

2016

## Shifting perspectives and the children of 1916

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This article was originally published as:

O'Neill, A. (2016). Shifting perspectives and the children of 1916. *The Journal*, 24 (4), 6-15.

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## shifting perspectives and the children of 1916

By Angeline O'Neill,

The books you read as a child brought you sights you hadn't seen yourself, scents you hadn't smelled, sounds you hadn't heard. They introduced you to people you hadn't met, and helped you to sample ways of being that would never have occurred to you. And the result was... somebody who was enriched by the knowledge that their own particular life only occupied one little space in a much bigger world of possibilities. (Francis Spufford, *The Child That Books Built*)

o writes Francis Spufford in his book *The Child That Books Built* and I believe it offers us a fruitful starting point for a discussion on the way literature helps shift perspectives. In order to do so I'd like to focus on historical perspectives, in particular the way that young readers in the early twenty-first century (whether Irish or not) are being encouraged to think about the Easter Rising. There are many views on the Rising: why it mattered and what it achieved. Until quite recently, two groups who were involved have been largely ignored: women and children. In 2016 they are still involved, only now they are readers – readers of an increasing number of texts written for them about twentieth century Irish history. As Spufford notes, reading enriches us when it makes us aware that we occupy 'one little space in a much bigger world of possibilities'. It can also make us aware that a multitude of little spaces constitutes this 'much bigger world of possibilities'.

It is important to understand why children's literature is important to present and future interpretations of and approaches to Irish history and narrative, in particular the Rising. In this spirit I'd like to consider the changing position of previously peripheral voices and spaces of young people through this literature. The inter-relationship between narrative and history, power and identity, is central to an understanding

of the process. Siobhan Parkinson's *Amelia*<sup>1</sup> and *No Peace for Amelia*<sup>2</sup> and Gerard Whelan's *The Guns of Easter*<sup>3</sup> and *Winter of Spies*<sup>4</sup> are very good examples of the changes taking place in the politics and poetics of Irish children's literature. Issues common to these texts include: the place of women and children in the Rising, their rights and the private 'wars' in which they fought, as well as issues of class and poverty, and constructions of nationhood. Both authors have chosen the genre of children's historical fiction, central to which is the coming-of-age story, as young protagonists question the world around them and begin to think critically. This, of course, is why children's literature is one of the most powerful (yet under-rated) forms of literature.

Children's literature, as opposed to literature written about children, is literature that is written with children as its main audience and has the child's eye at its centre.<sup>5</sup> However, in many ways the child's eye is becoming more sophisticated and knowledgeable about certain life experiences than children of previous generations, so the topics of this body of literature can be very similar to those of adult literature: for example, death, war, starvation, terror and violence. No longer are children spared any emotions. The evening news and current affairs programs bring them everything vicariously, and today's children are frequently exposed to violence in the name of entertainment. It could even be argued that distinguishing children's literature from other types of literature is unnecessary, because in some

- 1 Siobhan Parkinson, *Amelia*, Dublin, The O'Brien Press, 1994.
- 2 Siobhan Parkinson, *No Peace for Amelia*, Dublin, The O'Brien Press, 1994.
- 3 Gerard Whelan, *The Guns of Easter*, Dublin, The O'Brien Press, 1997.
- 4 Gerard Whelan, *A Winter of Spies*, Dublin, The O'Brien Press, 1999.
- 5 Barbara Kiefer, Susan Hepler and Janet Hickman, *Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature*, 2004, 5.



cases what was once thought of as material written for adults may now be termed children's literature, for example *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Perhaps the most important point that distinguishes contemporary children's literature from other types of literature is that it *validates* children's experiences. From the very beginning (whether oral or written) it has been and often still is related to pedagogics. Children's literature, we have been given to understand, must be moral and educational, effectively functioning as a form of social engineering. Perfect for overtly or covertly promoting national identity and the way a society would like both to see itself and be seen by others. This reflects the adult's need to protect and control the child, as the authorial voice assumes a natural authority over the child reader. Its appropriateness has been and still is judged differently by authors, adults buying books for children, and last but not least child readers themselves, which reflects the fact that the time and space from which adults and children view the world around them is different and has different values attached to it. The difference of time and space reflects different mental space as well as temporal and physical distance from historical events. Children who are growing and maturing are 'becoming' and as such their view is generally 'more flexible and forward thinking than that of an adult' and perhaps more readily able to break with the idea of sequence 'as the primary explanatory context for the present.'<sup>6</sup> The best children's writers now try to respect this and tap into it, and we see some convincing examples in recent Irish children's literature.

According to Valerie Coghlan and Keith O'Sullivan, 'the Rising has been a sensitive, indeed divisive event in Irish history, and until relatively recently, it would have been considered

6 Nancy Watson, *The Politics and Poetics of Irish Children's Literature*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2009, 161.

inappropriate for a children's book.'<sup>7</sup> However, a number of authors now make it and the ensuing Civil War the focus of their works.

This suggests a growing maturity of 'a nation that no longer sees the evils of history as the sole responsibility of the colonizer. In effect these authors present the complex and multivocal nature of Irish history to their readers.'<sup>8</sup> Parkinson and Whelan are two such writers.

Siobhán Parkinson has published more than twenty books since 1992 and her books have been translated into multiple languages. She has written in both Irish and English. *Amelia* and its sequel *No Peace for Amelia* are most pertinent to the Rising and the civil war. They tell the story of Amelia Pimm and her Quaker family, including their maid Mary Ann Maloney, set in the period 1914 – 1916. Mary Ann is a self-proclaimed Nationalist and Socialist and her brother, Patrick, is imprisoned for joining the Volunteers. Amelia's mother is later imprisoned for taking part in a women's rights protest. During the course of the books the Pimm family's fortunes change: Amelia's beau, Frederick, joins the British Army and Mary Ann's brother takes part in the Rising. Frederick is gassed and dies in France, while Patrick is shot during the Rising but survives.

Like Parkinson, Gerard Whelan has authored many books for children and publishes *in several languages*. *The Guns of Easter* tells the story of the Conway family (James, Lily and their four children) living in the Dublin slums during the Rising. James is a Nationalist but forced to enlist into the British army to support his family, while his brother-in-law is a member of the Volunteers and takes part in the Rising. Twelve year old Jimmy necessarily becomes 'the man of the house' and for a variety of

7 Keith O'Sullivan and Valerie Coghlan, *Irish Children's Literature and Culture: New Perspectives on Contemporary Writing*, New York, Routledge, 2011, 4.

8 Ibid.



reasons ends up traversing central Dublin during the Rising. The text is openly concerned with historical and political narrative and figures. This is Jimmy's rite-of-passage.

Whelan's sequel, *A Winter of Spies*, focuses on Jimmy's younger sister eleven year old Sarah and their family during the War of Independence. Very few things are what they seem and this realization is central to Sarah's own rite-of-passage. Michael Collins becomes an interesting focal point during this period of Sarah's development. Unaware that her father and uncle actually work for Collins on the railway, she has developed a romanticized view of him: 'Even saying the name of Collins excited her. He was a hero to the people – the young general who directed their war against the whole force of the empire.'<sup>9</sup> However, in a chapter suitably entitled 'The Big Fellow' her view begins to broaden when she meets him and hears him discussing 'a bit of a job' with her father: 'Just knowing what Collins meant by "a bit of a job" made her feel dirty, as though she were somehow defiled even by the understanding of it.'<sup>10</sup> Finally, as she witnesses a scene in which several deceptions are revealed and yet another killing is planned, young Sarah Conway has an epiphany: 'It had nothing to do with being British or Irish or anything else. It had to do with people who could think of other people as dirt. And there were people like that everywhere.'<sup>11</sup>

Both Whelan and Parkinson have chosen to write historical fiction for children – a genre which often focuses on the child protagonist's developing awareness of the social and political conditions of the world in which they live, a consciousness linked to their maturation into adulthood. These are novels of initiation in which the protagonists assert autonomy and develop an individual conscience.

According to historian Sean Dunne 'The aim of exploration is

9 Whelan, *Winter of Spies*, 60.

10 Ibid, 94.

11 Ibid, 177.

not definition and finality... [I]t is a venture behind and beyond the familiar story and the simple picture.'<sup>12</sup> (xxvii) If this is so then Parkinson and Whelan are explorers of the space in which history and narrative co-exist – the space in which history is a narrative about real events that happened in the past and narrative is the arrangement of events in the manner of a story. In other words history and narrative are inextricably linked, and together they tell powerful stories. The terms 'narrative, text or story' do not relate solely to literary fiction, and this realisation challenges us as it seems to signify the end of grand, overarching narratives which have been a source of power and a means of keeping everyone in their place and maintaining the status quo. As such, narrative is a way of exposing and questioning the ambiguities of historical discourse. This is seen in the given texts by the approach taken to issues of class and poverty.

The Pimms in *Amelia* are a wealthy merchant family, whose money is lost in a failed business transaction, as a consequence of which they have 'come down in the world', moving to a smaller house and foregoing their maids. However, they are still wealthy compared to the slum life evoked in Whelan's texts and the Pimms' fortunes do in fact improve again at the end of the novel. When life is at its worst, Mama must do the work of the servants and readers glimpse lower class 'women's work': cleaning grates, starting fires, cooking, washing and wringing and hanging clothes, ironing, shopping, baking, dusting, sweeping, polishing.<sup>13</sup> This is seen to both strengthen and challenge her ideas on women's rights, as it places her in a position similar to their former maid, Mary Ann Maloney, with whom she and Amelia have previously had an interesting discussion on women's right to vote: Amelia does not see the need and is more interested in whether it is better to be a lady or a woman, Mama believes it to be a matter of fairness and that all

12 Sean Dunne, qtd in O'Sullivan and Coghlan, xxvii.

13 Parkinson, *Amelia*, 96-99.



problems can be resolved through discussion, while Mary Ann maintains that men and women are equal in all ways and that there is occasion for violence in order to achieve justice.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, as Quakers the Pimms are pacifists, although drawn into the First World War and the Rising by Frederick and Patrick. Because of Mary Ann they have broken through the class barrier, even though they maintain different points of view on many political and religious issues. Initially, their reluctant involvement contrasts with the view of many Dubliners for whom the Rising is an inconvenient oddity, until the executions take place. Then the mood begins to change.<sup>15</sup> This accords with Jimmy's observation in *The Guns of Easter* that Dublin during the Rising was 'like some strange and sinister dream'.<sup>16</sup>

Whelan's *The Guns of Easter* provides a starker contrast between public and private spaces and their meanings. It is set in the slums, where the young protagonist's father is a supporter of the unions and has taken part in the 1913 strike, but is subsequently forced to join the British army to support his family. The Rising takes place in his absence. Throughout both of Whelan's novels the protagonist's mother, Lily Conway, must fight her own domestic war, little understood by anyone other than (possibly) her son Jimmy. In the concluding paragraph we find her:

Ignoring the sounds of her sister and daughters, and the growling of the men's war that leaked in through the cracked window of the tenement room, Lily Conway smiled a smile that echoed her sleeping son's. Her son had been gone, and now he was returned to her. Tomorrow things might be different; tomorrow things might be better or worse. That was the way of the world. But for this day at least, in the war that for her was the only real one, she had won.<sup>17</sup>

14 Parkinson, *Amelia*, 28.

15 Parkinson, *No Peace*, 197.

16 Whelan, *Guns of Easter*, 123.

17 Whelan, *Guns of Easter*, 166.

The issue of women's and children's rights is central to all of these novels, as both Whelan and Parkinson seek to 'deflate the triumphantly nationalist, and social and religiously conservative attitudes that publically predominated in earlier years'.<sup>18</sup> Mary Ann (the Pimm's maid) sees self as a 'modern warrior woman' in the context of the Rising and Amelia's character develops to such an extent that she expresses a desire to 'fight for justice and truth', although she has to work out what this means first. In this way, a variety of views are expressed by a range of characters. In both *Amelia* and *No Peace for Amelia*, for example, the relative merits of and problems with Cumann na mBan and Countess Markievicz are passionately debated. Even Amelia's cherished father pontificates on 'the natural order' and the relative merits of sons and daughters.<sup>19</sup> This surprises and provokes Amelia to rethink the need for women's rights, corresponding with her growing ambition to become a doctor.

Officially women and children occupied peripheral spaces in Ireland at this time but these children's novels promote a shift of perspective, as the child's eye is placed at the centre of the text and the narrative voice revolves around it. Accordingly, there is an emphasis on the importance of private and domestic spaces. The role and development of Sarah in *Winter of Spies* is a case in point. The novel begins and ends with Sarah and her doll, Eileen: in the first instance she is hiding a pistol in her doll's pram during a raid in an unfamiliar part of Dublin and the reader is told that 'she felt she had just taken her first steps into the adult world. It was true: she had. But it wasn't the world she expected. New worlds never are.'<sup>20</sup> In the course of the novel Sarah wrestles with issues of truth and deception, at the centre of which is the figure of Michael Collins, as well as life and death and the question of just causes. By the conclusion she

18 O'Sullivan and Coghlan, 42.

19 Parkinson, *Amelia*, 143.

20 Whelan, *Winter of Spies*, 15.

is 'the little rebel mammy' holding her doll after her own home has been raided: 'Tomorrow they'd clear up the house and start living again. A family clearing up a house and starting over – that was history for you.'<sup>21</sup>

To return briefly to Francis Spufford's comment that 'the books you read as a child brought you sights you hadn't seen yourself... They introduced you to people you hadn't met, and helped you to sample ways of being that would never have occurred to you,' it is my contention that children's literature is powerful. The treatment of the Easter Rising in Irish children's literature is evidence of this, written with children as its main audience and the child's eye at its centre. Recent Irish children's novels offer a powerful attempt to encourage critical thinking in young readers – none more so than such historical fiction as Parkinson's *Amelia* and *No Peace for Amelia* as well as Whelan's *The Guns of Easter* and *A Winter of Spies*. Through the authors' development of a diverse range of characters, as well as manipulation of poetics and various levels of language, these texts go a long way towards encouraging readers to identify and respond to some of the ambiguities of historical discourse surrounding the Rising.

In the words of Nancy Watson, 'if life in the present is part of an evolving historical process, then in order to foster a sense of wholeness we must somehow confront the past.'<sup>22</sup> It would seem that through the realm of children's literature, young readers are well positioned to do so.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Watson, 160.

## a christmas childhood

One side of the potato-pits was white with frost –  
 How wonderful that was, how wonderful!  
 And when we put our ears to the paling-post  
 The music that came out was magical.  
 The light between the ricks of hay and straw  
 Was a hole in Heaven's gable. An apple tree  
 With its December-glinting fruit we saw –  
 O you, Eve, were the world that tempted me.  
 To eat the knowledge that grew in clay  
 And death the germ within it! Now and then  
 I can remember something of the gay  
 Garden that was childhood's. Again.  
 The tracks of cattle to a drinking-place,  
 A green stone lying sideways in a ditch,  
 Or any common sight, the transfigured face  
 Of a beauty that the world did not touch.  
 My father played the melodion  
 Outside at our gate;  
 There were stars in the morning east  
 And they danced to his music.  
 Across the wild bogs his melodeon called  
 To Lennons and Callans.  
 As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry  
 I knew some strange thing had happened.  
 Outside in the cow-house my mother  
 Made the music of milking;  
 The light of her stable-lamp was a star  
 And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.  
 A water-hen screeched in the bog,  
 Mass-going feet  
 Crunched the wafer-ice on the pot-holes,