spelled out. There is still scope in these testimonies for inter-communal misunderstanding, and the perpetuation of mythologised or excessively ideological responses to recent history, because many of the assumptions made by these victims remain implicit and unspoken.

The sensitivities of the editing process are also an issue for Roy Garland in his biography of Gusty Spence, which makes very extensive use of direct transcription of Spence's 'conversations' with Garland. He uses this term, rather than 'interview', because the latter 'seems much too formal a description of our many discussions. These were never an onerous task for Gusty or myself.' (p. ix). Smyth and Fay clearly also attempted to reduce the formality of their interviews by asking only two simple questions: 'What has been your experience of the Troubles? How have the Troubles affected you?' However, the answers were complicated and sometimes contradictory, and 'people wanted to talk, to tell us about their experiences and the effects their experiences had on them ... They barely needed our questions, they only required our attention.' (p. 3). These interviews *were* often onerous and disturbing, partly because, at least initially, the interviewees were strangers, but also because they almost all dealt *directly* with 'the awful, gory and horrifying reality of the impact of war on the lives of ordinary people.' (p. 5).

The question of how frank some of the interviewees decide to be about their role as perpetrators of violence (as well as its victims) is of particular interest. Although Garland and Spence devote considerable attention to the latter's decision to turn away from violence (a decision made in 1974), there is less detailed assessment of the role played by Spence in planning or engaging in 'physical force' (both before and during his imprisonment). On his decision to abandon violence, Spence reveals, 'Whenever you'd spent as long as I had in the physical force game and seen what I'd seen, it was a bit of a wrench [to abandon it]. I was a physical force person. My whole life had been geared to physical force, in the army and in the UVF.' (p. 178). Laurence McKeown, a former member of the IRA interviewed by Smyth and Fay, does also enter into some discussion of his role in perpetrating violence, but it is overshadowed by his experience of prison and the hunger strike (pp. 51-62).

Smyth and Fay took the view that although on occasion they 'knew that the person [being interviewed] was presenting a facet of events that avoided highlighting their own role or that of others' (p. 4), they were not willing or able to judge 'whether such presentation is less true than another version ... Only some of the truths have been told. Some parts will be left out ... This book contains some accounts, not every possible



account. These accounts are as true as any others' (pp. 45). This may be a sensible strategy as far as it goes, but surely the reader also needs a compass to help them chart the uncertain territory between subjective perceptions and memories, on the one hand, and more dispassionate accounts from observers with greater distance, and maybe perspective. The editors refer convincingly in their conclusion to a 'perceptual hierarchy of events' for individuals (p. 133), with lower and higher order experiences, in terms of intensity and proximity (in time and space). For instance, some of the interviewees were used to living with the trappings of the violent conflict literally on their doorsteps, and seemingly became inured to routine manifestations of conflict (armed paramilitary or security force personnel, stop and search, etc.), remembering instead only the more intense or personal of their experiences. Whilst the experiences recounted here are often deeply moving, their *authenticity* needs to be complemented by an effort to understand the broader social and political significance of these experiences. Indeed, the Cost of the Troubles project has also attempted to deliver just such an account in a companion volume (Fay, Morrissey and Smyth 1999).

Smyth and Fay have brought together some powerful, affecting testimony, and a key conclusion of the project is that 'it is as if there are two or maybe three "worlds" in Northern Ireland in relation to the Troubles.' (p. 133). These are delineated especially by geography and social class; 'the Troubles have had most of their impact in relatively small concentrated geographical areas, and usually within poorer communities.' (p. 133). The experiences collected in this book bear this out, and the violent events of summer 2001 in north Belfast suggest that even after nearly a decade of the peace process, that impact remains unevenly felt (Fay, Morrissey and Smyth 1999: 141-155; Dixon 2001: 23-25).

Roy Garland's biography of loyalist leader Gusty Spence illustrates well the social and economic privations of working-class west Belfast during the middle of the twentieth century. Brought up in the Hammer district of the Lower Shankill, where poverty knew no sectarian barriers, Gusty took a very different route from his brother Ned/Eddie, who early on broke from Orangeism, and became a socialist, and later a member of the Communist Party and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). Gusty joined the re-born Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1965 after serving in the British Army in Cyprus, was convicted of the murder of Catholic barman Peter Ward in Malvern Street in 1966 (a charge he denies vociferously, with support from Garland), and served the best part of 20 years in jail, before his eventual release in December 1984. He has gone on to have an important influence on the evolving politics of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), and read the ceasefire statement on behalf of the Combined Loyalist Military Command in 1994.

The same objective social circumstances and family socialisation could produce highly divergent political paths; though they were to move closer together after Gusty's renunciation of violence and conversion to socialism, for many years the brothers were estranged. There is, in Spence's account of this relationship, a strongly self-critical reappraisal of his early political beliefs: in a letter to Ned in 1981, Gusty admits, 'As you know I have very much changed – not because of what prison has done to me, but because of what I have done for myself. If I had to serve a lifetime in dungeons like these, I wanted to know for what reason, and I searched for the truth ... I feel deeply embarrassed when I think of my former "truths" which when investigated did not stand up to scrutiny or fact.' (pp. 244-5).

Although the localism of Spence's circumstances was extreme, spending almost two decades in Crumlin Road and Long Kesh, it is clear that his remarkable approach to

these long years in prison, and the autodidactic education Spence gained, helped him to transcend this enclosed world, and draw broader lessons for the future, both in terms of his personal beliefs, and the political strategy of his organisation. His links with Republicans in jail (particularly with the socialists in the Official Republican movement), his emphasis upon discipline and his uncompromising approach to the prison authorities all make for a fascinating glimpse into survival strategies utilised by Spence and his comrades.

There are aspects of this biography which are frustrating, although there may be understandable reasons for what appear to be strategic absences. For instance, it would have been illuminating to read a detailed account of Spence's relationship with the UVF leadership outside prison, given his great importance as 'commanding officer' of the UVF in the jail, and his public profile in the Loyalist heartland. Spence confesses himself to be uncomfortable with his public persona, arguing in 1981, '[i]t is my sincere wish and true desire to bury once and for all time the undeserved and unsolicited image and myth of the Gusty Spence often portrayed in the "popular press".' (p. 247).

We do hear about Spence's critical attitude to what he perceives as ill-discipline in the leadership of the UVF and naked sectarianism in some of its activities, which are partly responsible for his eventual decision to resign both as CO in Long Kesh in 1978 and from the UVF itself, and there are allusions to 'a period of years' where 'a bad [UVF] leadership took over' (p. 227) In the early 1990s, he acted as a 'willing conduit' for the UVF, by reporting Loyalist views to a priest from Clonard monastery in Belfast, but discontinued this role, explaining, 'I said to the UVF, "Look, you told me you don't shoot Catholics just because they are Catholics but yet you go across the road and shoot a building worker simply because he was a Catholic? I can't accept your word." That was for me the straw that broke the camel's back.' (p. 274) Spence certainly makes a determined effort to distance himself from accusations of maintaining a sectarian approach to politics, although he does admit that when he joined the UVF 'sectarianism might have snuck into it in some shape or form but I joined the UVF purely for patriotic reasons and during my whole time in prison I never allowed any form of sectarianism.' (p. 48) Later on, Spence resigned, at least partly because, 'I was disenchanted with a paramilitary organisation that in some instances was carrying out violence for the sake of violence.' (p. 226) This part of the story remains frustratingly incomplete for the reader. Other sources can shed some light on these questions (Cusack and McDonald 2000; Taylor 1999; Boulton 1973), but there is still research to be done.

Although Roy Garland has done a good job in editing Spence's 'conversations' with him, in the copious use of this direct autobiographical material, the reader gets little direction from Garland himself. As a former officer in Tara, a shadowy Loyalist paramilitary grouping of the early 1970s, and now a member of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Garland is both personally and politically close to his subject. Whilst it is of course usual for biographers to have a certain degree of sympathy for their subject, in this case the admiration is perhaps too evident, despite Garland's final paragraph: 'In writing this book it has not been my intention to glamourise or lionise Gusty Spence, nor would he want this.' (p. 311) There is some pathos in the fact that as the book was being finished, Spence's home and those of members of his family came under attack during the Loyalist feud over the summer of 2000. Having spent much of his life, both in prison and since his release, arguing for progressive politics within working-class Unionism and Loyalism, and against gangsterism and political fragmentation within this community, it is easy to imagine the heavy heart with which Spence would have reacted to this violence.



A lasting legacy of Spence's influence is the existence of a cohort of politically astute Loyalists, in the shape of David Ervine, Billy Mitchell, Billy Hutchinson and others, who have helped the wider world to forge new perceptions of their community. Although this remains a minority viewpoint within Loyalist politics, it has been appreciated by many outside the movement, even by some in the Republican community. Garland points out the similarity between Gusty Spence's political journey, and that undertaken by Sinn Féin (SF) politician Martin Meehan (p. 309), and there were several unexpected parallels between Spence's views and those put forward by Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, in his memoir of Belfast city council during the 1980s and 1990s. The clearest example is Ó Muilleoir's disdain for the mainstream unionist politicians, and their antics inside and outside the council chamber; he relentlessly documents and sends up the efforts of both the UUP and Democratic Unionist Party to frustrate the forward march of SF in Belfast (Ó Muilleoir, who made his name as an Irish language activist, spent 10 years on the city council from 1987 to 1997, and SF was the joint largest party by the time he stood down). Spence shares this disdain, although he may well take issue with Ó Muilleoir's view that 'by 1998, unionism was rapidly becoming a spent force.' (p. 217) Ó Muilleoir recognises that the PUP representatives (Ervine, Hutchinson and Hugh Smyth) were 'in every respect a mirror image (bar their Orange rosettes) of the working class, beddenimed Sinn Féin supporters.' (p. 213)

Essentially, although it is leavened by many humorous anecdotes, occasionally at his own expense, but more often at the expense of the Unionists, Ó Muilleoir's account is a morality tale, in which the selfless efforts of Republican councillors to win equal treatment for their Nationalist constituents are constantly thwarted by Neanderthal bigots and bogeymen. There is, throughout, a confident expectation that Unionists will do the Republicans' PR work for them, by haplessly portraying themselves as sectarian and intransigent, and there is a wealth of material here that confirms this impression. Only late in the day do Unionist councillors wake up to the self-inflicted damage to their cause, due to their implacable determination to isolate SF: Fred Cobain, Unionist whip, argued, 'I think that we have such a bad image that even when we are right, we are wrong.' (p. 95) Ó Muilleoir presents a frank account of a cynical exercise, and it is not an uplifting read, although understandably he is delighted to report the growth of SF as a major force, and the shift of power between the sectarian blocs on the council.

While Ó Muilleoir is undoubtedly right to argue that 'the loss of City Hall, the jewel in the Unionist crown, was of inestimable historic and symbolic importance to Nationalists and Unionists alike ...' (p. 213), the wider context of this development is not much to the fore. This may well be because the target audience will probably be aware of such a context, but it still risks appearing a parochial focus. At times, the broader evolution of politics across Northern Ireland, whether in the constitutional or paramilitary arenas, is glossed over in this account. This is particularly the case with regard to the IRA campaign of 'armed struggle'. There is the occasional intriguing aside, for instance: 'The years following the hunger strike were a time of great optimism in Republican Ireland, even if delight at electoral successes was serving to smother the much-needed debate on the IRA campaign.' (p. 16) However, we learn little more about what this debate should have entailed, and why it was smothered.

In the end, these volumes of political memoir and auto/biography should not be read in isolation, or treated as if they reveal incontrovertible truths, but researchers can utilise these sources with caution, and with a constant effort to verify and check the consistency of the arguments presented (both internally, and with other available sources). Researchers will probably have to accept that they will still be left with an incomplete picture, but some judgments regarding the relative utility of the numerous

publications in these genres can be made. Insofar as they meet the criteria for internal consistency and accuracy, and they provide a relatively close 'fit' with other reliable sources, memoir and auto/biography make for useful tools for the contemporary historian. With the recent news that the rights for the second volume of Gerry Adams' autobiography have been sold, this is an issue for researchers that isn't going to go away, you know...

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