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Representations of Irish Identity and the Easter Rising in Sebastian Barry's *Ancestors Cycle*

By Kristi Good

Abstract

Among his other literature and poetry, Sebastian Barry has written eleven plays and novels, collectively titled here for the first time as the *Ancestors Cycle*, that specifically tackle the expression of Irish identity via his own genealogy. Barry addresses this issue of Irishness through the creation of characters who are based on his historical ancestors, particularly individuals who have been selectively silenced for their failure to adhere to political and societal norms deemed appropriate for the historical narrative of Ireland and, thus, a traditional definition of Irishness. In the novel *A Long Long Way* and the play *White Woman Street*, Barry examines the event of the 1916 Easter Rising—the start of the Irish War of Independence—through a variety of lenses: the genres of novel and drama, the stylistic tools of the literal and the symbolic, and the subject matter of political difference within his own family. The culmination of these elements offers a complex reading of the Easter Rising and the individuals involved, whether directly or symbolically, and challenges an audience to question the fraught definition of Irishness attached to this historical moment.

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By Kristi Good

It is remarkable that a writer like Sebastian Barry, who has earned many awards from Ireland for his drama and fiction about exclusively Irish people, does not see himself as "traditionally" Irish. He was born in Ireland but spent much of his youth living in England, and some of his ancestors were Catholic Loyalists at a time when Irish Catholics were expected to support independence from the British crown, rather than the crown itself. He has stated that it is important to him to be considered an Irish writer, saying, "The sort of Irish person I am might not have been considered very Irish years ago; and my wife is a Dublin Presbyterian, whose father's generation was definitively told they weren't really Irish" (Rochester). Religion and politics are but two components that have been used to define "Irishness" throughout the country's difficult history.

Barry is acutely aware that shifting definitions of Irishness are the source of much of the turmoil in his country, in both the past and the present.

> It's difficult to say what an Irish person is. That's what we've spent the century since independence doing—looking for shared tradition, then corrupting it, then fighting about the corrupting of it. Dev's [Eamon de Valera's] idea was that we were all rural, Catholic, poor: he tried to shoehorn a country together, but it was a country of very different people, and if you were Protestant, wealthy or middle class you somehow weren't "Irish," and that's what a good deal of the fighting's been about. Why did we do that to ourselves? Why did anyone let us do that to ourselves? ("This Much I Know")

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The historical narrative of Ireland has traditionally used nationality as a rallying cry, but generalizations of the qualities that make up an Irish person often leave a significant portion of the population marginalized.

In 2016, Ireland is commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising, the major military conflict that spurred Ireland's War of Independence in 1916, Ireland is engaging with the very question Barry raises about Irishness in a multitude of ways. The Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme focuses on five themes—Remembering, Reconciling, Presenting, Imagining, and Celebrating—and promises that "2016 will be a year of rich and diverse activities when the full complexity of the last 100 years on this island can be explored and celebrated" ("A Vision for Ireland"). Across these five themes, events fall under one or more of seven programme strands in an attempt to represent and reflect on the diversity of the occasion: State Ceremonial, Historical Reflection, An Teanga Bheo,[1] Youth & Imagination, Cultural Expression, Community Participation, and Global & Diaspora ("Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme Launch").

Among his other literature and poetry, Barry has written eleven plays and novels that specifically tackle the complexity of Irish identity via his own genealogy. Barry addresses this issue of Irishness through the creation of characters who are based on his historical ancestors. These individuals have been selectively silenced for their failure to adhere to political and societal norms deemed appropriate for the historical narrative of Ireland and, thus, a traditional definition of Irishness. In the novel *A Long Long Way* and the play *White Woman Street*, Barry examines the Easter Rising through a variety of lenses: the genres of novel and drama, the stylistic tools of the literal and the symbolic, and the subject matter of political difference within his own family. The culmination of

[1] This strand is dedicated to the propagation of Gaeilge, the Irish language, and is therefore presented in Gaeilge rather than in English.

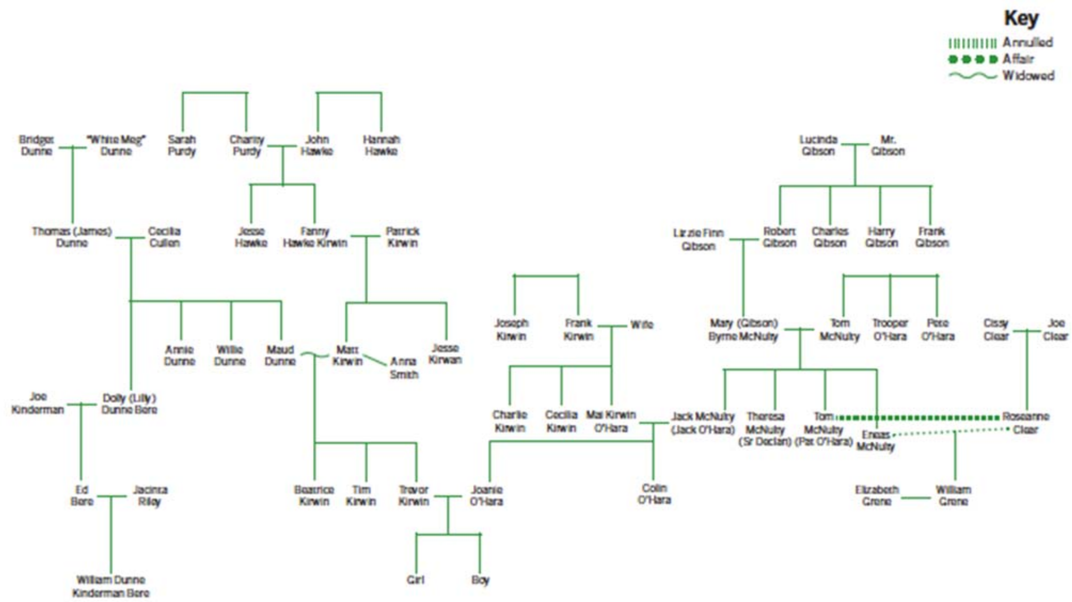
these elements offers a complex reading of the Easter Rising and the individuals involved, whether directly or symbolically, and challenges an audience to question the fraught definition of Irishness attached to this historical moment.

The effort to produce a more productive consciousness of the many and varied points of view that contribute to the historical and everyday experience of being Irish has been Barry's project for the last thirty years. He believes in the healing power of testimony, particularly testimony from victimized and marginalized Irish people who have been erased from what is considered an "acceptable" narrative of Irish history. Roger I. Simon and Claudia Eppert assert that testimony does not have to be firsthand and can come from what is known as a secondary witness. They say that testimony "comprises representations either by those who have lived through such events or those who have been told or shown such lived realities, either directly or indirectly, and have been moved to convey to others what has been impressed upon them" (Simon and Eppert 50). Barry, in fictionalizing the lives of his ancestors, has become a secondary witness for the historical traumatic events they encountered.

Shoshanna Felman, a professor of literature who collaborates with Dori Laub at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, writes on the importance of testimony. She says, "To testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement" (Felman 5). Laub contributes to the idea of testimony as a speech act by including the listener. "Through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. [. . .] The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony" (Laub 57-58). The act of testimony, then, is a complex relationship between witness and audience,

which creates a moment when a silenced voice may be heard and a gap in understanding may be filled. Barry's project is rooted in secondary witness testimony that attempts to achieve understanding through recreating silenced voices.

Nearly all scholars who approach Barry's writing will mention that whatever piece they have chosen to analyze is related in some way to one or more of the following eleven plays and novels, but these discourses have never before been examined together as a cohesive project. In my ongoing research, I have collectively titled these eleven pieces the *Ancestors Cycle*: *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990), *White Woman Street* (1992), *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995), *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998), *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998), *Annie Dunne* (2002), *A Long Long Way* (2005), *The Secret Scripture* (2008), *On Canaan's Side* (2011), and *The Temporary Gentleman* (2014). My initial study of Barry's *Ancestors Cycle* came out of a textual analysis designed to illustrate, both figuratively and literally, the mutual relevance of the eleven pieces that span two different genres of fictional writing: the play and the novel. The outcome of this analysis indicated a singular project rich with intertextuality and multiple interwoven themes. The most obvious indicator that these eleven discourses are related comes in the form of a family tree, which connects more than fifty of Barry's characters in an unbroken image from Barry himself to his great-great-grandparents. Aside from family, the major theme linking all of the pieces is War.



This family tree represents characters from Barry's *Ancestors Cycle*, rather than actual historical people. Barry wrote himself as a character into the novel *Annie Dunne* and is represented at the bottom of the tree as "Boy."

Barry's characters are affected by war in different ways. For many individuals, there is fighting in the community around them, but most of them are serving directly in a conflict, or have a family member who is serving. The *Ancestors Cycle* as a whole makes reference to seven particular conflicts: the American-Indian Wars, the Second Anglo-Boer War, World War I, the Irish War of Independence, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. Six of Barry's pieces directly reference the Irish War of Independence, but both *A Long Long Way* and *White Woman Street* specifically address the war's initial military conflict, the Easter Rising.

The Easter Rising began on April 24, 1916 in Dublin. Members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, who were committed to Ireland's independence from British rule, coordinated efforts with the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army, and the women's paramilitary organization Cumann na mBan to lead an insurrection. They occupied strategic locations in the city on that day with headquarters at the General Post Office on Sackville Street. From here, IRB spokesman Patrick Pearse read aloud the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, which declared Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom, and the violent, six-day conflict between Irish rebels and British military commenced.

Barry's novel *A Long Long Way* follows the brief life of Willie Dunne from his boyhood in the late 1890s in Dublin to his death on the battlefields of Flanders in 1918. Willie dreams of joining the Dublin Metropolitan Police, where his Catholic father has risen to the rank of Chief Superintendent, but height restrictions bar Willie from joining, and he searches for another way to serve his country. He joins the Royal Dublin Fusiliers to serve in World War I, but the confusion and senselessness of life on the battlefield is compounded by Willie's inner conflict about the political climate at home in Ireland. Barry's novel portrays not only the violence and despair of war, but also the comfort and joy of wartime brotherhood.

The episode that concludes Part One of *A Long Long Way* is an account of the Easter Rising. Willie has been home from Belgium on furlough to visit his family. At the end of his respite, the large military transports carry Willie and the other soldiers through the crowded streets of Dublin, where people cheer the soldiers on with a last farewell. As Willie and the other men wait to leave on ships bound for Flanders, they see an army messenger appear on the dock with an "air of urgency" (*A Long Long Way* 85). Within minutes, the soldiers disembark and are hustled into

column formation, much to their confusion. They march back into the city, ignorant as to the reason why, and Willie is struck by the strangeness of the scene before him.

> Their column was fiercely halted and things took place now that no one could understand the purpose of.
>
> For here now, as real as a dream as one might say, a little contingent of cavalry was drawn up just under the awnings of the Imperial Hotel, and at a shout from the officer in front, they drew their swords, pointed them forward, and went clattering and hallooing up Sackville Street. [. . .]
>
> Then, even more bizarrely, rifle shots crackled out from the General Post Office, in the most queer moment of ill-fitting likelihood, and then horses and riders started to go down, just as if it were some old battlefield, and there were Turks or Russians in the portals of the Post Office. (*A Long Long Way* 87)

Willie's column marches through Trinity College and Merrion Square to Mount Street Bridge, where the men rush to the aid of other troops taking fire from a nearby building. Willie shelters in a doorway with his wounded captain, already surrounded by dead soldiers. Suddenly, he hears a noise behind him and turns to find a young man pointing a revolver at him.

> You're my prisoner,' said a trembling voice.
>
> 'I'm not,' said Willie Dunne.
>
> 'I need you for a prisoner, Tommy,'[2] said the youngster.
>
> 'No,' said Willie.
>
> The wounded captain behind Willie sort of reached in over Willie's shoulder and fired his pistol. The bullet tore into the young

[2] "Tommy" was common slang for a British soldier. In this context, it is meant as a slur for an Irishman who serves the British crown, rather than supporting independence for Ireland.

> man's neck, and he fell to the marble floor. [. . .] Willie knelt down to him.
>
> 'I'm not going to shoot you,' he said. 'Are you a German?'
>
> 'German?' said the man. "German? What are you talking about? I'm an Irishman. We're all Irishmen in here, fighting for Ireland.' (*A Long Long Way* 92)

Willie holds the young man while he makes a final act of contrition. After asking God for forgiveness, he asks Willie's forgiveness as well. "'I only came out to win a bit of freedom for Ireland,' the man said, laughing miserably. 'You won't hold that against me?'" (*A Long Long Way* 93). Willie agrees that he will not, and the young man dies in his arms.

It is not until the regiment is ushered back to the docks that Willie gains more clarity on the events that passed from his new friend, Jesse Kirwan.[3] Willie's dismay and anger at the news that so many Irish were fighting and killing each other is compounded into a single sentence: "There's Irish lads, hundreds and hundreds of them, have lost their lives now fighting the Germans, Jesse" (*A Long Long Way* 96). Even as Willie returns to Flanders, his mind is on his family at home and the violence they may be enduring. He finds it difficult to speak to his fellow soldiers who had not been involved in the Rising. The general consensus among them when they finally understand what happened is one of disbelief and derision. Willie's sergeant-major exclaims, "What the fuck are they doing, causing mayhem at home, when we're out here fucking risking our fucking lives for them?" (*A Long Long Way* 103). The men cannot reconcile what they perceive to be an enormous gap in importance between their sacrifices in Europe and the infighting back home.

[3] Jesse's brother Matt will eventually marry Willie's oldest sister Maud and give birth to Barry's father. See Family Tree.

A newspaper reaches the men by early May with news of the courts-martial and firing squads lined up for "the leaders that signed that bit of unholy paper, and dozens and dozens more" (*A Long Long Way* 136).[4] As Willie talks over the situation with another soldier, Pete O'Hara,[5] they find themselves confused by the conflicting emotions they feel about the situation at home. The rebels at home referred to the Germans as their "Gallant allies in Europe" (*A Long Long Way* 138),[6] and Pete wonders if that makes himself and Willie enemies of the rebels back in Dublin, since the Royal Dublin Fusiliers are fighting the Germans for control of Flanders. They reason that they must be fighting against the Germans for *some* purpose, calling themselves "eejits" for not being able to understand the complicated state of affairs. But both Pete and Willie admit that, regardless of their anger toward the instigators in Dublin, they wish the leaders had not been shot. This emotional conflict leaves them feeling like "even bigger eejits" (*A Long Long Way* 139).

By July, Willie gets word that Jesse Kirwan is being held for a court-martial and in danger of being executed. Jesse asks specifically to speak with Willie Dunne before the proceedings, so that someone will know why he is being charged with disobedience. Jesse reasons that it is impossible for him to fight in the war after witnessing the Easter Rising. He entreats Willie:

> Say you saw me crying in the streets of Dublin. Did you think I was afraid? I wasn't afraid. I was thinking, They've ruined everything [sic]. Now we won't have a country at all. Now everything you and

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[4] The phrase "unholy bit of paper" refers to the Proclamation of the Republic, read by Pearse in front of the General Post Office and signed by the seven members of the IRB who coordinated the Rising.

[5] Pete O'Hara is the brother of Trooper O'Hara, from *White Woman Street*. See Family Tree.

[6] The leaders of the Easter Rising commissioned arms from the German military, knowing that the Germans would support an insurrection against Britain in Ireland to distract them from engagement in World War I.

> me and the others were trying to do is useless. And maybe I could have dried my tears then and got on with it. But then they started shooting those poor men, and that was a filthy business. […] Millions of lads have died out here. Maybe millions more will yet. Heaps and heaps of us. I will acknowledge my mistake, Willie Dunne. I thought it would be a good thing to follow John Redmond's words. I thought for my mother's sake, her gentle soul, for the sake of my own children, I might go out and fight for to save Europe so that we might have the Home Rule in Ireland in the upshot. I came out to fight for a country that doesn't exist, and now, Willie, mark my words, it never will. (*A Long Long Way* 156-157)

Trying to make sense of Jesse's execution, Willie attempts to convey these thoughts and feelings in a letter to his father. He writes about seeing the young man killed in Dublin and feeling pity for him, as well as for the executed leaders: Pearse, Clarke, and McDonagh. He wonders in the letter what John Redmond[7] would think about the uprising.

In September, Willie receives a letter from his sister Maud, who implores Willie to apologize to their father for whatever was in his last letter. As Willie ponders what he could have written to offend his father, the war rages on. Willie finally returns home on furlough in the autumn of 1917 and immediately feels the tension between himself and his father when the imposing man appears in front of him. In an instant, Willie

[7] Redmond was a fierce supporter of Home Rule for Ireland, but believed that enlisting with the British Army was an essential means for Ireland to achieve independence by fighting with the Allies against the Germans. His followers, the National Volunteers, were violently split on the issue, with many breaking off to rebel against fighting in the British Army. The Easter Rising was staged by those who split off from the National Volunteers, and Redmond had no part in orchestrating it.

remembers all the men he has seen die in the war and the tenderness he felt for them, a tenderness he also felt for his father.

> [Willie] was a man of five foot six who had seen a thousand deaths. Now he stood an inch from the source of childhood comfort, the man indeed who had washed him tenderly like a child when last he'd been home on furlough. Well he remembered it, the big hands cleaning away the war. That could never be effected again, he knew. (*A Long Long Way* 246)

James Dunne greets Willie with a tirade, the likes of which Willie has never experienced from his father before, and it is suddenly clear why James was so offended by Willie's letter. He says:

> They put a mark on Dublin that can never be wiped away, a great, spreading stain of blood, Willie. And I read in a letter from my own son that he feels for them some stupid, ruinous feeling. [. . .] You stand here, Willie, in the uniform of your gracious king. Under solemn oath to defend him and his three great kingdoms. You stand here in your own childhood home, your father a man that has strove to keep order in this great city and protect it from miscreants and the evil of traitors and rebels, for love of you all and in memory of your mother. (*A Long Long Way* 246-247)

In shock, Willie leaves the house, never to return again. He writes once more to his father from a British hospital, where he is recovering after being injured in an explosion and suffering from "shell shock." It is June 1918. He tries to explain again how the war has changed his thinking, but assures his father, "When I think of you there is nothing bad that arises at all," and he praises his father for the role he played in his life after the death of his mother (*A Long Long Way* 279). James writes back to Willie in October, apologizing to him and explaining his behavior.

> Will you forgive me, Willie? Forgive an old man stuck in other days. I lived my life in the service of the Queen and when she was dead of the two kings that came after. I wanted to keep order in this old city but [. . .] I also wanted to remember your mam and do what she bid me which was to look after you all. I cannot have the first thing make me forget the second thing. (*A Long Long Way* 291)

It is never certain that Willie reads James's last letter before he dies on the battlefield.

The genre of the novel allows for a rich psychological portrait of Willie's and James's differing views on the conflict at hand, and Barry's narrative offers a testimony of those views. The implications of secondary witness testimony reach beyond the personal sphere of the witness, Simon explains, and can have a significant impact on larger communities. The act of remembering is a pedagogical one, he writes, and occurs in two dominant modes: history and memorialization. History refers to the detailed documentation and interpretation of available sources, while memorialization seeks to recover what has been lost, or "has previously been known, but now must be told again" (Simon and Eppert 105). By incorporating historical sources and narratives with emotional and symbolic practices of memorialization, a pedagogical structure emerges which can "reinforce the significance of specific memories for the identities and commitments of specific groups, be they families, communities, or nations" (Simon and Eppert 106). Barry's narrative is, then, instructional in its plea to recognize that there are many different—and sometimes conflicting—components to Irishness.

But this in itself is not enough, Simon asserts, and the pedagogy of remembrance should cause us not only to learn something about our history, but also to question our understanding of ourselves. He writes:

> Much, then, depends upon the substance of our practices of remembrance, practices that constitute which traces of the past are possible for us to encounter, how these traces are inscribed and reproduced for presentation, and with what interest, epistemological frame, and structure of reflexivity we might engage these inscriptions—remnants in the guise of stories, songs, images, and objects. […] More importantly, practices of remembrance are questions of and for history as a force of inhabitation, as the way we live with images and stories that intertwine with our sense of limits and possibilities, hopes and fears, identities and distinctions. (Simon 3)

Memorializations often seek to adhere to historical narratives and uphold social norms that point toward the practices of civility and justice within a society. This legitimation does not serve the true purpose of testimony, and Roger states that we "have to consider a form of public history that opens one to both the demand of, and responsibility to, the alterity of the historical experience of others—an alterity that disrupts the presumption of the 'self-same'" (Simon 4). In order to move forward as a society, to imagine a future that is democratic, we must engage with the historical experience of the other. This concept of "public time," which is made up of the past, present, and future, is the moment wherein the pedagogy of remembrance occurs.

> It is a moment in which learning is not simply the acquisition of new information, but an acceptance of another's testamentary address as a possible inheritance, a difficult "gift" that in its demand for a non-indifference, may open questions, interrupt conventions, and set thought to work through the inadequate character of the terms on which I grasp myself and the world. This is thought that needs the other, thought that lives through the life of another with

> the implication that we are dependent on an other for what is ours. (Simon 7-8)

Barry's choice to reveal competing views on such a singular historic event as the Easter Rising is a pedagogical moment that asks contemporary Irish audiences to consider the role of the "other" in the historical events that culminated in their Independence.

The figure of James Dunne, alternately called Thomas Dunne in some discourses, was not a new character created for the 2005 novel. Barry had used the figure of his great-grandfather in two previous discourses: *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), a play centered on the character which brought Barry and actor Donal McCann great acclaim, and *Annie Dunne* (2002), a novel focused on Willie's older sister. Barry would again touch on the Dunne family in his 2011 novel, *On Canaan's Side*, exploring the life of Willie's youngest sister. James Dunne was a complicated ancestral figure for Barry to bring to public view: a Catholic Loyalist at the head of the Dublin Metropolitan Police who had been involved in the Sackville Street riots in 1913. Barry initially considered concealing the facts about his great-grandfather altogether. He said, "What a demon figure to bring you literary ruin. What price my credentials as an Irish writer?" (Wroe 4). The juxtaposition of the older Dunne's fierce political point of view with the younger Dunne's change of heart after encountering the horrors of war in the trenches of Europe provides a more rounded view of the Easter Rising, particularly when both men hold each other in such high esteem.

As a play, *White Woman Street* offers a less obvious psychological overview of its main character, Trooper O'Hara. As a representation of Barry's early, poetic work, it approaches the topic of the Easter Rising in a much more symbolic way. This play is set in America, where Trooper, based on Barry's maternal great-great-uncle, had fled the aftermath of the

Famine in Ireland to serve as a soldier in the Union Army during the American-Indian Wars. Now in his fifties at the time of the play in 1916, Trooper leads his small band of traveling companions to a town in Ohio called White Woman Street. The men busy themselves with planning a railroad heist, but Trooper has ulterior motives. He visited the town in his youth while serving in the wars and, desperate for a reminder of home after so long on the frontier, found himself at a brothel that touted the "only white woman for five hundred miles of wilderness" (*White Woman Street* 147). She was not a white woman, however, but a young Native American girl. Trooper is haunted by his return to White Woman Street and the traumatic event that occurred there, when the young woman killed herself with Trooper's knife after he had, unknowingly, taken her virginity. Trooper confronts his ghosts, but does not survive the railroad robbery, dying of a gunshot wound in the woods of Ohio.

A summary of the plot does not even hint to a connection with the Easter Rising, and even when the play premiered at London's Bush Theatre in 1992, very few people agreed on what the play was actually about: Irish exile? The American West? A train robbery? Laying a ghost to rest? The commissioned play opened the Bush's 20th anniversary season on April 23rd, only one day before the anniversary of the Rising. Reviews were mixed: some called it "ambling nostalgia with no bite" (Nightengale 5), and others seemed perplexed that "this new play by the Abbey's protégé is far from being typically Irish" (Edwardes).[8] Only Michael Billington of *The Guardian* recognized the historical import of the play, writing, "Even if the symbolism, with its references to religious resurrection and the far-off Easter Rising, is heavy-handed, I can live with that" (24). When the play moved to Dublin's Abbey Theatre in May, reviews were more forgiving.

[8] Special thanks to Natalie Garces-Bovett at the Bush Theatre who found this clipping in their archives. Page number not available.

Still, none referenced the play's ties to the Easter Rising, preferring instead to cite the Famine as an historical mooring point. Trooper's emigration from Ireland and the Famine were more concrete events in the story of the character's life and, thus, more accessible.

Barry peppers the play with subtle reminders of the historical period that Trooper and his group of outlaws inhabit. The major objective of the characters in the play is to rob a gold train that is headed to the nearby military forts with Easter pay. As Trooper explains the heist he says, "That train going through few days after that good and holy time. This time we're in now, I should have said" (*White Woman Street* 141). Because Barry has set the action in 1916 Ohio, rather than spotlighting Dublin and the historical event itself—as many other writers have done—Wei H. Kao writes, "The Easter Rising rings its bell in a manner that is invisible but not silent" (Kao). Barry's decision to shift focus away from the specific geographical area but to emphasize the importance of the date results in a subconscious but solid thematic layer.

Barry continues to offer small reminders of the season throughout the play. At the end of Act One, the character Nathaniel fondly remembers the intricate Russian Easter eggs of his youth while the men share memories around a campfire. Later, the men reminisce about how and when they all met each other, with one man, Blakely, recalling that is was "five year this Eastertime—no, sir, this first May coming" (*White Woman Street* 157). Twice, Trooper murmurs the Irish folk tune "Eggs & Marrowbones" under his breath (*White Woman Street* 142, 157). While the song does not directly refer to the Rising, the term "marrowbone" evokes the strategic rebel outpost at the distillery on Marrowbone Lane in Dublin. When the men finally reach White Woman Street, Clarke, the Native American man who watches after the brothel, confirms that Easter has just passed (*White Woman Street* 157).

While several of Trooper's companions enjoy the company of the women in the brothel, Trooper himself is paralyzed with fear in the bar, not having the courage to face the room where the Native American woman met her fate thirty years prior. Clarke passes the time by asking Trooper's friend Mo to read sections of the newspaper. The audience hears snippets about the price of garters and a local robbery, but on realizing that Trooper is from Ireland, Clarke shares a piece of news that he believes could be important to Trooper. He says, "We get plenty Irish in here. Place there burning like Richmond, I hear. Some big mail depot or someplace. Fire and ruin in Dublin. Fellas put in jail and likely to be shot. Fighting the English" (*White Woman Street* 158). Clarke is referring to the fire that consumed the General Post Office during the Rising and the impending execution of the seven individuals who instigated the rebellion and signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.

While Clarke's references would certainly ring a bell for an Irish audience, the import of the event is lost on Trooper. Barry describes his state as "*not listening, fixed on the door*" and responding vaguely with, "That right?" (*White Woman Street* 161). Trooper is consumed by his anxiety at returning to the traumatic scene that has haunted him for three decades and does not understand the importance of what Clarke is trying to tell him. Barry has saved the direct reference to the Easter Rising for one of the climactic narrative points of the story: our focus is on Trooper's agitation, as well as the historical import of what's happening in Ireland. The simultaneity of these two events is no accident. As Kao writes, "Significantly, *White Woman Street* not only reveals the volatility of identities but criticizes the way in which the Easter Rising is celebrated and romanticized in the Irish nationalistic discourse" (Kao). Barry's tactic highlights the intersection of the Easter Rising narrative with the fraught implications of an Irish diasporic identity.

Trooper's experience as an Irish immigrant in America illustrates a reversal of power that sheds a different light on the Easter Rising back in Ireland. Despite a decidedly xenophobic view of Irish and other immigrants to America, Trooper's stint as a young soldier placed him in a limited position of power over the indigenous people of North America, a position never afforded him back home as an Irish subject of England. But this power extended beyond the battlefield into the brothel, during Trooper's initial visit to White Woman Street. He imagined the prostitute he was going to visit as a treasured reminder of his homeland.

> Weren't she like a saint to those men, a place for pilgrimage. Tober nAlt she was, a holy well, a shrine, St Bridget, some powerful class of folk that would bring you luck and ease your longing? [. . .] No one could ever measure that need I feeling, a boy sullied up by wars, Indian wars. That need to view a sight of home, a goddess of my own countrymen. Men from my troop had swore she was from Listowel! (*White Woman Street* 148-149)

Barry merges the images of the fallen woman, a site of holy pilgrimage ("Tobernalt"),[9] and the iconic St. Bridget to complicate the notion of "home" for which Trooper longs.

In reality, the "white woman" of White Woman Street turns out to be a young indigenous woman concealed by the dark curtains of a brothel room in an effort to hide her true identity: yet another victim of the oppression of patriarchal colonial rule who "allowed the Irish to feel 'whitened,' or politically upgraded" (Kao). Kao's assertion that Barry's revisionist take on this momentous event in Irish history is a criticism of the erasure of a dark and "unsettling" look at Irish-American life may be correct, but Barry's greater project of the Ancestors Cycle is far from malicious. Fintan O'Toole agrees that there is a harshness in Barry's work,

[9] The site was famous for its status as a haven for religious dissidents under English penal law.

but it is tempered by the human relationships he depicts.

> For, such is the pleasure of a Barry play, it is easy to forget that his plays are remorseless and unflinching in the vision of Ireland as broken and fragmented. The love he shows within his circles of characters is matched only by the isolation of those circles from the surrounding world. [. . .] It moves from strangeness to almost unbearable familiarity, becoming, for an Irish audience, a majestic lament for our scattered and our forgotten, for the spawn of the coffin ship and the Virgin Jumbo, for the innocents made guilty by their forced conquest of a new world. (O'Toole)

Barry's subtle interplay between these harsh and tender realities allows his work to resonate across the centuries for members of the diaspora that continued to occur well after the 19th century Famine. The story of Trooper offers testimony for the diasporic community that was, in effect, forced from their homes in search of tolerable living conditions. Irish immigrants were maligned both in America, through xenophobic working and living restrictions, and in Ireland, for leaving friends and family to suffer harsh economic conditions. Like the Centenary Programme strand that focuses on "Global & Diaspora," Barry offers inclusion to the emigrant community that was historically excluded from the Easter Rising.

In many interviews, prefaces, and forewords, Barry has emphasized his desire to bring a wholeness to people's understanding of what it means to be Irish, even if some of those ideas are uncomfortable.

> By writing this shadowy great-uncle of mine back into the book of life, I was trying to put something back on the balance. Because if we exclude a part of ourselves, even a disreputable or reprehensible part, we by extension exclude and erase a part of the family, and by further extension a part of the nation. [. . .] A real nation has to acknowledge also the section of itself that is

> murderous and dangerous and deeply uncivil, for completeness if for nothing else. ("A Penguin Readers Guide" 6-9)[10]

By addressing the single historical event of the Easter Rising through the eyes of multiple characters in both *A Long Long Way* and *White Woman Street*, Barry has explored the conflicting personal politics of several branches of his family tree. He tempers James Dunne's Loyalist sympathies with Willie's humanist approach and highlights the complex relationship between identity and politics for members of the diasporic community, like Trooper. This multi-faceted approach to historical fiction and revisionism is a means for creating that pedagogical sphere of testimony and "completeness" that both Simon and Barry find so important for national healing.

The power of Barry's and other individuals' testimonies is at the core of healing the many tears in Ireland's historical fabric and altering the way in which major historical events such as the Easter Rising can be viewed. Portraying these alternative versions of experience allows people who may have once been erased from the "acceptable" narrative of history to take ownership of the event, and by extension, of their own Irish identity. By accepting alternative testimonies as a tool for healing and integrating what was once deemed unseemly back into the historical narrative, today's Irish can better understand in a very complex and real way who they are, where they come from, and how they can situate themselves in a global context for the continued health and growth of Ireland.

[10] Barry is referencing the great-uncle upon whom the character of Eneas McNulty is based. Trooper O'Hara is a representation of Barry's great-great-uncle (Eneas' uncle).

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