



Seamus Heaney and Belfast

6 February 2018

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Bernard Torney dir., 'Dusty Bluebells', BBC Television, 1971.



Bernard Torney dir., 'Dusty Bluebells', BBC Television, 1971.



Still from David Hammond dir., 'Steelchest, Nail
in the Boot, and the Barking Dog', BBC
Television, 1987.
Northern Ireland Digital Film Archive.



The people of the lower Falls area, well used to frustration and misfortune in the past, have no difficulty in adapting themselves to their present plight. The burnt-out shells of business premises, the street corners that look like bomb sites – already these are passed unnoticed by the local people.

Indeed the residents of the area have little time for the gaping sight-seers. One exasperated lorry-driver was heard asking a stranger: “Is it the Niagara Falls you’re looking for?”

“Irish News” Reporter, ‘Business as Usual’, *Irish News*, 22 August 1969, 1.

Left: Riots: Belfast. August 1969. Army take over: a young lady leaves the sealed off area passing through the barricades in Divis Street. *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 August 1969.

‘The Trade of an Irish Poet’ (May 1972)

On the one hand, poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal. Here the explosions literally rattle your window day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in internment camps – destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps deeply exhilarating, are in the air.

Heaney, ‘The Trade of an Irish Poet’, *Guardian*, 25 May 1972, p. 17.



People keep asking what it's like to be living in Belfast and I've found myself saying that things aren't too bad in our part of the town: a throwaway consolation meaning that we don't expect to be caught in crossfire if we step into the street. It's a shorthand that evades unravelling the weary twisted emotions that are rolled like a ball of hooks and sinkers in the heart.

Heaney, 'Christmas 1971', collected in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980, pbk. 1984), 30.



None, even though Belfast in the early seventies was a pretty unpleasant place to be. But then, it had never been altogether beloved. It had been familiar, yes, but the Berkeley experience meant that I was seeing it – and the university – with new eyes. What Derek Mahon calls [in his poem ‘On Belfast’] ‘a perverse pride in being on the side / Of fallen angels and refusing to get up’ – that pride in the downbeat that eventually downgrades began to get to me.

Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), 149-50.



The violence of the Panthers' rhetoric is shocking. 'Subversive' isn't quite the word. It is grotesquely violent, without irony, without concessions of any kind, meant to scare while it indoctrinates. When I think of the IRA's long-banned paper, *The United Irishman*, and its romantic traditional invocations in the great line of Tone and Emmet and Pearse, even its furious anti-British propaganda has an old-world restraint about it. When I think of Stormont's histrionic cries of wolf for as long as I remember, they seem as ridiculous as they are exacerbating.

Heaney, 'Views', *Listener*, 31 December 1970, p. 903.

Nacio Jan Brown, Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley, 1970, from *The Berkeley Revolution: A Digital Archive of One City's Transformation in the late-1960s & 1970s*:
<http://revolution.berkeley.edu/on-the-avenue/?cat=432&subcat=1>



Expertly civil-tongued with civil neighbours
On the high wires of first wireless reports,
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:

‘Oh, it’s disgraceful, surely, I agree.’
‘Where’s it going to end?’ ‘It’s getting worse.’
‘They’re murderers.’ ‘Internment, understandably ...’
The ‘voice of sanity’ is getting hoarse.

From ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’, in Heaney, *North*
(London: Faber, 1975), 52-3.