

Crossing Derry

Tony Simpson

Crossing water always furthered something

When quoting this line by Seamus Heaney, Martin McGuinness, Northern Ireland's deputy first minister, registered several points. He was speaking in Derry at a party for volunteers in *Fleadh 2013*, the all Ireland music festival which was held 'north of the border' for the first time and had attracted some 400,000 visitors to the city during five days in August. Heaney had died a few days after the Fleadh (pronounced 'fla'), on 30 August. His loss is keenly felt in Derry, where he attended St Columb's College as a boarder during his early teenage years. There his passion for poetry and flair for Latin and the classics were nurtured. From a small farm in Mossbawn in south County Derry, he had won a scholarship to St Columb's, courtesy of the 1947 Education in Northern Ireland Act, passed by the Labour Government of the day, as Heaney himself once remarked.

Mr McGuinness was acknowledging Seamus Heaney's profound contribution to civilization and culture, while also addressing Derry's divisions and how they are being overcome, literally, by the construction of the new Peace Bridge across the River Foyle. He was speaking a few days after visiting Warrington in the north of England, where he had given the peace lecture which we publish in this issue of *The Spokesman*. Two boys, twelve-years-old Tim Parry and three-years-old Johnathan Ball, had been killed in an IRA bombing in the town in 1993.

A short distance across the River Foyle, in a low-lying area known as the Bogside, British Army paratroopers, firing from the

City Walls, had shot dead 13 people on Bloody Sunday in January 1972. It was a re-enactment of the first of those killings, of Jackie Duddy, age 17 years, which formed the second of nine scenes of *The Conquest of Happiness*, directed by Haris Pasovic, who is from Bosnia. Inspired by writings of Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, which had its world première in Derry, is described in the programme as ‘epic theatre, dance and live music’. The performance took place around the old parade ground of Ebrington Barracks, from where the British Army had patrolled both sides of the River Foyle, until its final departure in 2003. Built in the 1840s, Ebrington Barracks is laid out in the shape of a star fort with buildings on three sides overlooking the city and the River Foyle. The fort sprawls across some ten acres plus the slob land against the river.

This military location resonated with meaning as Jackie Duddy, played by Dermott Hickson (from County Derry), was struck down by a Para’s bullet, and Fr Edward Daly, played by Sasa Handzic (from Sarajevo), led away the stricken band, crouching and waving his white handkerchief. Suddenly, the spotlight switched to a young woman in her white wedding dress, on one of several makeshift stages circling the parade ground, singing *She Moved through the Fair*. Jackie approached her and stretched out his hand. Mona Muratovic, also from Sarajevo, rendered this Irish classic beautifully, accompanied by Neil Martin and Rod McVey, who contributed exquisite music all evening. Apparently, Jackie Duddy’s family was consulted about the production, and expressed enthusiasm that some thought had been given to what Jackie’s life might have been.

The scene quickly shifted to Allende’s Chile and the plight of Victor Jara, poet, musician and revolutionary. Spanish replaced English and, in later scenes of *Conquest*, there was German, Slovene and other languages of the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, there was a rousing rendition of *Yugoslavia*, an old patriotic song, sung by members of the company and several hundred others from local choirs who doubled as extras. These local people brought to life a powerful scene set in Auschwitz. Children and be-shawled women marched behind military trucks spewing fumes into the face of the Nazi officer conducting them to the gas chambers, having endured the attentions of Joseph Mengele, the SS doctor.

Pasovic’s concept of *The Conquest of Happiness* is audacious, and its realisation dramatic and direct. Now and then, Bertrand Russell (played by Cornelius Macarthy) interjected. Russell’s words were mainly taken from his own writings, but there was some poetic licence. It seems rather unlikely, however, that Russell would have called for NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia during the 1990s, had he survived another 20 years or so.

Written for the page rather than the stage, Russell's interventions slowed the pace of *Conquest* a little. Of course, Russell himself was passionate in his causes, and sometimes vehement in their espousal; he never hectored, was often ironic, and always wrote incisively. Russell's actual final public message about Palestine features in the opening scene of the drama during which a Palestinian home is destroyed by a rampaging bulldozer. Russell bursts through the crowd, hooded on head against the chill night, and remonstrates with the driver and his settler accomplice. This pithy statement (see *Spokesman 100*), written in 1970 as a message to an international conference of parliamentarians in Egypt, includes the memorable sentence:

'The tragedy of the people of Palestine is that their country was "given" by a foreign Power to another people for the creation of a new State.'

The 'Power' was Britain, which helps explain why there is profound sympathy for Palestine in Ireland.

Such solidarity is manifested in Sandino's bar, next to Derry bus station. A Palestinian flag is emblazoned with two words, FREE PALESTINE, echoing the experience of FREE DERRY, declared in the nearby Bogside area between 1969 and 1972. The Free Derry Museum and Archive has now moved from its original portakabins into a permanent building. It is a stunning audio and visual display which tells the terrible story of Bloody Sunday and much besides. Opened by Moazzam Begg, the Guantanamo survivor and campaigner, the Free Derry Museum and Archive reflects the city's longstanding internationalist outlook.

Back in Sandino's, a silver missile/drone hangs from the ceiling, signed 'Raytheon'. The arms manufacturer closed its plant in Derry in 2010. In a famous trial two years earlier, the 'Raytheon 6' were acquitted on charges of criminal damage and affray at the Raytheon plant after they destroyed computers with hammers and occupied the premises prior to arrest. Notwithstanding high and long-term unemployment, arms manufacturers are not welcome in Derry.

The city looked magnificent in the evening light, prior to the performance of *Conquest*. The Peace Bridge, architecturally stunning, wound across the River Foyle, downstream from a big curve in the waterway. This lifeline now joins the two sides of the river, east and west, in a renewed community of common interest. Earlier in 2013, Brides on the Bridge had assembled thousands of Derry women in their wedding dresses in front of the Guild Hall, on the western side, before crossing over to the eastern side and entering the Guinness Book of Records for the

largest such gathering anywhere in the world. This was but one of many spectacular, entertaining and participative events to mark Derry as City of Culture 2013.

As a major port, Derry has always been an international city looking outwards, like Cork or Hull. In the sixth century, St Colmcille set sail from Derry for Iona to establish a monastic community there, whence Christianity spread across Britain. A millennium later, in the early seventeenth century, the plantation of Ulster by settlers from Scotland and England saw the construction of the Walled City, financed by the City of London. A condition of the deal, signed by King James the First, was that Derry received the epithet 'London', becoming Londonderry for the immigrant protestant community and their financiers.

The multinational production of *The Conquest of Happiness* involves companies from Belfast (Prime Cut Productions), Sarajevo (EastWest Theatre Company), and Mladinsko Theatre (Ljubljana). After Derry, the show toured to Rijeka, Mostar, Ljubljana and Novi Sad, before returning to the Belfast Festival in late October.

Crossing water always furthered something.

*Running water never disappointed.
Crossing water always furthered something.
Stepping stones were stations of the soul.*

*A kesh could mean the track some called a causey
Raised above the wetness of the bog,
Or the causey where it bridged old drains and streams.*

*It steadies me to tell these things. Also
I cannot mention keshes or the ford
Without my father's shade appearing to me*

*On a path towards sunset, eyeing spades and clothes
That turf cutters stowed perhaps or souls cast off
Before they crossed the log that spans the burn.*

Seamus Heaney
Seeing Things
Crossings xxxii
Faber and Faber, 1991